

Objections to Premiss 1

1. The Euthyphro Dilemma

Today we want to continue our discussion of the moral argument for God's existence. Last time we looked at the defense of the first premise that if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist. I argued that in the absence of God there simply isn't any plausible foundation for affirming the existence of objective moral values or duties.

Today we want to consider objections to premise (1).

The first objection that will be brought up if you present this argument will be the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma. The name comes from a character in one of Plato's dialogues named Euthyphro. The dilemma basically goes like this: Is something good just because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good? If you say that something is good just because God wills it, then good and evil become arbitrary. God could have willed that hatred is good. Then we would be morally obligated to hate one another and seek to do one another harm. That seems crazy. Some moral values, at least, seem to be necessarily the case and not just arbitrary in that way. But, on the other hand, if you say that God wills something because it really is good, then the Good is independent of God, contrary to premise (1). In that case objective moral values and duties exist independently of God, and it is not the case that if God were not to exist, objective moral values would not exist. So that is the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma.

Fortunately, we don't need to refute either horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma because the dilemma that it presents is a false dilemma. It is a false dilemma because there is a third alternative, namely, that God wills something because *he* is good. What do I mean by that? I mean that God's own concrete nature is the standard of goodness, and his commandments to us are in turn expressions of his nature. In short, our moral duties are constituted by the commands of a holy and loving God.

So moral values are not independent of God because God's own character determines what is good. God is essentially compassionate, kind, impartial, fair, and so forth. His nature is the moral standard which determines good and bad. Just as a high-fidelity recording is measured by how closely it approximates to the sound of a live performance (that is what we mean by “high fidelity”), so moral actions are measured by how closely they approximate to God's own nature. God's commands, in turn, reflect his moral character. Therefore, they are not arbitrary. So if the atheist asks, “If God were to command child abuse, would we then be obligated to abuse our children?” he is asking a question like, “If there were a square circle, would its area be the square of one of its sides?” The question has no answer because what it is predicated on is logically impossible.

The Euthyphro Dilemma presents us with a false choice, and we shouldn't be tricked by it. You don't have to choose either horn. There is a third alternative, namely, the morally good or bad is determined by God's nature and the morally right or wrong is determined by his will. Moral values are rooted in his nature;

moral duties are determined by his will. God wills something because he is good. Something is right because God wills it.

This view of moral theory has been defended eloquently in our day by such prominent philosophers as Robert Adams, William Alston, Philip Quinn, and many others. Yet atheists continue to attack the straw man erected by the Euthyphro Dilemma. For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* published in 2007 the article on God and morality, which is written by a very prominent ethicist, refers neither to the work of these men nor to the alternative that I've just laid out, but attacks only the view that God arbitrarily made up moral values, which is a view that no one I am acquainted with defends today.

2. Atheistic Moral Platonism

The mention of Plato brings to mind another possible atheistic response to premise (1). Plato thought that the Good just exists on its own as a sort of self-existent Idea. (If you find this difficult to grasp then join the company!) Later Christian thinkers equated Plato's Good with God's moral nature; but Plato himself thought the Good just existed on its own. So some atheists might say that moral values like Justice, Mercy, Love, and so on, just exist without any foundation. They are not grounded in God; they just exist on their own. We can call this view Atheistic Moral Platonism. It holds that objective moral values do exist, but they are not grounded in God. Indeed they are not grounded in anything. They just exist on their own.

What might we say about this view? I have three responses.

First, the view seems unintelligible. What does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value Justice just exists? It's hard to make sense of this. It's easy to understand what it means to say that some person is just, but it's bewildering when somebody says that in the absence of any people Justice itself just exists. It becomes even more bewildering when you reflect on the fact that Justice itself is not just, anymore than Loyalty is loyal, or Intemperateness is intemperate. So if there were no people around who are just, then how could Justice exist? It seems as if there wouldn't be any justice – this abstract object is not just. So Justice wouldn't seem to exist, which contradicts the view that Justice just exists on its own as an idea. Moral values seem to be properties of persons, so it's hard to understand how moral values like Justice can exist as an abstraction.

Secondly, this view provides no basis for moral duties. It tries to give a basis for moral values, but it has nothing to say by way of an explanation of our moral duties. Let's suppose for the sake of argument that moral values like Justice, Loyalty, Mercy, Forbearance, and so on just exist. How does that result in any moral obligations for me? Why would I have a moral duty to be, say, merciful? Who or what lays such an obligation upon me? Notice that on this view moral vices such as Greed, Hatred, Rapacity, Selfishness, and Sloth also exist as abstractions. So why are we morally obligated to align our lives with one set of these abstractions rather than with some other set of abstractions? Atheistic Moral Platonism, lacking a moral lawgiver, has no grounds for moral obligation.

Finally, third, it's fantastically improbable that the blind evolutionary process should spit forth precisely those sorts of creatures who correspond to the abstractly existing realm of moral values. This seems to be an utterly incredible coincidence when you think about it. Remember that this realm of moral values, as an abstract realm, is utterly independent of the natural realm. It is causally unconnected with the natural realm. So how is it that exactly that kind of creature should emerge from the blind evolutionary process that corresponds to this independently existing moral realm? It's almost as if the moral realm knew that we were coming! I think it is far more plausible to think that both the natural realm and the moral realm are under the authority of a God who gave us both the natural laws and the moral law than to think that these two independent realms of reality just happened by coincidence to mesh.

For those reasons I think that Atheistic Moral Platonism is a less plausible theory of ethical values and duties than is theism.

3. Stubborn Humanism

What's the atheist supposed to do at this point? Most of them want to affirm the objective reality of moral values and duties. It is not true that most ethicists or philosophers are relativists or moral nihilists. They want to have objective moral values and duties. So most of them simply embrace Humanism and just stop explanations there. Whatever contributes to human flourishing is good, and whatever detracts from it is bad, and that is the end of the story. This would be the position of someone like Sam Harris, for example, who is very insistent on objective moral values and

duties and simply roots them in human flourishing. I call this view Stubborn Humanism.

What might we say in response to this? I would argue that just taking human flourishing as your ultimate explanatory stopping point seems to be premature because of the *arbitrariness* and *implausibility* of such a stopping point.

Given atheism, why think that what is conducive to human flourishing is more valuable than what is conducive to the flourishing of ants or mice or chimpanzees? Why think that inflicting harm on another member of our species is wrong? When I put this question to the Dartmouth ethicist Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in our debate on the existence of God, he replied, “It simply is. Objectively. Don’t you agree?”¹ Of course, I agree that it is wrong to harm another human being, but I pointed out that that wasn’t the question. The question is: why would it be wrong if atheism were true? Given an atheistic worldview, picking out human flourishing as morally special seems to be arbitrary. In fact, on Sam Harris’ view it is the flourishing of sentient life in general that determines the good. But then promoting the flourishing of rats would be just as good as promoting human flourishing.

Moreover, it seems *implausible* as well. Atheists will sometimes say that moral values simply attach necessarily to certain natural states of affairs. The technical term here is “supervene.” These moral properties supervene on natural states. An example of supervenience would be how the property of wetness supervenes on hydrogen and oxygen when they are combined in a certain way.

1 William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?: A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Neither hydrogen nor oxygen is wet, but if you combine hydrogen and oxygen as H₂O, then wetness is a property that necessarily attaches to that substance. It supervenes on that state of affairs.

The claim is that moral properties in a similar way supervene on natural states of affairs. So the property of goodness naturally attaches to a mother's nursing her infant. The property of badness necessarily supervenes on a man's beating his wife. Atheists will say that once all of the natural properties are in place, then the moral properties just sort of come along with them necessarily.

Now on atheism this seems to me to be extraordinarily implausible. Why think that these strange, non-natural properties like "goodness" and "badness" even exist, much less that they necessarily supervene on various natural states of affairs? I can't see any reason to think that on atheism a full description of the natural properties involved in some situation would determine or fix any of the moral properties of that situation.

These humanistic philosophers have simply taken a "shopping list" approach to ethical questions. Because they hold to Humanism, they simply help themselves to the moral properties that they need in order to do the job. They just wheel their shopping cart down the moral aisle and pick the moral properties that they want to be part of their view. But what is needed to make this view plausible is some sort of explanation for why moral properties would necessarily supervene on certain natural states of affairs. Again, it's inadequate for the Humanist to assert that we do, in fact, see that human beings have intrinsic moral value because that's not in dispute. Indeed, that's the second premise of the moral argument! What we want from the Humanist is some reason to think that if

atheism were true, human beings would be morally significant. As it is, I think their Humanism is just a stubborn moral faith.

Somebody might persist: “But why is God the ultimate standard of moral value?” In a certain sense this question is just misconceived. Anybody has the right to present his moral theory and to explain its implications. The apropos question will be whether that moral theory is plausible. In particular, whether its explanatory ultimate is a non-arbitrary and adequate stopping point. I’ve argued that on Humanism that stopping point is premature. It is arbitrary and implausible. In contrast to Humanism, I think that theism has an explanatorily plausible or adequate stopping point. For God, by definition, is the greatest conceivable being, a being that by definition is worthy of worship. Anything that does not have that property just is not God. So nothing higher could be imagined. Identifying the Good with God himself, I think, supplies a foundation for a plausible moral theory.