

God and Morality

Antony Eagle

God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 5

Contents

- 'No Good Without God'?
- The Metaphysics of Morals
- Voluntarism and Subjectivism
- God and Naturalism: Identity Theories
- God and Prudential Reasons to be moral

'No Good Without God'?

The traditional conception

- › A traditional view links **morality** with the existence of God.
- › This is a very popular view (though not among philosophers). Here's a version from a semi-popular opinion piece on the ABC:
 - the Big Question: Is there a morally ordered world out there, or not? If you answer *Yes*, you're some variety of theist (perhaps whether you want to be or not), because the existence of a real moral order in the world leads inevitably to the view that Someone brought that order into being. (Payne 2017)
- › This kind of view – that objective morality ‘leads inevitably’ to God – might be used as part of an argument for the existence of God.
- › If ‘there wouldn't be a difference between right and wrong if God did not make it so’ (Anderson 2007: 216), then the fact of such differences entails that there is a God.

A moral argument for God

- (MAG-1) 'If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true' (Craig 1997)
- (MAG-2) So morality is objectively true only if God exists. (MAG-1)
- (MAG-3) 'Even if there were objective moral values and duties under naturalism, they are irrelevant because there is no moral accountability. If life ends at the grave, it makes no difference whether one lives as a Stalin or as a saint.' (Craig 1997)
- (MAG-4) So one ought to act morally only if God exists (to hold us to account). (MAG-3)
- (MAG-5) There are objective moral norms, and we ought to act morally in accordance with them. (premise)
- (MAG-C) God exists. (MAG-5, MAG-2, MAG-4)

The Two Strands of Argument (Brink 2006: 150)

- › Part of this argument is **metaphysical**: it says that if God didn't exist, nothing would **be** objectively right or wrong.
 - › Or, perhaps, that if God didn't exist, moral judgments would be 'simply a disguised subjective remark about the speaker's tastes' (Nerlich 1967,).
- › The other part is **prudential**: it says that if God didn't exist, we wouldn't have reason to let our choice of action be guided by the rightness and wrongness of the options.
- › The two strands are **separable**.
 - › For example: We might think there is objective morality that is relatively independent of God – but also (with Craig) that there would be no reason to follow its moral principles unless God existed to punish or reward our choices.
- › We concentrate on the metaphysical argument for now; and return later to the **prudential argument**.

The Metaphysics of Morals

The Euthyphro framework (Brink 2006: 151–52)

- › In Plato's *Euthyphro*, a question arises about **why** it is true that the gods love pious things. Two general classes of answer suggest themselves:
 - › The gods love something because it is antecedently pious by its own **inherent nature**.
 - › The gods love of something **makes** it pious.
- › A parallel set of options arise for understanding **why right actions are approved**, assuming that they are:
 - Naturalism** An agent approves of right actions because they are **already** right.
 - Voluntarism** An agent's approving of an action **makes** it right.
 - › 'Voluntarism' is so called because had the designated agent chosen of their own **volition** to bestow their approval otherwise, other things would have been right/pious/approved.

Canonical Cases of Voluntarism and Naturalism

- › In some other parallel cases, such as **personal taste**, the voluntarist answer seems correct.
- › Broccoli is tasty for me **because** I approve of its flavour, not because I somehow recognise its inherent tastiness.
 - › This is, at least in part, because properties of personal taste are **response-dependent**: since nothing could be disgusting if there was no one disposed to judge it so, the natural explanation is that disgustingness **depends** on the judgments of well placed observers.
- › By contrast, things could **weigh 100kg** even if no one was disposed to judge that they did – so facts about weight do not depend on the judgments of observers, divine or otherwise.
 - › This is true even if a perfectly omniscient God would indeed judge of all and only the 100kg things that they weighed 100kg.

Principled Attitudes

- › Naturalism is the correct view in cases where judgments can be **principled** – that the judge has **independent reason** to make the judgment they do.
- › In the case of piety, Plato thinks, the gods have their approving attitudes to the pious things because those things have features that **merit** those attitudes.
- › Likewise, it might be thought, **right actions merit approval** (maybe to be good precisely is to be **intrinsically approvable** – even if not to be in fact approved by anyone).
- › Since they merit approval, that is a sufficient and principled reason for God to approve them.

But, it seems, God would love good things because they are good. His attitudes would be principled. If so, the God-approved character of good things would depend on their being good, not vice versa. (Brink 2006: 152)

Naturalistic Meta-Ethics

- › Voluntarism looks like it will give us an account of the **origin and nature** of moral truth, founding morality on attitudes of approval.
- › What can the naturalist offer, if appeals to attitudes aren't available?
- › There are a number of options (Brink 2006: 157–58). Morality might derive from objective facts about:
 1. **Mutual advantage and reciprocity**; or
 2. what best **promotes aggregate good consequences**; or
 3. what would be **mutually agreeable to all interested parties** (perhaps from behind a 'veil of ignorance'); or
 4. what features of rational agents **force themselves upon us as worthy of consideration**; or
 5. 'our practices of reciprocal claim making, in which we work out together the kinds of considerations that count as reasons that all of us must heed, and thereby devise rules for living together ... on a basis of mutual accountability' (Anderson 2007: 228).
- › These are each controversial, and mutually exclusive – so it's not clear that naturalists have a better theory than voluntarists. Yet they do have options.

Naturalism and God

- › If naturalism is correct, however, then the argument with which we began may **fail**.
- › Recall Craig's premise:
 - (MAG-1) 'If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true' (Craig 1997)
- › If naturalism is correct, there **is** some reason to think that morality is objectively true, whether or not God exists – because there are good things and right actions, those that are such as to merit approval by God and by us.
- › So if we are to save our original argument, perhaps we ought to look at the voluntarist alternative.

Voluntarism and Subjectivism

Divine Command Theories of Morality

- › Our starting argument claims that God is the only reasonable ground for objective morality.
- › The standard picture: morality is something like a body of **rules and regulations**, and that just as earthly legislation needs a legislature for its creation and a judiciary for its enforcement, so morality needs a lawgiver and judge – God plays both roles (no separation of divine powers).
- › So God as the ‘divine lawgiver’ (Craig 1997) lays down moral decrees or **commands**, which **create right and wrong**:
 - (TS) ‘Right actions are right just because God approves of them, and wrong actions are wrong just because God disapproves of them’ (Kretzmann 1983: 258; see also Brink 2006: 151).
- › Whether or not God is the **source** of morality, God approves of all and only right actions.
- › Divine command theories of morality are a voluntarist explanation of this approval: God’s approval lines up with the moral facts because **right and wrong are explained by God’s attitudes**, not the other way around.

Omnipotence, Voluntarism, and Moral Contingency

- › A natural question: could God's attitudes have been otherwise?
- › Recall that God is **omnipotent**.
- › Since it is possible – though monstrous – to approve of **malicious murdering** (premeditated, of innocent bystanders, for thrills, without remorse, etc.), it is within God's power to approve of it.
- › Voluntarist divine command theories will then entail that malicious murdering **could have been right**, had God decided to bestow his attitudes otherwise than he did.
 - » This depends on the modal logical principle that possibly p and necessarily if p then q jointly entail possibly q .
- › Since God could have regarded the very same situation differently, the moral facts are only **contingently** related to the situation being evaluated.

Moral Supervenience

- › This is a problem to the extent that any actual act of malicious murdering is **necessarily wrong**.

The moral properties of a situation supervene on its natural properties just in case a full specification of the natural properties of the situation fix or determine its moral properties. This implies that two situations cannot differ in their moral properties without differing in their natural properties. So, for example, the racial injustice of the system of apartheid supervened on a complex set of legal, political, social, and economic restrictions on the opportunities of black South Africans and a culture of discriminatory attitudes toward them. Any social system qualitatively identical in all natural respects to this system of apartheid would also be unjust, and any social system containing both blacks and whites that was not unjust would have to differ in some of its natural (legal, political, social, economic, and psychological) properties from the system of apartheid. (Brink 2006: 153)

Supervenience and wrongness

- › An act of malicious murdering has various features.
- › Given supervenience, any act of killing that wasn't wrong would therefore have to differ in some feature or other from any **actual** wrong act of malicious murdering.
 - ›› We cannot vary the wrongness alone, without making other changes to the act or its circumstances.
- › Necessarily, then, any possible act perfectly alike in features to any actual wrong act would **still be wrong**.
- › The problem: God could decide to vary his attitude to an act without it being a response to changed features, given voluntarism.

Possible responses

- › If we say that God could not approve of malicious murder, then if we are to retain divine omnipotence we have two options:
 1. Maintain it is **impossible** for God to approve of the wrong; or
 2. We deny even the claim that necessarily, something is good iff God approves of it, which of course makes both naturalistic and voluntaristic explanations of it redundant!
- › Assuming we want to retain the fact that God makes the correct moral judgments, we have to go for option 1.
- › Since it is possible for us to approve of the wrong, why not God?
- › Maybe it's **omniscience**: God knows something about wrong acts that we do not, and then his omnibenevolence leads him to disapprove.
 - » One thing he would know that we do not is **how the moral supervenes on the non-moral**. But then malicious murder has some **feature** that an omniscient agent would know, and which makes it unapprovable. That feature leads to naturalism – it turns that God approves because he is **responding to** that feature.

The Arbitrariness of Voluntarism

- › To retain voluntarism, we have to allow that malicious murdering is not necessarily wrong, and that there is literally no reason at all that God is responding to when he decides what to approve – that ‘two situations could have different moral properties even if there were no natural differences between them whatsoever’ (Brink 2006: 153).
 - › That is: to save divine voluntarism, it can’t be that there is something for God to know about how the moral supervenes. So it cannot supervene.
- › That God disapproves of murdering, etc. would be ‘arbitrary and contingent’ (Brink 2006: 153); it is **divine whim**.

It seems that ultimately, it is arbitrary that murder and theft, for example, are bad. ... it seems that God could leave all the non-moral properties of the universe as they are; lift off the moral ones and invert them; and drop them back down again, leaving murder and theft as good and such things as kindness and truth-telling as bad. (Mawson 2009: 1035)

The Challenge of Subjectivism

- › Any kind of voluntarism, divine or otherwise, seems to lead to a kind of **subjectivism**:

Ethical objectivity, we said, claims that there are moral facts or truths that obtain independently of the moral beliefs or attitudes of appraisers. Ethical *subjectivism* is one way to deny ethical objectivity. It claims that what is good or bad and right or wrong depends on the moral beliefs or attitudes of appraisers. But [TS] is just subjectivism at the highest level. [It] implies that God's attitudes play a metaphysical, not just an epistemic, role in morality; his attitudes make things good or right. This is a form of subjectivism about ethics. But then the supposition that morality requires a religious foundation, as [TS] insists, threatens, rather than vindicates, the objectivity of morality. (Brink 2006: 154-55)

The Argument from Divine Subjectivism

- Subjectivism** If human morality depends on the evaluative attitudes of some subject, then we have no reason to think human morality is objectively true.
- (DS-1) If morality depends on God's evaluative attitudes (e.g., 'Right actions are right just because God approves of them'), then we have no reason to think human morality is objectively true. (Instance of Subjectivism)
 - (MAG-5) There are objective moral norms, and we ought to follow them. (premise)
 - (DS-2) If God exists, then morality does not depend on him. (DS-1, MAG-5)
- › Note the parallel to Craig's moral argument: we conclude from our lack of reason to accept objective morality given a certain hypothesis, to the falsehood of that hypothesis.

Epistemic Argument Against Divine Command Theory

- › Divine Command Theories also leads to a **sceptical problem**: how do we know that this world isn't itself the result of a divine decision to 'flip' good and evil?
 - › It would explain the evil we see – and our false beliefs about morality are just another evil perpetuated on us by God.
- › Acting morally matters – e.g., if God rewards the virtuous for their virtue, that is a reason to be moral.
- › It is therefore important that God reveal to us how **what his decrees are**.
- › Yet if we look to scripture, we get confusion – 'the Bible is morally inconsistent' (Anderson 2007: 223).
- › God, it seems, has left us subject to divine whim and also refused to relate to us what his whims are (or at least has not related them to us in a way that yields knowledge for us).
 - › Naturalism is better off here, since we can 'use our own independent moral judgment ... to decide which biblical passages to accept' (Anderson 2007: 223).

God and Naturalism: Identity Theories

Naturalism and Omnipotence

- › On the view that moral features supervenes on natural features, there is no challenge to divine omnipotence.
- › For it is not possible to vary the supervening features without varying the subvening ones, and omnipotence is (we assume for now – see lecture 6!) only the power to do anything **possible**.
 - › So it is no limitation on God's power that he is unable to create a world w in which I am in location L and none of the parts I have in w are in L – because *my* location supervenes on the locations of *my parts*.
- › Likewise, it is no limitation on God's power that he cannot make **a world where murdering is approved-by-him** – that would be an impossible world in which moral properties do not supervene on natural properties.
- › So any world God could make that includes murderings like ours, is a world in which those murderings are not approvable.

Knowledge and Approvability

- › Suppose God creates a world w in which murderings like ours exist, with the supervenient property of **unapprovability**.
- › I assume the principle that **to approve of something requires that you believe it to be approvable** – this is certainly plausible for perfectly reflective and perfectly deliberative agents as God is supposed to be.
- › Since God is omniscient, **all of his beliefs are knowledge**.
- › So for God to approve something in w requires that he knows it is approvable.
- › Since he cannot know the falsehood that murderings are approvable in w , he would not believe in w that they are approvable, and hence he would not approve of them in w .
- › So God's perfect knowledge makes his approving of evils impossible, and hence the fact that God doesn't approve of them is no obstacle to his omnipotence.
 - ›› Similarly, God could not believe $2 + 2 = 5$.
- › However, not all is well with the combination of PBT and naturalism

Naturalism and the Argument from Divine Sovereignty

- (D-1) 'Nothing that could count as as absolutely perfect could be dependent on anything else for anything' (Kretzmann 1983: 261). (premise)
- (D-2) If God exists, God's approval of ϕ depends on the rightness of ϕ . (naturalism)
- (D-3) If God exists, God depends on something. (from D-2, existential generalisation)
- (D-4) If God exists, God is not absolutely perfect. (D-1, D-3)
- (D-5) If God exists, God is absolutely perfect. (premise, perfect being theism)
- (D-6) God does not exist. (D-5, D-4, *reductio*.)

Rejecting the Euthyphro Framework

- › Theists will of course want to resist this argument – but the natural premise to reject, D-2, seems to follow from Naturalism, and the Voluntarist choice is even worse:
 - It may look as if the emerging conclusion is that perfect being theism is just incompatible with morality altogether. (Kretzmann 1983: 261)
- › The Euthyphro puzzle seems to force a choice: between the sovereignty of God and the arbitrariness of morality, on the one hand, and the autonomy of ethics and the diminishment of God on the other.
- › But maybe we should reject this framework as a **false dichotomy**.

The Identity Theory

the neo-Platonist intuition suggests, to give us a unitary object of proper worship and allegiance let us say that the good simply *is* God's nature and the general character of God's commands flows of necessity from that; because God is in His nature loving, for example, thus He commands that we love one another. ... Going down this path, we avoid both the problem of arbitrariness and the problem of sovereignty. The good is not arbitrary: given that God could not have failed to exist and could not have failed to have the nature that He does, there is indeed, as our intuitions would suggest ... no possible world in which values are different, e.g., in which murder is an acceptable hobby. But neither is the good something outside and prior to God, *contra* the traditional Platonist line; it is God's own nature. ...

everything other than God gets to be good or bad by its resembling or failing to resemble God's moral nature, but of God we may truly say, 'He just is what being good is'. (Mawson 2009: 1036)

Beyond Naturalism and Voluntarism

- › The identity theory, as I label it, is an attempt to reject the forced choice between naturalism and voluntarism.
- › Those doctrines were attempts to explain the truth of this claim:
 - (E) God approves of ϕ -ing iff ϕ -ing is right.
- › If God is identical to perfect goodness (Kretzmann 1983: 263), and likewise,
 - (B) Perfect goodness recommends ϕ -ing iff ϕ -ing is right,it then follows that (E) is true.
- › (E) becomes **insubstantial**: it isn't a claim that links two distinct things, such that we might ask **why** it holds and expect some substantive answer as to which side of the biconditional is **fundamental**.
 - › It is rather just a way of expressing a non-substantial claim, one that follows from an informative identity (like Frege's example of *the Morning Star is the Evening Star* (1892: 156)) and a triviality.

Objective Collection Theories

- › Consider this analogous theory: the **objective collection** theory of goodness.
- › Let's assume this **trivial biconditional**:
 - (OL) An action appears within the objectively correct collection of right actions iff it is right.
- › Then add this **identity**:
 - (GOL) God's approved actions are identical to the objectively correct collection of right actions.
- › And we can derive:
 - (GM) An action appears within God's approved actions iff it is right.
- › And we need no explanation here – we have an identity and an analytic truth.

Divine Simplicity (Kretzmann)

- › One disanalogy presents itself: **there is no independent reason to identify God's approved actions with the objective list.**
 - › This identity, if true, may not stand in need of further explanation – but it is nevertheless hardly something the atheist is going to be inclined to accept, and many theists will reject it too.
- › By contrast, the idea that God is identical with perfect goodness does have a supporting argument.

Kretzmann's argument

- (DS-1) God is absolutely simple, 'altogether without components of any kind' (Kretzmann 1983: 261). (premise, perfect-being theology)
- (DS-2) If X is an attribute of God and X is not identical with God, then X is a (mere) component of God. (premise, theory of logical parts)
- (DS-3) Goodness is an attribute of God. (premise, perfect-being theology)
- (DS-C) Goodness is identical to God.

Objection: God and goodness don't seem identical

If two terms denote the same thing, so that we have a true identity statement, anything we know of that thing, we know of it. Since we know of goodness that it is goodness, then if God is goodness, we must also know of God that it is goodness. But it is possible to know that goodness is goodness without knowing that God is goodness.

- › Response: we do know of God that it is goodness, if it is. After all, *goodness is goodness* and *God is goodness* would be two ways of presenting the very same state of affairs.
- › But we needn't recognise that state of affairs **when presented in the form *God is goodness***, even if we recognise it presented in the other form.
- › An **informative identity** is any true identity statement that need not be recognised as expressing a true identity (Frege 1892; Stalnaker 1984: 72–85). And *God is goodness*, says Kretzmann, is among these.

Objection: Intensional differences

- › Two attributes or properties are **co-extensive** just when the same things actually have them.
 - » Consider: *having a heart* and *having a kidney*.
- › But these properties aren't the same, since it is possible to have one without the other – they are **intensionally distinct**.
- › But if God is absolutely simple, he is identical to each of his attributes; and by transitivity of identity, they are each identical to each other.
- › But this is false, since it is possible that something be perfectly good without being perfectly wise or perfectly powerful.
 - » Couldn't an all-powerful entity be merely indifferent to the sufferings of humanity?
- › Even worse, isn't **ordinary goodness** also among God's attributes? And isn't ordinary powerfulness among them too? (It would be weird to say he is perfectly good but not even good (Kretzmann 1983: 268).) But then goodness is power too – which it clearly is not.

God and Prudential Reasons to be moral

The Divine Incentiviser

God plays a motivational role in ethics if he provides a needed incentive to be moral. If we reckon only the earthly costs and benefits of virtue, it appears we cannot always show that one is better off being moral. But if justice requires punishing vice and rewarding virtue, then God's perfect justice seems to imply that he would use heaven and hell to reward virtue and punish vice. Because the afterlife is eternal, its sanctions and rewards would dwarf the earthly costs and benefits of virtue and vice. It follows that the prospect of divine sanctions and rewards could provide a prudential motivation for morality that appears unavailable if we restrict our attention to secular sanctions and rewards. (Brink 2006: 159-60)

Crude Consequentialism

- › Craig says: ‘Given the finality of death, it really does not matter how you live’ (Craig 1997).
- › Ordinarily, if I say that it doesn’t matter whether you do A or B, it is because it is **permissible** to do either.
- › But since some ways of living are permissible, and other ways of living are impermissible, it clearly matters how you live, regardless of what happens after death.
- › Craig here must therefore be rejecting this theory of what makes a choice matter – and he **presupposes** that a choice can’t matter, or have moral significance, or be evaluated, without some further **practical consequences**.
- › Presumably, Craig thinks, virtue doesn’t pay out in good consequences during life. Since we have reason to be good, there must therefore be an afterlife with divine reward for goodness – where, again, goodness is merely a matter of what God happens to approve.

Why Be Moral?

- › It seems only God, with infinite rewards and punishments at his disposal, could ensure a **perfect overlap** between what we have best reason to do and what it is right to do.
- › But why think there is such an overlap? Why think that **reasons to be moral** can only be prudential?
 - › Perhaps our moral duties involve ‘nonderivative reason to benefit others’ (Brink 2006: 162), so that the best answer to the question, ‘why be moral?’ is ‘because practical rationality demands morality’.
 - › Perhaps moral action is its own reward – cultivating ‘other-regarding virtues make[s] a constitutive contribution to the agent’s own happiness’ (Brink 2006: 161).
- › We can have practical reason to be moral, on either view, without prudential regard for external consequences.

References

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth S (2007) 'If God Is Dead, Is Everything Permitted?', in Louise Antony, ed., *Philosophers Without Gods*: 215–30. Oxford University Press.
- Brink, David O (2006) 'The Autonomy of Ethics', in Michael Martin, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*: 149–65. Cambridge University Press.
- Craig, William Lane (1997) 'The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality', *Foundations* 5: 9–12.
- Frege, Gottlob (1892/1997) 'On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*', in Michael Beaney, ed., Max Black, trans., *The Frege Reader*: 151–80. Blackwell.
- Kretzmann, Norman (1983/2010) 'Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro', in Graham Oppy and Michael Scott, eds., *Reading Philosophy of Religion*: 257–70. Wiley-Blackwell.

References (cont.)

Mawson, Tim (2009) 'Morality and Religion', *Philosophy Compass* 4: 1033–43.
doi:[10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00244.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00244.x).

Nerlich, Graham (1967) 'Popular Arguments for the Existence of God', in P Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6: 407–11. Macmillan.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/popular-arguments-existence-god>.

Payne, Tony (2017) 'Is There Moral Truth Out There? A Response to Scott Cowdell on Gender and Identity'. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/is-there-moral-truth-out-there-a-response-to-scott-cowdell-on-ge/10095364>.

Stalnaker, Robert C (1984) *Inquiry*, A Bradford Book. MIT Press.