

Article

A New Explanation of Why the Euthyphro Dilemma Is a False Dilemma

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Abstract: The article gives a new explanation for why the Euthyphro dilemma is a false dilemma and argues that it is a middle position that both the theist and the atheist could accept. The argument is that both the will of God and the preferences of individuals are necessary truthmakers for what the good is. Each of the components is insufficient on its own, but jointly they are sufficient. Individual preferences are necessary to provide the normativity of the good, while God is necessary for the objectivity of the good. It is the combination of individual preferences into a possible world that is valued the most by the most that gives the normative goal for moral choices. It is the knowledge of God of what would most probably be valued the most by the most that makes a concrete choice the morally right thing to do in a concrete situation.

Keywords: the Euthyphro dilemma; God and morality; metaethics

1. Introduction

Divine command theory is a way of understanding morality where the will of God is the truthmaker for ethical norms. The classical challenge to divine command theory is the Euthyphro dilemma: is something good because God wants it, or does God want it because it is good? If something is good because God wants it, it seems to make morality arbitrary.

One way of defending divine command theory from the Euthyphro dilemma is to argue that the dilemma is false, as it sets up a contrast where none exists (Taliaferro 1998, pp. 203–4).¹ Robert Adams is an example of such an approach, arguing that God and goodness should be identified with each other, which means that God and the good are identical (Adams 1999). One should thus accept both horns of the dilemma since there is no contradiction between them.²

There are many different variants of divine command theory, but the Euthyphro dilemma remains a difficult challenge. One can try to restrict the theory to avoid arbitrariness, but then it seems that one must qualify the will of God, making something other than the will of God the truthmaker of ethical norms (Murphy 2012). There are also several other problems with divine command theory, but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss divine command theory. Instead, the article aims to provide a very different explanation for why the Euthyphro dilemma is a false dilemma by presenting specific definitions of “God” and “goodness”.³

God is here understood in the tradition of theism as the good and omnipotent creator of the world. However, God’s properties are understood more in the direction of open theism than in classical theism. God is not taken to be simple, timeless, and impassible but instead as being in time, not knowing the future. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the properties of God, so this is merely mentioned as stating presuppositions from the beginning for the sake of clarification.

More precisely, the article argues that both the will of God and the preferences of individuals are necessary components of what the good is. Each of the components is insufficient on its own, but jointly they are sufficient. In brief terms, the reasoning is as



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follows (further elaborated below): Individual preferences are necessary for the normativity of the good, but God is necessary for the objectivity of the good.⁴ It is the combination of individual preferences into a possible world that is valued the most by the most that gives the normative goal for moral choices. It is the knowledge of God of what would most probably be valued the most by the most that makes a concrete choice the morally right thing to do in a concrete situation.

Note that in this theory, God does not need to exist for the good to be good. God's knowledge is just a way of describing a truth: that something is probably the best way to the best world. What God knows is most probably the best way to the best world is the definition of what is morally right to do in a situation. It is not the fact that God knows or wills something that makes it morally right. This understanding of the relation between God and morality does not solve the Euthyphro dilemma in the sense of showing how the will of God is the truthmaker of goodness, but instead, it is a new way of showing the Euthyphro dilemma to be a false dilemma. Given the understanding below of goodness, God's knowledge, and God's will, I will argue that it is right both to say that God wants what is good because it is good, but also that good is defined as that which God wants. A theist can then argue that if God exists as the omniscient being presented here, the challenge from the Euthyphro dilemma can be avoided.

One could think that a theory of morality where God does not need to exist in order for good to be good is irrelevant to the discussion of the Euthyphro dilemma, but that is not the case. Theists typically want to say that moral norms can have truth value; that the will of God is the morally right thing to do; that God is sovereign in power and freedom; and that God is the explanation or truthmaker for moral norms. In the theory presented in this article, it is true that moral norms have truth value; that the will of God is the morally right thing to do; God is sovereign in power and freedom; and God is the explanation or truthmaker for moral norms.

Granted, God is less sovereign here than in divine command theory and less explanatory. As the creator of everything, God is, in my account, sovereign and the explanation and truthmaker of why anything—the good included—exists. But it is not the fact that God wills it that makes moral norms true (although God's will is indirectly relevant in the sense that God created the conditions and possibilities for everything that is good).

Given the understanding of God and goodness to be presented, both atheists and theists could agree that God's will and the good are identical, and thus that the Euthyphro dilemma is a false dilemma since the horns are identical. But the atheist and the theist will still disagree on whether the hypothetical God in the definition of goodness actually exists.

The next section presents and defends a theory of what goodness is and how it should be defined.⁵ This is followed with a section using this theory of goodness to analyze the Euthyphro dilemma, and then I conclude.

2. A Theory of Goodness

If a theory of ethics says that moral claims have a truth value, the challenge is to explain what makes ethically normative claims true. The different ways of explaining this are either naturalistic, non-naturalistic, or supernaturalistic. A naturalist refers to natural states to explain what makes norms true; a non-naturalist typically argues that values are ontologically irreducible entities, such as, for example, platonic ideas; and a supernaturalist argues that the will of God makes norms true. Each of these approaches encounters its own set of difficulties. Naturalistic theories are typically criticized for reducing the normative to something descriptive, which makes the normative disappear. Non-naturalistic theories are typically criticized for depending on mysterious and ontologically implausible non-natural values. Supernaturalistic theories are typically criticized with the Euthyphro dilemma.

I argue that the truthmaker for ethically normative claims is a possible world.⁶ There is a way that our world could have developed which is good and which can function as an objective, normative measurement of goodness without referring to mysterious entities or removing the normativity. But what makes it true that this possible world is a good world?

To make an ethically good or right decision means to find out what is right or good, all things considered. We should distinguish “good” in the sense of individual good, potential good, and morally/ethically good. There are different people who find different things to be good, and the value of things lies in their potential for being valued by someone. If individual goodness is just whatever somebody finds good, and potential goodness is whatever somebody can find to be good, then that is an explanation of value that does not refer to anything mysterious.

People have different preferences and different goals and different things they value as good, and thus different reasons for acting in different ways. But can we argue that something is the best preference or best goal or best understanding of what is good or best reason for acting a certain way? If a reason presupposes a goal, can we argue that something is the best goal or the best-justified goal? I suggest that the best goal could be the one that integrates the most goals. That overarching goal could be that which is valued the most by the most or makes the most individuals reach most of their goals. The overarching goal is then the best goal in the sense of being the most goal-inclusive goal. All the individual reasons have been summed to the best reason. This is how I define “morally good” as what is most inclusive of individual goods. The morally normative reason includes most individually motivating reasons.

The logic of this approach to explaining normativity is that normativity requires a goal. When you ought to do something, that which you ought to do is a means to a goal. People have their individual goals, but just being a goal is not enough to make it a moral goal. What is needed for the moral goal is for it to be the best goal for everyone. The goal that the most would value the most would be the best goal for everyone, and for that reason, the moral goal to strive for.

While this suggestion resembles preference utilitarianism, it contains some important adjustments that make it avoid the most common problems of utilitarianism. Two important differences must be clarified. First, I do not argue that what is best to do is that which, here and now, fulfills the most preferences. Then a majority could prefer to exploit a minority. Instead, we should think of the overarching good as the best possible way to the best possible world, and this is the way to the world that would most probably be valued the most by the most. That includes our way from the present situation to the best possible world, and there is clearly a better way to such a world than one where the majority exploits the minority.

Secondly, the best way to the best world includes the possibility of changing preferences. Some people have preferences that cause suffering, and this clearly is a case where changing preferences in some situations could make more people value life more. A society with a preference for violence obviously would not be the best possible world valued by the most people and, therefore, would benefit from changing preferences away from violence.

To sum up, thus far, we need individual preferences as truthmakers for what is good in order for goodness to be normative, but this good should be the best way to the best world, including changing preferences. This gives us a new set of problems: The humans living today do not know what the best world would be, concretely speaking, or what most would prefer the most, including present humans and animals and future humans and animals (both those who live today and those yet unborn). But there is a truth about what concretely would probably be the best way to the best world, even if no humans know that best way.

At this juncture, a hypothetical being is introduced into the discussion. The definition of goodness needs an omniscient being who knows as much as it is metaphysically possible for one being to know, including knowing how others feel, which I specify by calling this being “all-empathetic”. Maybe we live in an undetermined universe, where not even an omniscient being could know what actually would have become the best possible future. For this reason, I add the qualifier “probably”, and say that the best way to the best world is

that which an omniscient and all-empathetic being would know is most probably valued the most by the most.

If God exists, God is such an omniscient being. It is difficult to imagine that something other than God could be omniscient since omniscience seems to imply omnipotence (Ward 1982, p. 135). A being cannot know everything that it is metaphysically possible to know if another being is more powerful and able to hide knowledge from the first. Great power is needed to ensure that one has maximal knowledge, and it is difficult to see how any other being than God could be omniscient without having omnipotence. An omniscient and omnipotent being deserves to be called God.

In any case, I do not need to argue that there must be an omniscient being and that this omniscient being must be God. The reason is that my argument in this article is merely the following claim: if God exists as the omniscient being described here, that is a new way of solving the Euthyphro dilemma by showing it to be a false dilemma.

To “value” something is a term I use here broadly for experiencing (cognitively and/or emotionally) something as good (either individually or ethically good). Valuation can include pleasure but can also be just that an individual prefers something instead of something else. It requires the capacity to experience something as preferable.⁷ When I speak about being valued the most by the most, I do not specify humans or living beings since we do not know who has the capacity for valuing something. “Most” thus refers to any individual with a capacity for having preferences as here defined in terms of valuation.

In practice, it is humans who must try to determine what is probably the best way to the best world, regardless of whether God exists or not. But that does not change the fact that, given this definition, there is a true answer to what is objectively good, even if humans do not know what the concrete answer is.

Individuals with preferences are required in order to have a plausible truthmaker for what goodness in the normative moral sense is. But a hypothetical omniscient being is required to give a definition of goodness that can be true and thus objective (as mentioned, “objective” and “true” are here used interchangeably). Note that only the hypothetical being is the truthmaker of objective ethics, which means that the truthmaker is actually that which is most probably the way to the world most valued by most. Regardless of whether God exists, we obtain a good theory of objective ethics if we understand the good as the best possible way to the best world, which an all-knowing and all-empathetic being would know to most probably be valued the most by the most. But if God exists as this omniscient being, that is a new way of showing that the Euthyphro dilemma is false.

I realize that this theory is similar to an ideal observer theory. The theory is most similar to the preference utilitarianism of Richard Hare, who also includes an ideal observer (which Hare calls an “archangel”) (Hare 1981). The most important difference from preference utilitarianism is the inclusion of the best way to the best world, which means that what is right to do is not what fulfills the most preferences here and now. Instead, what is right to do is that which would be the best way from here to a world with the most valuation, and that includes that people can change their preferences.

When it comes to ideal observer theories in moral philosophy, such theories struggle with the following problem: Either the ideal observer does not have ethically normative properties, but then the problem is that we have no good reason to believe that the ideal observer will make ethically good judgments. It does not follow from being impartial, having all knowledge of non-moral facts, being rational, etc., that the ideal observer should make a morally good judgment. Or the ideal observer has ethically normative properties, in which case these properties explain why something is good and not the ideal observer, and thus it becomes circular reasoning to say that the ideal observer explains what is morally right. The ideal observer runs into a similar problem as the Euthyphro dilemma: is something good because the ideal observer judges it to be so, or does the ideal observer judge it to be good because it is good?

In my theory, normativity comes not from the ideal observer, but from the best goal being the combination of individual goals that gives the most valuation (best way to the

best world). Since no individual knows what is the concrete best way to the best world, the ideal observer is a way to describe the relevant knowledge for deciding what is morally right to do in a situation: what is most probably the best way to the best world? The ideal observer does not have to exist since the knowledge of the ideal observer is just a way of describing a truth: that something is most probably the best way to the best world. That the ideal observer wants something is not what makes something morally good, but what an ideal observer concretely wants in a concrete situation is a way to define what is morally good. In other words: What God (or a hypothetical ideal observer defined as an omniscient and all-empathetic being) knows is most probably the best way to the best world is the definition of what is morally right to do in that situation. It is not the fact that God knows or wills something that makes it morally right.

The preferences of individuals are what give normativity, and the ideal observer is what gives objectivity, but the ideal observer could also be described as a truth, and is thus not necessary. If God exists, God is the ideal observer. I argue that this is the right way to understand the relation between God and the good. God becomes less sovereign, but on the other hand, the Euthyphro dilemma is avoided.

3. The Euthyphro Dilemma in Light of This Theory of Goodness

With the definition of God and goodness given here, the alternatives of the Euthyphro dilemma coincide. On the one hand, God wants what is good because it is good, but on the other hand, what is good is defined as that which God wants—without presupposing that God exists. Note that God is here understood as an omniscient and all-empathetic being. The omniscience is taken to imply rationality in the sense that when God knows what is best for everyone, God also wants what is best for everyone. When it comes to what is the best way to the best world, God's knowledge and God's will are the same. God knows what is the best way to the best world, and God wants it to be actualized. But God's willing it does not add anything more than God's knowledge that makes it morally right.

Humans only know abstractly that whatever is the best way to the best world is good, but we do not know concretely which actions and choices are in fact the best way to the best world. This is where the definition of goodness needs the omniscient being who has concrete knowledge and thus a concrete will: God knows in concrete situations what concrete choice will most probably be the best way to the best world and wants us to make specific choices in accordance with that.

What God concretely wills in a situation based on God's knowledge is thus what defines what is concretely the morally right choice in the situation. But note that on my account, when it comes to moral choices, God's knowledge and God's will are the same. What is morally right to do in a concrete situation = what God wills in a concrete situation = what God knows is most probably the best way to the best world in a concrete situation = what is most probably the best way to the best world in a concrete situation. This way of understanding the relation between God's will and knowledge is meant to avoid the problems that follow when God's willing something alone is the truthmaker for what is morally good.

The definition works equally well independently of whether or not God exists. If God exists, then God is included in the group of individuals among whom we search for what is best for most, and what God values must be included in the definition.⁸ If God does not exist, then there is no God to include in the term "most".

In the original Euthyphro dilemma, God's will is meant to be the truthmaker of moral truths in the one horn of the dilemma. This is taken by supporters of the dilemma to be a bad alternative since it would make moral truths dependent on arbitrary decisions by the supposed creator of the universe. The other horn of the dilemma is that God wants something because it is good. But that horn does not give us a truthmaker for moral truths. If God wants that which is good because it is good, we do not understand what makes the good good.

If we qualify the meaning of it, we can use the sum of the preferences of individuals that have preferences as a truthmaker to explain how moral claims can be true. But those preferences alone will not suffice. It is possible that the majority—or even everyone—has bad preferences, i.e., preferences that do not actualize the best way to the best world, but instead a worse way to a worse world. And preference alone is a descriptive fact from which it is insufficient to draw normative conclusions.

What is required as a normative measurement and truthmaker is the possible world where everybody has the best life, i.e., fulfilling the most preferences such that it is valued the most by the most. However, this cannot be defined by the preferences of those who live today since their preferences would have to change, and we do not know how they must change in order for everyone to value the world the most. To define it, we need to refer to that which an omniscient being would know was most probably the best way to the best world. Then we obtain a normative goal to reach for but without any arbitrariness in the will of God. The normative goal is the best way to the best world, which God is here assumed to will.

Combining preferences and the will of God like this results in a theory of truthmakers for moral truths which can retain the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of the alternative views, which I aim to indicate briefly in the following with common arguments for and against naturalism, non-naturalism, and supernaturalism to show how the theory here presented integrates the advantages and avoids the objections.

Naturalism is typically defended by arguing that it avoids the problems of non-naturalism and supernaturalism, but a positive argument in its defense is the supervenience argument. The supervenience argument refers to the very plausible claim that moral facts seem to supervene upon descriptive facts. Supervenience means that A supervenes upon B if there cannot be a change in A without a change in B.

It seems clear that if there are two identical universes with identical histories, a moral norm cannot be right in one and wrong in the other. For example, if everything descriptive is identical in two universes, genocide cannot be wrong in one of the universes and right in the other. But if supernaturalism is right (in a version emphasizing the sovereign freedom of God), it seems that God could decide that torture was right in one universe and wrong in the other. Or if non-naturalism is right, it seems that two identical physical universes could be combined with different non-natural ethical values such that, for example, there could be justice in one of the universes but not in the other. Thus, the supervenience argument is meant to support naturalism over non-naturalism and supernaturalism.

How does the theory proposed in this article relate to the supervenience argument? The supervenience argument is not an objection to the theory proposed. Two identical possible universes or actual universes will be identical in their moral qualities, all of which depend on the normative measuring stick, which is the best way to the best world.

However, the supervenience argument reinforces the theory proposed here because it can retain the support from the supervenience argument while avoiding two common objections against naturalism. The two objections are that (1) naturalism commits the deontic fallacy of concluding from is to ought, and (2) naturalism reduces normativity to descriptive facts and loses the normative force of ethics.

The theory here proposed does not deduce from is to ought, but from ought to ought (or from is to is, depending on how you see it). An “ought” is basically a means to a goal, as in “you ought to watch the new James Bond movie”. The goal gives normativity a measuring rod to show how close you are to the goal. “Ought” in the moral sense requires a specific goal, and it is contested in moral philosophy what this goal is. Is it to be like God, the platonic idea of goodness, to make most people happy, or what? My suggestion is that the moral goal is the goal that is best in the sense of being the goal that would make most individuals value life the most. This is a description of a possible world, which is normative in the sense of being a goal to strive for and descriptive in the sense of having descriptive content.

The normative measuring stick is different ways to different worlds, where the quality is determined in terms of most valuation by most. The best way to the best world is a future possibility, and if one wants to reach that goal, there are certain ethical norms that we can follow which will lead us to the best goal. This is an explanation of what it means to deduce from ought to ought, where “ought” is understood as a descriptive possibility—meaning that, in one sense, it deduces from is to is. I believe this is the right way to think about moral normativity.

This is an explanation of what makes moral claims true in a way that can avoid the objection that ethical values are “queer entities” (Mackie 1977). The queer argument is a traditional argument against non-naturalism since it seems strange that there should be some non-natural entities that we can have knowledge about. But it is not strange that there is a possible future different from the present since this is something we have all experienced.

There is a possible future we can use as an ideal to critically compare the present with. This gives ethics its normative force without making that normative force into something mysterious we do not have reason to believe exists.

To sum up so far: The supervenience argument and the queer argument are arguments for naturalism and against non-naturalism or supernaturalism, while the normative force argument and the deontic fallacy argument are against naturalism and for non-naturalism or supernaturalism. The theory here proposed integrates all of these arguments in supporting the theory.

There is another traditional objection to naturalism which is meant to support non-naturalism, and that is the open-question argument by G. E. Moore (Moore 1903). This argument says that no definition can be given of the good, since we can always ask meaningfully—for any definition of the good—whether it is in fact good. For example, if “good” is defined as that which gives the most pleasure to the most, we can meaningfully ask whether that which gives the most pleasure to the most is actually good.

This is also an objection to the theory proposed here since I have defined the good as the best possible way to the best world an all-knowing and all-sympathetic being would know to most probably be valued the most by the most. And we can meaningfully ask whether that way is actually good.

I consider this objection to be invalid. The reason we feel that we can meaningfully ask whether any definition of “good” is actually good is because we have a vague definition of “good” based on many different ideas and experiences of goodness. But it does not follow from this that any definition of “good” cannot be right or best. We also feel that it is always possible to ask meaningfully whether a definition of culture, knowledge, religion, etc. is actually culture, knowledge, religion, etc. It does not follow that all of these terms are undefinable. The open-question argument lacks merit.

When it comes to arguments for and against supernaturalism, we have already seen how the theory proposed avoids the most common objection against supernaturalism, which is the Euthyphro dilemma. There is another argument which is of no value to those who do not believe God exists but is important to those who do believe God exists. That is that God should be thought of as sovereign in relation to everything, including morality.

I have two responses to this. First of all, we should distinguish between whether something exists because of God or is what it is because of God. In other words, we should distinguish between existence and essence.

In the Euthyphro dilemma, the question is not whether the good exists because God wants it to exist, but whether it is good because God wants it to be good. In my view, believers in God should find it more important that God explains the existence of things rather than their essence. The believer should say that that which is good—or funny or sickening—exists because it is created by God; the believer should not say that that which is good is good because God wants it, funny because it makes God laugh, or sickening because it makes God throw up.

Regardless of this first response, the believer could still think that God is not sovereign enough in my proposal, for my focus is on what God knows, not on what God wills. Something is good in my theory not because God wills it but because God knows that it will be best for everyone. A believer could thus think that this proposal fails to acknowledge the power of the omnipotent creator.

In response, I emphasize that believers should remember that God created the world. When God knows what is best for everyone, it is because God created the world such that a particular possible world would be best for everyone. When God knows what is best, it is based on what God wanted to be true when God created the world. If God created an indeterministic world, there will be some openness concerning what concretely is the best, but then it was God's decision first to create such a world.

This means that, for the believer, God's sovereignty is retained. Divine command theorists probably prefer a stronger emphasis on the sovereignty of God, but that comes with the price of the Euthyphro dilemma, which is avoided in my account. My theory works equally well if God does not exist. This should be thought of as an advantage. It would not be morally good if people who come to believe that God does not exist conclude that there is no right or wrong and that they can do whatever they want.

4. Conclusions

This article has defended an understanding of God and goodness that makes the alternatives of the Euthyphro dilemma coincide. On the one hand, God wants what is good because it is good, but on the other hand, what is good is defined as that which God wants. The good is the best way to the best world, and the best way to the best world is the way and the world an omniscient and all-sympathetic God would know was most probably valued the most by the most.

The definition works regardless of whether or not God exists. As all-knowing, God knows what most all would probably value the most, and as all-empathetic, God presumably wants what is good to happen, which means that God's will and the good are defined in light of each other. But the definition works equally well independently of whether or not God exists. If God exists, God is included in the group of individuals among whom we search for what is best for most, and what God values must be included in the definition. If God does not exist, there is no God to include in the term "most".

Some theists might find that this understanding gives too little support for sovereignty to God. On the other hand, it gives more support to the goodness of God. I find it to be an advantage that good remains objectively good even if one rejects the existence of God.

One may object that the solution makes a possible world the truthmaker of objective ethics instead of God, and thus is a rejection of the horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, which makes the will of God the truthmaker of ethics. In a sense, that is correct since, even if the will of God is part of the definition of what is good, the existence of God is not required. I find that to be an advantage since one can then avoid the arbitrariness that is the problem if goodness is based on acts of will alone. For the theist who believes that God does exist, goodness should be grounded in a good will, which is the proposal suggested here. If God's knowledge, God's will, and goodness are understood, as in this article, the Euthyphro dilemma is a false dilemma.

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Notes

- ¹ I use "the good" and "goodness" interchangeably, referring to the ethical concept of the good in general.
- ² Note that in Plato's dialogue, the context is polytheism, referring to gods (who may disagree with each other), but in this article, monotheism is presupposed.
- ³ It need not be a false dilemma given other definitions of the terms in the dilemma, but that could be said about any dilemma. The article argues that these are good definitions of God and goodness which both the theist and the atheist could accept.

- 4 «Objectivity» should here be understood in the sense that what is objective is that which is true.
- 5 The theory presented in section two, is a short version of a long theory presented in (Søvik 2022, chap. 13). It is beyond the scope of an article to defend a whole theory of goodness against alternative theories, which means that this theory must here be presupposed.
- 6 By “a possible world”, I refer to a physically possible world, the possibility of which is rooted in our actual world. The term includes both the end point and the way to get there (from our world as it is today). In other words, the best possible world is the best physically possible future development of the world.
- 7 (Hausman 2012) distinguishes between different concepts of preference: enjoyment, comparative evaluation, favouring, and choice ranking—Daniel M. Hausman, *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). By “valuation” I include both that it expresses appreciation and that it enables us to compare alternatives.
- 8 If God exists, it raises the problem that God may have valuations that are incomprehensible to us. Since there is no rational way for us to include incomprehensible valuation in our human ethics, we must create our ethics from our human perspective with the always valid proviso that there may be relevant facts we are not aware of.

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