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WHY IS GOD GOOD? *EUTYPHRO, TIMAEUS AND THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY*

In *Eutyphro* Plato presents a dilemma¹. Is it that acts are good because God wants them to be performed²? Or are they good independently of God's will and God wants them because they are good? One can also ask why God himself is good. Is God good because He is what He is? Or is He good because He wants and does what is good independently of Him? Many people think that God is surely good in and of himself, not because He conforms to some abstract rules or whatever else. Not so many hold in addition that good acts are good precisely and only because they are what God wants. This is what I happen to think. This view is commonly referred to as the Divine Command Theory³.

The trouble with this proposal is simply this: what does it have to do with our ordinary notion of 'being good'? If what is good depends on God's will, does it not mean that God can do whatever He likes, or, worse still, decree that what is bad be good or vice versa? Why, if at all, can we say that God is good in some common-sensical sense?

The classic response goes along the following lines:

- (1) It is God's nature to act in a certain way.
- (2) God's acts are good in the ordinary sense.

¹ P l a t o: *Eutyphro* 10e.

² Although this essay makes a steady progress from simple arguments to more technical ones, I have tried to minimize the use of the philosophical jargon in this paper. Therefore I always use the word 'good' and avoid 'right', 'just', 'virtuous' etc. I also take considerable liberty in reformulating Plato's ideas.

³ For stylistic simplicity I talk as if God's existence were taken for granted. But my discussion can be understood as analysis of *conceptions* of God and the good. Such analysis does not presuppose the ontological commitment to God's existence.

(3) The abstract moral principles which we use are in fact reflections of what is in God's nature and what accords with His will.

(4) God necessarily has the nature He has.

Working with these assumptions it is easy to show that:

(i) we can say that God is good in the ordinary sense (God will do what is good without fail)

(ii) goodness of acts depends on conformity with God's will, and the goodness of God's acts does not depend on anything external to God

(iii) nonetheless, God could not arbitrarily decide what is good and bad.

What this account does not explain, however, is why actually God happens to be good in the ordinary sense. We should not assume that the harmony is always perfect. Human opinions on what is good differ. So there have to be some divergences between God's view and the views of some people. Yet it seems that in some cases there is a general agreement among humans. For example, everybody should agree that gratuitous murder is bad. But why then is it not in God's nature to want to kill people without any reason?

Here is where Plato's *Timaeus* comes in. In a remarkable passage Plato asserts that *God is not jealous*⁴. We might take it to imply:

(1) God does not need anything (from anyone).

We will make two further assumptions:

(2) God only acts for a reason.

(3) God is perfectly rational and knowledgeable.

Now, reasons for acting can be divided in two mutually exclusive classes:

(i) self-interested reasons

(ii) altruistic reasons.

Bad acts can be committed either

(a) for self-interested reasons or,

(b) for altruistic reasons due to ignorance or imperfect rationality⁵ or,

⁴ P l a t o: *Timaeus* 29e.

⁵ What I mean is that someone may come to believe that something is good while it is bad, and act accordingly. The failure of *execution* of a good act, resulting in a *de facto* bad act does not concern us here. By itself, it does not reflect badly on the moral character of the agent. It is of course possible to add another assumption about God: (4) God does not make mistakes and nothing can prevent the execution of God's decision. This, together

(c) for no reason.

The division is exhaustive⁶. Now, God cannot commit bad acts for self-interested reasons, for, by (1), He does not need anything. Nothing which happens makes Him better (or worse) off⁷. Any failure of reason or knowledge is inconsistent with (3), so option (b) is ruled out as well. From (2) it follows that God cannot commit a bad act for no reason. Therefore, God cannot commit a bad act.

This does not yet explain why God acts at all. There are two possible explanations. We might regard not acting as a specific moral act. For example, failing to help when one should have helped normally counts as a bad moral act. In the case of God not acting would mean not making a world. Now, why would God not make a world? We can entertain three possibilities.

(a) There is a self-interested reason. But the world does not yet exist. So how could its coming into being impinge on God's self-interest? First, something the world could *do* would pose a direct threat to God's existence or well-being. We may assume that this is absurd. So it seems that the mere presence of the world would be unwelcome. The only thing which comes to my mind when I try to understand this is that by making a world God would cease to be a *unique* living being. We come to see that Plato's initially startling statement 'God is not *jealous*' is very apt. The only way we can understand a negative self-interested attitude towards something only potentially being is in terms of some kind of jealousy.

with (3) seems enough to ensure that God does not commit bad acts. It is not even necessary to assume that God is almighty, not to mention omnipotence. We need not assume that God could do whatever He wanted. It is enough that if He could not do something, He would not want to (this follows from His perfect rationality). Admittedly, if perfect knowledge does not amount to omniscience, God's acts could have consequences unforeseen by Him. In this case we might want to say either that actual consequences do not really matter for the goodness of acts (and only expectations or motivation matter) or that forbearing to act is not to perform an act. How omissions should be morally evaluated would be a further issue. If omniscience is assumed, these problems do not arise.

⁶ My colleague Ion Sterpan has observed that one could do evil for evil's sake, and so the division is not exhaustive. This objection cuts deep and I do not think I can do full justice to it here. But I am inclined to think that evil is not something which cannot give one a special reason for acting and that apparent cases of doing evil for its own sake' should be analyzed as involving self-interest. More importantly, I claim that in any case God is not in a position to want evil for its own sake. I assume that evil is not a special intrinsic property, but is only a privation, a relative absence of good. Let me note that saying this does not commit us to any substantial conception of the good and evil – what is actually good and what is bad is still an open question. Now, if God valued the absence of good rather than good, he would not create anything at all. And if he wanted both good and evil, he would be inconsistent with himself which would go against his perfect rationality. Similar issues will be discussed towards the end of the paper.

⁷ To be more precise, we should say 'nothing *can* make Him better or worse' and say that God *cannot* be in any need.

(b) There is an altruistic reason. If the only world which could be made were a very bad world, it could be better not to create it. Fortunately, it is possible to make a good world, as Plato asserts, or at least not a very bad one, as some more pessimist-minded people would say.

(c) There is no particular reason for not making a world.

Given our assumptions, God can fail to make a world neither for a self-interested reason, nor for no reason at all. There is also no altruistic reason not to make a world. And there apparently is a very good altruistic reason to make it: it will be a good world and good for its inhabitants. Therefore, being by nature good, God will necessarily make a world, and for a good reason too. This is the Platonist explanation.

The second explanation will have to deny that an omission to act should be regarded as an act. It has been established that there is no reason for God not to make a world. But if God did not make a world, this would be consistent with premiss (1). For on this account, omissions do not count as acts. Reasons are needed only for the explanation of acts, not of omissions. So premiss (1) does not rule out God's not making a world without a reason⁸. As it happens, God does make a world. This might be explained simply by His free choice to act (for an altruistic reason).

We might conclude that God cannot do what is bad, only what is good and always for a good reason. God, then, is good.

Let me now return to the *Eutyphro*'s problem. I have helped myself to the concept of 'altruistic reason'. Now, if one acts for an altruistic reason, one has to think that what one does will be *good for* somebody or something. And if one is right (and God will not make mistakes about these matters) one's act really is good for somebody. But this 'being-good-for' does not seem to consist in a relation to God's will. So I have explained why God acts only in a good way. But in the course of doing that, I assumed that God knows what is good for some beings, its goodness being apparently independent of God's will. So, after all, the reason to call God 'good' is that He acts in accordance with, and because of, some objective goodness, which might perhaps be explained as that which accords with the nature of creatures and with the absolute Good.

⁸ In what sense God *could* fail to create world or not might be a matter of further debate.

This might well be Plato's own position. I want to explore an alternative. First, I want to admit that we can specify the 'being-good-for' without making reference to God's will; the relation to the nature of creatures is a plausible option. But I claim that this is only *natural* good and not yet *moral* good. To give an example: satisfying hunger is naturally good. But in some circumstances – where there is someone more needy than me around and the food is sparse – it might not be morally good to eat⁹. My claim is that moral goodness must depend on conforming to God's will.

It should be noted, however, that the crucial distinction between self-interested and altruistic reasons is exhaustive only if altruism is defined in terms of the moral good. For I can act selflessly and yet against someone's natural interest, if I think it is morally good to act this way. So if our previous arguments are to hold, God must be a moral altruist. How can his acting for an altruistic reason be construed? The most general account is this. First, God wants some things to happen to his creatures (and, we might add, He is not in any way motivated by self-interest in framing his wishes). This defines what is morally good for them. Now, God certainly wants to act in accordance with His own will. It follows that He wants to do what is morally good. Acts done in accordance with the divine will are good, by definition. And of course God acts accordingly, the reason for His act is the divine will, and He wants to act in this way¹⁰. On every account, God and His acts are good.

This, however, leaves us with a somewhat formal and empty idea of God's altruism. 'God does what He thinks is good for His creatures' we might simply say, or rather 'God does what He wants'. And so we are back with our initial question: why what God wants to happen is roughly the same as what *we* would call good? Fortunately, the exit from the circle is not so far away.

God is the maker of natures before He is the lawgiver. If, in general, He did not want the creatures to enjoy the fulfilment of their nature, He simply would not have created the world. Indeed, the idea of a world in which creatures *as a rule* fail to realise their nature seems incoherent. At the very least, it does not seem to make sense

⁹ Perhaps there are materials for construing such conflict even in Plato. It could be better for philosophers in the ideal state to devote themselves only to contemplation, instead of ruling. But the right thing to do is to take the burden of ruling.

¹⁰ It might be noted that the conformity of divine acts to the divine will becomes much more interesting in the framework of Trinitarian theology.

for someone perfectly rational to make such a world¹¹. Therefore, there can be no widespread discrepancy between what is naturally good and what God wants. Furthermore, the extent of local departures from the natural good – say, sacrificing a particular man – will be strictly limited by the principle that God does not act arbitrarily, i.e. without a reason. It seems that the only reason for God not to want natural good for some individual is because of some more general altruistic considerations like what would be good for the *whole* of creation.

We have also said that God has made the world for an altruistic reason. But if we stick to our formal account of His altruism, it will simply mean that He did it, because He wanted to. If we are not able to say anything more, the whole project will crumble. For if asked for a reason why I did something, I can only say ‘I just wanted to do it’ this is no different from saying ‘Well, for no reason’. So why did God want to make the world? I think the answer is: because He wanted and appreciated the existence of the world and its inhabitants *for their own sake*. With this explanation comes to an end.

We know what it is like to want and to appreciate something for its own sake. Let us note three points. First, no abstract principles nor any notion of good need to be involved in this attitude. Secondly, it is not intelligible to appreciate the existence of something for its own sake and not to appreciate its nature. And that in turn implies wanting this nature to be preserved and realized. Thirdly, in our case this attitude may be related to some desire or need of ours; but in God’s case no self-centred desire is involved. Now, surely someone who appreciates the existence of others for their own sake, wants their natural good and does so without any self-interest in mind can be called an altruist and a good person in the most straightforward sense. And yet that does not imply that there is any abstract, objective standard to which the person has to conform.

It is of course still possible to maintain that we can properly say that God is good, because the way He acts conforms to *our* wishes, expectations and ideals. But it is no less plausible to say that God as God is good, and, indeed a model of what it is to

¹¹ Admittedly, rationality in this context would probably have to be something more than keeping to the rules of formal logic. But we might think of it, again very much in the Platonic spirit, as of a certain inner consistency and harmony of thought. We need not conceptualize it as conformity to some external formal standards.

be good. It is because people are like Him and want similar things that they are properly called good.

Thinking about God's goodness, we have considered three closely-related questions. Why should God and His acts be called good – are there external standards by which God's goodness should be judged? Why God's will and acts coincide to a large degree with what we ordinarily call 'good' – why God does not want that which is bad for us? Why God acts at all – why does He create the world? Addressing the second question, I have shown that the impossibility of God's doing something bad can be derived from three assumptions: that God does not need anything, that God only acts for a reason and that God is perfectly rational and knowledgeable. These very weak assumptions about God are sufficient to show that if God acts, He performs only good acts for *altruistic* reasons. There is no need to assume that God is in any sense *submitted* to a moral law of any kind to explain why God does not do bad things to anyone. It is also by appealing to God's altruistic attitude that we can explain His decision to create the world. It turned out, however, that there is more than one coherent analysis of God's altruism. On the Platonic account, altruism presupposes the idea of the objective good. We need not think of God as being in any sense submitted to this good; it is sufficient to assume that God has a perfect knowledge of what is good for creatures. Still, on this account, the realm of values is independent of God and His will. I have argued for an alternative account which rejects such an assumption and assumes that moral goodness is determined by God's will. This account invokes God's internal rational consistency and His appreciation of creatures to explain why God acts, and acts in a way which can be called 'good' and 'altruistic' in the most ordinary sense. Yet God's attitudes are considered as basic and not analyzable in terms of any external standard of goodness. Even though it seemed impossible at first, God's absolute sovereignty and tangible goodness can be happily reconciled.

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