

There has been a question in philosophical discussion since at least the time of Socrates (late 5th century BC) regarding the nature of what is good. The classic question posed by Socrates in Plato's Euthyphro is "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" The question is whether that which is pious is pious of its own essence, its own nature, and thus the gods love it, or whether the pious is made pious because the gods love it; Socrates clearly comes down on the former view.

In Socrates' question however, the "pious" is something external to the gods. As best I know there was no sense of the Greek gods defining essential goodness; they were more about power, and they could be quite capricious. Certainly for Socrates and Plato in any case the good is something ineffable which is not directly dependent on or the nature of the gods.

The Socratic question has been historically important in the discussion of what is called the Divine Command Theory. Is something good because God commands it, or does God recognize what is good and command it?

When I first read this a few years ago I intuitively differed with the terms of the Socratic argument. As I have come to understand it now, the Socratic argument is not a formulation of a DCT in terms which would be considered across the various traditions of orthodox (little 'o') Christianity.

The basic difference is this: Christianity is willing to posit a God that is essentially and only good. Thus goodness is of God's essential nature, neither accidental or contingent, and he is solely good, with nothing evil in his nature. (Yes, this begs crucial questions of God's existence and his nature, but so does any appeal to a cosmic good or moral principle which is external to God.)

It follows from these premisses regarding God's nature that God's speech and his commands are good, in that they source from his essentially and solely good nature. Thus when God speaks he utters something necessarily good, and for God's speech to be good it is sufficient that he speak. In argument form:

P1) God is essentially good (i.e. his goodness is not accidental or contingent.)

P2) God is good only (i.e. there is no evil in him.)

C1) Therefore God's speech and commands are necessarily and only good.

An objection which is generally raised is that the DCT leaves open the possibility that God could command gratuitous evil, thus declaring something evil as if it were good. In response, Christianity posits God not only as essentially good but as good only. If God is good only, then he cannot speak evilly. If he cannot speak evilly, then the objection fails, as it then is impossible for God to command evil.

Corollary to this objection, one might object that God, as absolutely free, is free to choose good or evil; thus the DCT should be rejected, as this freedom opens the possibility of God choosing and commanding evil. In response I reject that God is free to choose good and evil. If one accepts that he is essentially and only good, that precludes God's choosing evil, from which it follows that God is not absolutely free in the sense proposed. That may run counter to other ideas about the nature of God, but so far I think it holds.

We should note that the above objection sourcing from the absolute freedom of God is from a view in which good and evil are other than God; for God to be able to choose good and evil these must exist apart from God in order to be freely chosen by him. This is already a different argument, as in the proposed argument good does not exist apart from God, thus is not something God can choose; as essential to his nature, he is good, as is not of predication but of identity.

One might also object that in declaring creation as good, God declared something external to himself as good. That does not violate the conclusion that God's commands are good, nor does it lead us to conclude with Socrates that good is other than or apart from God. As creation, the original cosmos was a dependent expression of God's essential goodness; it was good contingent on God's goodness. The goodness of the cosmos is not a goodness which is independent of God, thus does not qualify as a good apart from God in the same way as posited by the Socratic argument.

In conclusion, it is my view that a DCT based on the nature of God as essentially and only good is a different argument than the Socratic formulation of the DCT and thus survives the objections to the Socratic form. Thus when God gives ethical commands we, to be good, should act as he says; in so doing we will act as he acts.

The DCT in this form at least leaves open the question of how we determine just what God said or interpret how it might be applied; that is a different discussion.

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