Who Says God Is Good?

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For example, central to the Gospel is the notion of "goodness." God is good; we're not good. God's goodness prompts Him to rescue us from our non-goodness, our sin. Seems clear enough.

To some people, though, it is not clear at all. Something so central to Christianity is hopeless vague to them: What is "good"?

"Well, that's simple, " one may be tempted to say. "'Good' is whatever God says it is." That answer, though, only magnifies the problem. It may explain what we mean when we say certain actions are good, but it makes it impossible to ever say God is good. And if God isn't good, then a Gospel based on God's goodness loses its legs.

I want to explain to you why that standard Christian response is a wrong turn and show you how you can get back on course.

This problem goes back a long way, at least to the 4th century before Christ. Plato's famous dilemma concerning the nature of goodness is still being raised today as a serious challenge to Christianity. Is an act right because God says it's so, or does God say it's so because it's right? The question first surfaces in Plato's dialog Euthyphro.

The Challenge

In Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro, Socrates is attempting to understand the essence of piety and holiness:

Socrates: And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro? Is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

Euthyphro: Certainly.

Socrates: Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro: No, that is the reason.

Socrates: It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

The dilemma Euthyphro faced is this: Is a thing good simply because the gods say it is? Or do the gods say a thing is good because of some other quality it has? If so, what is that quality? The problem stumped Euthyphro.

In more recent times, Plato's approach has been used as an assault on the coherence of Christianity. 20th century British philosopher and atheist, Bertrand Russell, formulated the problem this way in his polemic against the faith, Why I Am Not a Christian:

If you are quite sure there is a difference between right and wrong, you are then in this situation: Is that difference due to God's fiat or is it not? If it is due to God's fiat, then for God Himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not good independently of the mere fact that he made them. If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God.

The Problem

Russell's version is an attempt to show an internal flaw in the Christian's notion of God and goodness. Is a thing right simply because God declares it so, or does God say it is good because He recognizes a moral code superior even to Him?

This problem presents a dilemma because one is forced to choose between two options, both ultimately hostile to Christian theism. The believer is caught between a rock and a hard place.

On the one hand, God reigns and His Law is supreme. As the ultimate Sovereign, He establishes the moral rules of the universe. His commands are absolute. We must obey.

Ethicist Scott Rae describes the view: "A 'divine command' theory of ethics is one in which the ultimate foundation for morality is the revealed will of God, or the commands of God found in Scripture." This view is known as ethical voluntarism.

At first blush this seems correct, until we realize the liabilities. The content of morality would be arbitrary, dependent on God's whim. Though God has declared murder, theft, and debauchery wrong, it could have been otherwise had God willed it so. Any "immoral" act could suddenly become "moral" by simple fiat.

Further, it reduces God's goodness to His power. To say that God is good simply means that He is capable of enforcing His commands. As Russell put it, "For God Himself there is no difference between right and wrong."

This is the position of Islam, but it is unacceptable to the Christian. Morality is not arbitrary. God is not free to call what is wrong right, and what is right wrong. The text is clear: "It is impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18). God cannot sin.

But the alternative seems no better. If the Christian asserts that morality is not arbitrary, he is caught on the second horn of the dilemma. If the standard itself is absolute such that not even God can violate it, doesn't this make the Almighty Himself beholden to a higher law? The Sovereign becomes the subordinate.

In each case, Christianity loses. Either God is not good, or He's not sovereign. That's the dilemma.

Grounding

Plato's challenge forces us to consider an important detail in any discussion on the nature of morality: grounding.

The word "ground" originally meant "the lowest part, base, or bottom of anything."

In philosophy it refers to the foundation or logical basis of a claim. Euthyphro's task was to identify the logical grounding of piety or virtue. What base does morality "stand on"?

Frank Beckwith and I chose a title for our book on relativism that paints a word picture: Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air. Our point: Relativists who make any claim to knowledge have no basis for their assertion. They are standing not on solid ground, but on thin air.

A law is only as legitimate as the authority upon which it rests. The U.S. government can't pass laws governing Canadians. Our federal laws apply only to the people of this country. Individuals can't make up laws that apply to their neighbors. They don't have that authority.

The founders of our country argued that even governments are subject to a higher law. Certain truths are transcendent, they argued, grounded not in human institutions but in God Himself. This appeal to higher Law was their rational justification for the morality of the American Revolution.

The problem of grounding morality is a difficult one for atheists who claim one can have ethics without God. Certainly, an atheist can act in a manner some people consider "moral," but it's hard to know what the term ultimately refers to. It generally means to comply with an objective standard of good, a Law given by legitimate authority. However, without a transcendent Lawmaker (God), there can be no transcendent Law, and no corresponding obligation to be good.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton put the challenge this way:

In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing?

As I wrote in Relativism, "a 'moral' atheist is like a man sitting down to dinner who doesn't believe in farmers, ranchers, fishermen, or cooks. He believes the food just appears, with no explanation and no sufficient cause." The atheist's morality has no grounding.

Does the Christian fare any better, though? That is the challenge of Euthyphro's dilemma.

The Solution

The general strategy used to defeat a dilemma is to show that it's a false one. There are not two options, but three.

The Christian rejects the first option, that morality is an arbitrary function of God's power. And he rejects the second option, that God is responsible to a higher law. There is no Law over God.

The third option is that an objective standard exists (this avoids the first horn of the dilemma). However, the standard is not external to God, but internal (avoiding the second horn). Morality is

grounded in the immutable character of God, who is perfectly good. His commands are not whims, but rooted in His holiness.

Could God simply decree that torturing babies was moral? "No," the Christian answers, "God would never do that." It's not a matter of command. It's a matter of character.

So the Christian answer avoids the dilemma entirely. Morality is not anterior to God, logically prior to Him, as Bertrand Russell suggests, but rooted in His nature. As Scott Rae puts it, "Morality is not grounded ultimately in God's commands, but in His character, which then expresses itself in His commands." In other words, whatever a good God commands will always be good.

A Second Problem

The Christian's job is not done, though, because Bertrand Russell's observation suggests a second problem. Socrates' challenge to Euthyphro has not been met. What is "good"? It doesn't help to say that God is good unless we know what the term refers to.

If the word "good" means "in accord with the nature and character of God," we have a problem. When the Bible says "God is good," it simply means "God has the nature and character that God has." If God and goodness are the very same thing, then the statement "God is good" means nothing more than "God is God," a useless tautology.

The answer to this problem hinges on the philosophical notion of identity, expressed symbolically as A = A. When one thing is identical to another (in the way I'm using the term), there are not two things, but one. For example, the president of Stand to Reason (Gregory Koukl) is identical to the author of this article. Everything that's true of the one is true of the other. The author and the president are the same. They are not two, but one.

According to Christian teaching, God is not good in the same way that a bachelor is an unmarried male. When we say God is good, we are giving additional information, namely that God has a certain quality. God is not the very same thing as goodness (identical to it). It's an essential characteristic of God, so there is no tautology.

Knowing Goodness

A proper understanding of Christian teaching on God removes one problem, yet we still face another: What is "good"? How can we know goodness if we don't define it first?

The way Abraham responded when he first learned of God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah gives us a clue to the answer:

Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? (Genesis 18:25)

Here's the question. How did Abraham know justice required that God not treat the wicked and the righteous alike? As of yet, no commandments had been handed down.

Abraham knew goodness not by prior definition or by some decree of God, but through moral intuition. He didn't need God to define justice (divine command). He knew it directly. His moral knowledge was built in.

Even the atheist understands what moral terms mean. He doesn't need God in order to recognize morality. He needs God to make sense of what he recognizes.

This is precisely why the moral argument for God's existence is such a good one. The awareness of morality leads to God much as the awareness of falling apples leads to gravity. Our moral intuitions recognize the effect, but what is the adequate cause? If God does not exist, then moral terms are actually incoherent and our moral intuitions are nonsense.

Christians need not fear Plato on this score. When Euthyphro's dilemma is applied to Christianity, it mischaracterizes the biblical view of God. Goodness is neither above God nor merely willed by Him. Instead, ethics are grounded in His holy character. Moral notions are not arbitrary and given to caprice. They are fixed and absolute, grounded in God's immutable nature.

Further, no outside definition of piety is necessary because morality is known directly through the faculty of moral intuition. God's laws express His character and, if our moral intuitions are intact, we immediately recognize those laws as good.

This doesn't mean Christianity is true, only that it is not handicapped by Plato's challenge to Euthyphro.

Yours for the Kingdom,

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