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THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA AND UTILITARIANISM

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Abstract

In this paper I reexamine the Euthyphro dilemma to determine the principles underlying its critique of divine command theory. From this analysis, I claim that the Euthyphro dilemma can be fruitfully applied to other systems of ethics. As an example, I examine the Utility Principle which undergirds Utilitarianism. I argue that the Utility Principle is metaethically insufficient as the basis for our moral duties because it is good neither necessarily nor independently. The result is that Utilitarianism must be rejected as the definition of morality, though we may retain it as one of the good’s criteria.

The Euthyphro Dilemma and Utilitarianism

Introduction

The Euthyphro dilemma has long stood as an obstacle to a conception of morality as divine fiat; but though much has been made of the dilemma in relation to Divine Command Theory (DCT), I believe that it has implications which are more far-reaching than just one system. Underneath the Euthyphro dilemma’s scrutiny of God’s moral decrees, there lies an analysis pertinent to the wider field of metaethics. In what follows, I argue that, just as the Euthyphro dilemma questions the legitimacy of God’s commands as the originating point for moral duties, so it may question other systems’ foundational goods. By applying the Euthyphro dilemma to Utilitarianism as an example, I conclude that that system’s undergirding metaethical fails. And since Utilitarianism is of the same structure as other ethical systems, we should expect that they are all similarly vulnerable.

One caveat before moving on: in this paper I assume that our moral intuitions, generally, are helpful guides to understanding ethics; I am in agreement with epistemologist Roderick Chisolm’s statement that “we do know, pretty much, those things we think we know,” and I believe this includes our moral knowledge. Consequently, I will be working under the assumption of moral realism: we do have mind-independent moral duties which we can get right or wrong. For one am comfortable aligning myself with a position so closely attuned to

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our moral common sense, but I forewarn the reader here in case she does not share this intuition that moral talk is about something true or false.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

The Euthyphro dilemma is widely known. Originally employed by Socrates in the context of polytheism, it stands in objection to systems of ethics that are reliant on God’s decrees. In its modern iteration, the Euthyphro dilemma works by revealing two unacceptable positions that the Divine Command Theorist must choose between. These two ‘horns’ of the dilemma are that either (1) the command of God identifies morality, or (2) the command of God creates morality. If (1) is true then the theist must hold that morality is good apart from God, and that God functions in a purely epistemic capacity by giving morality his endorsement. But if that’s the case, then God is hardly the greatest of all possible beings which theists understand him to be, for given (1) even God is subservient to some transcendent good. The other horn is equally problematic, as (2) implies that God fabricates moral duties out of thin air, and thus God could have instituted any silly or evil thing to be moral. As William Alston puts it, “If God should command us to gratuitously inflict pain on each other we would thereby be obliged to do so.” Since that is absurd—and gives us little reason for obeying the particular morality the deity happened to select—the second horn of the dilemma must be rejected and the theist cannot maintain that morality is ontologically dependent on divine fiat. The result of this dilemma is that the Divine Command Theorist must show either that (1) or (2) are somehow acceptable after all, or that there is some alternative option which may allow the theist to avoid the horns altogether.

Unpacking the Analysis

So far we have the standard description of the modern Euthyphro dilemma—but we may delve deeper still. Underpinning this critique is an analysis that tests each system’s status as ontological or epistemological through an evaluation of its foundational principle. In other words, the Euthyphro dilemma asks whether a system is itself the moral reality or just an instrument for coming to know certain aspects of what the moral reality prescribes.

This dichotomy between what is real and what is merely instrumental for knowing portions of reality is the implicit point of conflict between systems of ethics, because it is really just another way of examining which system is true. If an ethical system has a relationship with morality which is ontological in nature, then that system is equivalent to morality, just as obeying God’s commands would be equivalent to morality were divine decrees morality’s source. If, however, a system’s relationship is epistemological, then that system is only a helpful criterion for discerning whether or not certain acts are moral—but it is not morality itself. Such an epistemological system might be analogous to a mother who, unable to otherwise convince her son of the danger of wandering into the woods, tells him that there are monsters there.

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5 Plato, Euthyphro, 10a-11a.
which will eat him. The mother’s instructions induce the appropriate actions from the child (he stays away from the woods) but achieves that behavior for reasons that are disconnected from reality. Or again, such a system might be like the high school physics teacher who explains Newtonian physics as a complete description of the mechanics of the universe, leaving her students unaware of the exceptions in that model that have been evident since Einstein’s theory of relativity. Epistemically-based systems of ethics are useful ways of guiding individuals in the moral life, but they are not ultimately sufficient or complete descriptions of what morality is.\(^7\)

It is the goal of every system—whether consequentialist, deontological, or character-based—to show that its relationship with morality is ontological rather than epistemological, because each system is claiming that it is morality and not just a signpost to morality. This is born out in the Divine Command Theorist’s rejection of the second horn of the dilemma: the system is morally and theologically impotent if God merely points us toward the good.

How does the Euthyphro dilemma help in examining whether or not a system succeeds as the ontological basis for morality? For starters, it immediately narrows the field of discussion to the foundation of a given ethical system. It doesn’t ask whether particular, derivative principles of right living are acceptable, but whether the basis of the system itself is acceptable (which, in the case of DCT, is God’s mandates). We’re not concerned with, for example, whether or not the Biblical prohibition against adultery is a proper command, because that particular principle obviously isn’t intrinsically true—it’s true, given DCT, by reference to the higher authority of God’s will. By going right to the basis of an ethical system, we may ask what sorts of attributes that foundation must have in order to have an ontological relationship with morality.

Regardless of the content of a given system’s foundational principle, it will take the form of a definition of moral goodness. For DCT the foundational principle is ‘Moral goodness is obeying God’s decrees.’ For other systems, the principle might be ‘Moral goodness is acting to promote maximal happiness’ (Utilitarianism) or ‘Moral goodness is acting with a good will’ (Kantianism). The foundational principle, then, just is moral goodness on that system. But if a given system’s foundational principle just is moral goodness, then it follows that the principle must have all of its properties in common with moral goodness.

What kinds of properties does moral goodness itself have? The attribute most significant to our discussion is intrinsic goodness. In Socrates’ argument with Euthyphro he pointed out that moral goodness itself (or piety, to use his language), is loved because “it is such as to be loved” not “because it is loved,” which is to say that it is good intrinsically, not extrinsically.\(^8\) This makes sense. If some good were such only by reference to an external principle, then it is that external principle which would be the true good. Thus, the foundational

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\(^7\) Some might find this distinction peculiar or even absurd. For if a person is doing actions that are moral, how could that not just be what morality is? Such a response misses that it is possible to do a correct act without doing it for the right reasons, or to do it for reasons that will not always be appropriate. Thus children who obey their parents out of love for them are moral in a way which mercenary children bought by promises of Santa’s gifts are not, and why adults who act rightly out of deference to their upbringing are morally inferior to adults who develop their own understanding of why they ought to live rightly. It is important not just to know which acts are right, but also what the basis for their rightness is.

\(^8\) Ibid.
good for any ethical system must be intrinsically good. Or, more helpfully, it must be a self-sufficient good: a good that is essentially, necessarily, and independently good.

We see then that one horn of the Euthyphro dilemma is reducible to a question about the ontological relationship between a system and moral goodness, which at its core, is further reducible to a question about the self-sufficiency of that system’s foundation. If the foundation is self-sufficient, the ontological relationship between that system and morality is secured. If not, the system is relegated to a purely epistemic role.

A Foundational View of Ethics

The goal, then, in evaluating the ontological status of a system is determining whether its foundational good is independent and necessary—both conditions are required for self-sufficiency. This evaluation puts pressure on the whole structure, because the rest of the system depends on the foundation. Systematic ethics, by their nature, identify almost all moral obligations as contingencies that rely on an ultimate self-sufficient principle. Such a principle is reputedly good by its nature and serves as the anchor point from which all other duties originate. In fact, the rest of the system is really just an extended explication of the foundational principle. If we were to find that the anchor point is not independent or necessary, then we should reject that whole system. Without an intrinsically good foundation, the whole structure has no metaethical basis, for it posits the absurdity of a dependent and contingent chain of duties that is ultimately groundless. It has left unanswered the vital question upon what these duties are contingent.

To further clarify this point, imagine that moral obligations in systematic ethics are like a layered pyramid, at the top of which are those duties that are smallest in scope, specific to certain situations. These ‘small’ obligations are wholly dependent on the lower layers to provide the contextual conditions under which they hold. So, for example, speeding is not always wrong (as for emergency vehicle drivers) but rather only under certain circumstances dictated by some more foundational principle. The key to understanding this structure is realizing that each successive layer gives a basis for the next one, telling us why that particular duty or principle holds. For example, my general duty not to enslave others has claim on my actions because of the more fundamental moral principle which states that I must respect the autonomy and dignity of others. This layering will go on to the bottom of the pyramid, at which point we must find one of two things: a self-sufficient principle, or yet another dependent principle. If the latter is found, then the chain of moral obligations is left incomplete, for there is nothing to adequately ground the previous layers, and thus the whole chain fails to properly obligate us. But if there is a self-sufficient foundation, that principle will be the necessary basis for moral goodness, and it will itself be good wholly without reference to anything external to itself. This independent good will anchor the entire system.

It is this foundation that the Euthyphro dilemma targets by calling into question the self-sufficiency of God’s commands as a foundational moral principle. Obedience to God’s command isn’t necessarily good, because we can imagine circumstances in which agents could

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9 This is obviously in contrast with ethical theories such as particularism which can’t meaningfully be called ‘systems’ at all.
rightfully disobey being commanded to murder or rape. And if we can conceivably judge God’s command to be immoral, then obedience to it also doesn’t seem independently good, because we would have to be judging according to some higher principle to which God’s commands must comply. It’s easy to see why this critique has been so disturbing to Divine Command Theorists: if God’s command fails the test for independence or necessity, then that would imply total system failure.

Utilitarianism’s Foundational Good

We turn now directly to Utilitarianism as the primary example for an alternative application of the Euthyphro dilemma. Utilitarianism is that cluster of consequentialist ethics that share in common the use of happy or pleasant outcomes as the foundation for their moral principles and obligations. It is to this collective anchor point that we must turn our scrutiny, asking whether or not Utilitarians have a foundation that is both independent and necessary.

To answer this question, we must first clearly discern what Utilitarianism’s fundamental principle is. In its classic form, Jeremy Bentham stated that “the principle of utility is... that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever; according to the tendency which it appears to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.... To disprove the propriety of it by arguments is impossible.” Similarly, John Stuart Mill’s version of Utilitarianism was one which “accepts as the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’” and which “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” Later, Henry Sidgwick wrote that Utilitarianism is “the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole.” More recently Peter Singer has described a form of “interest” Utilitarianism guided by the principle that the good is following the “course of action most likely to maximize the interests of those affected.” Though each of these accounts offers subtle nuances that emphasize different aspects of the utility principle, there is a common core from which we can derive a general principle. Broadly, I take the following (or something very like it) to be the foundational utility principle upon which all of Utilitarianism rests:

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10 It’s worth noting here the similarities and difference between this point and that made by G.E. Moore’s famous “Open Question.” Moore argued that we could meaningfully ask the question of any ethical system “Is it good?” which was supposed to show that it couldn’t be the good by definition (and therefore moral properties are irreducible). My argument is not Moore’s. I am not concerned with arguing from the mere concept of the definition, but rather arguing from the insufficiency of the definition in holding up in all circumstances. It is not merely that these moral foundations could be questioned conceptually, but that when we do question them we find that there are at least some examples in which they fail, and so they are inadequate definitions of the good. See G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66-68.
12 John Stewart Mill, op. cit., 46.
13 Peter Singer, Writings on an Ethical Life (Harper Perennial, 2001), 16.
**Utility Principle (UP):** An agent achieves moral rightness in any particular case if and only if he or she promotes the happiest possible outcome that agent could have produced.

What it means for an agent to “promote” happiness will depend on the particular brand of Utilitarianism. Ethicists have varyingly selected actions, intentions, virtues, or rules as the locus for consequential evaluation. But whether the Utilitarian ethic is put in terms of performing acts, submitting to tendency-rules, exemplifying virtue, or having the right intentions, all of these will be morally good or morally bad because of their relationship to outcomes. In Utilitarianism, consequences are ethically primary.

As an example, we can see the way in which (UP) grounds duties in an agent’s condemnation of murder. A Utilitarian would denounce murder because it causes overwhelming suffering. Causing overwhelming suffering is in turn wrong because it brings about some state of affairs other than the most possible happiness the actor could have caused, and that is a violation of (UP). Thus, specific duties (such as the duty not to murder) ultimately find their grounding in one very general, self-grounding principle.

**A Critique of the Utilitarianism Foundation**

Now then, does (UP), or something like it, really work as the foundation for ethics? Or to put it in the terms of the Euthyphro dilemma, *is morality just following (UP) or does (UP) merely identify morality for us?* Here are two primary obstacles which prevent us from answering in favor of (UP): the problem of improvement and the problem of counter-examples.

The problem of improvement shows that (UP) isn’t independently good. To see how, imagine some possible world in which (UP) were perfectly followed—call it ‘Utility World.’ Interestingly, Utility World should be impossible to improve, since it is just (UP) enacted on a universal scale. Our theoretical world is guaranteed by definition to contain the maximum amount of moral good. But is Utility World perfect? No, it seems that it isn’t, because we could easily think of ways to make its ‘perfection’ better.

Before improving on Utility World, first suppose for simplicity that it is a world in which only five persons ever lived, and that despite their numbers these five maximally followed (UP) so that they live as happily as is possible for them. Now, suppose that the five citizens of Utility World had two equally happiness-producing choices. They could either each pitch in to work for their survival, or they could enslave one of their number to do all of the work. If they choose to enslave someone, the slave’s discomfort will be equal to that of the collective should they have divided the work equally. In this way, both choices will produce the same amount of happiness and misery. Note also that in Utility World, because of the limited population size and short history, every act sets the rule for how much pain or pleasure an act will tend to cause, so that here rule-Utilitarianism collapses into act-Utilitarianism.

Now, suppose that the citizens opted for slave labor. In that possible world (UP) remains perfectly enacted. Suddenly, however, there appears an opportunity to improve on Utility World. If the decision were altered so that the group had elected for a fair labor system, that would be a better world, for it would possess not only actions which perfectly promote happiness but also actions which are just. This, however, should not be possible, for if we can improve on the fully implemented (UP), then we are judging it to be improved by some other
standard. But if we are judging (UP) by some other standard, then (UP) is dependent on that standard, which means it is not independently good. Furthermore, there are other goods besides justice that we could add to Utility World for its improvement. Arthur Holmes points out that if two acts yield the same utility, but act A involves breaking a promise while act B does not, “the utilitarian would have no basis for preferring A to B or B to A, despite the fact that common morality would opt unequivocally for B.” The point is clear: if (UP) really were independently good, we should not be able to find ways to improve any action that perfectly follows it. But we can find such improvements, so (UP) isn’t independently good.

The second problem for (UP) concerns the existence of the classic counter-examples such as the Utility Monster, the experience machine, the transplant dilemma, and the problem of sadists. Each example describes a peculiar situation in which utilitarianism seems to dictate an act which is morally absurd. The absurdities appear because these examples describe situations in which happiness and pleasure are at odds with other kinds of values, such as justice or truth (for example, the Utility Monster thought experiment describes a being who takes enormous pleasure out of torturing humans such that, for him, the most happiness-promoting act is always to torture, and for everyone else the most happiness-promoting act is to let him).

To each of these counter-examples the Utilitarian might reply that their deeply hypothetical nature prevents us from taking them seriously. Utilitarianism works in real life, and these far-fetched exceptions only prove the rule. Kai Nielson, for example, was little worried by non-actual counter-examples, writing that:

I allow, as a consequentialist, that there could be circumstances, at least as far as logical possibilities are concerned, in which [injustice] would be justified but that, as things actually go, it is not and probably never in fact will be justified.... The consequentialist is saying that, as the world goes, there are good grounds for holding that judicial killings are morally intolerable, though he would have to admit that if the world... were very different, such killings could be something that ought to be done.  

Nielson concedes that in some worlds injustice would be justified, but that we needn’t worry about this because that would probably never be the case in our actual world. This concession, however, cannot be made without undermining (UP), for it admits that in some possible worlds (UP) would lead to moral absurdity. But if (UP) is supposed to be the foundation for all of Utilitarianism’s moral duties, then it must be necessarily good, and thus it should hold up by definition in every possible world. Further, if (UP) only holds in particular circumstances, such as our actual world, then we require some further principle to know under which circumstances it applies; but (UP) would then be dependent on that higher principle and thus could not be self-sufficient.

Suppose though that the Utilitarian is willing, in response, to make a much stronger claim about (UP): that even in possible worlds where it would lead to moral absurdities (UP) is still right for the people of that world, and that the resulting injustices only seem wrong to us

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from our current moral vantage point. The difficulty here, however, is that adhering to (UP) even through the moral absurdities it produces in other possible worlds makes Utilitarianism rather radical in our own actual world. After all, if (UP) holds in all situations no matter how egregious, then the Utilitarian is committed to seriously accepting the moral priority of the Utility Monster or the experience machine even if these occurred in our actual world. It doesn’t help to argue that these examples are far-fetched and theoretical. (UP) must hold in every possible scenario. If these counter-examples work in any world, then the Utilitarian is committed to moral absurdity. It seems far more reasonable to concede that (UP) isn’t good necessarily, and that it is not thick enough to stand as our only moral guide in all situations.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, the Euthyphro dilemma targets the foundation of Divine Command Theory (God’s decree) and then questions whether that foundation stands in an ontological or epistemological relationship to moral goodness. If the former, then God’s command has no substantive connection to morality; if the latter, then the Divine Command Theorist is committed to the self-sufficiency of their foundational principle. This claim to self-sufficiency is risky, as a self-sufficient principle must be immune to both improvement and readily available counter-examples (e.g. what if God commanded rape?). Since such improvements and counter-examples exist, God’s decree (and thus DCT as a system) cannot stand in an ontological relationship to morality, and is thus false. Using Utilitarianism as an example, I’ve argued that the same move can be made against at least one other major ethical system: (UP) is the foundation of Utilitarian morality, and there exist counter-examples showing that (UP) cannot be equivalent to moral goodness, so (UP) and Utilitarianism are not related ontologically to moral goodness. Thus, if my argument is correct, Utilitarianism suffers the same plight as DCT.
Works Cited


