Euthyphro, Hume, and the Biblical God

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It is important that we see the philosophical implications of the statement that God's *nature* is normative. This essay will present two of them.

First, the "Euthyphro problem." In Plato's dialogue of that name, the question arises as to how "holiness" is to be defined. Euthyphro takes the common sense position that holiness is whatever the gods say it is. Socrates, however, demurs. If holiness is *loved* by the gods, then it must be something distinct from them. So: do the gods love holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it? Socrates and Euthyphro come to accept the former. The latter, they agree, would make holiness something arbitrary, as if a god could simply define *anything* as holy.

Ethical philosophers down through the years have applied such reasoning to the concept of ethical goodness. Does God love the good because it is good, or is it good because God loves it? The latter answer would seem to make goodness something arbitrary; but the former answer would seem to make goodness independent of God.

The problem is resolved, I think, by the principle advanced in the lecture outline: that God's nature is righteous and therefore normative. God loves goodness because he *is* good, and therefore he commands goodness in his revelation to man. Therefore in one sense, God loves the good because it is good; the concept is not arbitrary. Yet he does not need to look outside himself for a standard of goodness. That standard is his own character.

In some senses, too, the good is what God loves, what he commends and commands; the good is what he says is good! (1) Our only access to God's nature is his Word. Therefore *our* concept of God's goodness must be determined by his revealed word. For us, the good is good because God says it is. But this does not mean that God hits us with a lot of abstract commands which could have been opposite to what they are.[1] The word reveals not only God's commands, but also his nature. In the word we see how wonderful God's

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[1] Some commands in Scripture could have been otherwise; indeed, some are changed in the history of redemption, such as the command to bring animal sacrifices to the Lord. But the fundamental requirements of the law (what the Westminster Standards call "the moral law") are as unchangeable as God Himself.

character is, as well as the commands which proceed from it. The word also reveals our own nature, created by God to image him. In the word, we see that God's commands are "for our good." Thus God's word gives us, not only commands, but also a context showing the background of those commands in God's nature and his creative work.

(2) In another sense, this is also true for God himself. For God's Word and God's goodness are equally ultimate aspects of his character. Indeed, as divine attributes, they are ultimately identical. Remember that God's Word is his self-expression. God's goodness is a goodness which is exhaustively self-expressed; and God's self-expression is his entire self-expressed character, his goodness. So, contrary to Euthyphro, neither Word nor goodness comes before the other; the two are correlative. There is nothing in God's nature which His Word does not express; and there is nothing in His Word which lacks truth. So: God's goodness determines God's revelation, and God's revelation determines His goodness.

This solution could not have occurred to Socrates, because of the nature of the Greek deities. Zeus, for example, is not anyone's definition of goodness; indeed, he is not particularly good himself. So if he gets involved in human morality, it can only be in two ways: (1) by arbitrarily commanding people to do what he wants, without any truly moral basis for those commands ("might makes right"), or (2) by appealing to some moral standard above and beyond his own nature and setting that standard before us.

Hume's argument, you may recall, was that "you cannot deduce 'ought' from 'is.'" That is, you cannot derive normative conclusions from merely descriptive premises. G. E. Moore used the phrase "naturalistic fallacy" to describe that kind of error.

Now in a Christian epistemology, matters are not quite so simple. The reason is that God is both the chief fact and the chief norm. To put it differently: God's existence is a fact, and he is a person who rightly makes the highest demands on our obedience. Thus he is at the same time the most significant fact of our experience and the highest norm for our lives.

For this reason, Christians may often seem to be reasoning from description to norm. "God commands x, therefore I must do x." Is that a naturalistic fallacy? No, because we are not passing from a *merely*descriptive premise to a normative conclusion. Because God's commands are supremely normative, the self-expression of God's supremely normative nature, they entail normative conclusions. As another example, consider the New Testament's argument from indicative to imperative, as in Col. 3:1, which may be formulated logically: "You are risen with Christ; therefore you must seek the things that are above."[2] Is that a naturalistic fallacy? No again. To be risen with Christ is both a descriptive and a

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[2] Actually, I think the conclusion is more exhortation than a mere "imperative;" but part of its force is to convey obligation, and this will do for an illustration of the principle.

normative reality. Those who are risen with him are elevated with him, in him, to positions of honor and responsibility. Among those responsibilities is the obligation to seek what is above.

We must therefore be careful in our judgments of what arguments are, and are not, naturalistic fallacies. Often a premise which appears to be merely descriptive will, upon examination, contain genuinely normative elements. That is true in the Christian arguments noted above. At the same time, Hume is right in that one may not proceed from a *merely* descriptive premise to a normative conclusion. That is what non-Christian ethics often does, in trying to find morality in a godless world. The attempt to derive obligation from premises about matter, motion, time and chance is truly a "naturalistic fallacy." And that is, of course, the hopeless task which is faced by all ethical systems which reject biblical revelation.

But Christians also need to be careful here. For example, it will not do to argue that because some Puritan theologians endorsed a certain position that therefore it must be true. Useful as it is, Puritan theology in itself does not carry ultimate normative weight. Nor is it valid to argue, as in the book *Christian Faith, Health and Medical Practice*[3] that because man is free and responsible we ought to require informed consent for medical treatment.

Positively, the moral is: When you are arguing an ethical issue, make sure that you are able to justify the normative character of your conclusions. It is sometimes legitimate to argue from *apparently* descriptive premises to normative conclusions; but if you do that, you may be challenged to show that there is a normative element in your premise. You should be prepared to answer that challenge. In other words: it is always legitimate, in ethical debate, to ask "Where do you get your norm?" "Why *ought* we to do as you say?" Indeed, that is often the most important question that can be asked. It is a question that unbelieving ethics is fundamentally unable to answer. The only sound answer comes from the Christian revelation.

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[3] See my review of this book.