

Jake Z. presents:
GOD'S GOODNESS:
THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

1. **what to get from the following**

The *Euthyphro dilemma* is an important problem for theism. It's also a difficult topic.

Whereas, at first, some philosophical problems look imposing to some people, it can be hard to see why the Euthyphro dilemma is really a problem for theism. If, in the end, it doesn't seem like a problem to you, that's okay. What's important is that you understand the reasoning behind the solution I'll lay out.

Let me first explain what the Euthyphro dilemma is, then I'll present a response to it.

2. **just because God wills it**

Here's how the trouble starts:

We theists need to say that there's a God who's infinitely good.

So we need to say that everything God desires, intends, does, or says to do—for short, call this everything God *wills*—is good.

And once we say that everything God wills is good, an obvious question is “Why is it good?”

In reply, we can say this:

It's good simply because God wills it.

But then there are problems. Here are some of them.

3. problems

One problem is this:

PROBLEM 1 If God could make something good just by willing it, then He could make things like the following good just by willing them:

- racism • genocide of 6 million Jews
- misogyny • torturing babies for fun

But it can seem impossible that things like that would ever be good, no matter what anyone, God, preferred.

Now, we can bite the bullet and say this:

God could make even those things good. God is so powerful that He could make anything good. What's good is entirely up to Him.

But if what's good is entirely up to Him, then He has no reasons for willing what He wills: He makes things good just by *fiat*—i.e., just by arbitrary whim. And then there are problems like the following:

PROBLEM 2 In that case, if God were capricious and changed His mind a lot (the way, e.g., Zeus might), then what's good and what's bad could fluctuate from moment to moment.

EXAMPLE One moment it could be good to feed hungry children, and the next moment it could be bad to feed them, and good to torture them for fun.

Yet it can seem impossible that this fluctuation would be good.

PROBLEM 3 If God makes things good just by fiat, then goodness is nothing more than what He wills. I.e., that's all that goodness is—all that it amounts to. And this twists the notion of goodness—i.e., it turns it into something other than what it actually is—and makes it trivial to say that God is good.

ILLUSTRATION Suppose we used the term 'zoodness' to mean simply "what Zeus does," and the term 'jakeness' to mean simply "what Jake does."

If we used the term 'goodness' to mean simply "what God does," then the term 'goodness' would mean little more than 'zoodness' or 'jakeness'.

In order for it to matter whether God is good (e.g., for "God is good" to be a meaningful expression of praise), we need to be able to say He's good in some significant sense.

So we need an alternative to saying this:

God makes things good just by fiat.

4. the Form of the Good

The alternative is to say this:

Rather than making things good just by fiat-- i.e., rather than just creating a standard of goodness out of thin air-- God answers to a standard that already exists. He wills what He wills (rather than willing something else instead) so as to act in accordance with that standard of goodness.

It makes sense to talk about a standard of that sort, and there's precedent for talking that way. E.g., the ancient philosopher [Plato](#) (5-4th century B.C.E.) talked about a standard like that. For various reasons, he called it **the Form of the Good**.

What he said about it is complicated, and we've a small part of it. A thumbnail sketch is enough for the moment.

Let's say the Form of the Good would be some entity that meets the following descriptions:

- A. It's impersonal (unlike a human being or Zeus, e.g.).
- B. It isn't physical.
- C. It probably isn't in space and time.
- D. It makes good things good and serves as the measure of whether something is good (much as, say, a yardstick serves as the measure of whether something is 3 feet long).
- E. The Form of the Good is goodness itself. I.e., it's what goodness is. (That's what enables it to make things good and to serve as the measure of whether something is good.)

5. problem

Here, too, there's a problem, though:

PROBLEM It can seem that, if God didn't create the Form of the Good, then the Form of the Good is independent of God, meaning that the existence of the Form of the Good doesn't depend on the existence of God: the Form of the Good would exist even if God didn't exist.

And if there's something whose existence doesn't depend on the existence of God, then God can't be infinitely good.

6. what the Euthyphro dilemma is

So it can seem that theism is in a jam.

REASON

It can seem that theists have to say one of these two things:

God created the standard of goodness.

There's a standard of goodness whose existence doesn't depend on the existence of God.

And neither of those options is viable.

That's what the Euthyphro dilemma is.

7. solution

There's a solution, because there's a third option. The third option is to say this:

God didn't create the Form of the Good, but the Form of the Good still wouldn't exist if God didn't exist.

REASON

The Form of the Good is part of God.
Specifically, it's God's nature (or character).

According to this solution, the following are true about God:

- What God wills isn't good just because He wills it. Rather, it's good because it accords with His nature.
- In willing something, God acts out of His nature. Thus what God wills is an *expression* of His nature.
- God's nature is goodness itself.

This solves the problem posed by the Euthyphro dilemma.

There may be other ways to solve it, but this is my preferred solution—and it's one that's commonly endorsed by Christian thinkers, both past and present.
