

Phil 2, October 10, 2007

Moral Skepticism: there are no moral truths, somehow prior to and independent of us, that all of us must accept.

Moral skepticism and religious belief: Some skeptics are skeptics because they see religion as the only other option, and they find religion implausible. Some religious believers are believers because they see skepticism as the only other option, and they find skepticism repellent.

Both sides seem to accept:

There are moral truths that everyone must accept if and only if there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law.

We focus on one half:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept.

If this claim is false, then religious belief is not necessarily a way of avoiding skepticism.

John Locke, Two Treatises of Government:

To decide what moral rights people have, we have to figure out what rights God intended them to have.

Puzzle: Suppose there is a God. Why are we morally required to abide by what He intends for us?

Locke's answer: "And Reason, which is [the Law of Nature] teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions. For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one anothers Pleasure."

In other words: Why should we care about what God intended for men? Because God made men. And since He alone made men, they are His sole property. And since they are His sole property, He alone has the right to decide what happens to them. We must respect God's intentions for men, because God owns men, and we must respect God's property rights.

Difficulty: This argument presupposes that we must respect others' property. Where does this moral truth come from?

General lesson: In order to explain our duty to do what God commands, we need some moral rule of the form:

If you have relation R to X, then you must do what X says.

For Locke, relation R might be: “being the workmanship, and hence the property of.” For others, relation R might be: “having entered into a covenant with” or “having received great benefits from.” It doesn’t matter which we choose. The point stays the same. We cannot explain our duty to follow this moral rule by saying that God told us to follow this rule and we have a duty to do what God says, because this moral rule is supposed to explain why we have a duty to do what God says in the first place.

Plato, *Euthyphro*:

Euthyphro’s definition: “What is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.”

Socrates’ question: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?”

Euthyphro’s answer: The gods love pious acts because they are pious.

Socrates’ objection: If the gods love pious acts because they are pious, then what makes them pious must be something prior to and independent of the gods’ love. The gods perceive that these acts are pious, and as a result come to love them. The gods respond to piety; they don’t determine what piety is. “Loved by the gods” can’t be a *definition* of “pious.”

A neglected alternative: Why not say that pious acts are pious because they are loved by the gods, not the other way around? Perhaps because this would make piety seem entirely arbitrary.

Summary: In reading Locke and Plato, we have come across some puzzles about how divine will could explain moral truths. The basic problem is that the view that moral truths result from divine will seems to presuppose that there are some moral truths that do not result from divine will: that there are some moral truths that were already there anyway. So instead of the conditional:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept,

we seem to have the tautology:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law *and there are moral truths that everyone must accept*, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept.

If we’re puzzled about how there could be moral truths that everyone had to accept, then invoking Divine Will may not help.