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WHAT EUTHYPHRO COULDN'T HAVE SAID

James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar

In this paper we argue for a simple version of Divine Command Morality, namely that an act's being morally right consists in its being in accord with God's will, and an act's being morally wrong consists in its being contrary to God's will. In so arguing, we contend that this simple version of Divine Command Morality is not subject to the Euthyphro dilemma, either as Plato or as contemporary critics have ordinarily proposed it. Nor, we maintain, is our position incompatible with the most adequate formulation of natural law ethics. Finally we explain why Euthyphro could not have made a better case for his own position.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.¹

What is it to be a "simple believer?" In part, it is to see in God's will the standard of what is morally right and morally wrong.² This ethical stance doubtless contributes to the annoyed dismissal simple believers often receive in both public and philosophical forums. How important philosophy has been in bringing about the marginal status of the simple believer and his ethical stance is hard to say.³ If conceptual analysis counts as much as philosophers like to think, then the role of philosophy has been a major one. certainly there are grounds for the general claim that the teaching of philosophy is seldom kind to the thesis that God's will is the standard of what is right and wrong. This ethical stance, usually termed Divine Command morality (hereafter, DCM), has been given rough handling from Plato to Frankena, with any number of hostile critics in between. Although contemporary defenses of DCM have appeared in philosophical journals and colloquia, these defenses have employed sophisticated metaethical, causal, or 'paradigmatic' versions of DCM that the simple believer might well fail to recognize.⁴ Our first question, then, is whether there is a philosophically defensible version of DCM that a simple believer could both recognize and embrace.



I

The generally negative assessment of DCM from Plato's time to our own is largely due to Socrates' famous challenge to Euthyphro. This challenge, known as the Euthyphro dilemma, is perhaps the most serious and sophisticated challenge to the coherence of any DCM.

Let us begin, appropriately, with a simple version of DCM.⁵

(V.1) An act's being morally right consists in its being in accord with God's will, and an act's being morally wrong consists in its being contrary to God's will.

Admittedly, the use of 'consists' in (V.1) is vague, and we will say more about this in subsequent sections. But our present concern is to formulate the Euthyphro dilemma for (V.1).

Euthyphro's original version of DCM, namely,

(V.2) An act is holy if all the gods love it, and an act is unholy if all the gods hate it,

differs in three conspicuous ways from (V.1). First, Euthyphro's (V.2) is stated with respect to the gods of Homer, whereas the cornerstone of the simple believer's (V.1) is the God of Judaism and Christianity. This sharp transition from Hellenism to Hebraism will be essential to our defense of DCM. Secondly, following the tenor of modern philosophy, (V.1) is stated in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' rather than in terms of 'holy' and 'unholy.' Finally, Euthyphro's (V.2), unlike (V.1), is compatible with a merely extensional equivalence between God's willing or forbidding an act and that act's being right or wrong. And, of course, Socrates devises his dilemma to underscore just this point.

According to received philosophical doctrine, none of the above modifications in the transition from (V.2) to (V.1) succeeds in dulling the pointedness of the Euthyphro dilemma. Thus, most philosophers conclude that the dilemma, as directed against the simple believer's (V.1), shows morality's conceptual independence from the God. And many, like Socrates, following only the authority of argument, see in this dilemma a dialectical weapon against any hint of "authoritarianism" in ethics.⁶ But lest we acquiesce in any hasty conclusions, let us examine the supposed cogency of the Euthyphro dilemma—as directed against (V.1).

We can state the dilemma as follows:

- (P1) Either an act is right because God wills it, or God wills an act because it is right.
- (P2) If an act is right because God wills it, then morality is arbitrary.

(P3) If God wills an act because it is right, then DCM is false.

(P4) Therefore, either morality is arbitrary or DCM is false.

We might best appreciate the force of this dilemma if we next elaborate the supporting arguments for (P2) and (P3).

(P2), which expresses the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, is the claim that DCM makes right and wrong arbitrary. For suppose that an act is right or wrong just because God wills or forbids it. If so, then it seems that there is nothing intrinsic to the act itself that makes it right or wrong. Instead, whether it is right or wrong depends on a single decisive, but extrinsic, factor: God's will. Worse still for the simple believer, if God were now to forbid what had hitherto been a right act and to will what had hitherto been a wrong act, then right becomes wrong and wrong becomes right. Even if what God approves of is—as a matter of fact—what is right and what God disapproves of is—as a matter of fact—what is wrong, it seems that God's will could not, without flirting with arbitrariness, be the *standard* of morality.

So staunch an apologist as C. S. Lewis, writing about DCM, voices this very worry.

There were in the eighteenth century terrible theologians who held that 'God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God commanded them.' To make the position perfectly clear, one of them even said that though God has, as it happens, commanded us to love Him and one another, He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one another, and hatred would then have been right. It was apparently a mere toss-up which he decided to do. Such a view in effect makes God a mere arbitrary tyrant. It would be better and less irreligious to believe in no God and to have no ethics than to have such an ethics and such a theology as this.⁷

Does the faith of the simple believer that the heart of morality is to be found in God's will indeed implicate God in a scheme of moral arbitrariness?

The simple believer, of course, will want to block the accusation of arbitrariness. But how? The Commandments, he insists, are not merely arbitrary rules, enjoined upon even the non-believer. Rather the Commandments are, as it were, fundamental directives that tell us how we might respect and fulfill the nature that our Creator has given us.⁸

But if this answer is made, then further conceptual problems arise. For isn't the simple believer holding that: (a) an act is right because God wills it, and (b) God wills the act because it contributes to human flourishing? Yet it follows from (a) and (b), the critic charges, that an act is right, ultimately, because of its relation to human flourishing. If so, then haven't we have arrived at some

form of naturalism? But, if this is the case, why not avoid the detour through DCM and its attendant conundrums?

We have seen something, then, of the force of the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. The second horn, to which we now turn, will seem just as daunting. If DCM's account of right and wrong is not to be viciously circular, then it would seem that if God wills an act because it is right, the rightness of the act could not consist in God's willing it. The critic argues that 'because,' when used univocally, is an antisymmetric relation. Thus, for any propositions p and q ,

(1) if p because q , then it is not the case that q because p .

Now, the critic claims, we can see why (P3), the second horn of the dilemma, is true. For suppose we admit the antecedent of (P3), namely, that

(P3.a) God wills an act because it is right.

Using the minimal assumption that 'consists' implies 'because,' namely that

(V.1.a) an act's being morally right *consists* in being in accord with God's will

at least implies that

(2) an act is right *because* God wills it,

we can apply (1), the principle of the antisymmetry of 'because,' to (P3.a) to infer the negation of (2) and so conclude that DCM, as expressed by (V.1.a), is false. Thus, if God wills an act because it is right, then it cannot be right because God wills it. Hence an act's being right cannot simply consist in God's willing it.

There is, moreover, still another way of arguing for the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. This added argument rests on the claim that the believer must first justify his confidence about what God in fact wills by an appeal to ethical norms. James Cornman and Keith Lehrer have put their case plainly enough.

Consider what we would do if we read that Moses had returned with such commandments as 'make love to thy neighbor's wife,' 'Steal thy neighbor's goods,' and 'Take advantage of thy parents.' We would decide that whatever was revealed to Moses, it was not the will of God, because these are immoral commandments. We do not justify that something is moral by showing that it expresses God's will, because the only available way to evaluate conflicting claims about what God wills is by finding which one is in accordance with what is moral.⁹

If we know that something is God's will because we know that it is right, is it

not circular to claim that the act is right because God wills it?

Traditional philosophical wisdom, then, seems to have shown that the simple believer is far too simple. And yet we recall that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world. So perhaps we should not just yet dismiss the view of the simple believer.

II

But what can we say in defense of the simple believer? With his account of morality caught on the apparently well-supported horns of the Euthyphro dilemma, how are we to proceed?

Might one try to slip between those horns? Perhaps the alternatives posed in the dilemma's first premise

(P1) Either an act is right because God wills it or God wills it because it is right

are not exhaustive. But how could this be? One way is if the alternatives 'p because q' and 'q because p' (where p and q are propositions) are both false because p turns out, in some sense, to be equivalent to q. An analogy might be useful. Suppose one were asked whether measurement is quantitative because it uses numbers or whether measurement uses numbers because it is quantitative. Here the alternatives are, of course, spurious because in using numbers for measurement, one is engaged in a quantitative activity. Measurement's being quantitative just consists in its use of numbers. We cannot take the use of numbers in measurement to be the cause or the reason or the explanation of that activity's being quantitative, or conversely.

Now the simple believer reminds us that God personifies Perfect Righteousness. Part of what it means to say that God is righteous is that it is God's nature to act according to what is right, a righteousness we see in His fulfilling of His covenant with His people. To say that God *personifies* righteousness is to say that He is *Righteousness*. Hence, His acts are righteous simply by being in accord with His will. Finally, to say that God is *Perfect* Righteousness is to say that God's righteousness is complete in and of itself. Thus, to say that God personifies Perfect Righteousness is to say that his actions are completely and self-sufficiently righteous in that they are in accord with His will. God is not righteous because God conforms (however perfectly) to some higher standard of righteousness. Rather, God's will is not only the measure, but also the personal substance, of Perfect Righteousness. Expressing this understanding of God requires, to be sure, that the simple believer begin to develop a "philosophy of God." So, to an extent, the simple believer now becomes, if not so already, something of a philosopher. But this philosophy articulates, rather than supplants, simple belief.

Such reflection might well continue with perhaps the most fundamental Judaeo-Christian insight: God is one. This unity implies, not just that there is only one God but also that there is no division within God's nature. The internal divisions within our human nature, on the other hand, make possible a kind of chronic internal warfare. We often, for example, find our will to be at odds with our intellect. But there is no such contest between will and wisdom in God. We might, to be sure, find it useful to speak of God on one occasion under the aspect of will and on another occasion under the aspect of intellect. But to speak of God's will as sovereign does not suggest that God's will could ever be exercised arbitrarily. In God will and wisdom are one.

This doctrine, an aspect of the doctrine of divine simplicity, is often linked with the claim that God is *identical* with His attributes. Alvin Plantinga has sharply challenged this related thesis. He complains that while it begins "in a pious and proper concern for God's sovereignty, it ends by flouting one of the most fundamental claims of theism."¹⁰ Thus, he argues that

If God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life. So taken the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.¹¹

Yet the simple believer, confident that God is both Perfect Righteousness and Sovereign Lord, has a response that is a direct as Plantinga's challenge. Confessing that God is both a person and Perfect Righteousness, the simple believer concludes that the property of Perfect Righteousness is a person. Of course, Perfect Righteousness is not just any person, but rather the Perfect Person. Plantinga's assumption that no property is a person is doubtless true when restricted to any ordinary nonmoral property. Yet his assumption needs defense when it is extended to the extraordinary moral property of Perfect Righteousness.

The whole preceding line of argument, beginning with the simple believer's reminder that God personifies Righteousness, suggests a first escape between the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma. With an eye to Plantinga's unconvincing objection to its ontological basis, we shall call it the "moral perfection as person" strategy. This strategy, we have seen, insists that God *is* Perfect Righteousness. On this view the charge, that it must be the case that *either* God wills an act because it is right *or* that an act is right because God wills it, breaks down. Neither disjunct is true, since 'because' fails to capture the insight that God personifies Righteousness. And the righteousness of one's action just is its sharing

in the Perfect Righteousness who is God. The disjunctive first premise, then, of the Euthyphro dilemma betrays a deep misconception of the nature of God, and so the believer can rightly reject that premise.

However, the simple believer need not be committed to what we suggest above as the preferred ontological thesis about persons and properties. For even if one were to hold an absolute bifurcation of persons and properties, there is yet another way to deal with the disjunctive premise of the Euthyphro dilemma. The believer may take perfect righteousness as an essential attribute of God but nonetheless not identical with Him. There is, to be sure, a putative problem with holding this view. It takes the form of a new dilemma. If God created perfect righteousness, then there was a state of affairs in which God was not perfectly righteous, and so righteousness could not even be an essential property of God. But what if God did not create righteousness? Seemingly, the believer is not yet out of the woods. For if God did not create righteousness, then either righteousness exists independently of God or righteousness is essentially part of God's nature. In the former case, God is not sovereign nor is righteousness essential to God's nature. In the latter case, God's existence *depends* on His properties. Thus, here too, God's sovereignty is supposedly threatened.

But again the believer is not without a response. For perhaps God's uncreated but essential righteousness is dependent on Him for its existence and identity in a way that does not make God's existence equally dependent on His righteousness. An analogy with the natural numbers might suggest the kind of relation that we have in mind. The number one is a member, indeed an essential member, of the system of natural numbers, and distinguishable from the other natural numbers by the role it plays in this larger system. Although neither the number one nor the natural number system could exist without the other, the system of natural numbers is nonetheless a mathematical object of a logically higher order than is the number one. In this respect, the logical relation between the number one and the system of natural numbers is analogous to the metaphysical relationship between righteousness and God. Neither righteousness nor God could exist without the other, but God is metaphysically richer than is the attribute of righteousness. Once grounded in this metaphysical primacy, the sovereignty of God can be upheld.

We might call the second way of rejecting the disjunctive premise of the original Euthyphro dilemma the "property as essential attribute" strategy. While we continue to prefer our "moral perfection as person" strategy, we nonetheless see no insurmountable problem for the believer who insists on an absolute bifurcation between persons and properties or who prefers to say that God exemplifies—rather than is—Perfect Righteousness. These positions need not jeopardize God's sovereignty. For God's having a nature in the sense of having uncreated essential properties is entirely compatible with God's being metaphys-

ically richer than, and in this sense sovereign over, any one of these essential properties.

Thus, the simple believer can then adopt either the “moral perfection as person” strategy or the “property as essential attribute” strategy for denying the truth of the first premise of the Euthyphro dilemma.¹²

Let us now turn our attention to (P2) of the Euthyphro dilemma. It expresses what we call “the objection from arbitrariness.” The objection from arbitrariness really has two components. There is, to begin with, the preliminary criticism that the believer’s ethical stance makes the standard of morality extrinsic to human acts. An act is right or wrong not because of the kind of act it is but because of God’s will with respect to it. The second criticism draws its strength from the believer’s general commitment to the objectivity of moral rightness and wrongness *and* his specific insistence on God’s righteousness. The criticism, then, is that DCM reduces morality to the commands issuing from a subjective will (albeit God’s) and makes God party to an ethical framework that countenances, at least in theory, a deep moral inconstancy. But ethics just could not be like that. If morality is objective and if God is righteous and just, then the believer must be the first to look for another standard of right and wrong.

In light of such criticisms, it is no wonder that the simple believer can become uneasy about his initial claim that God’s will is the fundamental standard of right and wrong. But if the believer remains a simple believer, one suspects that he will not find in modern philosophy much help in seeing just what *is* the standard of right and wrong. Neither the normative theories of intuitionism nor utilitarianism nor social contract thought, at any rate, seem satisfactory. For the believer recognizes that they too often have implications that run counter to what God wills. (Even if God’s will is not the *standard* of morality, it remains—any believer contends—that actions that God wills are right and those that are contrary to His will are wrong.) Perhaps a Kantian approach offers greater promise than the general run of secular candidates. Yet Kant seems too often to fall victim to his own formalism. For sometimes an innocuous maxim turns out not to be universalizable while an immoral but cleverly restricted maxim passes muster. Moreover, the central Kantian category of respect for persons is left perilously unspecified. What, then, is the believer to do? How is he to construct a coherent account of his ethics?

First of all, the believer ought not to give up on the whole of philosophical ethics, much less do so without any scouting of its domain. Nor, of course, is philosophical ethics exhausted by the traditions just noted. Indeed, elements of each of these can be seen as themes interwoven into the fabric of DCM. The simple believer reminds us that Scripture speaks of the insights of conscience, of the call to an unrestricted benevolence, and of the covenant we share with God. But more importantly, the believer should not give up his original insight

that God's will is the standard of morality. What the believer must surely pursue, however, is a deeper grasp of just *how* God's will is the standard of right and wrong. The critic, then, actually does the believer a great service in forcing him to articulate this deeper understanding.

Now the deeper understanding that seems necessary has a tradition of its own. It is by no means unfamiliar to believers who have had an opportunity for ethical reflection. But its components, when they are accepted at all, are often scattered and put at cross purposes by modernity. The structure of this deeper understanding, then is roughly as follows.

What God wills for human beings is that they be happy. Their happiness consists in realizing such basic goods as life, knowledge, family, community, play, work, and worship of God. In realizing and participating in such goods, human beings flourish.¹³ Thus we act rightly when what we do helps us to realize and participate in what is humanly good and helps us to do so without intentionally destroying or compromising what is humanly good. But, clearly, what is good for us depends on the nature that we have. And this nature is not our doing. It is God's creation. As such, it is a profound expression of God's creative will. Moreover, seeing the goodness of His creation, God specifically wills and indeed legislates that we fulfill our nature and in so doing achieve happiness. God's will, in this twofold fashion of creative and legislative will, is truly the standard of what is right and wrong.¹⁴ Thus, the simple believer can never really forget that we are a kind of animal distinguished from others by being made in God's image and on this account free and rational. We are to live our lives on the basis of this extraordinary nature.

Given this sketch of how the believer might better understand the relation between God's will and morality, how exactly can we meet "the objection from arbitrariness?" What response is to be made to the objection that were God's will the standard of morality, the specter of arbitrariness could not be exorcised?

This "objection from arbitrariness" has, as we have noted, two components. There is, first, the preliminary point that DCM makes the standard of morality extrinsic to human acts. Can it be that an act is right or wrong not because of the kind of act it is but in virtue of how God's will is related to it?

This first component can, we think, be successfully answered. To begin with, it ignores certain special cases in which precisely because one is acting as God's agent the very structure and kind of action that one performs is determined by God's will.¹⁵ Was, for example, Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac an act of his simply intending the death of an innocent, and so committing murder, albeit for God's glory? If so, it was morally reprehensible. But in fact Abraham's decision was, rather, a decision to execute God's will. Were it not, it could not be recounted as an act of faith.¹⁶ So it is God's intention that gives Abraham's act its special character. And God's intention could scarcely be to secure the

death of an innocent person, and so commit murder, for His glory. Why not? God, as the creator and master of life, is thereby so related to human life that He is logically precluded from being a murderer. (Indeed, it is as peculiar to think of God's acts as having some sort of internal means-ends structure as it would be to think of God's deliberating, as we might, about how to achieve an end.)

Far more importantly, we can now see that this first component of the objection from arbitrariness overlooks the central point that God's will determines the nature that we have. What makes the act a human act is that we do it, and we act well in doing it if it perfects our nature. Since the nature is itself the result of God's creative will, God's legislative will with respect to any particular act can hardly be seen as extrinsic to the excellence of that act. For to be extrinsic to the excellence of an act means, in this context, to be *accidental* to the act's being excellent. But human acts are excellent just because they fulfill the human nature that God has willed. God's will, far from being accidental to human excellence, is its creative source. God, moreover, has a single will even if we consider it from distinguishable perspectives. That single will constantly expresses God's nature. And our deepening participation in God's nature is what fulfills our own nature.

There remains, of course, the second component of "the objection from arbitrariness." Once the worry about an extrinsic moral standard is put to rest, there is still what one might term the question of variability. For what if God were to will the reverse of what He now wills with respect to human acts? In that case our morality would be turned inside out. Clearly our previous consideration of God's will being one with God's intellect counts against the critic's charge of arbitrary variability. (After all, Hamlet was a melancholiac in accord with Shakespeare's dramatic intentions, but how odd it would be, even here, to say that Hamlet's character depended only on Shakespeare's arbitrary will. In our case, of course, we have the nature that we do in accord with God's will; and how mistaken it would be to say that our nature has been arbitrarily willed.)

There is a further consideration about God's will that plays an important role in the defense of the simple believer's position. God's will, including His will for us, is essential to God, or at least immutable with respect to Him. God's nature is unchanging. So to speak of God's first willing one thing for us and then willing another—and perhaps inconsistent—thing is metaphysically impossible. To speak in such a way implies that God, who changes not, undergoes change within Himself.¹⁷ (If God were subject to change—at least such a change as from good to better—God would fail to be worthy of worship since such change would imply some lack within God's nature.) Thus, the hypothesis that God might will an act of cruelty makes sense only if the hypothesis that God might not be God makes sense. The simple believer, of course, insists that the

latter hypothesis makes no sense at all. But if this hypothesis makes no sense, then the objection that DCM is somehow arbitrary is a failed objection. DCM is no more arbitrary than God is Arbitrary.

Here, though, the critic might protest that the chief worry raised by the objection from arbitrariness is not that God might change His will for us. Rather the worry is that God's will for us might have always been different than it in fact is—and different in a morally repugnant way. Thus the objection takes this form. "What if God had always willed that we practice cruelty and violate innocent life? Surely we would not accept the implication of DCM that if God so willed, cruelty and the violation of innocent life would be right."

But here the believer's answer is plain enough. God's creative will has given us a nature that cannot be perfected by such acts, nor could God do otherwise in light of His nature. So God's legislative will could not mandate such norms. Why is this so? God, the simple believer insists, is love. And God is goodness, the personification of goodness. But just as God's will is one with God's reason, so also is God's will one with the goodness—and the love—that God is. But such a will cannot bring into existence a human nature that would be perfected precisely in acting in a fashion that made it less like its Creator. God's seeing that mankind is "very good" is *Genesis's* testimony to man's sharing in the being of the Creator. But if God's creative will has made us in God's own image, it could hardly be contradicted by His legislative will. Hence, the supposition of the objector's query—what if God always willed that we practice cruelty and violate innocent life?—is again a metaphysically impossible one. Thus, this alternative reading of the objection from arbitrariness does not succeed in sustaining the original objection.

Perhaps, to be sure, a critic might now contend that this version of the objection from arbitrariness has been met at much too high a price. Have we not, after all, forfeited God's freedom? We are free to act wrongly. God, however, is not—but if God were, well, then, God could have given us nature "perfectible" by, say, acts of cruelty.

Now if ever the simple believer is wary of letting "the philosophers" do his thinking about God, it is when they reconstruct the concept God with the result that God is no longer worthy of worship. So the believer is not about to sign away God's freedom. For God's freedom, the believer might argue, need not rest on the possibility of acting in accord with some imperfection or limitation. We are free to do what is wrong *because* of our moral weakness. But God, whose will has no defect, cannot thus be free. Our freedom, in this respect, is the freedom of finitude. The absence of such freedom could well be seen as a positive mark of the Divine. Nor must we be surprised that God's freedom could have a different character than our own: there is like disparity between His knowledge and ours, between His love and our participation therein.¹⁸

Here we might also add, with a view to the order of grace, that God's being love—God's necessarily being God—is not incompatible with our salvation's being His free gift. For it was, first, God's free choice to create us with a nature that is able to receive His gift of grace. And, second, when we fell from grace, God chose how to respond in love. Just how, and how freely, He did this is the Good News.

But there nonetheless remains in the Euthyphro dilemma—even if our reply to the “objection from arbitrariness” is so far successful—the counterfactual conditional that so disturbed C. S. Lewis: if God *were* to will cruelty, then cruelty *would* be right. Ought not we to object to the very assertion of this conditional? If according to DCM, this conditional isn't false, doesn't that count against DCM?

At this point, it is useful to distinguish between what a theory logically implies and what we, in asserting certain of its consequences, conversationally imply. A given statement can be a logical consequence of a true theory and thus be true. But to assert that statement could, nonetheless, be conversationally inappropriate. For the assertion, without added contextual information, could be badly misleading in ordinary discourse. Thus, a letter of recommendation that says only that Jones always attended class and has neat handwriting may assert factual truths. But the letter conveys much more. The message it conveys is that Jones is, at best, a mediocre student. We communicate not only by what we say, but by what we could have said but didn't—by what we conversationally imply.

Now suppose that the simple believer were to make the isolated assertion that if God were, say, to will that we hate Him and one another, then to do so would be right. Conversationally this assertion implies at least that it is conceivable that God really could will hatred. Otherwise, after all, what would its point be? So perhaps, C. S. Lewis was properly alert to something important to the sensibility of the simple believer. Even if DCM logically implies the truth (albeit vacuously) of the counterfactual, to assert it is conversationally to imply that one is ready to entertain that its antecedent is conceivable or that it is even true in some possible world. Hence the simple believer rightly refrains from asserting this counterfactual, whatever its truth-value, for to do so betrays a radical misconception of God's nature. (Nonetheless, since we hold that the antecedent of this peculiar counterfactual is not possibly true, we could accept the counterfactual's truth without being committed to the possibility of its consequent being true.)

Turning now from Lewis's counterfactual worries, let us consider next, the critic's argument that the believer's response to (P2) implies a species of ethical naturalism. What is the motive behind the critic's new charge? Perhaps the following question suggests something of what is going on. Is a vintage of wine good, one might ask, because all the wine experts agree that it is or do they

agree because the vintage is good? Ordinarily, we would say that their agreement is based on their sensitivities to certain good-making features intrinsic to the wine itself. So, an individual with reliable wine-tasting sensitivities might bypass the consensus of the experts altogether. The critic's charge that the simple believer is committed to ethical naturalism is motivated by similar considerations. How so?

Assuming again that 'consists' implies 'because,' the critic argues that the believer is committed to the following two claims:

- (3) An act is right because God wills it.
- (4) God wills an act because it contributes to human flourishing.

Now the critic argues that (3) and (4) imply

- (5) So, an act is right, ultimately, because it contributes to human flourishing.

So why suppose that the standard of morality is God's will—any more than we would assume that it's the verdict of tasters that is the standard of good wine?

But clearly the critic's argument is guilty of a fallacy. For his argument assumes the transitivity of the 'because' relation.¹⁹ The argument has the following form"

- (3') p because of q .
- (4') q because of r .
- (5') So, p because of r .

Once put so baldly, we easily see that this argument form is invalid. If Uriah is willing to return to battle because David wants him to, and David wants Uriah to return to battle because David wants to keep secret his adultery with Bathsheba, it surely does not follow that Uriah is willing to return to battle because David wants to keep secret his adultery with Bathsheba. We cannot ignore the intensional context created by 'because.' In its first occurrence, 'because' creates a context for Uriah's reasons; but in its second occurrence it creates a context for David's reasons. Yet David's reasons are not necessarily Uriah's reasons. So the inference from (3) and (4) to (5) is fallacious given our rendering of its form. When there is a shift in intensional context, the transitivity of 'because' may fail. Thus, the critic's argument is invalid.

So we see that when the simple believer asserts both (3) and (4), there may be two separate intensional contexts. 'Because' in (3) creates a context in which we find expressed the metaphysical truth that the rightness of an act consists in God's willing it. 'Because' in (4) creates a context in which the believer expresses a truth that following God leads to flourishing.

What is more interesting, though, than the critic's logical fallacy is his faulty presumption that DCM is *incompatible* with any ethical naturalism. For in fact a rapprochement between DCM and a rich current of natural law ethics is precisely

what we seek. One must be careful here, to be sure, not to suppose that just any form of DCM can be joined with just any form of natural law ethics.²⁰ Certainly, too, some versions of DCM, lacking adequate articulation of either God's nature or man's created nature, are unsatisfactory in their own right. Equally, some versions of natural law theory, agnostic about the genesis of human nature and radically defective about the goods that perfect it, are unsatisfactory in their own right. Nonetheless, the best expression of DCM and the best expression of natural law ethics do, we think, form a structural unity.

Why is this so? Both traditions, it turns out, emphasize different dimensions of a single process. The process has as its point of inception God's will. This will is a creative will and generates a human nature which depends on God for its very being. Indeed, in some way it shares in God's own nature. But in willing human nature, God also wills the realization of human nature. Moreover, in the Decalogue—to take the central case—God's will operates legislatively. This realization of human nature is worked out in the conducting of human life. One's life is excellent insofar as one is rightly oriented toward the goods that constitute human happiness. One is virtuous insofar as one's conduct is habituated in obedience to God's legislative will. Now DCM has emphasized the beginning of this process: God's will and the doing of God's will by His human creatures. The natural law thinker, on the other hand, has usually underscored the identification and the right pursuit of the goods that constitutes human flourishing. Is so very much needed, really, for a rapprochement of the two traditions? Believers who think in terms of DCM need to reflect on how God's creative will is expressed through the constitution of human nature and on how that nature is fulfilled in the realization of certain basic goods. Believers who think in terms of natural law ethics need to reflect on how the fulfillment of human nature is normative precisely because God's will is expressed through that nature and virtuous because it is formed in the discipline of obedience to God's will.

No doubt this rapprochement must face objections from certain partisans of the two traditions it aims to unite. Some brand or other of voluntarism might insist that human nature has been entirely spoiled by original sin. If this is so, then seeing God's will as being expressed through that nature is a futile business. The short response to this is simply that were human nature so lamentably corrupted as suggested, it is hard to see how salvation could be effected at all. For it is we human beings who must be saved, and we cannot be completely divorced from our nature.

Alternatively some Thomists, say, might contend that on the account of morality that has been developed here, human nature remains the proximate standard of the rightness or wrongness of an action. And if this is so, why should we articulate the ethical stance of the simple believer in terms of DCM? The answer to this question does not deny that our nature, vastly more comprehensible to

us than God's nature, is the proximate norm of morality. But what makes human nature morally significant is that it is an expression of God's creative will. Thus, though not the proximate standard, God's will is the fundamental—and so most philosophically interesting—standard of morality.

Moreover, we want to articulate the ethical stance of the simple believer in terms of DCM because we think it can provide a particularly satisfying account of the distinctively Christian virtues. Consider, for example, the peculiarly Christian virtue of humility, which is, in an important sense, central to all the moral virtues. From a limited natural law perspective, humility has this pivotal position because it guards against the immoderate, and so less than fully rational, pursuit of the goods. As such, a lack of humility is an offence against practical reason. But from the perspective of DCM, we are better able to see how humility has this central role precisely because DCM recognizes our constant dependence on God's sovereign legislative and creative will. Correspondingly, pride, the root of wrongdoing, is primarily an offence against God, secondarily an offence against reason.

So much, then, for consideration of (P2) of the Euthyphro dilemma. Our response has taken us far afield, perhaps, but the results have been considerable. We want, next, to reconsider (P3). It states, we recall, that if God approves of an act because it is right, then DCM is false. First, notice that one argument for (P3) might rest on the assumption that 'consists' implies 'because,' more fully that 'an act's being right *consists* in God's willing it' implies 'the act is right *because* God wills it.' Implicit in our rejection of the disjunctive first premise, (P1), of the Euthyphro dilemma is a criticism of this very assumption. Recall that measuring's being quantitative just consists in its use of numbers and so, accordingly, it is not quantitative because it uses numbers—nor is the converse the case. Similarly, DCM need not imply that an act is right *because* God approves of it. But this initial argument for (P3) breaks down precisely in that it mistakenly assumes just such an implication. That argument, with its assumptions laid bare, is as follows.

- (6) God wills an act because it is right.
[assumption]
- (7) It is not the case that an act is right because God wills it.
[from 6 and the antisymmetry of 'because']
- (8) DCM implies an act is right because God wills it.
[from the critic's assumption 'consists' implies 'because']
- (9) So, DCM is false. [from 7 and 8]

But this argument cannot succeed without (8).

Notice, furthermore, that the critic's argument also employs the principle of the antisymmetry of the 'because' relation. As we pointed out in discussing the

non-transitivity of the 'because' relation, a fallacy may also be committed here if attention is not paid to shifting intensional contexts.

But, a critic might continue, isn't there a simpler, and indeed successful, argument for (P3)? It runs as follows:

(6') God wills an act because it is right.

[assumption]

(8') DCM implies that it is not the case that God wills an act because it is right. [from our assumption that '*p* consists in *q*' implies 'not (*q* because *p*)']

(9') So, DCM is false. [from 6' and 8']

To be sure, this is a simple argument, but the supporter of DCM would have an equally simple response to it. The critic's argument is merely the conditional proof of the contraposition of (8'). Rather than reading this argument as a refutation of DCM, what prevents our construing it as a refutation of the assumption (6')? After all, in meeting this subsidiary argument, the believer in DCM need not accept its assumption.

In any case, it would still be open to the supporter of DCM to accept the conditional proof from (6') to (9'), and even admit that (P3) is true, while still rejecting the Euthyphro dilemma in light of our earlier criticisms of (P1) and (P2) of that dilemma.

Here, too, perhaps we can put to rest Cornman and Lehrer's argument for the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. Recall their objection that if the only way to justify that God wills *x* is to show that *x* is morally right, then it is not the case that *x* is morally right because God wills it. Does their claim entail that DCM is false? By no means—and the argument against DCM to which it gives rise is invalid because it confuses epistemological with metaphysical issues. The nub of Cornman and Lehrer's argument is as follows:

(10) The only way to justify that *p* is to show that *q*.

(11) So, it is not the case that: *q* because *p*

But consider the following simple counterexample:

(10') The only way to justify that Adam has a soul is to show that Adam is rational (or potentially so).

(11') So, it not the case that: Adam is rational (or potentially so) because he has a soul.

This counterexample shows the invalidity of the critic's original argument.

We have argued, in section II, that the Euthyphro dilemma, as directed against our DCM, does not stand on its logical merits. Why, then, is it often thought so compelling? Why is it that objections to DCM sometimes *feel* decisive when

in fact they are not impressive—especially when separated from their cultural milieu?

At least since the Enlightenment, God's nature has been seen through a mirror and darkly indeed. The God of public discourse, one might say, has been either a vengeful God, or a romantic God of sentimentality, or the detached Watchmaker of the deists. But if a culture primarily sees God in any of these diminishing categories, it loses its sense of God as steadfast love, perfect righteousness, and everlasting Father. Yet when our understanding of God is so diminished, the worry that such a God might act arbitrarily becomes very real. Doubtless the simple believer should not expect that such a God, if yet alive, will soon recover from these cultural impoverishments. Still, the believer should be able to recognize how a defective culture gives a plausibility to, say, the objection from arbitrariness that it cannot, when faced with the testimony of the Living God, sustain.

There is, too, an entrenched agnosticism about the possibility of knowing God's will in the arena of public policy. A critic motivated by such agnosticism might concede that God wills that we love one another or that God wills that we pursue justice. But how, the critic asks, is love to be shown and justice pursued? How are we actually to proceed in the arena of public policy? Indeed, the critic suggests, if anyone comes before us with anything but the vaguest orientation for public policy worked out in terms of God's will or law, must we not suppose him to be a fanatic or a charlatan or, at best, a "fundamentalist?" (This last category has a way of becoming in public discourse marvelously expansive, either as a term of disparagement or boast.)

The simple believer shares some of these worries. For the believer, like any other citizen of our century, is no stranger to fanatics and charlatans. We know that fanatics and charlatans can distort any good and twist any truth. Why suppose one's understanding of God's will to be immune? Yet the simple believer has no trouble in distinguishing between, say, the religious fanatic's desire to abrogate civil liberties to promote a private revelation and, by way of contrast, a basic scriptural teaching such as the injunction against shedding the blood of the innocent. Nor does the simple believer profess either always to know God's will or to suppose that on every occasion there is but a single way of acting on God's will. Yet the simple believer finds in Scripture or in the tradition of the Church much more than general exhortation. If we love God, we are to keep his commandments.²¹ These commandments could scarcely challenge us as they do had they so little specific content as some suppose. Nor could they, given their challenge, strike us as so wise if they did not also comport with our nature in a way that the schemes of fanatics and charlatans never can.

If, of course, one is merely a philosophical theist, then one does not recognize Scripture or tradition as revelatory of God's will. Admittedly for such a theist,

there is a far greater problem in seeing clearly the content of God's will. Despite this, the simple believer recalls the promise, given in both Testaments, that God's law is written in the heart of every believer.

I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.²²

The simple believer's problem is not that of being clear about what are the main lines of God's will for him. The real problem is remaining obedient to God's will.

III

We have defended the simple believer's DCM against the Euthyphro dilemma. Now we might ask why the merits of the simple believer's DCM, and its unique metaphysical foundation, have remained so problematic to "the wise."

Let us begin with two intriguing questions. First, how is it that the Euthyphro dilemma succeeds against Euthyphro but fails against our version, (V.1), of DCM? And, second, what is it that the simple believer can say that Euthyphro couldn't?

Recall that Euthyphro's DCM was formulated in terms of holiness and the gods of Homer. Thus we have:

(V.2) An act is holy if all the gods love it, and an act is unholy if all the gods hate it.

The gods of Olympus, as we find them in Greek mythology, show all the follies of the humanity in the image of which they were crafted. With such gods it is no surprise that Plato, a mathematician by temperament, should postulate the existence of eternal and perfect universal standards by which the gods, too, could be judged. Instead of Zeus, Plato spoke about Justice itself; instead of Athena, Wisdom; instead of Venus, Beauty; instead of Apollo, Truth. Thus, for the philosophical Greek, it was transparently clear that we would want to say that the gods approved of an act because it was right. To say the reverse would court disaster.

We should also recall that Plato himself, when pressed to define justice in the *Republic*, attempted to explain the relationship of the Forms of the Virtues—Justice, Wisdom, Courage, and Temperance—in terms of the overarching Form of

the Good. In doing so, he was finally driven to the language of myth and metaphor.

It was the Sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring which the Good has created in the visible world, to stand there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects.²³

Believers have long found in Plato's language a foreshadowing of Johannine themes that "God is light; in Him there is no darkness" and that God is "the true light that enlightens every man."²⁴

Fortunately, the simple believer's DCM is rooted not in Hellenism but in Hebraic faith and trust in a sovereign God. The Hebrew people, scholars tell us, radically reworked the concepts which they borrowed from their neighbors. This enrichment is especially evident with regard to "holy" and "holiness." Where their neighbors emphasized the holiness of *things*, the Israelites worshipped the holiness of *God*. In so doing they introduced into the concept of holiness a basis in personhood.

Indeed, in Hebraic thought holiness takes on an intensely personal cast. God the Holy One is the Righteous and Just One, the God of Love. Since God is the perfect moral being, moral qualities pervade His holiness. The power of the Holy One also attached to His laws. Thus, the simple believer has no fear of affirming that the holiness of an act consists in God's commanding it. Let the Greeks submit their deities to the standards of morality. The Israelites, for their part, knew that God is Righteousness and hence His commands are righteous. His laws, too, show the deepest reality in that they are rooted in His very nature.

Thus while the Euthyphro dilemma might count decisively against various conceptions of gods, it does not defeat formulations of DCM that directly refer to the Living God of Scripture. Beyond this—though it marks a speculative turn—an explicitly trinitarian reflection on the distinctively personal ground of DCM offers us heuristic possibilities that we should not overlook.

Notice that in our formulating the simple believer's DCM, we underscored that God is one. To say that God is one is to say that He is one in being and substance. Yet God is also three persons. His nature is triune. Each person is wholly God, but each also has a distinguishing characteristic dimension. The simple believer's DCM, accordingly, ought to be able to draw fully on this special nature of the Living God. God functions as the metaphysical foundation of morality, not merely as a detached first cause, but rather as the God and Father of believers. Furthermore, if we are to be measured by, or model our conduct on, God Himself, then God must reveal Himself to us. But is not this revelation none other than the second person of the trinity? For it is Jesus, the Son, who is the revelation of God's nature. Jesus, furthermore, exemplifies the central virtue of the constellation of virtues to which DCM naturally gives rise:

“My aim is not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”²⁵ And finally, it is only through the Holy Spirit that we come to know intimately God’s will. An abiding truth in God’s will, a trust that makes DCM the natural expression of the simple believer’s moral stance, can come only through the gift of God’s indwelling spirit.

Euthyphro, to be sure, could not draw on such an understanding. Thus, in an important sense, what Euthyphro couldn’t say is far more important, in constructing a DCM, than what he could say. He couldn’t say, after all, that God is one *and* triune, that God personifies goodness, that God’s will is an unchanging expression of His reason, and that in obeying God’s will human beings are divinized. And these are just the sorts of things that one must say if DCM is to succeed. But, of course, that has been—in effect—our central thesis throughout.²⁶

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NOTES

1. St. Paul, I Cor. 1:20-21. (We use the *New International Version* unless otherwise specified.)
2. William Frankena, in his widely used *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), speaks of the Divine Command theory or theological voluntarism as maintaining that “the standard of right and wrong is the will or law of God.” See pp. 28ff.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) provides an illuminating historical account of how philosophy has often ill-served public discourse.
4. See Robert Merrihew Adams, “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1979; Philip Quinn, “Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory,” in Janine Idziak (ed.) *Divine Command Morality* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979); William Alston, “What Euthyphro Should Have Said,” delivered to the Society of Christian Philosophers, March 1985, at Loyola Marymount University.
5. This version was suggested—but then rejected—by Robert Merrihew Adams. See his “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness,” in Outka and Reeder (eds.), *Religion and Morality*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 318.
6. For example, Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (London: Crescent Books, 1959), p. 71.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), p. 61.
8. Psalm 19:1-11 expresses this aptly.
9. James Comman and Keith Lehrer, *Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 429.
10. Alvin Plantinga, *Has God a Nature?* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 53-54. Norman Kretzmann, by way of contrast, is one contemporary philosopher who has been far more sympathetic to the simplicity doctrine.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

12. To be sure, someone could raise the worry that 'an act's being in accord with God's will' might have a logical priority over 'an act's being morally right' that would imply an asymmetry between the two descriptions. This asymmetry, the critic might charge, would, in turn, justify (P1) of the Euthyphro dilemma. Here we would respond that indeed 'an act's being in accord with God's will' might enjoy a logical priority over 'an act's being morally right.' But it does not follow from this admission that (P1) is justified, for 'consists' does not imply 'because,' (for an elaboration of this point see our discussion of (P3) below), and (P1), unlike (V.1), turns on 'because' rather than 'consists.'

13. For a full discussion of the basic goods see Germain Grisez's monumental *The Way of the Lord Jesus* (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983).

14. We are indebted to Jorge Garcia for calling our attention to the important distinction between God's creative and legislative will.

15. See Patrick Lee's provocative discussion of this point in "The Permanence of the Ten Commandments," *Theological Studies*, vol. 42 (1981). In discussing the test case of God's command to Abraham and Aquinas's analysis of such cases, Lee writes (pp. 433-434):

One might object that in Abraham's case the death of Isaac is a condition for Abraham's executing God's project and therefore Abraham must intend the death directly. But Thomas's argument is that the role of an executor is a special case. Acts we perform 'on our own' are composed of act-in-intention and act-in-execution; but where a subject executes the intention of a superior, the whole act is divided between the partners, with the result that the executor's intention, precisely as executor, is no different from the manifest intention of the superior . . . Hence Abraham's intention is the same as God's: if God does not directly intend death, then neither does Abraham.

16. Heb. 11:17-19.

17. Aquinas presents this sort of argument in his discussion of the Eternal Law. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 100, a. 8. We appreciate that the question of what (if anything) is contingent about God's will has a complex history. We cannot, however, explore this complexity here.

18. This way of maintaining that God can be free yet unable to sin, though familiar in the Augustinian tradition, is admittedly controversial.

19. In another context, Baruch Brody has called attention to the fallacy of assuming the transitivity of the 'because' relation. See his, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch Brody (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 593ff.

20. Consider, for example, the chasm that opens between, say, Ockham's Divine Command ethics and Hobbes's use of natural law.

21. This injunction is a recurring scriptural theme. See, for example, Deut. 6:5-6, Matt. 22:37-40, Jn. 14:15.

22. Jer. 31:33-34; Heb. 8:10.

23. *Republic*, VI. 508 (Cornford translation, p. 219).

24. 1 Jn. 1:5b, Jn. 1:9.

25. Jn. 5:30b, *The New English Bible*.

26. A longer version of this paper was presented to the Loyola Marymount University Department of Philosophy and to the Southern California Society for the Philosophy of Religion. We are grateful to both groups, and especially to Robert Merrihew Adams, for a great many helpful comments.