

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

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Lecture Notes, February 20

I. Quiz: How did Enron misuse special purpose entities?

II. Defining “the pious” in the *Euthyphro*

In parts of the dialogue which are not reprinted, Euthyphro and Socrates work through two earlier attempts to define piety.

Socrates rejects Euthyphro’s first attempt to identify the pious with prosecuting wrongdoers, since there are other pious acts.

They also reject identifying the pious with what the gods love, since the gods may disagree.

They end up with the definition given at the beginning of our selection:

The pious = What is loved by *all* the gods.

The impious = What is hated by *all* the gods.

Given these definitions, Socrates asks, does the pious become pious from the love of the gods?

Or, do the gods love the pious because it is pious?

This question is one of the most famous in all of philosophy.

Socrates proceeds to show that the pious can not be identical to what is loved by the gods.

If two things are identical, they share all properties.

For instance, Superman is identical to Clark Kent.

Since Superman can fly, so can Clark Kent.

Since Clark Kent works at the Daily Planet, so does Superman.

Because he keeps secrets, some people do not know that, say, Superman is a reporter.

Now, consider the pious and the god-loved.

The pious has the property of being loved by the gods.

And the god-loved has the property of being loved by the gods.

So far so good: they share this property.

But, the pious has the property of being loved by the gods because it has a particular (pious) nature.

If something is pious, whether it is loved by the gods or not, it maintains that nature.

If the gods stop loving the pious, it remains pious.

On the other hand, the god-loved has the property of being god-loved only because the gods love it.

If the gods stop loving the god-loved, it ceases to be god-loved.

So, the pious and the god-loved have different properties, and so are different individuals.

We may also consider an instance of this question, applied to the impious.

Is murder impious because the gods hate murder, or do the gods hate murder because it is impious?

Which is the cause and which is the effect?

Note that the same question remains if we consider only one God:

Is murder impious because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is impious?

Also, the same structural problem arises for morality as for piety:

Is murder wrong because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is wrong?

We will consider this last version of Socrates’s question to Euthyphro.

III. Divine Command Theory and Natural Law

The first option is called voluntarism, or Divine Command Theory (DCT).

On voluntarism, ethics is a part of religion, and we should look to God for morality.

Voluntarism entails that God could change his/her mind, and make murder morally acceptable.

But it would seem that there must be a reason for God to choose certain acts as good and others as bad.

Voluntarism makes the choice between good and bad arbitrary, which seems repugnant.

We should explore the other option.

The second option is called natural law.

According to natural law, there is a limit on God's power.

God can not make murder morally right, for example.

So God is not omnipotent, in this way.

Natural law suggests that ethics can be studied outside of religion.

One can still consider God as the divine discoverer of morality, or as the creator of the world which contains the natural law.

The problem for the theist then becomes one of access: How do we know which of God's supposed pronouncements are really the divine word?

The theist has a problem here.

We can see the problem by considering, on the assumption that the good is identical to what God loves, whether God loves the good because it is good, or whether the good is good because God loves it.

That is, on voluntarism, morality is arbitrary.

On natural law, the power of God is limited, since there are natural reasons why acts, or people, or intentions are good.

Even if we take God as the divine discoverer of the good, then we have a problem of how to know what God truly loves.

One could take this conundrum as evidence against God having any role in morality.

I will proceed as such in this course, without considering God's will or the dictates of religion.

There are other reasons to sever the link between morality and religion, some of which Nielsen discusses.

IV. Introduction to Nielsen, "Ethics without Religion".

Nielsen's article contains some possibly obscure references:

Weltanschauung means world-view.

An Archimedean point is a solid foundation, or starting point.

A steppenwolfish personality is one of loneliness and despair.

Sartre's nausea is the feeling one gets when one recognizes one's own freedom, both the emptiness of life and its overwhelming possibility. See: <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/nausea.htm>

Dr. Rieux in Camus's *The Plague*, finds meaning in his work when Oran is quarantined by a plague.

See <http://www.levity.com/corduroy/camus.htm> and

<http://www.camus-society.com/the-plague-albert-camus.htm>

For some people, religion provides moral motivation because they believe in God, and believe that they should obey the word of God.

One need not even believe in God, though, to find moral motivation in religion.

According to Pascal’s wager, we should obey the dictates of religion, even if we do not know whether God exists.

Nielsen argues that we need not appeal to religion for moral motivation.

But, he does not take a Pascalian attitude, as he calls is.

It will be worth a moment to clarify what a Pascalian attitude is.

See: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>

V. Pascal’s wager

Consider how to calculate the expected value of a bet.

Expected value = (Payoff * Odds of winning) - (Cost of the Bet *Odds of losing)

For example, let us say that you bet six dollars that you will roll a one or a two on one roll of a fair die.

Your odds of winning are 1/3; your odds of losing are 2/3.

So, your expected value is $(6 * 1/3) - (6 * 2/3) = -\2 .

This means that on average, you will lose \$2 for each time you take this bet.

If you play this bet a thousand times, you are likely to lose about two thousand dollars.

If, instead, you get 2 to 1 odds, then your expected value would be $(12 * 1/3) - (6 * 2/3) = \0 .

Here, the bet is even.

In Pascal’s wager, we are wondering whether or not to believe in God, just as before we were wondering whether to take the bet.

We do not know whether God exists or not.

We can act as if God exists, or we can act as if God does not exist.

	God exists	God does not exist
Act as if God exists	Infinite reward	Finite sacrifice
Act as if God does not exist	Infinite Punishment	Finite reward

To calculate the expected outcome of acting as if God exists, we multiply the probability of God existing times an infinite number, and subtract the probability of God not existing times a finite number.

Of course, we do not know the probability of God existing.

But, according to Pascal’s wager, it does not matter.

For, as long as we ascribe some probability to God existing, then the expected value of acting as if God exists will be infinitely large.

$E.V. = P(\text{God existing}) * \text{Infinity} - P(\text{God not existing}) * \text{Finite value}$

For the first term, any number, even a very small number, multiplied by an infinite number yields an infinite number.

So, the first term will be an infinite number.

For the second term, any number multiplied by a finite number will be a finite number.

So, the second term will be a finite number.

An infinite number minus a finite number is an infinite number.

So, the expected value of believing in God is infinitely positive.

On the other side, the expected value of acting as if God does not exist is the reverse.

The calculation is the same, only the winning bet is in the lower left-hand box.

$E.V. = P(\text{God not existing}) * \text{Finite value} - P(\text{God existing}) * \text{Infinity}$

The expected value turns out to be infinitely negative.

The expected result is infinite punishment.

So, purely on a rational basis, in the absence of knowing whether God does or does not exist, we should act as if he does.

Ram pointed out that Pascal's wager only works if we give some positive value to the probability of God existing.

If we are certain that God does not exist, then even the infinite reward and punishment multiplied by zero end up at zero.

I pointed out that proofs of non-existence are difficult to find.