Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, February 1

I. Defining "the holy" in the *Euthyphro*

Euthyphro first tries to define holiness as prosecuting wrongdoers, such as he is doing.
Socrates does not like this definition, because it provides only an example.
There are other holy things.
Socrates wants a tool to help him understand the nature of holiness, and to allow him to determine, for any act, whether it is holy.

Next, Euthyphro defines holy as that which is pleasing to the gods, and the unholy as that which is displeasing to the gods.
Socrates says, "I certainly did not ask you to tell me what action is both holy and unholy: but now it would seem that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them."
This is because the gods may disagree.
So, Euthyphro's second definition leads to a kind of contradiction.
Euthyphro responds by saying that there are acts which are neither holy nor unholy, and that his act is pleasing to all the gods.
Euthyphro thus amends the definition:

Holy = What is pleasing to all the gods.
Unholy = What is displeasing to all the gods.

Socrates accepts this pair of definitions, but finds that a problem arises from them.

II. Voluntarism and Natural Law

Socrates and Euthyphro agree that:
Holy = What is pleasing to all the gods, or what they all love.
Unholy = What is displeasing to all the gods, or what they all hate.

Given these definitions, Socrates asks, does the holy become holy from the love of the gods?
Or, do the gods love the holy because it is holy?
This question is one of the most famous in all of philosophy.

Consider a specific instance of this question, applied to the unholy.
Is murder unholy because the gods hate murder, or do the gods hate murder because it is unholy?
Which is the cause and which is the effect?

Note that the same question remains if we consider only one God:
Is murder unholy because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is unholy?

Also, the same structural problem arises for morality as for holiness:
Is murder wrong because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is wrong?

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

The first option is called 'voluntarism', or Divine Command Theory (DCT).
Arthur's rejects this, in his article.
(He also uses "Divine Command Theory" to refer to both options, which is an odd use.)
On voluntarism, ethics is a part of religion, and we should look to God for morality.
But this means that God could change his mind, and make murder morally acceptable.
Doesn't there have to be a reason for God to choose certain acts as good and others as bad?
DCT makes this choice completely arbitrary.
This result seems repugnant.
We should explore the other option.

The second option is called 'natural law'.
(Arthur takes this position, but not by name.)
This means that there's a limit on God's power; she can not make murder morally right.
So she is not omnipotent.
This also means that there is ethical work to be done outside of religion.
God can still be the divine discoverer of morality, even though she is not the source.
The problem 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.
On voluntarism, morality is arbitrary.
On natural law, the power of God is limited.
One could take this result as evidence against God having any role in morality.
In any case, I will proceed 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.

III. Arthur's arguments against linking morality and religion

Arthur presents four arguments in attempting to separate morality from religion, rejecting the necessity of religion as a foundation for ethics.

1) Many people act morally without religious motivation, p 17.
But we might internalize the real motivation (i.e. religion).
An analogy: we do not fear a traffic accident when we drive.
We have learned to follow certain rules.
But the basic motivation is fear of an accident.
On the other hand, there are ethical atheists.
It is difficult to say that they have internalized religion.
Maybe they are acting out of bad faith, but Arthur's argument does seem plausible.

2) There are many religions, and we do not know which one is right.
They may conflict.
But we do not need to know the answer to be moral.
There are problems of revelation and interpretation.
Is the Bible God's word, or an historical account of God's actions?
Our answers to these questions project a prior understanding of morality, pp 17-18.

3) Moral arbitrariness of God.
(Already discussed, above; this only applies to Divine Command Theory.)
DCT entails the possibility of murder, torture being morally acceptable, if God changes her mind.
If you think that God can not change her mind, you have abandoned this position.

4) Linguistic argument: 'is morally required' does not mean 'is commanded by God'.
Societies without one concept can have the other.

IV. More problems with linking morality and religion

We may be tempted to confuse morality with self-interest.
If one does the right thing for desire of eternal reward or fear of eternal punishment, one have only acts in self-interest.
This seems not to be what we mean by morality.
Morality seems opposed to self-interest.
At least, it is difficult to determine if some one acts morally, when self-interest is involved.

A further problem with looking to God for morality:
We are doing philosophy.
We want to ask questions about why things are right and wrong.
'God says to do p' sounds a lot like, 'do p and shut up'.

That is enough about religion.
Now, we proceed to examine morality on its own.

V. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

Consider the following logical truth:
Either there is:
A) no morality;
B) exactly one morality; or
C) more than one morality.

You must decide which one of these options is right.