

God as the Grounding of Moral Objectivity: Defending Against Euthyphro

ABSTRACT: The Euthyphro Dilemma (is x good because God says it's good, or does God say x is good because it is good?), has been used as an argument against Theistic Ethics for hundreds of years. Plato was the first to use it. Since then Bertrand Russell, Kai Nielsen and many others have sought to really push it home. My aim in this paper is to show that the dilemma (as posed by both Russell and Nielsen) is a false one. Theistic ethics does survive the euthyphro dilemma. I take up and defend Aquinas' (?) position: that God himself (or his nature) is the standard of goodness, and not his commands. This position avoids the dilemma since God's commands / morality will not be arbitrary (since they are/it is rooted in God's nature), and Goodness will not be in any sense anterior to God either.

Section 1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to examine meta-ethical theories which, one way or another, take God as their foundation. The focus will be an argument against such theories known as the “Euthyphro Dilemma”. I contend that this dilemma doesn’t undermine (all) theistic ethical theories. In particular, I will put forward and defend a theory I call “Divine Nature Theory”. I will not be arguing that this theory is true, rather that it avoids the Euthyphro Dilemma, and various other objections besides.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, I will set out the Euthyphro Dilemma in its traditional form, then look at a more modern version of it put forward by Kai Nielsen. Nielsen’s version of the dilemma has a distinct epistemological twist. I argue that Divine Nature Theory answers the original questions raised by the Euthyphro Dilemma, and also the epistemological queries raised by Nielsen’s contemporary version. Following this I state and respond to two objections, specifically directed at theories like mine. The first is an epistemological objection, arguing that my theory undermines moral knowledge. The second argues that my theory reduces to Ideal Observer Theory, and so God drops out of the picture. Section seven is a discussion of the content that one may give to the phrase ‘God is good’, another issue raised by the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Section 2. The Euthyphro Dilemma

Since the main topic of this essay is the Euthyphro Dilemma, it would clearly be helpful if we knew just for whom the Euthyphro is intended to be a dilemma. Traditionally the dilemma is aimed at Divine Command Theories of ethics (DCTs from here). The aim of a DCT seems to be to capture the nature of the “Thou Shalt’s” of the Bible (such as the Ten Commandments), where being commanded by God and being morally required seem to be equated. As such, DCTs say that obligatory acts are all and only those which God commands to be done. The Euthyphro has also been aimed at other theistic ethical theories, specifically those which say that if God doesn’t exist, there can be no such thing as moral goodness. This will all become clearer as we continue. Plato, from whom the Euthyphro originates, put the dilemma brilliantly:

SOCRATES: Then what do we say about piety? Isn’t it [what is] loved by all the gods, according to your definition?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Just because it is pious, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, because it is pious.

SOCRATES: So it is loved because it is pious, not pious because it is loved?

EUTHYPHRO: It seems so.

SOCRATES: But it is because a thing is loved by the gods that it is an object of love or god-beloved.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: Then what is god-beloved is not the same as what is pious, Euthyphro, nor is what is pious the same as what is god-beloved, as you assert; they are two different things.

Euthyphro held to some form of theistic ethics. Socrates was making enquiries about the theory to see if it really held any water. Basically, he put the following question to Euthyphro: 'Is God's approval of certain acts the explanation of the fact that they are good acts, or is it rather that the fact that they are good acts explains why God approves of them?'^[1] The question actually in the text is 'Does God approve of good acts because they are good, or for some other reason?' Since Euthyphro holds that the proper definition of 'good acts' is 'Those acts which God approves of', these questions raise problems. If the goodness of certain acts explains why God approves of them then they cannot be good in virtue of the fact that God approves of them. This would mean that goodness is somehow prior to, and so 'separable from', the approval of God. On the other hand, if we say that certain acts are good because God approves of them, what answer can we give to the question 'why does God approve of those acts?' It would seem (or so the argument goes) that there is no morally satisfactory answer to this question. This would mean that it is arbitrary what God approves of, and hence if God had approved of murder and rape then those things would be good - but surely that's absurd.

Taking the second option (saying 'These acts are good because God approves of them') produces another, perhaps related worry. Theists want to say that God is worthy of praise. However, a necessary part of saying this is saying that God is good. Unfortunately, if we endorse this option we may remove all content from the phrase 'God is good'. How does taking the second option make 'God is good' empty? Well, the thought is that a person is good if and only if they do what they ought. Since God's approval fixes what a person ought to do, then applying this principle to God, 'God is good' becomes 'God does the things of which He approves'. But this looks the same as 'God does what He wants'. If this reduction is right, then either we must reject this second option or we should stop saying 'God is good' since being good is a lot different from doing what one wants!

To summarise: The Euthyphro Dilemma is that if we hold that good acts are all and only those acts which God approves of, then it would *seem*^[2] that we will be committed to either

- (a) The goodness of certain acts explains why God approves of them, or
- (b) That God approves of certain acts explains why those acts are good.

The problem with endorsing (a) is that it takes God out of the picture. The acts which God approves of are good 'before' He approves of them (since that is why He approves of them) and so would be good even if He didn't approve. Endorsing (b) produces two problems: first (i) it makes morality arbitrary, and second (ii) it removes the content from 'God is good'. Section seven will be devoted to the 'content of "God is good"' issue - which will be completely ignored until then.

Section 3. Nielsen's Version of The Euthyphro

Before I give any response to the Euthyphro Dilemma (henceforth ED), I want to outline a more modern version of the dilemma put forward by Kai Nielsen. As stated in the introduction, this version has an epistemological twist. In light of this, my response will also have an epistemological aspect. Nielsen's argument is, I believe, as follows:

Those who put forward theistic ethical theories want to say that from

(1) God wills A to do X.

we can deduce

(2) A ought to do X.

But in order for this to be a valid deduction we need the extra premise

(3) God is good.^[3]

Obviously the theistic-ethicist believes (3), but we must ask: On what basis? She needs a standard of goodness that is independent of God's will in order to make this judgement. This is because, if *the* standard is one that results from His will then we need to assume God's goodness to prove it. So assuming she can prove that God is good (without circularity) there must be an independent standard of goodness, and so goodness doesn't depend upon God. That is, even if God doesn't exist there is such a thing as (moral) goodness.

Section 4. Divine Nature Theory

This is the section where I put forward my critique of these two versions of ED, and based upon that critique develop my own position. I will look at Nielsen's argument first.

Nielsen's argument is, I think, fairly persuasive. But it does have some serious problems. The main problem is that in so far as it is valid it begs the question, and in so far as it doesn't beg the question it is invalid. What do I mean by this? Well if we look at the argument we see that Nielsen asks us to give a justification for our belief that God is good. That is, he asks us a question regarding knowledge, or 'epistemology'. On the basis that the question can't be answered in a non-circular way (and that circular ways of answering such questions are unacceptable), he concludes that there must be a standard of morality that does not have its roots in God. But this conclusion is about what is the case in the world it is metaphysical. But a metaphysical conclusion cannot be drawn from purely epistemological premises. Something has gone wrong. Lets look a little closer to see what the problem is.

Nielsen is assuming that we can make a judgement as to whether or not God is good. He further assumes that in order to make this judgement we need some epistemological grasp of a standard of goodness. So far so good. Nielsen thinks that from these two premises we can deduce that there is a moral standard which is separable from God. But this just doesn't follow. Compare the following case: Assume we can judge whether or not a certain town has a rail station. In order to do this we need some method of making the judgement. Lets say we look at a map. Now it clearly isn't the case that this entails that there be some other thing - entirely separate from the town - which ensures that the map got it right. The map is 'epistemologically prior' to the town but the town is clearly 'metaphysically prior' to the map. In other words though we come to *know* of the map showing a station before we come to *know* of the town having one, the town *actually has* a station before the map can show it.^[4] The same might be true of God and of goodness. Though we come to know of goodness before we come to know of God's goodness, it still may be the case that God's goodness must be metaphysically prior to our knowledge of goodness.

Of course to show that Nielsen's argument is invalid is not to show that its conclusion ought to be rejected. Indeed, until I show that there is actually a way for God's goodness to be metaphysically prior to our knowledge of goodness, I have done little to show that Nielsen is *really* wrong. This is a task I shall come back to after I look back to the original statement of ED. The Dilemma was whether we ought to say that God's commands fix that which is good, or that which is good fixes what God commands. DCTs, we recall, are trying to ensure the coincidence of the two categories of being an act which is morally good, and being an act which is commanded by God. The desire to do this is natural, given such Biblical texts as the Ten Commandments, all in the form of 'Thou Shalt ...'.

However, such a coincidence of two categories does not ensure a direct causal relation between them. There are other ways of accounting for the coincidence. The first would be to say that the connection between the two categories is linguistic - that 'is commanded by God' just means 'is good'. This makes the statement 'All acts commanded by God are good acts' an analytic truth - much like 'All puppies are young dogs'. I will say a little about this option shortly. Another way of accounting for the coincidence of the two categories would be to give them a 'common cause' as it were. So that the thing which causes God to command X also causes X to be good. Murray MacBeath[5] makes this very suggestion. He says that it may be that an act produces maximal happiness that accounts for these two facts. Of course, this completely evades ED since it takes neither horn of the dilemma. Unfortunately, it makes ethics entirely separable from God. However, as I will show later in this section, one can take this common cause option without taking God out of the picture at all.

I just want to say a little about the 'analyticity response' mentioned in the previous paragraph. This is not a response I will be looking at at all. There are two basic reasons for this. Firstly, I find such a response implausible due to (a) basic features of all 'analytic' meta-ethical theories[6] and (b) various peculiarities of this case.[7] Secondly, because I think that I can build a good reply to the challenge of ED without using this particular move, and what I am attempting to do here is simply to show that there is a version of theistic ethics which survives ED.

Okay, I have now pinpointed weaknesses in both of the arguments. The rest of this section is devoted to building a theistic-ethical theory that can take advantage of these weaknesses. My theory, Divine Nature Theory has two main parts to it. It has an epistemological part, designed to take advantage of the problems with Nielsen's argument, and a metaphysical part, which exploits the problems of ED as originally posed. I'll take the metaphysical part first.

The basic idea presented in this paragraph is that rather than having God's commands as the standard of morality, we could have God's *nature* as the standard. Since God's commands are presumably rooted in His nature (or His character), this will ensure that the things He commands are the things we ought to do. Hence, God's nature could be seen as a 'common cause' of the moral standard and of His commands. I use inverted commas here since there is a sense in which God's nature doesn't *cause* the moral standard at all, since it just *is* the moral standard. However, we still get the advantages of the 'common cause' response. The suggestion of making God's nature the standard is an attractive one. God is thought of as benevolent, omniscient, fair, and so on ... in other words He seems to have just the characteristics we would want any (personal) moral standard to have. It is from this suggestion that my theory derives its name: Divine Nature Theory. [8]

This paragraph puts forward the epistemological part of my theory. Though the theory derives its name its metaphysical part, it should be noted that both parts are equally important. Hence it might just as well have been called 'Divine Implantation Theory'[9]. Just why this name would also have been appropriate will be revealed shortly. Remember the problem with Nielsen's argument was that it confused the 'epistemologically prior' with the 'metaphysically prior'. To take advantage of this fact a theistic ethical theory must come up with a way in which someone might 'come across' morality without 'coming across' God - and so could 'come across' morality first. But it must do this without separating the two. With the emphasis on commands this seems difficult to do. We read God's commands in the Bible, or if you happen to be Moses you receive them - carved by the finger of God - on the stone tablets, or if one is a prophet or seer one might directly hear God's commands. But if these commands were all we had to go on, Nielsen's challenge would have succeeded. According to Nielsen, we shouldn't obey commands unless we know that

their source is morally good. But, as Nielsen points out, to know this we have to start with some moral knowledge. But if we have some moral knowledge where the only input from God was his commands, then we must have used an alternative standard to make our judgement. However, my suggestion (in which I am following numerous others[10]) is that God's commands have not been His only input. The further input from God is as follows: He has made us a certain way. He has made us with an innate ability to recognise the morally good and the morally bad. He has 'implanted' in us a faculty of attaining moral knowledge - a faculty of moral intuition. This, combined with the first suggestion (i.e. the move from 'commands' to 'nature') clearly solves the problems raised by Nielsen.

Let me paint a quick picture of the resulting position. God's nature is the standard of morality. His commands are fixed by His nature. Hence the position is called Divine Nature Theory (DNT from here on). In addition to this we posit that God has made us able to recognise the moral features of certain acts and so made us able to make moral judgements. The first point enables us to defuse the dilemma in a sensible way: DNT requires that God's nature is the standard of goodness, not God's commands. Obviously there is a sense in which ED, as originally stated, completely fails to even touch this position. The dilemma was "Does God's approval of X explain X's goodness, or does X's goodness explain God's approval of X?" But my position isn't committed to either of these options. Rather I hold that God's nature 'explains' X's goodness, and that God's nature explains God's approval of X. The second point enables us to answer Nielsen. How do we know that God is good? Well, we simply exercise the moral faculty which God has given us.

I suppose that ED could be re-stated as "Does X's being in accordance with God's nature explain X's goodness, or does X's goodness explain why it is in accord with God's nature?" But it is now obvious that I would endorse that first option. Actually the second option seems somehow peculiar. The peculiarity results from the fact that 'nature' is intended to be read in a broadly 'essentialist' manner. This means that whatever God's nature turns out like it couldn't have turned out otherwise. This 'couldn't' is a strong metaphysical one, not an epistemic one. If we look back to Kripke's work [11] we remember that it is a necessary truth that the Morning Star is the Evening Star. Epistemically, things could have been otherwise - but metaphysically they couldn't. Similarly, it seems a necessary truth that humans are rational animals. That is a statement about the 'nature' of humans. The statement - 'God is ...', where the dots are filled by a description of His nature, should be read in a similar way. If we read 'nature' in this way then something that doesn't have the nature that God actually has couldn't even possibly be God. Given this understanding of the word 'nature' it becomes clear that God's nature isn't the kind of thing that can be explained [12], so the second option in this 're-vamped' dilemma is impossible. It is also clear that taking the first option can't produce any arbitrariness worries: Morality couldn't have turned out different since God's nature couldn't have been different.

So the position I am advocating seems to dissolve ED. Nevertheless some objections are expected, and each of them can be seen as parallel to the objections raised embracing one of the two horns of the original dilemma. The first objection is really aimed at the 'Implantation' part of the theory. The second is aimed at the 'Nature' part.

Section 5. Objection: DNT undermines moral knowledge

In this section I consider an objection that I believe amounts to an 'arbitrariness' objection, or, as I said, *parallels* the standard arbitrariness objection. Here's the thought: DNT says that God has implanted moral knowledge in us, or alternatively that He has implanted the means to moral knowledge. It is due to this 'implantation' that we are able to tell that God is good. Consider a 'parallel' to DNT: Suppose that an evil tyrant has somehow (without you knowing) inserted a micro-chip into your brain. The function of the chip is to make it seem to you that everything that this tyrant does is good, and that everything he says is true. Now, whatever the tyrant said or did, it would appear to you that this tyrant was 'doing the right thing'. Suppose that you discovered the truth about the micro-chip: wouldn't this undermine your belief that the tyrant is a good man? It would seem so. But then since DNT has the same structure as our sceptical scenario, shouldn't DNT actually undermine our belief that God is good? The worry is that just as the tyrant is evil, but must always appear as good to us - doesn't DNT make it an open possibility that the same

could be true about God? Whatever God's nature is in fact like, the Divine Implantation part of the theory would entail that we thought God's nature to be good.

This argument looks strong, and seems to pose a real threat to DNT since it argues that one part of DNT undermines our justification for believing another of its parts. In short, if DNT is the truth then - according to this objection - it ought to be an unknowable truth. It strikes me that this objection has a valid point, namely that explicit justification of these beliefs will be circular. But we can happily concede this point, for the circularity need not be vicious and it is not at all peculiar to DNT. Actually *any* theory that posits 'objective values' will face the problem being advanced against DNT here: that 'seems so' doesn't entail 'is so'. Wholesale sceptical challenges pose a threat not just to my theory, but to all theories (even certain sceptical theories). Consider the following example (from outside of ethics): We claim that evolution has fitted us with our cognitive faculties. Shouldn't this claim lead us to worry about the status of the theory of evolution? Well, it is from the use of the aforementioned cognitive faculties that our belief in evolution results. This is normal. Any belief or cognitive faculty we have will have its historical causes. Not only this but it is always our beliefs and cognitive faculties which lead us to our conclusions about where those faculties come from. Circularity is unavoidable. It is, therefore, irrelevant that DNT happens to have a marked structural similarity with our sceptical scenario. Similar scenarios can be dreamed up to create worries about the other circularities.[13] If I ought to be worried about my theory, everyone else ought to be worried about theirs! I also remind the reader at this point that I am not trying to show that DNT is true but rather that it has not been refuted.

If there is any worry remaining for DNT here then perhaps it is in the thought that 'whatever God wanted to appear good to us would appear good to us even if it were actually bad'. I think however that the DNT theorist can and should simply admit this is true. They can deny that this truth poses a threat to the theory by saying that since God is good He will not so deceive us.[14] Put another way the worry is that whatever God made our moral faculties latch on to, those things would appear good to us. For this to be a genuine worry it has to be true that God could make our moral faculties latch on to anything at all. But it simply isn't true that God could do this, since He is by nature good and can't do anything contrary to His own nature. In other words, although God could make anything He liked appear good to us, He can't actually *like* just anything.

Section 6. Objection: DNT collapses into Ideal Observer Theory

John Chandler, [15] among others, has argued that theistic ethical theories such as DNT reduce to Ideal Observer Theory (IOT). IOT traditionally asserts something like 'X is good iff an omniscient, impartial, dispassionate and benevolent observer - an Ideal Observer - would (if such existed) commend of X'[16]. IOT doesn't depend upon the existence of the Ideal Observer, it merely says that good things are the type of things of which an Ideal Observer *would* commend. The emphasis is heavily on the 'would'. It can certainly be true that a person of type T *would* approve of action A, even if no person of type T exists. I believe that Chandler's argument is a little confused, and that two quite distinct types of argument are being conflated. The first type of argument is broadly metaphysical, the second is more epistemological. The first argument has the strong conclusion that Chandler requires, but suffers in other respects. The second argument is more subtle. It is (I think) valid and has acceptable premises ... the only problem with the second argument is that the DNT theorist can happily grant the conclusion. I give two readings of the first type of argument, and one of the second.

'Broadly Metaphysical Argument 1'

Assume that DNT is true, so: an act is good due to its being in accord with God's nature. Then since (contra the ontological argument) God's nature is logically separable from His existence we can say, indeed deduce from DNT, that 'an act is good due to its being such that it would accord with God's nature, were He to exist'. However, this is no longer DNT, it is something more akin to IOT. We should therefore abandon DNT in favour of IOT.[17]

I think that the reasoning here is faulty. If the conclusion is intended to be that DNT is false, then argument is certainly unacceptable. Consider the following parallel:

You hold that a certain place, X, is sunny because a certain entity with properties P, Q, R (i.e. the sun) stands in a certain spatial relation to X. But the sun's nature and its existence are logically separable, so why don't we say that 'X is sunny because a certain entity with properties P, Q, R would (if it existed) stand in a certain spatial relation to X'. We don't need to say that the sun really exists in order to make good sense of a place's being sunny.

The argument plainly begs the question. If the sun really is the cause of 'sunniness' then removing the sun from the real world ontology *will* prevent all places from being sunny. Similarly, if God is the standard of morality then removing God just will be the removal of the standard, and as a result renders all talk about morality false if not senseless. Therefore, the argument cannot be trying to establish that DNT is false. Before we ditch this first line of argument let's try to reinterpret it.[\[18\]](#)

'Broadly Metaphysical Argument 2'

Perhaps it is just trying to say that to get the essentials of DNT all we really need is IOT. The argument doesn't prove that DNT is false but that it (DNT) introduces unnecessary ontology. This seems more plausible, and leaves the argument with a metaphysical slant, but does this mean that we ought to drop DNT in favour of IOT? I don't think so. Firstly, if our only reason for thinking IOT true is that we think DNT is true then we can't simply abandon DNT. Consider the short argument

- (a) X is good iff X is in accord with God's nature
- (b) X is in accord with God's nature iff X is a loving act (since God is loving)
- (c) X is good iff X is a loving act

Now (c) could easily be a tenet of IOT (or another more naturalistic theory), and is derived from two premises which are themselves entailed by DNT. But if our reason for thinking (c) true is that we think (a) and (b) are true, we can't simply drop (a) and (b), and so we can't simply drop DNT. Perhaps the thought is that it was really the intuition that (c) is true which made us think that (a) was required. Now this seems a little more sensible, since (c) certainly doesn't entail (a) or (b), and we could happily construct a moral theory around (c) rather than (a). But this will only be a compelling point if believing (c) is our *only* reason for believing (a) and (b). However, I think that there are more reasons for holding to (a) than simply because it fits with the intuition that (c) is true. I'll come back to these reasons shortly. First let me talk to the second (more epistemological) argument that I mentioned earlier.

'Broadly Epistemological Argument'

This second argument is also based on the short argument (a)-(c) above and says that if (c) is true then knowing that (a) is true gives us only supplementary reasons (not essential reasons) to do the required thing. Furthermore, we can think (c) true without thinking (a) true. Unless this is to amount to something more than we said in the previous paragraph it's not clear that it is really an objection to DNT. DNT theorists can happily suppose that people do certain acts because those acts are loving, and not often for any other reason. I suppose that if (a) was thought to give *no* extra reason to do 'the right thing' then this could be damaging to DNT. However, in that instance I'm not sure that Chandler can make his case stick (again - I'll come to this later). The DNT theorist doesn't need to say that it is only our belief in the truth of (a) that can help us perform morally good acts. In fact the divine implantation part of the theory says that since we have a built-in sense of moral value we almost certainly will have some motivation to perform such acts, and that this motivation is (epistemically, but not metaphysically) prior to the fact that (a).

The attraction of IOT being considered here is, I suppose, that it does all the work that a standard theistic ethical theory does, but without the ontological commitments. In the next few paragraphs I intend to show that at the very least this is unproven, if not false. I want to show that there are reasons to endorse (a) other than that we accept (c). Theistic ethics does have attractions not had by IOT. Some of these attractions come as 'reasons to be moral' that are not there in IOT. If this section is successful in demonstrating these points then I take it that I will have shown that DNT does not (or does not so easily) reduce to IOT.

Firstly, a perennial problem for Ideal Observer Theory has been defining this observer without implicitly bringing moral evaluations into the definition. That is to say that the Ideal Observer analysis of 'goodness' has faced problems in making the analysis non-circular. Theistic Ethics can, I believe, bypass these difficulties fairly easily. The DNT theorist can simply provide an ostensive definition, they can 'point' to an actually existent being who instantiates the properties had by an Ideal Observer.[19] Since the DNT theorist holds that God has implanted some moral knowledge in us, and this is most plausibly knowledge of particular moral facts, there may be other ways to solve this problem too. This is because it gives the opportunity for a definition which although technically circular is still useful. (The suggestion takes us back to the 'how do we know that God is good?' issue.) It seems pretty plain that if God exists and if there is an objective morality then it is in virtue of certain features that God has given us that we come to be aware of moral facts. But this will then make it look plausible to say that God is also interested in morality, and hence that He is good.[20] But if He's good then He must have a nature such as to approve of the acts we know to be good.[21] So from those acts we know to be good we could build up a 'picture' of what God's nature is like. I suppose that this will not determine God's nature exactly, that is we won't have so much evidence as to determine the type or extent of God's benevolence, or to determine the precise details of His other moral attributes. But I'm not sure why we have need to do this anyway.

Secondly, this whole line of objection forgets that the theory has two elements. As well as the 'Divine Nature' part there is the 'implantation' part. However, we have not been given a suggestion for fitting this part of DNT into IOT. But since the implantation part as it stands clearly requires the actual existence of God then even if the reduction of the other part is possible the reduction is unsuccessful as it is incomplete. Third, DNT makes the relation between man and morality fairly perspicuous, but this is not so for IOT. Both man and morality have God as a common denominator, as it were. What do they have in common on the non-theistic view? If we appeal to a common history then this throws us into evolutionary ethics, which will undoubtedly be different from IOT.[22] If man himself is taken as the common denominator then we may end up in subjectivism.[23] Just what IOT should say here seems unclear. It may be thought that this is because the question itself is unclear. So let's clarify it a little. The question is basically this 'What is the relation between man and morality?' Since for morality to be binding upon man there must be some relation here, some relation other than the "bindingness". Perhaps this is still unclear, but it seems patent to me that there must be some relationship between morality and man in virtue of which morality is binding upon man. The nature of this relationship is unclear unless God remains in the picture. It may be thought that it is unclear even if God does remain in the picture. But even if this is so, and in the next paragraph I try to explain why it is not, at least the theistic framework gives us the possibility of some further relations between man and morality ... IOT doesn't even allow for the possibility.

A fourth point, (and one which may help to explain the 'bindingness' of morality) is that it is often said that evaluations only make sense within teleological frameworks. If this is true then since DNT provides such a framework and IOT doesn't, then we have strong reasons to prefer DNT. What does all this mean? An example is the best way to illustrate this point. We evaluate the workings of a watch by reference to what those workings are supposed to do. Watches are supposed to keep time, and a good watch is one that does so accurately. Since DNT theorists are (mostly) Theists [24] then they will say that God created us and that we are 'supposed to be' a certain way. The IOT theorist however has no such story to tell. Put another way, this point is that every complete theory of ethics has at its core a picture of the nature of man, where he has come from, perhaps where he is going, and (again *perhaps*) why he is here.[25] IOT theory doesn't answer any of these questions (by itself) but the theist has answers to each of these questions. Without introducing God, the IOT theorist will be pushed to the resources of evolution, but even then at best two of the questions will be answered ... not the third, which is undoubtedly the most important at this juncture.[26] I suppose it may be thought that these are mere assertions if I cannot give the reader any idea of what the DNT theorist will say about the question 'why are we here?' On the other hand it may all seem pretty obvious. Those who think the latter can skip to the next section. Now those who remain are likely to be thinking even the most devoutly religious person cannot answer such a question, for the mind of God is inscrutable. This seems a fair thing to say, and hence my answer is firstly not a complete answer to the question, secondly it isn't the result of a priori reasoning ... it comes from God's self revelation in the Bible. The book of Genesis (chapter 1 verse 27) tells us that God created man in His own image. I take this to mean that not only do we have several characteristics in common with God (personhood, intelligence, free agency and the like), God intends us to reflect His nature - as fully as we are able. But if God is good,

then it will follow that we ought to be good too. Other scriptures confirm this: ‘Be Imitators of God’ (Ephesians 5v1), ‘Be holy because I [the LORD your God] am holy’ (Leviticus 11v45-45). I conclude then that my assertions were not ‘mere’ assertions.

Section 7. On the Content of ‘God is good’

This section (which was promised at the end of section 2) is something of an addendum to the rest of the essay, and consists simply of a few thoughts about the content of the phrase ‘God is good’. Many people would regard this phrase as true but trivially so. Others would regard it as meaningless. I will first give an argument aimed at the second type of person, who regards ‘God is good’ as meaningless. After this I will move on to consider whether or not we can give the phrase any content.

It puzzles me (even in the present context) why anyone might deny that the phrase ‘God is good’ is meaningful, but nevertheless let’s have a look and see what we can discover. The alleged problem with the phrase ‘God is good’ arises because God is the standard of goodness, how can the standard of goodness itself be good? In order for something to be meaningfully said to be good it must be judged by a standard external to itself. But if God is the final standard of goodness then no such judging can be done. This line of reasoning seems to draw on Plato’s ‘third man’ argument[27]: Imagine a set of ten items each having the property X. So of these items (call them ‘a’ through ‘j’) it will be true that ‘a is X’, and ‘b is X’, and so on though to ‘j is X’. Now, these items have this property due to standing in relation to something else, to the property itself, that is to X-ness. But if X-ness itself has the property X, that is if ‘X-ness is X’ is true then we now have a collection of eleven things which all have the same property. This set must get its unity by standing in relation to something else, the ‘real X-ness’ ... but this could go on infinitely. Unfortunately, we then won’t have explained how the items came to have the same property. So we oughtn’t start on the regress at all, that is we ought to deny (in all cases) that ‘X-ness is X’.

To me these arguments seem lamentably weak. I agree that the regress mentioned would be a bad thing, but (depending upon ones understanding of ‘universals’ or ‘properties’) there is more than one way to avoid it. We can say that X-ness is X in virtue of standing in a certain relation to itself. It will follow that it won’t always, in every case, be true that ‘X-ness is X’ but no-one need be committed to that! Another, more pressing point is that God isn’t being said to *be* the universal ‘goodness’, but rather the *standard* of goodness - the thing which other things are ‘put up against’ in order to tell whether or not they are good. The third-man argument simply doesn’t work here, and its correlates are not compelling. I agree that sometimes we are making a category mistake (i.e. confusing two distinct categories) when we say that the standard of X-ness is X. But this isn’t always the case. Consider the set of positive integers:

$$\{1, 2, 3, \dots\}$$

The number 1 is a member of the set of integers. Now it has always seemed to me that the number 1 is also (at least part of) the standard of ‘integer-ness’. To see this we only need to reflect on the fact that the number 1, and the operator, or function, + (plus) are all we need in order to produce the whole set of (positive) integers.

$$\begin{aligned}1 &= 1 \\2 &= 1+1 \\3 &= 1+1+1\end{aligned}$$

The right hand side of each equation in this infinite chain consists only of 1’s and +’s. So, we can say that two is equal to a single ‘one’ plus another ‘one’. Three is simply two plus one more one. Similar things can be said for the non-positive integers. (Only we would then subtract our 1’s [28]) The number one does seem to be the standard of ‘integer-ness’ but it is also an integer. Hence, it follows that it is not always a category mistake to say ‘The standard of X-ness is X’.

Consider another question: Is the ‘metre-rule’ in Paris a metre long? For readers who don’t know, there is a ‘ruler’ kept in Paris that serves as the official standard by which the metre is defined. It seems patently true

that this 'ruler' is a metre long. If there were a dictionary that served as the standard by which all spellings were judged correct or incorrect, it would plainly be true that it contains 'correct spellings'. We cannot just rule out the phrase 'God is good' as meaningless. We must first find a reason to say that it is a category mistake to make such a statement. I know of no such reason. Since it seems plain to me that it is not a category mistake, I will continue in this assumption while I move on to consider the question of whether 'God is good' has any content.

The question of whether 'God is good' has content will undoubtedly be affected by what criterion we judge a person (rather than an act) to be good. All we need to consider here is how a DNT theorist should understand a person's goodness. It would seem to me that a DNT theorist ought to say (roughly) that human acts are good acts when and only when they are sufficiently like what God would do (if He were human?). However, the DNT theorist now has two options as to how to define 'good person'. The first is 'a good person is one who consistently does good acts'. The second is 'a good person is one whose character is sufficiently (morally) similar to God's character'. Applied to God himself the two definitions in turn will yield:

- (1) God is good iff He consistently does the kind of things that God does.
- (2) God is good iff His nature is similar to God's nature.

Both of these two options seem to be trivially true. However it seems clear that there is a sense in which neither of these statements need be considered trivial, that is that they are both entailed by a theory that is non-trivial, and that both would otherwise (that is without the support of DNT, or other theistic-ethical theories) be implausible. However, (1) and (2) - as they stand - are trivial. It strikes me that though 'God is good' is true but trivially so on DNT, the statement 'God is goodness' (Or more properly 'God is *the standard of goodness*') is much more informative. Also, it strikes me that (2) offers the DNT theorist an opportunity that, perhaps, (1) doesn't afford. This is the opportunity to praise God for who He is, though not (in many cases) for what He does. God's acts flow from His nature, but His nature just *is His* nature. We can think something or somebody worthy of praise even if it isn't by their choice that they are so worthy - we can admire the beauty of a painting ... or even the elegance of a proof. God can also be admired for who and what He is. Not only this, God can be praised for revealing His nature to us. Though He only has one nature to reveal to us, and couldn't have revealed another - He needn't have revealed it ... but He has, even in creating the world in all its beauty and splendour, and in showing us His love.

Section 8. Conclusion

My aim in this essay has been fourfold. But first let me say what my aim has not been. My aim has not been to give a moral argument for God's existence, nor has it been to show that any brand of theistic ethics is correct. My aim was rather to show that there is a form of theistic ethics (Divine Nature Theory) which avoids ED, and answers the more epistemological worries raised by Nielsen. ED has traditionally raised three problems. The first being a problem of arbitrariness, the second being that perhaps God can be taken out of the picture, and the third being the problem of giving content to the phrase 'God is good'. The first two problems, as such, are neatly avoided by DNT. However, each of them has a counterpart problem when it comes to Divine Nature Theory. The 'Arbitrariness problem' became the 'Problem of Undermining Moral Knowledge'. The 'Non-necessity of God problem', became the 'Reduction to Ideal Observer Theory problem'. The third problem remained largely unchanged. Each of these problems was shown not to pose a real threat to Divine Nature Theory, and hence I now conclude that Divine Nature Theory has successfully weathered ED.

As a final token argument in this paper I offer the reader the following 'Euthyphro' dilemma: Do you say things are good because they are good, or are they good because you say they are? If the latter then your moral standard is arbitrary (and you can't object if God's turns out likewise). But if you say the former then you have to explain where the moral standard comes from ... and Divine Nature Theory is certainly an option!

Notes

1. From here on I will speak of 'God' rather than 'gods', and of 'goodness' rather than 'piety', since these are the terms in which theistic ethical theories are now couched.
2. By using italics here I simply indicate where one might fault the argument. Indeed in section four I do fault the argument at this point.
3. We may need other premises too, such as 'A ought to do what a good being wills A to do'. But this is beside the point, (4) is at least a necessary condition of a (plausible) valid argument here.
4. Some things are shown on maps before they exist, but this doesn't in any way mean that the map is metaphysically prior to the town (in the required sense of 'prior').
5. In his paper 'The Euthyphro Dilemma' [3].
6. The main weakness is (in my view) that analytic theories run the risk of being highly subjective. A version of Moore's 'Open Question Argument' should suffice to illustrate this: If someone says 'by "Goodness" we just mean "N-ness"' then why shouldn't someone respond 'You may *mean* "N-ness", but I certainly don't'. The meaning of language can be highly contingent, and very subjective ... not so morality - or so I believe.
7. The main peculiarity I have in mind is that not many people today believe in God, and would be very surprised to here that by 'goodness' they *mean* 'commanded by God'.
8. I don't mean to suggest in this section that God's commands never produce obligations. Lets take as our example God commanding Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of tree X. Now it would be odd to suppose that it was God's nature that fixes the morality of such an action, so that it was immoral 'before' the command was given. However since God did (we'll suppose) command that action, the action (or refrain) is required ... but not just because He *commanded* it, but also because *He* - having the divine nature - commanded it
9. Basinger, in [4], puts forward very much the same position, and this is the name which he gives it.
10. Moreland [2], Basinger [4], Chamberlain [9], and Geisler [16], all seem to take very much this position.
11. S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard, 1980)
12. If this is unclear just try giving a causal explanation of why the Morning Star is identical with the Evening Star. Remember citing evidence in favour of some proposition is a lot different from saying what it is which makes the proposition true.
13. If the reader worries that the justificatory circle in DNT is too small, then I just beg the reader to believe me when I say that there are ways of enlarging it. (Such would make use of 'general revelation' in nature among other things.)
14. This reply has strong (epistemic) externalist overtones. But this needn't be seen as a bad thing. Externalism has its strengths ... and the fact that it can make this kind of move when faced with sceptical scenarios is one of them. Obviously externalism is inadequate in many respects, and the fact that the reply given here seems odd only serves to illustrate this point. But now that we are talking in terms of epistemology it should be clear that the worries here simply are those of a Cartesian sceptic ... and no theory can answer *those* worries.
15. John Chandler 'Divine Command Theories and the appeal to love' [2]

16. There are numerous other formulations of the characteristics of the Ideal Observer - for instance I think that 'otherwise normal' is often used in the place of 'benevolent' - here I just attempt to get the Ideal Observers features to closely parallel God's nature. For an exposition of IOT see R. Firth [15].

17. I briefly mentioned the ontological argument (OA) above, and it seems to me that even if its traditional form is faulty someone putting this argument forward might still be caught in a version of OA. This is because some modal versions argue from God's possible existence to His necessary existence. This is a problem here because making sense of what an ideal observer would command seems to entail the possibility of such an observer, but since these modal versions of OA argue from possibility to actuality then holding to IOT may necessitate holding that the ideal observer actually exists.

18. My reply here is not supposed to show that God exists, nor is it supposed to show that DNT is true. My objection is simply that the argument is supposed to be assuming the truth of DNT, when actually the argument sneaks in the assumption that DNT is false!

19. Alternatively there are other definite descriptions (such as 'the creator of the universe') available to the theist which will pick out God without mentioning His moral attributes.

20. If God is interested in morality then He presumably would want to be morally good, but then God's omnipotence will ensure that He *is* morally good.

21. Given DNT theory none of this talk about moral knowledge will be particularly mysterious either.

22. If evolution is going to furnish us with a genuine moral theory then it cannot merely tell us how we came to have the moral inclinations we do in fact have ... it must tell us why we must follow those inclinations. Presumably the answer will be because they are the key to survival. So survival becomes the chief good: this is clearly not IOT.

23. It may be the case that no strong form of objectivism (such as DNT can sustain) is true, but nonetheless if IOT is pushed into any form of subjectivism so as to account for 'bindingness' then we may still have reasons for adopting DNT that wouldn't be had by IOT. Remember this isn't an argument for the truth of DNT. Rather I am arguing that it is a sustainable position, and, in this section, that it does not reduce to IOT.

24. They need not be, they could be atheists and go in for some kind of error theory.

25. The question 'Why are we here?', may be thought to be the same as 'Where did we come from?', but actually is better read as 'What are we here for?'. This second reading of the question makes it clear that these two questions are distinct.

26. Evolutionary theory, as scientific theory, is purely descriptive. It clearly answers (to some extent) the question 'where did we come from?' Combined with other scientific data we may get an answer to 'where are we going?', but science alone can't give us an answer to 'where *should* we be going?', or 'why are we here?' (see previous footnote). Given what was said in footnote #22 it may be thought that we are here to 'survive', or 'to do the things that have led/will lead to our survival'. But to be honest not only do these things seem plainly false, they are also very distant from IOT which was what we had in play as a possible reduction of DNT.

27. This argument is at least intimated in Plato's 'Parmenides'.

28. Actually plus could be omitted too, since subtraction of a negative is the same as the addition of a positive - So $2=1--1$ for example.

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