

DIVINE GOODNESS

Related exam questions:

- Would divine command theory render more or less explicable the fact that some things are right and others wrong? (2000/3)
- 'We cannot find out what is the right thing to do by discovering what God has commanded, because we could not be sure that God really had commanded something unless we already believed that it was right.' Discuss. (2001/13)
- (a) If God is a moral being, does it follow that he has duties towards creatures? OR
(b) "If God is not a moral being, he has no interest in our moral behaviour." (2002/12)
- 'If God does not exist, anything is permitted'. (DOSTOIEVSKI). Discuss (2003/5)
- Why should we obey God? (2004/4)
- (a) 'I would urge us, in the same way that Kant urged us, to adopt a regulative principle to proceed as if God exists.' Is this good advice? OR
(b) "The concept of a moral law without a lawgiver makes no sense, and the only lawgiver capable of filling the role is God." What conclusion (if any) can be drawn? (2005/2)
- Does our ethical knowledge support or undermine belief in the existence of God? (2006/5)
- Is a religious basis for morality either necessary or possible? (2007/10)
- If value, meaning and purpose were inscribed in the world by God, would this restrict human freedom? (2008/11)
- What are the prospects for a moral argument for God's existence? (2009/8)
- 'And if it were fit for such poor finite creatures as we are to pronounce what infinite wisdom and goodness could do, I think we might say that God himself cannot choose what is not good: the freedom of the Almighty hinders not his being determined by what is best.' (LOCKE) Discuss. (2010/3)
- Is any form of divine command theory defensible? (2011/6)
- Are good things loved by the gods because they are good? Or, are they good because they are loved by the gods? (2012/1)
- (a) Should we want God to exist? OR
(b) Is God necessary for meaning in life? (2012/12)
- (a) Does theism make best sense of any aspect of morality? OR
(b) Is there a strong moral argument for the existence of God? (2013/5)
- Does it matter whether God exists? (2014/3)

- Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Is this act of obedience immoral? What does your answer suggest for the prospects of a 'divine command morality'? (2014/14)

There are four distinct issues here:

- (1) Is perfect goodness compatible with omnipotence?
- (2) Is perfect goodness compatible with freedom?
- (3) Can there be objective moral laws if God does not exist?
- (4) Is it up to God to decide what is good and what is bad?

Problem (1) was more or less covered in the omnipotence readings. You can say No (God is either not omnipotent or only contingently morally perfect), or you can say Yes (God has some necessarily unmanifested power). A sophisticated (but cheating) Yes strategy is to say that the person who *is* God (whoever holds the title "God", say Yahweh) is only contingently morally perfect, but "God is morally perfect" is a necessary truth (in the sense that the following is true: "Necessarily, if someone holds the title 'God,' then that person is morally perfect.") (Compare: "The winner of the race gets the trophy" is a necessary truth in the sense that, necessarily, if someone is the winner, they will be the one who gets the trophy. But, for any given winner S, it's not necessary that S gets the trophy, because In another possible world, someone else is the winner. This interesting cheating strategy is worked out in **Omnipotence and God's ability to sin** by Nelson Pike).

Problem (2) can be solved easily if one adopts compatibilism about free will (= you're free when what is happening is the same as what you want to happen — God always wants the do the best and that's what happens, so he's free). **Must God create the best?** by Adams contains some interesting additional thoughts on this issue (he argues that God is not required to create the best – if he were, he couldn't have created us.)

Problem (3) is related to the idea that only the existence of God can guarantee the objectivity of moral laws. Roughly, moral laws are objective iff certain actions are good (or bad) regardless of whether anyone (that is, any finite being) takes them to be so. People who think this is true are called moral realists. The basic tenet of moral realism is that (moral) goodness and badness are just as much parts of reality as properties like mass or electric charge. Many theists have the intuition that moral realism can only be true if God exists. **Moral arguments for theistic belief** by Robert Adams outlines a few arguments for this.

Problem (4) is traditionally called "the Euthyphro problem." Plato has a dialogue, *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates chats up a man (called Euthyphro) outside the courthouse. The man waiting to get in in order to sue his own father for damaging his property. (His father killed one of his slaves.) Socrates starts pestering Euthyphro with questions about the nature of morality. Specifically, he wants to know whether what is good is good because the gods approve of it, or, rather, the gods approve of good things because they are good. (At the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro leaves before it is his turn at the courthouse. Perhaps Socrates tricked him into realizing how immoral his intentions were.)

The Euthyphro problem is tricky because (given the usual theological assumptions) we're dealing with two necessarily co-obtaining states of affairs (assuming that God is necessarily morally perfect and that moral truths are necessary): necessarily, if X is good, God approves of X, and necessarily, if God approves of X, then X is good. So one cannot settle the question of dependence using modal

criteria.(Compare: Necessarily, if I exist, then God exists, but possibly, God exists and I don't, so God cannot depend on me.)

The thesis that what is good depends on God's will (or commands) is called divine command theory. It was famously revived by Robert Adams. He has an earlier and a later account. The earlier (**A modified divine command theory**) says that what theists mean by "wrong" is "contrary to the commands of a loving God". He claims that if God commanded cruelty, then our moral concepts would break down, hence it's not true that if God commanded cruelty, then cruelty would be good. One consequence of the earlier account is that the meaning of "wrong" is different in the mouths of theists and atheists. Later, in **Divine command metaethics as necessary a posteriori**, Adams modified his theory to remove this last feature. Now the claim is that speakers need not be aware of the true meaning of their terms, therefore "wrong" means "contrary to the commands of a loving God" even in the mouth of the atheist. A good intro to this whole dialectic is **Is morality based on God's commands?** from *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell 2004).

Finally, an interesting oddball: James Rachels in **God and human attitudes** argues that worshipping another being cannot ever be morally justified, therefore God does not exist.