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How Does Grounding Morality in God's Nature Solve the Euthyphro Dilemma?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how grounding morality in God's nature solves the Euthyphro dilemma and whether we only have moral values because our culture has learned over time what does and does not benefit society.

* How does grounding morality in God's nature solve the Euthyphro dilemma?

* How would you respond to someone who claims we have moral values because our culture has learned over time what does and does not benefit society?

Transcript

You're listening to Amy Hall and Greg Koukl on Stand to Reason's hashtag STRask podcast. Welcome, Greg. Thanks, Amy.

Alright, this first question, I think this topic today that we have a few questions regarding, I think you will enjoy. It's one of your favorite topics. So this first... Swam off bass fishing.

How'd you guess? So this first question comes from Quad G. Moto. And it actually, this topic came up a couple episodes ago, Greg. So it follows on from that.

Here's the question. I saw the following today. What is your response? So here's what he saw.

I still don't understand how grounding morality in God's nature solves Euthyphro. One could ask, could God's nature have been other than it is? If yes, it's arbitrary. If no, it's grounded in something else.

What am I missing? Okay, to clarify what Euthyphro is, this was a dilemma that was posed by Socrates in an educational account, that dialogue that he offered. And the dilemma had to do with God's relationship to morality. And the question that was asked

by Socrates, or the character he was representing, is a thing good because God says it is, or does God say a thing is good because it's good? Okay, now that's the dilemma.

In other words, here's one option and here is the other option. And the problem is for grounding morality in God is that each one creates difficulties. Is a thing good because God says it.

So whatever God says, that's going to be good by definition. This seems to reduce goodness to God's power. That he can say anything he wants.

He could say that rape is bad one day and rape is good the next day. And simply because he says it's so, it becomes bad. It becomes so.

So it seems to remove any sense of goodness from the characterization and only God's power to say so is left. Well, that doesn't seem right. Well, what if the thing is really good and the reason God says it's good is because it really is good.

Now that appears that he is drawing from an external standard of what is good and he doesn't have the liberty to change it because the external standard identifies the good. And that's the fixed standard of goodness that even God himself has to abide by and has to acknowledge. Now this puts goodness outside of God.

And that seems to diminish God as well. In the first case, you have God who is powerful but not good because his goodness and power are really about the same thing. In the second case, you could have a God who is, his goodness is only derivative of an external standard.

So he isn't the author of good or whatever. And so something else is good and God becomes contingent to that other thing. And so that just seems like, okay, now what? Now I was mentioning to you during the break Amy that the very first time that I heard Yutha first dilemma, some call you Thiefro.

J. P. Moreling calls it Yuthaifro. And then I, this was when I was at Simon Greenleaf University back in the late 80s. And he was teaching a class that came up and it immediately occurred to me that there's a third option.

That the third option is no, it is not simply a function of God's will such that he could will anything at all. And any morality at all, it's arbitrary. And therefore it wouldn't really be morality.

And it's not a result of some non arbitrary standard outside of God. It is a result of a non arbitrary standard inside of God that is God's character. Okay.

Now, the person being raising the issue says, how does that solve the problem? I'm not sure how why they don't see that it does because the problem is either it's arbitrary

God's power. Oh, that's not the case. God doesn't will things arbitrarily.

He wills them according to a standard. But the standard is not outside of God making him contingent and the standard over him. The standard is inside of him.

It is his flawless moral character. Okay. So God just can't will anything to be good or bad.

It flows from his character. All right. And so this then kind of splits the dilemma by offering a third alternative.

And the third alternative answers the charges of the dilemma. Okay. So I don't understand why the person is confused at this point.

How does that solve the problem? Because it offers a third option that's not subject to the objection the dilemma offers. It solves the problem. Now, I guess this doesn't even mean that God is good or that God exists.

What it does is answer the defeater and it defeats the defeater. That's all it does at this particular point. Now I could take it a step further.

And that is if this isn't the solution, then there cannot be any good at all. And this is what I argue in Street Smarts. This is the bonus for the theist.

If there is real evil in the world, there must be a standard of good. Or there must be a standard of good established by an appropriate authority. Okay.

And that's God. But if there's real good in the world, it can only be good if God is good. And if God isn't good himself, then there's no other way to establish goodness in the world.

And so it's the only solution that avoids the dilemma for one and provides an adequate foundation for goodness in the world from which we derive our understanding of evil. Okay. So my whole approach in the way I deal with this problem, and I think I've never actually heard anybody deal in quite the same way as I always start with the problem of evil.

Because it doesn't matter where you lived or when you lived. Everybody knows something's wrong with the world. It's a universal awareness.

But the awareness entails object of morality because morality is not objective is if there are not real moral standards that are broken and it's only relativistic, then there's no problem of evil in the world. There are just things that happen. People don't like.

But if there is a real standard of morality, there must be an author of the standard of morality that is adequate to show that the morality is a good thing and not just an arbitrary list of rules. Okay. When this goes a little bit to your Thiebro.

So this all comes together for me with the problem of evil. Now, there's a way to avoid all of this. And that is to say there is no problem of evil because there is no good.

It's all relativistic. It's all lost in a twilight of moral nothingness. Not the way to avoid this, but that's not the way the world is.

And so what I'm trying to do is observe something about the world that everyone acknowledges, problem of evil. And then I'm asking what is of necessity entailed in the fact of evil in the world and of necessity? What's entailed in the fact of evil is the fact of good. And here I'm talking about objective, transcended good because the evil itself is objective and transcendent.

And in order for a thing to be objectively good in a transcendent fashion, there has to be an objective grounding for that. We are obligated to be good. That's the nature of morality.

And we are only obligated to persons, not to things. Okay. So to whom are we obligated? We are not obligated to be good just to somebody who's really powerful.

We can only be obligated to be good to somebody who's really good. And who sets the good standard. Okay.

So that with that in mind, the euthi for dilemma is offered and it doesn't apply to our answer because the third answer, the third option, which turns out to be a solution to the dilemma is that God is actually good. And that's the standard that God works with his own character. And if it's not that answer, there is no other answer.

There is no other answer for good and evil objectively in the world. And you're stuck with relativism for everything. Yeah.

I think the problem here is that if I'm understanding this correctly, the problem is that he doesn't understand what kind of being God is. So he says, one could ask, could God's nature have been other than it is? If yes, it's arbitrary. Okay.

No. If no, it's grounded in something else. No, God's God's nature is not grounded in anything.

This is the whole point. God is a self-exist. He's not a person being.

He's not contingent on anything else. He is not any other way than he is. He could not be any other way than he is.

He's self-existent. Now, maybe what he's asking is, how do we know? And by the way, the way that he is is morally perfect too. Yes.

That's part of the package. And if you reject that, it has consequences for other things.

And I think what he's saying is, how do we know that God is good? And here I would just say, this is something we apprehend.

We apprehend the quality of goodness as opposed to the quality of evil. And we recognize it. I guarantee you, everyone out there recognizes the difference between helping someone across the street and murdering them.

There is a quality that we recognize not because we're comparing it to a standard, an arbitrary standard, or any other standard, and it's not a standard. And we say, oh, it doesn't match that standard. Therefore, it's bad.

We actually apprehend the quality of goodness, truth, and beauty versus the quality of the twisting of those things. Would you say the quality of goodness is the standard, though? I mean, it is kind of a standard, but it isn't just simply a list of rules. Well, I'm just saying that we recognize God's goodness.

We're not comparing him to another standard, if that's what he's asking. Well, we're recognizing goodness. That's what you were saying.

Then the question is, what view of the world makes sense of the existence of goodness that is an obligation that we have to perform? Yes. All I'm saying is we don't have to compare God to a standard in order to see that he's objectively good. Right, right.

It's kind of a primitive. It's right there. We see this.

And by the way, if we didn't have that capability that you're trying to do, we're trying to do that. And by the capability that you're talking about, Amy, he would not be able, the challenger wouldn't be able to say that anything is evil. These are entailed together.

They are built together. You know? So God doesn't need grounding as a self-existent being. Everything else needs a grounding for God is the standard.

I mean, ultimately, that's the point here. And hopefully that helps make some sense of it. Maybe we've misunderstood what his objection is, but do you have anything to add before we go to the next question? No, I do think that this gets down to the grounding question and written about it in different ways and more thorough explanation coming out in the streets, Mark's whole chapter dealing with this.

But I do think it's a little bit hard for people to grasp at first. They have to think about it. And this is why I use an illustration.

I think that's handy. And that is the idea of writers and writing. And for people to say, I believe that there are things to read, but I don't believe that anybody wrote them.

And there's an entailment there. If you have written things, those require writers. And if you have moral obligations, that requires someone to whom we are obligated, who's

adequate to the obligation.

And that would be a morally perfect God. And that means his character is fixed and morally good. And that's what avoids the dilemma that's been offered.

Let's go to a question from Sam. How would you respond to someone that claims we have moral values because our culture has learned over time what benefits and does not benefit society? Well, what that means, that is a common explanation. All right.

But there are a couple of problems. Actually, this is Sam Harris's approach, the very well-known atheist, the letter to a Christian nation, et cetera, et cetera. And he says morality is about human flourishing.

And we can determine what influences flourishing by an empirical way. And here's where science can help out in sociology and whatever, because we can determine human flourishing. Okay.

The problem is even the notion of human flourishing is philosophically and theologically laden is the notion of human flourishing provide for abortion on demand or not. Now, there are a whole lot of people think that having the liberty to get an abortion on demand improves human flourishing, but a whole lot of people think it does just the opposite. Okay.

Now, I'm not arguing either side here. I'm just simply saying the notion of what flourishing means is teleological. It presumes something about human beings and what it means for humans to prosper.

Last year I read the rise and fall of the Third Reich. All right. And it's in many very instructive books.

So, 1200 pages or so. And I read a very enlightening about a way of thinking and also very horrifying, because there's a whole chapter in there that I couldn't finish reading quite honestly. It was too gruesome even for me of what Hitler planned for Europe and the plans that he began to execute.

No pun intended there. For those who are under his control. Of course, we all know what that is, but it was much worse.

The plans went much further than he was able to go. Now, that was human flourishing from his perspective and according to his his worldview because the the Aryans were the humans and the others had lives not worthy to be live. But Levenson, Verteus Leven, a life unworthy of life.

And therefore they could be used for the benefit of those who had lives worthy of life. All this to say is the whole notion of what is good for society depends entirely on larger

worldview considerations. So this is the entanglement issue I've been talking about in the last couple of shows.

And so what is that? Yes, society has decided what is good for them in some measures. This is what some of our laws reflect. It's curious that the things that have served us really well are the kinds of laws that are part of a universal code that the Bible reflects.

Okay. And when we deviate from those kinds of things, then it becomes a question of whether or not we are actually flourishing. What's good for society? And it seems to me that society was much better off in terms of flourishing.

We didn't have cell phones, but I don't know cell phones as a matter of flourishing in terms of rich human experience, much better off 30 years ago, 40 years ago than we are now. And some will say, well, wait a minute, we had we had all kinds of racial problems then, but there are a whole bunch of other things we weren't facing that works against human flourishing. A lot of what is good for society depends on what part of society you belong to.

So Frank Beckwith and I wrote this book called *Relativism, Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. And this was a huge problem that we discussed. What is society? Which microcosm represents society? Our society, our broader society, it made up of a lot of smaller societies that have different more ways and folk ways and different understandings of what it means to be too flourish.

So who gets to decide that? What this demonstrates is that that rejoinder is a shallow rejoinder. It doesn't take into consideration everything that is entailed there and that it just amounts to morality being completely subjective, relativistic, and that relativistic morality changing from era to era as people's sensibility, individual group sensibility, whoever is in power, their ideas of what is good and flourishing change. And this is what we see all over the place, the political climate, demonstrate there is a clash of all of these things within the same broader society.

This is not a workable solution. And for all the reasons that I have identified. I think it also doesn't explain our sense of obligation.

So let's say I know that something would cause, quote, more flourishing, but I would prefer to do something else. For my flourishing. Yeah.

So where does that sense of obligation come from? Even if you define it as this is just something that's good for everyone. Well, why should I want to do what's good for everyone? Why don't I want to do what's good for me? Why is there any sort of obligation for me to do what's good for everyone? The only way to have an obligation to do something is if you're obligated to someone. It's not just here are the things, you know, we all do this.

We all know what we can do in our life to make us better, be more disciplined to do all these things. We can have a list of them. That doesn't mean we're going to do them all or that will even feel guilty for not doing them all.

There's something different about moral commands that we feel obligated to fulfill them and we feel guilty when we break them. And that can't be explained just by this is what makes things better because I don't think, you know, even if you were on an island all by yourself and there was no one there to make you feel guilty about something. If you were to do something morally wrong, if that's possible on an island all by yourself, then you would feel guilty because you are guilty of breaking a law from someone who is higher than you that you're obligated to respect and follow.

Think the South flourished under slavery. They flourished. Everything was going great for the society that mattered to those in power.

And that's why this whole concept of the culture decides what's good for culture all depends on who's in power. Now use the Third Reich as an example too. This was good for them.

Now you start imposing other things like, oh, well, that's not good for everybody and we have to have something that's good for everybody. Well, it wasn't good for many of the Southerners to lose all their slaves, but it was a higher good that was accomplished when human beings were liberated from slavery. And that had to be imposed by force and we had a civil war as a result.

And so, you know, it's just not, it isn't like, well, we all just agree with what's good for society. All different kinds of societies are involved. There is no simple society.

And to decide what's good for society is also based on an understanding of what society is supposed to be like. It's teleological and people don't agree on that. And the secular view and the religious view are quite different when it comes to that, though each are part of society.

All right. I'm sure there's much more we could say on this topic, but we have talked about this before. So if you're interested in hearing more, definitely go back through our archives.

You can always go through our archives. We have so many topics that we've discussed. If I could, the book, *Relativism, Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* goes into detail on the problems of this particular approach.

You have the Reformers' Dilemma, which is another difficulty because society is the standard. So if society is the standard, then whatever society says the majority rules, that's what is good by definition. So when you have a reformer, like a Gandhi or Martin Luther King or someone like that, well, there are oddmintoners.

Yeah, well, there are oddmintoners. They're going against the society's sense of what's good. So they must be bad by definition.

That's also part of the problem of this approach. But that's all in the book. And let me just add, yes, when we are acting morally, we do better.

I mean, that is true. But the question is why and why are we obligated to do it? Is it because God created us to be a certain way and? He is good and he wants us to be like him and when we're more like him, things are good? Or is it just because of some utilitarian reason that people give? If it's just some utilitarian reason, then some people will suffer, as you pointed out, who are not in power. And that is just what we see over and over.

Now, maybe some people might say, well, it's just a question of people getting it wrong. So maybe there's a way to flourish and people just have to figure out the right way. Okay, but the problem, again, there are still things that doesn't explain like obligation and whereas with Christianity, you see that there's a reason why we do better when we are moral.

But the fact that we do better when we are moral doesn't explain the morality existence in the first place. So I don't know if that helps explain. These are all part of the package, right? All right, well, we are out of time.

Thank you for listening to the hashtag SDRAskPodcast. We hope to hear from you. Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag SDRAsk.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for a stand to reason. .