Early Modern
Moral Philosophy

Lecture 1: Voluntarism

§1. What is voluntarism?

Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons

All there is to the fact that we have a moral obligation to φ is the fact that God wishes us to φ.

Regal Voluntarism About Moral Reasons

All there is to the fact that we have a moral obligation to φ is the fact that the Queen wishes us to φ.

Voluntarism About Moral Reasons

All there is to the fact that we have a moral reason to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes us to φ.

Voluntarism About Reasons

All there is to the fact that we have a reason to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes us to φ.

Do we have to be theists to be voluntarists…?

P1 For any moral fact, all there is to it is a fact about what God wishes us to do.
P2 There is no God.
C There are no moral facts.

Another view…

If we have a moral obligation to φ, then this is because God (or the Queen) wishes us to φ and we have a moral obligation to do whatever God (or the Queen) wishes us to do.

§2. The authority of morality and ontological parsimony

Why should I do what I have a moral obligation to do…?
P1  If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes us to do then we will be made to suffer.
P2  We have a reason of self-interest not to do anything that will result in our being made to suffer.
C   We have a reason of self-interest to do what God (or the Queen) wishes us to do.

P1  If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes us to do then we are failing to benefit someone who has benefited us.
P2  It is ungrateful to fail to benefit someone who has benefited us.
C   It is ungrateful not to do what God (or the Queen) wishes us to do.

A Voluntarist About Reasons can’t subscribe to the first account; a Voluntarist About Moral Reasons can’t subscribe to the second account.

Ontological parsimony

Voluntarism helps us to avoid postulating sui generis facts about moral obligations/moral reasons/reasons…

…but what about God…?

§3. Descartes and Pufendorf

T1  ‘…it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so… the supreme indifferense to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence.’

(René Descartes, Sixth Set of Replies, §6)

P1  God is omnipotent.
P2  If Divine Voluntarism is false, then God is not omnipotent.
C   Divine Voluntarism is true.

T2  ‘…since honesty… and turpitude are affections of human deeds, arising from their agreeableness or disagreeableness to a rule, or a law; and since a law is the command of a superior, it does not appear how we can conceive any goodness or turpitude before all law, and without the imposition of a superior.’

(Samuel Pufendorf, Law of Nature and Nations, Book 1, Chapter 2, §6)

P1  Moral obligations are legal obligations.
P2  Voluntarism About Legal Obligations is true.
C   Voluntarism About Moral Obligations is true.
Cf. the ‘jural view of ethics’ in Henry Sidwick’s *Methods of Ethics* (1874) and John Austin’s ‘command’ theory of law in his *Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832).

T3 ‘...it is not possible to have a [legal conception of ethics] unless you believe in God as a law-giver… It is as if the notion “criminal” were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten.’

(Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p.6)

§4. Clarke and Cudworth

T4 ‘...if there be no such thing as good and evil in the nature of things, antecedent to all laws; then neither can any one law be better than another… but all laws equally, will be either arbitrary and tyrannical, or frivolous and needless; because the contrary might with equal reason have been established…’

(Samuel Clarke, *Discourse of Natural Religion*, R 228).

P1 If *Divine Voluntarism* is true then God’s wishes are arbitrary.

P2 God’s wishes are not arbitrary.

C *Divine Voluntarism* is false.

T5 ‘...to say… my will takes the place of reason, is the motto of a tyrant.’

(Gottfried Leibniz, *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*)

This works against *Divine Voluntarism About Reasons*, but it doesn’t work against *Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons*...

T6 ‘Whence [i.e. from *Divine Voluntarism*] it follows unavoidably, that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just and righteous.’

(Ralph Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, R 119)

P1 There is a possible world at which God wishes us to torture puppies.

P2 If *Divine Voluntarism about Moral Obligations* is true, then any possible world at which God wishes us to torture puppies is a world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.

C1 If *Divine Voluntarism about Moral Obligations* is true, then there is a possible world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.

P3 There is no possible world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.

C2 *Divine Voluntarism about Moral Obligations* is false.
Possible responses…

Bite the bullet, and reject P3.

Reject P1 on the grounds that there is no possible world at which God is not benevolent, and at no possible world is it benevolent to wish puppies to be tortured.

P1 There is a possible world at which God wishes puppies to be tortured.

P2 If Divine Voluntarism About Goodness is true, any possible world at which God wishes puppies to be tortured is a world at which it is benevolent to wish puppies to be tortured.

C There is a possible world at which it is benevolent to wish puppies to be tortured.


Appeal to Divine Voluntarism About Modality…

T7 ‘The… truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him… It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them… To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change.’

(René Descartes, Letter to Mersenne)

God wishes there to be no possible world at which He wishes us to torture puppies, so there is no possible world at which He wishes us to torture puppies…

Bibliography

- Hooker, B. ‘Cudworth and Quinn’, Analysis 61:4 (pp.333-335).