Early Modern Moral Philosophy

Lecture 1: Voluntarism

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Introduction
Introduction


‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions…’

(David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, R 482)

‘Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.’

(Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, R 946)
Varieties of voluntarism

*Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons*

All there is to the fact that there is a moral reason to $\phi$ is the fact that God wishes (or commands) us to $\phi$.

*Regal Voluntarism About Moral Reasons*

All there is to the fact that there is a moral reason to $\phi$ is the fact that the Queen wishes (or commands) us to $\phi$. 
Varieties of voluntarism

_Voluntarism About Moral Obligations_

All there is to the fact that there is a moral obligation to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to φ.

_Voluntarism About Reasons_

All there is to the fact that there is a reason to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to φ.
The authority of morality and ontological parsimony

Why should we be responsive to moral reasons/obligations?

*Voluntarism* can give us a satisfying answer to this question.

If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to do, then we will be made to suffer. (*A reason of self-interest*)

If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to do, then we are being ungrateful. (*A moral reason*)

*Voluntarism* also gives us a way of avoiding the postulation of *sui generis* facts about moral reasons/obligations.

Do we have to be theists to be *Divine Voluntarists*? No!
Arguments for voluntarism: Descartes

‘…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 indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence.’

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

René Descartes
1596-1650
Arguments for voluntarism: Descartes

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

What does it mean to say that God is omnipotent?

There is no possible world that God could not have created.
Arguments for voluntarism: Pufendorf

‘...since honesty (or moral necessity) 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
1632-1694
Arguments for voluntarism: Pufendorf

P1  Moral obligations are legal obligations.
    Cf. the ‘jural view of ethics’ in Henry Sidwick’s *Methods of Ethics* (1874).

P2  *Voluntarism About Legal Obligations* is true.
    Cf. John Austin’s ‘command’ theory of law in his *Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832).

C   *Voluntarism About Moral Obligations* is true.
Arguments for voluntarism: Pufendorf

‘Naturally it is not possible to have a [law conception of ethics] unless you believe in God as a law-giver… But if a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation”, of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root… 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)
‘…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).

Samuel Clarke
1675-1729
Arguments against voluntarism: Clarke

P1 If *Divine Voluntarism* is true, then God’s commands are arbitrary and tyrannical.

P3 God’s commands are not arbitrary and tyrannical.

C *Divine Voluntarism* is false.

What does it mean to say that God’s commands are arbitrary and tyrannical?

‘to say… my will takes the place of reason, is the motto of a tyrant.’ (Gottfried Leibniz, *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*)
‘Whence [i.e. from *Divine Voluntarism*] it follows unavoidably, that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so fouly 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*, R119)
Arguments against voluntarism: Cudworth

P1 There is a possible world at which God wishes (or commands) us to torture babies for fun.

P2 If Divine Voluntarism about Moral Reasons is true, then any possible world at which God wishes (or commands) us to torture babies for fun is a world at which there is a moral reason to torture babies for fun.

P3 There is no possible world at which there is a moral reason to torture babies for fun.

C Divine Voluntarism about Moral Reasons is false.
Arguments against voluntarism: Cudworth

How might a fan of *Divine Voluntarism* respond to this argument?

Reject P3. Bite the bullet, and accept that there is a possible world at which there is a moral reason to torture babies for fun.

This seems like a serious cost!

Reject P1 on the grounds that, necessarily, God is kind.

But does it make sense to say that God is kind if his wishes (and commands) are not responsive to moral reasons?

Appeal to *Divine Voluntarism about Modality.*
Conclusion

*Divine Voluntarism About Moral Obligations* is less vulnerable to the objections raised by Clarke and Cudworth than *Divine Voluntarism about Moral Reasons*.

*Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons* has greater benefits than *Divine Voluntarism About Moral Obligations* in terms of ontological parsimony.

*Divine Voluntarism About Reasons* does not have the same benefits as *Divine Voluntarism About Moral Obligations* and *Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons* in terms of explaining the authority of morality.