

## **GOD'S GOODNESS, DIVINE PURPOSE, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE MEET THE NEW EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA**

JEREMY RANDEL KOONS  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY – QATAR

**Abstract:** The divine purpose theory (DPT) — according to which human life is meaningful to the extent that it fulfills some purpose or plan to which God has directed us — encounters well-known Euthyphro problems. Some theists attempt to avoid these problems by appealing to God's essential goodness, à la the modified divine command theory (DCT) of Adams and Alston. However, recent criticisms of the modified DCT show its conception of God's goodness to be incoherent, and these criticisms can be shown to present an analogous set of problems for the DPT. Further, the argument can be extended to any account of meaningfulness according to which the value of what humans do can only be conferred by God. Thus, it would seem that there is no tenable version of the view that meaningfulness is conferred on human life by some act or attitude of God's. The Euthyphro dilemma presents a significant problem for DPT and should ultimately compel its advocates to concede that human life is meaningful independent of God's wishes, commands or purposes. Indeed, the Euthyphro dilemma represents a threat to a wide range of projects in theist value theory — from theistic metaethics to theories of the meaning of life — and theists working in these areas need to defend critical foundations of their theory from the threat posed by recent formulations of the dilemma.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Thaddeus Metz writes, “The standard God-centred account of what makes life meaningful is the view that meaning in life comes from helping to realise God's plan or fulfilling a purpose God has assigned, where God is a spiritual person who is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful.” (Metz 2007, p. 197). However, the divine purpose theory (DPT), as I shall call it, faces Euthyphro problems essentially identical to those faced by the traditional divine command theory (DCT).

Authors such as Alston and Adams have attempted to circumvent these Euthyphro problems by defending a ‘modified’ DCT. On such views, God is essentially good, and God's nature constrains the commands that he issues. Theistic philosophers advocating for the DPT have availed themselves of this solution and largely take these Euthyphro problems to have been solved.

I argue that they have not been solved, and that a new problem — the ‘God's nature Euthyphro dilemma’ (GNED) — threatens a variety of theistic axiological projects. In this essay, I will argue for the following conclusions. First, I will briefly rehearse arguments for why the GNED demonstrates the unviability of modified DCT. Further, I will demonstrate that recent attempts to respond to the GNED are unsuccessful. Second, I will demonstrate that the GNED forms the basis of an argument against DPT. Third, I will argue that this strategy generalizes — this GNED-based argument can be used to demonstrate that a wide variety of supernatural theories of the meaning of life are not viable. Theists, working in a variety of areas of value theory (be it theistic metaethics or theories of the meaning of life) who think that Euthyphro problems have been solved — and who construct their theories based on this assumption — need to defend critical foundations of their theory. Finally, I will argue that the GNED compels theists themselves to affirm a crucial premise in the secular theory of value. In other words, the GNED allows us to demonstrate that human life is meaningful independent of God's wishes, commands, or purposes.

## II. DIVINE PURPOSE THEORY (DPT) AND THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

Perhaps the most common theistic view of meaningfulness is that human life is meaningful to the extent that it fulfills some purpose or plan to which God has directed us. Versions of the divine purpose theory (DPT), as I shall call it, are defended by John Cottingham (2005, chapter 3), William Lane Craig (2008), Stewart Goetz (2012), J.P. Moreland (1987), Philip L. Quinn (2008)<sup>1</sup>, and others. (It is worth noting that Metz — whom I quoted earlier — is not himself an advocate of DPT, and has criticized it across a range of publications.)

DPT has been fleshed out in various ways by various authors. For example, Goetz argues that our purpose is to experience ‘perfect happiness’:

I suggested that a plausible reading of [the question “What makes life meaningful?”] is “What makes life worth living?”... the most plausible answer to the question “What makes life worth living?” is the simple answer “Happiness,” and the answer to “What ultimately makes life worth living?” is “Perfect happiness, where perfect happiness, as that which consists of nothing but experiences of pleasure and constitutes one’s well-being, is the purpose for which one is created by God.” (Goetz 2012, pp. 17–18)

Cottingham seems to have a more complex view, according to which God’s purpose is that humans live fulfilling lives, in accordance with the right and the good, while completing God’s creation, the achievement of which is the “culmination” of our autonomy (Cottingham 2005, p. 43). In any case, whatever their specific views, advocates of DPT are united in arguing that only a divinely-conferred purpose can bestow meaning on the lives of humans. Goetz, for example, argues that naturalism (the rival to supernaturalism) conceives of a universe with no teleological (i.e., purposive) explanations — only causal explanations — and no free will; thus, there is no room for *any* purpose in such a universe, and hence no room for meaning. (See Goetz 2012, ch. 4.)

However, DPT encounters well-known Euthyphro problems: Is this purpose meaningful because God directs humans to fulfill it, or does God direct humans to fulfill this purpose because it is meaningful? The first option seems to render the purpose arbitrary; the second renders God otiose, as the purpose is meaningful independent of God’s direction.

Some theists (e.g., Cottingham 2005, ch. 3 §3; Moreland 1987, ch. 4) have argued that these Euthyphro problems can be defused by making a move that is becoming increasingly common in discussions of divine command theory (DCT): Theists assert that God’s nature is essentially good, and this constrains God’s commands<sup>2</sup> (and the purposes he directs us to fulfill). Crucially, then, the purpose God assigns us will no longer be meaningful *merely* because He has assigned it to us. Rather, it will be meaningful *in light of a particular standard of goodness*: a standard provided by God’s nature. Thus, the purpose God directs us to fulfill is neither (a) arbitrary nor (b) good/meaningful in virtue of some standard external to God (since God’s nature is the standard of all goodness, including goodness of purpose). As Cottingham puts the point, “God neither issues arbitrary commands, nor is he subject to prior moral constraints; rather his commands necessarily reflect his essential nature, as that which is wholly and perfectly good” (2005, pp. 46–7).

Some secular philosophers are willing to concede that this move evades the Euthyphro objection (but reject DPT on other grounds). Metz, for example, writes, “I maintain that Cottingham and other philosophers of religion have resolved” the Euthyphro problems for DCT, and hence also DPT (2013, p. 85). I argue that this concession is premature; the Euthyphro dilemma presents an insurmountable problem for

1 Quinn’s view is not a straightforward version of the DPT, as he claims that for a person’s life to have “positive complete meaning,” it must have *both* “positive axiological meaning,” i.e., “(i) it has positive intrinsic value, and (ii) it is on the whole good for the person who leads it,” *and also* “positive teleological meaning,” i.e., “(i) it contains some purposes the person who lives it takes to be non-trivial and achievable, (ii) these purposes have positive value and (iii) it also contains actions that are directed toward achieving these purposes and are performed with zest” (Quinn 2008, p. 35). Needless to say, the existence of God is, for Quinn, a necessary condition on the fulfillment of these conditions.

2 This move is made by, for example, Adams (1999), Alston (2002), and Craig (2009).

DPT, and should ultimately compel its advocates to concede that human life is meaningful independent of God's wishes, commands or purposes.

### III. THE MODIFIED DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

To begin, consider the 'modified DCT' advocated by Alston, Adams, Cottingham, Craig, and others. Alston argues that God is good — indeed, that God is “the supreme standard of goodness” (Alston 2002, p. 291) — and claims this move allows DCT to evade the traditional Euthyphro objections: “So far from being arbitrary, God's commands to us are an expression of his perfect goodness. Since he is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best” (Alston 2002, p. 290).

The critic of DCT will not be impressed and will argue that modified DCT merely recreates the Euthyphro dilemma at a new level. Thus, the critic asks, are various traits (kindness, justice, mercy, etc.) good because they are traits of God, or is God good because he possesses these traits? I will call this the *God's Nature Euthyphro Dilemma* (GNED).<sup>3</sup>

The standard response to the GNED is to embrace the first horn of the dilemma, and to argue that various traits such as kindness and mercy are not independently good or good-making, but are rather only good *because* they are possessed by God, who is himself the standard of goodness. Alston calls this view “valuational particularism” and makes his well-known analogy with the Paris meter bar:

What makes this table a meter in length is not its conformity to a Platonic essence but its conformity to a concretely existing individual. Similarly, on my present suggestion, what most ultimately makes an act of love a good thing is not its conformity to some general principle but its conformity to, or imitation of, God, who is both the ultimate source of the existence of things and the supreme standard by reference to which they are to be assessed. (Alston 2002, p. 292)

It follows, on this view, that if there were no God, such traits as justice and mercy would not be good-making. And indeed, Adams (who articulates a version of the modified DCT) writes that “If there is a God that satisfies [the] conditions imposed by our concepts [of the Good], we might say, then excellence is the property of faithfully imaging such a God...In worlds where no such God exists, nothing would have that property, and therefore nothing would be excellent” (Adams 1999, p. 46).<sup>4</sup>

### IV. THE INCOHERENCE OF THE MODIFIED DCT

The standard response to the GNED is not satisfactory. Indeed, it is doubtful that there is a satisfactory response to the GNED, and this conclusion will wind up having problematic consequences for the DPT. But first, why think that the standard reply offered by Alston, Adams and others cannot succeed?

The first — and less serious — problem is that the standard response reverses our normal understanding of the relation between thick and thin moral properties:

Actions and agents instantiate morally thin properties (rightness, goodness, etc.) in virtue of the morally thick properties these actions and agents instantiate. An action is not good *simpliciter*; it is good *because* it represents an act of charity, or a repaying of a debt, or something else. It is good in virtue of something else. Similar comments apply to the goodness of agents. (Koons 2012, p. 181)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Koons 2012; Kowalski 2011; Morrison 2001.

<sup>4</sup> As an anonymous referee for *EJPR* has pointed out, the theist might respond as follows: These are counterfactuals with impossible antecedents (e.g., “If God didn't exist...”) — at least, on the theistic assumption that God is a necessary being. So whatever implausible consequences I attempt to draw from such conditionals are blocked, since the antecedent is never — and, indeed, *can* never be — satisfied. I reply that I can concede the necessary falsity of the antecedent of such conditionals. Nevertheless, these conditionals serve to clarify *relations of explanatory priority* among various traits. And, indeed, this is precisely what Adams — himself, of course, a theist — uses such conditionals to illustrate: God's goodness is prior, in the order of explanation, to the goodness of any thick trait (such as justice or loving-kindness). That is the key point at issue.

Modified DCT upends this relation, in that it denies that God is good because of His instantiation of any morally thick properties. Rather, these thick properties have the valence they do *because* they are instantiated by a being who is good — reversing the standard order of explanation. This, in itself, is a puzzle. But it is a puzzle that signals a deeper incoherence — for it bars us from saying anything about what God’s goodness consists in.

Notice that if we should try to explain wherein God’s goodness consists, we are debarred by the modified DCT from giving any answer at all. God is not good in virtue of being just, or loving, or merciful. These traits are not good-making on the modified DCT. In fact, no trait is good-making — except the vacuous trait of ‘being identical to God’. Thus, God’s goodness is a ‘featureless property’, a bare particular, devoid of any content, since on the modified DCT God’s goodness is *logically prior* to any trait that could explain this goodness. As Kowalski summarizes the problem,

How should we understand God, a particular concrete being, serving as the standard of goodness? In virtue of what does God so serve? In order to avoid grounding God’s goodness, as the Platonist would, in truths that do not depend on God, it seems that God must somehow serve as the supreme standard of goodness *apart* from the properties He in fact possesses. It thus seems that God, *qua* bare particular, serves as the ultimate standard for moral goodness. (Kowalski 2011, p. 269)

Alston tries to resist this conclusion, arguing, “Note that on this view we are not debarred from saying what is supremely good about God. God is not good, *qua* bare particular or undifferentiated thisness. God is good by virtue of being loving, just, merciful and so on” (Alston 2002, p. 292). But he is trying to have his cake and eat it, too. For this passage continues, “Where this view differs from its alternative is in the answer to the question, ‘By virtue of what are these features of God good-making features?’ The answer given by this view is: ‘By virtue of being features of God’” (Alston 2002, p. 292). As Alston makes clear throughout his essay, the key feature of valuational particularism is that traits like kindness and mercy are good because they are traits of God; God is not good because He is kind and merciful. So in fact we are “debarred from saying what is supremely good about God” — *God’s goodness consists in literally nothing*. This is not a coherent view of the nature of goodness. While modified DCT might solve one problem facing DCT (namely, the arbitrariness problem), it does so at the cost of metaphysical incoherence.

#### IV.1. Some Proposed Solutions to the GNED, Briefly

While there is a robust literature surrounding the modified DCT, there is curiously little discussion of the GNED. Mark Linville, in discussing Alston’s moral particularism, seems to be aware that some such problem is lurking in the wings:

The question arises, In virtue of what is God said to be good? Alston’s answer: “God is good by virtue of being loving, just, merciful, etc.” But one may press a further question: By virtue of what are these features of God good-making features? Alston’s reply: “By virtue of being features of God.” In a step or two we arrive at the conclusion that God is good insofar as God has the features of God. God is godly. But then Satan is satanic. We seem to have essentially the same objection that we raised against William of Ockham’s version of divine command morality. In virtue of what shall we say that godly features serve as good-making features in a way that satanic features do not? (Linville 2012, p. 152)

What is it about God’s nature that has the power to confer upon mercy, justice, loving-kindness, and so on, goodness and pursuit-worthiness — in a way that (for example) Satan’s nature does not confer these properties upon the traits that Satan possesses? Unfortunately, instead of providing a substantive answer to this question, Linville provides instead a formal answer, replying that regresses of justification have to end somewhere and God’s nature seems like the best place to stop the moral regress:

The answer is that godly features serve [as good-making features] by virtue of their godliness. On Alston’s view, God’s nature is the first principle of value, and we beg the question against his view if we insist that God and his nature must be held up to some independent standard before we can meaningfully determine whether God is good... [A]ny standard faces the same difficulty, if, indeed there is anything difficult. Alston observes, “Whether we are Platonist or particularist, there will be some stopping place in the search for explanation.”

Sooner or later either a general principle or an individual paradigm is cited. Whichever it is, that is the end of the line....On both views, something is taken as ultimate, behind which we cannot go, in the sense of finding some explanation of the fact that it is constitutive of goodness. (Alston 1989, p. 269; Linville 2012, p. 152)

This doesn't advance the argument beyond Alston's response — and as I argued in Koons (2012), it doesn't address the objection. Granting to Alston that there is a linear regress of moral justification that must have a stopping point — a somewhat dated view of justification, to my mind — one's stopping point must be intelligible as a stopping point. But, as we have already seen, God is not morally good in virtue of any of the familiar characteristics (such as being just or loving). God's moral goodness is utterly blank, without any features that make it intelligible as a stopping place in an inquiry into the ultimate foundation of goodness. Since Alston and Adams make God's goodness prior to any of God's concrete moral virtues, the person of God is not intelligible as a stopping place in the quest for the ultimate source of good. God's supposed goodness, as I said above, is a complete blank, lacking any features whatsoever that would make it intuitively appealing why the object in question should be regarded as the ultimate exemplar of moral goodness. Morrision (2001, p. 132) criticizes Alston on similar grounds.<sup>5</sup>

Craig is one of the few religious philosophers to tackle the GNED head-on. Craig, for example, has argued that my (2012) criticism of modified DCT fails to establish that the theory is committed to an empty notion of God's goodness:

Koons himself, I think, undermines his argument later in the article when he distinguishes between what he calls "explanations-why" and "explanations-what." I found this to be a very helpful distinction, and I think it clarifies Alston's view. He says this:

We must distinguish between explanations-why and explanations-what. Even if explanations-why come to an end [you reach some explanatory ultimate; in the theist's case God...], and no further reasons can be given at this point, it does not follow that at this point there can be no further explanation-what. For we should still be able to explain what something is even if we can give no further explanation for why it is the way that it is.

I am amazed that he doesn't apply this to Alston's view of God! That seems to me perfectly correct. When you get to God you have reached the moral stopping point — the moral ultimate. There is no further reason why something is good. When you get to God you've reached the metaphysical and moral ultimate, the explanatory stopping point. But that doesn't mean you can't explain what goodness is or wherein the goodness of God consists. As Alston says, you can still explain to people that God is loving, kind, merciful, generous, and so forth. That would be an explanation-what, but not an explanation-why. (Craig 2015)

I think, however, that Craig's response misreads the original objection. As I originally argued, "Suppose (contrary to fact) that the electron's negative charge were simply a brute fact, and that no explanation could be given for why electrons have a negative charge. This would be an example of running to the end of explanations for why things are the way they are. But we could still give an explanation of what a negative charge is: how it interacts with positively-charged items (like protons), what the strength of its electrical charge is, and so forth. So even if we can say nothing about why the electron has this charge, we can say quite a lot about what this charge is" (Koons 2012, p. 191). We are to imagine, on the modified DCT, that God's nature ends the 'why'-regress. That is, there is no further question to be asked about why certain traits or properties are good — they are good because they are traits or properties of God, who is the exemplar of goodness. But, as I argued, we should still be able to say *what* this goodness is, just as we should be able to say something about what the electron's negative charge consists in. Now Craig is correct — we can say many things about what God is, on the modified DCT. We can say that God is loving, just, kind, and so on. But these cannot be answers to questions concerning *what God's goodness*

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous referee for *EJPR* has suggested that God might will His own goodness, at the same time as this willing being good. But this actually seems like a step back, into traditional divine command theory, where God wills, and His will is subject to no prior constraint by God's nature — and thus God can quite literally will anything, and it would then be moral. The whole point of modified DCT was to escape such arbitrariness objections by making God's will subject to the prior constraint of God's good nature — an advantage that is abandoned if we now say that God wills His own nature.

*consists in*. God's goodness is logically prior to these virtues, and so one cannot cite these virtues in an explanation—what of God's goodness. And indeed, in the last two sentences of the Craig quote, we see the crucial slippage—from talking about what God's goodness consists in, to talking about what traits God has. I am willing to grant to the modified DCT that we can attribute many traits to God—but none of these can constitute an explanation or account of what God's goodness consists in, since again God's goodness is prior in the order of explanation to any of these traits God may possess. Thus, the original problem remains: We can talk about what traits God has, but the notion of God's goodness remains incoherent, on the modified DCT, since God's goodness is *logically prior* to any of these traits God possesses (and indeed, confers goodness on them in virtue of God's possession of these traits).

This problem for modified DCT ramifies in a number of ways. It has been pointed out<sup>6</sup> that the arbitrariness worry—a thorn in the side of traditional DCT—seems to recur for modified DCT. If traits such as kindness and mercy are not antecedently good, but good only in virtue of God's possession of them, then it seems as though God's goodness would confer goodness on *any* trait He possessed. Thus, if God were miserly and dishonest, then these traits would be good in virtue of God's possession of them.<sup>7</sup>

However, the GNED makes this problem especially acute for the divine command theorist. No doubt the theist wishes to reply that a *good* God *wouldn't* be miserly or dishonest. But the GNED cuts off this avenue of escape for the theist: If God's goodness itself has no assignable character, then it is mysterious how it can then constrain the thick moral traits that God displays. Given the indeterminateness of God's goodness, God could equally well be miserly as generous, murderous as kind. A goodness that is blank will not entail, logically or metaphysically, that its possessor displays one specific trait from these various disjuncts. God's goodness radically underdetermines His character, making this arbitrariness worry even more acute.

Finally, it has been suggested<sup>8</sup> that the GNED can be avoided if we regard the relation between God (the perfect being) and the person who exemplifies the virtues (loving-kindness, justice, etc.) to a maximal degree as a relation of *identity*. The reply can be fleshed out as follows:

Consider an analogy. Suppose water is identical to H<sub>2</sub>O, implying that something is water if and only if it is H<sub>2</sub>O. If you ask what makes this stuff water, it's sensible for me to respond that it's H<sub>2</sub>O. No bare particular required. Similarly, now, suppose a perfect being is identical to a person who exhibits lovingness, justice, and related virtues to a maximally compossible degree. Now, if you ask me what makes this being perfect, it's sensible for me to respond that it's a person who exhibits lovingness, justice, and related virtues to a maximally compossible degree. No bare particular required.<sup>9</sup>

However, the analogy with water allows us to see precisely what is wrong with this response. Divine particularists insist on a particular relation—a particular order of explanation—between God's goodness and the specific virtues and traits that he exhibits. This relation is such that (as indicated in the quote from Adams at the end of section III above) if there were no God, these traits might exist, but they wouldn't be good—there would be no *goodness* in such a world. The whole point of evaluative *particularism* is that the specific particular (namely, God) confers goodness on the various traits (just as the Paris meter bar confers 'meterhood' on specific lengths).

Recall Adams's claim that in a possible world where there were no God, there might be justice, kindness, etc., but these things would not be good, as the relevant particular (God) would not be there to confer goodness upon them. It is not clear what it would mean to say (in the case of water) that there is no particular that confers water-hood on H<sub>2</sub>O. But to follow the modified DCT as closely as possible, we

6 By, for example, Alex Malpass. See his *Thoughtology* podcast, episode 18, 30:50ff. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPMrlxN0A4>>

7 A theist might object to this positing of counterfactuals with impossible antecedents. I have already addressed the issue of counterfactuals with impossible antecedents above (note 4). However, in the present case, I would respond as follows: The antecedents in question (e.g., "If God were miserly and dishonest...") are not impossible. On the modified DCT, if God possessed these traits, then they would be good, not bad. That is precisely the problem with modified DCT: It is unable to explain *how* these antecedents are impossible.

8 By an anonymous referee for *EJPR*.

9 An anonymous referee for *EJPR* put the objection in these terms.

would have to say that in such a possible world, there might be  $H_2O$ , but no  $H_2O$  is water. Thus, there must be some criterion for counting as water outside of being identical with  $H_2O$ . In other words, we should be able to identify possible worlds where there is  $H_2O$  but no water, but also identify possible worlds where there is  $H_2O$  and water. Thus, we must have independent criteria for the existence of  $H_2O$  and for the existence of water.

For starters, this intermediate conclusion will come as a shock to all of the fans of the Earth-Twin Earth/water-twater/ $H_2O$ -XYZ saga, who take it absolutely for granted that it is an essential property of water that it is identical to  $H_2O$ .<sup>10</sup> But let us set aside this (quite deep) problem, and let us assume that there are criteria for water-hood independent of chemical constitution: Perhaps a substance is water iff it is clear, drinkable, freezes at  $0^\circ\text{C}$  and boils at  $100^\circ\text{C}$ , etc. Thus, either  $H_2O$  or XYZ could be water (on this account) — Horgan and Timmons be damned! You may be willing to bite this particular bullet, in the case of water; but an analogous move is not obviously available to the modified divine command theorist. For while we may have independent criteria for water-hood, the whole point of the GNED is that we *don't* have independent criteria of goodness — apart from the morally thick virtues, such as justice, loving-kindness, and so on (which, again, we may not appeal to as an explanation of God's goodness). And so the modified divine command theorist who wants to say that God is identical to the being who maximally exemplifies the virtues, but also that God has an independently intelligible property of goodness — such that his exemplification of these virtues confers goodness on them, and they wouldn't be good if God didn't exemplify them — is again embroiled in a contradiction.

I will not continue to outline the problems with modified DCT; I have done so in greater detail elsewhere (Koons 2012). I believe many theists are of the view that modified DCT has resolved the Euthyphro-related objections facing traditional DCT, and proceed based on this understanding. My purpose in this section is merely to demonstrate that the Euthyphro dilemma still represents a significant problem for modified DCT, and that no satisfactory solution to this problem has been presented. Let us turn our attention to the relevance of this conclusion for the DPT.

## V. DIVINE PURPOSE THEORY AND THE GOD'S NATURE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

Let us turn our attention back to the DPT of the meaning of life. Advocates of DPT like Cottingham follow the modified DCT by appealing to God's essential goodness, which is supposed to make our human purpose dependent upon God's direction, without thereby being arbitrary. Because God is good, He will only direct us to purposes that are good for us (and hence objectively meaningful).

But our discussion of the modified DCT demonstrates that this strategy for rescuing DPT will not succeed — and it won't succeed because of the GNED. For DPT is faced, again, with two options. First, DPT can hold that various traits are good because God possesses them. But as we saw, this leads to an incoherent view of God's goodness, and is hence an untenable view.

So DPT is driven to the second view: God is good in virtue of being loving, just, merciful, and so on. But embracing this second horn of the dilemma undermines DPT. For this horn of the dilemma acknowledges that God is not the standard of goodness; rather, there is a standard of goodness external to God. As we saw above, arbitrariness worries loom if DPT claims that the divinely-ordained purpose is meaningful *merely* in virtue of being willed for us by God; it must be good *in light of some standard of goodness*. Modified DCT made this standard 'internal' to God's nature. But as we saw, this view of goodness is incoherent. Thus, the advocate of DPT must acknowledge that God's nature is *not* the relevant standard of goodness — the standard in question is external to God. Thus, on this second horn, the purposes assigned to us by God are good by reference to this *external* standard, *not* with reference to God's nature. As this standard of goodness is external to God, it seems the standard would remain whether God instantiated these qualities or not, since (again) these qualities are not good merely in virtue of God's

<sup>10</sup> See Horgan and Timmons (1990–91) and the ensuing literature. Horgan and Timmons, of course, are themselves drawing on Putnam's work (Putnam 1975).

possession of them (nor, again, in virtue of God having *willed* them). It follows then that the divinely-ordained purpose would remain good and meaningful irrespective of God's having willed it, since it is good by reference to a standard independent of God and His will. Ergo, DPT must ultimately admit that *the meaningful life is meaningful independent of God's wishes, commands or purposes*.

Cottingham, unfortunately, offers no elaboration or defense of the modified DCT, but takes it generally as a given that the version defended by Alston, Adams, and others has solved the Euthyphro problem. Cottingham restates the standard response as follows (part of which I have already quoted above):

The standard reply to this dilemma (the line taken by Augustine and Aquinas and by several modern defenders of the idea of divinely based morality) is that goodness is inseparable from God's nature. God neither issues arbitrary commands, nor is he subject to prior moral constraints; rather his commands necessarily reflect his essential nature, as that which is wholly and perfectly good. (Cottingham 2005, pp. 46–7)

While Cottingham responds to *some* worries about the standard response (e.g., how can *facts* — even facts about a supernatural being — create *normative requirements?*), he doesn't respond to anything in the neighborhood of the GNED, thinking (I believe) that the traditional response he cites has disposed of the Euthyphro dilemma in a satisfactory way. As the discussion of the previous section has demonstrated, however, Cottingham and other defenders of the DPT cannot take the viability of the modified DCT for granted. Much more work remains to be done to show that DPT can be rescued from the Euthyphro dilemma — if indeed such a rescue is possible.

At any rate, Cottingham has not, I argued, given us a satisfactory reason to think the modified DCT has been vindicated. This doesn't demonstrate by itself that a secular account of the meaning of life has been vindicated. Cottingham, for one, has various additional objections to such accounts, including what he calls the 'fragility of goodness'. But this seems to amount chiefly to the fact that humans are mortal and our projects ultimately doomed (he argues) to futility: "The goal and destination of all our elaborate plans and projects is, in the end, nothing. 'O remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men for nought?' [Psalm 89 (Book of Common Prayer version).] In the long term, as the economist John Maynard Keynes was fond of observing, we shall all be dead." (2005, pp. 77–8). But this amounts to little more than what Erik Wielenberg calls the "final outcome argument", an argument he (to my mind) ably dispatches.<sup>11</sup>

It is not, of course, my goal to defend secular accounts of the meaning of life from all arguments. I wish (for now) only to make a more modest point: Advocates of the DPT have not adequately responded to the GNED. To the extent that the GNED stands unrefuted, the dialectic between the advocate of the DPT and the secular theorist leads to the point that any purpose assigned by God to people must be meaningful *independent* of God's commands and *independent* of God's moral character — and hence that God is, *from the standpoint of constituting meaningfulness*, otiose to a theory of the meaning of life. This is not sufficient in itself to vindicate a secular account of the meaning of life. But it does put such accounts at a dialectical advantage. Let me develop the argument for this conclusion in a bit more detail.

### V.1. *The Argument Generalized*

The above argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other accounts of meaningfulness according to which the value of what humans do can only be conferred by God — according to which God is the ultimate source of meaning, goodness, and value. All will ultimately fall victim to the GNED. For example, suppose that the theist holds that our lives are meaningful in virtue of achieving various non-moral goods, and further holds that various states of affairs or events (pleasure and pain, achievement and failure, etc.) can only be good or bad if God confers such goodness or badness upon them. (Craig, for example, at least holds the latter view; see his [2008].) Again, we can ask whether (for example) pleasure is good because God decrees it to be so, or God decrees it to be so because it is good. Pleasure's goodness would

<sup>11</sup> See Wielenberg (2005), Chapter 1.



only depend on God, of course, if we took the first horn. But to avoid arbitrariness, God's decrees would have to be constrained by God's nature — and we are back to the GNED.

For example, Stewart Goetz argues as follows:

The most plausible answer to the question “What makes life worth living?” is the simple answer “Happiness,” and the answer to “What ultimately makes life worth living?” is “Perfect happiness, where perfect happiness, as that which consists of nothing but experiences of pleasure and constitutes one's well-being, is the purpose for which one is created by God.” (Goetz 2012, pp. 17–18)

However, in responding to the familiar Euthyphro dilemma (couldn't God have made pain and torture the good?), Goetz replies,

For a rebuttal, I turn to C. S. Lewis who, as I have already pointed out, believed that pleasure is intrinsically good. Lewis writes that “[God's] omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible” (Lewis 1962, 28). Because pleasure is intrinsically good, it is impossible that it ever be in and of itself either not good or evil. To claim that pleasure might be either intrinsically not good or evil is nonsense. (Goetz 2012, p. 18)

One then wonders why we need God for a picture of the meaning of life that is available to — and indeed has been ably articulated by — many non-theistic philosophers over many centuries.

Or suppose a theist holds that a meaningful life is one lived in accordance with moral values, and further holds that such moral values (and therefore meaningfulness) depend on God. Such a view of moral values is naturally subject to the Euthyphro objection, and as I noted above, even the modified DCT falls prey to the GNED.

Thus, it would seem that there is no tenable version of the view that meaningfulness is conferred on human life by some act or attitude of God's. All such views founder on the GNED and offer no advantage over secular accounts.

It is important to note where the dialectic leads us: In adopting the second horn of the dilemma set out in section V — the horn according to which the purposes assigned to us by God are good by reference to some *external* standard, *not* with reference to God's nature — it follows that axiological questions (such as questions of moral value and life's meaning/purpose) are not settled by reference to God's will or nature. Rather, they are settled with reference to some independent standard of goodness and value. Thus, it would seem that the GNED must lead theists themselves to affirm a crucial premise in the secular theory of value. And so I reiterate: It would seem that the GNED allows us to demonstrate that human life is meaningful independent of God's wishes, commands or purposes. Thus, the dialectic leads to a point where we should *prima facie* prefer secular theories of meaning and value.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The GNED represents a threat to a wide range of projects in theist value theory — from theistic metaethics to theories of the meaning of life. I have argued that there have been few attempts to address the GNED; and those few attempts have failed. Further, many advocates of DPT take the Euthyphro dilemma (insofar as it impacts their own work) to have been solved. Not only has it not been solved, but the GNED presents a problem that has implications for DPT, and for other supernatural theories of the meaning of life, as well. Thus, theists working in value theory need to defend critical foundations of their theory from the threat posed by the GNED. As things stand, the GNED seems to threaten such accounts and vindicate secular accounts of the meaning of life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous referees for the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* for very helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

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