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Morality Without God

Luke Hancock
lehancock@liberty.edu

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Introduction

This paper will primarily focus on an article by M. B. Wilkinson. This paper will show that, while Wilkinson's article can be critiqued in places, it succeeds in bridging the is/ought gap without traditional recourse to God as lawgiver. First summarizing Wilkinson's argument, then examining its potential strengths and weaknesses, this paper will ultimately argue that Wilkinson's offered stance on morality is tenable.

Review and Assessment

Wilkinson is presenting a foundation for morality based on natural grounds. He gives a basic metaphysic to support this idea and bases his morality in human nature. In doing so, Wilkinson claims to solve the is/ought problem and the Euthyphro Dilemma, as well as surpass situation ethics and relativism as a moral system. He does not rely on God for his morality, but gives a moral system that is consistent with a Thomistic conception of God. Following is a summary of his arguments.[1]

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[1] M. B. Wilkinson. 2015. "God, Goodness, Fact and Value." *Síntese: Revista de Filosofia* 42 (134): 397-422.

Grounding morality in God raises the philosophical difficulty of the Euthyphro Dilemma. The Euthyphro Dilemma asks the question of whether God's command to do something is what makes that thing good. If so, then morality depends upon God and is therefore arbitrary. If not, then morality is independent of God's commands, and God's act of commanding is unnecessary, and there is some law greater than or above God.[2] Wilkinson seeks to find a basis for a natural law or virtue ethics approach to morality that will allow for a creative and loving God.[3]

The second issue a moral system must conquer is the is/ought problem. There is a logical difficulty in moving from factual statements about the world (certain actions cause good/evil results) to imperative moral commands (certain actions ought/ought not to be done). This problem must be answered by any serious system of morality.[4]

Having explained these problems, Wilkinson discusses theories that fail. The idea that humans ought to follow social conventions, espoused by Hume, works fine until disagreement arises.[5] Religion and divine-command theory fall apart

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[2] John Cottingham. *Philosophy of Religion Towards a More Humane Approach, (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 76-80.

[3] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 399.

[4] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 399-400.

[5] Ibid., 400.

quickly as well, according to Wilkinson.[6] There is a need for morality apart from religion. Relativism also will not succeed.[7]

Wilkinson mentions Kekes' suggestion that conflicting values and obligations mean one should take moral commands with a grain of salt and recognize the flawed system. The author argues that competing moral precepts should not be ignored but rather the focus should be on making the proper judgment as a good person. Borrowing from William Temple, Wilkinson strives to achieve a unity of ethics. In order to do so, he divides ethics into three levels: deep, motivational, and particular.

The deep has to do with "the absolute obligation to will whatever on each occasion be right."[8] The motivational level has to do with the objectives behind the deep. Wilkinson discusses how ethics is a human enterprise in every sense, only humans deal with ethics, and in a Kantian way, ethics ultimately should focus on treating humans as an end, never a means. The third level, the particular, is concerned with specific ethical judgments on real-world topics. The author makes the significant point that questions of ethics at this level usually have a metaphysical

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[6] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 400.

[7] Ibid., 400-401.

[8] Ibid., 402.

component, whether it be ontological, concerned with the essence and nature of what a person is, or a discussion of rights.

After establishing the need for metaphysics, Wilkinson grounds his metaphysics in the proposition that material objects exist.[9] He subscribes to nominalism and discusses how nouns have been created for adjectival concepts, including examples like green, kind, and justice. This leads to the conclusion that discussion of moral goals such as justice and kindness will be plagued with difficulties unless these terms (justice, kindness) are treated properly as adjectives with no separate existence apart from their objects (just or kind men).

Wilkinson supplements his metaphysics with another claim, that persons are sentient, reflective, self-directed material objects.[10] This means that adjectives can be ascribed to persons. Specifically, moral qualities (justice, kindness) can be ascribed to persons whose actions are described by those qualities. More significantly than the acting is the being, says Wilkinson. Humans are acting creatures that think afterwards, so change comes about in the midst of existence. A person acts, reflects, and changes. This is how Wilkinson bridges the is/ought gap.

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[9] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 405.

[10] Ibid., 407.

People exist and act (fact or 'is') and their existence and actions cause them to make changes (value or 'ought').

Wilkinson makes the case that values are personal and only exist as adjectives, not nouns, and therefore have no existence apart from the object which is valuable. However, persons are in a constant state of change. Persons are intentional and active, imposing values on perceptions. Values are a precondition for actions. Human activity presupposes thoughtful consideration of the future.[11] Having made these assertions about values, Wilkinson suggests one universal moral principle: "It is proper to seek the good of persons." This principle stems from his anthropocentric view of value, and he backs it up with universal cultural assent.[12]

While this is significant progress in a system of morality, Wilkinson holds that all his preceding arguments are unhelpful without moral imagination, which he claims is the key to moral outlook. He says most forms of moral failings stem from the failure to see a person as more than a label (race, age, financial status). This emphasis on moral imagination affects moral education, leading to a focus on growing the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives. It affects moral ontology as well. A proper morality begins with a proper understanding of the

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[11] Ibid., 411.

[12] Ibid., 412.

existence of others as people in the same way that the self is a person.[13] Wilkinson summarizes his moral theory in his statement that "It is on the basis of our thoughtful objectivity and creative inter-subjectivity that we find the only worthwhile ground of significant, experienced life."[14]

Having formed the basis of his metaphysics, morality, and ontology, Wilkinson solidifies his theory with his conception of goodness. He follows Davies in saying that God is not morally good but is goodness itself.[15] This is how he solves the Euthyphro dilemma. Rather than arbitrary decrees, moral absolutes become necessary corollaries of God's divine nature and attributes.

Given the relationship between God's nature and goodness, there are significant implications for humanity. To be fully human is to exist in the fullness that God intends for humanity. Therefore, to be fully human is to be good.[16]

Wilkinson closes with a critique of other systems of morality. First, situation ethics ignore the importance of reflection, the process by which humans think back on previous actions and form values. Wilkinson also challenges the vagueness of the terms 'situation' and 'welfare.' The very concept of situation

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[13] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 413.

[14] Ibid., 413.

[15] Ibid., 414.

[16] Ibid., 415.

ethics seems to be challenged by the fact that some actions (for instance, burning babies) are always wrong, whereas situation ethics holds that morality always depends upon the situation.

Now that the article has been summarized broadly, weaknesses in Wilkinson's argument will be discussed. Wilkinson brushes aside Divine Command Theory without much thought or argumentation, but perhaps it is not as easily defeated as he suggests. He poses a scenario: suppose God were to command some act which is considered immoral. He asserts that Divine Command Theory immediately crumbles. Upon examination of the literature, it seems that Wilkinson has erected a straw man of Divine Command Theory. Robert Adams espouses Divine Command Theory and addresses the very issue that Wilkinson poses. Adams includes in his theory the requirement that God's commands only be followed if He has the character of loving His human creatures.[17] It would appear that Wilkinson leaves out consideration of what the "Divine" adds to Divine Command Theory. Overall, Wilkinson's dismissal of Divine Command Theory is too hasty to offer a proper discussion of it as a moral theory.

One curious seeming inconsistency appears in Wilkinson's arguments concerning how humans are creatures of action. He says that value precedes human

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[17] David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls. *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*. (Oxford University Press, 2011. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), 114.

actions and that human action precedes thought about those actions.[18] However, Wilkinson seems to believe that reflection upon action is what leads to the formation of values. How can value precede action and also come after reflection upon past actions? It is unclear if this logical progression is truly his position or a mistake. Perhaps this seeming discrepancy comes from mere semantics and could be resolved, but Wilkinson's theory needs more clarification in this area.

The question could be raised whether Wilkinson's characterization of the type of good that God desires is correct. He stresses that goodness is concerned more with human fullness than mere rule-following.[19] If Wilkinson is right, there seems to be a disproportionately large number of rules in the Bible. Granted, he accounts for Old Testament laws as useful in the pursuit of the good, even if obedience to them is not goodness by itself. The question remains whether this is a satisfactory characterization of how goodness ought to be conceived. Wilkinson's consistent emphasis on humankind could be construed to deemphasize other goals of morality, including behavior in accordance with rules and the glorification of God.

Finally, does Wilkinson adequately do what he has set out to do? Given his moral system, is God necessary as lawgiver in order to have morality? He has

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[18] Wilkinson, "God, Goodness, Fact and Value," 411.

[19] Ibid., 416.

succeeded in solving the Euthyphro Dilemma. His approach to the is/ought gap seems successful. Beginning without any specific religious revelation, he has proceeded to give a basic metaphysic, ontology, and morality. Wilkinson puts humankind at the focus of his theory, centering his primary moral command around humanity. Humans act, reflect, and create values based on this process. In doing so, the is/ought gap is successfully bridged. Wilkinson has succeeded in providing a system of morality which does not rest upon God or divine revelation but allows for His existence. Wilkinson's position is philosophically tenable. It succeeds in grounding morality without traditional recourse to God as lawgiver, and starts and ends with mankind, giving space for God to be the goodness and fullness that mankind properly imitates in pursuing right action.

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