

# MORALITY AND RELIGION: I

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Anna Kalypsas: a philosopher and teacher  
Mel Etitis: one of her best students  
Kathy Merinos: a student of more average ability  
Theo Logos: a religious believer with philosophical interests

*(A sunny town square somewhere in the Peloponnese. Anna Kalypsas and Mel Etitis are standing, holding open books; Kathy Merinos is watching and listening to them, also with an open book in front of her. Theo Logos appears and spots them. He stops to listen.)*

Mel: “Very well, then; what is agreeable to the gods is pious, and what is disagreeable to them impious.”

Anna: “An excellent answer, Euthyphro, and in just the form I wanted. Whether it is true I don’t know yet; but no doubt you will go on to make it clear to me that your statement is correct.”

Mel: “Certainly.”

Anna: “Come along then; let’s consider what we are saying.”

*(She notices Theo standing watching, and lowers her book.)*

Theo! Come and join us!

*(Theo walks over and sits at the table with Kathy; Anna and Mel sit down too, after Anna has signalled a waiter for an extra cup of coffee.)*

Theo: Good morning to you all! Are you rehearsing a play?

Kathy: No — we’re reading Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. It brings it so much more alive when we read it like a play. Do you know it, Dr Logos?

Theo: Why, yes. We read it when I was a student; in fact, there’s a tradition in my family that Plato was an ancestor of ours, so I was especially interested. I’ve forgotten most of it, I’m afraid — we concentrated on the *Republic* at College. Have you got far?

Kathy: No, we’ve only just begun. Anna was reading Socrates’ part, and Mel was reading Euthyphro’s.

Mel: Euthyphro has just given his opinion that “what is agreeable to the gods is pious, and what is disagreeable to them impious.” I expect that Socrates is about to tear his opinion apart.

Anna: In a way; in fact Socrates is about to point out that Euthyphro’s definition is fundamentally ambiguous.

Theo: But why do you find this interesting? You don’t even believe in *one* god, Anna, never mind all the ancient gods. And why should you care about definitions of *piety*?

Anna: Well, it's true that we're not interested in piety — but the arguments work just as well if we insert 'morally good' in place of 'pious', and I certainly am interested in morality, as you know. And we can replace Plato's gods with just one god, your own Christian god, if you like. Then we get a rather disturbing dilemma for someone like you.

Theo: I know that I should remember all this from my College days, but my mind is a blank. Remind me Anna, what is the problem? So far we just seem to have: "what is agreeable to god is morally good, and what is disagreeable to him is morally bad." What ambiguity do you and Plato find in that?

Anna: Well, the question is this: are we saying that what is good is good because god approves of it, or that god approves of it because it's good?

Theo: I suppose that I am getting myself into deep waters here — you have that look about you that should warn me off. But all right, I suppose that I have to take the risk. It seems to me, off the top of my head anyway, that god's laws — for example, the Ten Commandments — are good, and that that is why god gave them to us. Now, enlighten us... what arguments does Plato have against me?

Anna: Actually Plato agrees with you that that's the better choice.

Theo: Ah — but you said that there was a problem, so I suppose that that cannot be the end of things. It is never that easy.

Anna: True enough. Mind you, I'm not claiming that there's a deep problem in the sense that religious belief in general is threatened. It's just that both of the choices have worrying implications for religious believers. And even then, only for believers of certain kinds of religion (though that includes yours, Theo). Anyway, let's start with your choice.

As a Christian, Theo, I assume you believe that your god is the supreme being, and specifically that he created everything — not only everything in space and time, but even space and time themselves. (*Theo nods.*) But if he gives us his commandments because they're good, then goodness lies outside him; he hasn't created goodness, he's simply gone along with it. In other words, it turns out that the moral law is something independent of god, and that he obeys it, or is bound by it, or is to be judged by it, just as we are.

Mel: That seems to mean that we don't really need god for morality. He turns out to be at best a sort of teacher or guide, which is what I thought human beings like saints or priests were supposed to be capable of being.

Theo: No Mel, even if Anna were right, you would be jumping too far; I could argue that human saints are only teachers and guides through the power of god. Thus if morality exists independently of god, it could easily be that we still need him... that we are unable to discover moral truths for ourselves. But I admit that I do not like the idea. Apart from

anything else, given that god created us, we should have to ask why he created beings lacking the ability to be moral without his help.

But let me think Anna's suggestion through, just to see if the basic idea is acceptable — even if I have to reject it in the end.

Anna: Take your time Theo; feel free to think out loud.

Theo: Well... I suppose that I can see the point; it does seem that god's basic relationship with morality turns out to be the same as ours. Except, of course, that he is always morally good and we are not. But even if I accept that (and I do not, yet), it certainly does not follow that god *obeys* the moral law. *We* have to obey, because we are neither perfectly good nor perfectly knowledgeable — but god's actions are always in accordance with the moral law because that is his nature. It is like two perfectly made clocks, set to the same time, and wound up; they always tell the same time, but neither is obeying the other.

Anna: Yes, I see what you mean (and your example's oddly familiar) — but things can't be that simple. For a start, we have to ask what we mean when we say that someone is good; if there's a big difference between saying that a human being is good and saying that god is good, then I'd need you to show me that the word 'good' means the same in both cases. If it doesn't, then you might be *saying* 'god is good', but you're *meaning* something else. It's as if you're using the word 'good' as our ancestors used the wooden horse against Troy — appearing to offer a gift while in fact you're smuggling your warriors into the city.

If you want the technical term, it's 'the *Fallacy of Equivocation*'; that's when you use a word differently in different parts of your argument. For example, you'd probably agree that bachelors are unmarried men, but my mother is a Bachelor of Arts, so it seems that I can infer that she's an unmarried man! By switching the meaning of 'bachelor' in the middle, I made my inference invalid. Now, is that what you're doing with 'good'?

Theo: I think not; after all, when I say that this is a good knife, and that that is a good wine, I mean different things — but I am not committing a fallacy, surely? There is a central meaning there, which is relative to the sort of object with which we are concerned; one thing is good as a knife, the other is good as a wine. So when we say of a human being that he is good, we mean *good as a human being*... but that restriction does not apply to god; god is not good as some particular thing, he is just good as a being — he is good, full stop.

Mel: There's something odd there, though, Dr Logos. If you're using 'good' to mean 'morally good', then why do you want to make it relative at all? I might say of Anna that she's a good philosopher, and that means that she's *good as a philosopher* — but if I say that she's good in the moral sense, then at most I mean that she's *good as a moral being*. So if god

is a moral being, than there's no room for the sort of distinction you're trying to draw between him and human beings. I mean, 'good' must mean the same in all cases, mustn't it? Otherwise we're back to Anna's point about equivocation.

Kathy: But Mel, don't we sometimes say that someone is good considering their background, or upbringing? 'Good' might not be relative to us as human beings, but perhaps it's relative to us as individuals.

Mel: Well, perhaps — but even in that sort of case, we surely mean that someone's good *despite* her handicaps, not good *as* a handicapped person. I doubt whether Dr Logos wants to say that human beings are good despite the handicaps we started with; after all, he thinks that god is responsible for creating us, so he'd be forced to say that we're good despite god!

Theo: Er, no, I should certainly not want to say that. Even leaving aside the question of Original Sin, it is true that god created us, but other people created our upbringing and backgrounds.

Mel: I'm afraid that that's not what I meant; on your account, Dr Logos, we're not only moral despite our individual backgrounds, but despite our nature as human beings. And that doesn't depend upon other people. Does that mean you have to resort to Original Sin after all?

Theo: Yes, I see your point. No, let us avoid Original Sin — it is not a doctrine about which I am entirely happy. Look, perhaps I do not need to take this line after all. Anna, do you remember that in one of our conversations you explained that omnipotence did not mean being able to do the logically impossible?

Anna: Of course — because there's no such thing as the logically impossible for an omnipotent being not to be able to do.

Theo: So the difference between god and us, in the moral sense, is that his goodness is logically necessary. I mean that it is logically impossible that god perform an evil action.

Anna: That's ingenious, Theo, but I'm not sure about it. What's the difference between saying that god is necessarily good and saying that god is morally constrained?

Theo: Well, in the former case it is a matter of his nature, his *essential* nature. It is not that god would like to be bad but is not allowed to be — it is that his nature is to be good.

Mel: I don't see how that solves your problem though, Dr Logos. You still have to say that 'good' means something different for god and for us. For us, it's praiseworthy to be good, because we might not have been good; for god there's no question of praiseworthiness, because that's just how he is. And god's essence is still being defined in terms of something outside him — in terms of some independent concept of morality.

Theo: I fail to see why god cannot be accounted praiseworthy simply because his goodness flows from his nature. Surely we should praise him precisely for having that nature.

Mel: Yes, I see what you mean. Still, my second point stands: what's the status of morality if it's independent of god's will?

Kathy: Um, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I don't understand something. Why exactly is it that Dr Logos can't accept the first horn of Plato's dilemma? He seems to be faced with a tremendous problem arguing that god commands whatever is moral; why can't he say that morality is whatever god commands? In fact I thought that that was the usual Christian position.

Theo: I did not say that I *could not* accept the first position, only that the second was the one that seemed right to me, off the top of my head. To be honest, I do not see what is supposed to be wrong with the idea that god created morality, just as he created everything else.

Anna: OK, bearing in mind that the second horn of the dilemma is more problematic than it might have seemed – even if you're not convinced that it's ruled out – let's put it aside for the moment and look at that first horn. I think, in fact, that it presents even greater problems than the second. Let's start with a problem that has a well-known philosophical label. Have you come across the *Naturalistic Fallacy*?

(Mel nods, Kathy shakes her head, and Theo makes a gesture that conveys that he probably has come across the term, but isn't sure.)

Anna: Well, if you give an argument that has purely factual premises, but which has values or judgements in its conclusion, then you've committed the Naturalistic Fallacy. The same thing happens when you define a value, like *good*, in purely factual terms. It's sometimes called the fallacy of deriving an *ought* from an *is*.

Kathy: Why is it a fallacy?

Anna: Well, you could see it just as a particular version of an obvious fallacy; that is, you can't have something in the conclusion that isn't in the premises. After all, you wouldn't allow an argument like this:

All monkeys are mammals  
Koko is a monkey  
∴ Koko has a long tail

There was nothing in the premises about having a long tail, so how did it get into the conclusion? The same applies to values, or 'ought's; if they're in the conclusion of your argument, they should be somewhere in the premises.

Kathy: Oh, like John Stuart Mill, and his proof of utilitarianism?

Anna: Hmm, not really, I'm afraid. He was accused of committing the fallacy, but the accusation was based upon a rather careless reading of what he'd written. Still, you've got the basic idea of what the Naturalistic Fallacy is, and why it's a fallacy?

*(They all nod.)*

Anna: Now, the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma claims that goodness and badness are derived simply from whatever god commands. But that's to derive values from facts — so we have a clear case of the Naturalistic fallacy.

Theo: Surely, Anna, god's commands are not *natural* — they are *supernatural*.

Anna: True (at least, for the sake of argument — there's room for debate), but it's not naturalness in that sense that matters here. The point is that, for example, 'it's wrong to kill' is an evaluative statement, while 'god forbids us to kill' is a factual statement... it has no evaluative content.

Theo: But is there not something missing in that argument? That is, you have a premise: 'God forbids us to kill', and you have a conclusion: 'It is wrong to kill', but you surely need another premise — something like 'Whatever god commands is good, and whatever he forbids is evil'. Then you have the moral terms in one of the premises, so there is no fallacy.

Anna: Ah, but remember that we're rejecting the second horn of the dilemma for the moment, and assuming that 'good' just means 'whatever god commands' — but then: 'whatever god commands is good' turns out to mean: 'whatever god commands is whatever god commands'. Or, to put it another way, you've robbed the term 'good' of its evaluative content, and left it as nothing more than shorthand for a statement about what god commands.

Theo: But *god is good* — is that not where the evaluative content comes in? It is not like saying: 'Theo forbids you to kill', which would not tell you anything more about morality than would: 'Theo forbids you to sit in his favourite chair'. Because god is essentially good, then whatever he commands is essentially good too.

Mel: Sorry, Dr Logos, but I don't see how that would work. You're relying on the idea that 'good' means something apart from god's will — that's the second horn, not the one we're discussing now. Saying that god was good would mean something like: 'god always does what he commands, and never does what he forbids', and that just seems to make him consistent, not good. It certainly leaves 'good' meaning something different for god and for us — and whatever else you think of that, it leads to the Fallacy of Equivocation again.

But isn't there another route open to you, Dr Logos? Can't you say that what 'good' *means* is one thing, and what actually *is* and *isn't* good is another?

Anna: That's an interesting move, Mel. So Theo would have to say that the fact that, for example, killing is bad depends upon god's will, but the *meaning* of 'is bad' doesn't. Are you happy with that, Theo?

Theo: I am not sure, to be honest. How do you intend to distinguish between the two? Could you say what 'bad' meant without saying, or at least implying, what sorts of action were bad?

Anna: I see... you're saying that, once the meanings of moral terms are fixed, then the details of what's good and what's bad follow necessarily. So if the meanings of 'good' and 'bad' are independent of god's will, then he's hardly a moral *commander* — if he's essentially good, as you say that he is, then he doesn't have any choice as to what he tells us.

Theo: Well, how about this? Perhaps there are two kinds of moral principle: one kind is fixed, logically dependent upon the very meanings of 'good' and 'bad', and one kind is dependent upon other, non-moral facts. For example, there is a big difference between torture and nepotism. Torture is surely always and everywhere evil; that does not depend upon facts about how the world happens to be. Imagine, on the other hand, that I give a church contract to my nephew; that would only be wrong if I had promised my archbishop that I should be completely impartial in my choice of a contractor, and I knew that my nephew will not do the best job. God can command the latter kind of moral principle, but it makes no sense to say that he commands the former — how could he command what is logically necessary?

Kathy: Oh, do you have a nephew, Dr Logos?

Theo: No, Kathy — it was just an illustration. But you see what I mean.

Anna: Actually I'm not at all sure that I do, Theo. You say that your choice of a particular contractor would be a merely contingent evil, because it depends upon things like the fact that the contractor is your nephew, that he wouldn't do the best job, and the fact that you've promised to be impartial?

Theo: Precisely.

Anna: But isn't torture evil in just such a contingent sense? That is, it's only evil for me to apply electrodes to your tenderer extremities because you're the sort of being who can feel pain, and electricity causes pain. Neither of those things need have been true, and neither of them is a moral fact. So what's the real difference between the two cases?

Theo: But 'torture' just *means* causing pain — you cannot say that it is contingent upon the possibility of pain. That is what I mean when I say that it is necessary; it would be evil even in a world where it was physically impossible. After all, we can surely all think of kinds of action that are not in fact possible, but which would be evil if they were.

Anna: Now, be careful Theo. You've just explained to Kathy that you don't have a nephew, that your example of nepotism is hypothetical (indeed, physically impossible) — yet you're still able to say that nepotism is wrong for you. In other words, nepotism is just like torture, in that it would be immoral even in a world where it was impossible.

Mel: Isn't the distinction really between moral principles and specific occasions on which those principles are applied? And it's the same for all moral principles, isn't it?

Anna: Perhaps Theo's point can be salvaged — though I doubt that he'll find the result very helpful. There certainly seems to be a clear distinction between all the universal moral values and those which are specific to certain religions. So we might accept that god couldn't have decreed that torture be morally good — that's a logical impossibility — but he needn't have made the Sabbath day holy or forbidden graven images for Jews and Christians.

Theo: Hmm... you are right that such a distinction could not do what I need it to. I shall think further about all this, but I suspect that my distinction will in the end be of no help to me. Perhaps we should start from the other end of things.

Anna: Which end is that, Theo?

Theo: Well, I suppose that I am returning to the distinction that Mel drew between what 'good' means and what is good. As a philosopher, Anna, you are primarily interested in the former question, but the religious believer is primarily interested in the latter. Now, when Mel drew her distinction I suggested that the two parts were not really separable, but that is not quite true. I certainly doubt that one could say what 'good' means without describing the types of action that count as good — but one can surely say what types of action count as good without having to answer your philosophical question. And my answer is that it is good to obey god's commands. Now, what is wrong with that?

Anna: I can see two problems straight away. Mel, Kathy... what do you think?

Kathy: I don't think that it's fair to say that philosophers aren't interested in what is good. Dr Logos is portraying philosophy as just being about words and meanings, which isn't true at all.

Anna: Fair enough, Kathy — though perhaps Theo's only guilty of mild and rhetorical exaggeration. How about *philosophical* problems, though?

Mel: Well, Dr Logos, it seems to me that both parts of your claim are debatable. In so far as it's possible to say what 'good' means, I don't see why such an account should do more than *imply* that a certain set of actions count as good; it's not necessary actually to describe or to list all the types of good action. More importantly for your argument, though, it's surely not possible to say what counts as good unless you know what you mean by 'good'. Is that what you had in mind, Anna?

Anna: In fact I do accept both your points, Mel, but only the latter was one of *my* two worries. Yes, on Theo's view, only god knows what 'good' means — he tells us, and we have to trust him.

Theo: Of course we trust him, Anna; he is perfectly good, and would never deceive us.

Anna: But how do you judge that he's good? If you're going to make such a judgement then you need to know what goodness is. If you don't know what 'good' means, and only have god's commands to go on, then you seem to be back at the sort of circle that you faced earlier.

The other problem I saw, though, was rather different. Theo is claiming that 'it is bad to disobey god's commands' isn't a definition of 'bad' but only a description of those actions that are to count as bad. Now both of those claims seem more than a little odd to me, because they both seem to rule out a scale of goodness and badness. What I mean is this. Let's assume that god has commanded us not to murder or lie; if I disobey him, then my actions are morally wrong — but my wrongdoing doesn't lie in my having murdered and lied, only in my having disobeyed. So the murder and the lie are just as bad as each other, because they're both cases of disobeying god. In fact there's only one kind of wrongdoing, and that's disobeying god.

Theo: There are in fact Christians who would find nothing strange in such a position, but I confess that I cannot share their position; it seems to take us too far from our moral intuitions.

Mel: But is Dr Logos forced into that position? It seems to depend upon the assumption that god simply commands us to do one thing and not another. Couldn't he actually command that one type of action is very bad and another kind not so bad, one kind very good and another kind not so good, and so on?

Anna: Well now, that's a different sort of command, isn't it? We've been talking about god saying: 'Don't murder', but you're suggesting that he say: 'Murder is (very) wrong'. The former involves telling us directly not to do something, the latter doesn't.

Mel: Yes, I see that, but then can't Dr Logos say that god does the latter not the former?

Theo: A good point, Mel; moreover, rather than seeing god as issuing orders, it surely makes much more sense to see god as simply telling us what is right and wrong, so leaving us free to choose which path to follow.

Kathy: But surely god also tells us to be good and not bad, so doesn't it come to the same thing in the end?

Anna: We also seem to have lost sight of our starting point: what does 'morally wrong' *mean* when god says: 'murder is morally wrong'?

Theo: Oh Lord! I must admit, Anna, that I am beginning to get a little lost. Could we meet again tomorrow to continue with this discussion? I certainly do not want to leave matters here, but I really have to get back to my duties.

Anna: Of course, Theo; we'll see you tomorrow afternoon — say, about five at Manolis' café?  
*(Theo leaves them, and they in turn go their separate ways.)*

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### Some suggestions for further reading

- Paul Helm [ed.] — *Divine Commands and Morality* (O.U.P.; 1981)
- Gene Outka & John P. Reeder [edd] — *Religion and Morality* (Anchor; 1973)
- Plato — *Euthyphro* (any edition, really; the Penguin version can be found in *The Last Days of Socrates*)

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