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“Playing God” and Bioethics

“One should not play God” is said in serious public discussions concerning contemporary issues of bioethics such as cloning as well as in private clinical encounters, e.g., the common removal of a patient from a ventilator. Taken at face value, this statement asserts that there are certain acts reserved to God over which it would be wrong for humans to exert control. In what follows, I present a classic philosophical account of the relation between ethics and God.¹ To those familiar with the philosophical question concerning the relation between God and ethics more generally, my argument provides nothing new. Rather, it reminds one of what others have shown and applies insights -- going back to Plato² -- to bioethical matters.

In sum, I argue that most acts -- excluding those regarding God exclusively, such as blasphemy -- can be sufficiently although not entirely evaluated independently of reference to God. Thus, to evaluate most acts sufficiently, reference to God is not necessary. Also, given disputes about God’s existence, God’s nature, and about the appropriate role for beliefs about God in the public deliberations of a pluralistic society such as ours, claims relating God and bioethical issues ought to be avoided. Such claims do not resolve disagreement. For they increase rather than decrease disagreement by introducing a topic, namely, God, about which there is more profound disagreement than attends disputed bioethical matters. Moreover, such claims

¹For a nuanced theological account see *Authority in Morals*, Gerard J. Hughes, S.J., London: Heythrop, 1978.

²See *Euthyphro*, the dialogue from which the question relating the divine and the ethical is eponymously named ‘the Euthyphro question’.

lead others to reject the position associated with claims about God as having nothing to recommend itself but the claim concerning God. Thus, I make two claims: first, reference to God is not necessary in bioethical disputes; second, reference to God is not helpful in bioethical disputes. Before looking specifically at the relation between God and bioethics, let us attend to the more general framework relating God and ethics.

Dostoevski's Brothers Karamazov nicely illustrates the position that relates ethics and God. Throughout the book characters say things like: "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted" Although he is not the only character who says this, call this 'Ivan's thesis'. How are we to parse Ivan's thesis? One may categorize acts into: the permitted, which concerns what is ethically in the clear; the required, which concerns what is ethically necessary; and the prohibited, which concerns what is ethically forbidden. The permitted excludes the prohibited as its contrary and includes the required as a sub-category. How ought we interpret Ivan's thesis? Let us interpret it as requiring *only one change to reality*; namely, that God does not exist. That is, keep everything in existence, all physical and biological phenomena, geometrical truths, facts about human nature, and so on, and take God out of the picture. What ethical consequences does this have? Ivan says that if God were not to exist, then no acts would be prohibited or required: all would be permitted, even cannibalism.

If I were an atheist, Ivan's thesis would make me uneasy. More to the point, if I were an atheist, theists who believed Ivan's thesis would make me uneasy. Indeed, if I were an atheist surrounded by theists who thought that Ivan's thesis were true, I might try to reinforce their beliefs in God, for as one of the possible entrées were cannibalism permitted, I would rather have hungry mistaken theists than satiated atheists. Similarly, being a theist, if I believed Ivan's thesis,

and I knew any atheists who believed it, I would want to convince them that God does exist, if only to save my own skin.

Ivan's thesis rings false. For, he says that all ethical truths -- for example, that one ought not to kill and eat other human beings -- *proximately* depend on God. Although all ethical truths *ultimately* depend on God (like the truths of mathematics and physics), not all proximately depend upon God -- indeed, most do not. Thus, it is false to say that if God were not to exist then nothing would be prohibited. This is just as false as saying that if God were not to exist, the interior angles of a triangle would not equal two right angles, or that if God were not to exist, $2 + 2 \neq 4$. That is, if the only thing changed about reality is God's existence, there would still be ethical truths and these ethical truths would include truths about morally prohibited actions such as slavery and morally required actions such as caring for one's children or feeding the hungry. For example, if God were not to exist, one still must not kill and eat another human being because of what human beings are: agents having will and reason and the capacity to direct themselves to means and ends. This is as true as saying that, if God were not to exist the Pythagorean Theorem would still be true. Just as the Pythagorean theorem is true in itself, on its own, independently of its relation to God or to God's existence, so also, most ethical truths are true independently of God's existence or non-existence.

Why most? Some ethical truths do immediately and entirely depend on God. Judging the rightness or wrongness of such acts requires reference to God. Such acts directly concern our relationship to God: worshiping God, being grateful to God, seeking God's friendship, not blaspheming God, and so on. This class of acts concerns our relationship with God. To this extent, their evaluation does immediately and entirely depend on reference to God. My position,

which I will turn to shortly, is that most matters in bioethics do not depend proximately and entirely on God, because God is not the exclusive subject of the acts contemplated in bioethics. The thus far unexplained distinction between proximate and ultimate dependence requires elucidation.

Picture a nun teaching high school students geometry. The nun asks: “Why are the interior angles of a triangle equal to two right angles?” and an unprepared student responds, “because God made it that way, sister.” The student refers to an ultimate dependency -- one which the nun acknowledges. Nonetheless, the student receives no credit for such an answer. Nuns demand proximate causes. Characteristically, that upon which something ultimately depends will be that upon which many other things also depend while that upon which something proximately depends will not be that upon which many other things depend. Accordingly, answers referring to the proximate cause answer very few questions while answers referring to the ultimate cause answer a multitude of questions. “God wants it that way” and “God made it so” answer myriad questions; e.g., “why does it rain?” or “why ought we not kill and eat other humans?”³

Returning to the question relating God and ethics, if ethics proximately depended on something about God -- e.g., God’s will -- then in understanding why one ought not to do some act, such as enslave another, or in saying why one ought to do some act, such as pay one's bills, one would answer: Because God says so, or wants it. Call this a Divine Ethical Theory: according to it, an act is required or prohibited because of something exclusively about God.

³ This use of ‘proximate’ and ‘ultimate’ parallels Aristotle’s account of ‘middle term’ in the *Posterior Analytics*. When one demonstrates, one seeks the middle term closest to the conclusion at which one arrives; e.g., *Posterior Analytics*, Bk I, Ch. xiii, 78a22. Accordingly, when one offers ethical reasons, one offers proximate reasons -- the middle terms closest to the conclusion at which one arrives.

Of this theory, one asks two questions: first, Why does God like or dislike that act? Second, why should you do what God wants? The best answers to these questions show the falsity of Ivan's Thesis, and the error of talking about God in bioethics. For as we answer the two questions: Why does God want what God wants? and Why should I do what God wants?, we come to see the force of arguments against this view of ethics' relation to God. For if we ask what reason God has for what God does, there are two possible answers: for no reason at all, and for some reason. Both pose problems.

For if God has no reason for God's wants, one will desire to know why we ought to do what God wants if God has no reasons. In answer to this question, a proponent of this theory could tell us that we should do what God tells us to do, even though God has no reason for so wanting, because God is all-powerful and if we do not do what God wants, we will suffer the wrath of God. Yet, if the theorist takes this approach, then although it may be true that it is risky to disobey God, the theorist would be telling us that we should do what power dictates, simply because power dictates it. Few would find this an appealing view of ethics, or even a view of ethics at all.

Another possibility open to the theorist is more of an ethical reason, but it too shows the falsity of this account, for in answer to the question: why should we do what God tells us to do? the theorist might reply that we should do God's will because God loves us and wants what is good for us. Here, of course, we have an ethical reason for doing what God wants. For to say that we ought to do something because it is good for us, is to offer an ethical reason *par excellence*. Indeed, one of the most intelligible answers to the question "why should I do or refrain from that act?" is the response: "because it would be good or bad for you." So, if this is the answer to our

question of why we should do what God wants, then we have a reason. Yet, with this reason, we can put aside the fact that God wants us to do this act. For the reason relies not on the fact that God desires us to do this act; rather, it relies on the fact that this act is good and that is why God wants us to do it. So, solely the fact that God wants us to do some act cannot be the reason for our doing what is good. This holds true even if God makes things to be good. For, one might ask why is an act good or bad for us and legitimately respond that it is so because of the way God made us and that, ultimately, God causes the human good. Nonetheless, the good in such an ethics acts as a reason independently of reference to God.

Two other classically noted considerations militate against proximately and exclusively relating ethics and God. First, what one thinks God does, wants, or tells one to do partially depends on one's view of what is ethical. Therefore, what one thinks is ethical is independent of what one thinks about God. For example, a theist might say, as the writer of the book of Sirach does, "To no man does God command to sin." This only makes sense if sin exists in some way independently of what God commands. For example, the writer of Sirach could tell some cannibal that cannibalism is wrong, and if the cannibal said that "God told me to kill and eat this man," the author of Sirach can respond that it could not have been God who told him to kill and eat this man, for killing and eating other humans is wrong, and God does not tell one to do wrong.

Second, an ethical theory that reduced the ethical to what God wants would have great difficulty evaluating lying. For if one thought that lying were wrong because God said so, the question arises: how does one know that God told the truth? The answer would have to be something along the lines of: "God would never lie, because lying is wrong." The wrongness of

lying cannot be based solely on God's telling us not to lie.

What does this position imply for bioethics? First, if one thinks that some act is wrong because it would be an abrogation of God's role, or because it would go against something that God wants, one should ask oneself: why *proximately* is this so? and offer these reasons in the public square, for this is why those acts are in fact wrong, and not merely because of something about God. Yet, as noted earlier, certain ethical positions do depend upon God proximately; e.g., worshiping God, honoring God, not blaspheming, and so on. The ethical evaluations of such acts depend proximately and exclusively on God. What about in bioethics? Are there such acts? A few require consideration.

Classically, prohibitions of suicide refer to God. For example, Socrates and Aquinas argue that the wrongness of suicide can partially be understood as an offense against one's Maker or Creator. Similarly, one might argue that some cases of genetic manipulation offend God as Creator. Part of the wrongness of these acts is located in the proximate relation between the Creator and the created, but not all of it can be. For to locate all of the wrongness of some act the subject of which is not God in the relation to the Creator would be to evacuate that subject of value. While blasphemy or other acts concerning how we treat God can be wrong solely in terms of how we treat God as a subject, this is not the case in bioethical matters. For, bioethics evaluates the treatment of subjects other than God. Thus, while there are cases in which an act is right or wrong based entirely upon how it treats God, such cases will not occur in bioethics insofar as there is always some subject other than God, a zygote, an embryo, a mature human being, non-human animals, and so on, about whose treatment we debate. Since God is not the only one affected by the acts considered in bioethics, references to God are not necessary. This,

of course, does not mean that they are not true; I, for one, hold that they often are. Nonetheless, given the controversial character of the role of beliefs about God in our public deliberations, references to God are typically not helpful in bioethical disputes. For, in public debates, more disagreement attends beliefs about God and what role, if any, such beliefs ought to have in public policy than attends the disputed bioethical question. Accordingly, bringing such beliefs into the debate makes for more, rather than less disagreement. Moreover, it renders one's own position unnecessarily weak insofar as it may be dismissed as entirely religious and, as it were, ruled out of bounds by those who would exclude religious reasons from public discourse altogether. Of course, disputants in such matters should seek not agreement, but the truth. I have given reasons to hold that the truth in bioethical matters does not entirely depend proximately on God; therefore, it should not be presented as if it did.