

## REPLY TO JEFFREY STOUT

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I think Jeffrey Stout's criticism of me is a powerful one that deserves careful and attentive reading and reflection. With several rereadings I went back and forth concerning what I took to be the soundness of his carefully crafted arguments. I have come to the conclusion that he has in the last few pages an argument that I very well *may* not be able to satisfactorily answer. It may well be that Plato's Euthyphro argument and my contemporary critique of religious ethics rooted in my understanding of it leaves some forms of religious ethics intact. When I first read Stout's earlier careful critique of me in his *Ethics after Babel* I (1) responded that the crucial claims made in my *Ethics without God* could be made without appeals to foundationalist notions; and (2) showed (or at least thought I showed) that with his opting for a *modified* divine command theory he, like Robert Merrihew Adams, had changed the subject. Ockhamist divine command theory, one variety of mainstream Christian thinking concerning morality (natural law theory being the other), was thoroughly undermined by the Plato-type arguments against Euthyphro. I went further by arguing that the Platonic-type alternative offered no adequate shelter for theistic moralists. Far from an adequate ethics being dependent on religion, religion in a crucial respect, I argued, is dependent on morality. I am still so inclined and will articulate my rationale for that.

Stout in his present response to me, without addressing that directly, argues (1) that my argument in relying on Plato-style arguments against *Euthyphro* commits me to accept, if not foundationalism, at least an essentialism that, he argues, is very problematic indeed; and (2) that there is a deployment of divine commands which, even if taken counterfactually, would give us sound reasons, given certain assumptions which I assume for my divine command argument, that would provide good grounds for taking it that a religious

ethic rooted in divine commands would be superior to my purely secular ethic.

In setting out my critique of divine command theories I was far less concerned with *explanatory* reasons than *justificatory* reasons. It was with what Stout calls "epistemological issues" that I was concerned. I was less concerned with whether a religious ethics can be given a more plausible or coherent form than divine command theories with the claim of the modern Ockhamist divine command theorists (discussed in my *Ethics without God*) where on that Ockhamist account any secular ethics must be in a shambles, for, they claim, without God and his commands our moralities must be without objective grounds since it is only by unquestionably accepting the will of God and his commands that one can make sense of morality and of our lives and correctly orient ourselves in the world. It was with this claim that I was, and remain, centrally concerned. Natural law theories and modified divine command theories share too much in common with nonreligious moralities to provide the kind of thorough critique of secular morality that modern Ockhamist robust divine command theories both try and need to provide.

If Plato's Euthyphro argument is on the mark, nothing like that can be correctly or even coherently claimed. So it is not that I am claiming that no religious ethic (assuming that God exists) can be coherently articulated, but that robust divine command theorists cannot show us that divine commands provide *the* sole criterion (not just *a* criterion) that supposedly is not dependent on other moral or normative conceptions of what is right and wrong and what is obligatory so that ethics without God is at best a poor thing compared with any religious ethic at all. I am concerned here with robust divine command theories that claim that by attending solely to God's commands and not appealing to that "frail reed" that is our reason, we can have anything nonephemeral that is the source of our morality and enables us to make sense of our lives. It was this stark Ockhamist view of morality, and with this matter alone, that I was concerned with in critiquing divine command theory. In other places I have elucidated and assessed the quite differently based natural law theories.<sup>1</sup> When explicating and criticizing divine command theories it was the starkly based Ockhamist divine command theories with which I was concerned.

Given the assumptions I make for my divine commands argument, what I regard as challengeable by Stout is that he may have given us (pace what I claim) good reasons to believe that a religious ethics other than a robust divine command theory can be articulated that is superior to any secular ethics: precisely the opposite of what I want to establish.

Plato's argument in the *Euthyphro* is directed against the idea that what is pious is pious *simply because it is loved by the gods*, and my parallel argument is principally against the idea that what is good is good *simply because it is commanded by God*. Stout accepts these arguments put just like that. Reductive definitions or accounts fail here; we cannot correctly say that an act's goodness, rightness, or obligatoriness consists *simply* in its being loved, approved, willed,

or commanded by God. Being good cannot mean or consist in being willed or commanded by God. The open-question argument applies here. It is not a self-answering question to ask "It is commanded by God but is it something I ought to do?" This, unlike "He is a bachelor but is he unmarried?" is an intelligible question. "He ought to do *x*" and "He was commanded to do *x*" do not mean the same thing. They are not intentionally equivalent. Being commanded by God does not yield the essence (if there is such a thing) of what ought to be done or what is good or even desirable.

Stout has it, however, that this is not the end of the matter. Even if all such reductive accounts fail, as they at least seem to, has a core consideration of an ethical outlook, Stout has it, namely, an ethical outlook "in which what God loves, approves of, or commands is used as a standard for determining which acts are pious, good or right," been ruled out? If an essentialist definition of "good" fails to capture its essence (all the properties which are common to and distinctive of goodness), if no such definition can do so, as G. E. Moore argued, it is willed or commanded by God, could, as it is for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, still be a—not *the*—standard for being something we ought to do, a standard for being good or right. If the property of being commanded by God happens to correlate universally with acts that are good "then it should [while not being the essence of goodness] be able to serve as a practical standard for determining which acts are good." Being commanded by God can be a *reliable indicator* of what is good without being what "good" means or the essence of goodness. We can (pace Plato) use "commanded by God" as a reliable indicator without having a view about what the essence of goodness, rightness, oughtness, or obligatoriness is. Indeed we might take "commanded by God" as a reliable indicator while remaining thoroughly skeptical, as I am, as Richard Rorty is, and as W. V. O. Quine and Nelson Goodman were, of all essence talk.<sup>2</sup>

We should also keep in mind that something cannot become good *simply* by being commanded or willed, but that commanding it, as Stout claims, can in certain cases *create* goodness or a moral obligation. The latter does not say or imply "simply"; a command does not become good or obligatory even if it is from God simply because God commands it. But there do seem to be cases in which a fiat or command creates an obligation.

It is against the background of our religious practices—practices in which a believer engages—that God's commanding something creates an obligation. If you were not engaged in these religious practices, God's commanding certain things would not create an obligation for you to do these things. Indeed you probably would not *understand* what was being talked about. But if these are honestly your practices, practices you are committed to, it does. Your obligations here are practice relative. Believers engaging in these religious practices figure out or ascertain what they ought to do by figuring out or ascertaining what God requires. Our religious practices tell us something about what God is like. A being who commanded us to torture an innocent child just for the fun of it could not be God. Our religious consciousness does not allow us to take such

an anthropomorphic being—and a cruel one at that—as God. The scriptures here must have some nonliteral meaning if they are to have any attunement to our religious sensibilities or to our reason. What commands can be God's commands are constrained by the religious person's practices. Being commanded by God *partly* explains why an act must be done. It also, for a religious person, or more accurately for Jews, Christians, or Muslims, *justifies* what must be done. Why such theists have the obligations they have is determined (explanatorily and justificatorily) not by what is commanded or simply by being commanded but by *what* God commands and we by engaging in and well understanding religious practices come to have some inkling of what God is like and therefore of what (given our understanding) he *could* command and still be God.

The modern theologians—Emil Brunner, for example—whom I cast as latter-day Euthyphros—are telling us what morally speaking we *must*—categorically *must*—do. They are not in the business of showing what are the reliable indicators of what should be our actions and attitudes. There is, they have it, no acceptable alternative to relying simply on what God commands. We are not to set our minds to an appraisal of what God commands. Not only the theist, they claim, but anyone else who would avoid sickness unto death, who would avoid stark moral nihilism, or, put more moderately, who would avoid doing wrong must do what God commands no matter what his reflection reveals. There is no alternative. Such a theologian would have little truck with a practice-relative ethic. We are not, he has it, to use our own moral sensibilities—we are too irredeemably sinful for that—to decide what God commands or whether to obey his commands. In trying to justify our moral beliefs, whether we are theists or not, in trying to ascertain what we must do, the buck stops, for Brunner, with what is commanded by God. It is simply that he commands it that justifies our obedience. It is irrelevant what our moral reflection yields. I have tried to give grounds for resisting that. I do not see how or that I have constructed a straw man.

Sticking with explanatory considerations, Stout is perfectly right in claiming that if the perfect God of the monotheistic traditions exists, and we have epistemic access to his commands (certainly to assume a lot), then it would only make sense to consult those commands when deciding what to do, thus treating them as *a* kind of standard or criterion—a reliable indicator—of acceptable or right conduct. We would with that “epistemic access” have a cognitive grasp of what we must do that no secular moralist could have. If, by using this criterion—one among many—we place ourselves in a position to know more than we could otherwise know about our actual obligations, then there would be a strong sense in which that criterion would be crucial for there being a more adequate moral view. This, Stout thinks, is among the main things monotheists have in mind when claiming that “morality essentially involves religious belief.”

Stout thinks not only that monotheists think that, but that they *rightly* think that, given the assumptions of the Euthyphro account. In my essays on

divine command theory I assume (but only for the sake of that argument) that God exists and that we can know that he exists and that he has the nature that reasonably Orthodox Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe he has. He is the creator and providential sustainer and orderer of the world; he is perfectly omnipotent, omniscient, and loves his creation; he is perfectly good. Even so, I claim, we cannot fundamentally (not foundationally) ground morality in religion or base ethics solely on belief in God. Moreover, I claim, an objectively articulated purely secular ethic is superior to any religious ethic. Stout argues that this is not so. Remember that for the theist if God commands it, it is a reliable indicator that that same thing ought to be done and indeed is a reliable indicator of what *must* be done; it is a reliable indicator of what is good, right, and even obligatory. Without committing herself to a foundationalism or even to an essentialism, a religious moralist can respond, Stout has it, effectively to my way of arguing. Being fundamental in a foundationalist sense or even in an essentialist sense, Stout argues, is not the only way a knowledge of divine commands can figure indispensably into the most adequate moral view. Stout puts his argument thusly:

Let us assume that the adequacy of a moral view is a function of both the correctness of the judgments it includes and the range of important normative questions for which those judgments supply answers. Now, if God exists, and issues commands that provide us with the otherwise unattainable information about *what* our obligations are, then relying on knowledge of divine commands might well be essential to expanding the range of important normative questions we are capable of answering correctly. Hence, adding this theological component to an otherwise maximally adequate moral view would improve its adequacy. In that case, the most adequate moral view would essentially involve reliance on divine commands as a criterion. . . . Expanding the range of important normative questions we are capable of answering would, presumably, enrich our reservoir of justified judgments about what is good or right.

We know, as we have seen, that if God exists, issues commands, and has the nature the reasonably orthodox take him to have—something we are assuming for the argument—then God's commands are reliable indicators of good, coming from a perfectly good and omniscient being and from an all-powerful being. Knowing he makes such commands yields additional moral knowledge in a way no secular ethics can do. So with this enriched moral knowledge a religious morality, so the claim goes, provides an ethics superior to any secular one. It yields additional moral knowledge that no secular morality can.<sup>3</sup>

When I first read Stout's comments I thought, "Well, he, given his quite appropriately limited aims, is right about divine command ethics and I am wrong. End of story." But after several rereadings and ponderings I am less sure. Let me try to say briefly why. God's commands can only be reliable indicators of what we ought to do if God is good and *we can know this or reliably*

*believe it independently of having any religious practices or religious beliefs.* Jewish, Christian, and Islamic discourses not only tell us that God is good, but tell us that God is the perfect and supreme good. How do we even *understand* them, and assuming we understand them, how do we know they are true or even have reason to believe they are true? We, it might be said, know it from knowing the power and convincingness of the scriptures: from the very compellingness of its message. But it is by our own judgment, our (in a broad sense) moral understanding and moral sensibilities, that we are enabled to so view the scriptures and to so view God. It is not morality that is based on religion, but religion that is based on morality. Without a moral understanding independent of religion we could have no religious understanding at all. Without an *appreciation* that God is good and indeed is not only good but perfectly good and superlatively worthy of worship, we would have no moral reason for believing or accepting our religious practices, for playing those language games. But how do we understand "God" and the "perfect good" and "superlatively worthy of worship" without some logically *antecedent* understanding of "good"? His commands are to be obeyed or even taken to be reliable indicators of the goodness of his commands only if we already know, or have reason to believe, not only that God is good but that he is the supreme and the perfect good. God's commands can enhance our moral repertoire only if we have a nonreligious moral understanding that what God commands at least *prima facie* ought to be done because we know or have a good reason to believe that God is the Supreme Good. But this requires an independent understanding of such normative terms as "good," "perfect," "superlatively," "worthy," and "supreme."<sup>4</sup> (That is, it requires a non-religiously determined understanding of both thin and thick moral concepts.)

To be relevant, they must be *justified* in starting there. And to be that they must at least understand the meaning of "God is good" and to understand that is to have an understanding of "good" that is independent of any belief or disbelief in God. It is not just that there are uses of "good" (even moral uses) that have nothing to do with religion—of course there are—but rather that religious belief is incoherent without an understanding of "God is good" that is *not* religiously mediated. And the very *judgment* that God is good is dependent on that understanding. That is why I say religion is based on (rooted in) ethics rather than the other way around.

That God is the Supreme Good, that God's will must be obeyed, that God is the perfect good, that God is good, are all, in Wittgenstein's sense, grammatical remarks in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic language games. But why should we play these language games, or, more fundamentally, how can we have an understanding of the words and thus of the world embedded in these language games? Many people, including people brought up in a Jewish-Christian-Islamic culture, don't. Reasons and explanations—or so I say—need to be given here.

We should play these language games, it is said, because there is a being supremely worthy of worship that we call "God." But we could know this or

reasonably believe this (if indeed we can do either of these things) only by our own moral insight or at least our own moral understanding. We need to have an understanding of "good" in order to understand "worthy of worship." *Theologically based moral understanding is at least partially dependent on a logically independent moral understanding.* In this very fundamental yet still nonfoundationalist and nonessentialist way no religious ethics is left standing after Plato's Euthyphro argument. Religious moralities are not *freestanding* moral views.

We need not maintain that the divine command theorist must be claiming that we need to appeal to divine commands before making *any* judgment about what is right and good. But what I am claiming is that in appealing to divine commands we must appeal to completely nontheological moral judgments on which divine commands are based—or, if "on which they are based" sounds too foundationalist, say instead "on which we rely." (It might be said, "So we must appeal but must God?" Of course not, but an ethic relevant to us might be what we could appeal to.) God commands us, say, not to divorce. How do we know we ought to obey his command, that it is a reliable indicator of what we ought to do? We know that, some will say, because we know—knowing something about what God is like—that he is the perfect good and the supreme good and that commands coming from somebody who is the supreme good ought to be obeyed. But how do we know such things or even reasonably believe them? Don't we have to have some at least minimal understanding of "good," "worthy," or "desirable" to even understand "God"? And does that not give us some capacity to judge?

I should not be misunderstood here. Here my argument does not depend on denying or even doubting the existence of God or the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic characterizations of him. Neither I nor Stout are theists, but we agree, as did the disputants in the *Euthyphro*, for the sake of the discussion at hand, not to raise the question of the existence of God or how he is to be characterized. I think I have shown that relying on the commands of God (assuming he exists) involves in turn relying on a purely secular or a purely nonreligious moral judgment that God, assuming there is one, is perfect goodness and that therefore his commands should be obeyed. But to do that we have to rely on a non-theologically based nonreligious judgment that God is good. We must, to be able to do that, be able to judge without theology or religion that something is good and perhaps even morally good. And only with that capacity can we go on to say with understanding he is the perfect and supreme good, or even that he is good. To even understand what "God" means in Jewish-Christian-Islamic discourses we must understand what "good" and the "supreme good" means. That is logically and conceptually prior to even being able to believe or disbelieve in God or to be able to take his existence on trust. If we do not or cannot avail ourselves of this logically prior moral understanding we cannot even understand what it is to take belief in God on trust.

One further and quite different story now, a story concerning Stout's little sermon at the end of his essay in praise of the critical spirit—something to

which I, and perhaps all of us, would say "Amen." Something, that is, I am completely in agreement about with Stout, though I fail to see—perhaps because I am blinded—why it should be directed at me. We have seen that "God commands it" for a religious person is a standard, though not *the* standard for being so engaged. We should, Stout has it, allow for carefully examined beliefs about what God commands or directs us to do and to take notice of how they could enter into our practical reasoning. Well, we should give them space for entry, but we may conclude that they conflict with so much that we have in wide reflective equilibrium that we must set these religious beliefs aside.<sup>5</sup> Only *insofar as they survive the process of critical reflection*, Stout has it, should they be treated as beliefs we are entitled to hold and to act on. Well, again, "Amen" to this. So, Martin Luther to the contrary notwithstanding, the critical spirit overrides what religion requires. Something both Stout and I agree about. But a William of Ockham or a Søren Kierkegaard or a Karl Barth might respond, what religion requires needs no backup or endorsement from the critical spirit, from what careful reflection tells us to do. Vis-à-vis this reflection bit, remember Luther's remark that reason is a whore and that there is no greater enemy of grace than the ethics of Aristotle. *Perhaps* reflective endorsement, something we children of the Enlightenment deeply rely on and cherish, is not the final appeal? Stout, however, seems to make such a Socratic critical spirit the judge of what is to be accepted. That's fine, but this seems to make *us*, not *God*, the final court of appeal. Many, perhaps most, religious people would find that to be an affront. They would say, "Who are we to judge God?" But is there any way of avoiding this except by either crucifying our intellect or by not taking anything to be the final court of appeal (the last word)? I would certainly opt for the latter and I suspect Stout would too. We should all be so fallibilistic now. We can, of course, rhetorically say, "Who is man to judge God?" We must, some will reply, if we are not to be utterly lost, hold on to the *authority* of God and not foolishly set our intellects or will against his. As Alvin Plantinga puts it, compared to God we are cognitively deficient. Still, what can *we* do but use our own honest and informed reflective understanding and sensibilities to try to assure that any claimed authority is (or indeed even can be) authoritative for us? What can we do here—frail reeds though we be, cognitively deficient compared to God through we be—except to use our own reflective sensibilities or our gut reactions or some combination of both? We can proclaim that what determines things here is God and his grace, but is there any ascertaining whether it is God's word or anything like that except by what people carefully, informedly, and honestly reflectively endorse relying on both their hearts and their heads even though *sometimes* these capacities pull in opposing directions? There is no logical possibility—no matter what Luther, Kierkegaard, or Barth might wish—of bypassing the critical spirit here. But that is what Plato's character Euthyphro tries to do and what Plato rebuts and that is what the robust divine command theorists try to do and they fail.<sup>6</sup>



## NOTES

1. See my *Ethics without God*, rev. ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), pp. 7–50. Also my *God and the Grounding of Morality* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991), pp. 41–99. This is my response to Stout's n.10 in his "Socrates, Euthyphro, and Nielsen" in this volume. Yes, William of Ockham rather than Aquinas is the more plausible candidate to play the role of Euthyphro in medieval theology. Aquinas is not such a theorist. I have made quite different criticisms of Aquinas and modern Thomistic defenders of the so-called natural law. But the Ockhamist strand of modern theology is one major strand and presents the most stark rejection of any virtue in a secular ethics and a secularly grounded appeal to reason.

2. Antiessentialism is succinctly and very clearly expressed by Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 47–71.

3. For a contrast see my *Naturalism and Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), pp. 56–76.

4. Stout could at least plausibly respond that I am changing the assumptions of the Socrates/Euthyphro type argument here. The assumption was by both conversational partners that they were not to question, for the sake of argument, that God exists and has the properties that he conventionally is said to have. What is at issue is, given that such a God exists, whether we can determine what we are to do simply by knowing what he commands. Now to rebut that we can appeal to what I take to be the necessity of understanding certain religiously independent normative notions to even be able to understand the meaning of the concept of God. But for the sake of the argument we assume that we understand that. But in the dialectic we cannot do that for we cannot understand the use of "God" in the developed Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition without understanding these antecedent normative notions. That we are led to break some of the assumptions of the argument is determined by the way the dialectic goes.

5. I have discussed this in detail in my response to Nicholas Wolterstorff in this volume.

6. I remain ambivalent about my own argument here. It seems to be right but things continue to bother me within the text and in footnote 4. There is the generally metaphilosophical worry that my argument is too much *like* a "transcendental argument," something I have long eschewed. We can get nothing so decisive in philosophy or (perhaps formal contexts aside) anywhere else. But such metaphilosophical contexts aside, the constraints of Plato's *Euthyphro* argument require us to accept for the argument the existence of God, and that in turn presupposes that we can understand the meaning (use) of "God," "God is the perfect good," and "God is superlatively worthy of worship." But it is those things I think we cannot understand or at least cannot understand without an understanding of "good" that is *not* mediated by a religious understanding. But is this right? I think so. But I am not sure. I doubt if anyone can be sure, particularly if we clearly accept the constraints of Plato's argument. But my secularist and humanist readers need not think I am about to do an Antony Flew on them. I am just chafing at the constraints of Plato-type arguments. There are very good reasons for contesting the existence and coherence of God and for claiming the superiority of secular ethics over religious ethics. See the last two chapters of my *Naturalism without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996) for the latter considerations and as well and more particularly my *Naturalism and Religion*, pp. 56–76. And see the whole of these books for the first consideration.