

Heroical Apatheism: Lavelle's Dilemma

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Abstract

A common assumption is that the gods define what constitutes a purposeful life. Many followers of the gods are convinced that a purposeful life cannot exist without the gods to guarantee it; hence, denying the gods' importance is equivalent to acknowledging that life is unpurposeful. Lavelle's dilemma examines this consensus through the application of what is known as Euthyphro's dilemma. The supporters of the Lavelle Consensus face a powerful dilemma: either a purposeful life rests on the gods' arbitrary decisions, or the gods are not the originators of a purposeful life and life is therefore subject to an independent reality. Both horns of the dilemma compromise the need for the gods' existence or reduce them to dictators without any right to command. Lavelle's dilemma thus concerns itself with human beings' freedom and purpose in life. If powerful beings command human beings, then they are not free; if powerful beings dictate purpose in life, then it is *ipso facto* not human beings' purpose but their purpose. Thus, either an objective purposeful life exists, leaving science and philosophy to explain the content of this purpose, or a purposeful life is something all human beings are free to create themselves.

Keywords: Euthyphro's dilemma, heroical apatheism, purposeful life, Lavelle's dilemma.

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INTRODUCTION

The universe is truly amazing and beautiful. Its size and complexity are breathtaking, and one cannot help feeling privileged, important, and lucky to be a part of it all. Science and philosophy enrich us steadily with more and more knowledge about the workings of the universe, and they accomplish this without relying on hypothetical gods as an explanation. However, many people still repostulate the old claim that without the gods, not only is there nothing morally good or right but there can be no purposeful life.

More than 2400 years ago, the great philosopher Socrates was on his way to the Agora, the marketplace and civic centre for citizens in Athens. He was not heading there for trade or to spend his day in philosophical debate, as he usually did. Instead, Socrates was summoned on urgent business at Stoa Basileios—the Royal Stoa. He had been charged with disrespect for the gods, general immorality and corrupting the young people of the city [Plato, 1981].

Socrates meets an acquaintance, also on his way to the same office. This acquaintance is Euthyphro, who is bringing his own father to court for homicide; even though traditional Greek morality brands such an action as impiety, Euthyphro defends it based on the claim that he knows more about the nature of piety than those who blame him for this decision. In the ensuing debate between these two men, one of the most intriguing arguments ever deployed is put forward, “the Euthyphro dilemma”, which shows that even if the gods exist, contrary to popular opinion, they would play no objective role in how human beings decide what is moral and what is not.

Euthyphro's dilemma is the inspiration for a long sequence of philosophical reflections on definitions and foundations in metaethics. It poses a challenge to absolute moral standards given by the gods by examining whether what is morally good is just an arbitrary choice by the gods or whether moral properties have a greater, eternal foundation [Irwin, 2006].

Euthyphro's dilemma possesses a structure that can be formalized so that it can be applied to properties other than strictly moral ones. Hence, it can be applied to questioning the relations between purpose contents and hypothetical gods. As for moral properties, we likewise have a common assumption that life is purposeful only if there are gods to guarantee that purpose. In this article, I will discuss whether this common assumption is valid or whether purpose, like moral properties, can be said to either objectively exist independently of the gods or be something arbitrarily for which human beings themselves can decide the content of.

I must remark that most discussions in the philosophy of religion are influenced by what we in natural science call selection bias (severe selection bias, in fact) towards one or two specific religions and their gods. The literature contains an almost consequential consensus about speaking of deities in the singular. I will disregard this custom because I consider it a mistake. First, there is a basic understanding in the scientific field of comparative religion

that there are thousands of religions and, by extension, thousands of gods [Rudolph, 2000]. Thus, it is standard scientific practice to speak of gods in the plural. Second, the modern claim that different religions' gods are merely different interpretations of the same deity is blatantly a *non sequitur*. An application of elementary conceptual analysis to various existing religions shows that it is not possible to derive a single generic deity in light of the various religions' doctrines, and certainly not one upon which the different adherents can agree [von Hegner, 2016]. It follows that the most adequate way to speak from the perspective of comparative religion and proper philosophy of religion is to use the plural term.

A PURPOSEFUL LIFE

It is an often-heard claim that a purposeful life can exist only if the gods provide it. For a human existence to possess meaning is for it to have a purpose content that is commanded by the gods [Wielenberg, 2005]. One of the most common claims for the gods' importance is that only in deities can human beings find true and lasting happiness. The gods provide purpose to human existence, and loving such deities fulfils them as human beings (Nielsen, 1973). A more vulgar claim is that the gods are the creators of human beings, who thus have an obligation to please their benefactors. Because the gods are the creators of this world and in all likelihood have not ceded ownership of it, then the gods are also its owners, meaning that everything and everybody are their property (Swinburne, 1974). Thus, it is only by having faith in and pleasing the gods that human beings can find purpose in life.

This is a crucial issue to investigate more closely because for many people, the primary reason for embracing this claim is the assumption that only such hypothetical beings can guarantee the validity of a universal moral and, by implication, that only the validity of that universal moral provides ultimate purpose content for the life of human beings. That purpose content may not be identical with the commands of the gods, but to love the gods is the reason that human beings exist. If the gods do not exist, then there is nothing that human beings are supposed to accomplish in life; no grand goal has been assigned to them. Based on this consensus, human beings need the gods to be fulfilled and joyful. This belief is similar to that expressed in the epigram attributed to Dostoyevsky: "Without God, everything is lawful" [Outka and Reeder, 1973]. Hence, many believe that purpose content does necessarily require the gods' commands and that this connection poses a problem for those who consider the gods to be irrelevant.

While from a rational or existential perspective, it appears strange indeed to live by a purpose commanded by others, from the perspective of the followers of the gods, it is justifiable because it fulfils their human nature and makes them profoundly happy.

The obvious *prima facie* reply to this is, as Nielsen noted, that we simply do not have any evidence for the existence of deities. Because of the lack of such evidence, or proof, the claim by followers of the gods that human nature is fulfilled only in relationship to deities is unjustified (Nielsen 1973). Unfortunately, from this line of reasoning, it *ipso facto* follows that if one day we do in fact possess evidence of the existence of the gods, either because a future super-advanced science demonstrates that they exist or because they show themselves to humankind, then it must follow that the gods provide purpose in life to human beings. Thus, a different reply is needed.

As a side note, human beings can live, have lived, and obviously do live purposeful lives independent of belief in hypothetical gods. Religious belief is not necessary for having a purposeful life. Some religions such as Buddhism and Daoism (Gethin, 1998; Fasching and de Chant, 2001) do not even require gods to exercise moral properties and purpose contents.

It is an often-expressed thought in science that the deepest and most elegant equations possess beauty and can express profound insight with few symbols. Thus, Paul Dirac once stated, "It seems that if one is working from the point of view of getting beauty in one's equations, and if one has really a sound insight, one is on a sure line of progress" [Dirac, 1963]. In philosophy, we can likewise throughout history also find short remarks expressing great depth and insight. Euthyphro's dilemma is precisely one such sentence. In this dilemma, the gods and moral properties are conceptually distinct, and moral properties are ontologically independent of the gods. The dilemma has throughout history, oddly enough, mostly been viewed as a problem.

However, one person's vice is often another's virtue. For many modern philosophers, the idea that moral propositions' truth value and ontological status are independent of the gods is reasonable. In addition, indeed, for human beings grounded in democracy and ideals of freedom, it is a denigration to dignity and autonomy to be ruled by the commands of dictators, even those designated gods [von Hegner, 2016].

Plato presented one of the most intriguing arguments ever devised to demonstrate that even if the gods existed, and contrary to long-held assumptions, they would have no role in how human beings decide what is morally good.

The point of view that a purposeful life is possible only if the gods give it, or if the gods exist, I will, for reasons given later, designate the Lavelle Consensus.

EUTHYPHRO'S DILEMMA

The Euthyphro dilemma is named after Plato's Euthyphro dialogue, which details the inspiration for the argument. The dialogue describes Socrates on his way to the Agora, where he has been summoned on important business at Stoa Basileios—the Royal Stoa [Plato, 1981].

Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father for having committed an unintentional homicide, which Euthyphro does to avoid the religious pollution that might fall upon him due to his connection with the killer.

Euthyphro justifies this action on the grounds that the gods themselves behave in the same manner, according to the traditional tales. Socrates replies that he does not trust these tales because they imply immorality to the gods. Euthyphro soon finds himself dragged into a sophisticated philosophical discussion with Socrates regarding the pious.

Euthyphro suggests that the pious is the same as that which is loved by the gods. However, Socrates objects to this suggestion, since the gods may disagree among themselves. Euthyphro then modifies his suggestion, saying that the pious is only that which is collectively loved by all the gods. Socrates then puts forward the dilemma "Do the gods love the pious because it is the pious, or is the pious pious only because it is loved by the gods?" [Plato, 1981].

The first horn means that the pious, the good or the right, is neither explained nor constituted by the gods loving it or approving it or commanding it. This circumvents supposed problems such as arbitrariness and autonomy. However, this leads to the conclusion, Socrates says, that we must reject the second horn: the fact that the gods love something does not explain why the pious is the pious. Thus, the dilemma discerns the pious, the good or the right because of its intrinsic excellence. However, it discerns not the very nature of the pious but at most only a quality of the pious [Wainwright, 2005].

The remarkable outcome of Euthyphro's dilemma, then, is that the followers of the gods, if they are truthful, must accept that either moral properties are arbitrary or the gods, even if they exist, play no essential part in them. This conclusion has had a profound effect on the philosophy of religion, but in an updated form: "Is what is morally good commanded by the gods because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by the gods?" The continuing prominence of the dilemma in philosophy demonstrates the depth and importance of the questions raised by the argument [Irwin, 2006].

The first horn of Euthyphro's dilemma—"That which is morally good is commanded by the gods because it is morally good"—is the argument that there exist independent moral standards by which the gods themselves abide. This argument, which we can designate the independence problem [Kretzmann, 1999], was accepted by Socrates and Euthyphro in the dialogue.

This horn represents a number of issues for some religions because if there are moral standards independent of the gods' commands, then there is *ipso facto* something over which the gods are not supreme. It implies that there are realities other than the gods that do not derive their being from them [Alston, 1990]. The gods' commands are issued because they are morally good, not vice versa. The gods conform to moral standards instead of being their creators. Moreover, the gods depend for their goodness on the extent to which they accommodate this independent moral standard [Irwin, 2006].

Moral properties are thus objective in this line of reasoning, and the commands of the gods constitute a reliable measure of what is morally good or right. As stated by Price, "It may seem that this is setting up something distinct from God, which is independent of him, and equally eternal and necessary" [Price, 1769]. The source's truth is thus not a function of its primacy but a perfectly accurate indicator of the very content of morality itself.

Moral truths are independent of the gods' commands, and moral truths stand above the gods, in a manner of speaking, insofar as the gods are subject to these very truths [Murphy, 2012]. If there are moral standards independent of the gods, then what is morally right would retain its truth value even if the gods did not exist. This ultimately means that the gods are irrelevant to moral truths and that even moral absolutism is possible without the gods.

Hence, the first horn makes moral standards entirely objective and not dependent on any dubious dictatorship. It makes the good or the right independent of the gods' commands, thereby subjecting the gods to facts that are what they are irrespective of the gods [Alston, 1990], in accordance with an autonomy of ethics.

The second horn of Euthyphro's dilemma—"That which is morally good is morally good because it is commanded by the gods"—is the argument that something counts as morally good or right simply in virtue of its being commanded by the gods. There are no moral standards other than the gods' commands. This argument faces

three inherent problems: the contingency problem, the nonobjectivity problem, and the anything-goes problem [Murray and Rea, 2008].

The contingency problem implies that if moral properties depend on the free will of the gods, then moral properties are devoid of necessity. Thus, the idea that good actions are good because the gods love them implies making truths about goodness objectionably contingent [Murray and Rea, 2008]. Hence, anything, at any given time, could turn into good or bad. Statements such as “Honesty is good” would be contingent on how the gods feel about particular moral properties at a given time. D’Ailly stated that the gods do not “command good actions because they are good or prohibit evil ones because they are evil; but ... these are therefore good because they are commanded and evil because prohibited” [Wainwright, 2005].

The nonobjectivity problem casts doubt on the notion that moral standards are objective. If there is no moral standard other than the gods’ commands, then, rather counterintuitively for some, this means that moral standards are arbitrary. The gods’ commands are based on their particular mood from moment to moment [Murray and Rea, 2008]. If it is only a question of the gods’ powers, then the problem emerges that it is difficult to justify how objective moral actions can exist if human beings act only out of fear of the gods’ power or in an attempt to gain favour from them.

The anything-goes problem implies that we must agree that if the gods command human beings to do something that human beings currently consider to be morally wrong, such as genocide, then such an action becomes morally right [Murray and Rea, 2008]. This arbitrariness means that anything could become right and anything could become wrong simply upon the gods’ command. Perhaps the clearest historical example is stated by William of Ockham, who thought that if his god were to demand, say, cruelty for cruelty’s sake, then such actions would *ipso facto* be morally right, even obligatory. Thus, the gods create moral facts as a powerful king might create laws [Mawson, 2008].

LAVELLE’S DILEMMA

Euthyphro’s dilemma possesses a structure that can be formalized in such a way that it can illuminate other properties or contents than moral ones. Thus, it can be formulated as “That which is A is commanded by B because it is A, or, that which is A is A because it is commanded by B”.

In this section, I will formulate a different version of the question asked by Socrates that I will call Lavelle’s dilemma. It is named after Father Pierre Lavelle, a minor character from the novel *The Body* [Sapir, 1984]. For Lavelle, a purposeful life was guaranteed by the truth proposition of his specific religion. The central tenet of that religion is that its god once walked the earth as a man, was killed and was then resurrected. This resurrection acted as a type of guaranty that this god’s teachings and commands were valid. For Lavelle, a purposeful life was derived from this specific event in time and place.

The novel details the archaeological find of what appears to be the remains of Lavelle’s god. It describes the increasing accumulation of scientific evidence that it is indeed that god, which means that this god had been only a man, a historical person. If Lavelle’s god thus had not been resurrected, then everything else from that god, all its commands, would be arbitrary and not possess any truth for Lavelle. Hence, life would be unpurposeful.

The scenario in the novel is described in extremes. When Lavelle goes into the tomb to see the archaeological find, he has a purposeful life. When he exits the tomb, he has an unpurposeful life. In other words, Lavelle was immersed in the belief that if the gods did not exist, then there would be no purposeful life. The Lavelle Consensus states that a purposeful life exists only if purpose contents is commanded by the gods. Based on this statement, one can inquire, “Is a purposeful life commanded by the gods because life is purposeful, or is life purposeful because it is commanded by the gods?”

Each of these two horns leads to conclusions that the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus will find unsatisfactory. Lavelle’s dilemma can classically be formalized the following way:

- (1) If the Lavelle Consensus is true, then either (a) “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life”, or (b) “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”.
- (2) If (a) “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life, then “a purposeful life is purposeful independent of the gods’ commands”.
- (3) It is not the case that “a purposeful life is a purposeful life independent of the gods’ commands”. Therefore:
- (4) It is not the case that (a) “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life”.
- (5) If (b) “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”, then there is no reason to treat the gods as anything other than dictators.
- (6) There are reasons to treat the gods as anything other than dictators.

Therefore:

- (7) It is not the case that (b) “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”. Therefore:

(8) The Lavelle Consensus is false.

The first premise of the Lavelle dilemma offers two horns to the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus: either (a) “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life”, or (b) “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”. These two horns are intended to be logically exhaustive; thus, if the Lavelle Consensus is true, then one of the horns must be the case. The supporter of the Lavelle Consensus is thus forced to select one of the horns to affirm.

The second premise states the consequences of the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus affirming the first of the horns presented in premise (1), “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life”. It states that if the first horn is true, then “a purposeful life is a purposeful life independent of the gods’ commands”. This conclusion is supported by the argument here designated the virtue of independence.

The third premise denies that “a purposeful life is independent of the gods’ commands”. Naturally, the sceptic of the Lavelle Consensus does not think this premise to be true; the sceptic thinks that “a purposeful life is independent of the gods’ commands”. However, the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus are committed to accepting this conclusion because the Lavelle Consensus is the consensus that “a purposeful life is dependent on the gods’ commands”.

The first subconclusion, (4), is the rejection of the first horn presented to the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus in premise (1), “a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life”. That this horn is false follows from premises (2) and (3).

Premise (5) states the consequences of the Lavelle Consensus affirming the second of the horns presented to the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus in premise (1), “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”. It states that if this horn is true, then there is no reason to treat the gods as anything other than dictators. This conclusion is supported by what is here designated the dictators’ intrusion and the vacuity problem.

Premise (6) states that there is reason to treat the gods as anything other than dictators. This is once again used as a premise to which the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus are committed, rather than as a premise that the sceptic of the Lavelle Consensus thinks is true.

The second subconclusion, (7), is the rejection of the second horn presented to the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus in premise (1), “a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”. Subconclusion (7) follows from premises (5) and (6). Instead of the dictators’ intrusion and the vacuity problem, the virtue of choice can be applied to support it, if necessary.

Lastly, (8) concludes that the Lavelle Consensus is false. Premise (1) stated that if the Lavelle Consensus were true, then one of the two horns presented to the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus would also be true. However, the argument from (2) to (7) demonstrates that neither horn is true. Thus, we must infer that the Lavelle Consensus is false.

The first horn of Lavelle’s dilemma—“Is that which is a purposeful life commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life?”—is the argument that there are independent purpose contents, meaning that some actions are purposeful or unpurposeful in themselves, independent of hypothetical gods’ commands. A purposeful life stands above the gods in a manner of speaking, insofar as the gods are subject to such contents.

This is what for Euthyphro’s dilemma is designated the independence problem [Kretzmann, 1999], but for Lavelle’s dilemma, I designate it the virtue of independence, meaning that the first answer that the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus might give to Lavelle’s dilemma seems to entail the belief that a purposeful life holds independent of the gods’ commands.

If an independent purpose standard influences the gods’ commands rather than vice versa, purpose necessarily take on a status epistemically prior to and ontologically independent of the gods. This means that freedom from the gods fundamentally exists, insofar as purpose contents is derived from something else. Because hypothetical gods and purpose contents are conceptually distinct, and purpose contents is ontologically independent of the gods, then this implies that there are realities, such as moral properties, that do not derive their being from the gods’ power [Alston, 1990].

Supporters of the Lavelle Consensus disagree with this idea, instead asserting that a purposeful life is dependent upon the gods. If it is correct that the reply to Lavelle’s dilemma has this implication, then it follows that the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus cannot reply to Lavelle’s dilemma in this manner. The reason that the answer to Lavelle’s dilemma gives rise to the virtue of independence is that if a purposeful life is commanded by the gods because it is a purposeful life, then it seems that it must be a purposeful life prior to the gods’ commanding it; otherwise, the gods would not command it.

Thus, a purposeful life is independent of the gods’ will, thereby subjecting the gods to purpose contents that are what they are independent of the gods, like moral properties [Alston, 1990]. In this horn, purpose contents is

wholly objective and not dependent on any arbitrary commands from the gods. It thus exists in accordance with an autonomy of purpose.

One response to this can be that although the gods are no longer “purpose originators”, they can still be “purpose transmitters” and in that way continue to play a role in the foundations of a purposeful life as a type of law transmitter [Kretzmann, 1999]. The independent source’s truth content is not a function of its primacy but is an absolute precise indicator of the very content of purpose itself. However, it follows essentially from all this that *if* there is a purposeful life independent of the gods, then a purposeful life would be purposeful even if the gods did not exist. The gods’ function as a type of transmitter of purpose contents becomes what we call an unnecessary hypothesis. Thus, purpose contents truth value and ontological status are independent of the gods and, indeed, stand as independent and external criteria regardless of the gods’ existence or nonexistence. If purpose and truths exist at all, then some of these lie at the heart of reality itself, created by no one, under no one’s commands, almost analogous to, for example, gravity, affecting the actions and character of gods and humankind alike. Is this a restriction of freedom? Perhaps, but so, of course, is gravity.

If the gods exist, they thus appear to exist as citizens of the universe like the rest of us, regardless of their status in supposed categories such as contingent or necessary existence. This ontological independence feature is precisely the reason that most followers of the gods oppose this conclusion.

However, one person’s vice is often another’s virtue. The first horn leads to the conclusion that there is freedom for human beings in the sense that they are free of the tyranny of the gods. The gods’ existence or opinion regarding purpose contents are irrelevant; they can claim no more fundamental right than human beings to command purpose, and can certainly claim no obligation to be worshiped (whatever that obligation should be founded on anyway).

It is important to emphasize that this is not an atheistic or agnostic argument. The first horn states only that objective purpose contents exists independently of hypothetical gods. Thus, one can, as previously mentioned, believe that the gods are a type of transmitter of a purpose that is independent of them, or one can simply think that the gods do not have a purpose regarding purpose contents, and hence whether they exist or not is of no interest. Thus, this argument is a quintessential expression of an atheistic argument [von Hegner, 2016].

The second horn of Lavelle’s dilemma—“That which is a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods”—is the argument that there is no purposeful life other than what hypothetical gods command. Rather counterintuitively for some, this essentially means that purpose contents is abhorrent!

Just as for Euthyphro’s dilemma, we have the contingency problem [Murray and Rea, 2008], the claim that a purposeful life is purposeful because the gods command it, which make truths about purpose objectionably contingent. This claim implies that anything at any time could change a life from purposeful to unpurposeful, or vice versa, based simply upon the gods’ commands, that is, contingent on how the gods feel about a particular action at a given time. If the gods’ commands are abhorrent, then there is no reason to inquire into what they want. This idea is objectionable to anyone who thinks that claims about purpose contents are, if true, necessarily true.

The nonobjectivity problem questions the notion that purpose contents is objective. If there is no purposeful life other than the gods’ commands, then the gods’ commands are abhorrent. This means that the gods enforce their random opinions of what a purposeful life should be. This begs the question of why human beings should choose the gods’ opinions instead of their own. If purpose contents can be considered as expressions of the gods’ preferences, then why not simply focus on expressing the preferences of human beings instead? What is it about the gods that privileges their preferences so that what they consider purposeful or unpurposeful becomes purposeful or unpurposeful for everyone? It is not easy to point to any reason why one should privilege the gods’ preferences over human beings’. Thus, if a purposeful life depends on the free commands of the gods, a purposeful life would lose its necessity, meaning that no action is necessarily purposeful.

The anything-goes problem demonstrates that one must accept that if the gods want human beings to do something that they currently regard as unpurposeful, then that act becomes purposeful. The Lavelle Consensus appears to entail the claim that even abhorrent acts, such as, for example, the gods commanding that one must spend all one’s time worshiping them and avoid accomplishing anything in life, could be purposeful. It does not seem convincing that if the gods command such abhorrent acts, contradicting the wishes of human beings themselves, then such acts would have objective purpose contents. This problem therefore, *prima facie*, seems to show that the Lavelle Consensus is false.

These three problems are what, for Lavelle’s dilemma, I collectively designate the dictators’ intrusion, which illustrates the key point that the gods enforce their arbitrary opinions regarding what is a purposeful life through sheer power.

For the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus, this demonstration of the gods’ random and subjective commands is considered a problem, since it *ipso facto* renders the content of a purposeful life arbitrary. If the Lavelle

Consensus is true, then what is a purposeful life and what is an unpurposeful life depends on nothing more than the gods' mood.

However, for Lavelle's dilemma, I designate this problem the virtue of choice because it shows that if purpose contents is something one chooses or creates, then human beings are free to dictate for their lives the purpose contents they themselves desire. What right or ability do the gods possess to dictate to human beings what a purposeful life shall be? Apart from the gods' supposedly greater power and knowledge, nothing obligates human beings to prioritize their opinions of a purposeful life over what human beings consider a purposeful life.

If a purposeful life depends on what the gods command, then this begs the following question: How do the gods decide what to command? What could possibly inform their decision? If a purposeful life is founded on the gods' decision what to command, then the gods' decision regarding what to command cannot be informed by a purposeful life. For what is the source of human beings' obligation to conform to the gods' decision? Is it grounded in the gods' commands? This cannot be, for willing and commanding in themselves create no obligation. Hence, commands do not create obligation unless those commanding them yields some right to commanding.

However, where should that right come from? Do the gods have a right to command because they are gods? That argument is obviously circular. The authority to command cannot be derived from those very commands, or else a dictatorial vicious circle results [Cudworth, 1731]. Commanding creates obligations only where there is a prior obligation to conform. If a purposeful life is a purposeful life because it is commanded by the gods, then it must be commanded by the gods before it is a purposeful life. As Cudworth states regarding morality, "It is absurd to suppose that any one should make a positive law to require that others should be obliged, or bound to obey him for if they were obliged before, then this law would be in vain, and to no purpose" [Cudworth, 1731, pp. 17-20]. If there were any purpose contents before the gods decided what to command, and those contents influenced the gods' decision, then it follows that those contents would be independent of the gods' commands, which would bring us right back to the first horn. However, purpose contents cannot be independent of the gods' commands if the Lavelle Consensus is true.

This conclusion seems unsatisfactory for supporters of the Lavelle Consensus. If there is no purpose contents before the gods decide what to command, then it appears that the gods' commands can be neither enlightened nor validated by a purposeful life. The gods' will, the standard of a purposeful life, will itself be purposefully abhorrent, without any obvious right to will anything, hence leading to the dictators' intrusion. Compliance with this standard, then, despite what the Lavelle Consensus asserts, should therefore also be purposefully abhorrent. The Lavelle Consensus, however, holds exactly the opposite view.

To avoid this dictatorial vicious circle, the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus might suggest that human beings' obligation comes from gratitude to the gods for supposedly creating them [Swinburne, 1974]. This suggestion, however, does not avoid the dictators' intrusion, since it is basically a master-slave relationship in which human beings are the property of the gods, and a property over which the gods in principle can tyrannize as they please. It is a master-slave relationship with no justification except that one party possesses more power than the other. It follows that if the slave could achieve sufficient power to bring down the master and gain his freedom, then this would be a just and justifiable act.

However, the suggestion about gratitude presupposes a type of independent standard obligating human beings to be grateful to their creators. As Hutcheson writes, "Is the Reason exciting to concur with the Deity this, The Deity is our Benefactor? Then, what Reason excites to concur with Benefactors?" [Hutcheson, 1742]. However, there is *eo ipso* no relation between creation and gratitude, regardless of categories such as contingent or necessary existence. The gods commanding and demanding gratitude, submission and worship is along this line of thought based on power and no right. As Hobbes wrote, "The right of nature whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his laws, is to be derived, not from his creating them (as if he required obedience, as of gratitude for his benefits), but from his irresistible power" [Hood, 1964]. Thus, power somehow makes right.

It is the gods' power that underlies obligations, which fundamentally means that the gods are dictators or tyrants in the modern definition of these words [von Hegner, 2016]. Their commands are based on their power to enforce them, which once again leads directly to the dictators' intrusion. If might is not right, then the gods have no right to dictate to human beings their opinions of what is a purposeful life.

The second horn thus leads to the virtue of choice, meaning that human beings possess the freedom to make their own purpose, that purpose contents is what human beings make it. However, an important point is that human beings' freedom to do this is threatened in the sense that there might exist active gods who desire to dictate their opinion regarding what a purposeful life shall be. Such hypothetical gods are thus dictators, and human beings have every right to oppose or simply ignore such dictators.

Naturally, the supporters of the Lavelle Consensus could respond, regarding the intention of building one's own purpose in life independent of what the gods might think, that the gods do not care what human beings think

about them. They have the power to do what they want, regardless. The answer may be that if human beings one day, somehow, perhaps through the superadvanced technology of the future, gain more power than the gods, then they also have every right to overthrow or eliminate these gods in the same manner in which dictators have always been overthrown. The idea that might is right goes both ways. Is this possible? Well, it is a matter of faith, and faith, as the saying goes, is beyond reason.

Therefore, while Euthyphro's dilemma has been viewed as a problem to be solved to maintain the gods' rights to give commands, Lavelle's dilemma views it in a positive light. Purpose contents given by others is, regardless of the givers' knowledge and power, *ipso facto* only their purpose contents. Thus, a purposeful life is not given by the gods and has never been given by the gods.

It is important to emphasize that this is not an atheistic or agnostic argument. This horn says only that a purposeful life is not objectively given by the gods. One is free to think that the gods voluntarily, because of their supposedly greater power or knowledge, offer their advice regarding a purposeful life, or one may simply think that the gods do not have a function regarding purpose content and therefore that active gods are dictators who force their subjective opinions on other beings. Thus, this argument is a quintessential expression of heroic atheism [von Hegner, 2016].

One attempt to dissolve both horns of Euthyphro's dilemma has been made by resorting to the doctrine of divine simplicity, meaning that the trope of perfect goodness can simultaneously be the source of morality and yet also have application to itself [Oppy, 2006]. Hence, Aquinas took his god to be uniquely "being itself"; it is the god that is essentially goodness itself, and whatever that god commands regarding moral properties is identical with the god's nature [Kretzmann and Stump, 1988]. This attempt could supposedly be applied to the horns of Lavelle's dilemma as well, meaning that the gods do not command purpose contents; they are purpose. This is what I fittingly could call the vacuity problem, that the Lavelle Consensus through this attempt appears to entail the problem that the purpose claims (and moral claims) about the gods are empty tautologies.

The supporters of the Lavelle Consensus are committed to both the truth and the importance of this doctrine. It is because of this supposed truth and importance that the gods should be treated as anything other than dictators. It is the gods' very nature and hence no arbitrary command that constitutes the supreme standard of purpose; only things consonant with the gods' nature could be purpose or be good. Purpose supervenes, similar to goodness, on every feature of a god, not due to some general principles being true but just because they are features of that god [Alston, 1990]. To assert that the gods stand for purpose, then, would be to assert that the gods are as they will themselves to be, or, said differently, that the gods' commands give purpose contents equivalent to asserting that the gods' command what they want to command.

Thus, a god "judges by the objective criterion of perfect goodness which is himself" [Kretzmann, 1999, p. 426]. As Singer remarks, those who suggest this are "caught in a trap of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good? That God is approved of by God?" [Singer, 1993, p. 3]. Surely human beings can demand much more of moral properties or purpose contents than this, and that a god simply act as the god is inclined to act is hardly grounds for treating the gods as anything other than dictators.

In addition, this trope is usually put forward as if it is something by which to be impressed. However, is it? The only master whom the gods serve is their own essential nature. They cannot change. However, human beings all have choices—they make mistakes; they make wonderful things. They evolve, but the gods cannot. In that sense, human beings, unlike the gods, have a purpose in life.

That being said, the arbitrariness and vacuity appear to still be present. Hence, why should sceptics be convinced by the pair of claims that morality is absolute and objective and that morality is absolute and objective only if there is a trope of perfect goodness that creates the universe [Oppy, 2006]? While there is *prima facie* nothing to prevent sceptics of the gods from accepting that moral properties or purpose contents are both objective and absolute, there is no necessary relation between the first and the second claim. Postulating some individual, even a god, as the standard of goodness, irrespective of whether this god conforms to general principles of goodness, seems highly arbitrary.

The response has been that there must be a stopping point for any explanation. Hence, for example, an answer to a question such as "What is good about X?" will cite some characteristics that supposedly make X good. It is then reasonable to ask, "By virtue of what does good supervene on those characteristics?" The reply could be to cite the relation of those features to other supposed characteristics that make X good [Alston, 1990]. However, the response is that there are properties that just *prima facie* work that way. That is, sooner or later one ultimately reaches either a general principle or an individual paradigm that will be the end of the line of explanation. Thus, it is no more arbitrary to invoke hypothetical gods as the supreme standard than it is arbitrary to invoke a supreme principle. In both cases, something is assumed to be ultimate, beyond which no further inquiries can be made. That

is, the claim that moral properties or purpose contents supervene on the gods is no more arbitrary than the claim that they supervene on a principle [Alston, 1990].

This, however, begs the following question: Why stop at hypothetical gods, or rather, more precisely, why settle for hypothetical gods?

First, the concept of gods is in many ways a primitive concept, an upscaled version of sentient beings, with the objective of explaining many phenomena that humans did not yet understand (and to give life purpose). Science has throughout its history step by step successfully eliminated gods as explanations for phenomena, and today gods are not included in any scientific descriptions. This is due not to atheism but simply to the fact, that there is no evidence or sufficient reason to do so. The hypothesis of gods possesses no explanatory power or necessity in science.

Second, the concept of gods originates from a time when it was commonly accepted that single individuals would rule. Human societies were led by chieftains and medicine men, then princes and religious authorities. The concept of gods is an obvious extrapolation from this structure. The gods are, as previously discussed, fundamentally dictators and tyrants in the modern meaning of these words, a definition that holds regardless of their power and knowledge or their ontological or epistemological status [von Hegner, 2016]. The philosophy of ethics has increasingly moved away from the idea of dictatorships as a foundation for ethics and morality. There is an increasing understanding that human beings possess autonomous rights and dignity that no one in a democratic society can take away. It is a denigration of human autonomy and dignity to be commanded what to do by the gods in a democratic or an existential context. We are moving away from acceptance of dictatorship.

Lavelle's dilemma implies that Lavelle's Consensus is false and that there is no explanatory power or necessity between purpose contents and the gods, just as Euthyphro's dilemma implies that there is no explanatory power or necessity between moral properties and the gods. The important lesson is, thus, that if human beings can reach principles that go beyond the gods' tyranny, then why not do so? If human beings can choose between what they themselves consider a purposeful life and what others consider a purposeful life, then why not choose their own?

DISCUSSION

Lavelle's dilemma poses a challenge to the Lavelle Consensus. This position, which is generally assumed by many, holds that statements such as "Life has purpose" obtain their truth content from the existence, commands or nature of hypothetical gods. That is, the statement "Life has purpose" is true if and only if the gods guarantee the purpose contents. Lavelle's dilemma problematizes this consensus by questioning whether it means that what is a purposeful life is simply an arbitrary and dictatorial choice by the gods or whether a purposeful life holds independent of the gods.

Most of those who have worked with Euthyphro's dilemma have done so mainly on the gods' behalf, so to speak. They have attempted to dissolve or circumvent the dilemma with the intention of fitting in the gods; salvaging the gods' role, power, and knowledge; demonstrating that the gods still have an objective role to play. They thought this was the only way to maintain objective moral standards [Morrison, 2009].

Hence, the fact that these dilemmas open the possibility that moral properties and purpose contents can exist objectively as part of the universe has been overlooked. The existence or nonexistence of hypothetical gods thus becomes no more important than the question of, say, the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. It is worth remarking that the dilemma did not pose a problem for Socrates and the religious tradition he belonged to. To him, it was clear that something existed independent of the gods. The dilemma does not pose any principal problem for modern science either. Although it is unclear what objective moral properties or purpose contents mean in a scientific context, the existence of fundamental impersonal principles in the universe is a common concept in science. Most of us accept that we are governed by things existing independent of ourselves, namely, the laws of nature and all the phenomena they rule.

Lavelle's dilemma turns the classical discussion upside down. It concerns itself with the freedom and purpose of human beings. If powerful beings command human beings, then humans are not free; if powerful beings dictate purpose contents, then that purpose *ipso facto* is not human beings' but the gods'. Understood this way, the gods would be dictators enforcing their opinions on others through sheer power. One can even state that life becomes unpurposeful if the gods enforce their purpose contents on human beings. What they consider to be a purposeful life is not necessarily what human beings consider to be a purposeful life, which is why this situation is designated the dictator's intrusion. If one understands why Lavelle's dilemma is so powerful, then one will understand the unjustified assumption so common among humankind that purpose and hypothetical gods are connected—something the fictitious Father Lavelle never understood.

Lavelle's dilemma opens the possibility that purpose contents exists objectively as part of the structure of the universe, here designated the virtue of independence. If this possibility is true, then it requires an understanding of how the universe and life function, and it will properly take a combined effort of both science and philosophy to uncover what and why that purpose is.

Lavelle's dilemma also opens the possibility that purpose contents is not an objective fact built into the universe, here designated the virtue of choice. This possibility leads to the conclusion that we need some philosophical reflection to clarify things. Thus, it will take an effort from philosophy to clarify how we can formulate and create a purposeful life for ourselves, which of course happens to be one of the grand purposes of philosophy itself. Insight from evolutionary biology has taught us that living beings, including human beings, do not seem to have any ultimate built-in function that they must fulfil; human beings were not made for anything with a teleological direction. Nevertheless, this insight need not lead to an unpurposeful life.

As noted by Nielsen (1973), a separation can be made between two types of purpose. First, one can respond to the claim regarding a built-in purpose as follows: "that if man were not made for a purpose, his life must be without purpose actually is offensive for it involves treating man as a kind of tool as merely serving a purpose". According to Nielsen (1973) the standard objection that there must be deities in order to have a purpose for human existence trades on confusion. Because second, it is important to understand that there can be purpose in life even if there is no purpose to life. There does not seem to be a purpose for human beings *qua humans*, but human beings can have purpose in their existence because human beings have goals, intentions, emotions, and motives, all of which remain intact regardless of the apparent fact that existence is purposeless in the larger sense.

Lavelle's dilemma does not discern the very nature of purpose contents, what it is or should be. I will not attempt such a discussion of how to have a purposeful life here. There is a rich literature on this subject (see, for instance, Wielenberg, 2005). Suffice it to say that for the life of a human being to have purpose is for that life to be good and meaningful for the human being who lives it and for that life to include activity that is worthwhile. We can perhaps, like Aristotle, even say that some activities are intrinsically good or purposeful in and of themselves. In this more specific sense, things matter to human beings, regardless of the gods' existence or nonexistence.

Another view that we should move on from is the idea that the gods are important. They are not. The discussion about the gods virtually always focuses on whether they exist: Is there evidence for their existence? Is there sufficient reason for their existence? These, however, are only the secondary questions. The primary question is the gods' importance; they do not hold any greater importance than do human beings. The gods do not belong to the so-called grand questions. Their existence or nonexistence is in line with other questions in science, such as the question of the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. While the answering of such questions surely is immensely important and interesting, such answers to the grand questions are irrelevant. The grand, quintessential question is how to have a purposeful life. Understood in this light, Euthyphro's and Lavelle's dilemmas are considered as a good. They illuminate the fact that freedom from the gods exists. How about we embraced this joyful realization?

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