Handout 5

The Euthyphro

1. Metaethics

Metaethicists are interested in some variety of the following question:

What does it mean to say that something is good or right?

They're not looking for a moral theory (what's good is that which maximizes happiness) – unless you think *all it means* to be good, is, say, to maximize happiness.
(In this case: the question "why be good?" would be a question that makes sense).

Socrates is asking Euthyphro a metaethical question – he wants to know what goodness consists in, what it means for something to be good – not just some *criteria* for what is good.

Euthyphro's Answer: Divine Command Theory
What's good is that which is loved by God (/the gods).

2. Socrates' Argument

(1) Suppose for reductio that "good" means: loved by God.

(2) "It is not because it is a loved thing that it is loved by those who love it" (Assumption)

(3) God loves the good *because* it's good. (Assumption)

(4) God loves the good *because* it's loved by God. (1,3)

(5) It's not the case that God loves the good because it's loved by God. (2)

(6) God loves the good because it's loved by God, and it's not the case that God loves the good because it's loved by God. (4,5)

(7) "Good" does not mean loved by God (1-6, *reduction ad absurdum*).

3. The Euthyphro Dilemma

Sometimes this argument is put in the form of the dilemma. Suppose goodness is just being loved by God. We can now ask:

Is what's good loved by God because it's good or is it good because it's loved by God?

Horn (a)
What's good is loved by God because it's good
Problem: Bringing in God doesn't give us an understanding of what goodness is. Divine command theory doesn't answer the metaethical question.

Horn (b)
What's good is good because it's loved by God (God's love *makes* it good)
Problem: Then it seems we have no particular reason to care about the good and/or there's no substance to the claim that God is good.