

More on divine command theory
+ some other stuff

Today we will be finishing up our discussion of divine command theory. But we will also do two other things first: discuss the final exam a bit, and give a (very) brief overview of the semester, and the discipline of philosophy.

Why do this? One of the functions of an introductory class is to introduce you to the subject matter in such a way that you will be in a position to decide whether it is something you might like to pursue. This in turn raises the question: why in the world would I want to be a philosophy major?

There are a number of answers to this question, which I list in order of descending importance:

- It will terrify and/or infuriate your parents.
- Because you find it interesting. Contrary to popular opinion, this is an excellent reason for choosing a major, especially if you do not think of universities as very expensive vocational schools.
- But there are also some reasons which many would consider more “practical.” For example, suppose you want to become a lawyer: philosophy majors do better on the LSAT than students from any other major in the humanities, social sciences, or business (only physicists do better).
- Because you want to go to graduate school in philosophy, or something other subject; philosophy majors score higher on the GRE than students from any other humanities, social science, or business major.
- Because you want to get an MBA. Philosophy majors score higher on the GMAT than students from any major (including economics) other than physicists -- and way, way higher than business majors.
- Philosophy majors also do extremely well on the MCAT, the admission test for medical schools -- though in that case (of course) philosophy courses would have to be integrated into a course of study which covered the relevant scientific material.

What does being a philosophy major involve? Here there are several options:

- if philosophy is your main major, you must take 8 courses in addition to the university philosophy requirement;
- if philosophy is your second (“supplementary”) major, you must take 6 courses in addition to the university requirement;
- or, you can pursue an interdisciplinary minor in philosophy, which typically only requires 5 courses (not all of which are in philosophy). Interdisciplinary minors currently on offer include: philosophy in the Catholic tradition; philosophy and literature; and philosophy, politics, and economics.

What sorts of courses you might take in any of these majors depends, naturally, on what sorts of philosophical questions are of most interest to you. Some of the classes will focus on topics we have to some extent covered, such as: ethics; metaphysical questions about free will and personal identity; the philosophy of religion; logic (the study of validity); epistemology; philosophy of science; historical courses focusing on the work of a particular philosopher or group of philosophers.

But there are lots of other sorts of philosophy courses as well: courses on the philosophy of art and the philosophy of literature; courses on the philosophy of particular sciences, like the philosophy of biology or the philosophy of physics or the philosophy of psychology; courses on the philosophy of language, and on truth; courses on political philosophy; courses on feminism; courses on particular ethical issues, like issues surrounding death and dying; courses on Asian philosophy or other non-Western philosophical traditions; and courses on the philosophy of mathematics. Notre Dame routinely offers courses in all of these fields.

More details on all of this are available on the department web site, if you are interested; or you can make an appointment any time to speak to the director of undergraduate studies.

Now, some brief remarks on the final exam.

The final exam will be of the same format as the midterm exam, and will cover the material from the free will defense until our discussion of divine command theory today.

It is also worth the same as regards your final grade as the midterm.

As the final exam period is two hours in length, you will have twice as long to complete the final exam as to complete the midterm. But it should certainly not take you that long.

Our expectations for the final exam are related to our expectations for the midterm in the same way that our expectations for the second paper were related to our expectations for the first paper: we expect you, in the final exam, to do a better job of going beyond the material covered explicitly in lecture than you did on the midterm.

There are two complementary ways of going beyond the material covered in lecture: you can think through the problems on your own and come up with your own evaluations of the arguments discussed in lecture, and you can think about arguments in the readings which go beyond discussions in lecture. Doing the latter is the easiest way of doing the former well.

Last time we were discussing the dilemma raised by Socrates in the *Euthyphro* for divine command theories of morality. To understand this dilemma, we can begin by noting that the divine command theorist and her opponent can agree that, for any action x,

God commands us to do x if and only if x is morally right.

What they disagree about is the explanation of this; here we have two possible explanations to consider:

- (1) God commands us to do x because x is morally right.
- (2) x is morally right because God commands us to do x.

(2) is the characteristic thesis of the divine command theorist.

Moreover, it seems that (1) and (2) are exclusive: they can't both be correct.

Socrates gives a kind of argument for (1):

SOCRATES: Then what are we to say about the holy, Euthyphro? According to your argument, is it not loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, it is for that reason.

SOCRATES: And so it is because it is holy that it is loved; it is not holy because it is loved.

One can think of the argument as beginning with the thought that God must have *some* reason for issuing the commands that he does; otherwise, those commands would be completely arbitrary. But what could those reasons be, other than that those commands are the moral law? But if God does issue those commands because they are the moral law, it looks like explanation (1) above is correct, and divine command theory is false.

To maintain the truth of divine command theory, it seems that one must resist Socrates' argument, and deny his claim that the Gods choose to command things *because* they are morally right. But then one still faces the question posed by Socrates:

Why does God choose to command what he does?

Last time we were discussing some ways of answering this question. One might suggest something like this:

Because the rules which he commands us to follow would lead to people living in harmony, happily, etc.

But that seems to be at best a partial answer to our initial question: why should God want to issue commands which would lead to people living in harmony, happily, etc. rather than in conflict, unhappily, etc? As before, it is odd to think that God would choose harmony over conflict for no reason at all.

One might be inclined to reply as follows:

But God knows that it is **better** for us to be happy and in harmony than unhappy and in conflict.

And this does sound plausible. But it also gives rise to a further worry. The aim of the divine command theorist is trying to explain what makes something a part of the moral law in terms of the commands of God; but it seems that in order to do this he must presuppose facts about **goodness**: facts about what is better than what.

Moreover, it seems that these facts can't be explained in terms of divine commands, since, if they were, we would have no answer to the question,

Why does God command that we do what is best for us?

So it seems that the divine command theorist must limit the scope of his theory. Maybe we can explain what makes something a moral requirement in terms of the commands of God, but we can't give a parallel divine command theory of what makes something good. Goodness ends up being something essential to God, but which cannot be explained in terms of God's will.

This may initially appear to be a point against the divine command theorist. But it also helps the divine command theorist to answer an argument closely related to the worry raised by Socrates.

This related worry is that the divine command theory seems to imply that if God had commanded us to murder, cheat, and steal, then murdering, cheating, and stealing would be morally permissible. But surely even if God had commanded us to do these things, they would not be morally permissible!

One might express this with the following argument:

1. Possibly, God commands that we murder, cheat and steal.
2. Necessarily, if God commands that we do x, then we are morally required to do x.

C. Possibly, we are morally required to murder, cheat, and steal.

(2) expresses divine command theory, and (1) looks plausible, since it seems that God could have commanded whatever God wanted to command. So is the divine command theorist forced to admit that it could have been the case that murder was morally required?

The sort of divine command theory discussed above has a different response available. If God is essentially good, how might we reply to this argument?

However, this is not enough to resolve another sort of dilemma, which results from actual cases in which the commands of God seem to conflict with what we ought to do.

The classic example here is the story of Abraham and Isaac:

“After these things, God tempted Abraham, and said to him: Abraham, Abraham. And he answered: Here I am. He said to him: Take thy only begotten son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and go into the land of vision; and there thou shalt offer him for an holocaust upon one of the mountains which I will show thee.”

One way of thinking about this case (due to Robert Adams) is as one in which Abraham is presented with three conflicting claims:

- (A) If God commands me to do something, it isn't morally wrong for me to do it.
- (B) God commands me to kill my son.
- (C) It is morally wrong for me to kill my son.

Put yourself in Abraham's shoes: since (A)-(C) are mutually inconsistent, you cannot believe all three. Which one should you give up?

It looks like the divine command theorist must suggest that you should give up (C), and endorse the claim that it is morally permissible for you to kill your son. However, this might not be the only option; Kant suggests another way of thinking about the case:

“Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: ‘That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.’ ”

One reading of what Kant is saying here is that it is always more reasonable to give up (B) than to give up (C). What do you think? Can the divine command theorist endorse this reply?