

Divine command theory

Today we will be discussing divine command theory. But first I will give a (very) brief overview of 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 some 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 getting a degree in philosophy 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 you are pursuing a minor in philosophy you must take 4 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); 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 the philosophy of mathematics; and even courses on philosophy and science fiction. 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 me, or to the director of undergraduate studies.

So far we have discussed two different answers to the question,

What makes an act morally wrong?

The **Kantian** answers this question by saying:

It violates the categorical imperative.

The **consequentialist** answers this question by saying

It leads to consequences which are, overall, worse than the consequences of some other action available to you.

We now turn to our third answer to this question, which is the one given by the **divine command theorist**. The divine command theorist answers this question by saying

It contradicts the commands of God.

It is worth noting that there is one sense in which divine command theory is an alternative to Kantianism and consequentialism. A divine command theorist might say that the commands of God are the ones laid out in such-and-such book - where these diverge from the moral requirements that the Kantian or the consequentialist endorses; the divine command theorist would then be defending a rival view of our moral requirements.

But the divine command theorist could also say that, for example, God's command is that we follow the categorical imperative. Then the divine command theorist would be, in one sense, agreeing with the Kantian - she would be agreeing about what our moral requirements are. But she would be going beyond the Kantian in offering an explanation of **why** the categorical imperative is the moral law. (Analogous remarks apply to consequentialism.)

Obviously, this is not a view of ethics which someone who does not believe in God (or a God who issues commands) is likely to endorse. It is also not a view of ethics which someone who believes that God exists, but does not issue commands, can believe in. But it is a view of ethics to which many believers in a personal God -- including Christians, Jews, and Muslims -- have been attracted.

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1. Many people teach and discuss ethical questions primarily in a religious context. One might ask: why do they do this? The divine command theorist has an answer: the subject of ethics is partly religious, since when we are talking about moral requirements we are really talking about the will of God.
2. Many think that the idea of moral obligations, considered apart from the will of God, simply makes no sense. What could it mean to say that I *must* (for example) help someone in need in cases in which this is not in my long-term interest? What in the world could give rise to facts of this sort about moral obligations?
3. Many religious believers find it hard to see how *else* they could think of the relationship between morality and the commands of God. The only option seems to be that the moral law is prior to and independent of the will of God; but it is hard to see how this might be so. If God is the source of everything, one wants to ask, how could the moral law be independent of God?

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The character of Euthyphro endorses divine command theory:

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Well, Socrates, if that is what you want, I certainly can tell you.

SOCRATES: It is precisely what I want.

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.

Of course, one important difference between Euthyphro's version of divine command theory and the sort that we are interested in is that his is a polytheistic version of the theory. Some of Socrates' objections to Euthyphro focus on this, such as those which are based disagreements between the various gods.

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Euthyphro states his position as follows:

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I would indeed affirm that holiness is what the gods all love, and its opposite is what the gods all hate, unholy-ness.

Socrates responds by raising the following dilemma for this position:

SOCRATES: We shall soon know better about that, my friend. Now think of this. Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?

At first, Euthyphro is confused by the question. Socrates responds to his confusion with a series of examples, one of which uses the example of vision. Given that for any thing x,

Someone sees x if and only if x is seen.

we can still ask: **is x seen because someone sees x, or does someone see x because x is seen?** The answer seems clear: it is the first. Something is seen because someone sees it, and not the other way around.

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But then we can ask a parallel question about the moral law and what God commands. Socrates and Euthyphro **agree** that, for any action x,

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

But, even if we agree about this, we can still ask: does God command us to do x because x is morally right, or is x morally right because God commands us to do it?

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It seems that there are two possible answers to this question:

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

Two things are pretty clear: the divine command theorist is committed to answer (2), and (1) and (2) are **exclusive**: they can't both be correct.

Socrates' problem for the divine command theorist takes the shape of an 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.

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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.

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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?

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 this merely delays the problem. We can still ask: why does God choose to command us to follow rules which would lead to us living happily?

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.

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But this is in some ways an uncomfortable response for the divine command theorist to give. The aim of the divine command theorist is trying to explain what makes something **the right thing to do** 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.

This seems to show that, even if divine command theory can explain why some actions are right and others wrong, it cannot explain all the facts having to do with moral value; in particular, it cannot explain facts about what is better for us, or what is good.

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This undercuts one of the motivations for divine command theory. That was that it is hard to see what could give rise to moral obligations, and other moral facts, other than the commands of God. But, as we have seen, the divine command theorist is committed to saying that facts about what is good cannot be explained in terms of the commands of God.

One thing that the divine command theorist can say is that goodness can be explained in terms of the nature, or essence, of God. Perhaps what is good and bad can be explained by reference to how God essentially is, rather than by what commands God issues: goodness is, in some sense, resemblance to God.

This is also related to another sort of objection to divine command theory, which was pressed by the 17th century English philosopher Ralph Cudworth. According to Cudworth, the following is a consequence of divine command theory:

nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this Omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that Hypothesis forthwith become Holy, Just and Righteous.



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Cudworth is saying that, if divine command theory is true, then, **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.
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- C. Possibly, we are morally required to murder, cheat, and steal.

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The conclusion of this argument seems to be false, and the argument is valid, so either (1) or (2) must be false. (I.e., the argument is a **reductio** of either (1) or (2).) The divine command theorist can hardly reject (2). So the divine command theorist seems forced to reject (1): she must say that it is not within the power of God to command us to do certain things.

This seems initially puzzling; but perhaps it seems less puzzling if we return to our claim above that God is not just good, but **essentially** good. If God is essentially good, then it is impossible for God not to be good; and if it is impossible for God not to be good, then perhaps it is impossible for God to command that we murder, cheat, etc. Then denying (1) is no more an objectionable limitation on the omniscience of God than is the denial that God could create a stone so large that God could not lift it.

However, this puzzle leads to another one. If it is not possible that God command us to murder, cheat, and steal, does that imply that God's decision not to command these things is not **free**? The worry here is that in solving these puzzles about divine command theory, we end up with the conclusion that God lacks free will. This is at least potentially in conflict with the free will defense we considered as a response to the problem of evil. If God - the paradigm of a good being - is not free to do evil, why is it so important that we have this power? Thus the present objection to divine command theory, plus consideration of the problem of evil, seem to point to the need to say more on the topic, not of whether free will is possible, but **why it is valuable.**