

Two challenges to divine command theory

Divine command theory makes the following claims:

For any action x which is wrong, x is wrong because God commands us not to do x

For any action x which is permissible, x is permissible because God does not command us not to do x

For any action x which is obligatory, x is obligatory because God does commands us to do x

Divine command theory is the most obvious way in which moral facts might depend on God. This is the view which Quinn defends in the reading for today. In the other two readings, we get a pair of related objections to this view.

In the reading from Plato, Socrates presents a dilemma for this view. He agrees that the following claim is true:

x is morally obligatory if and only if God commands that we do x

But he notes that this is not yet divine command theory. Even when we have some true claim of the form

X if and only if Y

we can ask

Is X true because Y is true, or is Y true because X is true?

He uses the example of seeing to illustrate this. Moreover, both of these can't be true — it can't be that X is true because Y is true *and* Y is true because X is true. So we know (if we endorse the claim above) that *exactly one* of the following claims is true:

- (i) God commands us to do x because x is morally obligatory
- (ii) x is morally obligatory because God commands us to do x

This is sometimes called the *Euthyphro dilemma*. It is a difficulty for the divine command theorist because the divine command theorist has to endorse (ii) — that after all is just what divine command theory claims. So the divine command theorist has to reject (i). But then we can ask the divine command theorist a difficult question: If God does not command us to do things because they are good, just why does God command us to do them? Does God just arbitrarily pick some things to command?

Cudworth raises a related objection. He notes that the divine command theorist must agree that,

- (1) Necessarily, if God commands some action, then that action is morally obligatory.

But, he says, imagine that God commands us to perform some truly horrible action. But then pick some really horrible action, like child abuse. It is surely possible for God to command this. So,

- (2) Possibly, God commands me to abuse an innocent child.

But then from (1) and (2) it follows that

- (3) Possibly, it is morally obligatory for me to kill an innocent child.

But, Cudworth thought, (3) is obviously false. Since (2) is true, (1) must be rejected, and divine command theory along with it.