

Divine Command Theory

1. Divine Command Theory: This is the view that rightness stems from God's commands: That is, an action is right if God commands it, and wrong if He forbids it. On this view, morality is dependent on God.

2. The dilemma: Socrates asks Euthyphro, "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" Stated more simply, we can ask a very similar question about morality. If all of the right actions are ones that God commands, then:

Are those actions right because God commands them, or does God command them because they are right?

This is a dilemma. A dilemma has two "horns," or two possible answers, neither of which are desirable. Let's look at both of them:

3. Horn 2: God commands us to perform right actions because they are right: This is the view that actions are right independent of what God says. That is, there is a set of right actions, that are right regardless of what God commands us to do. As it happens, God commands us to perform those actions, and He does so because they are right actions.

Objections to Horn 2:

1. First, this is not divine command theory. Accepting this horn of the dilemma seems to commit us to some objective standard of morality "outside" of God. As such, morality is not dependent on God.
2. Many theists will find this horn unappealing. Since it puts morality outside of God, they think that it takes away from God's omnipotence. That is, if this horn is right, then morality is beyond God, such that He is subject to its standards just as we are. As such, He is not all-powerful.

4. Horn 1: Right actions are right because God commands them: This is the view that actions are right simply because God says they are. Likewise, actions are wrong simply because God says they are.

Objections to Horn 1:

1. How does saying something is right MAKE it right? That seems weird.
2. God seems to have no reason to say one thing is right over another, since, before He gave His commands, no action was more right or wrong than any other. I.e., His commands are arbitrary. As Shafer-Landau puts it,

If there are no moral rules or reasons prior to God's commands, then there is nothing that God could rely on to justify the divine commands. So any choice is arbitrary. (81)

Note: If God did have reasons for His commands, then horn 2 would be the correct horn to accept—not horn 1. Horn 2 says, "God commands actions because of some reason—namely, because they are right."

3. Could God make horrible things right just by saying so (e.g., rape, murder)? It seems that, according to this theory, He could. For, since there are no moral reasons or rules prior to God's commands, acts such as rape and murder would NOT be morally wrong prior to God's commands. So, if God SAID rape and murder were morally right actions, then they would BE morally right actions. This is counter-intuitive
4. Things seem wrong for reasons like, they cause great pain, they remove good things from the world, etc. But, this horn of the dilemma implies they're only wrong because God said so. So, according to this theory, things are wrong for really unintuitive reasons.

5. What are your intuitions?: Consider the following: Tomorrow, God commands us all to rape and kill each other. If God commanded rape and murder tomorrow, would rape and murder suddenly be right actions? If divine command theory is correct, then they would be.

Ask yourself this question: If God commanded such things, would you think that they were right actions, or rather, would you think God had suddenly become an evil God? If the latter, then you are judging God by an external moral standard. In other words, your ethical intuitions are telling you that divine command theory is false.

What do you think? Is there a way out of this dilemma?

Morality Without God?

1. Why Believe in DCT?: Many theists accept Divine Command Theory because they believe that there is no way for morality to be objective if it does not come from God. (Note that this is NOT the claim that an atheist cannot act in ways that would make us judge them to be a good person. If there is no objective morality, it is still possible to be kind, altruistic, honest, etc.)

Shafer-Landau says that the basic argument for the idea that there cannot be objective morality without God is something like the following:

1. There ARE objective moral laws.
2. All laws require a law-maker.
3. Objective truths cannot be “made” by human beings.
4. Therefore, objective moral laws must have a non-human law-maker.

The natural inference is that this non-human law-maker is God. There are many theists and atheists alike who hold something like the view just stated. For DCT-theists, God grounds objective morality. For DCT-atheists, there is simply NO objective morality (since God doesn't exist and therefore cannot ground it).

2. Objection: The problem, Shafer-Landau argues, is that premise two of the above argument is false. Consider other sorts of objective “laws”: the laws of physics, the laws of chemistry, mathematical truths, etc. Surely THOSE sorts of laws don't require a “law-maker”—so premise 2 (the premise which states that all laws require a law-maker) is false.

Reply: One might reply that, while laws such as the laws of physics do not require a law-maker, laws of morality DO. This is because there is a very important difference between these two sorts of laws; namely, the former are merely descriptive laws, while the latter are prescriptive laws (or, as Shafer-Landau puts it, the latter are “normative” laws).

A descriptive law merely dictates or describes what WILL happen, while a prescriptive, or normative, law dictates what OUGHT to happen. For instance, according to the law of gravity, a rock WILL fall to the ground if I let it go. However, according to the law of beneficence, I merely OUGHT to help out others in need. This says nothing about whether or not I WILL in fact help the needy. And the latter sort of law (about what one SHOULD do) seems to require a law-maker.

In light of the objection, then, we might amend premise 2 of the above argument to say, “All normative laws require a law-maker.”

Rebuttal: Shafer-Landau points out that there are other normative laws besides moral laws. For instance, the laws of rationality: for example, it seems true that, whenever you see that some belief is justified, then you OUGHT to believe it. On the other hand, whenever you see that some belief is NOT justified, then you OUGHT NOT believe it.

Shafer-Landau takes this sort of example to refute even the revised version of premise 2. What do you think? Are there such things as normative laws of rationality? If so, does the above example prove Shafer-Landau's case?

3. God's Moral Perfection: Finally, Shafer-Landau points out that God is typically thought of as being morally perfect. What does this mean? Well, it seems to mean that God always does what is morally right. But, if DCT is the correct moral theory, then God is morally perfect in a very trivial way—basically, He is perfect by definition!

Consider: If DCT is the view that the morally right action is the one that God commands, then God could NEVER command a morally wrong action. That would be impossible, for as soon as He commands it, it becomes morally right.

But, when we say that God is morally perfect, what we REALLY seem to mean is that God never acts wrongly; i.e., He always acts in accordance with what is morally right. This seems to imply that there is a moral standard by which we judge God's actions when we assign the label "morally perfect." On the other hand, if DCT is true, then God is morally perfect in only a trivial way.

4. Grounding Morality: In the Craig-Antony debate, Craig insists that, if there is no God, then human beings are just "accidental by-products of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe, and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time."

We are atoms: That being said, on atheism, it seems that we are just collections of atoms arranged in a certain way. But matter is not subject to any moral authority. Cutting a little girl in half is nothing other than separating some atoms from one another.

We are animals: We are merely animals and, like animals, we are not subject to any greater moral authority. Animals kill and eat one another, but they are not murderers. Animals forcibly copulate with one another, but they are not rapists. Why should humans be thought of any differently? Sure, we evolved to be AVERSE to certain actions, but this is just our DNA giving us certain inclinations. It was not evolutionarily advantageous to think killing one's own species was

permissible, so those individuals were (largely) weeded out by natural selection. But, notice that this is not truly objective morality. It is only genetic inclination.

We are not accountable: Finally, there seems to be no REASON to promote happiness or prevent suffering if atheism is true. Eventually, the human race will cease to exist, and nothing will have mattered. And, ultimately, no one is accountable for their actions. On the other hand, if theism is true and we are immortal, and rewarded or punished for our actions for all eternity, our actions have ultimate moral significance and accountability.

Reply: Antony's reply is basically this: We are not MERELY matter. We are matter arranged in very unique and special ways. We are not MERELY animals. We are a special sort of animal with the ability to reason, to foresee the consequences of our actions, to empathize with others, to recognize when others are suffering, etc. As such, we are in a unique position to determine when our actions promote happiness or suffering.

We do not need some ETERNAL accountability in order to have moral obligations, or a motivation to be moral. We ARE accountable during our short lives, though. Either we devote our lives to promoting happiness or we do not. The value of happiness should be enough of a reason for us to want to promote it. Cutting a little girl in half is not a mere separation of atoms. It is an act that produces enormous suffering, and brings an end to a living, sentient, feeling being—one that would otherwise be capable of continuing to experience happiness. That alone should be a reason and a motivator for us to refrain from killing.

Finally, she says that it seems like the primary reason for a theist to be moral is that they wish to avoid hell. But, this does not seem like a very virtuous reason to do good things (i.e., out of fear). The atheist is in a unique position to be good FOR THE SAKE OF BEING GOOD, even though it is true that they will not be punished for eternity if they are not good. Is this not far more admirable?