

## Divine Command Theory

**1. Divine Command Theory:** This is the view that morality is grounded in God's commands: That is, **an action is morally right if and only if God commands it, and wrong if and only if He forbids it.** On this view, morality is dependent on God.

This is an attractive view because, on this view, morality is OBJECTIVE in the sense that morality is in no way dependent on what human beings think about it. Also, it preserves the idea that God is ALL-powerful, since morality falls under His domain. In fact, it explains the existence of morality in general, since moral laws seem to require a law-GIVER.

**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 morally right 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:

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 commits us to the existence of 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 somehow "beneath" morality, and subject to its standards just as we are. As such, on this view, God is not all-powerful.

Horn 1: Right actions are right because God commands them: This is the view that right actions are right simply because God says they are. Likewise, wrong 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: On horn 1, God COULD NOT have objective reasons for making the commands that He does. If God *did* have such 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. But, it seems like there ARE good, objective reasons for why certain actions are wrong; reasons like, they cause great pain, they remove good things from the world, etc. But, horn 1 implies that they're only wrong because God said so. So, according to this theory, things are wrong for really unintuitive reasons.
4. As mentioned, DCT must deny that there are any reasons independent of God for why certain actions are morally wrong. But, then, on DCT, if God did not exist, there would be no such thing as moral right or wrong. As a famous paraphrase of Dostoyevsky puts it, "If God is dead, then all things are permissible." So, if atheism turns out to be true, then stabbing children in the face for fun turns out to be morally permissible. This may seem incredibly counter-intuitive to some.
5. 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, or INDEPENDENT of, 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.

**3. What if God commanded something terrible?:** Let's focus on that last claim (5). Imagine that God commanded us all to rape and kill each other. If God commanded rape and murder, would rape and murder suddenly become morally right (i.e., obligatory) actions? If divine command theory is correct, then they *would*.

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.