

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.

Four Replies: Wes Morriston states the present objection in terms of the following argument:

1. DCT entails that whatever God commands is morally obligatory.
2. God could command X.
3. So, if DCT is true, then X could be obligatory.
4. But, X could NOT be obligatory.
5. Therefore, DCT is false.

He then considers four replies that theists give in response to this worry, and finds them all to be unsatisfactory. Here are the objections and Morriston's replies:

- (1) God has never commanded X: Some theists respond to this worry by pointing out that God has NOT in fact actually commanded anything so horrible. So, we don't need to worry about this hypothetical scenario.

Reply: The fact that this is a hypothetical scenario is irrelevant. For, DCT says that an action WOULD be morally right if God commanded it. For all we know, maybe he WILL come down tomorrow and command us all to kill (just as he commanded Abraham to kill his son, or Moses to kill all the men, women and children living in Canaan).

- (2) P2 is false. God could never command X: Recall our discussion of the concept of God. It is commonly believed that, if God exists, then He is omnibenevolent, or wholly morally good. Even more, He is ESSENTIALLY omnibenevolent. But, a being that is essentially morally good CANNOT command such a horrible thing. Doing so would be contrary to His essence. So, we need not entertain the possibility—or rather, the Impossibility.

Reply: First, Morrision notes that the claim that “God is essentially good, and so could not command X” seems to detract from God’s omnipotence. God is supposed to be ALL-powerful. This means that He has the power to do ALL things—including X. (We will discuss several puzzles regarding divine omnipotence in unit 3)

Second, note that, we might question what the claim, “God is essentially good” even MEANS on DCT. As Shafer-Landau asks, what does it mean for God to be morally perfect, or morally good? 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, **God is perfect by definition!**

Consider: If DCT is the view that the morally right action is the one that God commands, then, no matter what God commands (rape, murder, etc.) it would NEVER be a command to commit 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 the standard, and so is morally perfect in only a trivial way.

If the theist responds, “Yeah, but, God isn’t just trivially good. God’s essential nature is actually the sort that promotes love, charity, happiness, peace, compassion, and all that other good stuff.”—if they say this, they are implying one of two things:

- (a) God is good because THOSE things are good—in which case, we are judging God to be good based on some external standard. This is no longer DCT. This is to reject horn 1 in favor of horn 2.
- (b) We are VERY lucky. For, what if God had happened to have the sort of “essential nature” that actually promoted hatred, cruelty, suffering, selfishness, violence, and so on? Those things would, by definition, be “good”—but, it still seems true to say that, if the world were “good” according to that standard, life would not really be worth living. So, we are lucky that God’s nature is NOT like that!

(3) We would not need to obey: Robert Adams suggests that, while it is POSSIBLE that God issues terrible commands—i.e., there is a possible world where he DOES—we are not in that possible world. Or at least, it is VERY improbable that we are. So, if we heard the voice of God telling us to rape and murder, we would be justified in ignoring it. For, at that point, since the command is so morally outrageous, you would be justified in suspecting that it was not God issuing the command at all, but rather some demon deceiving you. But, even if you were SURE that God had issued the command—i.e., even if the improbable turned out to be true and we WERE in one of the possible worlds where God commands terrible things—you would still be justified in ignoring it, since Adams' version of DCT is that the morality is defined by the BEST possible set of divine commands.

Reply: [What?? Adams' view is very bizarre and idiosyncratic. It seems to me that, if it is possible that God could command X, then Adams' claim should just devolve into horn 2—or else, into the claim made in (4), below. For, as soon as Adams says that we should only follow God's "best" possible set of divine commands—i.e., the ones He issues in the world where He is morally perfect—then an external standard is immediately being appealed to. Otherwise, how do we know which possible world is the one where God issues His "best" commands?]

(4) P4 is false. Something presently wrong would become obligatory: Some theists just bite the bullet here, and admit that, Yes, if God commanded rape and murder, then these things WOULD become morally obligatory actions. After all, The Lord works in mysterious ways. His ways are not our ways. He is infinite, and we are finite. Who are we to question God's motives? [See the movie, [Frailty](#)]

Reply: The most obvious response here is that this is not satisfying. If God told you to rape and murder, or torture children, and you KNEW that it was actually God who made the command, every fiber of your being would tell you that God had suddenly become EVIL. Thus, it seems difficult to escape comparing God with some external moral standard. Psychologically, it is almost impossible to TRULY believe that WHATEVER God says is right, IS right.

But, Morrision raises a further worry: He asks us to compare the evidence that you would have with the evidence that, e.g., your church congregation would have after you'd told them about your "message from God" commanding you to torture children. You and they BOTH know that (a) You are psychologically certain that God has spoken to you, (b) God is good, (c) God sometimes has reasons that are beyond our understanding, (d) It is, in theory, possible that God has some good, but inscrutable reason for wanting you to torture children.

Clearly, THEY would draw the conclusion that you were crazy, and you ought not torture children. So, how could YOU be convinced that you were NOT crazy, and that you ought to go through with it? You don't seem to have access to any evidence that they do not. But, to act completely contrary to the evidence is irrational. So, (4) is basically suggesting that it is possible that we will be morally obligated to do something seemingly terrible, contrary to all reason. The only thing that would make you believe that you should torture children, while others believe the opposite, would be if God had somehow COMPELLED you—that is, overridden your free will to MAKE you believe it, despite all evidence to the contrary. But, Morrision says, that is not a command at all. That is brainwashing, or coercion, or something equally non-command-like.

[Reply: Is Morrision right? Think back to Bergmann's reply to self-defeating Naturalism. What your congregation has access to is the INFERENTIAL evidence. But, YOU might have access to NON-INFERENTIAL evidence. God might have appeared to you, and you felt the presence of UTTER beauty, love, peace, and so on. You might be TOTALLY convinced that God spoke to you, and that you should follow His command to torture children, and you might be totally justified in believing this (according to Huemer and Bergmann) even though you could never explain this to others.]

There is also the worry that Morrision raises, that, on Christianity, it seems that God HAS commanded some really awful things. Furthermore, God's reasons for doing so do not seem to be "mysterious" or "transcendant"—rather, God seems to have only very BAD reasons for these awful commands. [We'll examine this accusation at the end of unit 2]

Morality Without God?

Why believe DCT after all these accusations? Well, many theists feel strongly compelled to believe that there is such a thing as morality. But, these same theists also believe that there cannot even BE such a thing as morality without God. To them, morality NOT grounded in God's commands does not even make sense. (So, in some respect, this lesson might in some way be viewed as an argument for the existence of God. Call it "The Moral Argument").

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 makes 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 IS 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 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. 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?