In Defence of Divine Commands

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In the mid-twentieth century Philosophy of Religion underwent a resurgence. Theological topics often considered to be dead or consigned to the philosophical scrap heap began to be discussed anew. One feature of this resurgence, often unnoticed in standard secular ethics texts, is the revival of divine command theories of ethics. One result of this is that all too often such theories are summarily dismissed in standard ethics texts on the basis of a short simple argument known as the Euthyphro dilemma.

In this article I will introduce and defend a divine command theory of ethics. In Section 1 I will set out what modern divine command theories of ethics typically contend and I will distinguish this from some common misunderstandings. In Section 2 I will discuss the Euthyphro dilemma. I will suggest this objection is not the conclusive rebuttal it is often assumed to be.

1. What is a Divine Command Theory?

I. What a Divine Command Theory is

The most important modern defence of a divine command theory is found in the work of Robert Adams. In *Divine Command Ethics Modified Again* and in his later monograph, *Finite and Infinite Good*, Adams puts forward the view that “ethical wrongness is (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God.”1

[Emphasis original]

If God exists then we can plausibly explain the nature of moral obligation by identifying obligations with God’s commands analogous to the way “we explain the nature of water by identifying it with H₂O, or explain the nature of heat by identifying it with molecular motion.”2 The term ‘God’, in such discussions, is used in the traditional sense to refer to a necessarily existent, all powerful, all knowing, loving, just, immaterial person who created the universe. Adams’ theory is fairly standard; other leading divine command theorists such as William Alston,3 William Lane Craig,4 C Stephen Evans,5 and John Hare6 take a similar line. While some modern divine command theorists have departed from Adams’ view, they have argued that God’s commands directly bring about moral obligations, for the sake of this article we can take Adams’ view as typical of modern divine command theories.

II. What a Divine Command Theory is not: Avoiding Strawmen

It is important to distinguish what a divine command theory is from common misunderstandings of a divine command theory. Two clarifications are necessary.

First, it is a theory about the nature of the moral obligations, “such properties as being morally permitted, being morally forbidden or prohibited, and being morally obligatory or required.” It is not a theory about the nature of goodness in general. C Stephen Evans explains, “it does not appear that the concept of obligation is identical to the concept of what it is ‘good to’ … It might be good, even saintly, for me to give a kidney to benefit a stranger, but it is not an act I am obliged to do.”7

Second, a divine command theory is not the claim that the word “wrong” means “contrary to God’s command;” nor is it the claim that someone cannot recognise or know what is wrong unless they believe in God. Rather it is the claim that moral obligations are, in fact, divine commands and that wrongness is identical with the property of being contrary to God’s commands.

The example of heat illustrates this distinction.
Heat is, in fact, a certain type of molecular motion but obviously, that fact is not the meaning of the word heat. People knew how to use the word heat centuries before they discovered its physical nature. They also knew the difference between hot and cold before they understood the science of heat. In the same way, divine command theorists contend we can know the meaning of moral terms such as right and wrong, and know the difference between right and wrong, without knowing that rightness and wrongness consist in agreement and disagreement, respectively, with God's commands.

These clarifications sweep away several prominent objections to divine command theories that still linger in standard ethics texts. Peter Singer, for example, states “Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of ‘good’ is nothing other than ‘what God approves’ ... but these theists are caught in a trap of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good? That God is approved by God?” Harry Gensler also offers a criticism of a divine command theory: “Imagine an atheist who says the following: “kindness is good, but there is no God”. If “x is good” meant “God desires x”, then this claim would be self-contradictory (since it would mean “God desires kindness, but there is no God”). But it isn’t self contradictory. So “x is good” doesn’t mean “God desires x.”

In fact, divine command theorists do not contend that “good” means “desired by God” so this objection attacks a straw man.

Equally missing the point are a series of objections that contend people can recognize wrongdoing prior to, or independently of, God’s commands. Paul Kurtz has objected to a divine command theory by noting that many prominent atheists have “exemplary lives.” Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has argued that “The divine command theory makes morality unknowable [because such theories entail] we cannot know what is morally wrong, if we cannot know what God commanded ... we have no sound way to determine what God commanded.” Others, such as Patrick Nowell-Smith, have objected that we can know and recognize what is wrong quite independently of any belief in God’s commands, and so, a divine command theory is false.

The problem is that a divine command theory does not claim that people cannot recognize what is wrong unless they know what God has commanded. I contend our moral obligations are, in fact God’s commands.

2. The Euthyphro Dilemma
This brings us to the most well-known objection to divine command theories. This argument is known as “the Euthyphro dilemma” or “Plato’s Euthyphro” and is named after a dialogue Plato...
wrote. The current version used against monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, is an adaptation (the original applied to polytheistic religions, those religions that believe in many gods). The argument is usually framed in terms of a rhetorical question: "Are actions wrong because God prohibits them or does God prohibit them because they are wrong?" James Rachels sets the argument out as follows:

[1] "Suppose God commands us to do what is right. Then either (a) the right actions are right because he commands them or (b) he commands them because they are right."

Rachels goes on to note that either option leads the believer in divine commands into trouble:

[2] "If we take option (a), then God's commands are, from a moral point of view, arbitrary; moreover, the doctrine of the goodness of God is rendered meaningless.

[3] If we take option (b), then we have admitted there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will.

Rachels concludes:

[4] "Therefore, we must either regard God's commands as arbitrary, and give up the doctrine of the goodness of God, or admit there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will and give up the theological definitions of right and wrong."

Obviously, a divine command theorist cannot accept option (b), the claim that God commands actions because they are right. This would entail that rightness and wrongness exist independently of and prior to God's commands. The debate therefore focuses on [1] and [2]. I will respond to each below.

I. Is the Dilemma a False one?

Turning first to [1] above, Rachels contends that a person who believes that God commands what is right faces a dilemma; either he or she holds that something is right because God commands it or he or she maintains that God commands it because it is right. He assumes that the divine command theory must affirm one horn of the dilemma, that there is no third option available.

But is there no third option? Why not claim, as divine command theorists typically do, that neither option is correct? Actions are not right because God commands them nor does he command them because they are right; rather, rightness is identical with the property of being commanded by God.

Rachels assumes that the relationship between God's commands and moral obligations is some kind of causal relationship where the cause and effect are distinct things and one must exist prior to the other (logicians call this kind of relationship an asymmetrical relationship). But this is precisely the assumption divine command theorists typically reject. As noted, they contend moral rightness and wrongness should be identified with God's commanding and prohibiting actions. Unlike cause and effect relationships where a cause is distinct from and prior to the effect, identity relationships are symmetrical; identical objects are not distinct things where one exists prior to the other. Identical objects are the same thing. To ask which of two identical things existed prior to the other is to ask whether something existed prior to itself, which is an absurd question.

So I am inclined to think [1] is false. My more substantial criticism however will be levelled against [2]. In [2] Rachels offers two fairly standard criticisms of a divine command theory. They are, first, that a divine command theory makes God's commands arbitrary; I will label this the arbitrariness objection. Second, that it renders empty or meaningless the doctrine that God is good; this I will label the emptiness objection. It is to these two objections that I will now turn and devote the rest of this article to.

II. The Arbitrariness Objection

Rachels contends that the divine command theory: "leads us to trouble, because it renders God's commands arbitrary. It means God could have given us different commands just as easily. He could have commanded us to be liars and then lying, and not truthfulness would be right."

His objection then is that if a divine command theory is true God could command anything and if he did then it would be right for him to do so. Here Rachels alludes to an extremely common objection. This objection was pressed forcefully by Michael Tooley, in a debate he had with William Lane Craig at the University of Colorado. Tooley stated that a divine command theory: "is quite a hopeless theory because of its implications. One of its implications, for example, is that if God had commanded mankind to torture one another as much as possible, then it would follow that that action was obligatory. Perhaps Dr. Craig would be happy with that consequence. But many people, including many religious thinkers, are very unhappy with that consequence, and so have rejected the divine command theory of morality."[1]

Tooley's concerns have been echoed by others. For example, Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King have objected.

"DCT [divine command theory] implies that it is possible for any kind of action, such as rape, to not be wrong. But it seems intuitively impossible for rape not to be wrong. So, DCT is at odds with our commonsense intuitions about rape."

A similar line of argument has been made by David Brink,
“We might also notice a counterintuitive implication of voluntarism. Voluntarism implies that all moral truths are contingent on what God happens to approve. Thus, for example, had God not condemned genocide and rape, these things would not have been wrong, or, if God were to come to approve these things, they would become morally acceptable. But these are awkward commitments, inasmuch as this sort of conduct seems necessarily wrong.”

If we single out the example of rape the argument can be construed as follows:
[A] If DCT is true, then if God commanded us to rape we would be required to rape;
[B] It is absurd that we could be required to rape;
[C] God could command us to rape;
Therefore:
[D] A DCT is absurd.

The key premise here is [C]. However [C] is dubious. Divine command theorists do not contend that moral obligations are identified with the commands of just anyone. They explicitly identify them with the commands of God understood as an all powerful, all knowing, loving, just, immaterial person who created the universe. So [C] holds only if it is possible for such a person to command rape. This is unlikely. The very reason people like Tooley, Brink, and Garcia cite examples of rape is because they view it as a paradigm of an action that no virtuous person could ever knowingly entertain.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that [C] were true - that it is possible for a just, loving and omniscient person to command rape. It would follow that rape could only be commanded in situations where a just and loving person, aware of all the relevant facts, could endorse it, and under these circumstances it is hard to see how [B] could be maintained.

It is hard then to see how both [C] and [B] can be true; hence, this objection contains at least one false premise.

III. The Emptiness Objection

Rachels’ second objection is that a divine command theory entails that “the doctrine of the goodness of God is rendered meaningless.” Peter van Inwagen lucidly highlights the problem; a person can be morally perfect only if that person has both moral duties and acts in accord with them. This means a person can be morally good only if they have duties. However, according to a divine command theory the wrongness of an action consists in its being forbidden by God; given that God does not issue commands to himself it follows that God has no duties. Consequently, a divine command theory implies that God is not morally perfect.

Of course, analogous reasoning also implies that God is not morally imperfect either. To have a moral flaw God would have to have duties and act contrary to them; given that God has no duties this is also impossible. Van Inwagen’s conclusion is that a divine command theory entails that the property of moral perfection does not apply to God; he is neither good nor evil.

There is a grain of truth to the suggestion that if God has no duties then he cannot be said to be good in any meaningful sense. If we are going to understand God’s goodness in terms of God having duties that he consistently fulfills then a divine command theory cannot account for God’s goodness. However, why must the phrase ‘God is good’ be explicated in terms of God having duties? I do not see why it should.

Many theologians and philosophers have suggested an alternative; God’s goodness should be understood in terms of God having certain character traits. To claim God is good is to claim that he is truthful, benevolent, loving, gracious, merciful, it is to hold that he is opposed to certain actions such as murder, rape, torturing people for fun and so on. Now, even if God does not have duties, it does not follow that he cannot have character traits such as these. It is true that God is not under any obligation to love others or to tell the truth or what have you but that does not mean he cannot love others or tell the truth. God does not have to have a duty to do something in order to do it.

Conclusion

Modern divine command theories explain the nature of moral obligations by identifying moral obligations with God’s commands. These theories cannot be dismissed by noting that

“good” does not mean “desired by God” nor can they be dismissed by pointing out that people can recognise right and wrong independently of, or prior to, any beliefs about God’s commands. Similarly, appealing to the Euthyphro dilemma is premature; if moral obligations are identified with God’s commands then actions are not commanded by God because they are wrong nor are they wrong because they are commanded by God. Attempts to suggest a divine command theory makes morality arbitrary or renders the claim that God is good empty, similarly fail.
Notes


8 Evans, Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love, p.16.


18 James Rachels, Elements of Moral Philosophy, p.42.