

26 God, Morality, and Religion

Kristin Seemuth Whaley¹

I. Introduction

Religion and morality seem to go hand-in-hand, and specific moral codes are often grounded in specific religious traditions. Identifying the nature of the relationship between religion and morality may therefore seem straightforward: the right thing to do is whatever is right according to religious tradition. Justification for this claim derives support from the idea that religious moral codes have origins in divine will: “Morality is whatever God commands.” The theory that identifies the morally right with what God commands is called, unsurprisingly, ‘Divine Command Theory’. Divine Command Theory, or ‘DCT’, is attractive to religious practitioners for a couple reasons. One is that it captures the sense that religion provides guidance for living an ethical life; God provides this guidance through giving commands and shaping religious moral codes. Another is that DCT seems to provide a moral theory according to which there are objective moral facts; morality isn’t susceptible to subjective preferences or impermanent social consciousness. If the morally right is what God commands, there is a true measure of our actions and a genuine responsibility for our behavior.

Despite this attraction, DCT is subject to a *dilemma*, a style of argument that requires commitment to either of two possible, and unfavorable, options. The Divine Command Theorist is forced to make a choice: if the moral is whatever God commands, then either God commands things because they are right, or they are right because God commands them. As we will see, taking either option requires serious theological concessions.

A similar dilemma is found in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, a dialogue in which Socrates inquires about the nature of piety, or holiness. Euthyphro begins by proposing that whatever the gods love is pious or holy, and that which they hate is impious or unholy. Socrates presses Euthyphro by raising the dilemma of whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or whether the pious is holy because it is loved by the gods. Euthyphro replies that the pious is loved by the gods because it is holy; the pious is pious for a reason independent of the relationship between piety and the gods. The gods, then, love the pious for this reason, whatever the reason ends up being. But whatever is beloved of the gods is beloved because the gods love it; being beloved by the gods is entirely dependent on the relationship between the beloved and the gods. Socrates cites this difference in dependence as a reason to reject ‘whatever the gods love’ as a legitimate definition of ‘piety’. There must be something else about piety, independent of its relationship to the gods, that establishes its true nature. Socrates is asking Euthyphro for this independent reason, which Euthyphro fails to provide.

We can instantiate the same kind of dilemma for Divine Command Theory, inquiring about the nature of

¹ Kristin Seemuth Whaley is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Graceland University. She specializes in metaphysics and philosophy of religion, and she is a recipient of the AAPT Grant for Innovations in Teaching. You can find more information about Dr. Seemuth Whaley’s work at kristinseemuthwhaley.com. This work released under a CC-BY license.

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

morality. In what follows, we will address each option, or *horn* of the dilemma, in turn. In taking the first horn, that God commands things because they are right, the Divine Command Theorist will be required to concede that God is not unlimited in power. In taking the second horn, that things are right because God commands them, the Divine Command Theorist will be required to concede that God is not truly good. Since the Divine Command Theorist likely views unlimited power and unlimited goodness to be essential divine features, neither of these options is acceptable. Since it was the assumption that DCT is true that generated the dilemma, the Divine Command Theorist is forced to conclude that DCT is false.

II. The Dilemma

Divine Command Theory seems to be an attempt to ground morality theistically; the morally right is whatever God commands. As a background commitment, the Divine Command Theorist is likely motivating the theory in the context of a religious tradition that accepts the *divine perfections*, or attributes of God. The perfections include

- *omnipotence*: God is all-powerful,
- *omniscience*: God is all-knowing, and
- *omnibenevolence*: God is all-good.

It is certainly fair to question whether there is such a being that has, or necessarily has, the divine perfections. But the dilemma does not hinge on successfully arguing against the perfections. Instead, it is because the Divine Command Theorist likely accepts the divine perfections that the dilemma arises in the first place.

A being with the divine perfections, God, seems to be the kind of being that is capable of commanding actions that are morally right. Plausibly, God knows what is right, God desires for the right to be done, and God is powerful enough to effectively command the right. Therefore, DCT is a natural extension of this variety of theism.

But, given the divine perfections, we can construct the dilemma for the Divine Command Theorist:

- A1. If DCT is true, then morality is whatever God commands.
 - A2. If morality is whatever God commands, then either God commands things because they are morally right, or things are morally right because God commands them.
 - A3. If God commands things because they are morally right, then God is not omnipotent.
 - A4. If things are morally right because God commands them, then God is not omnibenevolent.
 - A5. God is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent.
- ∴ AC. DCT is false. (‘∴’ means ‘therefore’)

The argument begins in premise A1 by citing the definition of Divine Command Theory: the morally right is what God commands. The Divine Command Theorist will accept this premise, since it provides an accurate statement of what DCT is. Premise A2 sketches options for the relationship between morality and God’s commands: either God’s commands are grounded by moral facts or moral facts are grounded by God’s commands. If there is an explanatory relationship between God and morality, then it has to be one or the other. In the first case, God looks to the moral facts to determine what should be

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

commanded, ensuring that God is commanding what is indeed right. In the second case, God's commands establish the moral facts; whatever God decides is right becomes right in virtue of God's command.

More work needs to be done to establish premises A3 and A4, and we will see auxiliary arguments for these premises shortly. But before we do so, note that even if you don't agree with premise A5, the Divine Command Theorist almost certainly does. Premise A5 affirms a background commitment that the Divine Command Theorist likely accepts: God has the divine perfections. So, since accepting DCT yields two unacceptable options, the argument concludes with AC that DCT is false.

III. The First Horn: The Argument for A3

Premise A3 represents the first horn of the dilemma for the Divine Command Theorist: If God commands things because they are morally right, then God is not omnipotent. Premise A3 can be established by appealing to an auxiliary argument:

B1. If God commands things because they are morally right, then morality is outside God's control.

B2. If morality is outside God's control, then God is not omnipotent.

∴ A3. If God commands things because they are morally right, then God is not omnipotent.

B1, the first premise of the auxiliary argument highlights the relationship between morality and God's commands in taking the first horn of the dilemma. According to the first horn, God will guarantee that any command given fits with what's morally right. God will look to the moral facts and then make commands on their basis. So, suppose God is about to issue the Ten Commandments. God will investigate the nature of morality, identify the moral facts, and issue the commandments accordingly: Thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, etc. God makes these commands because murder and stealing are wrong. The commandments should be followed, then, because the commandments accord with the moral facts. Since God is omnibenevolent, God will only issue commands that fit with the moral facts, and God defers to the moral facts in order to make moral commands. So, although God will command things that are morally right, the moral facts cannot be determined by God. Otherwise, they would be right because God commands them, and not the other way around.

Having deferred to the moral facts, God's commands are therefore somewhat restricted, and we arrive at B2. God cannot decide to command just anything; God will command only what is right. Accordingly, morality is independent of God, and God's commands are restricted to only what is right. Morality is not affected or changed by God's will. If this is the case, then a whole range of facts, moral facts, are outside the scope of God's control, and God has no power to change them. But if this is the case, then God is not omnipotent; God is not all-powerful.

Some argue that being restricted by moral facts does not threaten God's omnipotence. God is also restricted, plausibly, by logical facts. God cannot, for instance, make a round square, but this may not seem to be much of a threat to God's power. Unlike logical facts, however, one might argue that moral facts, like natural facts or physical facts, seem to be exactly the kinds of facts that *should* be within God's power. But, in taking this horn of the dilemma, the moral facts instead have power over God.

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

So, we arrive at A3: If God commands things because they are morally right, then God is not omnipotent. This is an unfortunate result for the Divine Command Theorist, who will consider rejecting God's omnipotence to be unacceptable. The first horn may then prod the Divine Command Theorist to consider the other option. Instead, perhaps things are morally right because God commands them.

IV. The Second Horn: The Argument for A4

Premise A4 represents the second horn of the dilemma for the Divine Command Theorist: If things are morally right because God commands them, then God is not omnibenevolent. Premise A4 can be established by appealing to an auxiliary argument:

- C1. If things are morally right because God commands them, then God's commands are morally arbitrary.
- C2. If God's commands are morally arbitrary, then God is not omnibenevolent.
- ∴ A4. If things are morally right because God commands them, then God is not omnibenevolent.

C1, the first premise of this auxiliary argument illustrates the challenge of taking the second horn of the dilemma. This relationship between God's commands and morality makes it the case that God could command anything whatsoever and it would be morally right simply because God commanded it. So, when God issues the commandment, 'Thou shalt not murder', a class of actions, particular kinds of killing, became morally wrong. If God never gave the command, then these kinds of killing would be morally acceptable. If God had not prohibited it, then it would not be morally wrong, for instance, to kill an innocent person for no reason, despite any apparently-bad consequences or apparently-bad intentions.

Since, according to the second horn, the moral facts depend entirely on God's commands, there is no objective standard that God must look to before making commands. God could command, 'Thou shalt put on thy right shoe before thy left shoe except on every third Thursday of the month, in which case thou shalt put on thy left shoe before thy right.', and it would become immoral to put on your left shoe before your right on a Monday. Such a command is totally unprincipled, and we should feel no moral pull toward either shoe. This is because such a command would be *morally arbitrary*, or without principle or moral reason. There is no external standard by which we could measure the legitimacy of the command and no recourse to appeal to if we broke it. So, C1, if things are right because God commands them, then God's commands are morally arbitrary.

Even worse, if God's commands are morally arbitrary, then God could command things that we consider to be morally reprehensible, and these things would become right. For instance, God could command 'Thou shalt torture thy children', and it would be morally right to torture your children. Any complaints that this is wrong would fall on deaf ears, for, according to the second horn, if God commanded it, it is not wrong. The fact that the second horn allows that God could command things like the torture of children negates any lingering plausibility concerning God's omnibenevolence.

It is very tempting at this point to think, "Well, God would never command the torture of children, because torturing children is wrong, and God would not command something that is wrong." But note that in making this move, we find ourselves again facing the first horn. If God would not command something that is wrong, then this is possible only if God looks to the moral facts in order to determine what to command. But, if God does so, then morality is outside God's control. The Divine Command

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

Theorist can make this move, but then they must give up on God's omnipotence.

The moral arbitrariness of God's commands is a serious problem for the Divine Command Theorist, which we see in C2. Recall that God is supposed to be omnibenevolent. When omnibenevolence is attributed to God, it is supposed to highlight a perfection or a laudable divine quality. But if morality is arbitrary, then saying that God is good becomes trivial. It would be analogous to saying that God is divine, or, like Euthyphro, saying that whatever is beloved by the gods is loved by the gods. It may be true, but it does not provide any reason to think that divinity is a good-making feature or a perfection; it is true simply because anything that is God is divine. Likewise, anything that God commands would be morally right. So, saying that God is omnibenevolent is merely another way of saying that God meets the moral standard that God establishes. This is not praise-worthy; it is trivial.

We arrive at A4: If things are morally right because God commands them, then God is not omnibenevolent. Like rejecting God's omnipotence, rejecting God's omnibenevolence is likely to be considered unacceptable. In taking the second horn, the Divine Command Theorist fares just as poorly as in taking the first. Both options require conceding divine perfections, but this is inconsistent with what the Divine Command Theorist is trying to accomplish.

V. Remaining Options

Having established the auxiliary arguments, we now see the dilemma completed. If DCT is true, then either God commands things because they are morally right, or they are morally right because God commands them. If God commands things because they are right, then God is not omnipotent. If things are right because God commands them, then God is not omnibenevolent. Since God is (according to the divine perfections) both omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then we must conclude that DCT is false.

DCT has attraction given certain religious commitments. It is unlikely that an atheist, for instance, would endorse DCT. The dilemma is therefore forceful because it is contingent on a theological understanding that attributes the divine perfections to God. It is logically possible, however, for the Divine Command Theorist to reject A5 and deny that God is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. An objection could take the form of arguing that it is theologically acceptable to say that God is not omnipotent or that God is not omnibenevolent. A Divine Command Theorist might prioritize the connection between God and morality over the divine perfections, and they may consider this to be necessary, albeit unpalatable, concession.

Another option is to deny the explanatory relationship between morality and God's commands. Perhaps what God commands is morally right but not *because* it is morally right, and whatever is morally right is morally right but not *because* God commands it. On this option, the class of actions that God commands is identical to the class of actions that are morally right, but there is no dependence in either direction.

In reply, I grant that these options are possible. They are not, however, desirable. While there may be theists willing to concede the divine perfections, I suggest that in doing so we likewise concede attraction to grounding morality theistically. The connection between God and morality seems attractive because of the divine perfections, and conceding the divine perfections weakens the case to think that God and morality are inextricably linked. Further, if one thinks that God and morality are inextricably linked, it is implausible to argue that there is no explanatory relationship between them.

VI. Conclusion

It is natural for religious practitioners to see religion as authoritative in matters of morality. But if DCT is true, and morality is whatever God commands, then a dilemma arises. Either way we try to define the relationship between the morally right and the commands of God, an unacceptable result follows. Either morality is outside God's control, in which case God is not omnipotent, or God's commands are morally arbitrary, in which case God is not omnibenevolent. Since omnipotence and omnibenevolence are divine perfections that cannot be simply subtracted from God's nature, both horns of the dilemma are unacceptable. As a result, we, and the Divine Command Theorist, should conclude that DCT is false.

For Review and Discussion:

1. What is the point of the Euthyphro dilemma and how can this create problems for DCT?
2. What are the reasons some people believe religion is necessary in order to have morality? Do you think they are right? Why or why not?
3. If God is perfect, does DCT still make sense? Why or why not?