6

SUBJECTIVISM, RELATIVISM, AND DIVINE COMMANDS

The previous three chapters explored normative ethics. The main questions in these chapters were: 6.1

- Which acts are right and which acts wrong?
- What makes acts right and wrong?
- How should you live? What kind of a person should you be?

The discussion of these questions assumed that there are truths about right and wrong. We've understood ethical theories as attempts to capture these truths.

Many people find the whole idea of moral truths mysterious. At this point you move from normative ethics to **metaethics**.[1] In normative ethics you are still taking part in ordinary moral debates. Outside the philosophy seminars we usually think about more specific moral questions. We wonder about whether it would be wrong to lie to a friend or fail to keep a particular promise. We also often disagree about whether cheating on taxes is wrong or whether it should be permissible to have an abortion. In normative ethics you just think about these questions more systematically. 6.2 

When you move to **metaethics**,[2] you move from ordinary moral debates to a more theoretical level (for metaethics textbooks, see Fischer, 2011; Kirchin, 2012; Miller, A., 2013). From the theoretical standpoint, you then start to think about what is going on in the ordinary moral debates. You can ask questions such as: 6.3 

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- What do moral words mean?
- **Can moral statements be objectively true?**[3]
- Are there moral properties and what are they like?
- What constitutes making a moral judgment, psychologically speaking?

Metaethics therefore doesn't investigate what is right and wrong; rather it is interested in the nature of moral language and thinking, and whether there are moral properties or objective moral truths. These metaethical questions will be the topic of the next three chapters.

6.4 Many people are **deeply skeptical**[4] when they first consider these metaethical questions. They find the idea that there could be objective moral truths suspicious. As a result they naturally attempt to find more down-to-earth ways of making sense of moral language and thought.

6.5 Here is one way to make this move. It is natural to use the model of law to understand morality (**Anscombe, 1951**).[5] After all, for an act to be wrong is a bit like for it to be against the law. Both law and morality are important standards for evaluating what we do. This is true even if some legal acts are morally wrong and some illegal actions are morally right. For example, even if it is legal to cheat on your partner, doing so can still be morally wrong.

6.6 In the case of law, someone has to make the law for there to be a law. There has to first be a sound legislative process, which usually takes place in a parliament. The outcome of such a process is a law, which requires you to do some things and forbids you to do others. Therefore, things do not just happen to be legal or illegal, but rather someone has to make it the case that things are permitted and forbidden by the law (see Hart, 1961).

6.7 If you use the analogy of law to understand morality, then you will also think that things don't just happen to be right or wrong, but rather some acts are wrong because someone first made it the case that they are wrong. If you follow this line of thought, then moral standards too must be created by voluntary acts of an agent or a group of agents. This view of morality is called **voluntarism**.

6.8 This chapter discusses three metaethical views which all take this intuitive voluntarist line of reasoning seriously (see also Shafer-Landau, 2004). The first view is called **subjectivism**.[6] On this view what is right and wrong depends on what you approve and disapprove of as an individual. The second theory is called **relativism**.[7] This is the view that what is right and

wrong is determined by what your society accepts and forbids. The last theory is called the **divine command theory**.[8] According to it, moral standards are based on the commands of God.

Subjectivism

One knee-jerk reaction to metaethical questions is to insist that "It's all just a matter of opinion!" If you have this reaction too, then you will love subjectivism. It is an attempt to develop the idea that morality is just a matter of opinion into a proper metaethical theory that answers the basic questions in metaethics. However, you will need to be careful because subjectivism is difficult to make consistent. 6.9

Subjectivism is best understood as a theory of what moral words mean. There are very few genuine defenders of this view in metaethics today (but see **Dreier, 1990**).[9] **Thomas Hobbes** seemed to endorse subjectivism when he wrote: 6.10

> But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves (**Hobbes, 1660, ch. 6**).[10]

Here Hobbes makes an interesting claim about what you mean when you say that something is good.

You personally approve of certain actions and disapprove of others. According to subjectivism, when you say that an act is good or right all you mean is that you approve of the act. Likewise, when you say that an act is wrong all you mean is that you disapprove of the act. Subjectivists therefore think that making claims about what is right and wrong **reports** what you approve or disapprove of. When you discuss moral questions, in the end you are just talking about your own attitudes. You are describing whether or not you like different acts. 6.11

This view is easy to illustrate with an analogy. Consider claims about what is yucky and yummy. It is natural to think that when you say that **rhubarb is yucky**[11] and raspberries yummy, all you are really saying is 6.12

that you like raspberries but not rhubarb. In this way, the words "yucky" and "yummy" are devices for telling other people about what you like and don't like. According to subjectivists, the meaning of moral words can be explained exactly in the same way.

Advantages of subjectivism

6.13 Subjectivism has many appealing features. Firstly, it means that morality is just a matter of opinion, which many people believe anyway. This is because, according to subjectivism, all there is to being right or wrong is that you approve or disapprove of the act.

6.14 Another nice thing about this view is that it doesn't make moral qualities mysterious. If saying that an act is right just means that you approve of it, then you will easily know which acts are right. All you need to do is to find out what you approve of, which you can usually tell yourself. Sciences like evolutionary psychology can, moreover, shed light on why you approve of different acts. If subjectivism is the correct theory of what moral words mean, then this also tells you what is right and wrong.

6.15 Subjectivism can, in addition, explain two important features of our moral discourse. Firstly, it can explain how some moral utterances are true and others false by providing the conditions under which your moral utterances are true. If you say "**waterboarding**[12] is wrong," then, according to subjectivism, this utterance is true if and only if you are against waterboarding and false otherwise.

6.16 Secondly, subjectivism can also explain the practical nature of moral judgments (see Chapter 8 below). **There is a match between what people say is right and wrong and what they are motivated to do**.[13] People who claim that eating meat is wrong tend not to want to eat meat, for example.

6.17 Subjectivism makes sense of this observation. When you say that an act is right you are reporting your positive attitudes toward the act. Given that you have that attitude it is not a surprise that you will want to do what you think is right. Take Sam, who says that it is wrong to eat meat. When he says this he means that he disapproves of eating meat, which explains why he doesn't want to eat meat.

Objections to subjectivism

6.18 Despite these advantages of subjectivism very few people who work in metaethics accept the view. This is mainly because:

- subjectivism doesn't fit our moral experience;
- subjectivism makes you morally infallible; and
- subjectivism can't explain moral disagreements.

Objection 1: Experience Consider your own moral experiences: fairly often you first come to think that some act is wrong and only then you begin to disapprove of the act. Many people like fur coats before it is explained to them how much **the minks suffer in their tiny cages**.[14] This leads many people to conclude that wearing fur is morally problematic and because of this they will have negative attitudes toward fur coats. 6.19

The problem is that this simple story would be ruled out by subjectivism. According to subjectivism, you always first disapprove of certain actions. Once you do this you can then call these actions wrong. This would make it impossible for you to begin to disapprove of an act because you first think that it is wrong.

Objection 2: Infallibility Secondly, even if you can often know what is right and wrong, it is hard to accept that you are infallible about it. Most of us are humble enough to admit that we can be wrong about what is right and wrong. **Sometimes we even realize that we have been morally blind**.[15] Furthermore, there are situations in which it is really hard to tell whether some act is wrong. Consider **cloning animals**.[16] Is this right or wrong? This case raises so many different ethical issues that it is hard to be certain. 6.20

Subjectivism is unable to account for these facts (**Rachels, 2003, ch. 3**[17]; Shafer-Landau, 2004, ch. 3). According to it, when you say that an act is right you mean that you disapprove of the act. If you know what you disapprove of, you will always know what is wrong. Knowing what is right and wrong would not be any harder than knowing what you like, which is something you usually know with ease. For subjectivism, moral knowledge is therefore so easy to come by that you couldn't be mistaken or struggle to find an answer. This isn't what it's like. 6.21

Objection 3: Disagreement Finally, subjectivists can't explain how you could have moral disagreements with other people (**Moore, 1922, sect. 26**).[18] Let's imagine that you and Ben are talking about whether terrorist suspects should be subjected to waterboarding. You say that it would be wrong to do so whereas Ben claims that it wouldn't. Intuitively in this case you disagree with Ben. There is something that you are convinced of that Ben just doesn't accept. 6.22

6.23 Subjectivists can't make sense of this disagreement. According to them, when you say that waterboarding is wrong you mean that you disapprove of it. Likewise, when Ben says that waterboarding is right he only reports that he is for it. In this case, Ben can agree with what you say and you can accept what he says. Ben can happily agree that you do not like waterboarding and you can equally well accept that he is for it.

6.24 This means that, according to subjectivism, there is no disagreement between you and Ben. In fact, in all cases where it looks as if people disagree about moral questions, people would just be talking about their own attitudes and therefore talking past one another. This consequence of subjectivism is difficult to accept. You really want to hold on to the idea that we can have genuine moral disagreements.

Relativism

6.25 Many people try to avoid these problems with subjectivism by accepting a view called **moral relativism** instead (**Harman, 1975**; **Lafollette, 1991**).[19] According to relativism, when you talk about right and wrong, you are not talking about your own personal preferences, but rather about what the moral code in your society permits and forbids.

6.26 A moral code is a set of prescriptions. One moral code could, for example, contain the following prescriptions:

- Do not lie!
- Do not steal!
- Tell the truth!
- Do not kill except when this is the only way to save your life!

Actual moral codes are like this (only a bit more complicated!). A society's moral code is the set of prescriptions which most people in the society accept. These prescriptions therefore influence what people do and what they are praised and criticized for.

6.27 Relativism is also a theory of what you mean when you say that an act is right or wrong. There are two different versions of relativism. The first version is called **appraisal relativism**. According to it, when you say that it is wrong to lie, this utterance means that your own society forbids stealing. Appraisal relativism makes the truth of moral utterances relative to the moral code which is accepted in the speaker's society.

The second version of relativism is called **agent relativism**. According to it, when you say that it is wrong for Natasha to commit fraud, you mean that the moral code in Natasha's own society forbids committing fraud. On this view, the relevant moral standards are not the ones in your society but rather the ones accepted in the society of the agent whose actions you are evaluating. For the sake of simplicity, the rest of this section will focus on appraisal relativism even if I will occasionally refer to agent relativism too. 6.28

Perhaps the best way to understand appraisal relativism is to think that, according to it, simple moral sentences like "lying is wrong" are **incomplete expressions** (**Boghossian, 2006**).[20] When you use this sentence the context you are in completes your utterance. Whenever anyone says that "lying is wrong," they always therefore really mean that: 6.29

Lying is wrong relative to F.

"Relative to F" is here a hidden parameter which is not explicitly mentioned in the sentence you utter. As you recall, according to relativism, a moral claim is always about what the moral code of your society accepts. The placeholder "F" stands for this code. This way of understanding relativism is motivated by the idea that otherwise relativism quickly leads to contradictions. Without the additional parameter, it could be true both that *lying is wrong* and *lying is not wrong* as long as there is one society which accepts lying and one which forbids it.

The context in which you say "lying is wrong" determines which moral code you are referring to. This explains how when Bill, as an American, says that "lying is wrong," in his context he means that: 6.30

Lying is wrong relative to the American moral code.

Similarly, when Hans as a German says that "lying is wrong," in his context he means that:

Lying is wrong relative to the German moral code.

This is how the context in which the speaker is completes what the speaker means. This also explains why relativism does not lead to contradictions. It can be true both that lying is wrong relative to code A and not wrong relative to code B.

Advantages of relativism

6.31 Relativism too has many theoretical advantages. Like subjectivism, it makes right and wrong scientifically investigable. You can **empirically investigate**[21] which moral norms are accepted in your society, and evolutionary psychology can help you to understand why these norms were accepted instead of others.

6.32 Relativism can also explain under what conditions moral utterances are true. If you say that it is wrong to steal, this claim is true when the moral standards of your society forbid stealing. Given that you probably accept the moral standards of your own society yourself, this view can furthermore explain why you are motivated to do what you think is right. If you correctly report that your society's standards forbid stealing and you accept those standards, then you will not want to steal.

6.33 Even more importantly, relativism can avoid many problems of subjectivism. It fits the idea that you can come to disapprove of an act because you discover that it is wrong. Because of peer pressure we often come to share other people's attitudes. Thus it isn't a surprise that you can disapprove of eating meat when everyone else is against it too.

6.34 Relativism furthermore explains how you can be mistaken about moral questions and how some moral truths can be difficult to discover. It is not always easy to know which acts are permitted in your society. Consider sleeping with many people at the same time. Is this wrong? According to relativism, this question is whether the moral standards of your society forbid adultery. **This is something that you can easily be mistaken about and also something that isn't easy to find out**.[22] Relativism can therefore explain how you can make moral mistakes and why moral knowledge isn't always easy to get.

6.35 Finally, relativism enables you to disagree with Ben about whether waterboarding is wrong. When you and Ben disagree about whether waterboarding is wrong you really disagree about what your society's stance toward waterboarding is. You are saying that most people in your society are against waterboarding whereas he is saying that most people in your society are not against it.

6.36 Relativism has one more important advantage. Many people are impressed by a scientific truth called **descriptive cultural relativism**.[23] This is the observation that different societies have different moral codes (Benedict, 1946). **In some societies people give tips whereas in other societies this is considered to be demeaning**.[24] This leads many people to think that

we should adopt the attitude of tolerance toward other cultures. Even if you think that we should tip generously, you don't want to force other societies to adopt this practice. You want to accept that tipping can be right in your society but wrong in Sweden. Many people continue to believe that accepting relativism in metaethics is the best way to tolerate other cultures and their moral norms.

There are, therefore, many good reasons to accept relativism in metaeth- 6.37
ics. **Despite this, surprisingly few philosophers working in metaethics are relativists in this sense**.[25] The next section will look at some of the main reasons for this.

Problems of relativism

Problem 1: Disagreement It is not clear whether the relativists can really 6.38
avoid the problems with subjectivism. Consider moral disagreements again. Relativism can easily explain how the members of the same society can disagree. In disagreements like the one between you and Ben, you are making conflicting claims about what your society accepts.

However, consider people who are not members of same society (Shafer- 6.39
Landau, 2004, p. 41). For example, take the following exchange between Irish Róisín and Swedish Anna who are talking about whether it is wrong to have an abortion:

RÓISÍN: It would be wrong to have an abortion.
ANNA: No, there wouldn't be anything wrong with it.

In this situation, Róisín and Anna definitely disagree. However, according to relativism, they could not do so because they would be talking about different topics. Relativists would claim that Róisín is talking about what is accepted in Ireland whereas Anna is talking about what people accept in Sweden. In this situation the disagreement between them goes away. Anna can accept that people in Ireland are against abortions and Róisín can admit that the Swedes have nothing against them.

Relativism thus makes moral disagreements between members of differ- 6.40
ent societies impossible. However, this is not plausible – you can disagree with people from other cultures even about moral questions. Many of us, for example, strongly disagree with the practice of **female genital mutilation**[26] that is widely practiced in many societies.

6.41 *Problem 2: Moral fallibility* Relativists also face problems when they attempt to explain moral fallibility and moral knowledge. The relativist says that moral claims are about what most people in your society think. Admittedly, this is something that you can be wrong about and also something that you might struggle to find out. However, things are not so straightforward.

6.42 Consider this question: Should you give money to charity? What evidence should you take into account when you answer this question? According to relativism, the only way to answer this question is to find out what other people in your society think. This is counterintuitive. What most people think does not seem all that important when you consider whether you should give money to charity. It would be far more important to know how desperately people need help, how effective different charities are, and how much you could afford to help. One implausible consequence of relativism, therefore, is that information about what other people think would always be best evidence for what is right and wrong.

6.43 *Problem 3: Tolerance* The third problem is related to what motivates many to be moral relativists in the first place (**Pojman, 2000**[27]; Shafer-Landau, 2004, pp. 30–33). Does it really follow from relativism that you should tolerate what the members of other societies do?

6.44 The claim that "it is wrong to force the members of other cultures to live in the same way as you" is a moral claim. In this respect, it is just like the claim that "lying is wrong." Relativism is a general theory of what claims like this mean. So, if you claim that lying is wrong, you mean that most people in your society are against lying. Then, according to relativism, when you say that it is wrong to coerce other societies to live in the same way, you mean that most people in your society are against this.

6.45 The problem is that this claim need not be true – **some societies are not tolerant**.[28] The members of these societies believe that you can force other people to follow your way of life. In the relativist framework, if you are a member of this type of intolerant society then you would be mistaken if you said that it is wrong to force other societies to live like you. The upshot is that relativism is not the best way to defend tolerance. Notice that this objection also applies to agent relativism. Imagine that you come across a foreign society whose members just can't tolerate other cultures. Are they doing anything wrong by being intolerant? If agent relativism is true, they are not, because on that view everyone's actions should be measured by the moral standards of the society they belong to.

Problem 4: Multiculturalism The last problem with relativism is my personal favorite (Shafer-Landau, 2004, ch. 10). Many of us belong to many different societies. I belong both to Finnish and English societies. I spent the first 28 years of my life in Finland and since then I have lived in England for 10 years. Imagine that I tell you that "you should always go to the **sauna**[29] naked." 6.46

According to appraisal relativism, my utterance is true if most people in my society are in favor of going to the sauna naked. This is hopeless. **All Finns go to the sauna naked**.[30] In contrast, **English people never go to the sauna naked**.[31] They are horrified by this Finnish tradition. So is my utterance true or not? If I am a member of the Finnish society it is true, and if I am a member of the English society it isn't. If I belong to both societies then my utterance is both true and false – which would be a blatant contradiction. To avoid this, the relativist would need to explain which society I really belong to. There doesn't seem to be a non-arbitrary way of deciding this. 6.47

Divine Command Theory

So far, this chapter has explained why moral standards cannot be set by individuals or societies. If moral standards must be set by someone despite this, then you must look for alternative sources of morality. Many people draw from this the conclusion that moral standards must have a supernatural source. According to this view, which has been popular throughout the history, acts are right and wrong because **God**[32] as a divine being made them so. This view is called **the divine command theory** (for contemporary presentations, see **Adams, 1979**; **Wieranga, 1983**; Quinn, 2000).[33] 6.48

God is supposed to be an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-powerful, loving, and perfectly good being who is the creator of our universe. This fits roughly the descriptions of God given by the major monotheistic religions. This chapter will not take a stand on whether such a being exists. The focus will only be **whether God could be the source of moral standards if you presuppose that He exists**.[34] 6.49

Divine command theory and moral words

We first need to formulate divine command theory more carefully. The first option would be to understand the divine command theory as a 6.50

metaethical view of what moral words mean. According to this theory, when you say that "it is wrong to lie" all you mean is that God commands us not to lie.

6.51 It is not plausible that everyone means this when they use the word "wrong." Many people do not believe in God and other people think that many different gods exist. These people can't be talking about what God commands when they use moral language. Or, if you think that they are still talking about God's commands, then you would have to think that these people are badly conceptually confused. Despite their best attempts they keep talking about what God commands – even though they don't even believe in Him.

6.52 You could try to avoid this problem by claiming that the divine command theory is only about what religious people mean when they talk about right and wrong. This view would claim that when a believer claims that "it is right to rest on Sundays" she means that God commands us to rest on Sundays. This view would then have to give some other explanation of what other people mean when they talk about right and wrong.

6.53 Robert Merrihew Adams has shown that this is not what the divine command theorists should say (**Adams, 1979**).[35] First of all, you want to know just as much what **atheists** and **polytheists**[36] mean when they talk about right or wrong. The more serious problem is that this new proposal again fails to leave room for moral disagreements.

6.54 Consider the following exchange between Catholic Margaret and atheist James:

MARGARET: Premarital sex is wrong.
JAMES: No, premarital sex isn't wrong.

According to the version of the divine command theory under consideration, Margaret's claim means that God commands us not to have premarital sex. However, this view also claims that James's utterance doesn't mean that God isn't against premarital sex as he doesn't even believe in God. James must therefore be talking about something other than what God commands.

6.55 As a result, in this exchange Margaret would be talking about God's commands and James about something completely different. The problem is that this would make the previous exchange a lot like this:

MARGARET: The weather is fine.
JAMES: No, the traffic is bad.

In this case there's no disagreement between Margaret and James; they are talking about different things.

This case illustrates how you can't have a disagreement unless the words in your mouth mean the same as they mean for other people. Yet, in the previous case there was a disagreement between Margaret and James about whether premarital sex is wrong. Because of this, the divine command theory can't be a theory of what believers mean when they use moral words. 6.56

Divine command theory and moral properties

What is the divine command theory about, then, if it isn't about what moral words mean? The most charitable way to understand this theory is to see it as an account of the nature of moral properties. If an act is right, it has the property of being right. Divine command theory is a theory of what this property is like. This view is not interested in what the word "right" means, but rather what it is for an act to be right. This is a **metaphysical question**[37] about the world. 6.57

Robert Merrihew Adams has formulated an improved version of the divine command theory along these lines (**Adams, 1979**).[38] According to him, the divine command theory reveals the fundamental nature of moral properties. What moral properties consist of is, on this view, captured by the following type of claims: 6.58

- For an act to be right is for it to be an act which God commands us to do.
- For an act to be wrong is for it to be contrary to God's commands.

This proposal solves the problems of the previous versions of the divine command theory. Adams's view is neutral about what you mean when you say that an act is wrong. It can recognize that when believers, atheists, agnostics, Christians, Muslims, and polytheists discuss what is right and wrong they use the words "right" and "wrong" with the same meaning. Because of this, everyone will talk about the same topic and this in turn allows people to have genuine moral disagreements. 6.59

According to the resulting view, when you call an act "wrong," you mean that this act should not be done and that we should blame people for doing it. In fact, this is what everyone means when they talk about right and wrong. When you use the word "wrong" in this sense you also manage to refer to a certain property of acts in virtue of which the act should not be 6.60

done. The divine command theory is then supposed explain what this property is like. The quality of acts you pick out when you talk about wrong acts is that God commands us not to do these acts. If wrong acts were like this, then the wrongness of acts would explain why we should not do the wrong thing and why we should be blamed for acting wrongly.

6.61 This story allows Adams to say that even non-believers use moral words with the same meaning as religious people. Because of this, they need not be conceptually confused. Atheists might have mistaken beliefs about which acts are right and wrong and why, but this is no worse than someone having mistaken beliefs about many other things.

Advantages of divine command theory

6.62 The first good thing about the divine command theory is that it can explain nicely how you can know what is right and wrong. Because God is infinitely good and loving He reveals His commands to us through **revelation**.[39] God communicates to us what is right and wrong because He wants us to follow His commands. Of course, this still leaves us with many questions of divine revelation itself. How do we know how God's commands should be interpreted? How do we know which one of the conflicting religious texts is the unique source of divine revelations? These are, admittedly, pressing questions, but at least in principle the divine command theory can tell us a story of how we can know what is right and wrong.

6.63 Secondly, divine command theory can at least attempt to explain the so-called **normativity**[40] of moral properties. This quality of moral properties is difficult to pin down. J.L. Mackie famously argued that moral properties are magnetic (**Mackie, 1977, ch. 1, sect. 7**).[41] Acts which are right have "to-be-doneness" built into them, because you are required to do these acts by their very nature. Likewise, wrong acts have "to-be-avoidedness" built into them – there is a categorical requirement not to do these acts.

6.64 The divine command theory can explain why right and wrong acts have such normative "oomph." According to this theory, the to-be-doneness of right acts is based on our relation to God and, more specifically, on God's authority and the debt we owe to Him (**Swinburne, 2008**).[42] The suggestion is that you can understand our relationship to God by considering the relationship between parents and their children. Parents have authority

over their young children. Young children should obey their parents because the parents know better, they love their children, and they are responsible for their existence and well-being.

Divine command theorists can use this model to explain how God has 6.65
authority over us and therefore also why His commands are normative for us in the same way. If God's commands are normative for us, then right and wrong must be normative for us too. This is even before we have said anything about Heaven and Hell. Admittedly, this story too raises difficult questions. We can ask how helpful the parenthood analogy is for understanding what our debt to God could be. We can also ask what the source of the requirement to repay our debts to God is. The answer to this question can't be that God just demands us to repay our debts to Him, or we face a vicious circle. But at the very least, the divine command theory has introduced a distinct way of thinking about normativity of moral properties that is recognizable from the familiar analogy of families.

The Euthyphro Dilemma*

The end of the previous section showed that the divine command theory 6.66
has many advantages. This final section will explain the most famous and powerful objection it. This objection is so good that even many believers reject the idea that morality is based on God's commands.

The Euthyphro dilemma was first formulated 2400 years ago by **Plato** 6.67
in a dialogue entitled ***Euthyphro***, which gives this objection its name (Plato, circa 380 BC).[43] You can also find discussions of similar arguments in the writings of **Gottfried Leibniz** and **Ralph Cudworth** (**Leibniz, 1686, sect. 2**; **Cudworth, 1731, book I, ch. 2**).[44] The following will be a sketch of how the objection is usually understood today. There is some **controversy**[45] about whether this is the argument which Plato had in mind in his original dialogue.

If you accept the divine command theory, you have to think that there 6.68
is a strong correlation between two properties. You are committed to the idea that all and only the acts which God commands us to do are right. Any act that is right is an act which God commands us to do, and any act that God commands us to do is right. So far, the divine command theory only says that two properties – right and what God commands – always come together. They are perfectly correlated.

6.69 This could not be merely a coincidence. We will need to explain why the correlation between the two properties holds. There are two alternatives. The first is:

A. God commands us to do certain acts because these acts are right.

The second alternative is to think that:

B. Some acts are right because God commands us to do them.

Therefore, either God's commands explain why certain acts are right (B), or facts about which acts are right explain what God commands us to do (A). The Euthyphro dilemma is **a dilemma**[46] because both of these alternatives are problematic for the divine command theory. Whichever way you explain the correlation between the two properties there is bad news for the view.

What is right explains what God commands*

6.70 Let us consider option (A) first. If you accept this option, you will think that God commands us to do certain acts because they are right. The problem is that this is not really faithful to the spirit of the divine command theory. You are now assuming that there are right and wrong acts first. You then think that God sees which acts are right and because of this He commands us to do them. However, in this case God is not a part of the explanation of what it is for acts to be right. After all, some acts are right independently of Him.

6.71 God could still be argued to serve an important function in ethics. It could be claimed that His commands offer us additional information about what is right and wrong. God could also give you additional incentives for doing the right thing. But as far as we focus on metaethics and the nature of moral properties, God would in this case play a lesser role.

God's commands explain what is right*

6.72 Your second alternative is to think that right acts are right just because God commands us to do them. On this view, we use facts about God's commands to explain what it is for some acts to be right. This fits how the divine command theory was formulated above. The suggestion was that for an act

to be right just is for it to be what God commands you to do. On this alternative an act is right only because God commands you to do it.

Therefore, if you choose this horn of the dilemma, you must think that 6.73
acts are not initially right or wrong at all. God then comes on the scene and commands us to do certain acts. As a result, some acts become the right thing to do and others the wrong thing to do. This horn of the dilemma leads to three famous problems (**Miller, C., 2013**).[47]

Problem 1: God's goodness First of all, this alternative makes God's own 6.74
goodness a mystery (Alston, 1989, p. 255). Most people who believe in God think that He is perfectly good. If you believe in God, how should you understand this property of God if you think that things are good and right because of God's commands?

Some divine command theorists argue that the property of goodness 6.75
exists independently of God even if right and wrong are based on God's commands. This more restricted divine command theory therefore relies on a separate theory of goodness that is not connected to what God commands. This leads to the question: if good is independent of God's commands, why couldn't right and wrong be independent of His commands too?

The second alternative is to accept that God's goodness too is based on 6.76
God's commands. This would help you to understand good and right in the same way. However, it is not plausible that God is good because of God's commands. God can't be good because He commands Himself to be in a certain way. Because of this, there is no plausible way to understand God's goodness if you think that acts are right because God commands us to do them.

Problem 2: Anything could be wrong The second problem with thinking 6.77
that acts are right because God commands us to do them is that any act could be right (Quinn, 2000, p. 70). Recall that according to this view, no act is right before God commands us to do it. God then commands us to do certain acts and as a result these acts become the right thing to do. If God had commanded us to do some other acts, then these acts would have been right. If He commanded us to boil newborn babies alive, then doing so would have been the right thing to do.

Some theist philosophers have accepted this implication. **St. Augustine** 6.78
wrote in the ***City of God*** that murdering another person is the right thing to do when God commands you to do it (**St. Augustine, circa 420 AD, book I, ch. 21**).[48] For most of us this is too big a **bullet to bite**.[49] Surely

there are some acts that could not be morally right even if God commanded you to do them. Horrible acts like killing newborn babies for fun by boiling them alive could not be morally right even if God told you to do them.

6.79 *Problem 3: The reasons for God's commands* The final problem is that plausible answers to the previous objection lead only to further problems (Timmons, 2002, pp. 29–30). Suppose that someone claims that it is not the case that anything could be right or wrong because God could never act on a whim. As a perfectly rational being, He always acts and issues commands for good reasons. And given the reasons He has, certain things just had to become right and wrong. What's wrong with this response to the previous challenge?

6.80 The problem is that this response makes God's commands redundant. If God has good reasons to command you not to do certain acts because they are unfair or hurt others, then you already would have good reasons not to do these acts. You too should care about unfairness and avoiding hurting others for exactly the same reasons as God. Therefore whatever reasons God has to command certain acts, these reasons are also why you should act in those ways. This means that whatever reasons God has for His commands, these same considerations make it right for us to do the relevant acts. This means that if God has good reasons to issue His commands, He is no longer needed as the ultimate source of morality.

6.81 So, to summarize, acts can't be right *because* God commands you to do them because:

i. this would make God's own goodness mysterious;
ii. any act could be right if God commanded you to do it; and
iii. if God's commands are not mere whims, then his commands are redundant as we already share His reasons.

It is more plausible to believe that God commands us to do certain acts because they are right. The only weakness of this conclusion is that this doesn't allow you to use God's commands to explain what it is for acts to be right. Either way of looking at the divine command theory, it fails.

Summary and Questions

6.82 This chapter has explored three metaethical theories: subjectivism, relativism, and the divine command theory. The first two of these theories are

attempts to explain what moral words mean. These views say that when you claim that an act is right you mean either that you approve of the act or that your society approves of it. These widely held views have many attractive features. They fit the idea that different people have different moral views, they make moral properties less mysterious, and they can also explain how we know what is right and why we care about this. A lot can be said for these views.

We then saw why most philosophers do not accept these metaethical views. First of all, they don't seem to fit our everyday moral experiences. We often come to be in favor of acts because we think that they are right. We also do not think that information about what people approve of is good evidence for what is right. Perhaps the most serious problem with these views, however, is that they do not leave room for ordinary moral disagreements. 6.83

The last sections of this chapter then investigated the divine command theory. This theory is not about the meaning of moral words but rather about what it is for acts to be right. This view too has many attractions, but you should only accept it if you can give a good response to the Euthyphro dilemma. 6.84

Based on the philosophical resources introduced in this chapter, consider the following questions: 6.85

1. Which basic idea motivates subjectivism, relativism, and the divine command theory? How plausible is this foundation?
2. How do subjectivists and relativists analyze the following claims:
   i. It is wrong to eat meat.
   ii. Mao should not have started the Great Leap Forward.
   iii. You should help the poor.
3. Use examples to explain why moral disagreements are a problem for subjectivists and relativists. Can you think of a response to this objection?
4. Does subjectivism or relativism fit better the idea that we usually want to do what we think is right?
5. How should divine command theorists attempt to tackle the Euthyphro dilemma?

Annotated Bibliography

Adams, Robert Merrihew (1979) "Divine Command Metaethics Modified," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, *7*(1), 66–79, full text available at http://