CHAPTER 5

The Euthyphro Problem

The *Euthyphro* recounts a conversation between Socrates and Euthryphro. The latter is planning to prosecute his father for an unintentional homicide in order to avoid any religious pollution that might accrue to him as a result of his association with the "murderer." Socrates' immediate reaction is amazement: "Good heavens, Euthyphro! and is your knowledge of religion and of things pious and impious so very exact that, supposing the circumstances to be as you state them, you are not afraid lest you too may be doing an impious thing in bringing an action against your father?" Euthyphro is unperturbed, however, professing "exact knowledge of all such matters." The conversation then turns to a discussion of the nature of piety. After some preliminary fencing, Euthyphro proposes that the pious or holy is what is loved by the gods, and this leads to the central question of the dialogue: "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods?"[1]

While the *Euthyphro* ends inconclusively, Socrates clearly favors the first alternative. Goodness or rightness or holiness is neither explained nor constituted by the gods loving it or approving it or willing it. On the contrary: what is good or right or holy is good or right or holy independently of anyone's attitudes toward it—including those of the gods. The gods love or approve of or will the good or right or holy because they discern its intrinsic excellence—an excellence it possesses independently of their approval or love of it.

Socrates's position has dominated Christian philosophical theology. Some important Christian thinkers have embraced the second alternative, however—what is good or right is good or right only because God wills or commands it. This view is called "divine command theory" or "theological voluntarism." The present chapter examines some historically significant versions of this theory. The remaining chapters in Part II discuss contemporary attempts to defend divine command theory against its critics and to offer positive arguments in support of it.

Some Classical Statements of Divine Command Theory

Pierre d'Ailly (1350–1420), Chancellor of the University of Paris and later bishop and cardinal, states the voluntarist position quite clearly: "nothing is good or evil

1 Plato, *Euthyphro*, in Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1. New York: Random House, 1937, pp. 385–6, 391.

which God necessarily or from the nature of the thing [loved or hated], loves or hates . . . Neither is any quality connected with justice on account of its own nature, but from sheer divine acceptance; nor is God just because He loves justice, but rather, the contrary is the case: something is possessed of justice because God loves it, that is accepts it . . . " "Nor therefore does He command good actions because they are good, or prohibit evil ones because they are evil; but . . . these are therefore good because they are commanded and evil because prohibited."[2]

D'Ailly's position is echoed by his student Jean de Gerson (1363–1429), who succeeded him as Chancellor: "nothing is evil except because prohibited [by God]; and nothing good except because accepted by God; and God does not therefore will and approve our actions because they are good, but they are therefore good because he approves them. Similarly, they are therefore evil because he prohibits and disapproves of them."[3]

Why would anyone endorse a position like this? For at least two closely connected reasons. The first is God's absolute sovereignty. If God is Lord of everything, then God depends on nothing, and nothing escapes his sovereignty. The claim that God's will is guided or shaped by independent standards of good and evil, right and wrong, threatens both assertions. For if God is *subject* to independent standards, he depends on them and so isn't Lord *of* those standards. This point emerges clearly in the following passage from Martin Luther:

> He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens [or is commanded] must be right. Cause and reason can be assigned for a creature's will, but not for the will of the Creator, unless you set up over him another creator.[4]

The view that God's will is subject to independent standards of right and wrong, good and evil, also appears to compromise his omnipotence. Thus, Descartes asserts that an "idea of good" did not impel God to create one thing rather than another. For example,

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2 Pierre d'Ailly, *Questions on the Books of the Sentences*, Book I, Question 9, Article 2, and Book I, Question 14, in Janine Marie Idziak, ed., *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979, pp. 63–4.

3 Jean de Gerson, *On the Spiritual Life of the Soul*, Reading I, Corollary X, in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, p. 66.

4 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 236–7.

> God did not will to create the world in time [that is, with a beginning] because he saw that it would be better thus than if he created it from all eternity; nor did he will the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right angles because he knew that they could not be otherwise. On the contrary, because he worked to create the world in time it is for that reason better than if he had created it from all eternity; and it is because he willed the three angles of a triangle to be necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so in other cases.

Indeed, "nothing at all can exist which does not depend on him. This is true not only of everything that subsists. but of all order, of every law, and of every reason of truth and goodness. . . . For if any reason for what is good had preceded his preordination, it would have determined him towards that which it was best to bring about." And that would be inconsistent with his omnipotence. "Supreme indifference in God is the supreme proof of his omnipotence." "Eternal truths," such as those of mathematics or morality, "depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, ordained them from all eternity."[5]

These considerations are reinforced by another. Humble submission to God's will is a central strand of theistic piety. Passage after passage of the Hebrew Bible or Christian New Testament suggest that rebellion or disobedience is the essence of sin. And "Islam" simply means submission to God's will. Couple this with the widely held view that God's revealed will[6] is the proper measure or standard of human conduct, and it may seem just obvious that the Lord of heaven and earth's omnipotent will can't be subject to an external standard. Why, then, have so many orthodox theists rejected it? To answer this question, let us turn to one of the most thorough attempts to respond to theological voluntarism—Ralph Cudworth's *A Treatise Concerning True and Immutable Morality* (1731).

Cudworth and Theological Voluntarism

Cudworth (1617–88) begins by calling attention to three apparent—and unpalatable—consequences of the claim "that there is nothing absolutely, intrinsically and

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5 René Descartes, "Reply to the Sixth Set of Objections," nos 6 and 8, *Objections and Replies*, in Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, trans., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 2. New York: Dover Publications, 1955, pp. 248, 250–51. The assumption that God could have made it the case that what is in fact true and necessary (that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, say, or that promise keeping is *prima facie* wrong) is not true or not necessary implies that an axiom of the stronger systems of modal logic, S4 and S5, is false: it is not the case that what is necessary is necessarily necessary. This axiom is intuitively plausible. It is not universally accepted, however, and some coherent systems of modal logic (S3, for instance) dispense with it. So its rejection by theological voluntarists like Descartes isn't a conclusive objection to divine command theory.

6 As revealed in the Bible, for example, or in the *Quran*.

naturally good and evil, just and unjust, antecedently to any positive command or prohibition of God; but that the arbitrary will and pleasure of God . . . by its commands and prohibitions, is the first and only rule and measure thereof."[7]

The first is that "nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked . . . but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent deity, must needs . . . forthwith become holy, just and righteous." If God were to command us to blaspheme, for example, or to torture an innocent child, doing so would be morally obligatory. The second is that "to love God," or protect the innocent, "is by nature an indifferent [that is, morally neutral] thing." Hatred of God or the persecution of the innocent becomes wrong only when or if God prohibits it. The third unpalatable implication is that it is consistent with God's essential nature "to command blasphemy, perjury, lying, etc." Commanding "the hatred of God," for example, "is not inconsistent with the *nature* of God," but only with what God has in fact commanded. (Cudworth 10–11, my emphasis)

And to these points we may add a fourth: theological voluntarism appears to undercut the very possibility of morality as divine command theorists understand it, namely, as unreserved obedience to what one rightly believes to be God's will. For, as George Rust (d. 1679) points out, if God isn't *essentially* just and truthful, if nothing in his nature prevents him from lying to us or breaking his covenant with us, then we have no basis for trusting him or for believing that what he has *declared* to be his will (in scripture, through the church, and so on) really *is* his will. A commitment to theological voluntarism thus makes the practice of morality impossible.[8]

Cudworth believes that consequences like these are unavoidable if "nothing [is] so essential to the Deity, as uncontrollable power and an arbitrary will, and therefore that God could not be God if there should be anything evil in its own nature which he could not do." (Cudworth 10) Descartes had argued from God's "uncontrollable power" to theological voluntarism. Cudworth, however, thinks that Descartes's argument should be stood on its head: since the consequences of theological voluntarism are unacceptable, we should reject the conception of divine omnipotence from which they follow.

In Cudworth's opinion, such things as triangles or promise breaking or contempt of God have fixed natures or essences. As a result, it is logically impossible to "make a body triangular . . . without having three angles equal to two right ones," for instance, or to permit or bring about an act of promising breaking which isn't morally wrong. And "the reason . . . is plain, because" things like these "imply a

7 Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning True and Immutable Morality*. London: J. & J. Knapton, 1731. (Reprint, New York: Garland, 1976.) p. 9. Henceforth Cudworth.

8 George Rust, "A Discourse of Truth." From Joseph Glanville, *Two Choice and Useful Treatises* (London: James Collins and Sam Lowndes, 1682), sections xi, xii. Reprinted in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, pp. 192–3. Is Rust's argument acceptable? That God is not *essentially* just and truthful only implies that God *might not have been* just and truthful. That God might not have been just and truthful, however, does not entail that he *isn't* just and truthful, or that we have no reason to believe that he is.

manifest contradiction." That triangles have angles which aren't equal to two right angles, or that acts of promising breaking aren't morally wrong, are necessarily false. (Cudworth 14–15)

In short, moral truths, like truths of mathematics and logic, are *necessarily* true, and their denials are logically impossible. So if God can make it false that promise breaking is wrong, say, or that hatred of God is morally evil, he can make necessary truths false.[9] Or, as Cudworth puts it, God would have the power to alter the essences of things, making it true that the angles of a triangle aren't equivalent to two right angles, for instance, or that human beings aren't animals, or that promise breaking isn't wrong. And this would have two absurd consequences.

First, if the "essences of things [are] dependent upon an arbitrary will in God," then *God's* essence is dependent on an arbitrary will of God. But in that case, God could have willed that "there . . . be no such thing as knowledge in God himself," or "that neither his own power nor knowledge should be infinite." For if God freely determines the constituents of his own essence, he could determine that it not include power or infinite power, or knowledge or infinite knowledge, and thus determine that there be logically possible worlds in which his power or knowledge is limited, and possible worlds in which he has no power or knows nothing at all. (Cudworth 33–4)

Second, the view in question "destroys all knowledge." (Ibid. 32) Why? Presumably because a logically impossible proposition entails all propositions.[10] So in

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9 Which is, of course, equivalent to making logically impossible propositions true.

10 There are at least two arguments for this. First, a proposition, q, is entailed by another proposition, p, if and only if it is logically impossible for p to be true and q to be false. Now suppose that p is a logically impossible proposition. If it is, then it is impossible for p to be true. But if it is impossible for p to be true, then, for any proposition q, it is impossible for p to be true and q to be false. So p entails q. This argument is question-begging in the present context, however, since it relies on the claim that logically impossible propositions can't be true—which is the point at issue. A second argument is less obviously circular. Cudworth makes the common assumption that logically impossible propositions are or entail contradictions. Suppose that they are or do. Then we can show that a logically impossible proposition entails all propositions. Let p and q be any propositions.

(1) p and not p (Assumption) Therefore,
(2) p (From [1])
(3) p or q (From [2]) Therefore,
(4) not-p (From [1]) Therefore,
(5) q (From 3 and 4)

If this is the sort of argument Cudworth has in mind, however, it may miss Descartes's point, namely, that God can make the impossible *possible* (and hence *not* self-contradictory). If God were to will that the angles of a triangle are not equal to two right angles, for example, or that promising breaking isn't wrong, he would thereby will that these things be possible (because true), and hence not self-contradictory.

making a logically impossible proposition true, God make *all* propositions true. If all propositions are true, however, then, for any proposition p, both p and its denial are true, and the distinction between true and false beliefs collapses. (The belief that God exists and the belief that he doesn't would both be true, for example, and similarly for any other belief.) And this undermines the very notion of knowledge. For "A knows that p" entails that A knows that not-p is false. And "A knows that not-p is false" entails "Not-p *is* false." Yet if all propositions are true, not-p *isn't* false. So knowledge, as Cudworth says, is "destroyed." If there is no such thing as knowledge, though, there is no such thing as knowledge of God's will, and the injunction to obey him becomes pointless.

But suppose we grant that theological voluntarism is problematic. Still, isn't it the *only* position compatible with God's absolute power and sovereignty? Cudworth thinks it is not.

Omnipotence is (roughly) the power to do anything possible. Since moral truths are necessarily true, their denials aren't logically possible. Hence the fact that God can't make it false that promise keeping is morally obligatory, say, or that infidelity is wrong doesn't count against his omnipotence. God's power ranges over contingent states of affairs, not necessary ones. "The will and power of God have an absolute, infinite and unlimited command upon the existences of all created things to make them to be, or not to be at pleasure; yet when things exist, they are what they are . . . by the necessity of their own nature."[11] (Cudworth 16) For example, God is free to either make or not make triangular surfaces, just as he pleases. But he is *not* free to make a triangular surface whose angles aren't equal to two right angles, for doing so isn't possible. Similarly, God is free to create or not create worlds in which promise breaking occurs. But he is *not* free to create a world in which promise breaking occurs and isn't morally wrong since that state of affairs, too, is logically impossible.

Yet in spite of Cudworth's protestations, isn't God's inability to bring about impossible states of affairs a limitation of his power, as Descartes thought? Cudworth believes it isn't. For "a contradiction is a non-entity, and therefore cannot be the object of divine power." (Cudworth 32)

Precisely what is Cudworth claiming? Perhaps he thinks that a contradiction can't be the object or content of an act of will. I can't, for example, will that 'twas

11 Cudworth doesn't mean that *each* of a thing's properties is essential to it but, rather, that each property that is *included in its nature or essence* is essential to it. God can't make a triangular surface whose angles aren't equal to two right angles, but he *is* free to make triangular surfaces that are red or not red, "at pleasure," since neither redness nor nonredness are included in the nature of a triangle. Compare Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974; originally published in London, 1787), chapter I, section III: Moral truths are *necessary* truths, and "omnipotence does not consist in a power to alter the [essential] nature of things, and to destroy necessary truth (for this is contradictory . . .) but in an absolute command over all *particular, external* existences, to create or destroy them, or produce any possible changes among them."

brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe since nonsensical strings of words don't pick out states of affairs that could be willed or chosen. So if contradictions are meaningless, as some have claimed, then they too can't be objects of possible acts of will. But the trouble with this is that self-contradictory propositions are *not* meaningless. It is precisely *because* we understand the meaning of "A triangular surface exists whose angles aren't equal to two right angles" that we realize that it cannot be true.

Or perhaps Cudworth is arguing that contradictions are *nothing* (nonentities) because they can't possibly *be* or obtain, whereas power ranges over actual and potential *being*. But if he is, his argument begs the question, for radical theological voluntarists like Descartes maintain that "contradictions" (triangles whose angles don't equal two right angles, for example) *can* be or obtain—if God wills them. Or perhaps Cudworth thinks that his claim is simply self-evident. The problem with this, though, is that it isn't evident to the theological voluntarist.

And *isn't* God's power in fact constrained or limited (and hence imperfect) if his creative decisions are limited by the Good and other essences, as Cudworth and others think? To this George Rust replies: "It is no imperfection for God to be determined to Good; it is no bondage, slavery, or contraction, to be bound up to the eternal laws of right and justice." On the contrary, "it is the greatest weakness and impotency in the world to have a power to evil . . . " Indeed, "the more any being partakes of reason and understanding, the worse is the imputation of acting arbitrariously . . . " Liberty to choose is a perfection only where there is a moral "indifferency in the things or actions about which it is conversant."[12] And Cudworth would agree.

But would or should a traditional theological voluntarist be impressed by this argument? Note first that, on her view, everything, including promise breaking or lying or taking an innocent life, *is* intrinsically indifferent. Things become good or bad only when and if God commands or prohibits them. Hence, it is no imperfection in God to be at liberty with respect to them. Nor does God's power to command or do what we believe to be evil (break a promise, say) imply a defect in his understanding, as the passage from Rust implies. For if there *are* no "eternal verities" or moral truths to know (as most traditional voluntarists believe), that God doesn't know them implies no intellectual defect. Finally, on the voluntarist's view, God's power to lie, say, or make lying right, is not a power to *do evil*, since good and evil are *constituted* or *made* by whatever God freely wills or prohibits.

Let us suppose, however, that attempts to show that perfect or unlimited *power* doesn't entail theological voluntarism are successful. Isn't it nonetheless true that voluntarism is a necessary consequence of God's *sovereignty*? Cudworth, and like-minded philosophers and theologians, think that it is not.

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12 Rust, "A Discourse of Truth," pp. 198–9; reprinted in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, pp. 196f.

Note first that not even the voluntarist can reasonably claim that *everything* depends on God's will, "for instance; this will itself; his own existence . . . ," and so on. "To suppose these dependent on his will, is so extravagant, that no one can assert it."[13] Nor can one reasonably assert that the fact that God's will and existence don't depend on his will limits his sovereignty.[14] So the fact that something exists or obtains which doesn't depend on God's will isn't *in principle* objectionable or inconsistent with his sovereignty.

Yet suppose that we grant this. Doesn't the doctrine of God's sovereignty nevertheless entail that everything *other than* God depends on his will? And doesn't that, in turn, imply that necessary truths in general, and moral truths in particular, do so? Cudworth thinks that it does not. That essences and necessary truths do not depend *on God's will* does not imply that they don't depend *on God*. The "essences and verities of things" are included in God's "eternal and immutable wisdom" which is, in turn, an expression of "his essential goodness."[15] (Cudworth 34–7) Eternal truths, including moral truths, aren't independent of God because they are part of his *nature*. Richard Price concurs. "None have reason to be offended when *morality* is represented as eternal and immutable; for it appears that is only saying that God himself is eternal and immutable, and making his nature the high and sacred original of virtue."[16] Whether this response is satisfactory depends on the plausibility of the sorts of view examined in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

Where do we stand at this point? Cudworth, and the theological mainstream, have presented an attractive alternative to theological voluntarism's conceptions of God's power and sovereignty. It is not clear that they have demonstrated its superiority, however. Many of their arguments against the theological voluntarist's conception of divine power beg the question,[17] and their response to the sovereignty objection

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13 Price, *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, chapter 5, p. 86. Cf. the discussion of this point in Chapter 4, pp. 65–6.

14 This can be challenged. Some have suggested that infinite power and total control entail an ability to commit suicide. So God's (continued) existence and willing *do* depend upon his will. The standard response is that since God necessarily exists, it is logically impossible that he (or anything else) bring about his nonexistence. This move won't impress a *radical* voluntarist like Descartes, however, because the radical voluntarist thinks that God's power and control aren't restricted to the possible.

15 Cudworth's conception, I think, is essentially Neoplatonic. The eternal essences are not just objects of the divine intellect. They are also expressions or reflections of the Good. But the Good for Cudworth, as for other Christian Platonists, isn't *distinct* from God; it is his being or nature or character.

16 Price, *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, chapter 5, p. 89.

17 Question begging is endemic in responses to radical voluntarism. For two more examples, consider these arguments of Richard Price: (1) that (1a) God is "eternally and

depends on controversial views about God's nature (that he is the Good, for example, or that necessary truths are contained in his intellect and have no being apart from it). The plausibility of their position also depends on the claim that basic moral truths are necessarily true, and that they are can be doubted. Suppose, for example, that moral utterances don't express propositions that are true or false but, instead, express attitudes of approval or disapproval, or commend or condemn certain courses of action. Since moral propositions aren't true (or false), on this view, they aren't necessarily true (or necessarily false), and so can't limit what God can do or command.[18]

We will turn to modern defenses of divine command theory in Chapter 6. But before doing so, it is worth considering one last argument of Cudworth's.

Acts of will create obligations where none previously existed *only* against a background of *already existing* obligations. For example, I have no obligation to lend Margaret my copy of Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. If I promise to do so, however, I *am* obligated to lend it to her, but only because of my *pre-existing obligation* to keep any promises I make. Similarly, if the legislature passes a law requiring everyone to drive on the right-hand side of the road, I am

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unalterably" (that is, necessarily) righteous and holy implies that (1b) there is an eternal and unalterable (that is, necessary) distinction between right and wrong, holiness and unholiness. (2) (2a) "To conceive of truth as depending on God's will, is to conceive of his intelligence and knowledge as depending on his will." (2b) Yet this is incompatible with the concept of will "which from the nature of it, *requires something* to guide and determine it." (Price, *Review*, chapter 5, p. 86f.) Neither argument either will or should convince the committed radical voluntarist. (1) If righteousness or holiness is a purely "formal" notion, as voluntarists sometimes imply (so that righteous and holy actions are *whatever* actions God wills that we perform), then (1b) can be admitted without abandoning voluntarism. Since there is no time at which God wills *every* action, there is, at each time, a distinction between those actions God wills us to perform and those he doesn't, that is, between those actions that are right and those that aren't. There is thus an "eternal and unalterable" distinction between right actions and actions that aren't right. Of course this rejoinder wouldn't satisfy Price since it leaves open the possibility that the *content* of God's will, and thus of rightness, varies and so isn't "unalterable." But could one *show* that this rejoinder is inadequate without begging the question against voluntarism (by rejecting its "formal" conception of righteousness, for example)? (2) As for the second argument, that the *contents* of God's intelligence, that is, truths, depend on his will doesn't imply that *God's intelligence* does so. So (2a) is false. Nor is it just obvious that the will "from the nature of it, requires something to guide and determine it." The possibility of a purely gratuitous choice has its defenders, and lies at the heart of the voluntarist's conception of a God of unlimited power and sovereignty. So to deny the possibility of gratuitous choice is to deny the coherence of her conception of deity. One can't, then, simply *assume* that gratuitous choice is impossible without begging the question against theological voluntarism.

18 This view seems to me false (see Chapter 4), but the point is that the anti-voluntarist's response rests on a number of controversial assumptions. Many important modern moral philosophers *are* non-cognitivists.

obligated to drive on the right, but only because of my prior obligation to obey "civil powers, that have lawful authority of commanding." (Cudworth 22) So while acts of will or commanding can, in a sense, create obligations where none previously existed, they cannot be the source of *all* obligations.

To say even this, however, is to concede too much since, "if we would speak . . . more accurately and precisely," we should "rather say" that acts of will do not "make anything morally good or evil, just and unjust, which nature had not made such before." For morally indifferent things, "considered materially in themselves," remain indifferent even after they have been promised, say, or legitimately commanded. The moral goodness of my keeping my promise to lend Margaret my copy of Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* lies not in the action of lending her my book, considered "in its own nature," but in the "formality of keeping faith and performing covenants." Similarly, the moral rightness of obeying traffic laws does not lie in the rightness of driving on the right or stopping at red lights as such, but in "the formality of yielding obedience to the commands of lawful authority." The goodness of *promise keeping*, on the other and, or the rightness of *obeying lawful authority* depends not on will or command but on the "eternal verities," that is, on necessary moral truths.[19] (Cudworth 20–26)

Yet why can't *God's* will be the source of our obligation to keep our promises, say, or to obey lawful temporal authority? Perhaps it can. Even so, one pivotal question remains unanswered. For what is the source of our obligation *to conform to God's will*? Could that, too, be grounded in a divine command?

It could not, for willing and commanding as such create no obligations. It is, rather, "natural justice or equity, which gives to one the *right* or *authority* of commanding, and begets in another *duty* and *obligation* to obedience." (My emphases) Willing or commanding creates obligations only where there is a *prior obligation to obey*. Willing or commanding, then, can't be the source of *all* obligation. If all obligation were grounded in God's will, for example, then the obligation to obey God[20] would be grounded in God's will. But it is "ridiculous and absurd" to

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19 Richard Price makes a similar point. "No will can make anything good and right which was not so antecedently and from eternity; or any action right that is not so in itself." Commands and promises don't alter the moral nature of *what* is commanded or promised, but produce "a change in the circumstances of the agent" so "that, what in consequence of it becomes obligatory, is not the same with what *before* was indifferent." What is obligatory is not lending my book to Margaret, or observing the Sabbath, considered in themselves, but keeping a promise I have made or "*obeying the divine will*, and *just authority*"—and that *these* things are obligatory is necessarily true. "Had there been no reason from the [necessary] natures of things for obeying God's will," for instance, "it is certain [that God's commands] could have induced no obligation . . . So far . . . is it from being possible, that any will or laws should *create* right; that they can have no effect, but in virtue of natural and antecedent right." (Price, *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, chapter 1, section iii, pp. 50–52.

20 Without which God's commands would lack authority.

suppose that "any one should make a positive law to require that others should be obliged, or bound to obey him . . . for if they were obliged before, then this law would be in vain, and to no purpose; and if they were not before obliged, then they could not be obliged by any positive law, because they were not previously bound to obey such a person's commands." If I already have an obligation to obey Mary's commands, for instance, it is pointless for her to command me to obey them. If I do not, then the mere fact that Mary tells me to do something puts me under no obligation to do it. It would seem, then, that even if God is the source of each of our other obligations, he cannot be the source of our obligation to obey God. (Cudworth 17–20)

Cudworth's argument is powerful and appears to leave the divine command theorist with only two alternatives. One is to deny that we are morally obligated to obey God's commands. The other is to limit the theory to obligations other than the obligation to obey God. The first seems counter-intuitive, although the divine command theorist may be able to partially dispel the appearance of oddity by providing *non*moral reasons for obedience such as God's power, or benevolence, or goodness.[21] The second alternative involves abandoning the fine generality of the theory, and leaves at least one obligation (namely, our obligation to obey God) unaccounted for. These and other issues will be explored further in the next three chapters.

21 These reasons are nonmoral in the sense that they don't (or needn't) appeal to moral *obligations*. Some of them may be moral in a broad sense, however. (As William Alston says, in "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," moral goodness isn't exhausted by the morally obligatory.) If my reason for obeying God is his goodness, for example, then my reason is moral in this wider sense.