# 2

# Divine Command Theory

In the minds of many people, there is a deep connection between morality and religion. Historically, of course, religious worldviews contain a moral outlook as part of an overall vision of the place and purpose of human beings in the world. People brought up in a religious community thus come to associate morality with religion. In addition to the historical connection between morality and religion, there are other possible connections between them. For instance, one might claim that moral knowledge requires revelation. However, in this chapter we are mainly interested in a particular way in which morality has been thought to depend on religion, or more precisely, on the commands of God. The thought, central to the divine command moral theory, is that morality itself—what is right and wrong, good and bad—depends on God's commands. It is God's act of commanding that we avoid certain types of action that makes those actions wrong, and similarly for other moral concepts.[1]

## 1. THE THEORY

The divine command theory about to be presented is what we may call an "unrestricted" view about the relation between God and morality because it proposes to explain the nature of both the right and the good in terms of God's commands. Later in the chapter (section 4), we will briefly consider a restricted version of the general idea that morality depends on God's commands—restricted because this version allows that some parts of morality do not depend on God's commands while other parts do.

In presenting the unrestricted divine command theory, let us begin with the theory of right conduct—that branch of moral theory that concerns the nature of right and wrong action. The main idea is that what makes an action right or wrong

depends on (and thus can be expressed in terms of) God's commands. Theologian Robert C. Mortimer explains the view this way:

> From the doctrine of God as Creator and source of all that is, it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is, still less because it seems expedient. It is right because God commands it. This means that there is a real distinction between right and wrong that is independent of what we happen to think. It is rooted in the nature and will of God. (Mortimer, 1950, 8)

Mortimer mentions the rightness of actions being based on God's commands (by which he means an action's being obligatory), but all the other moral categories can be similarly characterized. In order to focus on the divine command theory, it will help if we express the essentials of the theory in terms of a set of basic principles.

**Theory of Right Conduct**

An action A is *obligatory* if and only if (and because) God commands that we A.

An action A is *wrong* if and only if (and because) God commands that we not A.

An action A is *optional* if and only if (and because) it is not the case that God commands that we A (thus, not obligatory), and it is not the case that God commands that we not A (thus, not forbidden). Less cumbersomely: An action A is optional if and only if (and because) God neither commands that we A nor that we not A.

If we turn for a moment to the divine command theory's account of value—the goodness and badness of persons, things, experiences, and states of affairs—it is, again, facts about God's commands that make certain things good and others bad (or evil). Typically, in presenting a theory of value we are concerned with the nature of *intrinsic* goodness and badness. However, in connection with the divine command theory, it would be misleading at best to talk about what is intrinsically good—good in itself—since the very idea here is that nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Rather, on this theory it is something extrinsic to whatever is good or bad that confers upon it the value it has, namely, God's commands.[2] With this in mind, we can set forth the divine command theory of value:

**Theory of Value**

Something S is *good* if and only if (and because) God commands that we bring about or preserve S.[3]

Something S is *bad* if and only if (and because) God commands that we refrain from bringing about or preserving S.

Something S is *value-neutral* if and only if (and because) God neither commands that we bring about or preserve S nor that we refrain from bringing about or preserving S.

What is crucial for understanding the divine command theory is the idea that what makes an action right or wrong, good or bad, is nothing but brute facts about God's commands. The fact that he commands that we not kill, rape, torture, and so forth is what makes such actions wrong; their wrongness consists entirely in the fact that he commands that we not engage in such actions.[4] We will come back to this point in section 3.

How might the theory be used? One obvious way involves appealing to some source, such as the Bible, that purports to contain evidence of God's commands. According to Mortimer, for example, the Bible provides moral guidance in three principal ways. First, "it recalls and restates in simple and even violent language fundamental moral judgments which men are always in danger of forgetting or explaining away. It thus provides a norm and standard of human behavior in the broadest and simplest outline" (1950, 15). For instance, the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament and Christ's teachings regarding love for fellow human beings in the New Testament provide general moral rules for all human beings.

Second, in addition to moral rules, which we might call the letter of the moral law as commanded by God, we find evidence of the proper spirit for following God's commands. Ideally, humans are to strive toward holiness by following God's commands, not out of fear or self-interest, but out of love for God. Because the moral worth of persons has to do with their motives, this point about the spirit of morality presumably reveals the divine command theory's account of moral worth: the moral worth (and hence moral virtue) of individuals is measured by how closely they come to fulfilling God's commands out of the motive of love for God.

Finally, according to Mortimer, biblical revelation "suggests new emphases and new precepts, a new scale of human values which could not at all, or could not easily, have been [otherwise] perceived" (1950, 16). As an example Mortimer notes that the Incarnation, signifying the restoration of fallen human nature, instructs us that God has equal concern for all human beings, including the outcast, downtrodden, and despised. This equal concern means that all human beings have a special dignity and that consequently all humans are to be treated as ends in themselves. The idea of human dignity is a moral idea that might otherwise be obscure to human beings except for revelation.

## 2. DEFENDING THE THEORY

Let us now consider why anyone might accept the divine command theory—or at least anyone who is already a theist. There are four arguments to consider.

According to what I will call the *linguistic argument*, the divine command theory is true simply because "obligatory," when used in its moral sense, just means "commanded by God" (and so on for the other moral concepts). Consider someone who would deny the truth of any of the theory's moral principles. According to the linguistic argument, such a denial would be like denying the general claim that all bachelors are unmarried. If one denies this latter claim, while also intending to use the term "bachelor" as it is ordinarily used, then one shows a lack of understanding of the

concept of a bachelor. Similarly, so it might be claimed, if one denies the principles of the divine command theory, one thereby shows that one does not understand basic moral concepts of the obligatory, the good, and so on.

However, this appeal to meaning is implausible. Indeed, its implausibility is easily revealed by comparing the bachelor example with any of the divine command theory's principles. It certainly would show a lack of understanding on the part of someone to deny that all bachelors are unmarried, for it is manifestly clear that part of what we mean by the term "bachelor" is "someone who is unmarried." If we know that someone is a bachelor, the question of whether he is also unmarried is settled. Or to put it another way: if one claims that someone is a bachelor but then goes on to claim that he is married, one can be accused of contradicting oneself. But similar points cannot be made about moral concepts. If one claims that some action is obligatory but that the action is not commanded by God (perhaps because the speaker does not believe there is a God), one is not guilty of self-contradiction. So, the particular linguistic argument under consideration is not persuasive.[5]

*Religious arguments* for the theory appeal to theistic premises, for example, premises about the nature of God. Such arguments, then, attempt to provide support for this moral theory by appealing to nonmoral views, and thus represent an appeal to the standard of external support for evaluating moral theories that was explained in section 7 of chapter 1. We have already encountered one such argument in the first quote from Mortimer. He infers the truth of the divine command theory from the theistic claim that God is creator of all. We can elaborate Mortimer's line of thought as follows. God must be the creative source of morality and hence the divine command theory must be true, because if he were not the source of morality, then there would be some moral standards or principles independent of God. And if there are moral standards and principles independent of God, it follows that he would not be creator of all things. So, if God is creator of absolutely everything (except himself), then we are committed to the divine command theory.

I will pass over this argument for now since we return to it in the next section, where I will argue that the theist has good reason to question one of its basic assumptions.

According to the *argument from moral objectivity*, the only moral theory that provides an objective basis for a single true morality is the divine command theory. According to monotheism there is a single God, who issues a set of commands to all human beings, regardless of culture and historical setting. This means that, contrary to moral relativism, there is a single set of objectively true moral principles, and hence the kinds of problems that infect moral relativism do not apply to the divine command theory.[6]

An argument that is similar to the appeal to objectivity is the *authority of obligation argument*, according to which being under a moral obligation involves being subject to an authoritative demand. And this requires a divine authority in a position to issue commands. One way of developing this argument is to hold that obligation is an

inherently interpersonal concept involving a relation between the party who is under an obligation and someone who has authority to place demands upon that party. The argument (that we will explore in more detail later in the chapter) is that the only being capable of placing human beings under an obligation—who has the authority to do so—is a divine authority. Thus, concludes the argument, to make sense of moral obligation, we must suppose that there is a divine authority—someone who issues commands and thereby creates obligations.

One major worry about the objectivity and authority arguments is that there may be ways of accounting for these features of morality without appeal to God. The other moral theories featured in this book (besides relativism) can be understood as attempting to defend a single true morality whose moral principles are objectively true and furthermore whose principles of right conduct in particular can explain obligation and its authority. So, in order for these arguments to have force, it would have to be that all other moral theories fail to do the job. This remains to be seen. Let us now consider challenges to the theory.

## 3. THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

Many thinkers (both theists and nontheists) have claimed that the divine command theory should be rejected owing to a dilemma that takes its name from the title of one of Plato's dialogues, the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Euthyphro professes to know what piety is, and Socrates questions him about it. After Euthyphro gives examples of what he takes to be pious actions, the dialogue continues:

> Socr: Remember, then, that I did not ask you to tell me one or two of all the many pious actions that there are; I want to know what is characteristic of piety which makes all pious action pious. You said, I think, that there is one characteristic which makes all pious actions pious, and another characteristic which makes all impious actions impious. Do you remember? (Plato, 1976, 7)[7]

After some discussion, we get Euthyphro's answer:

> Euth: Well, I should say that piety is what all the gods love, and that impiety is what they all hate. (11)

Socrates then poses the crucial question:

> Socr: Now consider this question. Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it? (11)

Here, Socrates is asking about the relation between piety and the love of the gods. But the same question can be raised in connection with the relation between morality generally and the commands of God: does God command that we perform

obligatory actions because they are obligatory, or are some actions obligatory because God commands that we perform them? To fully appreciate the dilemma that results from having to choose between these two options, it will be useful to pause for a moment and review a few of the key tenets of traditional theistic belief.

According to many versions of theism, there is a single personal God who is an all-perfect being, possessing every perfection to the highest degree. God's perfections include omniscience (being all-knowing) and omnipotence (being all-powerful). In addition, the following three tenets further characterize God's nature:

> *Divine creator*: God is creator of everything (other than himself). God's omnipotence ensures that he can bring about anything possible, and his being creator is a matter of his realizing his omnipotence in bringing about this particular world from among the possible worlds he might have created instead.
>
> *Divine rationality*: God is a fully rational being; everything he does, he does for a good reason.
>
> *Divine moral perfection*: God, as a being, is morally good in the fullest possible sense: he possesses every moral perfection to the highest possible degree. If we were to make a list of these perfections, we could begin by saying that he is all-just, omnibenevolent (all-loving), all-merciful, and so forth.

I won't pause to elaborate these tenets, hoping that my readers will find them clear enough for present purposes.

The Euthyphro dilemma is a dilemma for the theist who accepts these claims about the nature of God. And, as noted above, it arises in connection with the question: How is morality related to God's commands? There are two possibilities. Either morality depends on God's commands, or it does not. To be more precise, the two options are these. Either:

1. Morality depends entirely on God's commands: what makes an action right or wrong and what makes something good or bad are just God's commands.

or

2. Actions have features that make them right or wrong, and states of affairs, experiences, and character traits have features that make them good or bad. There are thus standards of right and wrong, good and bad that specify those features of actions that make them right or wrong and those features of states of affairs, experiences, and character traits that make them good or bad. Being omniscient, God has complete knowledge of such standards, and being completely good (and caring for human beings) he issues commands to humanity that conform to this knowledge.

The first option represents the unrestricted divine command theory. The second option represents the rejection of this theory because it presupposes that, independently of God's commands, there are moral standards that specify those features of actions, character traits, and so forth that make them right or wrong, good or bad.

The dilemma can now be easily explained. In response to the question about how God and morality are related, either the theist accepts the divine command theory (option 1) or not (option 2). Whichever option one takes, one runs afoul of one or more of the basic theistic tenets mentioned above. Let us see why.

First, if one embraces the divine command theory, then one seems forced to give up the thesis of divine rationality, since it looks as if (contrary to this thesis) God does not have good reasons for the commands he issues. As I have been saying, according to the divine command theory, what *makes* an action obligatory is the fact that God commands that we do it; he does not command us to not kill and not steal because they are independently wrong. It is his commands, and his commands only, that make such actions wrong. But apparently this means that God's commands are arbitrary, mere whims; he might just as well command human beings to kill and steal as command humans to not kill and steal. After all, on this version of the theory, it isn't the fact that such actions are harmful to the victim, for example, that makes them wrong. But then if God's commands are not based on facts about actions that make them wrong, it looks as if he has no good reason whatsoever to issue one set of commands over another. Call this the *arbitrary whim* problem—a problem that is very commonly raised against the divine command theory. One challenge, then, to the divine command theorist (who wants to hold on to the divine rationality thesis) is to explain how this problem can be avoided.[8]

The arbitrariness worry concerns God's commands. The unrestricted divine command theory also has trouble with the claim that God (as a being) is perfectly good. According to this version of the theory, what makes someone a morally good individual (an individual having moral worth) is that he or she follows God's commands out of love for God. This would imply that God's own goodness or moral worth as a being is a matter of God's following commands that he gives to himself out of love for himself. But, as Philip Quinn notes in explaining what we may call the *divine goodness* problem, "since there is no moral value in always being obedient to self-addressed commands, the divine command theorist is unable to maintain that God is morally good" (Quinn, 2006, 75). And, of course, this means that the divine command theorist is forced to give up the thesis of God's divine moral goodness.

So we have before us one horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. If the theist accepts the divine command theory, then in light of the implications of the theory regarding arbitrariness and divine goodness, she must give up the theses of divine rationality and divine moral perfection. But clearly it would be too much for the theist to give up these theses, particularly the thesis of divine moral perfection, since it is the basis for devotion and worship. If this is correct, the theist must reject the divine command theory that we've been considering. But then if the theist rejects the theory, her view seems to require rejecting the thesis that God is creator of all. After all, if we admit that the right and the good are not a matter of God's commands, aren't we saying that there exists a moral code or standard that is independent of God? And if so, then he is not creator of everything. Mortimer's religious argument, recall, was to the effect that we have to accept the divine command theory in light of the idea

of God as creator. This is the second horn of the dilemma. Call it the *divine creation* problem. So, whether the theist accepts the divine command theory (option 1) or not (option 2), it looks as if she must give up an important tenet of theistic belief about God. Hence, the theist faces a dilemma.

Now one way in which one might address the dilemma is to reject the divine command theory, claim that there are moral standards or principles that are independent of God—that God does not create—and argue that this option does not really compromise the divine creation thesis. How can this be? Many philosophers hold that fundamental moral standards, truths, and principles are not only true, but necessarily true. A truth is necessary when it is not possible for it to be false. Consider the mathematical proposition that 2 + 2 = 4. This is not only true, but necessarily so: it is not possible for the equation to be otherwise. God couldn't make 2 + 2 turn out to be 5 given the quantities designated by 2 and by 5 and given what "+" and "=" mean. But so what? As many theologians have argued, the fact that God cannot do or bring about what is impossible represents no genuine limit on God's omnipotence. So if we understand very basic moral principles to be necessarily true, we can likewise point out that it is no real limit on God's omnipotence that the truth of those principles does not depend on God's commands. If we reconsider the claim about God as creator, then we should reformulate it to say that, as omnipotent, God has power over everything that is not a matter of necessity. In particular, God is creator of the entire physical universe including human beings, whose existence is certainly not a necessary fact.

So one way to get out of the dilemma created by the tension between the theistic tenets and the divine command theory is to reject the theory, and refine one's understanding of what it means to say God is creator.

Can theists live with this solution to the dilemma? It is worth noting that many theists reject the divine command theory and embrace the sort of solution just proposed. For instance, Franz Brentano (1838–1917), who early in his life was a Catholic priest, wrote: "According to the Christian, the commandment to love our neighbor is right not in virtue of the fact that God requires it; God requires it in virtue of the fact that it is naturally right" ([1889] 1969, 41–42). But at this point it is important to remember that we have been examining an unrestricted view of the relation between God's commands and morality. Suppose one backs away from the claim that all of morality—the right *and* the good—depend simply on God's commands? As we are about to see, rejecting this assumption allows the theist a way to go through the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma without being impaled on either horn. Let us take a closer look.

## 4. RESTRICTING THE THEORY

There is a middle way for the theist that preserves the idea that God's commands play a foundational role in morality, while at the same time avoiding the problems

just noted in connection with the Euthyphro dilemma. After all, even if it is implausible to suppose that all of morality depends on God's commands, it would be fallacious to immediately conclude that none of it is so dependent. Compare: it is not the case that all animals are carnivorous, but from this fact alone it does not follow that no animals are carnivorous. And indeed it is false that no animals are carnivorous. So, according to a restricted version of the theory, it is not the case that *all* of morality is based on God's commands. And this can be explained by the fact that goodness and obligation are importantly different so that the former is to be explained without appeal to God's commands, although a complete explanation of the latter requires reference to God's commands. Let us briefly consider the central ideas behind this version that I will summarize by stating four guiding ideas.[9]

First, on a restricted view, God's goodness is a matter of his possessing the various perfections to the greatest possible extent, including such perfections as being all-loving, all-merciful, and all-just. These characteristics are what *make* God supremely good. And as a supremely good being, God serves as the very paradigm of goodness. Thus, the problem of making sense of God's goodness that bedevils the unrestricted view does not arise on this view.

Second, God's goodness is a partial basis for an account of moral obligation. The idea is that certain actions such as torturing an innocent person for fun are incompatible with God's nature as an all-loving, all-just, all-merciful being; they are actions that necessarily God would never perform. Such actions therefore deserve the title of "bad actions." By contrast, actions whose performance God would necessarily not fail to perform owing to the moral quality of his nature are good actions. So, we have a conception of actions being good or bad owing to how they are related to the various excellences or virtues that constitute God's moral goodness.

But from the fact that an action is one that would be good to perform, it does not automatically follow that one has an obligation to perform the action. This is because the goodness of something only implies that the thing in question is worthy of being desired or, because we are concerned with actions, worthy of being performed. Something more is needed in order to explain why certain good actions (and not others) are not only good to do but required or obligatory. Even if we say that the sorts of actions that result from the exercise of one or another virtuous character trait are not only worthy of being performed, but ones whose performance would be excellent, we need more to explain obligation. After all, not all actions that would be worthy of being performed, indeed excellent—such as actions of supreme self-sacrifice—are also morally required. That is, it is common to recognize actions that it would be good to do but are "beyond the call of duty." Such actions are called "supererogatory."

Third, according to the restricted view, this additional obligation-making element has to do with the fact that the concept of moral obligation is arguably a social concept, in the sense that for one individual to be under a moral obligation to perform some action that action must be one that is demanded of her. And demands naturally presuppose some sort of relationship among rational agents: the one making the demand and the one upon whom the demand is being made.[10]

One might suppose that the moral conventions that have arisen in one's society constitute the social aspect of obligation—those conventions involve the society imposing demands upon its members. But the obvious problem with this proposal is that the moral conventions that a society happens to have may include "requirements" that are clearly morally outrageous, and may fail to include requirements that represent legitimate moral demands. Moreover, different societies may have conflicting moral norms—a theme to be explored in the next chapter on relativism. As Robert Adams remarks,

> These are all reasons for thinking, as most moralists have, that actual human social requirements are simply not good enough to constitute the basis of moral obligation. (Adams, 1999, 248)

So, fourth, the proposal by the restricted divine command theorist is that God and only God can play the role of the person to whom (at least ultimately) all moral demands are owed, as one who has the authority to demand of humans that they perform certain actions and avoid others. Moral requirements or obligations on this view depend (partly) upon God's commands. The fact that an action is not only a good action but one that God commands that we perform is what makes obligatory actions obligatory.[11]

We may now summarize the basic idea behind the restricted divine command theory of right conduct as follows:

> **RDCT** An action is *obligatory* if and only if (and because) that act is morally good *and* it is commanded by God. Wrong actions are ones that are morally bad *and* which God commands that we not perform. All other actions are optional.

Notice three features of this view. First, it understands goodness and badness to be basic (within the realm of moral concepts) and defines or characterizes rightness and wrongness in terms of what is good and bad. With respect to the structure of moral theory, the theory of value is more basic than the theory of right. Second, as already mentioned, the view does not explain God's goodness in terms of his commands, so it avoids the divine goodness problem. But also, it avoids the arbitrariness problem because, as Adams (1999, 264) puts it, "those commands spring from God's character, which is the standard of goodness." God's commands are thus not arbitrary—his own nature serves as a basis for distinguishing good from bad actions which is in turn a basis for which actions he commands. Third, on this view God is the moral center of the universe for two reasons. First, as explained, God is the ultimate realization of moral goodness and stands as the paradigm of moral goodness. Second, it takes God's commands (together with facts about the relation between actions and moral goodness) to fully explain the deontic status of action.

What about the second horn involving God as creator? After all, it looks as if the restricted view implies that there are principles or standards of goodness including, for example, that being all-loving is a good character trait, that are independent

of God; that do not owe their being correct to God's creative activity. God, being good, is subject to these standards, but he does not create them. Now we have already noted that it is open to a theist to say that basic moral standards are necessarily true and that there being such truths that God does not create does not really compromise God's creative power, properly understood. But the third point from the previous paragraph—about God being the moral center of the universe—seems to completely avoid any tension involving God as creator. This is because the proposal being suggested is that God *is* goodness. So as for the question "What makes these traits or features of God good-making ones?" the answer is "Just because they are features of God." If this makes sense and is correct, then the theist does not have to say that God is subject to independently existing standards.

We now have two versions of the divine command theory before us, an unrestricted and a restricted version, so let us turn to an evaluation of them.

## 5. EVALUATION OF THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

In evaluating the divine command theory, let us consider what can be said for and against the theory in both its unrestricted and restricted versions, making use of the standards for evaluating moral theories introduced in section 7 of chapter 1.

*Consistency, determinacy, and applicability.* First, if we assume that God's commands are consistent and that he has revealed enough detail about his commands to guide our moral decisions, then we may conclude that both versions of the theory satisfy the standards of consistency and determinacy. But it is worth noting that there are important issues about what constitutes a command of God and how determinate those commands are. If it turns out that the commands God has given to human beings are very general in their nature—the Ten Commandments suppose—then appealing to these rules in trying to determine the deontic status of a great many actions will require moral judgment. In this case, the theory will itself be limited in what conclusions can be drawn from a simple application of its principles; in this respect it will be much like the view of W. D. Ross that is featured in chapter 9.

While the standard of determinacy has to do with the range of actions whose deontic status is fixed by God's commands—the broader the range, the more determinate the theory—the applicability standard has to do with whether and how God's commands are accessible to human beings. If God issues a set of very determinate commands, but does not convey them to human beings, then the determinacy standard is met, but not the applicability standard. Regarding applicability, many if not most theists hold that God's commands are revealed to human beings through scripture, a point made by Mortimer. If this is correct *and* God's commands are reasonably determinate (an issue that we shall pass over) then all in all the divine command theory does reasonably well on the three criteria in question.

*Intuitive appeal.* Second, according to the standard of intuitive appeal, a moral theory should develop and make sense of plausible beliefs about morality. One such belief (held by many) is that there is a deep connection between morality and religion. Of course, this idea is what guides the development of the divine command theory, and so one might think that this standard favors the divine command theory—that the divine command theory, unlike competing theories, captures the belief in question. And so one might suppose that if one rejects the divine command theory, one has to reject what is surely a widely shared belief among theists.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that rejection of the unrestricted divine command theory is at odds with what religious people, including many fundamentalist Christians, really believe about the basis of right and wrong. In a very interesting study, psychologist Larry Nucci interviewed certain groups of fundamentalist Christian students about their understanding of the relation between God's commands, the Bible, and morality.

One group of subjects was composed of 64 fundamentalist Christian children and teenagers who were members of the Dutch reform Calvinist denomination attending Calvinist parochial school in Chicago. One of the questions he put to his subjects was this: "Suppose God has commanded [it is written in the Bible] that Christians *should* steal. Would it then be right for a Christian to steal?" (Nucci, 1986, 167). What Nucci found was that 69 percent of the subjects ages 10 to 13 and 81 percent of subjects ages 14 to 17 said no. Furthermore, when students in this study were asked whether God would ever command us to steal, students often gave the sort of response offered by a 15-year-old female subject who said that God would never issue such a command because "it's not the right thing to do, and he's perfect, and if he's stealing, he can't be perfect" (Nucci, 1986, 168). The idea that God's issuing such a command (and thus endorsing stealing and other such harmful actions) is not consistent with God's nature fits nicely with the basic tenets of the restricted divine command theory. But this leaves open the question of whether these subjects think that obligation depends in some way on God's commands. The study of another group of fundamentalist children addressed this question.

The group in question was composed of some Amish and some Mennonite children and teenagers ranging in age from 10 to 17 who attended the same fundamentalist school. Among other things, they were asked questions such as the following: "Suppose God had not given us a law about stealing, would it be all right to steal?" The result was that 70 to 100 percent of the subjects in each age category said that actions such as stealing, hitting, and slander would be wrong even if God had not commanded that we not perform them. Furthermore, when asked to justify this claim, most subjects gave reasons that made reference to the nature of the actions in question. For instance, one 17-year-old Amish teen, when asked why he thought slander would be wrong even if God or Christ had not told human beings to avoid slander explained, "it still wouldn't be right . . . [because] it is putting another person down . . . and I think no one has the right to do that" (Nucci, 1986, 165–66). The conclusion Nucci draws from this sort of evidence is that a majority of these

fundamentalist Christians think that what makes certain actions wrong concerns the nature of the actions including their effects, period. And this in turn suggests that they do not think that obligation depends even in part on God's commands.

Suppose one takes the subjects of Nucci's study to be representative of fundamentalist Christian thinking about goodness and obligation. How does this bear on the correctness of divine command theory? Not much, one might think. After all, facts about what some people *believe* about the relation between God's commands and morality is not sufficient to show that a theory not in accord with such beliefs is incorrect. But remember, according to the criterion of intuitive appeal, it does count somewhat in favor of a theory if the theory captures people's beliefs about morality. And one might suppose that at least for Christians, and perhaps other monotheists, the divine command theory captures the Christian conviction that God "creates" morality in the way that Mortimer seems to advocate. And if so, then this counts at least somewhat in favor of the divine command theory. But in light of Nucci's study one has reason to doubt that the divine command theory really does capture the Christian's beliefs about God and morality. Perhaps Brentano's claim, quoted toward the end of the previous section, captures the thought of most Christians: God requires certain actions because they are "naturally" right.

*External support*. The attempt by Mortimer and others to argue from religious claims about God (he is creator of all) to the truth of the unrestricted version of the theory represents an appeal to the standard of external support. However, we have found reason to reject at least the unrestricted divine command theory.[12] In any case, I think what can be said is that for theists who think that God plays some essential role in explaining at least some aspects of morality, the restricted divine command theory fits with theistic belief and thus (to the extent that such beliefs are warranted) the theory thereby acquires some external support.

*Internal support and explanatory power*. Finally, let us suppose that the principles of right conduct and value can be used (together with facts about what God commands) to derive our considered moral beliefs. The theory will thereby satisfy the standard of internal support. But again, the Euthyphro dilemma helps us see that it is not God's commands alone that make something right or wrong, good or bad, and so the unrestricted divine command theory fails to plausibly explain what makes something right or wrong, good or bad; it fails to satisfy the standard of explanatory power. This means that it fails to satisfy the main theoretical aim of a moral theory of providing moral criteria for the right and the good.

The restricted version is far more promising on this count since it treats the nature of goodness and badness as being independent of God's commands and explains right and wrong partly in terms of goodness and badness and partly in terms of God's commands. The major worry that remains is whether God's commands are really essential in explaining the deontic status of actions. There are two questions here. First, is the concept of obligation an inherently social concept of the sort the

restricted divine command theorist supposes? Some philosophers have argued that the sorts of demand characteristic of moral obligation are grounded in the sorts of reasons there are for performing some actions and avoiding others. For instance, that an action would cause a sentient creature gratuitous harm may fully explain why the act is morally wrong. No need to bring into the picture some additional agent cast in the role of demander.[13] But even if the social conception of obligation is correct, there is the second question of whether God and God alone can play the role of demander. For instance, Stephen Darwall (2006) defends a view that purports to explain obligation entirely in terms of certain interpersonal relations among human beings. His view attempts to avoid the relativist worries raised in the previous section about basing obligation on the moral norms that happen to be in force in a society at some time. Here is not the place to explore this matter further. In any case, Darwall's view has certain affinities to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant that we examine in chapter 8.

Suppose, finally, that the restricted divine command theorists are right, and for there to be genuine moral obligations there must be a God who issues commands. And suppose also that there is no such God. One immediate implication is that strictly speaking there would be no "genuine obligations," nor would there exist a being who fully and perfectly exemplifies the various good-making excellences of character. But nevertheless, moral virtue would still be possible for human beings, even if humans cannot realize such traits as generosity, love, and mercy as fully as could God. And virtue could serve as a basis for distinguishing good from bad actions. As for obligation, humans would be stuck with something less than the full-blooded kind that requires God and his commands.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Rejecting the divine command theory does not mean that religion generally, and God's commands in particular, are of no importance for morality. Certainly, assuming there is a God of the sort believed in by many theists, one can look to revelation for some moral guidance. Moreover, one can look to revelation for some indication of what makes an action right or wrong or some state of affairs good or bad. Christ's teachings concerning love might be construed as advocating an ethic of universal benevolence—the idea behind the consequentialist moral theory that we will consider in chapters 5 and 6. Mortimer, recall, claims that the Bible contains the idea that all humans possess a kind of dignity—an idea that is central in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which we take up in chapter 8. The idea that human beings are created by God and designed to fulfill certain purposes is, of course, an idea to be found in the Bible; this idea is featured in Thomas Aquinas's moral theory, which we examine in chapter 4.

Whereas the divine command theory attempts to ground morality (or at least obligation) on the will of God—his commands—the theory known as moral relativ-

ism attempts to ground morality on the will of society. Both views share the idea that morality is importantly connected to the dictates of some authority, but they are otherwise quite different. Moral relativism is the subject of the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. The divine *command* theory is a species of a more generic type of moral theory often called "theological voluntarism," according to which morality depends on one or another volitional activity of God. For instance, instead of understanding the nature of right and wrong in terms of God's commands, other forms of the generic view make morality depend on what God *wills* or *intends* with regard to human action. For a discussion of the significance of such differences in the formulation of such theological views, see Murphy, 2008 cited in Further Reading.

2. We might attempt to capture something of the contrast between things with intrinsic value and things having extrinsic value by distinguishing those things with regard to which God issues commands—things having what we might call fundamental goodness or badness—from those things that, because they are instrumental in bringing about what is fundamentally good or bad, can be said to have derivative value. But since this complication does not matter for our purposes, I will ignore it.

3. Strictly speaking, this characterization makes everything that is intrinsically good something that human beings are in a position to do something about. But surely there could be things or states of affairs that are intrinsically good but are beyond the range of what humans can either bring about or preserve (perhaps because they are in some remote corner of the universe that we will never experience). (I thank Robert Audi for calling my attention to this problem.) To fix this defect, either we can restrict these characterizations to only those things, experiences, and states of affairs that humans can do something about, or we could replace reference to what God does and does not command with reference to what God does and does not approve of. (God may approve of all sorts of things that simply do not relate to human existence.) Since it is the divine command theory, I have chosen to express both the principles of right conduct and the principles of value in terms of God's commands. So we are to understand the principles of intrinsic value as restricted in the manner just explained.

4. Throughout, and merely for convenience, I use the masculine pronoun to refer to God.

5. This does not mean that all possible versions of the linguistic argument are as easily refuted. Sophisticated linguistic arguments that cannot be considered here are to be found in, e.g., Adams, 1973, 1979.

6. We study moral relativism and its problems in the next chapter.

7. All references to Plato's *Euthyphro* are from Plato, 1976 (translated version).

8. See for example Zangwill, 2011b.

9. For an elaboration and defense of the sort of view in question, see Adams, 1999.

10. Notice that the concept of goodness does not appear to be a social concept in the way obligation appears to be. This difference is supposed to help explain why the good and the right can be treated differently by divine command theorists. For a discussion of this point, see Adams, 1999, 233.

11. Of course, the arbitrariness problem will arise all over again unless God has some reason why he commands that we perform certain actions from among the ones that are good.

12. Indeed, reflection on the Euthyphro dilemma reveals why, despite initial appearances, the theory is at odds with some basic tenets of theism, giving the theist reason to reject this version of the theory. It might initially seem ironic that the divine command theory conflicts with certain religious tenets, but we just saw from Nucci's study that many (young) fundamentalists implicitly reject the divine command theory in favor of the idea that what is right or wrong is not just a matter of God's commands. Notice that in the Nucci study featuring Amish and Mennonite children who were asked about the deontic status of actions on the supposition that God had not commanded we refrain from doing those actions, their answers suggest that God's commands play no role in explaining the wrongness of actions in question.

13. See also Murphy, 2008, who raises worries about whether the restricted version of the divine command theory is well motivated, worries having to do with the alleged social nature of obligation.

## FURTHER READING

### Philosophical Literature

Adams, Robert M. 1973. "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness." In *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder. New York: Doubleday. Reprinted in Helm, 1981. A sophisticated defense of the divine command theory.

———. 1999. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A defense of restricted divine command theory.

Alston, William P. 1990. "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists." In *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael D. Beaty. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Alston's main suggestion is to restrict the divine command theory in the manner explained in this chapter.

Berg, Jonathan. 1993. "How Can Morality Depend on Religion?" In *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer. Cambridge: Blackwell. Covers much the same ground as this chapter. Includes a select bibliography.

Hare, John. 2006. *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*. Oxford: Blackwell. Provides more historical detail than contained in his *Stanford Encyclopedia* article, as well as a defense of divine command theory.

———. 2009. "Religion and Morality." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu. An informative historical overview of views about the connection between morality and religion in Western thought.

Helm, Paul, ed. 1981. *Divine Commands and Morality.* New York: Oxford University Press. Twelve essays (many of them at an advanced level) by leading philosophers debating the divine command theory. Includes a useful introductory essay by the editor plus a bibliography.

Murphy, Mark. 2002. *An Essay on Divine Authority*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. An exploration of whether and to what extent God has authority over created rational beings.

———. 2008. "Theological Voluntarism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu. Highly recommended as the next item on this list to read for a concise yet thorough overview of the various philosophical views that make God central to morality.

Quinn, Philip. 1978. *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A sophisticated defense of the divine command theory.

———. 2006. "Theological Voluntarism." *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Very readable overview and defense of a restricted form of divine command theory. Less comprehensive in its coverage of certain aspects of theological voluntarism than Murphy's article of the same title.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. 2009. *Morality Without God?* Oxford: Oxford University Press. A short, lively defense of the view that morality exists independently of God. Highly recommended.

Wielenberg, Eric. 2005. *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2, "God and Morality," develops a thorough and penetrating critical examination of the attempt to establish a connection between God and morality. Of particular interest is the author's criticisms of various versions of divine command theory, including the sort of restricted view defended by Adams.

## Empirical Literature

Nucci, Larry. 1986. "Children's Conceptions of Morality, Social Convention, and Religious Prescription." In *Moral Dilemmas: Philosophical and Psychological Reconsiderations of the Development of Moral Reasoning*, ed. C. Harding. Chicago: Precedent Press. Some results of this study are presented in section 5 of this chapter.