

### **Divine Command Theory**

The Divine Command Theory is strongly associated with the role that religion, and more specifically God, plays in ethical conduct. This theory represents the idea that God commands what is good and what is bad. In other words, right and wrong is the law of God. (Frankena, 1973, 28) Acting in one's own best interest and for the greatest good is ethical conduct that God has commanded. To stray away from ethical conduct is forbidden by God. Unfortunately acting in one's own best interest may not be in tune with working for the greatest good. For example, if a soldier in the middle of battle can save his own life by abandoning his mission and hiding, he may be sacrificing the greatest good. He would be saving his own life, which is likely in his own best interest. However, he would not be working for the greatest good, which is fighting for his country. With such contradictions, many philosophers and religious thinkers questioned or even rejected Divine Command Theory, including Socrates. (Frankena, 1973, 29) Socrates asked questions about Divine Command Theory. He wanted to try to decipher how it was even possible to know what God wanted and whether God had really established right and wrong in the universe. (Frankena, 1973, 29) Many people are comfortable accepting that God is good. Therefore, according to the many, what God wants is for good to happen. Many people willingly accept at face value that God's word establishes what is right and what is wrong. Others question the foundation of right and wrong in the universe. Some people have argued that God merely reveals what is right and wrong and does not necessarily will it to happen. (Frankena, 1973, 29) In accord with this idea is the willpower that man has to act ethically according to the commands of God. It is his or her choice to make decisions based on what God sets forth as right and wrong. One could argue that Divine Command Theory is

teleological in nature, as it encourages individuals to act in a manner that gives strong consideration to consequences. God would not want people acting without knowing that the outcome would produce the greatest good. In contrast, the counter-argument is that Divine Command Theory is really deontological in that it focuses on acting in good intentions. They should have faith that good will come of decisions made. Having faith and intending to do good does not necessarily guarantee outcomes of the greatest good. When the United States government began the welfare program, it intended to help out people down on their luck. However, many people took advantage of the program over the years by accepting help when they clearly did not need it. In opposition to this deontological concept, people might argue that God only helps those who help themselves, meaning that people who abused welfare programs were not operating under the notion of Divine Command Theory. If a person on welfare did everything they could to get on their own feet, then they would be doing what is in their own best interest and the greatest good, which is what the Divine Command Theory supports.

Case #4 of the Warner case studies is an example of where Divine Command Theory offers direction for John the soldier. According to Divine Command Theory, John should do what God commands as right, which is the greatest good for himself and others. In this case, it's clear that John should share some of the water and drink some of it himself. By hoarding all the water to himself, he is obviously not doing good by Divine Command Theory. Of course, John would have to accept the idea that God has set forth what is right and wrong, and then, John would have to act accordingly.

In Case #5 of the Warner case studies, the attorney faces a dilemma about whether or not to reveal evidence. By using Divine Command Theory, the attorney would want to pursue a course of action that God deemed as good, or morally right. The question is: is it moral to reveal evidence or is it moral to put an evildoer in prison? The attorney might be reasonably

confident that, if the suspect is exonerated, he is highly likely to commit further gruesome crimes. Certainly, the attorney has to consider this thought above the profit that they might make or being completely honest. Divine Command Theory does not promote the idea of honesty. Rather, it supports the idea that individuals do what is right by God. For the greatest good of all concerned, the attorney has to seriously consider allowing the suspect to go to prison, which keeps innocent citizens safe.

Divine Command Theory certainly is a strong form of ethics that people can use to live their daily lives. Of course, people have been using God's word in their lives for centuries, especially when confronted with difficult decisions. According to Divine Command Theory, God commands what is right or wrong. In this manner, people are left to interpret the meaning of God's word. In history, the interpretation of God's word has led many people to perform great deeds to help others. Unfortunately, some people have chosen to strongly interpret the word of God to commit atrocities against other people. Such atrocities have included the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. In these tragic historical events, people used the word of God in their own way to murder many people. Whatever ethical theory a person subscribes to, they are responsible for the consequences of their actions and decisions. If a person lives their life by Divine Command Theory, they still have to make decisions based on the command of God. This means that the individual has a choice of whether to accept the command as ethical or not. Believing that it was God's command to kill an innocent victim is certainly unethical.

### **References**

Warner, Douglas W. The Basis for Ethical Conduct/Ethics for Decision-Making Case Studies. 5th ed. 1984.

Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.