

The Epistemological Objection to Divine Command Ethics

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Abstract

According to the epistemological objection to divine command ethics, if morality is grounded in God's commands, then those who do not believe in God cannot have moral knowledge. This objection has been raised – and answered before. However, the objection persists, and I argue here that it has not been substantially improved upon and does not deserve a second hearing. Whether or not God's commands provide the basis of moral facts does not imply that unbelievers cannot have moral knowledge, since the ability to know that something is true does not depend on our ability to know what makes it true.

"Divine Command Ethics" refers to a cluster of very similar ethical theories. The one feature they all have in common is a very close relationship between the will of God and moral obligation. In one version (a version propounded by Robert Adams), the property of being morally right or wrong is identical with the property of being respectively commanded or forbidden by God. In another version (defended by the late Philip Quinn), the relationship is a causal one where it is God's will that make acts right or wrong. Other variants that exist tend to closely resemble one or the other of these two.¹

One objection, not just to divine command ethics but to theologically grounded ethics in general, has been the claim that if morality had its basis in God, then people who do not believe in God would not know right from wrong. But surely there are plenty of non-believers who do know right from wrong (even if, like believers, they

¹ Contrary to rare allegations in the literature, *no* current version of divine command ethics holds that the words "right" or "wrong" simply *mean* (i.e. are semantically equivalent to) "commanded by God" or "forbidden by God." It is regrettable that such misrepresentation still persists, albeit sporadically, in spite of much clarification and response from divine command ethicists.

get it wrong sometimes). So it can't be the case, some conclude, that morality has its basis in God, let alone in God's commands or will. I will refer to this objection as the epistemological objection and I will argue that it is mistaken. I will look at a couple of crude versions of the objection to theologically grounded ethics in general to show where they go wrong, and then I will turn to a more recent and nuanced version of the objection to a very specific type of divine command theory of ethics, an objection from Wes Morriston. Although a slight improvement on earlier versions of the same objection (if only because of the care taken in formulating it), I will argue that it still fails for the same reason. A divine command theory of ethics is not troubled by skeptical concerns over whether or not unbelievers can enjoy (or likewise be burdened with) moral knowledge.

Crude versions of the epistemological objection

Richard Taylor presented a version of the epistemological objection in his debate with William Lane Craig on the question of whether or not the basis of morality is natural or supernatural:

The basis for morality is conventional, which means the rules of morality were fabricated by human beings over many generations. These rules are: to abstain from injury, to abstain from lying, theft, assault, killing, and so forth. These rules were not the invention of God. No one in this room imagines that if there were not a God to tell us these things, we would not know any better. No one in this room thinks that if God had not told us this, if God had not delivered these rules to Moses, then we would not see anything wrong with my stealing, assaulting, and killing.²

Firstly it is obvious that Taylor is begging the question. The debate was about whether or not there could be

2 Is the Basis of Morality Natural or Supernatural?: A Debate between Richard Taylor and William Lane Craig, Union College, Schenectady, New York October 8, 1993, reproduced on the internet at <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-taylor0.html>, accessed 10th October 2005. It is somewhat puzzling to note that in the same breath Taylor claims that human beings literally fabricated morality, but then he later claims that we can "know" better, morally speaking, than to do certain things – apparently speaking as though moral claims could be objectively true after all.

moral facts without God, and Taylor, in his opening statement, says – to a largely Christian audience, no less – that nobody in the room doubts that if “there were not a God to tell us” these things, they would still be knowable. Obviously truths cannot be known unless they are truths, and the very question in debate was meant to be whether or not there could be moral truths without the existence of God. But there is an important claim being taken for granted here: *Either* God tells us moral truths by issuing explicit public utterances (whether in person, through Moses, or through someone or something else), *or* we would not see anything wrong with doing anything, no matter how terrible it was. Taylor affirms later in the debate that this is in fact what he means:

I profoundly believe we should be loving, kind, and the other virtues he enumerated. In order to say that, do you need, do I need, to think that God is watching? Does any of us need to think that we are going to be punished if we are not loving, kind? Do we not see something worthwhile in being loving, kind, treating people in certain ways, and so forth, which *doesn't* require us to talk about “objective standards,” doesn't require us to refer to Scripture, refer to any sermon that anyone's ever heard? We can see this. We can see this because human beings are born with the capacity for this and are quite capable of seeing its propriety. No one would suggest that I have no reason for being loving, kind to those who are dear to me and, indeed, to my enemies. We can see this without God telling us that. We can see this without clergymen telling us this.

Taylor's position is that the fact that we can know moral truths without referring to Scripture or being told them by clergymen establishes that morality is not grounded in God. The apparent assumption made here is that a supernatural basis for ethics requires that people who don't read the Bible or go to church won't have any moral knowledge (although in principle they might have accidentally true moral beliefs).

Almost surprisingly, Taylor is not the only ethicist (or theologian) to make this argument. The liberal Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway opened his book about “keeping religion out of ethics” by posing the questions,

as though they made religiously grounded ethics look absurd: "Do we have to be religious to be moral? Do we have to believe in God to be good?"³ The suggestion here is that grounding ethics in God removes the ability to be moral from people who are not religious or who do not believe that God exists. Gert makes the argument explicitly:

It is also a consequence of this view [that morality requires a theological foundation] that atheists cannot consider anything to be a moral rule. Further, not only atheists, but deists, or anyone who does not believe that God gave persons any rules to live by, would also be logically excluded from holding that anything is a moral rule. Also, anyone who doubted that the rule against killing came from God would *necessarily have to doubt that it was a moral rule*. None of these consequences is true. Hence it cannot be a necessary condition for a rule to be a moral rule that it be a command of God [emphasis added].⁴

Hopefully it can be seen that the same epistemological objection is the thread that connects these three arguments. The underlying argument is as follows, where Q is the act of knowing moral facts and C is anything.

- 1) If C is the cause of our ability to Q, then person *p* cannot Q unless he believes in C.
- 2) *p* does Q, and does not believe in C.
- 3) Therefore C is not the cause of our ability to Q.

Clearly 1) is false. Counterexamples to this premise are readily available. For example, certain biological facts about the respiratory system bring it about that a human being can breathe. It does not follow that since a member of a scientifically illiterate tribe of bushmen doesn't know anything about how the respiratory system

3 Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1999), 1.

4 Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its nature and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 117.

works – or even that we have such a thing – he cannot breathe. In fact the scientific implications of what Taylor and Gert suggest are absurd, leading to the view that we cannot know that any phenomenon at all occurs unless and until we know what causes it. This is to confuse the epistemic autonomy of ethics – the independence of the ability to *know* ethical facts from the knowledge of religious truths from theological truths – with ontological autonomy – the independence of the ethical facts themselves from theological truths.

Crude versions of the epistemological objection are therefore highly implausible and do not warrant much attention. Nonetheless, ethicists – and divine command ethicists in particular – have been explaining how divine command ethics is compatible with non-believers having moral knowledge for several decades now, and I will say more about two examples (Adams and Quinn) shortly.

Morrison's version of the objection

More recently, Wes Morriston has entered the fray, claiming that if divine command ethics were true, unbelievers would not be able to have moral knowledge.⁵ “People who do not believe that there is a God,” he claims, “constitute an *obvious* problem for divine command metaethics” [emphasis added].⁶ Morriston decides to focus only on one specific variety of divine command theory, one in which the property of being morally right or wrong is identical with the property of being commanded or forbidden by a loving God. His main approach is to seize on a limited sense of “command” in which divine “commands” are speech acts to certain persons.

There is actually nothing new about the objection. It has been posed and, in my view, answered, decades ago. In the early seventies Eric D’Arcy presented an objection that, I hope the reader will agree, could easily have been part of Morriston’s paper:

5 Wes Morriston, “The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers: A special problem for divine command metaethics,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 65 (2009), 1-10.

6 Morriston, “The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers,” 1.

[I]f immoral actions are immoral merely because God so wills it, merely because God legislates against them, it would be sheer coincidence that someone who knew nothing of God or his law happened to adopt the same views about particular actions as God did.⁷

This is to say that those who don't know that God exists or issues commands wouldn't have access to the source of moral truth. Morriston's summary of his objection bears out the similarity between his argument and the one Darcy used:

[Reasonable non-believers] have moral obligations, and are often enough aware of having them. Yet it is not easy to think of such persons as "hearing" divine commands. This makes it hard to see how a divine command theory can offer a completely general account of the nature of moral obligation.⁸

At this point we have to distinguish between two ways of thinking about divine command ethics. Some proponents of divine command ethics, like the late Philip Quinn who advocated a causal divine command view, do not believe that divine commands must be delivered via some sort of speech act in order to bring about the moral rightness and wrongness of certain actions. Although the literature has by and large always referred to the view that he and others hold as a "divine command" theory of ethics (and indeed this is what Quinn called his view in his work *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*), Morriston prefers not to refer to Quinn's position that way, and to instead call it a "divine will" theory of ethics, since it is God's will that brings moral facts about, and not God's speech acts. Robert Adams, who holds that moral properties are identical with properties about being commanded by God, construes divine commands more narrowly to specify that God's will has been *communicated* to those who are expected to obey it.

7 Eric D'Arcy, " 'Worthy of Worship?': A Catholic Contribution," in Gene Outka and John Reeder (eds), *Religion and Morality* (Garden City: Anchor press, 1973), 194.

8 Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers," 1.

Although he personally held the former and not the latter of these two divine command theories, Quinn nonetheless defended them both against D'Arcy's epistemological objection in 1979. Firstly, he pointed out that a more general divine will theory of ethics that says nothing about speech acts does not even have this problem on the face of it:

Our theory asserts that divine commands are conditions causally necessary and sufficient for moral obligations and prohibitions to be in force. It makes no claims at all about how we might come to know just what God has commanded. For all the theory says, it might be that we can come to know what God has commanded by first coming to know what is obligatory and forbidden. After all, it is a philosophical truism that the causal order and the order of learning need not be the same. Even if effects are sometimes known through their cause, causes are sometimes known from their effects. So it is consistent with our theory to maintain that we can come to know what is obligatory and forbidden without prior causal knowledge of why these things have the moral status they do.⁹

For the divine command theorist who is content with a more general thesis about the relationship between God's will and moral facts, Morriston's argument has no importance and can simply be ignored. I take Morriston to grant this without protest:

[A] divine will theorist who construes his theory as an account of the identity of the properties in the moral obligation family does not need to deny that one can have justified beliefs about moral right and wrong in a wide range of cases without knowing anything about God. There are, of course, legitimate questions about how we do know what our moral obligations are, and such

9 Philip Quinn, "Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory," in Christian B. Miller (ed), *Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44-45. This paper was first published in Janine .M. Idziak (ed.), *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

questions are not immediately answered by a divine will theory.¹⁰

Morrison here comments not on a causal theory (which is what Quinn held) but rather one concerning the identity of moral properties, but I think the same defense is available in either case. If God's will *makes* actions moral or immoral, that likewise leaves open the question of how people can recognize that acts are moral or immoral.¹¹ There is, then, no necessary problem here for more general divine will theories.

What then of a divine command theory where divine commands are construed in terms of speech acts? Quinn defended those who hold this view as follows:

One reply to this line of argument might be to claim that such things as scripture, tradition, personal revelation, and natural law itself are sources of knowledge concerning what God has willed.¹²

In other words, even if you think that divine commands must be construed as speech acts in such a way that it can be sensibly claimed that God has *communicated* his will to us, why suppose that this presents a problem? There are plenty of ways in which religious believers maintain that God communicates his will to people.

10 Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers," 9.

11 To this, Morriston adds another claim about divine will theories that I take to be quite false:

There would of course be a serious problem for the divine will theorist if he held that the only way to discover whether something is right or wrong is first to discern what God wills concerning that thing. Then God really would be forcing us to play a very ugly and unfair sort of guessing game.
Morrison, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers," 9.

This does not seem right at all. Why assume that if the prerequisite for knowing what is right and what is wrong is to know what God wills then the only thing we can do is guess? This might be true if we're already committed to the claim that there's just no way at all to find out what God wills, but to put it gently, this rather ambitious thesis would need at least *some* defending before we can just assume it. I will say more on this later.

12 Quinn, "Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory," 44.

The question that one might have, naturally, is over whether or not any of the wide variety of ways in which God could communicate his will to us really counts as a command or a speech act. But rather obviously (I think), all that matters is that they count as a speech act or a command in as strong a sense as a proponent of the divine command theory thinks that God's will is expressed to us in speech acts or commands. It would plainly be an empty challenge to say, in effect, "Ah yes, you divine command theorists have a defensible theory as long as you hold a very broad view of what can constitute a divine command. But what if your view were different, and you had a much *narrower* conception of what constituted a divine command, so narrow that nobody who disbelieved in God could know what was right and what was wrong?" Maybe the answer would be that this narrower theory would generate serious problems, but little follows from this if nobody actually holds that narrower view.

Robert Adams, who does hold a divine command theory involving speech acts and not just God's will more generally, admits that the question of exactly what counts as a divine command is a "difficult question."¹³ He cites theologian Richard Mouw, who indicates that God's commands can take a whole variety of forms like Scripture, natural law, perhaps even one-off commands that really do come *directly* from God, introspection on our moral intuitions etc. According to Adams, for his divine command theory to have teeth, "it is important ... to insist on a range of possibilities at least as wide as Mouw suggests for the communication or revelation of divine commands."¹⁴ This is because in order to avoid just the sort of epistemological objection that Morriston later raised, "it is important to understand divine commands as cognitively accessible to human beings quite generally, and hence in a wide variety of ways."¹⁵ In Adams' view, "reasoning will play an important part in our access to divine commands."¹⁶

13 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 263.

14 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 263.

15 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 264.

16 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 264.

In summing up just what he took a divine speech act to be, Adams reiterates essentially the same response that Quinn offered:

In my opinion, a satisfactory account of these matters will have three main points. (1) A divine command will always involve a *sign*, as we may call it, that is intentionally caused by God. (2) In causing the sign God must intend to issue a command, and *what* is commanded is what God intends to command thereby. (3) The sign must be such that the intended audience *could* understand it as conveying the intended command.¹⁷

Notice point 3: The sign need not be such that its intended audience is able to understand that the sign comes from God or that the command is God's command. The only thing the sign needs to be able to do is to get the audience to understand the *requirement* contained in the command. This way, the fact that a person does not believe in God is no barrier to that person knowing that something is a moral requirement.

This kind of answer has become standard when defending theologically grounded ethics, and now no epistemological objection can get off the ground without squarely addressing it. As this paper was being written, a contribution to the subject by David Baggett and Jerry Walls was published, and here too this answer reared its head. "The source from which we gain knowledge is one matter;" they explain, but "what made the subject matter true and knowable is quite another."¹⁸ People may well gain knowledge of what is right without understanding ultimately why it is right or what its rightness consists in. A divine command theorist need not worry that there is only one way for God to convey commands, and hence a barrier to non-believers gaining moral knowledge, since "one could be a theistic ethicist and subscribe to any of a wide variety of mechanisms

17 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 265.

18 David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 160. As Baggett and Walls note at this point, the medievals recognized this epistemological/ontological distinction, describing it in terms of the order of knowing on one hand and the order of being on the other.

by which God reveals his will to us.”¹⁹ Their sample of possible mechanisms similar to Quinn’s: “theistic ethicists have a broad array of resources at their disposal to construct a workable moral epistemology: natural law, conscience, moral intuitions, general revelation.”²⁰ They also make the uncontroversial observation that this is the way that the concern over whether atheists can have moral knowledge has been answered before many times. Indeed, it has now become a “well-worn path for those who answer the challenge against theistic ethics that emphasizes that even atheists and secularists can know what is right or good apart from any explicit reference to God.”²¹ It is a distinction that has been made by many contemporary ethicists and philosophers of religion such as William Alston, Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milliken are just a few examples. Given that this kind of answer has become so standard, why does Morriston think it should now be re-tried? Has the objection become more developed so as to avoid the replies suggested here? I maintain that it has not.

Morriston takes his objection to apply specifically to the version of divine command ethics propounded by Adams. Why, then, does he take this account of a speech act as a “sign” to be inadequate? The first specific objection that he raises to Adams’ account as outlined above has to do with feature (3) of a divine command. (3) is important. People are capable of failing to understand the content of signs through their own fault; negligence, engaging in poor moral reasoning, entertaining absurd beliefs when they should really know better, and so on. It would not be reasonable to require of properly given sign that everybody, regardless of their culpability, *does* understand it as conveying a moral requirement. But Morriston takes issue with this. Noting the use of the word “could” in the above, he says:

But where, exactly, does this leave a reasonable non-believer? In what sense is he *able* to understand a sign “as conveying a divine command”? He is, after all, a *reasonable* non-believer.

19 Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, 161.

20 Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, 165.

21 Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, 161.

He has done all that he is epistemically required to do with respect to his beliefs about God, and he still doesn't believe that there is any such being. Even if he is aware of a "sign" that he somehow manages to interpret as a "command" not to steal, how can he be subject to that command if he doesn't know who issued it, or that it was issued by a competent authority?²²

One attractive response that some theists might make is that it is not a settled matter between theists and non-theists that you can fail to believe in God even though you have done *all* that you are epistemically required to do. Should a theist successfully argue that point, then this objection could not even get off the ground. Should a theist simply *believe* that this response would be true, then Morriston's objection will not be persuasive to a theist like this. But more to the point, surely it is irrelevant whether or not the unbeliever in question "doesn't know who issued" the command. He does not need to know that *anybody* issued it, one would think. Morriston puts quote marks around "conveying a divine command," but this is not a quote. Adams did not say that a sign needs to be such that a person can understand that it conveys a divine command, but only that he can understand it as conveying "the intended command." He does not even need to know that it is a command, provided the command can be conveyed to him. In slogan form: People need knowledge of the command, not knowledge about the command. Remember that it is the command itself that is conveyed, in Adams' view, and not the awareness that something is a command.²³ A helpful analogy is that of a stop sign. The point of a stop sign is not to convey the message "here is a stop sign." The point of a stop sign is to convey the imperative,

22 Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers," 5.

23 This, specifically, is what is wrong with the following analogy that Morriston gives:

To appreciate the force of this question, imagine that you have received a note saying, "Let me borrow your car. Leave it unlocked with the key in the ignition, and I will pick it up soon." If you know that the note is from your spouse, or that it is from a friend to whom you owe a favor, you may perhaps have an obligation to obey this instruction. But if the note is unsigned, the handwriting is unfamiliar, and you have no idea who the author might be, then it's as clear as day that you have no such obligation.

Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believer," 5.

In the above hypothetical scenario, the fact that something is a command from a person is overtly communicated ("I will pick it up soon.") Now, once a person *does* realize that a command comes from God, then there would be little doubt that the command should be obeyed, but provided the content of the command can be conveyed to a person *as* a moral requirement and provided they recognize that it actually is a moral requirement, then the further question of whether or not they realize where it come from does not change this.

“stop!” Even if for some reason a person did not realize that this red object before her was the object answering to the description “stop sign,” as long as she realized that it required her to stop, her ignorance about stop signs would not prevent her from knowing that she should do the thing that those stop signs required her to do.²⁴ Consider for example the possibility that God conveys the “sign” to people regarding some act (let’s pick murder) via a proper function of the human conscience. Nobody needs to know what conscience is, how we got one, or that God uses it to ensure that we have some true beliefs in order for them to know, via conscience, that murder is wrong (assuming, of course, that there were a conscience with proper functions).

Unfortunately, this misconstruction of Adams’ model of a “sign” is what drives the rest of Morriston’s argument.

For example:

Consider, for example, the obligation to refrain from inflicting unnecessary suffering on one’s fellow creatures. Reasonable non-believers have been unable to interpret whatever “signs” they have been given as *divine speech acts* forbidding this sort of behavior. But this has not prevented many of them from seeing that it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering. How can Adams account for this?²⁵

By now, I hope, it is perfectly clear how Adams could account for this: by denying that unbelievers need to understand that the relevant signs have been given as divine speech acts. All they need to understand is the content of the speech acts themselves and hence that there exists an obligation, which they, on Adams’ theory, are quite capable of doing.

24 Here as elsewhere in contemporary philosophy of religion, the *de dicto / de re* distinction helps to clarify things. Speaking *de re*, this woman knows that she should do the things that stop signs convey to her that she should do. We could say, “of the thing that stop signs in fact convey, she knows that she should do it.” *De dicto*, of course, she does not know that she should do what stop signs tell her, since she does not even believe that there are stop signs. We could not say, “Of this thing she should do, she knows that it is conveyed by a stop sign.” Once more the supposedly tiresome distinctions made by medieval friars rescue us from significant misunderstanding, if only the moderns would listen!

25 Morriston, “The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers,” 7.

Having made much of this alleged problem for divine command ethics, Morriston then considers that there might be a response to his objection – namely, the response that was already implicit in Adams' formulation as I have presented it. In rejecting that response, we are told that “the idea of a command that one can “receive” without being aware of being *addressed by anyone* is extremely counterintuitive.” But the fact that Morriston finds an idea counterintuitive is not instructive. He adds to this that even if we do construe divine commands as broadly as this (as Adams does), we end up sacrificing the “social” component of Adam’s theory. As Morriston summarizes:

For Adams’ account to work the way it is supposed to, divine commands must be embedded in an analogous network of interpersonal relations. When we disobey God’s commands, the most important personal relationship of all is violated, and this gives us a powerful reason to obey. When we disobey God, we incur moral guilt and we need God’s forgiveness. God, after all, is a loving creator, from whom we have received all that we have. We owe him our unconditional love, devotion, and obedience, and our moral obligations to one another are ultimately constituted by our obligation to obey his commands.²⁶

There is no reason, on the face of it, why a divine command theorist must think that any of this is undermined by a very broad sense of divine commands, or why, for that matter, all of the above could not be true of unbelievers. All that would follow is that unbelievers are not aware of all of the moral reasons that exist for doing things – perhaps they are even unaware of the *most* important reason. But while this seems like a fairly straightforward implication, it raises a problem, says Morriston:

The trouble is that the interpersonal relations specified by this picture do not seem to be available to all human beings. In particular, they are not available to non-believers. The non-believer places

26 Morriston, “The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers,” 8.

no value on her relationship with her creator, since she doesn't know she has one. For the same reason, she doesn't worry about any damage to this relationship, nor does she feel any need for God's forgiveness. So it is hard to see how Adams' social requirement version of the divine command theory applies to *her*.²⁷

But from the perspective of a divine command theorist, the social aspect of morality might apply as follows: When people do wrong, they harm the most important relationship of all, the relationship that they have with their creator. Since unbelievers don't realize that they have a creator who issues moral commands, then while there's usually little stopping them understanding what these commands require of them, they don't realize how much damage they do when they don't obey those commands. In fact they can't ultimately give a correct account of what *makes* moral misdeeds as bad as they are. This latter claim is part of the moral argument for theism, which argues that only theism can explain moral duties and prohibitions, and hence God's existence should be accepted by skeptics who are aware of moral duties but who had never previously been able to account for them, like people who hear a voice with no idea where it originated.²⁸

Summary Thoughts

Morrison's complaint is not against divine command ethics very generally, where God's will either constitutes or causes moral duty (e.g. Quinn's view). After all, that view does not even need to offer an account of moral epistemology. Nor is the complaint against a divine command ethics wherein God's will is expressed via some sort of sign, where what constitutes the sign may be any one of a fairly broad range of things (e.g. the view of Adams). That view is well equipped to account for the moral knowledge that unbelievers have. Morrison's

27 Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-believers," 8.

28 Indeed, Adams argues that the social feature of obligation in general provides us with *reasons* for thinking that if morality is a special case of obligation then it is best accounted for by invoking God. Hence he is actually presupposing that unbelievers will recognize the phenomenon of moral obligation before they understand its theological implications. Adams, "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 4:3 (1987), 262-275.

complaint, we eventually discover, is against a form divine command ethics wherein the only way that God makes moral knowledge available is via overt speech acts of a strictly stipulated sort where the recipient understands *that* God has issued a command (so that most of what Adams takes to count as commands do not count as speech acts in this more limited sense). But once the complaint is fully qualified, it becomes trivial. Who, after all, actually advocates this rather idiosyncratic version of divine command ethics? Maybe his critique serves as a warning to all divine command ethicists that they should not develop their views into one that falls within the scope of Morriston's critique, but as far as I am aware, nobody in the literature on divine command ethics has shown any signs of doing so. As an effort to breathe new life into the old epistemological objection to divine command ethics, it is not successful.

The refutations of the epistemological objection that have been used before continue to apply now. That moral facts exist because of – or are identical with – certain facts about God's will is no barrier to the possibility of non-theists having moral knowledge. As I consider a divine command theory with a very broad notion of what constitutes a command (that is, a notion like that of Adams) to be the most plausible, I have said as much as I need to on behalf of a divine command theory against the epistemological objection. The objection is against a straw man.

Lastly however, let us imagine that a variety of divine command ethics were to emerge that *did* involve this very strong notion of what it is for something to be a "command." Suppose this new variety made the claim that what makes an action wrong is that God forbids it, and what makes an action morally required is that God commands it, and those commands are things expressed *verbally* by God, or mediated verbally in an overt manner via some representative, perhaps the church or the authors of Scripture. Suppose that a proponent of this view – a hypothetical emerging philosopher who invented this new take on divine command ethics – responded to Morriston as follows: "I realize that those who claim that there is no God do not realize that God has issued these commands either directly or via an intermediary, but the fact is that they really *should* realize that God exists and has issued these commands. *Claiming* that they have done their epistemic duty is verbally

easy, but I will argue that it is not true. There are good arguments for the existence of God, and there are good reasons for accepting the Christian faith. The evidence is so good, in fact, that to reject it is merely to engage in tenacity in the teeth of the facts."

As I have indicated, I do not hold this version of divine command ethics and I am not aware of anyone who does. Nothing of interest follows, therefore, if this response ultimately fails. Having said that, I do not think that it can be simply brushed aside any more than the claim that there are good reasons to be a theist or a Christian can be brushed aside. If someone in Morriston's position does simply brush it aside, then anyone who holds the view will have to be excused for not finding Morriston's argument interesting.