

The non-moral goodness of God

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This presentation is meant to do two things:

Firstly, to serve as a (very minor) criticism of a line of argument used in modern apologetics on behalf of (usually Christian) theism involving an appeal to God's goodness. On a more positive note, I want to persuade philosophers of religion (and their readers) to adopt my way of thinking about divine goodness and my way of expressing those thoughts. I want to explain why I think that it is best not to think of God as being essentially moral (or as moral at all), and that when we call God "good," we should think of this goodness as non-moral. Some theists will already agree with this pair of claims, and if I am successful I will increase their number.

Secondly, I intend to explain how the confusion of the moral and the non-moral when discussing goodness has contributed to arguments *against* theologically grounded ethics, and how preserving clarity about this distinction defuses those arguments and exposes them as cases of either equivocation or misrepresentation.

Divine commands and arbitrariness

I tentatively hold to a divine command theory of morality. When I talk about morality, I am talking about duty. I think that the morally right thing to do is that which God commands us to do, and the immoral thing to do is that which God commands us to abstain from. I also think that there are actions that are

not morally wrong but which are not morally required, namely things that God does not command that we do or that we not do. Within divine command ethics there are a few possible ways of construing the relationship between God's will and the moral status of actions. Perhaps God's will *makes it so* that an action is right or wrong in a causal sense. Perhaps an act's property of being wrong *just is* (is identical with) the property of being willed against by God. Perhaps the term "morally right" *means* "willed by God" (although I do not think that this is so, and I am not aware of anyone who does).¹ Or perhaps some other relationship holds. A variation on a divine command theory can maintain that it is simply God's *will* that constitutes or causes moral obligation (as in Philip Quinn), or that God's *commands* serve this purpose (as in Robert Adams). The point is just that "divine command ethics" really refers to a cluster of similar views.

I have become convinced that some Christian apologists have weakened their position when trying to avoid the problem of arbitrariness. That problem is as follows: What makes God's commands non-arbitrary? This problem is sometimes presented in terms of horrendous commands. We have certain intuitions about morality, and a moral theory that violates those intuitions will be less believable as a result of that violation. If morality is grounded in God's will or commands alone, then what God decides to command is not bound by moral rules, is arbitrary, and in theory, the objection goes, God could command rape or torture and it would be the right thing to do. This intuitively seems to most people to be obviously wrong, and so, they reason, morality could not be grounded in God's commands after all.

¹ Robert Merrihew Adams once held this view and expressed it in "A modified divine command theory of ethical wrongness" in Gene Outka and John P Reeder, Jr. (eds), *Religion and Morality* (Garden City: Anchor, 1973), 318-347. However before long he abandoned that view and adopted a view wherein the property of wrongness is the property of being prohibited by a loving God, in "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7:1 (1979), 66-79.

Does God have a moral nature?

Here is where the apologist often appeals to God's nature, arguing that God's commands (and perhaps just morality itself) are grounded in God's nature. This is precisely where I want to draw our full attention: *What is it* about the God's nature that enables us to appeal to it and do away with the problem of arbitrariness and the problem of horrendous commands? Paul Chamberlain, in his stimulating and enjoyable but popular level dialogue, *Can We be Good Without God?*, expresses this appeal via his character Ted (the speaker expressing the author's own view).

Ted succinctly describes how God could explain the existence of moral facts as follows:

My explanation begins with God, who is the Creator of the universe and who is also a moral being. In his nature is a sense of right and wrong. It is part of what and who he is. Furthermore, he is immutable. He cannot change to be anything other than what he now is.

I then assert that this moral Creator God infused his moral knowledge into the minds of the people he created.²

To speak this way is to say that God has an innate knowledge of morality, and that God passes this knowledge onto us.

Because I think that the commands of God are the locus of moral rightness and wrongness, I do not think that God has any moral duties. Although God may have any number of motivations for acting or

² Paul Chamberlain, *Can We be Good Without God?: A Conversation About Truth, Morality, Culture, and a Few Other Things that Matter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 173.

commanding as he does, *the desire or inclination to fulfill the demands of morality* is not and cannot be one of those motivations, because it is only the commands of God that gives moral quality to acts or decisions. Therefore it is impossible for God to be, as Chamberlain calls God, a moral being (that is, a person who lives in accordance with his moral duties). Prior to God commanding that we act in a certain way, God has no knowledge of moral rightness and wrongness because there is no such thing as moral rightness or wrongness independent of God's commands.

Therefore we should not say – as William Lane Craig does – that “God’s moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands which constitute our moral duties or obligations.”³ It may well be true that God’s *nature* is expressed to us in what he commands. However that nature is not moral, because morality is bound up with the concept of duty and God has no moral duties. Craig uses the language of morality elsewhere to describe God’s commands, saying that God only commands things if God has a “morally sufficient reason” to command them. But this cannot be so if moral properties are either brought about by God’s commands, or identical with the property of being commanded or prohibited by God.

When theists grant that God’s commands accord with morality and then use the idea of God having a moral nature to explain how this is possible, they are attempting to satisfy a challenge. The challenge is that in order for God to have reasons for commanding as he does, thereby avoiding arbitrariness, those reasons must be moral reasons, and so the challenger quite understandably asks how God can

³ William Lane Craig in William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations of a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 491. I realise that Dr Craig also says that God is not subject to moral duties. All I am taking issue with is the claim that God’s nature is not merely good (or loving, kind, just, fair and so on), but actually *moral*. Part of what I want to correct is a use of language that may not actually agree with what Christian scholars want people to understand them as saying.

have *moral* reasons for acting as God does, without making morality independent of God. I do not think there is any good reason to try to satisfy this demand, because the demand is based on an error: namely the error of assuming that if God has reasons for commanding, then those reasons are moral reasons. Moreover, I actually agree with skeptics who say that if God's nature is moral, then this fact places the basis of morality outside of God's nature (an objection I will call *the independence problem*).

The divine command theorist may well claim that God would not command, say, the torture of children, but when asked why not, there is no reason why she must say that God's nature is moral, and *that's* why not. Perhaps the answer is that God does not *like* the torture of children, God is loving, and God is powerless to change what he likes and does not like (these things are part of God's nature). Edward Wierenga noted that "a divine command theorist might well believe that some features of God's character, for example, that He is essentially loving, place constraints on what He commands."⁴ None of these constraints are moral (except in the sense that they might become moral for us, if God commands us to emulate certain divine traits – as Christians believe that God does). The fact that there is no moral standard determining what God must command does not mean that divine commands are arbitrary, if by arbitrary we mean *without reasons*. In order to avoid the independence problem we can accept that there may well be reasons for why God's commands are what they are, as long as those reasons are not moral reasons. God created the world in a certain way because doing so satisfied God's desire that certain traits exist in the world and in us, and given the way God desires the world to be and the way he intended us to function and relate within the world, there is a God commands or wills behaviour within the constraints of his love, justice, and ultimately his goodness. Thus things become morally required because God wills them, and God wills them because God desires them since they

⁴ Wierenga, "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Nous* 17:3 (1983), 401.

satisfy God's preferences, albeit not for any moral reasons.

So is God good?

Let's return to the issue of God's lack of moral goodness. If God is not morally good, can we then appeal to God's goodness to fend off objections about arbitrary or horrendous commands? My answer is yes. God is essentially good, and God's nature is what gives rise to his will (just as my nature gives rise to mine). But having already said that God is not subject to moral standards, that God has no duties, and that God does not command for moral reasons, can I say that God does what he does for reasons of goodness? Absolutely, because "good" is not necessarily a moral term. We might exercise moral goodness by being good at performing our moral duties, but we might have other kinds of goodness as well. We might be good singers, good runners, good philosophers, or good Xs, where an X could be any number of other things that a person can be. We do not see any problem in defining this kind of "goodness" without reference to God.

The Bible lays down the challenge, "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). We are thus given an expectation that God's traits will coincide with our existing notion of goodness, because by tasting and seeing, that is, by experiencing some sort of relationship with God – or perhaps even just an exposition of divine revelation – we will discover that God is good. This makes sense if we know what it is to be good before we taste and see. If we understand God's goodness as non-moral goodness, there is no threat here to God's role as the source of morality. There are certain things that we recognise as good by virtue of the fact that we are made in the way that we are made. Some things by their nature are conducive to our happiness and flourishing: Love, kindness, fairness, justice and so on. We call

such things good, and by saying that God is good, we are saying that God's nature is to exemplify *these* things that fit into our existing category of good.

While I try to avoid the bandwagon fallacy of taking too much comfort in the fact that others agree with me, it's always nice to see that I'm not alone. Brian Davies, the eminent Thomistic philosopher, makes the same observation, commenting on the biblical material:

The Bible certainly says that God is righteous. So far as I can gather, however, it never conceives of God's righteousness along moral lines - by which I mean that it never takes God to be righteous because he does what is (morally) the right thing for him to do (as someone might commend me for doing what it is morally right for me to do).⁵ In the Old Testament, God's righteousness seems to consist in his acting in accordance with his covenant with the people of Israel (all the terms of which are drawn up by him). So it amounts to the notion that God can be relied upon to do what he has said he will do (with respect to Israel). Righteousness, in this context, clearly does not mean 'moral goodness which accords with standards of goodness binding on all who seek to be morally good'. And Old Testament texts *never* suggest that God is good because he conforms to some code or other (which I take to mean that they never suggest that God is good as a good moral agent is good).

We can also speak about a person being *good to us* in a non-moral way, if we are careful. If we are sick and in need and someone provides for our well-being and care, they are being good *to us*. I say that

⁵ Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 95.

we need to be careful here, because these acts are also morally good if God wants us to treat other people this way. I share the view that God actually does command us to live this way, but whether these acts are morally good or not, they are also good *for us* in the sense that they help us to flourish and be happy. There is no threat at all to the moral sovereignty of God in saying that we can think of this sort of (non-moral) goodness without reference to God's will.⁶ God's will that we do this does not (and cannot) change what is and is not good in the non-moral sense.

Failure to make these clear distinctions: between rightness and goodness, or stated differently, between moral goodness and non-moral goodness, lies at the heart of at least some critiques of theologically grounded ethics. Not only have I avoided the independence problem, but the above account of moral duty and the distinctions made mean that the existence of natural and non-moral goodness independent of God's commands does not pose a problem for the view that all moral facts have their basis in God's will.

Perhaps not appreciating the distinctions I have made here, Erik Wielenberg critiques what I take to be a divine command theory of morality. He calls DCT the "dependency thesis," as it portrays morality as dependent on God's will or commands. Drawing on Ralph Cudworth, Wielenberg raises a very familiar objection to divine command ethics, namely the problem of arbitrariness mentioned earlier. The argument here is that if morality is based on God's will then it would be completely arbitrary. God could command us to torture and pummel each other, and this would be OK. As Wielenberg puts it, this view

⁶ There is a sense in which I am speaking out of both sides of my mouth here, for I do think that what *is* good for us in this non moral sense is ultimately determined by God in the sense that God could have created the world very differently, where things that are very bad for us in this world (e.g. drinking hydrochloric acid) are actually good for us. I am setting this fact aside here because to pursue it would be to miss the point being made, namely that we are not robbing God of moral sovereignty by saying that non-moral goodness in this world can be understood independently of understanding the way God wants us to live.

implies “that it could be morally permissible for one person gratuitously to pummel another.”⁷

According to Wielenberg, this is “absurd.” Notice that Wielenberg is referring, and correctly so, to the concept of being “morally permissible.” The subject is morality or ethics, the study of what we ought and ought not do. Just as well-known as this objection, is the reply to the objection, as also noted earlier. Wielenberg is aware of this, as he quotes from Edward Wierenga (from an article published in 1983) who, like other divine commands theorists, explains that if God is *essentially loving*, then there exist constraints on what he will and will not command. “He would not command an action which, were it is to be performed, would be a gratuitous pummeling of another human being.”⁸ In other words, the fact that moral duties derive from God’s will does not imply that God could in fact command atrocities which would thereby become morally required. But Wielenberg does not accept this response. He has two objections to it, but I am going to focus on the second. His first objection is that Wierenga’s defence does not show that God cannot command abominations, it merely presents us with a scenario in which God *would* not command them. Wielenberg says, “this implies that if, *per impossible*, God were not loving, he could make it the case that it is obligatory for someone to inflict a gratuitous pummeling on another human being.”⁹ Without going into much depth, let me just note here that many, perhaps most, theologians and Christian philosophers, do not think of God as having his traits accidentally. Instead he has them necessarily, and it is therefore necessarily the case that he would not command the kind acts that Wierenga refers to.

7 Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48.

8 Edward Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine command Theory,” *Nous* 17 (1983), 394.

9 Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 49.

What I wish to highlight, however, is Wielenberg's second response. He says:

Second, notice that the Dependency Thesis implies that nothing distinct from God is intrinsically good or evil. The claim that the Dependency Thesis is necessarily true implies that it is *impossible* for anything distinct from God to be intrinsically good or evil. This is because intrinsic value is the value a thing has by virtue of its intrinsic nature. If an act of will on the part of God bestows value on something distinct from God, that value cannot be intrinsic. It will be value that the thing has in virtue of something distinct from itself.¹⁰

Here is where the water begins to get muddy. There is nothing wrong with what Wielenberg says here, provided he is being careful. The Dependency Thesis is a theory of moral duty. This quotation from Wielenberg is only correct, therefore, if he is using the words "good," "evil" and "value" to refer strictly to moral value in the sense of facts about moral duties. If this is what he means, then what he says here is unobjectionable, because the Dependency Thesis *just is* the view that independent of God's will, there are no objective moral values in the sense that we do not have any actual moral duties, whether we think we do or not.

If this is what Wielenberg meant, then of course the above quotation would not constitute an objection to the Dependency Thesis, it would merely describe it. But observe what Wielenberg says in the very next sentence:

I think this implication is problematic for the simple reason that some things distinct from God actually are intrinsically good and some things actually are intrinsically evil. Pain, for example, seems to be an intrinsic evil. It is evil in and of itself; its badness is part of its intrinsic nature and is not bestowed upon it from some external source. Yet the theist who

¹⁰ Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 49.

accepts the Dependency Thesis must reject this, and maintain instead that pain is bad only because God made it so.¹¹

This objection is apparently rather obvious to Wielenberg. He says that just as an epistemology leading to the absurd view that I do not have hands should be rejected (as Thomas Reid pointed out), “a metaphysics that leads to the conclusion that falling in love is not intrinsically good, or that pain is not intrinsically evil, should be rejected.”¹² However, what we are seeing here is a rather obvious case of equivocation. When Wielenberg says that falling in love is intrinsically good, he surely does not mean that it is our moral duty to fall in love. Likewise, when he says that pain is intrinsically bad, it is absurd to think that he means that it is somehow morally wicked to be in pain. What he has to mean is that there is some non-moral goodness involved in being in love, and some non-moral badness involved in experiencing pain. Here, I am fairly certain that any divine command theorist would agree with Wielenberg. There is an obvious sense in which pain is bad *for us* and there is an obvious sense in which it is good to be in love as it provides us with certain goods. But none of this has anything to do with morality. Therefore, the fact that goodness and badness of this sort might exist independent of God’s commands does not present a problem for the Dependency Thesis, in much the same way that God deciding to command certain things because they are good does not.

Let me sum up then by drawing together the threads of this analysis. Firstly, some theists have sought to defend a divine command theory of ethics by saying that God has a moral nature. Therefore his commands are not arbitrary, because God has morally sufficient reasons for commanding as he does due to his own moral goodness. In a number of the cases I know of, this is more verbal confusion than

11 Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 50.

12 Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 50.

anything else, and perhaps if the authors' attention was drawn to these cases, they would concede that things should have been said differently so that those who reject theologically grounded ethics would not have this foothold from which to strike. But it strikes me as an important lapse nonetheless. I have argued that the problems associated with this way of fending off the arbitrariness objection vanish once we construe God's nature in purely non-moral terms, saying instead that *all* morality is subsequent to divine commands, and as such defenders of divine command ethics should construe God's goodness this way and expunge moral language from their description of divine goodness. Stated bluntly, theists should not attribute moral goodness to God if they are also going to say that God's commands are the source of morality. They should think instead of God as non-morally good.

Secondly, I have noted that there are at least some objections to divine command ethics from without that initially appear to be persuasive only if this distinction between moral and non-moral goodness is overlooked. It is true, as Wielenberg notes, that it seems absurd to us that all things bad for us would have been good for us were God to declare otherwise, but the reason that this is not a problem is that not only is moral goodness subsequent to God's will, as noted earlier, but divine commands are constitutive (or causal, that distinction isn't what matters here) only of *moral* goodness, and not every other kind.