

Is There an Echo in Here? Critiques of God-based Ethics

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The late twentieth century saw what Philip Quinn described as a “revival” in divine command ethics.¹ An unprecedented amount and quality of work was produced in defence of what had been regarded by many as a pariah among ethical theories. Within the field of philosophy of religion, these works had their desired impact. Certain important objections to divine command ethics (and theologically grounded ethics in general) were soundly and publicly put down. But many people out of the loop of the relevant field (whether bioethicists, ethicists who have little to do with philosophy of religion or simply philosophers who do not *like* conservative philosophy of religion but who must cover it in their introductory teaching regime) tout those same objections as though they were conclusive. When this occurs, there is no apparent interaction with the published responses to these objections. Instead, the objections are simply re-presented in the (apparent) belief that it is business as usual.

Why visit this issue again? Why am I presenting defences of divine command ethics that, according to me, have been presented before? My answer is the same as that of a man who repeatedly sues people for defaming him with the same false claim, even though he has already cleared his name on one occasion. There really *is* an echo in here. The proposed rebuttals of divine command ethics continue to be published (and taught) without noticeable modification and without interaction with the replies that were offered the last time someone offered exactly the same proposed rebuttal, which likewise was offered without dealing with the last rebuttal to the same objection. So I want to do two things. Firstly, I want to do my own bit to persuade people that the objections really *have* been addressed. I will outline the essentials of a divine command theory of ethics and say why I think it has a lot going for it, and then explain why the objections I am talking about do

¹ Philip L. Quinn, “The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, supplement (1990), 345-365.

not even get close to being successful. Secondly, like the unpopular mortician who reminds people that Elvis is dead, I want to do my small part in making sure that “sightings” of him in shopping malls (to thrash the analogy) are false alarms and yet frustratingly common, and that many philosophers making confident comments about the demise of God-based ethics are considerably out of touch with the literature on the subject (and hence they ought not present the arguments to classroom, journal or publisher in the first place due to their own lack of qualification to do so) *or* they are presenting arguments that they know to have been refuted and they are not acknowledging the fact or responding to the refutations (in which case they are impugned as philosophers), *or* they continue to think that the objections to divine command ethics are good ones, in which case I hope to at very least encourage them to reconsider this view. I am making the modest request that philosophers cease and desist from hasty and ill-conceived arguments against divine command ethics, and that as in all other areas of philosophy, the position should be sympathetically understood, suitably researched and the arguments against it and the responses to them at least summarily assessed, before confident claims are made about the susceptibility of divine command ethics to obvious knock-down objections that any sensible philosophy could see.

What is a Divine Command Theory of Ethics?

In basic terms, a divine command theory (DCT) of ethics holds that what is morally right depends on (or is simply a matter of) God’s commands, or more broadly, God’s will. There exists a diversity of DCTs, since the nature of this relationship can be construed in more than one way, but if any strong relationship between moral rightness on God’s will exists, then the theory you are dealing with is a DCT of some sort. The relationship between God’s will and moral rightness could be one of determination, whereby an action is right because God commands it. It could be a relationship of identity, whereby the property of rightness *is* the property of being willed by God, or it could be something else. There is, of course, room for development within DCTs, and more varieties may yet be proposed, so I have no intention of offering an exhaustive taxonomy.

One obvious reason that a person – an atheist – might not think that a DCT has much going for it is that it entails that God exists. Any helpful assessment of DCT, if it is not to become an argument about whether or not God exists, simply needs to grant theism for argument's sake. After all, if, once this assumption is granted, DCT provides a more persuasive or consistent model of ethics than other meta ethical or normative ethical theories, then this plausibility itself counts as an argument for theism.

Divine command ethics, if correct, offers much. For one thing, it provides a standard of ethics that does not depend on human convention, which is one of the most troubling features of many rival theories of ethics. Different human conventions conflict with each other. The conventional morality of the Nazi regime conflicts with the conventional morality of the Amish, for example. There is no comeback here about different *religious* traditions also conflicting, because a divine command theory need not entail that there is a dependence of morality on religious traditions. Divine command ethics entails a dependence of morality on the will of God, and provided there is only one God, and that God is not double minded, there is no conflict of standards here. A second feature giving divine command theory considerable appeal to theists is that it preserves a strong notion of God's authority and sovereignty. Thirdly, Divine Command theories seem – to me at least – to capture the features that have strongest appeal in both cognitivist *and* non-cognitive approaches to ethics, especially prescriptivist ethics as espoused by R. M. Hare. Prescriptivism holds that moral judgements are not fact claims but merely commands. Divine Command Ethics retains this sense that moral claims do command, but it also retains the widely held intuition that moral claims really do mean to state facts, the denial of which is precisely what keeps many from embracing prescriptivism. On the face of it then, Divine Comand Ethics is an attractive theory to those who are prepared to consider theologically grounded ethics.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

The main objections to DCT that I will be addressing derive from the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma, proposed by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. Writing in 1961, Kai Nielsen looked back on the history of moral philosophy and

said, "Until recently most analytic philosophers, as well as many other philosophers, have assented to the claim, as old as the *Euthyphro*, that morality and religion are logically independent and that it is *impossible in principle* to base a morality (any morality) on religion" [emphasis added].² As an observation of popular trends, this may be true, but equally true is that many philosophers have not thought very highly of the Euthyphro dilemma at all, and this claim is all the more true today. The Euthyphro dilemma has had its day. However, this has not stopped a number of philosophers from appealing to it.

The dilemma is old and well known. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters a man (named Euthyphro) outside a court, who is bringing a lawsuit of murder against his father. Socrates is horrified that a man would prosecute his own father, but the man explains that he is doing what the gods would will him to do, and hence it is the virtuous thing to do, regardless of how shocking it might seem. Seeing that Euthyphro considers himself knowledgeable on matters of theology and morality, Socrates asks him to explain what piety is. Euthyphro's famous reply was to say that "Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them."

Plato's first objection to this view is of little importance, since it has to do with the problems that Euthyphro's position has given the pantheon of many Greek gods. Since the gods quarrel over what is pious and impious, there are some things that are both dear to the gods and hated by the gods, meaning that some things are both pious and not pious, suggesting that Euthyphro's understanding of piety must be mistaken. I have no interest in this objection, since it would be avoided entirely if there is only one God, or even, perhaps, a number of gods who never disagree. I am not aware of anyone today who seeks any mileage against theologically grounded ethics from the first objection. At any rate, those who have written in the last few decades in defence of divine command ethics have been monotheists, and as such this objection might be highly successful against some forms of polytheism, but it has little relevance as an objection to DCTs as they are defended in the philosophical literature.

² Kai Nielsen, "Some Remarks on the Independence of Morality from Religion," *Mind* 70:278 (1961), 175.

Plato's objections that follow the first have become myth. By this I mean that it really no longer matters exactly what Plato meant by them since they have taken on a life of their own, formulated in much more succinct terms, and there is now a received understanding of what the Euthyphro dilemma is, and it is really this received understanding with which the theological ethicist must contend, since this is the form of the argument generally used against him. The dilemma, in Plato's terms, consists of the question of "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is loved of the gods."³ In modern times, the dilemma has been used as a critique of divine command ethics, and has been phrased: "Are morally good acts good because God wills them, or does God will them because they are morally good?"⁴ The dilemma, so it is claimed, gives rise to at least one of three serious problems for a DCT: The problem of emptiness, whereby "God commands what is good" becomes a tautology; the problem of independence, whereby God only commands things because they are already morally good, thus making God irrelevant to the moral rightness of action; and thirdly the problem of horrendous commands, whereby God could, if DCT is true, command acts that we find horrendous. I will deal with each of these in turn.

The Emptiness Problem

The emptiness problem, although not always given this label, is the objection that any DCT reduces to an empty tautology, since "good" just means "commanded by God." I will start with an earlier example of this type of objection, and then move on to some more recent ones that have appeared after the revival in divine command ethics that Quinn spoke of.

According to Kai Nielsen, philosophers can know that deriving moral facts from theological propositions is *impossible in principle* for the following reason, as he outlines the argument that he endorses:

³ Plato, *Euthyphro* ed. and trans. B. Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1892, 3rd Ed.), paragraph 10.

⁴ Greg Dawes, *Phil 210: Philosophy of Religion*, Coursebook (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2005), 99.

The traditional argument may be put as follows. No information about the nature of reality, or knowledge that there is a God and that He issues commands, will by itself tell us what is good or what we ought to do. The statement, 'God wills x', is not a moral pronouncement. Before we know whether we ought to do x, we must know that what God wills is good. And in order to know that what God wills is good, we should have to judge independently that it is good. That something is good is not entailed by God's willing it, for otherwise it would be redundant to ask, 'Is what God wills good?' But this question is not redundant. 'God wills x' or 'God commands x' is not equivalent to 'x is good', as 'x is a male parent' is equivalent to 'x is a father'. 'God wills it but is it good?' is not a senseless self-answering question like 'Fred is a male parent, but is he a father?'. The moral agent must independently decide that whatever God wills or commands is good.⁵

The particular form of theological ethics that Nielsen has seized upon is a voluntarism wherein the meta-ethical statement being made is that "Good *means* willed by God," in the same way that "unmarried man" is semantically equivalent to "bachelor." Thus, the claim that what God wills is good is construed as an attempt at stating an analytic truth, and Nielsen considers that the judgement that "God's commands are good" is really a synthetic judgement, dealing with two things (God's will and goodness, although strictly speaking divine command ethics is a theory of moral obligation, not of goodness). What Nielsen does not do, however, is produce examples of divine command ethicists who say that "good" (or "right") means "willed by God". Divine command ethics need not be a meta-ethical theory of this kind. It might be construed, for example, as a view, not on what moral terms mean, but rather a view on what living the moral life in fact involves. This means that the relationship between divine commands and moral goodness is not a relationship of *meaning*, but rather a relationship of *identity*.⁶ Alternatively, one might hold that the divine will is broadly *causal* for moral obligation, and that something becomes a moral duty because God commands or wills it. So Nielsen has attacked a position that no divine command theorist needs to hold (and which, as far as I am aware, no contemporary divine command theorist does hold). Even if he is right, he had not actually rebutted anybody.

Nielsen does, however, admit that there could be other ways of showing that religion and morality are not independent. He considers the argument of D. A. Rees, "it is not possible within a framework of theistic belief such as we are familiar with, to say, 'God commands me to do X but I ought not to do it'." And so it must be the

⁵ Nielsen, "Some Remarks," 175.

⁶ A relationship of identity does not even involve using "good" as a predicate of God's commands, any more than "the morning star is the evening star" involves applying a predicate to either the morning or the evening star.

case that even if good does not *mean* commanded by God, the two things are not independent. Nielsen considers the implications of this move:

It is true enough that 'I ought to do X' can be understood without any reference to the commands of God at all. Yet since we would not call God 'good' unless He is regarded as *worthy* of obedience, it is not possible to fully understand 'God commands me to do X' without understanding 'I ought to do X.' In understanding 'God commands me to do X' I must understand that there is an intended reference in this use of language to right action. 'God commands me to help the poor' is normally both a religious and a moral utterance. To fail to understand this is to fail to understand the use of this utterance.⁷

In other words, what God commands can indeed be what is good without the idea of divine commands being semantically tangled up in the word "good," so long as God is such that it is always good to obey Him. But Nielsen thinks that this claim is the death-knell for any claim that morality has a theological foundation. In fact, he argues that *unless* the relationship between God's commands and goodness is a semantic relationship, a theological basis for morality is ruled out.

To take this more plausible road is to give up far, far too much to continue to argue that religion and morality are not independent and that morality must be based on religion. ... To admit that 'God commands me to do X' and 'I ought to do X' are not equivalent and that the latter expression can be understood independently of the commands or will of God is to admit that a morality can be independent of religion.⁸

This is very basically mistaken. The fact that the claim that we ought to obey God's commands in order to do the good is a not a semantic theory of goodness does not at all imply that there is no religious meta-ethical foundation for morality. What if God commands things because they are good, but their being good is dependent on theological facts other than divine commands?⁹ Or what if things are good because God commands them, and "good" does not mean "commanded by God?" This attack on divine command ethics

⁷ Nielsen, "Some Remarks," 178.

⁸ Nielsen, "Some Remarks," 178. Nielsen adds:

The above argument does not show that Christian moral beliefs can be derived from nonmoral beliefs, but only that some Christian moral beliefs can be derived from some other Christian or Theistic moral and religious beliefs. But was this ever in doubt?

The answer is of course no, this was never in doubt, but so what? As a reply to the objection that "God's commands are good" is a mere tautology, it is perfectly adequate to reply by pointing out that the claim is a theistic theory of normative ethics, and not an attempt at a meta-ethical claim, if indeed this is the case.

⁹ Even if this would no longer be a "divine command theory" of ethics, it would still involve theologically grounded ethics, which is what Nielsen is attacking.

rests on the assumption that unless two terms mean the same thing they cannot identify the same thing, or that unless two terms mean the same thing, the thing identified by one term cannot cause the thing identified by the other. This is obviously not true. The combination of the words “the twin towers in New York City” clearly does not carry the same semantic denotation as “the target of a horrific terrorist attack in 2001,” but they do identify the same thing, and it is hardly a tautology to say “The twin towers in new York City were the target of a horrific terrorist attack in 2001.” Likewise “heat” does not mean “melting,” but heat causes melting.

In the later twentieth century and early twenty first century it is less excusable than ever before to dismiss divine command ethics as a semantic theory that generates this tautology. I am not suggesting that this objection to theologically grounded ethics was acceptable prior to the mid twentieth century, since historic voluntarist views of ethics did not make “good” mean “willed by God” either. Rees offered no historical defence of his choice of words when he said, in introducing his essay on divine command ethics, that “Philosophy has long been familiar with the view that ‘I ought to do X’ means ‘God commands me to do X’.”¹⁰ In fact philosophy is familiar with no such thing, as Rees might have noticed had he sought to reference the claim in major works of theological ethicists in history, yet he saw fit to open his essay on mid twentieth century divine command ethics this way. Rees, to be fair, wrote prior to the plethora of recent defenses of the theory against such representations, and before divine command ethicists had gone to the trouble of pointing out that this semantic theory was *not* readily visible in history at all. The other authors guilty of such representations do not have this excuse.¹¹

In what is still the definitive defence of divine command ethics, Philip Quinn noted the objection from meaning, and quite frankly conceded that the objection is a good one, but it is only good if the divine command theorist is in fact *saying* that “God commands x” means neither more nor less than “x is good” and vice versa. But all we need to do is deny that the two sentences mean the same thing, and proceed with a theory of identity or a

¹⁰ D. A. Rees, “The Ethics of Divine Commands,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956-1957), 83.

¹¹ Another point in Rees’ favour is that he was prepared to admit quite readily that a divine command theory *need* not be construed as a semantic theory.

causal theory unfazed.¹² As Quinn later pointed out in 1990, there has been something of a revived interest in divine command ethics, and one of the consequences of this is that several ways of construing divine command ethics have been distinguished and carefully spelt out. What is noteworthy however is that the claim that “good” or “right” *means* commanded by God, or what God wills, is not at all a prominent feature in divine command ethics. The divine command theorist who had been the main defender of this view, Robert Merrihue Adams, held to it briefly and then abandoned it, now holding a view wherein “ethical wrongness *is* (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God.”¹³ In fact Edward Wierenga, one of the more prominent defenders of a divine command theory of ethics, notes quite candidly that in his view “definitional” divine command theories are implausible, and that “most persons, including many theists, who have thought about whether moral and theological predicates are synonymous have not concluded that they are.”¹⁴ Wierenga’s formulation is one of dependence:

For example, if an act is obligatory, then it has the property of being obligatory in virtue of having the further property of being commanded by God; and if an act is wrong, then it has the property of being wrong in virtue of having the further property of being forbidden by God.¹⁵

Wierenga distinguishes between direct explicit commands, and the divine will, and explains that his divine command theory, like many, incidentally, is concerned with what God wants or wills, and divine commands are construed to mean that. “Thus, what makes an act obligatory is that God wants it to be performed.”¹⁶ Likewise, John Hare’s claim is that “what makes something obligatory for us is that God commands it,” not that there is a

¹² Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 40-41.

¹³ Robert Merrihue Adams, “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7:1 (1979), 76. Adams’ previous essay defending a semantic relationship between divine commands and wrongness – although not goodness more widely construed – was reprinted as “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness” in Paul Helm (ed.), *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1981), 83-108.

¹⁴ Edward Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine Command Theory,” *Nous* 17:3 (1983), 387.

¹⁵ Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine Command Theory,” 388. Although the theory bears a strong resemblance to a causal theory, Wierenga says that he does not wish the relationship between divine commands and moral rightness or wrongness to be a causal relationship, but rather “some asymmetric relation of dependence.” Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine Command Theory,” 389.

¹⁶ Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine Command Theory,” 390.

semantic relationship between being good and being commanded by God.¹⁷ Richard Joyce claims that the relation between an act's being morally right and God's will is such that an act is right *by virtue of the fact* that God commands it. God's commanding something "constitutes" that thing being right.¹⁸ So to attack theologically grounded ethics as some have attacked divine command ethics by saying that it makes moral requirement *synonymous* with divine commands is not defensible, since it attacks a straw man. While it may be *possible* to articulate a DCT that holds this semantic relationship, it is by no means necessary, it is the weakest possible way of construing a DCT, and nobody who defends a DCT actually *does* hold this view.

But Nielsen is not alone in rejecting divine command ethics on the grounds that it is supposed to be a meta-ethical theory telling us what "good" means. Almost half a century later, explaining what the Euthyphro objection entails, Greg Dawes explains that the first problem the divine command ethicist finds himself with is what he calls the "emptiness problem."

The proposition that "God is good" now becomes an empty formula. More precisely, the proposition "God's actions are good" reduces to the trivial "God's actions are God's actions" or "God's actions correspond to God's commands." To say that God is morally perfect would be to say no more than that he acts consistently.¹⁹

It seems fairly obvious that by calling the claim trivial or empty, Dawes means that it is just a tautology, something true by definition. This is to construe divine command ethics as a meta-ethical view that explains what the word "good" means. But if divine command ethics is not construed this way, this objection cannot arise.

In fact, even the formulation of the *Euthyphro* dilemma that Dawes cites does not lead to the problem he suggests. He formulates the dilemma as the question "Are morally good acts good *because* God wills them, or does God will them *because* they are morally good?" But the question itself implies that the relationship

¹⁷ John Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, Divine Commands and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

¹⁸ Richard Joyce, "Theistic Ethics and the Euthyphro Dilemma," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30:1 (2002), 58.

¹⁹ Dawes, *Philosophy of Religion*, 99.

between God's commands and the moral rightness of acts is not being construed as semantic, but rather *causal*. If Socrates construed the relationship as one of meaning, then the dilemma would have been silly: "Does 'right' mean 'commanded by God', or does 'commanded by God' mean 'right'?" The answer would have been yes in each case. Accusing divine command ethics of reducing to tautologous claims on the basis of *Euthyphro* then both fails to appreciate the varieties of divine command theories and involves a misreading or misunderstanding of the very question posed in *Euthyphro*. This type of confusion is not unique to Dawes, who quotes Plato's causal formulation of the relationship between goodness and divine commands and then goes on to say that he is explaining this tension by saying that the first horn of the dilemma results in the two terms meaning the same thing.

Anecdotally in philosophical circles, dismissals of divine command theories of ethics by appeal to *Euthyphro* because they reduce to a tautology are no less common now than they were thirty years ago. Writing on the broader theme of explanatory vacuity, Joel Press says:

According to the divine command theory of ethics, whatever actions God approves of are good or permitted or perhaps obligatory, and whatever actions God disapproves of are evil or forbidden. So the theory, in effect, defines goodness and evil in terms of God's approval or disapproval. However, if the goodness of an action just is God's approval of it, the action's goodness cannot also be the source of that approval. Yet the only appropriate explanation of God's approval of an action appears to be its goodness. Given the divine command theory's definition of goodness, claiming that God approves of an action because it is good reduces to the vacuous claim that God approves of that action because it is something of which he approves.²⁰

Peter Singer made the error no less blatantly, as recently as 1993:

Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of "good" is nothing other than "what God approves". Plato refuted a similar view more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods approval that makes them good. The alternative view makes God's approval entirely arbitrary: if the gods had happened to approve of torture and disapprove of helping our neighbours, torture would be good and helping our neighbours bad.²¹

²⁰ Joel Press, "The Easy Solution to the Problem of Explanatory Vacuity," at the website of the University of Arizona, <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~press/epev-synthese-manuscript.doc>, accessed 19th September 2006.

²¹ Peter Singer *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2nd ed.), 3.

Singer brings up the second horn of the dilemma which I will turn to next, but observe what he says about the first horn. It would have been beneficial for Singer to have identified the “some theists” he had in mind, but the important thing to note is that Singer says that there is a claim that “good” just means “what God approves,” and then he immediately says that this was the first option Plato refuted when he tackled the claim that divine commands are *causal* for morality.²²

One final example. Louis Pojman says that a divine command theory entails three theses. Firstly, “Morality (i.e. rightness and wrongness) originates with God.” Secondly, “*Moral rightness* simply means “willed by God,” and *moral wrongness* means “being against the will of God.” Thirdly, “Since morality is essentially based on divine will, not on independently existing reasons for action, no further reasons for action are necessary.” When characterising the view this way, of course, Pojman does not cite any contemporary examples of a divine theorist who holds this view. But when in his next sentence he admits the possibility of a different qualified version of the theory, what Pojman says beggars belief:

There are modified versions of the Divine Command Theory (one of which is examined in Appendix 1) that drop or qualify one or more of these three theses, *but the strongest includes all three* [emphasis added].²³

Not only is this not the strongest version of the theory, but it is a stretch to say that it is a currently existing version of the theory, and to say that this is the strongest version but some people hold to a qualified version of it is disastrously misleading. Pojman repeats himself so that he is not misunderstood in his representation of the divine command theory, although when he does so he presents two quite different versions of the theory as though they were the same:

²² As Quinn noted, pinning down with perfect precision what Plato meant has proven to be a fiendish task. Whatever he meant, however, certainly involved a causal rather than a semantic relationship, or at very least an asymmetrical relationship, at least on a surface reading.

²³ Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 194. The theory that is examined in Appendix 1 is that of Robert Adams, but it is construed by Pojman as a theory of rightness, even though Adams presented it as a theory of wrongness in “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness.” What is even more perplexing is that although Pojman’s book was published in 2006, he critiques the article of Adams that Adams himself critiqued before writing “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again,” which appeared in 1979, a full twenty-five *years* prior to Pojman’s work being published!

We can summarize the divine command theory this way: Morality not only originates with God, but *moral rightness* simply means “willed by God,” and *moral wrongness* means “being against the will of God.” That is, an act is right *in virtue* of being permitted by the will of God, and an act is wrong *in virtue* of being being against the will of God.²⁴

As in Singer’s comments so with Pojman’s, misrepresentation is combined with outright confusion, and the reader is simply not informed of the facts of the matter. Now, it might be tempting for Pojman, Singer, Dawes, Press and others to try to wriggle out of the error by saying “well my comments are still worth making because of the fact that there is such a widespread view among divine command theorists that actually good *does* just mean (or even partially mean) commanded by God.” But this move is very unpromising, because most defenders of anything like voluntarism or divine command ethics have *not* held the view suggested by so many philosophers, including Dawes, Singer and Press, and yet the objection keeps being presented as though it is obviously successful.

The problem of abhorrent or arbitrary commands and the problem of independence

The other supposed problem of taking the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma and embracing a DCT is that it results in the highly counterintuitive claim that God can require us to do things that we find ourselves regarding as *obviously* morally wicked, like rape or torture, and that such actions would be right simply because God willed them. I am treating this objection together with the problem of independence, which is used as a reply to one possible defence against the problem of abhorrent commands. Dawes sums up the objection graphically: “If God is not bound by any pre-existing moral standards, he could wake up tomorrow morning (speaking metaphorically) and decree that torturing small children is now good.”²⁵ The language of “goodness” can be translated into language of “rightness,” since what Dawes intends to critique here is a divine command theory, which is not a general theory of goodness, but a theory of moral obligation. Again, this is a frequently articulated objection to a theory of obligation grounded in God’s will. If things become right just because of

²⁴ Pojman, *Ethics*, 194.

²⁵ Dawes, *Philosophy of Religion*, 99.

what God wills then morality, so the argument goes, is arbitrary. Scott Davis responds to Robert Adams using this argument:

Might there be cases in which torturing babies for sport was not wrong? There might be cases where what looked to us like senseless torture was not, in fact, such - imagine a traditional initiation rite of the appropriate sort - but that is not the issue. There might be cases where torture might be excused, for reasons of madness, or what have you. But that is not the issue either. If anything is essentially evil, it would seem to be the torture of babies for sport: not because of the concept, nor because of any convention or command, but simply because of the nature of the act. Put it this way: God could bring into existence an essentially wrong act merely by creating two storm troopers lightheartedly bayoneting a small child. A metaethical theory that denies this is in serious trouble. But for Adams, the act is wrong only in the world in which it has been forbidden by a loving God. That the act need not have the status of being forbidden in all (ethically relevant) possible worlds indicates that its wrongness is contingent. But here the causal theory can be turned against Adams. For if I am right in viewing senseless torture as essentially wrong, then ... ethical wrongness is not, necessarily, identical with being forbidden by God.²⁶

Ethicists and philosophers of religion will recognise the objection as very familiar among criticisms of divine command ethics.

Dawes anticipates one possible response, one similar to the response I will offer, but does not think it can succeed:

One popular defence may be rejected immediately. It consists in the view that while God *could* command us to torture small children, he *would* not do so. ... The difficulty with this position arises when one asks: Why not? Why would God not command us to torture small children? If the answer is that God is good, then one can ask what standard of goodness is being applied in making this claim.²⁷

In other words, the claim is that this response to the problem of arbitrary commands leads us to the “problem of independence,” as it implies “that the good exists prior to God’s command and that the moral facts are independent of God.”²⁸ Here again the conflation of the good and the right rears its head, and once more I will forgo a detailed correction of that.

²⁶ Scott Davis, “Ethical properties and Divine Commands,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11:2 (1983), 297.

²⁷ Dawes, *Philosophy of Religion*, 100.

²⁸ Dawes, *Philosophy of Religion*, 99.

The divine command theorist has been depicted as setting himself up for the problem of independence, when in fact he need not do so. The divine command theorist may well claim that God would not command the torture of children, but when asked why not, there is certainly no reason why he must say that the answer is that God is good or that God follows moral rules. Perhaps the answer is that God does not *like* the torture of small children, and God is powerless to change what he likes and does not like. Powerlessness of this kind is certainly not problematic when applied to an omnipotent God, since it is merely a consequence of the belief that God's nature does not change. That this response tends to be made is well attested in the literature.²⁹ Wierenga notes 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.”³⁰ This is why Ronald Green was wrong to dismiss theological voluntarism on the grounds that it is a “reduction of God's nature and character to sheer wilfulness.”³¹ That moral obligation is *generated* by God's will does not reduce God's character and being to His will. God's will may itself depend on other things, like God's entire being and character. The fact that there is no moral standard external to God determining what He must command does not mean that divine commands are arbitrary, if by arbitrary we mean *without reasons*. This fact is lost on many critics of the divine command theory as see above, and as demonstrated explicitly by Mark Timmons:

As I have been saying, according to the divine command theory, what makes an action obligatory is the mere fact that God commands that we do it. This means that God's commands are arbitrary – he has no reason for commanding that we keep our promises and avoid hurting others; he might just as well have commanded us to ignore our promises and ignore how our actions affect others.³²

This claim too rests on the unwarranted assumption that if God has any reasons for commanding as He does, those reasons must be reasons that arise because of moral obligation. Timmons confirms that this is precisely

²⁹ For a defence of the claim that God has a nature and is subject to it see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* The Aquinas Lecture, 1980 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

³⁰ Wierenga, “A Defensible Divine Command Theory,” 401.

³¹ Ronald Green, *Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115.

³² Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 29.

the assumption that his objection rests on, when he explains why he thinks the only escape from the problem of arbitrariness is to fall into the independence problem:

We can perhaps bring out this point more clearly if we suppose that God does have reasons for his commands. For example, suppose he has some reason for commanding that we help others in need. What sort of reason might that be? Apparently, it would be some fact about the action—some fact that makes that action an action we ought to do. But then if God is basing his commands on reasons of this sort, we are committed to saying that God commands what he does because certain actions are right or wrong and, given God's nature, he conforms his commands to what is (independently of his commands) right or wrong. So in supposing that God has reasons for his commands, we are in effect rejecting the divine command theory.³³

Likewise, James and Stuart Rachels propagate the very same objection, again as the weakest feature of divine command ethics, with not so much as a reference to any of the responses that have been or could be made to it.

Perhaps God has commanded truthfulness to be right. However, on this theory, God could have given different commands just as easily. He could have commanded us to be liars, and then lying, and not truthfulness, would be right. (You may be tempted to reply, "But God would never command us to lie." But why not? If he did endorse lying, God would not be commanding us to do wrong, because his command would make it right.) Remember that on this view, honesty was not right before God commanded it. Therefore, he could have had no more reason to command it than its opposite; and so, from a moral point of view, his command is arbitrary. This result may seem not only unacceptable but *impious* from a religious point of view.³⁴

Although still appearing in published works on ethics – without interaction with the responses to it – this particular argument has been answered in the literature for years. In order to avoid the independence problem we can accept that there may well be reasons, so long as those reasons are not *morally obliging* reasons. Thus things become morally required because God wills them, and God wills them because they reflect His nature. Even if this claim is problematic for other reasons (for example, someone might be prepared to bite the bullet and argue that it is *false*), it is quite unchallenged by the Euthyphro dilemma.³⁵

³³ Timmons, *Moral Theory*, 29.

³⁴ James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007, 5th ed.), 56.

³⁵ An illustration from everyday life shows this well. I want my children to be healthy, so I tell my son to eat his vegetables. The reason that he is morally obliged to eat his vegetables is that I have told him to do so, and not the fact that they will make him healthy. But I have my own reasons for instructing him that do not morally compel him to eat

Closing Remarks

The examples I have provided here are the tip of the iceberg in the real world. Some of these texts continue to be staple teaching resources for undergraduate ethics courses, going through multiple editions with no modifications whatsoever on these points. They are not irrelevant writers in ethics or fringe works that nobody is likely to read (Singer, Rachels and Timmons being obvious examples – not that the other authors are irrelevant either). In philosophy departments in universities around the world, the objections surveyed here are routinely raised as though there were no answers, and the published replies are not even mentioned. A quick internet search will reveal one set of lecturer's course notes after the other where this farcical treatment of the Euthyphro dilemma is played out time and again. This phenomenon is *everywhere*. It hardly needs to be pointed out (one would have hoped) that what scholars write and what lecturers teach, to a considerable extent, impacts on the way people think about the subject in question. Evidence of the influence of these objections is seen also in numerous websites and blogs of the students of these lecturers who regurgitate these objections to religiously grounded ethics and declare those objections victorious, again, with no interaction whatsoever with recent defences. Statements are made, such as (and these are direct quotations from internet blogs), "Let's look at the Divine Command theory of ethics. It holds that 'morally good' means 'commanded by God' and that 'morally wrong' means 'forbidden by God.' It's that simple." At times people say that *because* they have taken classes in philosophy of religion, they are informed enough to debunk obviously silly theories like a divine command theory of ethics, by pointing out that "If 'Z is good' means 'Z is commanded by God,' then 'God's commands are good' means 'God's commands are commanded by God.' This is clearly ridiculous." Ridiculous indeed! It would be much more comfortable to say that the problem with comments like this is just that they are made without education on the relevant subject matter. If only people who say such things, we might say to ourselves, would take classes in philosophy of religion. But if the observations I have made are anything to go by, those classes, or time spent reading respectable philosophers may well have

his vegetables, namely, I love my son and I want him to be healthy. In the case of God, such love may be said to cause His will, but it does not *morally* coerce it.

been the cause of these comments in the first place. That this can and does happen is an indictment on the state of philosophical teaching and scholarship – at least when it comes to this issue – in many mainstream institutions.

The situation that I have sketched in popular moral philosophy with respect to the treatment that theologically grounded ethics receives is bleak, but I do not want to go too far. The situation is far from universal. Within the field of philosophy of religion itself, freshly nuanced criticisms are appearing, and, so far as I can tell, being competently addressed.³⁶ However, things are not as they should be. In our day and age the academy is without excuse when it produces graduates who think – because they have been taught – that Euthyphro is an unanswerable knock down objection to voluntarism, or that divine command ethics is obviously laughable because it reduces to a tautology, or to the position that God can or might command rape and it would be unproblematic. Our reaction to the scenario in philosophy should be comparable to the way we would react if physics graduates thought – because they had been taught as a straightforward fact – that Newton had it all right, and had never heard of Einstein, or that logical positivism had discredited all moral judgements. There is an echo in here, the echo of arguments that should have been given a decent burial long ago, but like Elvis, just don't seem to want to die.

³⁶ Good recent examples of just this include Mark C. Murphy “A Trilemma for Divine Command Theory,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19:1 (2002), 22–31. Murphy argues contra Adams and Alston that a view wherein the property of being morally obligatory is identical with the property of being commanded by God is a view that is inconsistent with two well received and plausible theses; the free-command thesis and the supervenience thesis. In defense of the theories of Adams and Alston, Michael J. Almeida responded with “Supervenience and Property-Identical Divine-Command Theory,” *Religious Studies* 40:3 (2004), 323-333.