

Divine Command Theory and the Euthyphro Argument

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The divine command theory is the view of morality in which what is right is what God commands, and what is wrong is what God forbids. This view is one that ties together morality in and religion in a way that is very comfortable for most people, because it provides a solution to pesky arguments like moral relativism and the objectivity of ethics.

The Euthyphro Argument comes from Plato's dialogue in which Sokrates asks: Is something is right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? The ethical implications of this argument suggest that the relationship between morality and religion might not be as clear-cut as previously thought. What makes this question so effective is that if the interlocutor accepts either part of it he is often logically forced into conclusions that may conflict with other beliefs he has, therefore creating a logical dilemma for him. Let us look at these two cases:

- (a) If something is right because God commands it, then it follows that something would be just as right if God commanded otherwise. God "says" it is right to honor your father and mother, and so that is the morally right thing to do because He says it. However if on the mount God had commanded Moses to say it is not right to honor your father and mother,

then it would be just as right today to do that because it is what God commanded. This, in effect, completely trivializes all the commands of God as completely arbitrary, and furthermore it eliminates the logical validity of God being Good, because if something is Good because God commands it, then God is Good because God commands it, a tautological statement with no real force behind it. The rebuttal that God would chose something to be right because of His infinite wisdom fits in line more with the next argument.

(b) The second option, that God commands something because it is right and that is obvious to Him in His infinite wisdom, avoids the arbitrariness of the previous option, but introduces a new problem which takes us back to the beginning: if God commands something because it is right, then in accepting that argument you have abandoned a theological concept of right and wrong, insofar that it would be right whether or not God commands it.

Each of these cases will lead the believer in the divine command theory into morally uncomfortable territory. In my personal experience, I have found that when presented with these two options, most people who previously believed in the divine command theory outright will go with the second option, as it is more pious to acknowledge God's infinite wisdom and an independent concept of right and wrong than to characterize God as arbitrary.

Another problem with the divine command theory that isn't as logically addressable, but is still a sticking point, is that what God "says" is mired in issues of accuracy and human error. What if a person claims God has said something to them, and another person claims God has said something different? Whom should you believe? The answer is, of course, the right one, but that does not get you anywhere. Now think of this in larger terms of the chief document of Judeo-Christian faith, the Bible, and millennia of time and generations of translations multiply the problems. Within the Christian faith, different denominations accept different parts of the Bible, and exclude others from the very inclusion in printing; a Catholic bible will be textually different from a Baptist bible. Furthermore, in teaching their particular texts, different parts are emphasized and deemphasized, lending an entirely different interpretation of what is thought by each to be God's word.

All of these arguments lead us to the fact that the divine command theory is not as universal and robust as many might believe it is. This should not be viewed as an anti-religious argument, rather simply as an invitation for deeper thought into the issues. Some of the greatest religious thinkers of all time such as St. Thomas Aquinas rejected the divine command theory because of the very logical dilemmas presented here. Therefore, in this sense, elements of religion certainly do and should borrow from moral concepts, but moral conceptions may exist separate from religion.