DIVINE COMMAND THEORY AND MORAL OBLIGATIONS
The question to which I address my attention in this paper is what difference, if any, God’s (in)existence would make for meta-ethics (i.e., for the metaphysical foundations of moral ontology). I will appeal to Divine Command Theory (DCT), illustrate how a version of it escapes the popular Euthyphro-esque objection, and then argue that DCT is the most plausible account of objective moral duties.

Ludwig Wittgenstein observed that “ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural.”¹ This admission betrays a latent sense of the relevance of the question of God’s existence for moral ontology.² Although the sensus philosophi³ has generally acknowledged this impression, it has not been so easily articulated. The most promising attempt to capture and express this general meta-ethical intuition has been some version of DCT, according to which “divine commands are constitutive of moral obligations.”⁴ This theory, however, “is hardly in fashion among ethicists these days;”⁵ it is popularly spurned and dismissed on the basis of a Euthyphro-esque objection. For example, Steven Cahn, appealing to “Plato’s remarkable dialogue, the Euthyphro,”⁶ asks: “is [something] wrong because God says it is wrong, or does God say it is wrong because it is wrong?”⁷ If the former, then “anything God commands would be right”⁸ including “adultery,
stealing, and murder,”⁹ which renders morality absolutely arbitrary. If the latter, then God is beholden, himself, to a moral standard, so that morality is independent of God. The first option seems unconscionable, while the second bankrupts DCT of its very coherence. Posing this dilemma is perhaps the most fashionable way of dismissing DCT today, as it appears to be a “fatal logical objection.”¹⁰

Recently, however, there has been a revitalization of DCT in the work of philosophers such as “Robert Adams, Philip Quinn, William Alston”¹¹ and William Lane Craig. Alston recounts that when he began to work on the problem he “had little real sympathy for divine command theory… [but] now I think there might really be something to a divine command ethics.”¹² The reason is that, while there are some proponents of DCT who embrace voluntarism, the majority of DCT theorists split the horns of the dilemma by providing a third alternative. This third alternative is to identify God’s nature as “what Plato called the “Good.””¹³ William Lane Craig explains;

[...] the Good is determined paradigmatically by God… Just as a meter was once defined paradigmatically as the length of an iridium bar housed in the Bureau des Poids et des Mesures in Paris, so moral values are determined by the paradigm of God’s holy and loving character… Moreover, since according to classical theism, God exists necessarily, his nature can serve to ground necessary moral truths.¹⁴

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God’s commands are, on this account, implied by his necessary nature;\textsuperscript{15} “if God is essentially good, there will be nothing arbitrary about his commands; indeed it will be metaphysically necessary that he issue those commands for the best.”\textsuperscript{16} Notice that the claim being made is one of metaphysical \textit{identity}, so that “such a view is immune to the objection that many persons, at least, don’t mean ‘is contrary to a command of God’ by ‘is morally wrong’ just as the view that water is \textit{H}_2\textit{O} is immune to the objection that many people do not mean ‘\textit{H}_2\textit{O}’ by ‘water’.”\textsuperscript{17}

Having dodged the famous dilemma, and with a clear meta-ethical account firmly in place, Dr. Craig has gone on to give a now popular axiological argument for the existence of God which goes as follows:

1. If God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.\textsuperscript{18}

This simple syllogistic argument faces at least two formidable problems. First, the major premise is plausibly not just a counterfactual, but a counterpossible,\textsuperscript{19} and counterpossible

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\item \textsuperscript{15} Notice that, against the possibility of God creating a world with moral agencies to whom he issues no commands, there may be good reason to think that God’s freely choosing to create a world with moral agencies may just involve issuing commandments to them. I have not the space to work out such an argument here, but at least we can say that if there are moral duties which remain invariant across all (broadly) logically possible worlds, then DCT is the most plausible way to account for them. Note that variation across logically possible worlds is, after all, the whole problem with voluntarism.
\item \textsuperscript{19} If there is a successful ontological argument out there, whether articulated or not, then God’s existence would turn out to be an analytic truth, just as if there is a successful modal-cosmological argument, and Craig has flirted with these types of arguments on numerous occasions. Still, he can be seen as offering a moral argument to those who aren’t convinced of any ontological-like arguments, and for whom God’s existence remains plausibly counterfactual.
\end{itemize}
conditionals are notoriously true, if at all, only vacuously.\(^\text{20}\) Second, there may not be any particular difficulty in grounding ‘objective’\(^\text{21}\) moral values naturalistically. Jaegwon Kim writes that “normative supervenience [is] the widely accepted doctrine that normative or evaluative properties supervene on nonnormative, nonevaluative properties”\(^\text{22}\) and “various metaethical positions accept normative supervenience.”\(^\text{23}\)

However, accepting for the sake of argument that the objectivity of moral value can be purchased in this way, at least moral duty, if it is ‘objective,’\(^\text{24}\) seems impervious to naturalistic accounting. Thus William Lane Craig offers a hypothetical rejoinder:

[Granting] for the sake of argument that moral values do exist independent of God… how does that result in any moral obligations[?]… Who or what lays such an obligation on me?... on an atheistic view there simply is no ground for duty, even if moral values somehow exist.\(^\text{25}\)

Craig may be slightly overstating his case. There is (only) one other non-theistic alternative to DCT on the intellectual market; namely ‘moral Platonism,’ which seeks to ground moral duty in the Platonic realm. This alternative, however, is surely less plausible than DCT; for starters, it is clearly less parsimonious, it invites Hume’s famous objection that indicatives never imply

\(^{20}\) Consider the following true sentence: “if there are invisible rainbows, then George Bush is a square circle.”

\(^{21}\) To say that something is ‘objective’ in Craig’s sense is just to say that it is “independent of whether anybody believes it” or perceives it. See James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 491. And Craig adds ‘perceives’ in other publications, such as: William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, Third Edition (Illinois: Crossway, 2008), 173.


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imperatives, and even apart from arguments for Theism and/or against Platonism, it seems intuitively plausible that “human persons are not [and cannot be] ethically accountable to impersonal things.”

In summary, we have seen that there is a version of DCT which escapes the Euthyphro dilemma, and plausibly grounds the objectivity of both moral values and obligations. Moreover, even if naturalism could in principle account for the objectivity of moral values, only DCT and moral Platonism can provide an ontological foundation for objective duties, and of these DCT is evidently the more plausible.

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26 Interestingly, on the Platonic view, the ‘is’ is an ‘ought.’
Bibliography


