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The Divine Command Theory

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The Divine Command Theory

Business leaders, along with society in general, rely on ethical frameworks to guide daily decision-making processes and logically confirm gut feelings. Prominent ethical frameworks such as deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics are popular tools employed in this process. However, various alternative ethical frameworks are also commonly used to determine the morality of contemplated actions. The Divine Command Theory (the “DCT”) is such an alternative ethical framework based on a belief in God and an acceptance that the morality of actions stems directly from God’s commands. According to the DCT, an action is morally acceptable if God commanded such action or if a divine command motivates someone to take a morally appropriate action. As commonly formulated, the DCT can be divided into three ethical sub-frameworks: (1) Religious Communities, (2) Command as Motivation and (3) Created Morality. All three alternatives are found throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition and certain other theistic religious traditions. The DCT has faced prominent criticisms since its inception beginning with a dilemma posed by Socrates during a heated discussion with an early adherent of the DCT. Over time, many DCT theorists responded to these objections by positing philosophical and religious counter-arguments and defending the DCT while others modified the DCT into various iterations addressing such objections while at the same time faithfully retaining the core idea that God’s commands dictate and/or motivate morality.

Sub-Frameworks of the Divine Command Theory

The Religious Communities Framework

The Religious Communities framework of the DCT posits that God's commands, and only God's commands, define what is morally right and morally wrong. However, this version of the DCT requires that only members of DCT-adhering religious communities are required to interpret and then abide by the commands of God. For instance, certain Christian denominations view the appointment of females in ministry to be contrary to God's commands and, therefore, morally wrong while other Christian denominations do not interpret God's commands in such a manner and consequently appoint females to ministry positions. Interestingly, many adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition fall outside of this Religious Communities version of the DCT because they view God's commands as only a partial source of their ethical responsibilities. For example, a Christian might believe that loving a neighbor is morally good even without a corresponding commandment issued by God. This framework acknowledges that the DCT is meaningless to a non-believer as one cannot be forced to abide by God's commands without a corresponding belief in a supreme deity. Finally, the Religious Communities framework accepts the idea that groups outside the religious community define morality independent of God's commands and that these interpretations of morality might significantly differ from the interpretations of the religious community.

The Command as Motivation Framework

The Command as Motivation framework of the DCT claims that certain actions are moral independent of any divine command but that God's commands provide people with the necessary and proper motivation to act morally. Therefore, like the Religious Communities framework, the Command as Motivation framework only applies to individuals who sincerely believe in God and are, therefore, motivated to follow God's commands. For example, honesty

is a practice explicitly commanded by God in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Assume that an atheist is presented with an opportunity to lie and chooses instead to act honestly. In this instance, the atheist's decision to act honestly is a moral decision – because honesty is moral independent of God's commands – but the honest action in this instance is viewed as coincidence because the atheist will not have the divine motivation required to consistently act honestly. This version of the DCT places God as the motivating force behind ethical actions but relinquishes the idea that moral actions are dependent upon God's will.

The Created Morality Framework

The Created Morality framework of the DCT states that God's will, expressed through God's commands, is the exclusive determinant of morality and that no action can be considered moral if performed without regard to God's commands. In other words, a person must believe that an action is moral because God wills such action to be moral – not because the action is good in and of itself – and then must take action (or refrain from taking action) solely because God has commanded (forbidden) such action. For example, if an atheist refrains from committing adultery based on a deontological belief in a duty to be a faithful spouse and not because God has commanded people to refrain from committing adultery, the atheist has acted unethically under the Created Morality framework. This is true even though the atheist abided by God's command and refrained from committing adultery because the atheist operated under a belief that refraining from adultery was moral without regard to God's commands. Although all three sub-frameworks of the DCT require that certain people comply with God's commands, only the Created Morality version of the DCT claims that God defines morality for everyone in all circumstances.

Objections to the Divine Command Theory

The most prominent objections to the Divine Command Theory stem from a Socratic dialogue commonly referred to as the “Euthyphro Dilemma.” The dialogue began when Socrates entered into a friendly discussion with an early Athenian adherent of the DCT. The two men were discussing the Athenian gods and the virtue of piety. Euthyphro – the other participant in the discussion – argued that piety was a virtue loved by the gods when Socrates posed the question as to whether the gods love piety because piety is good or whether piety is good because the gods love piety. Over time, this two-part question has been modified – removing the plurality of Athenian gods and replacing them with a singular God and also replacing the virtue of piety with the more generally concept of moral goodness – to form the modern version of the Euthyphro Dilemma. The modern version asks the following question to an adherent of the DCT: Is an action morally good because God commands such action or is the action morally good in and of itself and this goodness constitutes the reason why God commands such action. An affirmative response that an action is good because God commands it can be met with two objections – the Abhorrence Objection and the Emptiness Objection. An affirmative response that an action is good and, because the action is good, God commands such action can be met with the Irrelevance Objection.

The Abhorrence Objection

If an action is good only because God commands such action then what would happen if God chose to issue an abhorrent command? This criticism can be referred to as the Abhorrence Objection. What if, instead of God commanding that a person love a neighbor, God issued a

command that a person must be cruel to a neighbor? Under the DCT, an adherent would now be required to be cruel to a neighbor in order to act in a morally acceptable manner. This type of action contradicts the believer's expectations of God and God's nature, yet strict adherence to the DCT would seemingly require such abhorrent action simply because God commanded it.

The Emptiness Objection

Additionally, if any particular action is good only because God commands it, then God serves as the ultimate arbiter of what is morally right and what is morally wrong. An issue then arises as to whether the sentence "God is good" has any meaning in a world where God determines what is good. This criticism can be referred to as the Emptiness Objection. For example, DCT proponents state that "God is good," while the DCT itself claims that "Good is whatever God commands." The Emptiness Objection transposes these statements and claims that saying "God is good" is the same as saying "God is whatever God commands." The argument is then made that this statement is empty, trivial or entirely without meaning. Because adherents of the DCT strongly believe that the concepts "God is good" and "good is whatever God commands" have meaning, then any suggestion that these belief statements are meaningless tautologies undermines a core principle of the DCT.

The Irrelevance Objection

Alternatively, a response that an action is good and this goodness is the reason God commands such action, is met with the Irrelevance Objection. This objection states that if an action can be considered good regardless of God's commands then God's commands cannot be the source of all moral goodness. This places a stumbling block in front of the DCT argument that all moral

correctness and moral wrongness stem solely from God's commands. For instance, if loving one's neighbor is good in and of itself and this goodness is why God commands people to love their neighbors then God's specific command becomes irrelevant to moral goodness – the action of loving a neighbor is already good.

Responses to the Euthyphro Dilemma

Many philosophers and religious adherents over many centuries have attempted to counter the objections presented by the Euthyphro Dilemma. These defenders of the DCT argue that the logical flow of Socrates' argument is flawed and that a believer in the DCT is not limited in choosing either the first or the second prong of the Euthyphro Dilemma. DCT adherents also attempt to specifically counter each of the three objections presented by the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Some defenders of the DCT counter the Abhorrence Objection by claiming that God is a loving God and would never issue abhorrent commands. This counter-argument makes the Abhorrence Objection meaningless because there is no possibility that God would issue abhorrent commands. Other DCT proponents argue that God's nature prevents God from issuing abhorrent commands. This specific counter-argument makes the Abhorrence Objection irrelevant because God is restrained from issuing abhorrent commands.

The Emptiness Objection can be countered by the idea that it is not an empty statement to claim that "God is what God commands." This counter-argument states that because God is omnipotent and has the power to act differently from specific commandments it is significant that God chooses to act in accordance with such commandments. Therefore, the statement that

God is what God commands is not a meaningless tautology and, indeed, shows that God has made a choice to comply with specific commandments.

The Irrelevance Objection can be countered with the idea that God cannot be considered irrelevant even if good is determined to exist independent of God's specific commands. The counter-argument is as follows: if God, before issuing any commands, defined what good is and then, at a later time, commanded that people act in accordance with what is already good, this process makes God relevant and not irrelevant. Without God, good would not exist in the first place.

A Modified Divine Command Theory Framework

The philosopher Robert Adams, unsatisfied with responses to the Euthyphro Dilemma objections – particularly the response to the Abhorrence Objection – created a new iteration of the DCT. This new version modified the idea that moral wrongness stems from violating the commands of God with the idea that moral wrongness stems from violating the commands of a loving God. This modified DCT renders the Abhorrence Objection meaningless because a loving God would never issue abhorrent commands. This theory is further supported by the fact that a loving God is the theistic model prominent in the Judeo-Christian tradition and, therefore, such a nature of God makes logical sense to believers.

A major criticism of this modified theory relates to the believer's concept of the supremacy of God and the corresponding requirement to obey God in accordance with this supremacy. For instance, when a person believes that an apparently abhorrent command would not come from a

loving God, that person is allowed to freely disregard the command. This decision would be considered ethical under the modified theory even though the actor is purposefully disobeying the commands of the supreme authority.

The Divine Command Theory Today

The Divine Command Theory is as old as God's first commandment. The theory has gone through various iterations culminating in three commonly-known sub-frameworks. Today, the DCT is viewed as a substantive ethical framework whose merits and flaws continue to be debated in the public square with input coming from various arenas – including philosophy, religion and even the business community. These debates continue to focus on the objections created by the Euthyphro Dilemma and the DCT continues to be modified into new versions with the continuity of a consistent focus on God's commands as defining or at least motivating appropriate moral conduct.

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See also:

- Ethical Decision Making
- The Golden Rule
- Islamic Ethics
- Jewish Ethics
- Theories of Ethics – Overview

Further Readings and References:

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