



STUDYDADDY

Get Homework Help From Expert Tutor

[Get Help](#)

1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology

Philosophy, One Thousand Words at a Time

Because God Says So: On Divine Command Theory

31 MARCH 201416 SEPTEMBER 2019 ~

Author: Spencer Case

Category: [Ethics \(https://1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com/85-2/ethics/\)](https://1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com/85-2/ethics/), [Philosophy of Religion \(https://1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com/philosophy-of-religion/\)](https://1000wordphilosophy.wordpress.com/philosophy-of-religion/)

Word Count: 1000

Assuming God exists, what is the relationship between God's commands and morality? Assuming that God is morally perfect and so commands all and only good things, we may distinguish between two claims:

- a. God commands what He does *because it is good*.
- b. What is good is so *because of God's commands*.

If (a) is true, then facts about goodness exist independently of God's will. God's commands are a *response* to them. If (b) is true, God's commands *themselves create* all truths about goodness and badness. The philosophical fork in the road between (a) and (b) is known as the "Euthyphro Dilemma," since a version of it appears in Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*. To accept (b) is to accept Divine Command Theory about ethics (henceforth DCT), which shall be our focus here.

1. What Is Divine Command Theory?

Before we continue, let's first get clear about what DCT *isn't*. DCT isn't a theory about *which particular* actions are wrong and right, since it makes no claims about what God in fact commands. It also isn't a theory of how we come to *know* ethical truths. It is silent on how God makes His commandments known, or even *whether* He chooses to make them known. Finally, DCT isn't inconsistent with atheism. The two are logically compatible, but together entail that there are no truths about morality, just as there would be no truths about what's legal in a state of anarchy.

We should also take care to distinguish DCT from Natural Law Theory (henceforth NLT). According to NLT, moral facts are grounded in the natural order of the universe and in the natures of human beings. Of course, theists who endorse NLT hold that God created that very natural order, thereby creating the moral order, but this position still differs from DCT. Both theories agree that God created a moral order to the universe, but one holds that God created the moral order through his creation of the natural order, while the other maintains he created the moral order by commanding and forbidding things.

Another way to look at the differences between NLT and DCT is this: If a defender of NLT decided that atheism was, after all, true, he need not abandon his moral theory in order to retain at least some of his moral beliefs. It is at least conceivable that an uncreated natural order grounds ethical truths. However, if a divine command theorist adopted atheism, then he would either have to change his moral theory or accept that there are no moral truths.

2. Two Worries for Divine Command Theory

While DCT is often appealed to in popular defenses of religion, it's controversial among religious thinkers. In Christianity, William of Ockham defended DCT, and so did many Protestants, but NLT is a much more common view among Christian philosophers. In Islam, the 'Asharite school of theology appeared to accept DCT, but the Mu'tazilite school rejected it. Even the views of most 'Asharites include important qualifications (al-Attar 99-140).

Why do so few really thoughtful believers accept DCT? Well, think about asking *why* God prohibits theft, lying, and adultery. We want to say: "Because these things are bad." But to give such a justification is to abandon DCT. Per DCT, *that God so wills* is supposed to be the explanatory foundation of morality. So, DCT makes God's commands totally arbitrary.

While one troubling consequence of DCT is arbitrariness, another is the possibility of God's commanding really horrible things. Think of the morally worst thing conceivable. Whatever you've just thought of, if DCT is true, then God *could* make that thing morally right by commanding it. Wes Morriston formalizes this thought into the following argument against DCT:

1. DCT entails that whatever God commands is morally obligatory.
2. God could command X.
3. So if DCT is true, X could be morally obligatory.
4. But X could not be morally obligatory.

Therefore, DCT is false. (Morriston 251)

DCT entails (1) and (3), so the defender of DCT must reject at least one of either (2) or (4). One could deny (2) by appealing to God's eternal and unchanging nature. Perhaps Robert M. Adams could be interpreted as rejecting (2). He endorses a modified version of DCT, according to which the commands must issue from a loving God (Adams 249-276; Morriston 254-259). So maybe God is constrained by his own loving nature. The problem surrounding the rejection of (2) is that it arguably undermines God's omnipotence.

Rejecting (4) is a kind of response philosophers call "biting the bullet," since most people who think about the possibility of X's being morally obligatory have a visceral intuition against it. Among Christian thinkers, William of Ockham comes close to biting that bullet, but even he seems to have wavered (King 239-240). Among Muslim philosophers, Al-'Ashari stands out as the best example of a thoroughgoing bullet-biter (al-Attar 111-122).

Are there any good arguments for DCT? Perhaps the best way to argue for DCT is to try to show that *if* you believe in God, *then* you should accept DCT as the correct moral theory. An appeal to God's power might be effective here:

1. God is the most powerful thing conceivable.
2. Something that can make things right or wrong by will is more powerful than something that can't.
3. So, if God can't make things right or wrong by will not the most powerful thing conceivable (since we can conceive of something that can).
4. But this is absurd.

Hence, God can make things right or wrong by will (definition of DCT).

This argument alone won't convince atheists of DCT, since it only works if you assume God exists. However, it could be employed in tandem with other arguments for God's existence (maybe one of Aquinas's five arguments, for instance).

Critics of DCT might reject (1) on the grounds that God, as they understand Him, isn't the most powerful being conceivable FULL STOP, but the most powerful being conceivable *who is consistent with all divine attributes*, including goodness. Most who have thought deeply on the matter would rather make concessions on omnipotence than accept a morally arbitrary God. Might, it is thought, doesn't make right. Not even God's might.

References

[Adams, Robert Merrihew. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. Oxford University Press. \(1999\). \(http://global.oup.com/academic/product/finite-and-infinite-goods-9780195153712?q=Finite%20and%20Infinite%20Goods:%20A%20Framework%20for%20Ethics&lang=en&cc=us\)](http://global.oup.com/academic/product/finite-and-infinite-goods-9780195153712?q=Finite%20and%20Infinite%20Goods:%20A%20Framework%20for%20Ethics&lang=en&cc=us)

[al-Attar, Mariam. *Islamic Ethics: Divine Command Theory in Arabo-Islamic Thought*. Routledge. New York. \(2010\). \(http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415656702/\)](http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415656702/)

[King, Peter "Ockham's Ethical Theory." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*. Edited by Paul Vincent Spade \(1999\). \(http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/philosophy/medieval-philosophy/cambridge-companion-ockham?format=PB\)](http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/philosophy/medieval-philosophy/cambridge-companion-ockham?format=PB)

[Morrison, Wes. "What If God Commanded Something Terrible? A Worry for Divine-Command Meta-Ethics" *Religious Studies* 45, 249-267. Cambridge University Press \(2009\). \(http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5978388\)](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5978388)

[Plato. *Euthyphro*. Translated by G.M.A Grube. In *Complete Works*. Edited with introduction and notes by John M. Cooper. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. \(1997\). \(http://www.hackettpublishing.com/complete-works\)](http://www.hackettpublishing.com/complete-works)

Related Essays

Attributes of God (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/09/15/attributes-of-god/>) by Bailie Peterson

Possibility and Necessity: An Introduction to Modality

(<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/12/08/possibility-and-necessity-an-introduction-to-modality/>), by Andre Leo Rusavuk

Introduction to Deontology: Kantian Ethics (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/06/09/introduction-to-deontology-kantian-ethics/>) by Andrew Chapman

Introduction to Consequentialism (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/05/15/introduction-to-consequentialism/>) by Shane Gronholz

About the Author

Spencer has a Ph.D. in in philosophy from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Previously, he served as a public affairs specialist for the U.S. Army in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He also spent nine months in Egypt as a Fulbright Student Grant recipient to study Islamic philosophy. His main interests are ethics, meta-ethics, and comparative philosophy. <http://colorado.academia.edu/SpencerCase> (<http://colorado.academia.edu/SpencerCase>)

Follow 1000-Word Philosophy on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/1000wordphilosophy/)

(<https://www.facebook.com/1000wordphilosophy/>), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/1000wordphil)

(<https://twitter.com/1000wordphil>) and subscribe to receive email notice of new essays at the bottom of [1000WordPhilosophy.com](https://1000wordphilosophy.com/) (<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/>)

6 thoughts on “Because God Says So: On Divine Command Theory”

1. Pingback: [Because God Says So: On Divine Command Theory – JahJah's Blahblah](#) ~ [Edit](#)
2. Pingback: [Attributes of God – 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology](#). ~ [Edit](#)
3. Pingback: [Nathan Nobis on “What Norms or Values Define Excellent Philosophy of Religion?” | Philosophy of Religion](#) ~ [Edit](#)
4. Pingback: [Hell and Universalism – 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology](#). ~ [Edit](#)
5. Pingback: [Ethics: A Collection of Online Resources and Key Quotes - The Daily Idea](#) ~ [Edit](#)

6. Pingback: [Principlism in Biomedical Ethics: Respect for Autonomy, Non-Maleficence, Beneficence, and Justice – 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology](#). ~ [Edit](#)

Comments are closed.

WEBSITE POWERED BY WORDPRESS.COM.



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help