

## The moral obligations of reasonable non-believers A special problem for divine command metaethics

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**Abstract** People who do not believe that there is a God constitute an obvious problem for divine command metaethics. They have moral obligations, and are often enough aware of having them. Yet it is not easy to think of such persons as “hearing” divine commands. This makes it hard to see how a divine command theory can offer a completely general account of the nature of moral obligation. The present paper takes a close look at this issue as it emerges in the context of the most recent version of Robert Adams’ modified divine command theory. I argue that, despite a valiant attempt to do so, Adams does not succeed in giving an adequate account of the moral obligations of non-believers. More generally, I claim that if divine commands are construed as genuine speech acts, theists are well advised *not* to adopt a divine command theory.

**Keywords** God · Morality · Obligation · Divine · Command · Metaethics

A divine command metaethics must hold that the moral obligations of all persons are fixed by the commands of God. On some version of the theory (notably, that of Robert Adams), divine commands are successful speech acts. It is a problem for this account that some people don’t believe that there is a God who might issue any commands. It is implausible to think of such persons as “hearing” divine commands, but this does not prevent them from having genuine moral obligations. A non-believer who does something terrible cannot escape culpability simply by pointing out that he does not believe in God! How, then, can a divine command metaethics—especially one that takes the idea of a “command” quite seriously—account for the moral obligations of non-believers?

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In setting up the problem, I shall assume that the evidence of God's existence is not so widely available and compelling as to make it unreasonable for a normal, well-informed adult not to believe in God. By this standard, there are lots of perfectly reasonable non-believers. Some—Theravada Buddhists, for instance—have been brought up in nontheistic religious communities, and quite naturally operate in terms of the assumptions of their own traditions. Others, including many western philosophers, have explicitly considered what is to be said in favor God's existence, but have not found it sufficiently persuasive. Still others have never looked into the question in a serious way, but have seen no pressing reason to do so. I shall assume that many persons in each of these categories are *reasonable* non-believers, at least in the sense that their lack of belief cannot be attributed to the violation of any epistemic duty on their part.<sup>1</sup> The question, then, is this. How could persons in these categories be the recipients of divine commands? If they can't be, it's hard to see how *their* moral obligations could be constituted by those commands.

### Property identification, not conceptual analysis

The problem is especially acute when a divine command theory is understood as an attempt to analyze the meanings of various moral terms. So understood, it appears to be committed to the analyticity of such statements as:

1. If X is morally obligatory, then X is commanded by God.
2. If X is morally wrong, then X is forbidden by God.
3. If X is morally permitted, then X is not forbidden by God.

But statements like these can hardly be true just in virtue of the meanings of the moral terms used in them, precisely because many non-believers are competent users of the same moral vocabulary as believers, using moral terms with what appears to be much the same meaning as believers, regarding very many of the same things as morally wrong, obligatory, and permitted. For example, rape is thought to morally wrong by believers and non-believers alike, keeping promises is thought to be at least a *prima facie* duty by nearly everyone, and painting one's walls white is generally thought to be morally permissible but not morally obligatory.

In the earliest version of his well known "modified" divine command theory, Robert Adams dealt with this problem by restricting the theory in such a way that it offered an analysis of the meaning of the word "wrong" only as used in "Judeo-Christian religious ethical discourse".<sup>2</sup> He also suggested that the meaning of such words is partly the same and partly different for believers and non-believers.<sup>3</sup>

In subsequent developments of his theory, however, Adams has taken a quite different tack, presenting it as a thesis about the identity of the properties that play the roles "semantically indicated" by words in the moral obligation family.<sup>4</sup> Just as a chemist

<sup>1</sup> I would also argue that their lack of belief is not due to any cognitive malfunction, but that claim is stronger than I need to make for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Adams (1973, p. 84).

<sup>3</sup> Adams (1973, pp. 103–107).

<sup>4</sup> See especially Adams (1979, 1999).

and someone ignorant of chemistry can mean the same thing by the word “water” even though only the former knows its true nature, so the non-believer may use the word “wrong” with the same meaning as a believer even though the non-believer lacks the correct theory of what wrongness is. In this version of Adams’ theory, the property picked out by the word “wrong” is identical to the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God, even though this is obviously not what the word “wrong” means in common discourse.

In recent years, several prominent friends of the divine command theory have followed Adams’ lead, treating it as a theory of the objective nature or constitution of the properties picked out by various terms in our moral vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I shall be concerned exclusively with theories of this type.

This does seem to me to be the right line for a theological voluntarist to take. However, it does not provide a complete solution to the problem of the reasonable non-believer. The reason is that commands are speech acts in which a person tells others what to do. In order successfully to issue a command, one must *deliver* it to its intended recipients. This brings us right back to the problem of the reasonable non-believer. On the face of it, God has not succeeded in speaking to *her*. And since she is a *reasonable* non-believer, God has not even succeeded in putting her in a position in which she *should* have “heard” a divine command. How, then, can *she* be subject to God’s commands? How can *her* moral obligations be understood by reference to what God has commanded *her* to do?

### Divine will theories

In response to this problem, some philosophers otherwise friendly to the divine command theory simply drop the communication requirement and resort to what might be called a *divine will theory*.<sup>6</sup> According to theories of this type, the wrongness of an act consists in its being contrary to God’s will—a will that may or may not be openly expressed, and that may be communicated to some, but not to others. If God is *against* torture, then torture is wrong, but God doesn’t have to *tell* anyone that he is against torture in order to make it wrong. It is wrong because it is contrary to his will, and it would still be wrong even if he had not issued any explicit commands having a bearing on that subject. Similarly, if God *wants* us to keep our promises, then promise-keeping is morally obligatory. That’s what it is for promise-keeping to be morally obligatory. Again, this will be so whether or not God issues any explicit commands about promise-keeping.

Divine will theories come in many different flavors.<sup>7</sup> But all of them must face a difficulty that Robert Adams, at least, believes to be insuperable. If we drop the communication requirement, and God has not issued the appropriate commands, then the

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Alston (1989, p. 254). See also Evans (2004, p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> Though they may continue to refer to it as a divine *command* theory. See, for example, Wierenga (1983, pp. 387–407). See also Murphy (1998, pp. 1–27).

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous different theories, some more plausible than others. For an exhaustive catalogue of the possibilities, see Murphy (2007).

divine will that constitutes the difference between right and wrong may well be hidden. It is *always* hidden from reasonable non-believers, and, perhaps sometimes from believers as well. Adams suggests that “this yields an unattractive picture of divine-human relations, one in which the wish of God’s heart imposes binding obligations without even being communicated, much less issuing in a command.” He continues: “Games in which one party incurs guilt for failing to guess the unexpressed wishes of the other party are not nice games. They are no nicer if God is thought of as a party to them.”<sup>8</sup> Adams takes this objection to be decisive, and it is partly for this reason that he prefers a version of the divine *command* theory on which commands are—in some hard to define sense—speech acts. At the end of the paper, I’ll have something to say about how a divine will theorist might respond to this objection. For the moment, though, I want to concentrate on showing how little Adams’ own theory does to address this worry. More specifically, I shall argue that his notion of a divine command is too “thin” to do the work required of it. I begin by sketching in a few more of the details of Adams’ current theory.

### A social requirement theory

In his most recent treatment of the subject, Adams develops his theory of *moral* obligation in the context of a “social requirement” theory for *all* types of obligation, non-moral as well as moral. *Requiring*, he says, “is something people *do* in relation to each other.” It “essentially involves communicative *acts*.” All obligations are therefore “grounded in interpersonal relations.”<sup>9</sup>

Some obligations—Adams calls these *pre-moral*—are constituted by the demands human persons place upon one another in social contexts. For example, if I agree to be the “best man” at a wedding, I undertake the obligation of offering the first toast to the newly wedded pair. If I become a citizen of a particular country, I acquire an obligation to abide by the laws of that nation.

Such pre-moral obligations are obviously variable and relative. They depend on the requirements of the particular society in which one finds oneself. By contrast, Adams thinks that *moral* obligation is objective and requires a “transcendent ground”. He believes that this ground is supplied by the relation all human beings have to a loving and wise personal Creator who requires them to do certain things and forbids them to do others.

If this is right—if, that is, a genuinely *moral* obligation is generated only when *God* requires something of a person—then it does indeed seem that in order to have that obligation one must be made aware of the fact that a command has been issued. A mere “uncommunicated volition” cannot by itself impose an obligation in the way that (under the right conditions) a command can.

So how does Adams handle the problem I raised at the outset? How, according to him, could a person who doesn’t know that God exists be expected to know that God has commanded her to do (or to refrain from doing) something? And if she can’t be

<sup>8</sup> Adams (1999, p. 261).

<sup>9</sup> Adams (1999, p. 262).

expected to know, then how—on Adams’ social requirement view—can she be subject to the command in question?

Adams is well aware of this problem. His discussion of it is subtle and nuanced, but his position is not easy to pin down. Everything depends on just what it is for God to issue a *command*. Here is what he says about that.

In my opinion, a satisfactory account of these matters will have three main points. (1) A divine command will always involve a *sign*, as we may call it, that is intentionally caused by God. (2) In causing the sign God must intend to issue a command, and *what* is commanded is what God intends to command thereby. (3) The sign must be such that the intended audience *could* understand it as conveying the intended command.<sup>10</sup>

What sorts of “sign” does Adams have in mind? Apparently, this is meant to be a very broad category indeed. In addition to scripture, Adams says that it includes the deliverances of private conscience, “moral impulses and sensibilities common to practically all adult human beings”,<sup>11</sup> and even the requirements of one’s own society. Through such “signs” as these, Adams supposes that God intends to issue various commands. Although some of these commands are addressed to single individuals or groups of individuals, the ones Adams is especially interested in are allegedly addressed to everyone. The signs through which God expresses these universal requirements must have the meaning God intends, and those to whom they are addressed must be able to grasp that meaning, thereby coming to know what is morally required of them.

The wording of point (3) above makes it clear that Adams does not think it is necessary that divine commands actually be understood in order to be binding—he insists only that the signs involved *could* be understood “as conveying the intended command”. But where, exactly, does this leave a reasonable non-believer? In what sense is he *able* to understand a sign “as conveying a divine command”? He is, after all, a *reasonable* non-believer. He has done all that he is epistemically required to do with respect to his beliefs about God, and he still doesn’t believe that there is any such being. Even if he is aware of a “sign” that he somehow manages to interpret as a “command” not to steal, how can he be subject to that command if he doesn’t know who issued it, or that it was issued by a competent authority?

To appreciate the force of this question, imagine that you have received a note saying, “Let me borrow your car. Leave it unlocked with the key in the ignition, and I will pick it up soon.” If you know that the note is from your spouse, or that it is from a friend to whom you owe a favor, you may perhaps have an obligation to obey this instruction. But if the note is unsigned, the handwriting is unfamiliar, and you have no idea who the author might be, then it’s as clear as day that you have no such obligation.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, it seems that even if our reasonable non-believer gets so far as to interpret one of Adams’ “signs” as conveying the message, “Do not steal”, he will

<sup>10</sup> Adams (1999, p. 265). The word “could” in the last line is italicized by me.

<sup>11</sup> Adams (1999, p. 270).

<sup>12</sup> This example is adapted from Wielenberg (2005, pp. 60–61).

be under no obligation to comply with this instruction unless and until he discovers the divine source of the message.

This is a serious problem, since no advocate of the divine command theory would want his theory to exempt non-believers from all moral requirements. As Adams himself says:

... the ethical obligations whose nature I propose to analyze in terms of divine commands are not just those of some particular sort of Christians, or even of adherents of all the theistic religions, but those of human beings in general.<sup>13</sup>

So how can Adams explain the moral obligations of non-believers? He cannot say that everyone who is subject to God's commands must understand them *as divine commands*. On the other hand, he readily concedes that "what one can reasonably expect one's audience to understand by certain signs" imposes *some* "constraint" on "what one can mean (or command) by those signs."<sup>14</sup> If, for example, God wanted to command us not to steal, he could not do this by having a madman rise up and utter the English sentence, "God says to bring him a cup of coffee".

So what, exactly, are the constraints that Adams is willing to recognize? He proposes the following:

... the signs must be such that they would be likely to be understood in the intended sense if the intended audience had a good attitude toward the commander and the relevant situation, and did a good job of interpreting the signs.<sup>15</sup>

I do not see how this helps. Suppose the "intended sense" of a divine command conveyed by some "sign" caused by God is "Don't steal." And suppose a non-believer understands this "sign" in its "intended sense". If he has no idea who caused the "sign", or whether it was intentionally caused by a competent authority, it's hard to see why he should take himself to have an obligation to obey.

It is also quite implausible to suggest that a *reasonable* non-believer must have a "bad attitude" toward the commander (God). He may have no more of an "attitude" toward God than he has toward Father Christmas. On Adams' account, this seems to leave just one possibility open—the non-believer must have failed to do "a good job of interpreting the signs." But if "interpreting the signs" just involves understanding their intended content, our hypothetical non-believer has done that. If it also involves understanding who issued the command, then it's hard to see how a reasonable non-believer could fairly be expected to have correctly interpreted the "signs". In what way, then, has he failed to do a "good job"?

It seems, then, that Adams' theory would make it exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, for non-believers to discern their moral duties. In special cases, this may not be a problem for Adams' theory. If, for example, there is a duty to worship God in a certain way or on a certain day, then of course non-believers will be unaware of it; but perhaps that's all right because *they* will not have that duty

<sup>13</sup> Adams (1999, pp. 263–264).

<sup>14</sup> Adams (1999, p. 269).

<sup>15</sup> Adams (1999, p. 269).

unless and until they do become aware of it. But what about the vast number of moral duties about which believers and non-believers agree? What about the “ethical obligations” of “human beings in general” that Adams says he is most interested in explaining?

Consider, for example, the obligation to refrain from inflicting unnecessary suffering on one’s fellow creatures. Reasonable non-believers have been unable to interpret whatever “signs” they have been given *as divine speech acts* forbidding this sort of behavior. But this has not prevented many of them from seeing that it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering. How can Adams account for this?

I think Adams’ only option at this point is to say that reasonable non-believers do *to some degree* correctly interpret the “signs” they have been given—and that in addition to understanding the *content* God intends to convey, they feel what Adams at one point calls the “imperative force” of that content.<sup>16</sup> Might this be sufficient to enable them to “receive” the relevant divine commands? Suppose it is. Then, putting this extremely weak notion of a “divine command” together with Adams’ very broad view of what counts as a “sign”, we can perhaps imagine a non-believer who has “received” a divine command and feels its “imperative force” without knowing either that it is a genuine *command* or that its origin is *divine*.

Consider, for example, a non-believing philosopher who feels a quite natural revulsion towards gratuitous cruelty. This feeling of revulsion may (on Adams’ theory) count as a “sign” of the divine prohibition directed against cruelty. Responding to this sign, the non-believing philosopher forms no beliefs about God, and she may not even think of it as a “sign”. But she does form the belief that gratuitous cruelty is wrong, and she feels the “imperative force” of this belief—she feels that such cruelty is simply “not to be tolerated”. Unbeknownst to her, of course, God is the ultimate cause of her very natural feeling of revulsion, and in causing it we may suppose that God intended that she respond in some such way as this. So, although the non-believing philosopher has no idea that this is the case (as far as ethical theory is concerned, her views may be broadly naturalist and utilitarian), Adams may say that she has in fact been “addressed” by God and has “received” a divine command.

Against this proposal, it might be urged that the idea of a command that one can “receive” without being aware of being *addressed* by *anyone* is extremely counter-intuitive.<sup>17</sup> Even if God is the ultimate cause of the non-believer’s thinking in this matter, she does not seem to herself to be “interpreting” a “sign” or receiving a “command”, and it is quite a stretch to insist on this way of characterizing what she is doing.

But even if we do agree to stretch the concept of a command this far, it should be observed that virtually all the *social* content has now been removed from the idea

<sup>16</sup> Adams (1999, p. 268). “We can suppose it is enough for God’s commanding if God intends the addressee to recognize a requirement as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.”

<sup>17</sup> A referee for *IJPR* suggests that Kant’s moral theory is an important exception to this generalization. It is true, of course, that Kantian moral principles are imperative in form, and that Kant speaks of them as “commands”. On the other hand, he does *not* think of the moral imperative as a “speech act” emanating from some external source. Insofar as it has a source, that source lies in the rational will itself—a will that “legislates universal law”. This point is made clear by the “autonomy formulation” of Kant’s categorical imperative.

of a divine command. This is especially significant in the context of Adams' theory, since the supposed advantages of a "social requirement" theory of obligation presuppose interpersonal relations. For example, Adams holds that the value one places on one's relations to other persons helps explain why one has a motive to do what they "require" of one. Being held accountable by and to others is also stressed in Adams' theory, as are the guilt one experiences when there is a rupture in one's relations with another person and the forgiveness that only the offended party can make possible.

For Adams' account to work the way it is supposed to, divine commands must be embedded in an analogous network of interpersonal relations. When we disobey God's commands, the most important personal relationship of all is violated, and this gives us a powerful reason to obey. When we disobey God, we incur moral guilt and we need God's forgiveness. God, after all, is a loving creator, from whom we have received all that we have. We owe him our unconditional love, devotion, and obedience, and our moral obligations to one another are ultimately constituted by our obligation to obey his commands.

For committed Christians, this is quite an attractive picture. The trouble is that the interpersonal relations specified by this picture do not seem to be available to all human beings. In particular, they are not available to non-believers. The non-believer places no value on her relationship with her creator, since she doesn't know she has one. For the same reason, she doesn't worry about any damage to this relationship, nor does she feel any need for God's forgiveness. So it is hard to see how Adams' social requirement version of the divine command theory applies to *her*.

In his attempt to include non-believers in the intended audience of God's commands, then, Adams is forced to weaken the requirements for what it is to be divine command so much that he eliminates what he sees as some of the most attractive features of his theory. For non-believers, what "receiving" a divine command amounts to is just whatever it is for them to arrive at correct views of their moral obligations. If it is their "natural revulsion" to heinous acts that leads them to believe those acts to be wrong, they will be said to have "received" this information from their creator simply in virtue of the fact that he is the creator of the human moral sensibility. If it is the conventions of the particular society within which they have grown up that lead them to believe such things to be wrong, this will once again be attributed to the creator who somehow "uses" human beings and their choices to make them have these moral beliefs.

Adams may, if he wishes, call these "divine communications" in which non-believers—without realizing that they are doing so—"interpret" various "signs" that have been given them by God. But if this is all there is to receiving a divine command, then it is hard to see how Adams' theory has any real advantage over a pure divine will theory. After all, a divine will theorist does not deny that God is our creator, and need not deny that God plays an important role in bringing both believers and non-believers to see what their moral obligations are. A divine will theorist might even say that—without realizing it—the non-believer has *de re* knowledge of God's will in virtue of knowing her moral obligations. She needn't know that it is *God's will* that constitutes those obligations in order to have them any more than a competent user of the word "water" needs to know that water is H<sub>2</sub>O in order to know that water is drinkable. In this respect, the advantage is entirely on the side of the divine will

theorist, since she is not saddled with the task of assimilating her theory to a “communication” model according to which God—in some non-literal sense—“speaks” to non-believers, giving them “signs” that they must then “interpret”.<sup>18</sup>

### Divine-human relations

I promised to say something about Adams’ complaint that a pure divine will theory yields “an unattractive picture of divine-human relations”. How decisive is this objection?

I think a divine will theorist might plausibly respond to Adams’ objection in somewhat the following way. “My theory,” he might say, “is a theory about the identity of the properties picked out by expressions like ‘morally obligatory’ and ‘morally wrong’”. As such, it is not committed to any particular ‘picture of divine-human relations’. And it certainly does not imply that God wants us to ‘guess’ what he wants from us, or that he blames us if we don’t guess correctly.”

There would of course be a serious problem for the divine will theorist if he held that the only way to discover whether something is right or wrong is first to discern what God wills concerning that thing. Then God really would be forcing us to play a very ugly and unfair sort of guessing game. But a divine will theorist who construes his theory as an account of the identity of the properties in the moral obligation family does not need to deny that one can have justified beliefs about moral right and wrong in a wide range of cases without knowing anything about God.

There are, of course, legitimate questions about how we do know what our moral obligations are, and such questions are not immediately answered by a divine will theory. But it would be much more reasonable to expect a divine command theory to provide answers to those questions. If one thought moral obligations were wholly constituted by divine speech acts, instructing us as to what to do or to avoid, then it would be quite natural to suppose that we learn the difference between right and wrong by having God tell us to do some things and not to do others. But as we have seen, the existence of reasonable non-believers who are aware of having moral obligations tells heavily against this simple view.

### Conclusion

Reasonable non-believers have genuinely *moral* obligations. If a divine *command* theory takes the idea of a “command” at all literally, it will be unable to give a satisfactory account of this fact. When—as in the case of Adams’ theory—the concept

<sup>18</sup> A referee for *IJPR* correctly points out that according to Adams, God *is* the Good, and that we can be morally good only insofar as we relevantly resemble or “image” God. On this quasi-Platonic view of the Good, a non-believer might well have some sense of the Good, without realizing that the Good is a personal God. So on Adams’ theory, a non-believer could have a strong sense of failing to be morally good without having a correct conception of the true nature of the Good. I do not disagree. I would only point out that Adams also makes a great deal of the distinction between being *good* and doing what one is *morally obliged* to do. He insists that divine *commands*—understood as speech acts (in some not entirely literal sense)—are required for full-fledged moral *obligation*. It is this latter claim that is the target of the present paper.

of a command is weakened enough to allow non-believers to be the recipients of “divine commands”, the theory loses whatever advantages it might have had over a pure divine will theory. In that respect, at least, divine will theories are preferable to divine command theories.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, divine will theories have problems of their own. For example, there is the non-trivial matter of specifying precisely which of God’s volitional states are the ones that actually determine our moral obligations. But that, as they say, is a story for another day.