

Handout 3: God and Morality

I. The Divine Command Theory (a.k.a. Theological Voluntarism)

“From the doctrine of God as the Creator and source of all that is, it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is, still less because it seems expedient. It is right because God commands it. This means that there is a real distinction between right and wrong that is independent of what we happen to think. It is rooted in the nature and will of God.”

- Robert C. Mortimer, *Christian Ethics* (1950)

A. The Theory

Divine Command Theory (DCT) (as a theory about right and wrong action):

- (i) An act is morally obligatory if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, God commands it;
- (ii) an act is morally wrong if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, God forbids it; and
- (iii) an act is morally permissible if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, God does not forbid it.

B. Motivations for DCT

C. DCT and Atheism

D. Two Inconclusive Arguments Against DCT

1. DCT and God’s Particular Alleged Commands

An Argument Against DCT from God’s Particular Alleged Commands

1. If DCT is true, then:
 - (a) homosexuality is wrong;
 - (b) slavery is sometimes ok;
 - (c) it’s ok for soldiers to rape and pillage;
 - (d) it’s wrong for a woman ever to disobey her husband;
 - (e) it’s wrong to eat shellfish.
2. But (a) – (e) are not true.
3. Therefore, DCT is not true.

2. DCT and the Difficulty of Knowing God’s Commands

An Argument Against DCT from the Difficulty of Knowing God’s Commands

1. On DCT it’s hard for us to know what’s right and wrong.
2. Any ethical theory on which it’s hard for us to know what’s right and wrong cannot be true.
3. Therefore, DCT is not true.

E. The Euthyphro Problem

“The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”

- Plato, *Euthyphro* (c. 380 B.C.)

Socrates's Dilemma for DCT:

EITHER:

Horn 1:

OR

Horn 2:



(Horn 1): Wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

(Horn 2): God prohibits wrong actions because they are wrong.



- (a) God's prohibitions are arbitrary.
- (b) Morality is contingent.
- (c) God's goodness is trivial.

Incompatible with DCT, since morality is no longer ultimately based on God's commands.

The Euthyphro Problem (in the form of a valid argument):

1. If DCT is true, then either Horn 1 or Horn 2 is true.
2. Horn 1 is not true.
3. If Horn 2 is true, then DCT is not true.
4. Therefore, DCT is not true.

F. Does Horn 2 Make God Less Powerful, Or in Any Other Way Less Great?

1. Horn 2 and Accounts of Omnipotence
2. Theological Voluntarism and the Story of the Contest for Omnipotence
3. Theological Voluntarism and the Problem of Evil
4. Other Examples God's "Subjugation"

G. A Non-Voluntaristic Role for God in Morality

II. The Moral Argument for the Existence of God

A. Craig's Argument (p. 19)

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

B. Premise 1

1. What are "objective moral values"?

To say that "objective moral values exist" is to say:

- (i) that some *moral statements* are true (these are statements like:

'It's wrong to eat meat.'
'Abortion is wrong except to save the life of the mother.'
'Undeserved suffering is bad.'
'What Ted Bundy did to Joni Lenz was wrong.'
'Hitler was evil.');

and

- (ii) when they are true, they are not made true in virtue of anyone's attitudes about them, or about what they are evaluating.

To illustrate:

"... to say, for example, that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right and that it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everyone who disagreed with them" (Craig, p. 17).

2. Why Think Premise 1 Is True?

- a. Argument from Authority (Russell, Ruse, Nietzsche) (pp. 17-18)
- b. Argument from Evolution (p. 18)
- c. The "No Foundation in Reality" Argument (p. 19)
- d. The No-Lawgiver Argument (pp. 19-20)
- e. The Improbability Argument (pp. 20)

C. Premise 2

1. Why Think Premise 2 Is True?

- a. The Clear Apprehension Argument (p. 21)

D. Problems with Premise 1

1. The Euthyphro Problem
2. The Incompatibility of Theological Voluntarism and Moral Objectivism