

# DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS

## Discussion Openers

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) often said, “If God is dead, everything is permitted.” What does this mean? Would you live your own life any differently if you concluded that God is dead?

In the Amish and Mennonite sections of Pennsylvania, you can often see black horse-drawn buggies on the highways. Not only do their religious beliefs dictate using horse-drawn buggies instead of cars powered by mechanical engines, but their religious convictions also prohibit the Amish and Mennonites from displaying images—including the image of the red reflective triangle that the state requires that they put on the rear of their carriages to lessen the danger of collision with cars. How do you think we should resolve conflicts such as these?

In the film *Gandhi*, Gandhi at one point says, “I am Moslem; I am a Hindu; I am a Christian; I am a Jew.” What did he mean by that? In what sense, if any, was it true? In what sense, if any, do you feel that it is true about you?

Some philosophers have argued that religion is harmful to the moral life while others have claimed that it is necessary to it. What’s your view?

A young Muslim mother was repeatedly raped in front of her husband and father, with her baby screaming on the floor beside her. When her tormentors seemed finally tired of her, she begged permission to nurse the child. In response, one of the rapists swiftly decapitated the baby and threw the head in the mother’s lap.

(Stump, E., "The Mirror of Evil" in Morris, T. (ed.), *God and the Philosophers* (1994))

How do we know this is wrong?

## Euthyphro Dilemma

The question Socrates asks Euthyphro in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*:

*Is what is right that way because God commands it, or does God command it because it is already morally right?*

## The second option = Autonomy of Morality

Euthyphro goes for the second option. What are the consequences of this choice?

## The first option = Divine Command Ethics (a.k.a. Theological Voluntarism)

This ethical theory holds that all moral requirements derive from God's commands. One way of articulating the basic idea goes as follows.

(1) An action is morally *forbidden* (wrong) because God commands against it.

(2) An action is morally *permitted* (right) because it is not the case that God commands against it.

(3) An action is morally *obligatory* because God commands that it be performed.

## Background

This conception of morality has a long history. The Hebrew Bible is full of stories of God imposing requirements, the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) being a very clear example of this.

In the Gospels Jesus teaches his ethics of love in the form of commands to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22: 37-40).

In the Middle Ages, it **William of Ockham** argued along these lines. Other thinkers, like **René Descartes** developed a Divine Command approach to ethics. More recently, the Danish Philosopher and writer **Søren Kierkegaard** supported similar approaches.

In Islam, the **Qur'an** is believed by Muslims to be the literal word of God. Its ethical commands are to be taken as the commands of God.

## Some Negative Criticisms of Divine Command Morality

- Moral rightness is **completely arbitrary**—Assuming that God commanded us to be honest, this makes honesty morally right. But the choice of commanding honesty was not made for any **reason**. God could just as easily chosen to command lying (murder, theft, torturing babies, etc.) and then this would have been morally right. It makes no sense to say, “But God would never command those things!” Why wouldn’t he? (You can’t say, “Because they are wrong!”) If he had commanded the Ten Anti-Commandments (Thou shalt steal, Thou shalt kill, Thou shalt bear false witness...), these would have been morally right.

- Given the assumptions of Divine Command Morality, if there is no God, nothing is morally forbidden, nothing is morally obligatory, and everything is morally permitted.

- **Leibniz** (German Theologian and Mathematician) said in *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686):

*So in saying that things are not good by any rule of goodness, but sheerly by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the contrary?*

- **Divine Commands and Human Autonomy.** By saying that the good is simply whatever God wills it to be, this position makes human moral life depend solely on God’s will. What place, then, does human reason have? Are human beings simply reduced to the role of obedient puppets?
- **How is God’s Will known?** A primary source of God’s commands in the Judeo-Christian tradition is **Scripture**. This leads to several ambiguities. First, not every command in the Bible is to be understood as applicable. God is

recorded in Genesis as commanding Abraham to kill Isaac, but it would be silly to think that today this command gives us a moral duty to kill Isaac.

Second, not only those parts of the Bible written in the imperative mode (as explicit orders) are to be consulted in figuring out what God commands. The Bible is full of different genres of writing; poetry, songs, parables, narratives, histories etc.

Further, if we only attend to explicit commands, we will miss much of what God actually requests us to do. For example, nowhere in the Gospels does Christ tell His disciples to stop discriminating against Samaritans. However, Christ’s actions and parables clearly suggest that He was telling His followers to do so.

- **Divine Command Morality seems to boil down to ‘My own command morality’** Even if God is cited as the higher authority for right and wrong, you are the authority who chooses what it is and what it is telling you to do.

- **Can only believers be moral?** What about those who do not believe/have access to God’s Will?

- **There are rival theories for the basis of ethics that don’t appeal to a deity** **Thomas Hobbes** (English Philosopher of 17<sup>th</sup> C.) argued that moral standards are necessary human conventions that keep us out of a perpetual state of war.

Others, such as **David Hume**, argued that they are based on human ‘affection’ for their fellow humans.

Still others, like **Charles Darwin**, trace the development of morality as a part of evolutionary adaptation.

**Can you think of other negative criticisms?**

## In defence of Divine Command Ethics

- Euthyphro dilemma is not a dilemma if polytheistic deities replaced by monotheistic Judeo-Christian deity.  
**Alister McGrath** (Cambridge Protestant Theologian) explains:

*The Euthyphro dilemma has force if, and only if, human and divine ideas of justice or goodness are understood to be two completely independent entities— a perfectly reasonable assumption for Plato, given the polytheism of his period.*

He goes on to explain that Christians ‘... recognize that what God does is right, because we have been created in the image of divine ideas of righteousness. Human and divine ideas of goodness resonate’

- *A man would feel wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet ... If the whole universe had no meaning, we should never have found out it has no meaning: just as, if there was no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning.*  
(C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity)

We could adapt this argument quite easily to morality. Replace ‘sense of meaning’ or ‘sense of light’ with ‘sense of morality’. Then we get: if there were no universal sense of morality we would not even ask about/recognise notions of morality/immorality.

- *But there is a difficulty about disagreeing with God. He is the source from which all your reasoning power comes: you could not be right and he wrong any more than a stream could rise higher than its own source. When you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on.*  
(C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity Book)

This argument is similar to the one used more recently by McGrath above.

**Can you think of other positive criticisms?**