

DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS – A CRITIQUE THROUGH HISTORY

<p>In defence of DCE</p> <p>Genesis 2nd Creation Account – symbolism of 'eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good/Evil' & 'you will be like God' = human attempts to usurp God as the ultimate arbiter of morality, a project bound for chaos, folly, failure and death.</p> <p>Ancient Hebrew understanding never really split religion and ethics – they were united in a harmonious whole. Belief and behaviour formed a continuum. Morality sprang from belief in a Creator God who had created all humans in his image. This is developed into what we now call the Judeo-Christian heritage.</p>	<p>Against DCE</p> <p>Plato (c.428-c.348 BC) presents the Euthyphro dilemma with all its implications.</p>	<p>ANCIENT</p>
<p>The major attempts to ground morality in 'something else' all come with major difficulties. For example:</p> <p>Kant's Deontology is coldly rational, is based on his own unique epistemology, cordons off feelings, doesn't deal with duty conflicts, refuses to accept that some consequences ought to matter, etc... His system requires three classical metaphysical postulates: God, immortality, free will.</p> <p>Act Utilitarianism depends on an impossible weighing up of consequences, depends on 'happiness' (=?), easily leads to counter-intuitive moral results, etc. Rule Utilitarianism shares some of the problems of AU, but has its own particular difficulties, too.</p> <p>Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), a Danish Philosopher and religious writer, emphasised the importance of the personal act of faith and utter submission to the Divine Will. In many ways his writings anticipate the movement known as Existentialism.</p>	<p>Enlightenment Period (c. 18C onwards) DCE attacked:</p> <p>Philosophers such as Samuel Clarke argued that moral values can be intuitively perceived and, again, like mathematical truths, can be understood by any rational being. Since God is a rational being, then God, too, endorses these eternal standards of morality. However, God's mere acceptance of moral standards in no way creates them, and in that sense is no different than a human's acceptance of moral standards.</p> <p>Thomas Hobbes argued that moral standards are necessary human conventions that keep us out of a perpetual state of war. (Leviathan, pub. 1651)</p> <p>Jean-Jacques Rousseau presented the picture of the 'noble savage' – the idea that human beings in primeval simplicity are naturally ethical beings. For Rousseau, it was so-called civilisation – and the idea of private property – that introduces evil into the world. (A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, pub. 1755)</p> <p>Others, such as David Hume (and J. S. Mill afterwards), argued that they are based on human instinct. (Affection of Humanity: The Foundation of Morals, pub. 1751)</p> <p>Immanuel Kant presented an alternative system – a radical deontological ethics – based on human reason (writings such as the Critique of Practical Reason, pub. 1788)</p>	<p>ENLIGHTENMENT</p>
	<p>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels believed that ethics was conditioned (like just about everything else) on the economic arrangements under which human beings live. (Communist Manifesto, pub. 1848)</p> <p>Charles Darwin examined the question of the origin of morality. He believed that any animal endowed with the social instincts and familial affections of humans would develop a moral sense or conscience 'as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well, developed as in man' (The Descent of Man, pub. 1871)</p> <p>Friedrich Nietzsche believed that morality is the creation of 'the herd' – the great mass of ordinary people, led more by fear than by hope, afraid to stand out of the crowd. (Beyond Good and Evil, pub. 1886)</p>	<p>INDUSTRIAL</p>
<p>Clive Staples Lewis argued forcefully for a Universal Moral Law grounded in the Divine Being (especially in the small book 'The Abolition of Man' and the larger work 'Mere Christianity').</p> <p><i>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.</i> (Mere Christianity, pub. 1952)</p> <p>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</p> <p><i>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. (Ibid.)</i></p> <p>This argument could be used to dismiss an objection raised by the Euthyphro Dilemma.</p> <p>In his essay, "The primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," Philip Quinn highlights the importance of God's Will in Judeo-Christian Ethics. For example, he says that the central Christian Command to love everyone is not merely an endorsement of a pre-existing standard of morality, since it is contrary to human nature to love everyone. It is in fact a new standard that was created by God's pronouncement.</p> <p>Alister McGrath (Protestant Theologian) dismisses the Euthyphro Dilemma as only being a Dilemma in the polytheism of ancient Greece. 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.</p>	<p>Sigmund Freud (in Civilisation and its Discontents, pub. 1930) thought that ethics was a 'therapeutic attempt' to resolve a conflict between our natural innate aggression and a 'cultural super-ego', or the collective authority of the community.</p> <p>Modern Darwinists (e.g. Stephen Jay Gould) are still hard at work to demonstrate that morality/altruism is evolutionary.</p> <p>More recently, DCE has undergone systematic attack by philosophers like Kai Neilsen. He questions the claim that "God is good" is true by definition (the same way that "wives are women" is true by definition). For, the terms "God" and "good" are not identical, and to understand that statement we need a prior understanding of moral goodness that is independent of God.</p>	<p>MODERN</p>