

## Is God Always Right?

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We are going to examine the ‘Divine Command’ theory of ethics. But first we need to think about how ethics and religion are related.

Let’s look at some difficult cases...

- Someone believes that God is telling him to kill. If he was right, does it make the killings right? If you don’t think that killing can ever be right, then how could you prove that God had not spoken to him?

If you do not believe in that God exists, you are clearly going to opt for his belief being part of a pattern of mental disturbance. But if you believe in God, there is the problem of knowing how to judge between genuine and bogus claims to have received a command from God.

- But what of God’s order to Joshua to slay all the occupants of Jericho once the walls had fallen? Most ethical arguments would say that genocide can never be justified. So how do you understand what the Old Testament says about Joshua?

A suicide bomber believes that he or her is fulfilling God’s purpose by attacking representatives of the West and thus becoming a martyr. If God commands it – of, rather, if your scriptures say that God commands it, does that make it right? And that’s not just between religions; in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was torn apart by wars between Protestants and Catholics.

Both the psychopath and the religious martyr, may believe that God has commanded them to do what they do. If you say that is impossible, you are placing human reason and morality above the authority of God.

How should ethics relate to religion? There are three possibilities:

1. Autonomous Ethics. Ethics is based on human reason. It does not need religious support, and – where religious views differ – it can judge between them. [Examples: respect for individuals; not killing the innocent; care for the environment – none of these require religious backing; they are based on pure reason.]
2. Heteronomous Ethics. Ethics is based on traditions and rules that exist apart from its own ethical arguments. Typically, this means that religious traditions or the supposed commands of God establish what is right or wrong. Reason has a more limited value in applying those rules to everyday situations, but reason itself is

not enough to establish right or wrong. [An example of this might be the keeping of Saturday or Sunday as a day of rest – there may be perfectly good reasons why people benefit from not working every day, but the tradition comes from religion.]

3. Theonomous Ethics. This is the view that our understanding of God and the source of our ethical thinking are one and the same. Religion and morality are equally inspired by God. [An example of this kind of argument is the ‘natural law’ view that the universe is ordered and works on a rational basis – and that an expression both of the existence of a God and also of the ability of human beings to think rationally and ethically.]

With this in mind, we need to look at the classic arguments for the Divine Command theory of ethics. It is called the **Euthyphro Dilemma**: In Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. In it, Socrates asks ‘Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?’

If you argue in favour of the first option, you simply accept that whatever God commands must be considered ‘good’: you have no independent way of deciding right or wrong.

However, if you take the second of Socrates’ options, it implies that there is an independent standard of good, known to human reason, by which you can judge God’s action and therefore declare it to be ‘good’.

This is to create an authority over and above God – the authority of human reason to know right from wrong – and this is what many religious people will not accept.

Notice that this dilemma does not mean that secular and religious moral view are necessarily different from one another. In other words, you may believe exactly the same thing to be right, but do so for very different reasons. Secular and religious moral systems can often agree on fundamental values, for example ‘love’ or ‘respect for persons’. It is not the moral conclusions that distinguish the secular from the religious, but the methods at which they arrive at those conclusions and the ways in which they justify them.

The ‘Divine Command Theory’ argues that whatever God commands is good. It is linked to the belief that God is the origin of all goodness. Therefore, if God is the creator of the world, and the source of love – as believers claim – then it is clear that whatever he commands is bound to be good. This is simply because God is seen as the definition of what ‘good’ means.

It is possible to use this dilemma as a basis for arguing for a Natural Law approach to ethics. In other words, if God is the rational creator of everything, then the universe should display a rational structure and purpose. Human reason, in contemplating the universe, is thus (whether it recognises it or not) also contemplating God.

However, if someone argues that they have had a personal experience of God, and that he has commanded something, how can you set about judging whether that is possible, or whether they may be mistaken. They might be convinced that God spoke to them in a dream, but does that mean anything more than that they dreamed that God spoke to them?

So the tendency is to go for some sort of clear-cut religious authority – and in terms of Christianity, there have been main sources of authority:

1. the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
2. scriptures.

But, if you want to argue that a command in the scriptures always counts authoritative, there is the dilemma concerning the way in which the scriptures should be interpreted:

- should you take everything literally, or is it more poetic or symbolic?
- to what extent should the scriptures should be read in the light of circumstances, cultural and historical, within which they were written?

In other words, even if something was commanded by God 2000 years ago, does that mean it is necessarily valid for all time and in all circumstances?

So, for example, portions of the Old Testament are concerned with the purity of the Children of Israel, and therefore make a great point about not allowing them to be contaminated by contact with other nations and their forms of worship. The genocide of the Canaanite peoples by the invading Israelite tribes sounds horrific as recorded. But did it actually happen, or is this a writer many centuries later saying what he thought ought to have happened. In other words, covering up the fact that many of the children of Israel settled down with the locals and got on very nicely! So was the genocide God's command, or was it a later view about what God's command should have been?

Quite apart from the historical authenticity, there is also a difficulty with language. People tend to take a modern translation of an ancient text, and interpret it as though the words that have been used to translate the original mean the same thing.

To use the most obvious of examples...

Hebrew has a specific word, *betulah*, for a virgin, and a more general word, *'almah*, for a young woman.

In Matthew's gospel there is a reference back to Isaiah, when he quotes: "A virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" ([1:22-23](#)). But the passage from Isaiah says:

7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a young woman (*almah*) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

15 Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.

16 For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

A plausible explanation of the purpose of the passage in Isaiah is that the original prophecy was spoken in 734 BC, when, before a soon-to-be-born child knows the difference between good and evil, Syria (which threatened Israel at the time) would be conquered. This prophecy would be fulfilled 2 years later, when Syria was defeated by the Assyrians in 732 BC.

So, in the original, the real sense of the passage is to say that Syria is not really as threatening to Israel as some think, because before any child born now is old enough to understand good from evil, Syria will be destroyed. Either this was an accurate political prediction, or else it was written after the event. But notice that it is absolutely nothing to do with the idea of a virgin birth.

But when *'almah* was translated into Greek, the word used could also refer to a virgin. Hence it turned into the idea that a virgin would give birth.

I would argue is that you can get into the same sort of problem areas when it comes to the commands of scriptures of all religions. Very few people are able to do all the scholarly work to show exactly what a command might have meant. Therefore anyone taking a literal command in scripture as a justification of present morality is actually trusting more in the ability of translators than in any idea of God.

Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity accept that there can be a measure of interpretation in order to understand the scriptures. In Islam a gathering of scholars can decide on correct interpretation of Islamic law. In Judaism, there is generation upon generation of rabbinic interpretation. In Christianity, scriptures were to be understood in the context of agreed sets of beliefs, and Church leaders (bishops) took responsibility for guiding that interpretation.

And this leads to another problem with the Divine Command theory - relativism, which would see religious beliefs and scriptures as coming from particular settings, and not necessarily suitable for universal application. In other words, even if you have done all your homework and decided that the claim that God gave a particular command is true, that does not necessarily mean that it is a command that should be given or obeyed today.

Now you may feel that I have strayed a long way from the Divine Command Theory of Ethics – but actually, the way in which you interpret scriptures, and the sort of authority you give to the commands of scripture or the doctrines set out by a religion, are at the heart of the problem.

And at the heart of it is the distinction between natural religion and revealed religion.

Natural religion is based on a rational interpretation of the nature of reality – thus, for example, the arguments for the existence of God (Ontological, Cosmological and Design arguments) work on the assumption that religion is reasonable, and that if the universe is the creation of a rational god, then his thoughts will be reflected in natural human reason.

A revealed religion, however, believed that God is revealed in particular events, rather than in the general structure of the universe. These events are recorded in scriptures, and therefore the scriptures become the principle source of authority.

Most people recognize that religion can be useful in giving a sense of purpose or moral guidance, even if they themselves are not religious. However, when it comes to the Divine Command theory of ethics, the issue is more contentious. We live in a world where violence is too often justified with reference to religion, and religious groups may be ‘unreasonable’ in their dealings with one another. The problem with the Divine Command theory of ethics is that any religious group may claim that God has commanded them to do what they do – whether it is caring for the sick or killing those who oppose their religion.

A final note about ‘God’... Both Hindu and Buddhist philosophies make an important distinction between absolute truth and conventional truth. At the absolute level, we really can say very little about what ‘reality’ (Brahman for Hindus) is about. But in order for religion to function we need to use images, that show the divine in quasi-human form. The advantage is that such God’s can show love or anger, can give commands and offer rewards and punishments – hence it is more possible to have what feels like a relationship with them (and Hinduism, of course, has many different gods – each expressing a facet of reality). But the crucial thing, for these religions, is recognizing the limitations of those conventional images. They are limited symbols, pointing to a transcendent reality.

It is therefore important to recognize that divine commands – orders from God, whether people think that God speaks to them directly today, or the record in scripture of people who have thought that in the past – are limited by the ideas and language of the individual people who receive them. Whatever the word ‘God’ may mean, it is certainly not the sort of being that literally has a mouth and gives orders. Commands are always limited by the imagination and understanding of the person who feels that they receive them.

Therefore, at the end of the day, you really have to decide whether you are going to take on trust what a religious person tells you is God’s will, or whether you are going to think through your own principles and valued by use of your own reason.