

A Defensible Divine Command Theory

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The term 'The Divine Command Theory of Ethics' is similar to 'The Ontological Argument' in that there is no unique entity deserving of that title. Rather, there is a multiplicity of theories, each of which is appropriately taken to be a divine command theory. The strongest versions are, if not the finest, at least defensible. That is, according to these versions moral predicates, such as 'is obligatory,' are to be defined in terms of such theological predicates as, 'is commanded by God,' or moral properties, such as the property of *being obligatory*, are to be identified with such theological properties as, *being commanded by God*. Perhaps the most famous defender of this sort of divine command theory is Euthyphro ([15]: 9D). However, even if Plato did not succeed in refuting Euthyphro's definition of the pious as that which is loved by the gods—showing at most that Euthyphro's definition is inconsistent with certain other premisses also held by Euthyphro¹—definitional divine command theories are widely held to be at best implausible. I think that the most persuasive consideration against such theories is that most persons, including many theists, who have thought about whether moral and theological predicates are synonymous have not concluded that they are. And, most persons, including many theists, who have thought about whether moral properties are identical with theological ones have not concluded that they are.

Perhaps the weakest forms of the divine command theory assert simply that what God commands is coextensive with what is right. Such versions of the theory are compatible with the view that God is not a moral authority in the sense that He has or exercises the right to determine morality, but only in the sense that He gives expert moral advice.² Other weak versions are possible. According to Richard Swinburne,³ God can bring about the obligation that we obey His commands by placing us in certain circumstances, for example, the circumstances of having been created and sustained by Him or of being allowed to use His property. But according to this theory, some of God's commands

merely reinforce obligations we would have anyway, and many moral truths are entirely independent of God's will or commands. Philip Quinn⁴ has presented a theory according to which "divine commands, were they to be issued, would suffice to impose indefeasible requirements." But Quinn's theory does not include the claim that God *has* issued any commands, and it leaves open the possibility that any requirement imposed by a command of God is also imposed by something else. None of these proposals, then, includes a leading feature of the traditional divine command theory, which is that all of our obligations are due to God's commands. In this paper I shall describe a divine command theory which incorporates this feature, but which is not definist, and I shall try to show how this theory can be defended against a number of recent and traditional objections.

I

According to the view I want to present, there are moral properties such as *being obligatory* and *being wrong*, and there are what might be called "theological properties," such as, *being commanded by God* and *being forbidden by God*. But it is not true that properties of the first kind can be identified with properties of the second kind. Furthermore, it is not true that predicates expressing moral properties can be defined in terms of predicates expressing theological properties. According to this view, however, if an act possesses a moral property, it does so in virtue of possessing some theological property. For example, if an act is obligatory, then it has the property of being obligatory in virtue of having the further property of being commanded by God; and if an act is wrong, then it has the property of being wrong in virtue of having the further property of being forbidden by God. More precisely, the theory includes the following principles:

- (P1) For all acts *a*, *a* is *obligatory* iff God commands *a*; and if *a* is obligatory then by commanding *a* God makes it the case that *a* is obligatory.
- (P2) For all acts *a*, *a* is *wrong* iff God forbids *a*; and if *a* is wrong then by forbidding *a* God makes it the case that *a* is wrong.

The left conjuncts of these principles assert the coextension of what is obligatory and what is wrong with God's commands and prohibitions, respectively. The right conjuncts are intended to express the stronger condition that the possession of these moral properties is in some sense

dependent upon God's activity. The familiar notion of permissibility may also be introduced, as follows:

- (P3) For all acts *a*, *a* is *permissible* iff it is not the case that God forbids *a*; and if *a* is permissible then by failing to forbid *a* God makes it the case that *a* is permissible.

These principles are stated in terms of particular acts or act-tokens, rather than generic acts or act-types. This distinction may be roughly made by noting that the latter are kinds of acts, and they can, for the most part, be done over and over again. Act-tokens are particular acts, they are datable, and they are non-repeatable. Act-tokens may be thought of as instances of act-types. There is good reason, to be discussed below, for formulating the theory in terms of particular acts rather than in terms of generic acts. For now, however, let me merely mention three additional assumptions I shall make about act-tokens. First I shall assume that there exist acts which do not occur or are not performed. This is to accommodate the likely possibility that there are acts which God has commanded, and which are, accordingly, obligatory, but which are not performed. I shall also assume that for each act there is a unique person who is the agent of the act. The agent of an act is the person who would perform the act, were it to be performed. And I shall assume that for each act there is a time at which or during which the act would be performed, were it to be performed. If these last two assumptions are unwarranted, I believe that they can be avoided by reformulating what I say in terms of triples of acts, agents, and times.

Doubt might arise concerning (P3) because it requires that in order for an act to be permissible, God's *failing* to forbid the act makes it permissible. But can a failing make something else to be the case? I am inclined to think that it can. My failing to intervene can make me an accomplice, or my failing to register can make me ineligible to vote. Moreover, God's failing to forbid an act is never a mere oversight; acts which He fails to forbid are acts of which He is aware but which He *declines* to forbid. If (P3) remains suspect, the divine command theory could be formulated with the right conjunct of (P3) deleted. Such a formulation would accept what Quinn calls "Karamazov's Thesis," namely, that if God did not exist, then everything would be permitted ([17]: 30).

A word should be said at this point about the locution, 'makes it the case that.' I do not intend this to express a causal relation. Hence, even if all causal laws are brought about by God, it will not follow that (P1)-(P3) are brought about by God. Rather, I take 'makes it the case that' to express some asymmetric relation of dependence. No doubt the theory I am presenting would be more attractive if more could be said

about the nature of this relation. Nevertheless, I am sure that there are such relations, and (P1)-(P3), as well as other things to be said below, can be taken to place constraints on the interpretation of the theory's primitive locution.

I should also note that although I speak of God's commands and prohibitions and I call the theory a divine command theory, this is really a convenient shorthand and a courtesy to tradition. I think that the theory is best formulated in terms of God's will and wants or His approval and disapproval. Thus, what makes an act obligatory is that God wants it to be performed. As a matter of fact, God's commands might always be general and never commands that some particular act be done; so they might not generate many obligations. Divine commands could, nevertheless, be extremely important for the divine command theorist, for perhaps it is through general commands that God reveals His wishes with respect to particular acts. Distinguishing between God's explicit commands and His will allows a resolution of the difficult problem of Abraham and Isaac. Presumably God prohibits the killing of innocent children. Yet Isaac was an innocent child whom, according to the biblical account, God commanded Abraham to kill.⁵ Must the divine command theorist conclude that it was both obligatory and wrong that Abraham kill Isaac? I suggest that the divine command theorist not take God's command that Abraham kill Isaac as indicating God's desire that some particular act of Abraham's killing Isaac be performed. Rather, God issued that command to reveal what He really wanted, or to induce Abraham to do what he really wanted, which was that Abraham, out of desire to obey God, *prepare* to sacrifice Isaac. Hence, although Abraham's actually killing Isaac would have been wrong, his preparing to sacrifice Isaac was obligatory.

Principles (P1)-(P3) are incomplete. They fail to capture an important category of moral appraisal, namely, that category of acts which are better than permissible but which are, nevertheless, not quite obligatory. To see why the divine command theorist should want to recognize such a category, consider the following possibility. Suppose that God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh but did not specify the exact route or time of departure. Then there are an indefinite number of particular acts, any one of which, had Jonah performed it, would have been a case of Jonah's going to Nineveh. By performing one of these particular acts, Jonah would have done what was right, but none of these acts was itself obligatory. Yet, such acts seem better than merely permissible. Perhaps we can call such acts "right." This moral term can be incorporated into our divine command theory by means of the following principle:

- (P4) For all acts a , a is *right* if there is a set A of agent-identical acts such that (i) each member of A is permissible, (ii) a is a member of A , and (iii) God commands that some member of A be done; and if a is right, then there is a set A which satisfies conditions (i) and (ii) and which is such that by commanding that some member of A be done, God makes it the case that a is right.⁶

It might be thought that, intuitively, a right action is one way of discharging an obligation. In the case above, however, each of an indefinitely large set of particular acts of going to Nineveh was indeed right for Jonah, but it is less clear what obligation he would have discharged by performing one of them. No particular act was obligatory in this case. Is the act-type *going to Nineveh* obligatory? That depends on the conditions under which an act-type is obligatory, a topic about which our theory has so far had nothing to say. One possibility is that an act-type is obligatory just in case all of its instances are obligatory. On this suggestion the act-type *going to Nineveh* would not have been obligatory for Jonah, since some instances of it, say, on a stolen donkey or by way of Egypt, would have been wrong for Jonah. On the present suggestion there might nevertheless be some other act-type which was obligatory. Call the set of permissible acts, with Jonah as agent, of going to Nineveh, ' A .' Then perhaps the act-type *performing at least one member of A* was obligatory; by doing one of the members of A , Jonah would have discharged this obligation. A second possibility for extending the concept of obligation to act-types, and one which will be adopted below, requires reference to the *complement* of the act-type. For any act-type A , the complement of A is the act-type of *refraining from A* or of failing to perform A . The second suggestion, then, is that an act-type is obligatory if and only if every instance of its complement is wrong. If we assume that anything Jonah might have done other than going to Nineveh would have been wrong, the present suggestion does allow us to say that the act-type of *going to Nineveh* was obligatory for Jonah. Thus, by performing one of the right particular acts, Jonah would have discharged this obligation.

A right act is, by definition, permissible. If, furthermore, God never commands an act which He also forbids, and He commands a particular act only if He commands that some member of the unit set of that act be performed, then every obligatory act is right.

If the variables in (P1)-(P4) were taken to range over act-types, some difficult questions would arise. Suppose that God were to say, "Do what I command."⁷ Then according to (P1) so construed, the act-type *doing what God commands* would be made to be obligatory by God. God would make it the case that we ought to obey His commands. That is,

God would make the divine command theory itself true. If He did, could He have failed to do so? Could He have made some other ethical theory true instead? We can avoid these questions if the truth of the divine command theory is independent of God. According to the theory which I am presenting, what God determines is not that the divine command theory is true, but rather what our particular obligations are. The reason our theory does not have as a consequence that God makes keeping His commands obligatory is that we should not take God's command, "Do what I command," as enjoining any *particular* act, and it is only the moral status of particular acts which, according to (P1)-(P4), is determined by God. There may be many particular acts which God makes obligatory, and each of them, if performed, will be a case of doing what God commands. But the general obligation to do what God commands is not, according to our theory, imposed by God.

If act-types do have the same moral properties as act-tokens, our theory can be extended to accommodate this, perhaps by annexing such principles as:

- (P5) a type of act A is wrong *iff* for all acts a , if a is an instance of A then a is wrong.⁸
- (P6) a type of act A is permissible *iff* there is some act a such that a is an instance of A and a is not wrong.

Of the two conditions for attributing obligation to act-types considered above, only the second preserves the expected duality of obligatoriness and permissibility, and for this reason is to be preferred. Hence, where \overline{A} denotes the complement of A .

- (P7) a type of act A is obligatory *iff* \overline{A} is not permissible.

These principles do not entail that God determines the moral status of act-types. Whether a given act-type is wrong, for example, depends in part on which particular acts are instances of it, and that might well not be determined by God. For example, whether Neil's flailing his arms at t is a case of his hitting Carl might depend on whether Neil or Carl have arranged to be within striking distance of each other at t , and that would not be determined by God. Of course, the possession of the various moral properties by act-types will depend in a derivative way upon God, simply because, according to (P1)-(P4), the possession of moral properties by act-tokens is determined by God.

Let us look next at how our theory can be defended against objections.

II

Objection I. Perhaps the most widely held objection to the divine command theory is given by Ralph Cudworth in the following passage:

... certain it is, that diverse modern theologers do not only seriously, but zealously contend. . . that there is nothing absolutely, intrinsically and naturally good and evil, just and unjust, antecedently to any positive command or prohibition of God; but that the arbitrary will and pleasure of God, (that is, an omnipotent being devoid of all essential and natural justice) by its commands and prohibitions, is the first and only rule and measure thereof. Whence it follows unavoidably, that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just and righteous. ([5]: 9-10)

Exactly how these remarks count against our version of the divine command theory needs to be spelled out. Perhaps Cudworth should be construed as attacking (P1). Consider some grossly wicked act, for example, that particular act which was Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl. We might take Cudworth's point to be the claim that (P1) entails

- (1) If God were to command Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl, then it would be obligatory.

If this claim is a decisive objection to (P1) then it must be the case both that (P1) does entail (1) and that (1) is false. Taking 'Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl' to refer in (1) to a particular act, we may concede that (1) follows from (P1). But it is by no means clear that (1) is false. To see this, we should first note that just as the person who is in fact the President is only contingently the President, so, according to the view of events I am presupposing here, that act which is in fact Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl is only contingently a case of Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl. If Neil had acted in response to a heart attack of Carl's rather than an insult, that very pounding on the chest might have been an attempted resuscitation instead of a gratuitous pummeling. Now according to a leading theory of counterfactual conditionals, a counterfactual is true if and only if either the possible world closest in overall similarity to the actual world but in which the antecedent of the conditional is true is a world in which the consequent is also true, or the antecedent is impossible (See [18]). Alternatively, if there is no such thing as the closest antecedent-world, a counterfactual is true if and only if either there is some world in which its antecedent and consequent are true and there is no world as close or closer in which its antecedent is true and consequent false, or its antecedent is impossible (See [10]). If we agree with either of these characterizations of counter-

factuals, we can say that (1) is false just in case there is some sufficiently close world in which God commands Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl but in which that action is not obligatory. Is there a world like this? Surely the divine command theorist would think not, and with good reason. For if God is all-loving, then even if He is not essentially so, He is all-loving in worlds similar to the actual world. And in such worlds He would not command an action which, were it to be performed, would be a gratuitous pummeling of another human being. Rather, the nearest worlds in which God commands that action which is in fact Neil's gratuitous pummeling of Carl are worlds in which that action, were it to be performed, would instead be an attempted resuscitation or, perhaps, a legitimate defense against assault. So while (1) may indeed follow from (P1), we have no reason to think that it is false. Hence, this construal of Cudworth's objection presents no problem for our version of the divine command theory.

It is possible, and perhaps more plausible, to take Cudworth as claiming that propositions like

- (2) If God were to command that there be performed an action which is a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl, then a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl would be obligatory.

are entailed by the divine command theory but are false. Of course, (2) is not obviously a consequence of (P1)-(P4), since these principles are formulated in terms of God's commands of particular acts (or, in the case of (P4), sets of particular acts) and not in terms of God's command that an action of a certain type be performed. Nevertheless, it might be held that a divine command theorist ought to have an opinion about (2), and so we shall examine what he or she can say about (2).

Why should we think that (2) is false? William of Ockham, for example, was a divine command theorist who presumably would have accepted (2). He held that if God were to order fornication, for example, it would not only be licit but meritorious ([14]: III, 12, AA). He made similar remarks about hatred of God, stealing, and adultery ([14]: II, 19, O). And he apparently thought that God could at any time change the moral order ([13]: c.95).

Perhaps, however, Cudworth could point to a difficulty in accepting (2). He might think that (2) is incompatible with some obvious and incontrovertible fact, perhaps with

- (3) There is no possible world in which a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl is obligatory.

Now (3) does have an air of incontrovertibility about it, and I am willing to concede that it is true. But we have not yet found a reason to abandon (2). This is because (2) and (3) are not incompatible. We could use (3) to discredit (2) if we also accepted

- (4) There is a possible world in which God commands that there be performed an action which is a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl.

But why should a divine command theorist be willing to accept (4)? He or she might believe that if God is essentially wholly good, so that in no possible world does He do what is wrong, then there is no world in which He commands someone else to do what is wrong. Someone might object that this response does not *establish* that (4) is false, on the grounds that if God determines what is wrong, it does not follow from the claim that it is impossible for Him to do wrong that it is impossible for Him to command that there be a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl. But cannot the divine command theorist simply hold that there are no possible worlds in which God commands that a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl be performed? It is not my purpose to argue in support of the divine command theory. Rather, I am trying to show how it might be formulated in such a way that it can be seen that traditional objections fail to refute it. The present objection assumes that the divine command theorist accepts (2), and it attempts to show that (2) is false by deducing its denial from (3) and (4). In order for the objection to be convincing, (3) and (4) must either be obviously true or essential to the divine command theorist's position. But (4) is not self-evident; nor need the divine command theorist accept it. So the objection fails. Indeed, the divine command theorist can even give a reason for rejecting (4), namely, that some feature of God's character, for example, that He is essentially loving, precludes His commanding in any possible world that a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl be performed.⁹ But now we can see what the divine command theorist can say about (2). If (4) is false, then the antecedent of (2) is impossible. But according to the leading theories of counterfactual conditionals, as we have seen, a counterfactual is vacuously true if its antecedent is impossible. Hence, the divine command theorist can easily accept (2); but this is harmless. Given the impossibility of its antecedent, (2) is trivially true. Thus, the objection that (2) is a false consequence of the divine command theory is mistaken.

The theory I have just sketched avoids Cudworth's objection by insisting on the falsity of (4). A divine command theorist *need* not reject (4), however. An alternative is available for someone who accepts not only (3), but (4) as well. If (3) and (4) are both true, then there is a

possible world in which God commands an act which in that world is not merely not obligatory, but which is plausibly thought to be wrong. Hence, a divine command theorist who accepts both (3) and (4) should not hold that the theory is true in every possible world. But cannot the theory be taken to be contingent? Accordingly, what actually makes an act obligatory is that God commands it, but in other possible worlds perhaps another, contingent, ethical theory is true. Indeed, if there are possible worlds in which God commands that a case of Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl be performed, then at least in those worlds, God's commands do not determine what is right. So if (4) is true, then (2), as Cudworth claims, is false. But this fact, though interesting, does not count against the contingent divine command theory, since it is not committed to (2).

III

We have seen how the divine command theory can avoid the objections suggested by the passage from Cudworth. There are, however, some other objections which might be raised. I shall briefly consider five of them.

Objection II. The first is the claim that if the theory is true, then only religious believers, or only persons informed of God's commands, could tell what is right or wrong. Eric D'Arcy puts the point this way:

... if immoral actions are immoral merely because God so wills it, merely because God legislates against them, it would be sheer coincidence if someone who knew nothing of God or his law happened to adopt the same view about particular actions as God did. ([6]: 194)

It is clear, I believe, that this objection does not apply to the divine command theory as I have presented it. According to the theory, there is the property of being wrong, a property distinct from the property of being forbidden by God or from any other theological property. However, it is not part of the theory that a person can only *recognize* that an act has the property of being wrong by first recognizing that the act has the property of being forbidden by God. Analogous remarks hold for acts that are obligatory, right, or permissible.

Objection III. The objector might regard this response as grounds for another objection: if what is right or wrong can be recognized independently of knowing anything of God's commands, the divine command theory is irrelevant. We should concentrate on finding which acts have the properties of being right or wrong, however that might be done, and not worry about trying to discover God's commands. There are two things that can be said in reply. First, there is

clearly a place for a theory of morality which is of theoretical interest, and not, primarily, of practical interest. It would be theoretically interesting to learn that what makes acts obligatory is that they are commanded by God, regardless of the practical difficulties in discovering God's commands, just as it would be of theoretical interest to learn that utilitarianism is correct, regardless of the practical difficulty of calculating the values of the consequences of all of our alternative actions (See [7]: 40f.). Second, the divine command theorist need not be so pessimistic about the practical relevance of God's commands. The divine command theorist presumably believes that God has revealed certain of His commands. The divine command theorist might also believe that, at least in some cases, it is less difficult to discern God's commands than to detect whether an act has a certain moral property. Hence, if this is correct, the theory might even have some practical value.

Objection IV. Some philosophers apparently believe that the divine command theory violates the Humean dictum: "No Ought from an Is." In discussing the claim "that certain religious beliefs entail certain ethical beliefs, and that the latter can be logically inferred from the former," William Frankena appeals to Hume's slogan and remarks that

properly construed, it is a perfectly correct dictum. By the ordinary canons of logic a conclusion containing the term 'ought' or 'right' cannot be logically derived from premisses which do not contain this term, except in such cases as "It is raining, therefore either it is raining or we ought to be kind to animals," which can hardly afford aid and comfort to theologians who [claim to derive ethical conclusions from theological premisses] or even to those who advocate kindness to animals. ([9]: 300)

Let us say that an argument is *formally valid* just in case its corresponding conditional is an instance of a theorem of the predicate calculus, and let us say, less precisely, that an ethical claim is *interesting* just in case it is not one like the claim that it is raining or we ought to be kind to animals. If we suppose that there is a clear distinction between purely factual statements and ethical or evaluative ones, then we can say that a formulation of Hume's dictum suggested by Frankena's remarks is the claim that no formally valid argument whose premisses are jointly consistent and purely factual has an interesting ethical conclusion. So construed, Hume's dictum does seem to be supported by the "ordinary canons of logic," but is the divine command theory incompatible with this claim? Is there according to the divine command theory, a formally valid argument which has consistent factual premisses and an interesting ethical conclusion? I do not think so, since in order to construct a formally valid argument from the factual premiss

(5) God forbids Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl,

for example, we would need some evaluative premiss like

(6) Whatever God forbids is wrong

in order to derive an interesting ethical conclusion like

(7) Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl is wrong.

Thus, I do not think that the divine command theory is incompatible with this formulation of Hume's dictum.

There is another version of Hume's dictum suggested by Frankena's remarks, however, with which the divine command theory might be incompatible. In the passage cited, Frankena was discussing the view "that certain religious beliefs entail certain ethical beliefs," and he claimed that Hume's dictum might be inconsistent with that view. If we agree that one proposition entails another just in case it is not possible that the first is true while the second is false, then it might well be that a set of theological propositions entails an ethical conclusion without there being a formally valid argument with the theological propositions as premisses and the ethical proposition as conclusion. Perhaps we should consider, then, the following stronger formulation of Hume's dictum: No consistent set of factual premisses entails a contingent, interesting ethical conclusion. Is the divine command theory inconsistent with this principle? The answer depends on which version of the divine command theory is intended. Consider again

(5) God forbids Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl.

According to the contingent divine command theory, (5) does not entail

(7) Neil's gratuitously pummeling Carl is wrong.

On this version of the theory, the conjunction of (5) with a contingent proposition such as

(6) Whatever God forbids is wrong

entails (7), but (5) alone does not entail (7). So the contingent version of the divine command theory does not seem to be inconsistent with this formulation of Hume's dictum.

The same cannot be said for the strong or non-contingent version of the divine command theory. According to the strong version, (6) is necessarily true. Thus, since (5) in conjunction with (6) entails (7), (5) alone entails (7). Is this objectionable? I know of no reason to think that the second formulation of Hume's dictum is true—in contrast to the first formulation, it cannot be defended by a simple appeal to the “ordinary canons of logic.” Hence, I do not think that this is a serious objection. Someone who does accept this formulation of Hume's dictum can nevertheless accept the contingent version of the divine command theory.

Objection V. According to Leibniz, “those who believe that God establishes good and evil by an arbitrary decree. . . deprive God of the designation good . . . ” ([11]: para. 176).¹⁰ Is our formulation of the divine command theory guilty of this charge? Why should we think that the divine command theory deprives God of the designation ‘good’? Leibniz offers the following as his reason, “what cause would one have to praise. . . [God] for what He does, if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?” (*Ibid.*) What exactly does this mean? When Leibniz speaks of God doing something quite different, does he mean to consider God acting in different ways, or does he mean to consider God issuing different commands? If the former, then perhaps Leibniz' claim is that the divine command theory entails

- (8) For any act a , if God were to do a , then a would be right.

And if the latter, then perhaps Leibniz' claim is that the divine command theory entails

- (9) For any act a , if God were to command a , then a would be right.

Whichever Leibniz intended, he presumably would couple it with either

- (10) If (8), then there is no reason to praise God,

or

- (11) If (9), then there is no reason to praise God.

And he apparently holds

- (12) If a being is good, then there is a reason to praise that being.

Clearly, both the conjunction of (8), (10), and (12) and the conjunction of (9), (11), and (12) entail

- (13) It is not the case that God is good.

Thus, it is perhaps by one of these arguments that Leibniz attempts to support his charge that the divine command theory “deprives God of the designation *good*.”

What response can be made to these arguments? The defender of the strong version of the divine command theory certainly seems to be committed to (8) and (9), so it would be futile to deny them. And (12) seems beyond reproach. But why accept (10) or (11)? Indeed, (11) is not at all plausible. Even if the constancy of God’s commands were to provide no reason to praise Him, there might well be other reasons to praise Him. For example, He might be praiseworthy for acting in ways that are kind, or loving, or just. Since (10) considers not only God’s commands, but His acts as well, it might seem to have a better claim to truth. But (10) is not especially plausible, either. This can be seen if we consider what the defender of the strong version means by accepting (8). According to the strong version, not every act with God as agent is such that it is possible that God perform it. There is no possible world in which, for example, God commands that there be performed an instance of Neil’s gratuitously pummeling Carl. So the defender of the strong version does not hold that there are acts which, intuitively, are wrong, but which God could perform and which would be right were God to perform them. Rather, according to this view, (8) reflects a certain admirable feature of God’s character: whatever He would do would be right. Surely, He is praiseworthy for this; so (10) seems mistaken.

An alternative response is open to the defender of the contingent version of the theory. On this view it is possible for God to do acts or command acts that would be wrong. Hence, some acts are such that were God to do them or command them, they would not be right. So neither (8) or (9) are consequences of the theory. Thus, even if (8) or (9) were to preclude ascribing goodness to God, that would not count against the contingent divine command theory. This construal of Leibniz’ objection, then, is unconvincing.

Perhaps, however, Leibniz’ objection can be taken somewhat differently. Maybe Leibniz means to emphasize the *arbitrary* nature God’s commands seem to have according to the divine command theory. After all, if what is right or wrong is determined by God, He cannot

appeal to an independent standard of right and wrong in deciding what commands to make. Hence, God's commands would seem to be arbitrary, and, thus, according to Leibniz, they provide no basis for ascribing goodness to God. Indeed, this objection can be strengthened by posing it in the form of a dilemma. Either God's commands are arbitrary, or they are not. If they are, then God merits no praise either for issuing them or for acting in accord with them. If, on the other hand, God's commands are not arbitrary, then He must have reasons for them; but then the moral status of acts would seem to derive from these reasons, rather than from God's commands.¹¹ I believe that the divine command theorist can make a plausible response to this objection. According to the divine command theory there is no independent standard of morality to which God's commands conform. In that sense, then, God's commands are arbitrary. But the divine command theorist need not think that God's commands are utterly arbitrary; as we saw above, a divine command theorist might well believe that some features of God's character, for example, that He is essentially loving, place constraints on what He commands. Other such features might include being faithful, being kind, and being merciful. These attributes are such that possessing them tends to coincide with acting in conformity to God's commands. To the extent that this is true, God is praiseworthy because of His commands: they are commands that "comport well" with the mentioned attributes. Nevertheless, it might be that God's possessing these attributes of being loving, faithful, etc., is what provides the primary reason for ascribing goodness to Him. Moreover, the divine command theorist might well value these attributes independently of God's commands. This would allow an account of how by ascribing goodness to God a divine command theorist not only describes God, as having various character traits, but also, typically, expresses approval—the traits in question are ones which the divine command theorist values. So although the divine command theorist holds that God's commands do not conform to an independent moral law, it does not seem to me that the divine command theorist is thereby prevented from ascribing goodness to God.

Objection VI. A final objection has not, as far as I know, actually been made against the divine command theory, but is a natural application of recent work on the formulation of act-utilitarianism. According to Lennart Aqvist, the moral status of an act may change over time ([2]). It might be alleged, however, that there is no way to incorporate this feature into our version of the divine command theory. God, after all, is immutable, or so it is often thought, and His commands and prohibitions must remain constant. Hence, according to our theory, the moral status of acts, which is dependent upon those commands and prohibitions, must also remain constant.

I do not wish here to challenge the claim that God is immutable, especially since many theists who might otherwise hold the divine command theory believe that God is immutable. But why should we think that the moral status of an act can change with the passage of time? Fred Feldman¹² has constructed the following example to show that it does.

Suppose a patient is ill, and that his doctor can choose between two main courses of treatment. He can either give the patient medicine A today, and then give him medicine A again tomorrow, or he can give him medicine B today and again tomorrow. Suppose the course of treatment with B would cure the patient, but would produce some unpleasant side effects, while the course of treatment with A would cure the patient without any side effects. Suppose, finally, that mixing the treatments would be fatal to the patient, a delightful person who spreads cheer wherever he goes. In this case, let us agree, prior to the time at which he gives any medicine, it is right for the doctor to give A on the first day, and it is right for the doctor to give A on the second day. Suppose, however, that the doctor fails to do what is best. For whatever reason, he gives the patient B on the first day. It seems clear that it is no longer right for him to give A on the second day—that would kill the patient. Once the doctor has failed to do his duty, and has given B on the first day, the rights and wrongs of the case seems to change. ([8]: 267)

To assess this case, let us suppose that t_0 is some time before the treatment is begun, t_1 is the time at which the first dose is given, and t_2 is the time at which the second dose is given. Then we can summarize Feldman's claims about this case as follows:

- (14) At t_0 , it is right to give medicine A at t_1 .
- (15) At t_0 , it is right to give medicine A at t_2 .
- (16) At t_2 , it is not right to give medicine A at t_2 .

Taken together (15) and (16) entail that the moral status of an act changes between t_0 and t_2 . Since (16) is beyond dispute, it would be more profitable to question (15). Why should we think that it is true? One might try to support it by claiming that what is right at t_0 is the complete course of treatment. Thus,

- (17) At t_0 , it is right to give A at t_1 and to give A at t_2 .

And (17), it might be alleged, entails (15). However, Feldman's example can equally well be taken to show that (17) does *not* entail (15) and that (15) is false. Presumably it was true all along that the doctor would give medicine B at t_1 , and, in particular, this was true

at t_0 . But if it was true at t_0 that the doctor would give medicine B at t_1 , then it was also true at t_0 that it would be wrong to give medicine A at t_2 . At t_0 *we* might be ignorant of the doctor's impending poor choice at t_1 ; hence we might be justified at t_0 in believing that medicine B would be wrong at t_2 . God, on the other hand, being omniscient, would always have known that medicine B would be administered on the first day of treatment. Hence, He would have been careful to command that B also be given on the second day. Thus, this case does not clearly show that the moral status of an act can change over time.

It might be objected that this way of viewing the doctor's dilemma requires that we say, counterintuitively, that it was a good thing that the doctor did not perform all his obligations. For if the doctor had done what was right at t_1 and given medicine A then, and had done what was right at t_2 and given medicine B then, he would have killed a delightful person instead of curing him.¹³ It does not follow, however, that had the doctor done what was right on both occasions, the patient would have died. The objector's premisses are

- (18) If the doctor had done what was right at t_1 , he would have given medicine A then,

and

- (19) If the doctor had done what was right at t_2 , he would have given medicine B then.

Although, in this case (18) and (19) are both true, it does not follow from them that

- (20) If the doctor had done what was right at t_1 and the doctor had done what was right at t_2 , then he would have given medicine A at t_1 and he would have given medicine B at t_2 .

To see this, recall that on the Lewis-Stalnaker interpretation a counterfactual conditional is (non-vacuously) true just in case in the possible worlds most similar to the actual world in which its antecedent is true, its consequent is also true. Consider (19). On the assumption that the case under discussion is real, in the actual world the doctor gives medicine B at t_1 . Accordingly, the nearest worlds in which the doctor does what is right at t_2 are like the actual world in that medicine B is given at t_1 . (Perhaps the actual world itself is

the sole nearest.) Moreover, in the nearest worlds in which the doctor does what is right at t_2 , having given medicine B at t_1 , the doctor gives medicine B at t_2 ; so (19) is true. By contrast, the nearest worlds in which the antecedent of (20) is true are more remote from reality, for in the actual world the doctor did not do what was right at t_1 . In the closest worlds in which the doctor does what is right at both times, he gives medicine A at t_1 . And in the closest worlds in which he does what is right at both times and gives medicine A at t_1 , he rightly gives medicine A at t_2 as well. So (20) is false. If the doctor had done what was right on both occasions, what would have been right on the second occasion would have been different from what actually was right but would not have had fatal consequences. Finally, those acts which actually were right, namely, giving medicine A at t_1 and giving medicine B at t_2 , *are* such that it is a good thing that the doctor does not do both of them. But had the doctor done both of them, he would not have done what was right on both occasions, since the second is right only given that the first is not done.

What if it could be shown that (17) does entail (15)?¹⁴ Would that be damaging? I think not. The divine command theorist could reasonably reject (17) rather than accept (15). Recall that (17) was proposed to express the claim that what was right at t_0 was the complete course of treatment with medicine A. I think that the divine command theorist should agree that at t_0 this complete course of treatment was right, but it can be argued that (17) does not adequately express that claim. After all, (17) explicitly asserts the rightness of a *conjunction* of acts, rather than a *course* of action. So the divine command theorist could reject (17) but accept

- (24) At t_0 , the following course of action is right: giving medicine A at t_1 and then giving medicine A at t_2 .

Is (24) true in this case, and does it entail (15)? Before we can answer these questions we need to look more closely at (24). As our divine command theory has been developed, moral properties apply, in the first instance, to particular acts. In a derivative way they may also apply to types of acts. But we have not yet seen how moral properties apply to a course of action. Perhaps we can begin to extend the theory as follows. First, let us say that a course of action is a sequence, $\langle a_1, \dots, a_n \rangle$, of agent-identical acts such that for each a_i and a_j , if $i < j$ then the time of a_i is no later than the time of a_j . One condition that seems to be necessary for a sequence being right is that it be, in some sense, within the power of its agent. Not every member of a right sequence, however, actually has to be within the power of its agent. It could happen that in carrying

out the sequence the agent would do things that bring subsequent members of the sequence within his or her power. Thus, it seems to be sufficient that each member of a right sequence is such that it would, at its time, be within the power of its agent, were all temporally prior members to have been performed. Analogously, not every member of a right sequence actually has to be right. Perhaps it is sufficient that each member is such that it would be right, were all temporally prior members to have been performed. If this is correct, however, it is clear that (24) does not entail (15). What (24) tells us about the moral status, at t_0 , of giving medicine A at t_2 is that it would be right, were medicine A to be given at t_1 . From this it does not follow, unconditionally, that, at t_0 , giving A at t_2 is right. Whether this way of conceiving of the moral status of a sequence of acts can be satisfactorily worked out is unclear. But it does seem reasonable to think that if something like this is correct, appealing to (24) to establish (15) will not succeed. I can discover no other reason to think that (15) is true, and so I conclude that we have no reason to think that the moral status of an act can change over time. Hence, it is no limitation if the divine command theorist does not admit such change.

I hope to have shown that the divine command theory can be stated in a way in which it is immune to a variety of initially impressive objections. If I have been successful, then perhaps rejection of the theory is premature and further discussion of it is appropriate.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹The best reconstruction of Plato's argument with which I am familiar is given by S. Marc Cohen in [4].

²Richard J. Mouw appears to hold such a view. See [12].

³See [20]. This view is also presented in Ch. 11 of Swinburne's [21]. A similar view is defended by Baruch Brody in [3].

⁴In [16]. The Theory presented in [16] is developed in greater detail in Ch. 4 of Quinn's [17]. It should be noted that in this book Quinn discusses a variety of divine command theories in addition to the one mentioned in the text.

⁵*Genesis* 22.

⁶Condition (iii) is intended to be read *de dicto*, and, hence, as not equivalent to:

(iii') Some member of *A* is such that God commands that it be done.

In (P1)-(P3) what God commands, forbids, or fails to forbid are particular acts. In (P4), on the other hand, what God commands is that a set have one of its members performed. This complication can be avoided, if there are disjunctive acts of sufficient complexity, by recasting (P4) in terms of the disjunctive act, a_1 or a_2 or . . . , where a is some a_1 .

⁷Compare *Leviticus* 18:1-5. "The Lord spoke to Moses and said, Speak to the Israelites in these words: I am the Lord your God . . . You must keep my laws and conform to my institutions without fail: I am the Lord your God. You shall observe my institutions and my laws. . ."

⁸Someone who holds that lying is wrong might want to say that the act-type *lying* is wrong. But (P5) does not allow us to say this, since some instances of lying are not wrong. Perhaps, however, the claim that lying is wrong should be taken as a summary of past moral experience. Then we might prefer to say that the act-type *lying* is wrong if most instances of lying are wrong, or if most situations in which an instance of lying is an option are situations in which that instance is wrong. I shall not attempt to introduce this sense of 'wrong' into our theory.

⁹Rather than holding that God is essentially loving, Robert Adams suggests that an ethical statement of a believer "*presupposes* that certain conditions for the applicability of the believer's concepts of ethical right and wrong are satisfied. Among these conditions . . . that God loves His human creatures" ([1]: 323).

¹⁰For this reference I am indebted to a referee for NOUS.

¹¹This way of presenting Leibniz' objection was suggested by an editor of NOUS. The solution I recommend, which consists in admitting that God's commands are arbitrary, in the sense that there is no external standard of morality, but denying that this

precludes ascribing goodness to God is inspired by Robert Adams' discussion in [1], especially pp. 337-341. Another response is suggested by Baruch Brody in [3], where he argues that God's reason for commanding an act need not be what makes the act obligatory.

¹²Feldman notes that his example is based on one given in [2].

¹³This objection was proposed by a referee for NOUS.

¹⁴Another referee for NOUS suggested that

- (21) For all a, b , and t , if, at t , it is right to do a and to do b , then, at t , it is right to do a and it is right to do b .

and

- (22) For all t, p , and q , if, at t, p and q , then, at t, p , and, at t, q .

are necessary truths. It might then be argued that (17), (21), and (22) together entail

- (23) At t_0 , it is right to give A at t_1 , and, at t_0 , it is right to give A at t_2 .

Clearly (23) entails (15); so if (21) and (22) are necessary, (17) alone entails (15), despite my denial of this entailment above. This argument, however, is not entirely persuasive. The reason is that whether (21) is true might depend upon how it is filled out when the times of the acts in question are made explicit. There are two ways of filling out (21) to consider. The first takes the times of the acts to be the same as the time at which the acts are said to be right. Hence,

- (21') For all a, b , and t , if, at t , it is right to do a at t and to do b at t , then, at t , it is right to do a at t and it is right to do b at t .

The second allows, more generally, that the times of the acts differ both from each other and from the time at which the acts are said to be right. Thus,

- (21'') For all a, b, t, t' , and t'' , if, at t , it is right to do a at t' and to do b at t'' , then, at t , it is right to do a at t' , and it is right to do b at t'' .

Now (21') is eminently plausible, and what plausibility (21) has might well derive from understanding it as (21'). On the other hand, (21'') does not appear to enjoy the same high degree of intuitiveness. Indeed, as I suggested above, the case under discussion can be taken to show that (21'') is false. Since t_0, t_1 , and t_2 are distinct times, it is (21'') that is required for the objector's argument that (17) entails (15). But (21'') is questionable, so the objection is unpersuasive. (Incidentally, in [19] J. H. Sobel entertains analogues of (21') and (21'') with 'ought' replacing 'right,' and he considers accepting the former while rejecting the latter. See pp. 204-5.)

¹⁵Earlier versions of this paper were read at Franklin and Marshall College, February 1978, and at the Eastern Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association, December 1978. On the latter occasion Philip Quinn was the official commentator, and I am grateful to him for his criticism. Substantially the present version was presented in the fall of 1980 at the University of Illinois/Chicago Circle, the University of Vermont, and the University of Rochester. I received helpful criticism on each of these occasions. Finally, I have also benefited from the criticism of Richard Feldman, Robert Holmes, Paul Weirich, and two anonymous referees for NOUS.