

The Divine Command Dilemma: A Christian Appraisal

“Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?”¹ This is what has come to be known as the “Divine Command Dilemma” (hereafter, DCD). There are two propositions, implicit in the DCD, which place an individual who seeks to answer Socrates in a theologically difficult situation. The first would run something like: “An act is right because God commands it.” The second proposition would be “God commands an act because it is right.” Either horn of the dilemma makes for a seemingly insoluble problem.

If one held to the belief that *an act is right because God commands it*, then God’s commands may very well be unpredictable as he capriciously chooses among options. For example, God may decree that lying, murder, adultery, *et al.* is wrong today, but morally acceptable tomorrow. Put differently, “Could God make lying, murder, adultery, *et al.*, right?” Nevertheless, God appears, in this case, to be a senile old man who can’t make up his mind what he wants his creation to do. The moral quality of every activity would depend upon the whim of God. Yet, the fact that humans could recognize evil in, say, Auschwitz would mean that humans are deciding what is evil, and not God.²

Still, if God were to decide upon moral standards, they would be entirely unreliable, since his decrees are subject to change. While it is logically possible that an omnipotent being *could* choose to alter his sanctions regarding a given issue, it doesn’t necessarily follow that he *does*. Given the biblical data regarding the nature and character of God, who is “metaphysically richer”³ than the quality of omnipotence, it would be logically impossible for God to change moral standards (see below). Furthermore, if *God* wills something, then the term “God” is usually loaded with moral, as well as metaphysical, significance.

The second proposition, “God commands an act because it is right,” is equally problematic. This implies that something, viz., what is right, exists independently of God. Stated differently, “if God wills an act because it is right, the rightness of the act could not consist in God’s willing it.”⁴ In this case, God is not the basis of morality, something else is. Of course, God is the one conveying the standards of morality, but there is nothing intrinsic to his nature that defines what the right/good is. Hence, one could remove God as the ground of morality, because he has become irrelevant to the moral question of right/wrong. God may endorse moral activity, but he does not provide a foundation for it. The question of how one knows the right would still remain, but whether or not God is the basis for morality would not apply.

The end result of this conclusion is complete despair. Carnell says

without God to tell us otherwise, humanity appears to be but a huddling mass of groveling protoplasm, crowded together in a nervous wait for death, not unlike a group of helpless children that aggregate together in a burning building, pledging to love each other till the end comes . . . we are all going to die, and . . . ‘the wages of virtue is dust.’⁵

However, neither horn of the DCD comports with a biblical view of God. Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am,” quite possibly indicates that God is self-existent or ontologically distinct from all. That is, he exists absolutely independent of every other thing or being which exists (Acts 17:24-25). Only God exists fully and completely in himself. Whereas the nature, character, and existence

of created things and beings are derived, God's nature, character, and existence are eternally contained in himself (cf., also, Gen. 21:33; Deut. 33:27; Ps. 90:2; Is. 9:6; 40:28; Hab. 1:12; Rom. 16:26 on the eternity of God). If God exists necessarily, then his existence remains the same in all possible worlds. There are no conditions under which God would not exist. God has always been and will always be who he is. He eternally sustains his own existence.

Moreover, God exists as a simple, indivisible being. He cannot exemplify properties independent of himself, nor is he a composition of individual parts. All of God's existence is united into one integrated, eternal being. This is the notion of divine simplicity. The unity of God implies "not just that there is only one God but also that there is no division within God's nature."⁶ He is completely loving, just, merciful, holy, jealous, and wise. All of God's being exemplifies all of his attributes simultaneously. In addition, every attribute is qualified by every 'other attribute. For instance, God is *mercifully* just and *justly* merciful. Not one of his attributes is laid aside in order to express another. Every activity of God is conditioned by all of his attributes all of the time.

Regarding divine simplicity, confusion comes when human understanding and experience is projected upon God. That is, humans have certain aspectual ways in which to speak and understand God, but these may not be wholly adequate in clarifying the relationship between God's will and God's intellect. Yet, the distinction between God's will and God's intellect is not so disconnected. Hanink and Mar explain.

The internal division within our human nature . . . make possible a kind of chronic internal warfare. We often, for example, find our will to be at odds with our intellect [cf., esp., Rom. 7:14-25; Jm. 4:17]. But there is no such contest between will and wisdom in God. We might, to be sure, find it useful to speak of God on one occasion under the aspect of will and on another occasion under the aspect of intellect. But to speak of God's will as sovereign does not suggest that God's will could ever by [sic] exercised arbitrarily. In God will and wisdom are one.⁷

There are other concerns in the relationship between the metaphysical and functional nature of God. For instance, while it is logically necessary that essence precede function, biblical thought suggests that what a person does intimates who the person is (e.g., 1 Jn. 3:7). *Identity and activity are not always conceptually distinct*. Therefore, God's attributes are what he is, not what he possesses, nor merely what he does in relation to his creation. God's entire being is in each attribute, and each attribute is in his entire being. In this case, then, "the basis for morality becomes God's nature as it is expressed in God's will."⁸ What Augustine said of the three persons of the triune God could equally be said of the attributes of God. The attributes are "infinite in themselves. And so each is in each, all are in each, each is in all, all are in all."⁹ Therefore, "God's will cannot be separated from his nature. He wills what he does because he is the God he is."¹⁰

The most obvious problem with the way in which the DCD is put forth is that it is a false dichotomy. In other words, one is pressed to choose between two positions as if they were exclusive or exhaustive. The options are either (a) God is arbitrary and capricious, or (b) morality is separated from the God who gives commands, making God unnecessary to the moral question. There is, however, another logical possibility available. Both (a) and (b) are sub-contraries and could both be true. But, this would result in a God who frivolously chooses from a plethora of pseudo-good ideals [which, according to my thesis, cannot exist apart from

God]. One is pressed to look for another position, namely, both (a) and (b) are false and some combination of the two is plausible or another position altogether is more tenable.

It is possible that the nature and character of God is the ground for what is right. In fact, “God is not righteous because God conforms (however perfectly) to some higher standard of righteousness. Rather, God’s will is not only the measure, but also the personal substance, of Perfect Righteousness.”¹¹ And, if what is right issues forth from God, then, like God, there can be no shifting in morality. Parenthetically, it would seem unlikely that eternally valid moral principles could begin in temporary individuals.¹² They may be recognized by finite humans, but they could not originate in humans.

Hence, the Kantian notion that “all moral conceptions have their seat and origin completely *a priori* in the reason”¹³ can be rejected as false. Kant believed that “to have moral worth an action must be done from duty.”¹⁴ However, the “Kantian picture of Duty is that of a self-propelling rope that tugs at our conscience. Duty becomes a metaphysical Unmoved Mover, an independently existing ontological posit.”¹⁵

The ultimate problem of a Kantian meta-ethic is that it replaces the lost authority of a divine lawgiver with the authority of the autonomous individual. The weakness of Kant’s project is that what he prohibits entrance at the front door [the sense of ought], he brings in by the back door. Although ethics is autonomous, legislated by reason alone and universally applicable, even to God, and although, as rational beings, we ought to obey the moral law disinterestedly, nevertheless, that law could not be justified without four classical metaphysical posits: God, immortality, a transcendent self, and free will.¹⁶

A more tenable move would be to postulate that the only basis for something good which is infinite, eternal, and universally obligatory is found in an infinite and eternal being. This leaves us with God as the metaphysical starting point of morality.

Alister McGrath offers another important insight on the DCD. It assumes an absolute discontinuity between divine and human ideals. But, if there is a degree of correspondence between what humans made in the image of God perceive is the right and what God himself says is the right, the DCD loses its impact (cf., Rom. 2:14-15). McGrath 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. . . . But the Christian doctrine of God destroys the dilemma by insisting upon an inbuilt and indissoluble link between human and divine ideas of goodness, which persists even in fallen human nature. We 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: the disharmony presupposed by Plato is an irrelevance, given the Christian understanding of God and human nature.¹⁷

Yet, another related problem, one that was alluded to by Protagoras, remains: the problem of ‘man being the measure of all things.’ In fact, if morality is discovered in the nature of God, how can one “be sure he knows exactly when and how and what God said and what he meant?”¹⁸ After all, would it not be the case that regardless of how removed from judgments about the source of morality one tries to be, a person always ends up being their own authority? 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.”¹⁹

One response to the belief that “I am the authority on who/what is my authority” is understood by distinguishing between *recognition* and *attribution*. Recognition of authority outside of self does not mean any authority is being attributed to self. For example, if I assert that it is wrong to drive faster than the speed limit, I am not necessarily the authority on speeding. Rather, I am simply recognizing an authority (civil government) outside of myself.

Moreover, one must have a starting point from which to begin making moral claims. If the approach “I am the authority on who/what is my authority” is taken in every aspect of knowledge, then no one could know anything for certain. Everyone would go through life suspending judgment on everything. On a non-moral side, those things we can be certain of is that we can't be certain of anything, save perhaps self-evident truths, which hardly appear obligatory (albeit “don't torture the innocent” flies against all moral sensitivities and could be argued as self-evident as Kant sought to do). Likewise, to make a decision regarding the basis of morality (e.g., God) is not to set one's self up to be the authority in an ultimate sense, but merely to have a starting point from which to begin the quest for the ultimate authority.

To maintain that “I ought to do x, because God says so” is to work from the presupposition that God is the ultimate authority. The moral criterion of what is right is grounded in God's will which is good. But, Kai Nielsen has stated that without

a prior understanding of goodness, we could not understand the sentence “God is good.” This clearly shows that our understanding of morality and knowledge of goodness are independent of any knowledge that we may or may not have of the divine. Indeed, without a prior and logically independent understanding of good and without some nonreligious criterion for judging something to be good, the religious person could have no knowledge of God.²⁰

It is true that before a qualitative or evaluative statement is made about an object, some prior understanding with respect to that quality or evaluation is logically necessary. However, that prior understanding is not self-existent, but derived. More importantly, what is logically prior in thought is not necessarily prior in existence metaphysically. Descartes acknowledged in the *Cogito ergo sum* that human thought is not the ultimate ground for existence, since even a “thinking thing” was contingent upon God for existence.

Contrary to Plato and the second horn of the dilemma, goodness is not an autonomous entity circling the earth. Goodness is a metaphysical property that manifests in someone(thing) whose existence logically precedes attribute.

Still, the goodness of an act and the act itself are not entirely independent entities. Human understanding of what is good or right may be independent of attributing goodness or rightness to an object, but this would not entail a separate metaphysical status to the act or the quality. And, where does the notion of ‘good’ come from, if not from God? Thinking that the idea of ‘good’ is independent of God does not make it so.

If, for example, I say “x is right” and God says “x is wrong,” then who is correct? Since God is the Author, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life, then would he not have the authority to legislate

the good? If, on the one hand, the biblical God is right in his judgments regarding morality, then he deserves my compliance. On the other hand, if a generic god were wrong in judgments on morality, then he is probably a far better liar than I am a detective and I would never know the difference anyway. But, due to the *imago Dei* moral absolutes are not so elusive.

For example, the universality of moral absolutes is indicated in the Ten Commandments. The limitation of their *application* between the Old and New Testaments may vary due to situational factors. Nevertheless, the transcendental nature of God's moral law reflects his holiness (Rom. 7:12). Just as the Lord Almighty is holy and good (1 Chron. 16:34; Ps. 118:1; Is. 6:3; Mt. 19:17), so is his moral law (Ps. 19:7; Jm. 1:25). Kaiser notes that there is nothing new about the decalogue. "All the Ten Commandments had been part of the law of God previously written on hearts of stone, for all ten appear, in one way or another, in Genesis."²¹ Therefore, God's moral law has been from the beginning of time and is normative for all people everywhere and at all times. The decalogue is not dependent for its *meaning* upon a specific cultural context. Though application will vary, the meaning remains constant.

In conclusion, "objective moral obligation operates only in the context of divine law; in any other setting the phrase 'I ought' loses truly obligatory content."²² The basis for morality is found in the nature and character of the biblical God who is good absolutely. Whatever God thinks and wills is always in accordance with his perfect nature. Reason, duty, and humanity is insufficient for knowing the good. Because of the *imago Dei*, the possibility exists for humans to recognize the good that is grounded in God's nature. Although the human will is weakened by sin and is incapable of performing that which is intrinsically good (Rom. 3:10ff), God has sufficiently revealed his good and perfect will in the human heart and provided the basis for moral judgment. In the end, the essential question for and concern of the DCD becomes:

"Is the good good because the very essence of God is good?" The good is not a product of an arbitrary decision of a mere will sporting about in a vacuum. Neither is it good because God's will happens to yield to an alleged higher set of (Platonic) principles to which the Creator of all is subservient. Rather, the good is good because it is consistent with God's very nature.²³

—ENDNOTES—

1. Socrates, "Euthyphro," in Oliver A. Johnson, *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers* (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1989), 24.
2. Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 41.
3. From James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar, "What Euthyphro Couldn't Have Said," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (July, 1987): 247.
4. *Ibid.*, 244.
5. Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 327.
6. Hanink and Mar, "Euthyphro," *ibid.*, 246.
7. *Ibid.*

8. Winfried Corduan, *Reasonable Faith: Basic Christian Apologetics* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 267.
9. From Augustine, *The Trinity*, VII.6.11. Quoted in Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 256.
10. Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, ed., C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1984), 77.
11. Hanink and Mar, "Euthyphro" in *ibid.*, 244.
12. William L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994),
13. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles on the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., T. K. Abbott (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988), 38-39.
14. *Ibid.*, 24, n. 1.
15. Louis P. Pojman, "Ethics: Religious and Secular," *Modern Schoolman* (November, 1992): 5.
16. *Ibid.*, 22, emphasis mine.
17. McGrath *Intellectuals*, 41-42, emphasis in original.
18. John R. Buff and Miton Goldinger, eds., *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 190.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Kai Nielsen "Morality and the Will Of God," Peter Angeles, ed., in *Critiques of God* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1976), 248-249.
21. Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 82. Commandment one in Genesis 35:2; two in 31:39; three in 24:3; four in 2:3; five in 27:41; six in 4:9; seven in 39:9; eight in 44:4-7; nine in 39:17; ten in 12:18; 20:3.
22. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 6 (Waco: Word, 1983), 257.
23. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 1, *ibid.*, 234.