

Divine Command Theory

I. Definition: Divine Command Theory (DCT) is defined by two necessary conditions:

- A. *The Extensional Equivalence Thesis:* An action is morally right if, and only if, God wills (commands, approves of) it and morally wrong if, and only if, God forbids (disapproves of) it; and,
- B. *The Dependency Thesis:* God's willing (commanding, approving of) an action is the reason that a morally right action is morally right and God's forbidding (disapproving of) an action is the reason that a morally wrong action is morally wrong.

II. Criticisms:

A. The Euthyphro Argument

1. *Euthyphro's Thesis:* An act is pious (holy) if, and only if, it is loved by the gods.
2. *Socrates' Question:* Are pious actions (i) loved by the gods because they are pious or are they (ii) pious actions because they are loved by the gods?
3. *Socrates' Argument:*
 - a. If (i), then the piety of the action explains the fact that it is loved by the gods; being loved by the gods does *not* explain why an act is pious. (If it did, the pair of explanations would be circular.) On this alternative, Euthyphro is not giving a view analogous to a divine command theory because he does not accept a dependency thesis.
 - b. If (ii), we must ask for an explanation of *why* the gods love certain actions (those that turn out to be pious because of the gods' love of them). Either there is some explanation for the gods' love of pious actions that is not based on their being pious or there is no explanation at all for the gods' love of pious actions.
 - (1) If there is such an explanation, then whatever explains the gods' love for these actions is the explanation of an action's being pious.
 - (2) If there is no explanation of why the gods love certain acts, then the gods' love is capricious and whimsical.
 - c. Therefore, either the gods are capricious and whimsical or their love is not the explanation of why a pious action is pious.
4. *Application to Divine Command Theory (DCT):* Socrates' argument in *Euthyphro* is said to work against the Divine Command Theory of ethics if we substitute 'morally right' for 'pious' and 'willed by god' for 'loved by the gods', purportedly showing that either God is capricious and whimsical or His will is not the explanation of why a morally right action is morally right. Thus, it is claimed, either God is capricious and whimsical or DCT is false (because the dependency thesis is false).

5. *A Reply for Euthyphro*: Euthyphro can accept the Dependency Thesis but argue that although there *is* some cause of the gods loving pious actions, this is not the cause of those actions being pious. (That is, he can deny the claim made in II.A.3.b.(1) above: If there is an explanation for the gods' loving pious actions—a non-circular one consistent with the dependency thesis—then whatever explains the gods' love is the explanation of the piety of the action.)
 - a. *An Analogy to Law*: There may be some explanation of a lawmaker making a particular law, but what makes it the law is an act of the lawmaker—not whatever caused the lawmaker to act. Thus, the lawmaker may not be capricious or whimsical, but still the law depends on the will of the lawmaker; an act is illegal if, and only if, it is forbidden by the lawmaker.
6. *Application of the reply to DCT*: The reply suggested above for Euthyphro can be employed by the defender of DCT, but at a significant cost.
 - a. To use the above reply, Euthyphro would have to admit that *piety* is an irreducibly religious notion, so that if the gods didn't exist or didn't care about any human actions, nothing would be pious or impious. Similarly, the defender of DCT would have to hold that morality is an irreducibly religious notion so that if God didn't exist or didn't care about human actions, then nothing would be morally right or morally wrong. It wouldn't, then, make any moral difference whether you helped an old man across the street or pushed him under the wheels of an oncoming car.
 - b. In order to avoid playing verbal games with the word 'moral', a defender of DCT who uses the above reply would have to deny that the reasons God has for approving of certain actions provide *the functional equivalent* of moral reasons for us to act. If the fact that some action has a certain property is good enough for God to approve of the action, why isn't that fact good enough for *us* to approve of the action as well. If it is a good enough reason for our approval, then what, other than verbal legislation, prevents it from being considered a moral reason.

B. The Abraham Argument: If DCT is correct, then no matter what God were to will, it would be morally required. This consequence is often illustrated by appeal to the Biblical story of Abraham and his son, Isaac, in which God commands Abraham to kill Isaac. While the command is retracted, the critic of DCT asks whether it would have been morally right for Abraham to kill his son had the command *not* been withdrawn.

To put a sharper point on the issue, suppose God were to command that we do all in our power to cause eternal and universal suffering for all creatures. Would it then be morally right to do so?

1. *Objection*: This sort of point is often met with the response that God, being all-good and loving, would not command such a thing.
 - a. *Replies*:
 - (1) Perhaps not, but notice that even if this is true, God's refusal to command such things cannot be based on the fact that they are morally wrong.
 - (2) The objection misses the point. The issue is not what God *would* command, but what would be morally right if God *were* to command it.