

**Syllabus** Meta-ethical theory – God as the originator and regulator of morality; right or wrong as objective truths based on God’s will/commands, moral goodness is achieved by complying with divine command; divine command as a requirement of God’s omnipotence; divine command as metaphysical foundation for morality/ Robert Adam’s modified divine command theory.

**Challenges** – the Euthyphro Dilemma (inspired by Plato); arbitrariness problem; pluralism objection.

**Definition - Divine Command Theory (DCT)** argues that moral goodness derives from God’s commands or from the divine will.

## Technical vocabulary

**Euthyphro’s dilemma** – a difficult choice first posed by Plato, between morality being based on divine command (good because God says so, which makes morality seem arbitrary) and morality being independent of God (which makes God irrelevant to morality).

**Objective truth** – moral truth derives from natural features of the world which are empirically measurable or derived from shared characteristics of human beings, such as desires, experiences or a common nature.

**Omnipotence** - God’s characteristic as all-powerful.

**Omni benevolence** – God’s characteristic as all-loving.

**Meta-ethics** – literally ‘beyond ethics’, hence a study of the meaning of moral language such as ‘good’ and ‘right’.

**Metaphysics** – the study of what lies beyond physics – the unmeasurable, the non-empirical as in the first principles of things, or abstract ideas, or beliefs about being, nature and existence.

**Pluralism** – the view that there are many sources of value, with the problem of how to choose between them (linked with ethical relativism).

## Background

DCT arises from major world religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity. God speaks, and his commands are taken as authoritative, with penalties for disobedience.

Examples:

1. God commands Moses to take a tablet of stone, ascend Mount Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments. Extract 3A.1: Exodus 20: 16-26
2. God commands Joshua to sack the city of Jericho and kill all living creatures, men women, children and animals. Extract 3A.2 Joshua 5:13 -15; 6:21-24
3. God speaks to Moses and reveals his character. Extract 3A.3 Exodus 34: 1-33

Notice that divine commands give us a reason to be moral – to please God (positive) or because we are afraid of the consequences if we do wrong (negative). It is also relatively simple – to find a command and then obey it seems to take away the onus on our own judgement.

However, the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (IEP) comments: “one might argue that if the motive for being moral on Divine Command Theory is to merely avoid punishment and perhaps gain eternal bliss, then this is less than ideal as an account of moral motivation, because it is a mark of moral immaturity. Should we not instead seek to live moral lives in community with others because we value them and desire their happiness?”

## Euthyphro's Dilemma

In a purported conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro, Socrates asks: “The point which I would first wish to understand is whether the holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy or holy because it is beloved of the gods?”

For the full dialogue, refer to:

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/Phil160,Fall02/euthyphro.html>

This creates two horns of a dilemma when applied to God's commands. As discussed in Extract 7a.

**Horn 1:** Moral goodness is good because God commands it. But what happens when God commands us, as God did to Joshua, to slaughter men women and children in a city in times of war. Surely we would find this repugnant and wrong?

**Horn 2:** Moral goodness is good because goodness is independent of God. But this creates a problem: surely God is therefore irrelevant to morality and also, shouldn't human beings judge God's actions in commanding Joshua to slaughter the innocent as morally wrong?

## Objective or Relativistic

Morality has to come from somewhere and in this course we examine a number of options – the issue of derivation.

1. *Morality comes from God* and without religion everything becomes permissible (as Dostoyevsky argues in the Brothers Karamazov). But is this an objective claim? Objectivity implies a shared basis which everyone can access – objective truth is often expressed a scientific truth based, for example on empirical observation. But meta-ethical god-claims of this sort don't seem to mean the same thing as 'I've just counted the number of happy people in this crowd'. This creates the problem of **relativism** (see next section). Is divine command theory really a form of relativism?
2. *Morality comes from human experience*, in our shared desires or our shared experience of pleasure or happiness. This is the claim of the utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), or John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

3. *Morality comes from our shared human nature and unique ability to reason.* This is the claim of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and the Natural Law theorists. Human beings have goals and purposes which are unique, and which set us apart from animals. One shared purpose is to live a good life, which is something measurable and quantifiable as conditions of human well-being and human flourishing.
4. *Morality comes from character, not the nature of actions.* This is the claim of virtue ethicists such as Aristotle (322-384 BCE). There may or may not be an objective basis for this – this issue is considered in the next part of the course (part 3B).

## Is Divine Command Theory a form of Relativism?

Religions may claim that there is an objective, metaphysical basis for morality in the unseen eternal presence of a Creator God, for example.

But meta-ethically, what does this mean?

- a. If God is an **objective** reality, then we should be able to test the proposition “God exists’ by our five senses. But this is impossible to do.
- b. If God’s **commands** are an objective reality, then they could be observable in the way the world is set up, by looking at some objective facts about human nature. But it seems these objective ‘facts’ are always changing. For example, in Christianity it was claimed for many years that men were superior to women because ‘Adam was formed first, then Eve’ (Genesis 2:13). Paul uses this as an argument for saying that women should never teach or have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2: 12 -15) – but in our culture this would be illegal (by the Sex Discrimination Act 1975) and is thought to be immoral.
- c. If God’s commands are true because they reflect God’s character. Then goodness (moral value) seems to be made **relative** to the character of God. But suppose this character is vindictive or cruel, then surely we would say actions coming from these characteristics are wrong?

It seems that the claim to objectivity is beset by problems – it may be acclaim to objectivity, but it appears to descend into relativism – the values of goodness are expressions of cultures and as culture changes so our interpretation of what God is saying changes with it.

## Modified Divine Command Theory

Robert Adams (1987) argues that it is possible to escape the two horns of **Euthyphro's dilemma** by basing the divine command theory on the character of God, and particularly his love. Any action is still wrong 'if and only if it is contrary to the commands of a loving God' but it is inconceivable that a loving God would command torture or the killing of innocent people.

Adams also argues for the objective properties of moral right and wrong. Here objective means, according to Adams, that it doesn't matter what we think of right and wrong, the truth of the ethical statement 'lying is wrong' lies outside our judgment and within the objective properties of God. As an objective fact, God's character never changes – his nature is perfect and 'God therefore retains his supreme moral and metaphysical status' (Michael Austin, IEP).

However, it is also true that many people do not believe in God and so refute the claim that Gods' character underpins his commands and that his commands have authority. For this reason, Adams concedes, 'the theory cannot be reasonably offered except as a theory of what the word wrong means as used by some but not all people in ethical contexts' (2003:463).

What of William Ockham's view that acts such as adultery or murder or theft would be 'right' if God had commanded them? This view is unacceptable to Adams. Doesn't this imply that he has contradicted himself by arguing both that rightness of an action is identical to God's command, and at the same time, if God commanded immoral acts it would be morally acceptable to disobey them?

Adams falls back again on the character of God to make the idea of obeying him conditional upon his loving, benevolent character. Divine Command Theory presupposes a loving benevolent God. Although 'it is logically possible that God should command cruelty for its own sake, it is unthinkable that God should do so' (466). Our assumption is that God loves us. The Christian's faith requires us to obey and our faith in a loving God makes such commands practically impossible.

## The Pluralism Objection

This has two elements:

1. There are many religions of the world, and they don't produce the same divine commands.
2. There are many interpretations within Christianity of what the apparent commands existing in the Old Testament (such as God's commands to Joshua to kill the people of Jericho) actually mean. Moreover, most Christians today reject the commands passed down by St Paul, in the New Testament, that women should be silent in church, keep their heads covered, and never have authority over a man. They argue these are culturally relative to Paul's time and need to be re-interpreted. But if we allow this reinterpretation, then why not re-interpret other commands as culturally relative?

In this way the plurality of religions and the plurality of interpretations of any one religion's commands provide serious difficulties for any theory that sees divine commands as the basis for ethical right and wrong.

## References

Robert Adams, Modified Divine Command Theory, in Charles Taliaferro and Paul Griffiths ed. *Philosophy of Religion, an Anthology* (Blackwell, 2003).  
Michael Austin, Divine Command Theory, in the *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (IEP).