

The divine command theory

Religion



The Divine Command Theory The term divine command theory refers to the ramification of related ethical theories which hold that God's will is the foundation of ethics. Such theory entails that the moral value of acts, i. e. their " goodness" or " badness," is dependent only on God's commands (" Divine Commands and Morality").

There are three main versions of the theory which are summarized as the weakest, stronger and strongest versions. The weakest version argues that God's commands are applicable within the context of specific religious communities, thus, limiting the application to only those within a specific group or sect. The stronger version holds that moral behavior is good in itself, as such, we should live in a particular manner since God wills it. Similar to the weakest version, this entails the only religious believers need to concern themselves with moral accountability. The strongest version asserts that moral behavior is good because it is willed by God. (" Faithnet")

The divine command theory is said to have been disproved by the Euthyphro dilemma, dubbed after Plato's dialogue, which goes: " Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God" (" Philosophy of Religion")

If one accepts the first argument that morally good acts are willed by God because they are morally good, the independence problem arises. This means that the argument itself is inconsistent with the theory since moral value becomes independent from God's will. (" Philosophy of Religion")

On the other hand, should one hold the second argument that morally good acts become such because they are willed by God, then problems pertaining to arbitrariness, emptiness and repugnant commands are contended with.

The arbitrariness problem stems from the argument that the divine

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command theory seems to attribute morality only on God's whims. The emptiness problem implies that statements depicting God as good do not make sense, thereby, rendered as empty tautologies. Given the divine command theory, God can only be described as consistent because God acts in accordance with his command. Lastly, the problems of abhorrent commands result from the divine command theory because it seems to entail that if God willed abhorrent acts like murder and rape, these acts would become morally good. (" Philosophy of Religion")

In response to the critiques of this theory, some religious writers like William of Ockham reacts with his firm belief that God could change the moral order at any time and disregards the above objections. Others recognize the need to address the said problems. For instance, Duns Scotus argues that, given one set of moral values, God could not have commanded contrarily because they are necessary. However, some moral values are dependent on God's decision, so God could have commanded otherwise. As an example, it is a necessary truth that murder is morally wrong, therefore, God could not have commanded otherwise or rescinded this command. On the other hand, keeping the Sabbath Day holy or going to church every Sunday is not a necessary truth, in this regard, God could have commanded otherwise or retracted this command. (" Wikipedia")

Similarly, Philip Quinn also argues for the acceptance of the divine command theory given the same reasons. Moreover, he asserts that God's sovereignty entails that God must be in control of everything including moral standards. His arguments require total belief in God's exercise of control over creation (Hooker).

The divine command theory shows only one spectrum of the ethical theories
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in Christian faith and probably one of the most debated philosophical issues. Despite the many problems and questions stemming from its arguments, a theist or believer finds fervor in defending the divine command theory in view of God's sovereignty and role as the prime mover and master creator.

References

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