

# [The euthyphro dilemma persuasive essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-euthyphro-dilemma-persuasive-essay/)

Religion and morality have been seen as inseparable since the advent of Western thought (http://plato.

stanford. edu/entries/religion-morality/) – religion’s fundamental characters being frequently ethical in nature, and morality often viewed as a derivative of religion. However, the relationship is not as clear cut as many people would like you to believe. A very old and important dilemma facing this relationship is the Euthyphro dilemma, discussed in Plato’s Euthyphro. In it, Socrates and Euthyphro argue about the nature of morality outside of a court. Socrates is being prosecuted for impiety, while Euthyphro is charging his father with murder.

Although charging your father, even for murder, is frowned upon in Ancient Greek culture, Euthyphro justifies it by claiming that this is similar to what the Gods have been reported to have done, and therefore it is alright. After multiple definitions of holiness and piety, Socrates brings up the Euthyphro dilemma , which when adapted to a monotheistic context where God is an all-powerful, all-knowing being (which I will be using), goes: (1)Is what is moral commanded by God because it is moral? or (2)Is it moral because it is commanded by God? First I will discuss ‘ divine command theory’, one horn of the dilemma (2). Next, I will talk about the other horn, which includes all theories about ethics (or meta-ethics) that aren’t related to God’s will (1). After examining the weaknesses of each option, I will consider – and argue against – the alternative options presented by theists. Finally, I will state the reasons why the arguments for divine command theory aren’t strong enough, and why (1) is the most sensible option to choose.

God’s commands determining morality – otherwise known as divine command theory – is often a popular option at first, since it nicely puts ethics and God together, but the more you look into it, the more implausible it begins to sound. The six major problems with divine command theory can be called ‘ the independence problem’4, ‘ the arbitrariness problem’4, ‘ the emptiness problem’4, ‘ the problem of abhorrent commands’ , not knowing God’s will, and the ‘ naturalistic fallacy. ’ Firstly I’ll explain the ‘ problem of abhorrent commands’. Divine command theory states that whatever God commands determines good or bad.

So if God commanded us to not kill, it would become immoral to kill. However, it also allows for the opposite to happen – he can order us to kill our neighbours, and this would become morally good. This is troubling for many theists, and so a common reply to this would be that God would not command such a law because God only commands morally good acts. This is ‘ the independence problem’, and contradicts divine command theory. If God chooses which moral commands to give his subjects based on morality, it means that morality is in fact independent of God after all! Another similar reply to the one just put forward is that God, by his very nature, is good.

But what does this mean? In divine command theory, it turns out, absolutely nothing! This is ‘ the emptiness problem’. By using divine command theories on morality, the phrase ‘ God is good’ is like saying ‘ God is what God desires’. And if God is the standard of Good, then calling God good is a logical mistake according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said it is like calling the platinum metre stick in France, which was used as a standard for the metric system, both a metre long, or not a metre long . Also, saying ‘ God’s commands are good’ is like saying ‘ God’s commands are what God desires’. Surely there is more to morality than simply saying ‘ God is good because God acts how he wants to act’? Another problem is ‘ the arbitrariness problem’.

Because certain actions do not have moral values before God gives it some, it can be deduced that God decides whether these are good or bad on an arbitrary whim. This means that things like murder, rape and theft are only bad because God impulsively, and without reason, decided it should be. This is, as you’d expect, quite troubling, as it means that if things went different, we’d be living in a world where rape and murder were accepted. Also, most theists would admit that it would be hard to accept this kind of moral foundation, as it gives things like murder and charity no moral value. If these values have no reasonable basis, why should we follow them in the first place? It seems quite fair to not follow these morals, and seems unfair to punish people for not following them, especially in a world where rape and murder were promoted.

The next problem is the difficulty in knowing God’s commands. How exactly can we know God’s will? In divine command theory, God’s will is the only thing that determines morality. Theists will first point to the religious scriptures…

but which one? A Christian might think it is obviously the Bible, but an objective viewer will have to choose between the Bible, Quran, Vedas etc. You can not say look at which one has the better moral arguments, since you’re trying to derive morality from the book! Another common source for morality is through people who have spoke to God. But many people claim this, so how do we know who is right? Someone might say that God told him to destroy a village; does this mean he is right? The final option is that God gave us reason and knowledge, and so morality is instilled in our very nature. But then, what is the point of believing in certain religions if people are going to act the same anyway? And people don’t act the same, so does that mean God is responsible for psychopaths and serial murderers? The final major problem with divine command theory is the ‘ naturalistic fallacy’, discussed by G. E. Moore in Principa Ethica, influenced by David Hume’s is-ought problem.

Moore says “ that the eternal reality is good, will by no means justify us in aiming at its manifestation, unless that manifestation itself be also good. ” Just because God commands you to do something, doesn’t make the command itself good, since you cannot use non moral terms to give terms like “ good” meaning. The commands end up feeling more like laws than morals. The other half of the dilemma, (1), is that God says things are good because they adhere to a standard of morality outside of God. Because God in this context is an all-knowing being, he knows exactly what is right and what is wrong.

So if you believe that morality is independent of God, when God says ‘ thou shalt not kill’, the command reflects morality, not determines it. This side of the dilemma answers many of the troubling problems of divine command theory. Morality is no longer arbitrary, because God derives his values from an independent source. It is now possible to call God good, and because God is good, abhorrent commands are very unlikely. But as you’d expect in a dilemma, this side also proves problematic, and to some, lands a fatal blow to the religion-morality relationship.

If morality is independent of God, then it means that God has no part to play in morality, other than a relayer of information. God becomes similar to a wise man who one goes to for advice or knowledge – the wise man’s utterance of ‘ the world is round’ does not make the world round, but instead reflects his knowledge of the surrounding universe. As we can see, this horn of the dilemma doesn’t say that the concepts of God and morality are completely unrelated, only that “ morality does not depend on God for its existence. Another problem facing theists who believe that morality is external to God is the restraints it places on God. God, being a rational agent, now has to abide by a higher set of rules, and it is possible for God to do bad things and therefore be an evil God.

However, if a theist argues that God by his very nature can only do good things and cannot possibly do any bad things, not only does it meant that God is not longer omnipotent, but more importantly it changes God from a rational agent to an almost non-sentient system. Free will necessitates the ability to freely choose between good and evil, and saying that God can physically only do good is lessening him to an almost subhuman being, which some would say shouldn’t even be called good, because it doesn’t have the rationalization abilities needed in determining right from wrong. And if a being doesn’t know the moral values to their actions, how can we judge the moral behaviour of that being? So as we can see, both options are troubling to theists. (1) belittles God and his purpose, while (2) makes morality arbitrary and God meaningless. As you would expect, theists who find both views unacceptable have tried to create a third option that will allow God to determine morality, while retaining moral values that would otherwise be arbitrary. Although there are many propositions, almost all are built out of two concepts: that God is good, or that God is love.

The first view, that God is in some way the very definition of good, is the most common argument by theists who understand the consequences of accepting either horn of the dilemma. This answer to the Euthyphro dilemma was first – or most famously – formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, a very influential Christian philosopher and theologian who is responsible for a lot of the Catholic Church’s teachings and beliefs, and was named divine simplicity. Aquinas believed that God is an irreducible and indivisible being , and because of that, God can’t have goodness, but rather is goodness. Therefore, his commands determine goodness (thus keeping the connection between the will of God and morality), but makes it so God can also be called good (since his very nature is good). At first glance it seems like quite an attractive and plausible answer to the dilemma.

It doesn’t put morality outside of God, nor does it rely on arbitrary whims, but instead is central to the very character of God. However, I feel that it is nothing more than metaphysical rhetoric constructed to distract us from the original problem. What does Aquinas exactly mean when he says goodness is God? Either he means that God’s nature consistently reflects goodness, in which case it goes back to (1), as it implies that an independent standard of morality exists as which to compare God’s nature with (Wittgenstein’s meter stick), or that it is God’s attributes and character that determines goodness. But this just rephrases the dilemma. Instead of ‘ God’s commands’, it is now ‘ God’s attributes’. What if it was in God’s character to kill innocent human beings? Would this make it right? And since there is no independent morality, we become just as lucky to not have a violent and cruel natured God as we did to not have a God who issues violent and cruel commands! So it turns out that this solution isn’t really a solution after all, and instead just makes the problem more convoluted.

Recently, there has been more emphasis on God’s loving nature than there was before. God is love’ is now often used as a solution to the Euthyphro dilemma. God being love can be supported by the Bible verse “ He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. ” This is becoming quite popular because it gives God a positive nature, while not comparing him to a moral standard. Also, it cleverly avoids complete arbitrariness – it may still be morally arbitrary to say ‘ thou shalt not kill’, but it isn’t completely arbitrary, since God doesn’t want us to kill each other because he loves us, and wants the best for us.

But is this all just rhetoric like Aquinas’ solution? Let’s examine it closer. First of all, how does God telling us what is best for us make his commands into morality? Our parents might tell us that it is in our best interests that we don’t touch a hot stove, but it doesn’t make it immoral to do so. Someone might respond by saying it is moral to listen to authority figures, but why? They might argue that it’s because they love us. But why does being loving have that sort of moral authority? Unless there is an outside source of morality, love is morally valueless.

If God commands love to be good then we just go back to option (2). Divine command theorists still have some arguments left to support their belief. According to Gensler, there are three arguments for divine command theory (which he decides to call supernaturalism) : (A)The Bible teaches it (B)All basic laws of every sort depend on God’s will, and (C)God is the only plausible source of objective moral duties He first responds to (A) by saying that the Bible never explicitly says that divine command theory is true. All the Bible says is to worship and obey God, and this could be for many reasons, not just divine command theory.

To (B) and (C) he says that some things aren’t derived from God, such as logical truths like x = x, and that it “ assumes that ‘ A ought to be done’ means something of the form ‘ X legislates A’” , which he says is not necessarily true, as some things (going back to logical truths) are true in and of themselves. In my opinion, (1), or that morality is independent to God, is the best option. The problems associated with (1) aren’t as severe as (2), divine command theory, as it doesn’t turn morality up on its head, and just belittles God to nothing but a messenger boy in morality. You can keep the relationship between God and morality alive, not by claiming that there is some definite connection between the two, but because God is all-knowing, and therefore has better knowledge of what is good and bad. I have also concluded that the alternative options to the dilemma, such as God being goodness, or God being love, are not proper solutions to the problem as they both go back to one or the other option in the original dilemma.

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