

# The ideas behind divine command theory

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



## **The Euthyphro**

One of the most important questions ever debated throughout human history is how we ought to act within a society? This question of morality seems like a very simple and intuitive question on the surface, however, this question has plagued (seems too harsh?) even the most notable philosophers throughout the ages. Dating all the way back to ancient Greece, Socrates, one of the most influential figures of ancient philosophy, also sought to find the answer to that very question. Socrates was always keen on seeking out those who believed they had answers to these questions and ironically, many people were absolutely convinced they had uncovered the truth behind this simple question that still has yet to be definitively answered in modern times.

One of the earliest documented explanations offered to the question of morality are the ideas behind Divine Command Theory. However, through Socrates' quest for knowledge, he, whether intentional or not, has exposed a problematic dilemma for divine command theorists that sparked one of the most dangerous debates in throughout history; A debate threatening the legitimacy of our supposed creator, and a direct challenge to the idea of an all-powerful, worldly God. In this paper, I will discuss the characteristics of Divine Command Theory (DCT), the unforeseen dilemma incited from the story told by Plato in The Euthyphro, and how this dilemma has left a major impact on the validity of DCT. With obvious roots that trace back all the way to ancient Greece, the Divine Command Theory seems to be one of the earliest widely accepted beliefs of moral obligation, yet still somehow has remained very culturally relevant through modern times.

Though beginning its roots in Greek Mythology, DCT has evolved with time and found itself rooted in various other religious sects. For example, one of the most notable elements to Christianity are God's definitive Ten Commandments laid out as a general moral guideline for followers to live by. For the sake simplicity, in this paper I will be referring to DCT as a condensed, simplified version of this theory coined ' DCT lite'. In its simplest form, DCT is a theory that views morality as somehow dependent on God, and that we are morally obligated to is follows his commandments.

DCT also assumes two overarching attributes of God: First, that there exists a God who is our worldly creator, and second, that God is perfection. Divine command theorists believe that God has created an objective moral framework of morality that follows: all moral actions are commanded by God, and similarly, all immoral actions are forbidden by God. Under the DCT, it is important to make the distinction that it does not drawn any implication as to WHY God commands certain actions and forbids others, it is just so that He does. It is not to be necessarily assumed that God commands/forbids actions because God sees them as moral/immoral. The objectiveness and explicit declaration of right and wrong action of DCT points to the classification of a normative theory, rather than a metaethical theory focused on questioning the idea of morality itself. Despite the far-reaching popularity of DCT at the time, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates may have incidentally (analogy for opening pandoras box/pulled the thread that unraveled/etc ) positioned a very problematic dilemma for DCT through a unsuspecting conversation with a man named Euthyphro.

This impactful (want something much stronger here) moment in history is told by Plato, a student of Socrates, in the story called *The Euthyphro*. In Plato's story of *The Euthyphro*, Socrates meets a man named Euthyphro who is in the process of prosecuting his own father for crimes against their servant. This was striking to Socrates; abandoning family loyalty in pursuit of moral justice was publicly repugnant at the time. Initially, Socrates praises Euthyphro and insists he must truly must have a deep understanding of morality to pursue the prosecution of his own father. Euthyphro proudly touts his sophisticated understanding of divine law and what it is to be holy.

Socrates, on a quest for knowledge and a deep understanding of our world, takes this opportunity to hear out man and pleads Euthyphro to teach him what the true definition of holiness may be. After countless conversations with everyday people claiming to have enlightened thoughts, Socrates has evolved into a natural skeptic. Thanks to this, Socrates has developed a conversational method with the goal of breaking an argument or idea down point by point though specific and thorough questioning to properly identify any holes or inconsistencies. This highly analytic conversational tool is now popularly referred to as the Socratic Method. Socrates begins his method initially by asking Euthyphro to lay out his definition of holiness and Euthyphro lands on the definition "Holiness is what the gods love, and that unholiness is what they all hate" (218).

From here, it is necessary for Socrates to understand why the gods might love something. To get here, they must reach an understanding of the what it means for something to have the property of being loved. Through

sequential analogies of similar ideas, Socrates, for example, gets Euthyphro to agree that something has the property of being carried because it is in state of being carried, and NOT, that people carry something because it has the property of being carried. Similarly, applying this conclusion to the property of love, Socrates explains “ A thing is not loved by those who love it because it is in a state of being loved. It is in a state of being loved because they love it” (218), to which Euthyphro continues to agree.

Now, going back to the original definition of holiness being “ something loved by the Gods” and not some other reason, Socrates poses the question “ Then it is loved by the Gods because it is holy; it is not holy because it is loved by them?”, to which Euthyphro again agrees. This proves a direct contradiction and inconsistency to what how Euthyphro agreed the property of Love should be defined. In the end, Socrates concludes that Euthyphro has not, in fact, provided an accurate definition of holiness, rather, he has merely shown that being loved by the Gods is merely an attribute of something that happens to be holy.

Unfortunately, Socrates and Euthyphro are still left with the question “ Do the gods love holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?” (218). The answer to this question is very important to consider because under the DCT, we must question our moral decisions based on what God commands. However, it turns out that the either answer to a very similar question will result in a problematic conclusion consistent with the antithesis of the universal truths at the backbone (Basis?) of DCT, thus, creating the infamous Euthyphro Dilemma.

Regarding moral decision making under DCT, we now seek to find the relationship between the property of being moral, and the property of being commanded by God. To help us understand this relationship more clearly, we can restate Socrates' question on holiness to ask " Do the Gods command an action because it is moral, or is an action moral because it is commanded by God?". Let us say that one in defense of the DCT were to agree with the presumption that it must be true that " an action is morally correct because it is commanded by the Gods". This would lead us to the implication that if God were to command us to inflict pain and suffering upon others, acting in such way would be morally justified.

This should cause major alarm because it is widely understood that the infliction of pain and suffering should always be morally reprehensible. This should raise alarm for the followers of DCT is because this implies the foundations of moral decision making, as decided by God, are arbitrary in nature. There seems to be no other decipherable answer to why God chooses to command certain actions yet forbid others (Relate back to Euthyphro conclusion about holiness). Supporters of the DCT would not enjoy being left with implication that to bring pain and suffering onto others could possibly be a morally acceptable action, nor would they like to agree with the implication making God's foundations of morality to be arbitrary, an insult and contradiction to God's assumed perfection. Now, to avoid these implications, let's say a divine command theorist might suppose the opposite, that " if the Gods command a particular action, it is because the action is morally correct".

By agreeing with this assumption, they are now able to avoid the arbitrariness of the DCT. However, this statement immediately suggests that the standard of morality lives externally to God. This, in turn, directly contradicts the DCT's idea of God being our worldly creator. God is no longer the creator of our ethical standards, rather, God is simply able to recognize the nuances of morality to determine right from wrong. This brings God down to the level of humans when discussing the realms of morality, an idea incompatible with God being the supreme absolute creator of our universe. This leaves a very compelling dilemma for divine command theorists. In order to get behind the idea of DCT, they either must concede that in some way the standard of morality is an emergent property of our universe, rather than being explicitly designed by God at the time of creation. Or they must concede the arbitrary nature of God's commandments.