

# Divine command theory

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The most basic difference in divine command theory and Immanuel Kant's moral theory is where the founding principle comes from. Kant argues that as rational creatures with the ability for autonomous thought and action, we can rationally determine the morality of any situation. Divine command theory requires that humans ascertain the will of God to know the difference between right and wrong. In large part the two theories overlap and many who promote divine command theory would argue that Kant simply did not take his explanation far enough.

They would argue that had he determined the source of rationality, i. e. the theory that God endowed His creation with freewill and autonomy, then he would see that even the rational choice theory of morality leads back to divine intervention. However, Kant argued that it is impossible using rational arguments to determine if God exists or not. We can, however, argue rationally that humans are rational beings and capable of autonomous action. Therefore, we can argue that autonomous beings have the rational capability of determining a guiding moral principle.

Kant's theory argues that the moral principle which guides life should be determined in a vacuum, absent of the facts. This was his way of arguing against situational ethics. A guiding principle, the basics of morality, should be determined based solely on rational thought and then, once the principle is established, the facts of the situation may be applied to the moral principle and the appropriate action, the answer to the question, "What ought I to do?", can be determined. Kant's theory requires the identification of the categorical imperative that is essential to living a moral life. Morality is determined by the one rationally determined categorical imperative.

If then an action seems within the situation as though it will not be compatible with the categorical imperative, then it is morally wrong and there is no justifying it or changing things around to make it okay. For example, if the rationally determined categorical imperative is that murder is wrong, then it is wrong. This is actually a form of the argument many people use in opposing the death penalty. They argue that it cannot be morally justified to kill someone even if it is being done because he killed someone else. Their categorical imperative is that it is irrational to kill another person. This person should also then be a conscientious objector as there is no circumstance under which killing is not morally wrong.

Under divine command theory, the order of God that "thou shalt not kill" would be an equally definitive moral compass, except that the God's commands are rarely that direct. One of the biggest criticisms of divine command theory is that it does not indicate how one is to determine what God's command is. Many point to the scriptures, but those vary, sometimes greatly among translations and faiths. In centuries past, many believed in the divine rule of kings as God's voice on earth.

Therefore, if the King commanded it, it was the word of God as well and since many of these kings sent men into battle in direct opposition to the commandment against killing, the theory of divine command is weakened by the need to identify God or His commands. Even extending into the modern day, the Pope is considered by Catholics to be the voice of God. Is the word of the Pope then the moral guide for the divine command theory? And, the seemingly contradictory messages of the Bible (or other scriptures) become

a much greater problem. If we are basing our morality on God's command, but His words are unclear, how can morality become clear?

Ultimately, the difference between right and wrong in the two theories is potentially huge. Under the divine command theory, anything that God commands can be considered right and anything contrary to God's command is wrong. With Kant's theory, wrong is defined as being immoral and immorality is irrational. Therefore, any act which is irrational could be considered morally wrong. Thus the two theories can lead to very different conclusions in the exact same case.

Essentially, the difference between the two is that though Kant argued that moral theory should be determined in the absence of facts, it is not hard and fast and allows for some circumstantial ethics. The simple problem with divine command theory is that if it relies on scriptures as God's command, it is clear cut with no room for interpretation. Why then would man be capable of rational thought if there were no rationality needed? With divine command theory any creature that can understand simple commands could be taught to obey the law and the creation of a species capable of rational thought would be unnecessary.

Likewise, the problem with moral theory is that it does not have clear cut right and wrong. By arguing that the requisite is rational action, Kant has made it possible for anything to be rationally justified even perhaps the greatest of moral wrongs including murder or even genocide, if the reasoning were sound. Because of the difference in their application, the two theories can be applied with completely different outcomes.

For instance, assume that a man is walking through the woods late in the evening and sees a man attacking a woman whom he knows to be virtuous (just to make it clear she is the victim here). Because the attacker is in such a rage, the only manner that the observer has to prevent him from killing the innocent is to kill the attacker. If we use the divine command theory to determine our course of action, harkening back to the Ten Commandments and “Thou Shalt Not Kill”, the observer is left with no action that he can take to prevent the death of an innocent woman.

Under Kant’s moral theory, it is completely irrational for the observer to allow an innocent to be killed simply because a Divine Being ordained that killing is wrong. Therefore, under the Kant theory, the observer would be wholly justified in killing the attacker. He would be doing the right thing. While clearly not all moral obligations and decisions would ever be this clear cut, this example illustrates where the two theories diverge drastically.

It is precisely this type of scenario which leads me to support Kant’s moral theory over the theory of divine command. The theory of divine command relies on the existence of a Supreme Being and the knowledge of His will in personal action. Like Kant, I am not certain that we can determine if God exists, much less what His divine command would be. In a different age, divine command theory as method of determining morality made perfect sense.

The king, ruling with divine right, could ordain the divine commands of his nation and the law would therefore be good, but as we have entered the age of reason and science, the theory of divine command falls short. It does not offer any guidance on issues that were not conceived of when the Bible or <https://assignbuster.com/divine-command-theory/>

other scriptures were written. Unless one accepts that the Pope is the direct conduit to God's will left on earth, how could one determine what the divine command theory would be on an issue like cloning and therefore what the morality might be.

Some religious people might say that cloning is wrong because it attempts to subvert God's role in creation, but where in the Scripture does it say 'thou shalt not clone'? And, if we accept the argument that God did not intend for man to interfere in the creation process, should we not then find in vitro fertilization and even breeding controls on animals to be contrary to God's law? The simple failing of the divine command theory is that it does not reach into the modern age and allow moral decisions appropriate to the times in which we live.

Kant's theory on the other hand is perfect for the age of reason, probably based on the time frame in which it was being developed. When the means test of rationality is applied, virtually any decision can be made, often in the style of Kant's writings about common sense.

For example, the rational mind can identify the moral ambiguity of cloning, especially cloning of a rational being. With all consciousness of thought, we can determine that creating that which we do not understand may be wrong. We can also rationally determine that choosing to mate specific animals in hopes of getting a particular set of genetic traits or implanting an embryo into a uterus is not an evil act simply because it involves creation. Even those who believe in the existence of a Supreme Being cannot argue why a God that is "good" and benevolent would object to the use of scientific advances to prolong life and to assist the natural process of procreation.

As a further example of this, consider the use of nuclear weapons. Though we can default to the idea that thou shalt not kill as divine command argument against the use of the weapon, the argument falls short when we realize that man has been commanded to kill hundreds of times throughout history in God's name. However, when we consider the discussion of nuclear weapons using Kant's theory, we can determine that the use of nuclear weapons on any widespread basis is irrational and therefore immoral and therefore wrong.

The rational arguments against the weapons are plentiful: they destroy every living creature for miles, they destroy the land making it uninhabitable for years, and the radiation spread cannot be controlled, leading to countless additional injuries, illnesses and deaths. Ultimately, both theories come to the same conclusion, but Kant's theory provides a better argument supporting the cause.

Objectors will say that the problem with Kant's theory is that humans have the capacity to act irrationally and therefore immorally. That irrationality negates the concept of a rational test of morality. This argument is flawed in that it is based on a premise which we call mental illness. In American society at least, when a person has lost the ability to tell the difference between right and wrong, we determine that they are mentally ill. This means even our system of psychology is based loosely on Kant's premise that we are rational creatures, capable of autonomous action.

Furthermore, nothing in theory would ever preclude a person from acting in a manner contrary to their moral theory. It is completely possible for a person to know an action is morally wrong and do it anyway. Sometimes,

they will make attempts to justify the actions in their own minds or to others, but even the great majority of criminals can acknowledge that there is a significant difference between right and wrong even while they are choosing the wrong option. This is the reason that the American legal system recognizes mitigating factors, those excuses for why it was okay to do the wrong thing. We understand that the rational mind can also try to reason out doing what it desires.

Critics of Kant's theory would also argue that there are no simple clear cut definitions of right and wrong. That is correct. There aren't. Ethics and morality are situational, no matter what people want to say or believe. It can be as simple as believing that a little white lie is occasionally okay (Do you really want to tell your mother her new dress looks hideous?) or as extreme as a blatant attempt to manipulate society and yourself that murder is justifiable. Regardless, Kant would argue that the theory holds true. Rational beings know that these actions are wrong and society, which is not a rational being, has dictated that we are allowed to act otherwise.