

# NECESSITY, CONTROL, AND THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

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*The simplest Divine Command Theory is one which identifies rightness with being commanded or willed by God. Two clear and appealing arguments for this theory turn on the idea that laws require a lawgiver, and the idea that God is sovereign or omnipotent. Critical examination of these arguments reveals some fundamental principles at odds with the Divine Command Theory, and yields some more penetrating versions of traditional objections to that theory.*

## **I. Introduction**

A divine command theory (hereafter DCT) worthy of the name says that to be right is to be commanded by God, and to be wrong is to be forbidden by God. In this discussion I will be concerned only with the ‘divine command theory’ which asserts this property identity. In my view, this theory is the simplest and most appealing ‘divine command theory’ there can be. The waters have been much muddied in the recent literature by many more complicated but less intelligible and less appealing theories. I will not explicitly address ‘divine command theories’ about the meaning of moral terms, moral knowledge, or the ‘causal’ divine command theory<sup>1</sup>,

views according to which rightness ‘consists in’ but is not identical to being commanded by God, accounts which are deliberately vague as to how moral obligations ‘depend on’ facts about God<sup>2</sup> or Robert Adams’ theory that to be right is to be commanded by a *loving* God.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, much of what I say will be useful for rebutting the case for and even refuting such theories.

In sections II and III I lay out two attractive arguments for DCT, thus partly explaining the appeal of DCT to reflective theists. I argue that neither of these is sound, thereby undercutting what I consider two of the strongest arguments for DCT.<sup>4</sup> In exploring these arguments we will discover some fundamental moral insights which are inconsistent with DCT, thus yielding penetrating versions of standard lines of objection.<sup>5</sup> In section IV I conclude by indicating some of the ways alleged divine commands are relevant to ethics despite the falsity of DCT.

## **II. Argument 1 for DCT: Right and wrong are relative to laws, which require a law-giver**

### **A. Taylor’s argument**

Richard Taylor claims that ‘rules do not merely describe [the distinction between right and wrong]; they create it.’<sup>6</sup> Here is an appealing argument which is similar to Taylor’s:

- L1. For any act type A, A is right (wrong) only if there is or has been some law that requires (forbids) A. That is, no kind of act is right or wrong *simpliciter*, but rather

in relation to some law that requires or forbids it.

L2. All laws are expressions of commands.

L3. For every command, there is (or has been, or will be) a person or group of persons which is giving or has given the command.

L4. Therefore, For any act A, A is right (wrong) only if there is (etc.) some person or group of persons which requires (forbids) that kind of act.<sup>7</sup>

Taylor describes different ‘levels’ of right and wrong, which arise from different ‘levels’ of laws.

In ascending order, these are 1. gaming, 2. convention (etiquette), 3. legality, 4. morality.<sup>8</sup> The commanders are easy enough to find in the first three levels, but what about the crucial fourth?

Taylor observes that

...wherever human beings have upheld moral law, they have, at least originally, assumed a source of it, and that source has been some god... that is what distinguishes it as the *moral law*, namely, that it is commanded by the highest authority, higher than any king, priest, or other merely human authority.<sup>9</sup>

Taylor is arguing from atheism to the denial of moral realism<sup>10</sup>, but it is clear that a theist could argue similarly from moral realism to DCT. That is, one could argue as above (L1 to L4) and then proceed to argue that the unity, overridingness, and universality of moral obligation requires there to be a supreme commander, God. That is, one might argue that moral realism is true only if there is a supreme commander. But moral realism *is* true, so there is a such a commander.

Conversely, one might agree that moral realism requires a supreme commander, but since there

is no such commander, moral realism is not true. Taylor's argument (L1-L4), then, is interesting because it links moral properties with the commands of supreme authority, thus providing justification for an premise that can be used to argue either for theism or for the denial of moral realism.<sup>11</sup>

Is Taylor's argument sound? L3 is true. L2 seems to be true as well, *if* by 'laws' one means *concrete* things, such as the event of commanding, the spoken sound, or the written sentence. For the argument to be valid, we must read 'laws' in L1 in the same, concrete sense. It is irrelevant to point out that philosophers often use 'laws' to mean abstract things such as general principles or propositions - laws of morality, laws of thought, laws of logic, etc. Whether or not L2 is true read in *that* way is a controversial matter that we can sidestep here. Since L2 (read concretely) and L3 are true, and L4 follows from L1-L3, the argument is sound if L1 is true.<sup>12</sup>

In my view, the argument fails because L1 is false. To see this, we must keep in mind that a 'law' here is a concrete entity – a speech-act, a written code, or simply the mental action of commanding or forming the here-and-now intention to issue a command.<sup>13</sup> It seems that there is a possible world wherein any such 'law' is lacking. One should agree to this regardless of what one's stance towards theism is. If one is a theist, it seems possible that God not create any creature, in which case, there will be no one to issue commands to. (I assume here that if theism is true, God doesn't of necessity issue any command to himself.) If one is an atheist, and doesn't believe the concept of God to be contradictory, then there still seems to be a possible world with no physical universe, no angels or non-physical souls or spirits, but only a perfectly good God with no need to issue any commands at all. If the concept of God is coherent, there will be no discoverable contradiction in such suppositions. And if one is agnostic, one can see by the above

reflections that whether atheism or theism is true, it seems possible that there be a world with no divine laws or commands. Of course, there are also possible worlds containing divine commands. And if it is contingent truth there is a law forbidding an act of type A (e.g. murdering a man merely for the fun of it), it will be a contingent truth that acts of type A are wrong. There will be some worlds where there is no such command, and thus by the DCT, should such an act (*per impossible*, as we're imagining a world with nothing but God) occur in that world, it wouldn't be wrong. But to the contrary, it would be, for that sort of action seems intrinsically wrong (more on this in section II.C below). Hence, it seems that L1 is false, and thus that the argument fails.

Another difficulty stems from the fact that if L1 is true, being forbidden suffices for being wrong. But the giving of a command is an action, and we can ask whether or not *that* action is wrong. If the act of forbidding is itself wrong, there may be cases where something is forbidden but not wrong or commanded but not right. There are at least three ways for a commanding to be wrong. First, irrespective of what is commanded, the commander may not have the moral authority to give orders to those in question. Second, a commanding can be wrong if the commander thereby knowingly enjoins someone to do a wrong act. Third, even if the commander has the authority to command, and commands an act that is not wrong, the act of commanding could still be morally wrong for other reasons having to do with the commander's motives. For instance, he may command something out of sheer cruelty.<sup>14</sup> So on the face of it, we can ask concerning a commanding of God whether *that* act is wrong. Why ask this question? When a command is wrong for the first or second reason, those commanded have no obligation to obey. In the third kind of case, those commanded have an obligation to obey, but there is a moral defect in the character of the commander.

## B. Alston on God's Commands

When it comes to the question of whether or not a commanding by God is wrong, there are three options for the friend of DCT. First, he can claim that the question is inappropriate where God's actions are concerned, for his actions can be neither right nor wrong. The DCT defender can still claim that all his actions are good, but he must deny that God is obligated to do anything.<sup>15</sup> God doesn't have obligations, and so in principle cannot do, or fail to do, something which he has a duty to do.

This stance has serious costs for biblical theists, for God is frequently portrayed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures as both putting himself under obligations by making promises and contracts, and fulfilling those obligations in various ways. William Alston suggests that this is not a problem, as such theists

...can hold that the Biblical writers were speaking loosely, analogically, or metaphorically in so describing the transactions [wherein God seems to put himself under obligations] ... They were choosing the closest human analogue to what God was doing in order to give us a vivid idea of God's action. It would be more strictly accurate to say that God *expressed the intention* [to do those things which he is described as 'promising']...<sup>16</sup>

This move is more costly to the biblical theist than Alston admits. First, not only does God make contracts with people, but he is later represented as promising that he will adhere to these contracts. If such a 'contract' is just a declaration of God's intention to act, and such a

subsequent ‘promise’ is just the expression of another intention, then he is merely saying in such places that still intends to do what he previously intended to do, or if one believes God to be outside of time, that he timelessly intends to do what he timelessly intends to do. Second, even if the biblical writers can be excused for their misleading covenantal language, one wonders if a being which can’t have obligations is wrongfully deceiving recipients of the revelation, when he makes them believe they collectively have a deal or contract with him. Whether or not this is morally wrong, one might think it inconsistent with God’s goodness to lead people to false beliefs about non-existent divine-human covenants. This is hardly like leaving humans to their mistaken beliefs about the layout of the solar system or the age of the universe, as it deals with the heart of the relationship between God and ourselves. Third, on the strategy in question one cannot properly understand the divine attribute of faithfulness. Someone is faithful just in case he meets his obligations, keeps his promises, and sticks to his agreements (except in cases where it is not obligatory to follow through with the deal because the other party has done something to void it). Someone who never makes promises can never keep them, and one who never has obligations cannot act in accordance with them. But God is repeatedly described as faithful, and is depicted as adhering to his deals or covenants and keeping his promises and contracts.<sup>17</sup>

Alston’s strategy forces one to construe divine faithfulness as something like mere reliability. That is, to say that God is ‘faithful’ means simply that he always (or usually) carries through with his announced intentions; you can count on him to do what he intends more than you can count on an atomic clock to keep time. Arguably, this loses some important content of biblical theism, namely the claim that God treats us with such dignity that he doesn’t only command us, but actually stoops to make deals with us, putting himself under obligation to do certain things, much as a parent makes promises to her child, or as husband enters a covenant with his wife.<sup>18</sup> It seems that to say that God is faithful is to say *more* than just that he is uncapricious or reliable in

some sense, or that we can safely depend on him. Someone making Alston's move can simply deny all this, but I claim that it is better to forego a thesis which surrenders such valuable and important *prima facie* contents of biblical theism. Since God does make and keep promises, God does what is right, and not only what is good. That isn't a knockdown argument, as it can be avoided by maintaining a sparser theism, but it is a convincing one.

Alston might counter that he conceives of God as essentially perfectly good. For such a being, it is not logically possible that he fails to do what is best, and the notion of an obligation to A has no application to beings who logically cannot help but do what they do.<sup>19</sup>

I agree that if a state of affairs is obligatory to S only if S in some sense has control over whether that state of affairs obtains, and that a being which necessarily exists and essentially does the best in no sense has control over whether he does the best. Therefore Alston is correct that divine obligations are incompatible with divine essential goodness. I answer that the evidence a biblical theist has for the claim that God has obligations (i.e. the many statements of scripture applying notions in the obligation family to God) is stronger than the evidence she has for the claim that he is essentially good. The case for this latter claim can only be intuitions about what the 'greatest possible/conceivable being' must be like. But the methods of perfect being theology are perilous, and the intuitions can waver and change. In the present case, at least three factors weaken the case for belief that God is essentially good. First, the notion of the greatest possible being might be contradictory, as is the notion of a highest possible integer (similarly with the notion of a being with all possible perfections). Second, the notion of essential goodness might be contradictory, if moral goodness requires freedom to do wrong. Third, omnipotence, or God's maximal power, may include the ability to give up knowledge. But if a being is no longer all-knowing, it starts to look possible that it could act wrongly. In this way, one might think that omnipotence rules out essential goodness. Now none of these worries

demonstrates that God is *not* essentially good, but they do show that it isn't immediately obvious that God must be ('by definition' it is sometimes said) essentially good. In sum, to claim that notions in the obligation family have no application to God looks like an unpromising response to the question about whether God's commandings can be right, for it requires the theist to say that God cannot do what is right, promise, keep promises, make deals, or have the virtue of faithfulness.

A second option for the DCT defender is to claim that God's commands are neither right nor wrong, because he neither commanded nor forbidden those commands. Little can be said for this position, because some of those commands look right (forbidding adultery and murder, commanding that the poor be cared for) and because counterfactually, we want to say that *if* God were to command murder, theft, and blasphemy, he'd be wrong to do so, even if he didn't command himself not to give those commands.

A third option for the friend of the DCT is to claim that all his actions are right, since for each of God's commands, he commands himself to give *that* command, and so on for *that* command, and so on, to infinity. So to give one right command, God has to give an infinity of right commands! *Perhaps* God could do this, but most theists still want to say that God's commands are right not because he commands himself to give those commands (how could *that* make a command right?) but rather, to put it loosely, because they fit the natures of things, which only God perfectly and completely understands.<sup>20</sup> 'Not so fast,' a DCT defender may counter, 'Alston has argued that features of actions and states of affairs are good-making features precisely and only because they are features of God.'

Goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some general principles are true but just because they are features of God. Of course, we can

have general principles, e.g., *lovingness is good*. But this principle is not ultimate... it is true just because the property it specifies as sufficient for goodness is a property of God.<sup>21</sup>

The DCT defender may argue that ‘right’ is, like ‘good’, a ‘particularistic predicate’, a term whose conditions of application make essential reference to an individual. So the suggestion is that to be right is to be commanded by God, the individual, not just anyone who might be related to us as a benevolent creator, etc. (For his part, Alston only makes the goodness claim, arguing that none of God’s actions can be right or wrong.)

The obvious objection to either move is this: How could *that* (being a feature of this individual or being commanded by this individual) make something good or right? Isn’t that an unintelligible suggestion? Alston responds (in defense of the goodness claim),

...this objection amounts to no more than an expression of Platonist predilections.

One may as well ask: ‘How can it be an answer to the question, “Why is this table a meter long?” to cite its coincidence with the standard meter-stick?’ There are just some properties that work that way.<sup>22</sup>

Alston admits that it is arbitrary which stick we choose as the standard meter-stick. Any meter stick that takes up the amount of space indicated by ‘100 centimeters’ will do. So it appears that the meter-stick case is not analogous to the morality case. It is not the individual meter stick *qua* individual that matters, but is rather the individual meter stick *qua* example of a meter-long thing which is the standard. But then in a more ultimate sense, it is the universal property of being *so*

*long* that is the standard. In the case of God, though, it is supposed to be the individual as such (*not* the individual, bear in mind, *qua* great, perfect, powerful, loving, etc.) which is the standard of goodness. That is, any action he does is good, simply because he does it. Similarly, one might say that the rightness of God's command just is or consists in the fact that God the individual (*not qua* wise or loving, etc.) gives it. Something unintelligible lurks in these suggestions. We can bring this out by examining Alston's second response to what I've just called 'the obvious objection':

Whether we are Platonist or particularist, there will be some stopping place in the search for explanation. ...sooner or later either a general principle or an individual paradigm is cited. Whichever it is, that is the end of the line. ...On both views something is taken as [explanatorily] ultimate... I would invite one who finds it arbitrary to invoke God as the supreme standard of goodness to explain why this is more arbitrary than the invocation of a supreme general principle.<sup>23</sup>

Alston's challenge can be met. Suppose a Nazi concentration camp guard tortures to death an imprisoned child solely for his amusement. This, we can all agree, is both bad and wrong. Why? I would answer, because it is an example of the act-type 'A morally aware being torturing an innocent solely for the fun of it', and necessarily, all tokens of that type are both bad and wrong.<sup>24</sup> A DCT proponent could answer that it is wrong because it is a token of the some general type, perhaps, *Failing to love one's neighbor*, the opposite of which God has commanded. And it is bad, simply because God would never do such a thing; he has no

propensity whatever to torture merely for the fun of it.

Here's the difference between Alston's explanations and mine: in mine, there is an intelligible connection between the explained and the explanation. Don't we all have modal intuitions, that if the perpetrator is morally aware, and the victim truly innocent, then the acting of torturing merely for the fun of it must thereby be both bad and wrong? This seems no more difficult to grasp than the fact that in all worlds, everything is identical with itself. Not so with the claim that the said Nazi's action is wrong just because the individual Yahweh has commanded the opposite. Whatever necessity is alleged to be here is not evident. Any pull we feel to think it is evident can be explained away. Our conception of the individual God, is the conception of someone who is loving, faithful, all-knowing, all-powerful, compassionate, and our creator - someone, that is, who has a great number of morally relevant features. Now consider: 'The Nazi's action is wrong just because the individual Yahweh commanded the opposite.' We're tempted to take this as evident, I claim, for at least two reasons. We may think of God not *qua* individual, but as someone who has certain authority-conferring features. Alternately, we may let the appeal of this proposition - 'we should believe/it is evident that/we know that the Nazi's action is wrong because the individual Yahweh had commanded the opposite' - 'bleed onto' the non-epistemic proposition in question.

Alston sees the dialectical jam we're in here; the Alstonian DCT defender and I both claim that our position is self-evidently true, and that the other has not sufficiently considered the matter. The Alstonian DCT defender may allege that I am not sufficiently acquainted with the individual nature or haecceity of God; if I were I would see how God is the kind of 'ultimate moral standard' he suggests. Despite this dialectical standoff, at most one of us is correct. I suggest that Alstonian moral explanations have no appeal in themselves; their *sole* appeal is that they allow a person to give them while accepting the conjunction of a number of claims which

do have some intrinsic appeal, roughly: (1) realism about moral goodness and obligations, (2) God has moral reasons for his commands (i.e. what they enjoin is good), (3) beings which logically cannot act otherwise are not subject to obligations, and (4) God is essentially perfectly good. In contrast, my explanations are intrinsically intelligible, and have a higher epistemic status for theists than the conjunction of (1)-(4) above. In sum, commands are actions, and actions have moral properties (both in the value and in the obligation families). On the face of it, some divine commands should be right, and all should fail to be wrong. Confronted with this, the DCT theory forces one into either incoherence (the commands are good or right solely because *he* gives them) or bad theology (God makes no promises or deals, and cannot be faithful). For any command, neither the authority of the commander nor the moral status of the action commanded are completely determined by the will of the commander.

### **C. Why not contingent moral principles?**

Why shouldn't the DCT defender allow that divine commandings or willings are contingent events, but add that all moral principles are contingent as well? The reasoning would run as follows:

- C1. Suppose: K is an arbitrary action-type such that its tokens are clearly wrong in the actual world.
- C2. Suppose: God freely forbids K-actions.
- C3. No act is free unless it is possible for the actor to have refrained or done otherwise in those very circumstances.

C4. Therefore, in some possible worlds featuring K-actions, God does not forbid K-actions.

C5. DCT

C6. Therefore, in at least one possible world, there is a K-action which is not wrong.

C7. Therefore, for any action-type K the tokens of which are wrong in this world, it is a contingent truth that K-actions are wrong.

An immediate problem with the argument is that it seems more certain that C7 is false, than that all its premises are true. Thus, instead of being a proof that all moral principles are contingent, it seems to be a solid argument against C3 or C5. And if we're willing to accept the libertarian principle C3, then we actually have an argument against C5, that is, DCT. The problem with C7 is that it runs directly against philosophical intuitions shared by most philosophers.

What reason is there to think that at least some truths like 'K-actions are wrong' are necessary, though they are not analytic (that is, true in virtue of the meaning of their terms, like 'The Pope is Catholic.')

<sup>25</sup> Briefly, in some cases it seems impossible that such an action occur and fail to be wrong, even supposing it is *not* forbidden by God. That is, for some Ks, it seems there is no possible world in which there is a non-wrong K-action, even if we suppose there are worlds in which Ks occur but are not forbidden by God (or worlds in which God does not will that no K-actions occur). Some actions have non-moral features not having to do with God which seem to logically guarantee wrongness by themselves. Let K be any of the following, and it seems that all such token actions will be wrong in all worlds containing them, because of facts not having directly to do with God's commands or preferences.

Torturing an innocent human baby just for amusement.

Raping a woman solely to hurt and humiliate her.

Breaking a solemn promise regarding an important matter on a whim.

Killing an innocent human merely to discover what it feels like to kill.

We can call this the *independence intuition*; it is the appearance that at least one moral property of an action is had because of facts not having directly to do with God. This intuition is dependent on, but different than what we call the *supervenience intuition*. Consider any particular morally wrong action by a moral agent. It seems that *if* one perfectly understood the nature of that act in its complete psychological, social, causal, spatial, temporal and historical context - including at least a consideration of who is doing the act, what they've done previously, why they are doing it, to whom it is being done, the relationship between the two, and what the reasonably expected consequences are - then one would see that all acts of *that* kind - ones with exactly those morally relevant non-moral features - must be wrong in any world in which they occur. This is a powerful intuition, though its power is obscured by the fact that *we* never know all there is to know about any token act. But we can see that if we did, we would see that necessarily, all tokens of that very specific act-type are either right, wrong, or neither. Often we cannot be certain about the moral status of a particular act because we are ignorant of too many of its morally relevant features. On the other hand, in many instances we are able to latch on to act-types that are specific enough to guarantee rightness or wrongness. (If this is right, then L1 of section II.A above is false, unless one can make sense of commandings or willings which happen of logical necessity.) This intuition grounds the widely accepted doctrine of the strong supervenience of moral on non-moral properties. This says that necessarily, for any moral property, if anything has that property, then there is some non-moral property it has, and which

is such that necessarily, if anything has that non-moral property, then it has the moral property as well.<sup>26</sup>

The proponent of the DCT is, like most moral theorists, committed to the doctrine of strong supervenience of moral on non-moral properties, but for her the doctrine becomes uninteresting, since the only non-moral properties that moral properties supervene on have to do with being willed by God, and she is *identifying* moral properties with non-moral ones. For her the strong supervenience doctrine is true but shallow; rightness and wrongness don't merely supervene or depend on various non-moral properties - they *just are* certain (of what we thought were) non-moral properties.

What the DCT proponent cannot accept is an insight which for some philosophers goes hand in hand with the supervenience intuition, which we can call the *variety intuition*. This tells us that various acts are wrong for *many different* kinds of reasons; in different sorts of actions, the wrongness can supervene on any number of non-moral properties. Acts of killing one's wife to get her life insurance to spend the money on entertainment are wrong for very different reasons than acts of stealing the office's paper clips merely to save a tiny amount of one's own adequate income. Breaking a solemn promise merely for sake of convenience is wrong for a different reason than setting the family dog on fire is. The DCT is inconsistent with the variety intuition; according to it actions are right or wrong because of one narrow kind of non-moral fact, facts about what God commands or wills to happen or not happen.

Admittedly, not every moral philosopher has the variety intuition. The parade of simplistic moral theories down through the ages attests to this.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, I confess that I have such a firm, strong, and clear intuition, though as with many rock-bottom convictions, I can't give a non-circular argument for it. Still, the discovery of this firm and clear intuition in oneself gives one a principled reason to deny DCT, even though others lack the intuition. I

would say that the same holds for the independence intuition; it seems about as strong and clear as my surest convictions (e.g. That it is true that  $2+2=4$ ). In particular, it seems no weaker than the supervenience intuition. How can the DCT defender, for the sake of a cherished theory, deny such an evident proposition, especially when she admits to an equally evident claim, the strong supervenience of moral on (apparently) non-moral properties?

In sum, a little Moorean judo throws down the preceding argument. It is more evident that C7 is false than that all the premises are true, so at least one premise is false. Arguably (this isn't the place to defend C3), the villain is C5, the DCT. Some may object that C3 doesn't hold for the kind of freedom God has, or simply deny that any of God's actions are free. But combining this view with DCT amounts to denying that all moral principles are contingent, and thus abandoning the strategy at hand.

### **III. Argument 2 for DCT: *All truths depend on God***

There is some sense in which the God of theism - unlike the gods of polytheism, pantheism, and process theology - is not dependent on anything else. Rather, the universe of contingently existing things depends *on him* for its existence, for he created and sustains it. Most theistic philosophers and theologians agree that (1) God did not have to create the physical universe, (2) he in no way depends upon it for his existence, and (3) his acquiescence and support are necessary for the continuing existence of each and every contingently existing thing. All reflective theists wish to cash out these vague claims into a more precise account of God's metaphysical primacy, and some theists do this in a way that seems to support DCT. That is, their philosophical theology contains what can be thought of as very 'strong' accounts of divine

properties such as sovereignty, omnipotence, independence, or impeccability, and they argue from one of these to DCT.

Here's a way to get from a strong account of divine sovereignty or omnipotence to DCT. All theists claim that it is in God's power to make most contingent propositions true or false. Those theists with a very strong conception of divine sovereignty also claim that for every contingent proposition, it is true only if God wills it to be true. Some also claim that it is also in his power to make logically necessary propositions true or false, and that for every necessary truth, it is true only if God wills it to be true.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, if one holds such a view about the dependence of all truths (or at least all truths which are not about God, so as to avoid claim such as 'God exists because he wills it') on God's free decisions, then one is already committed to something in the neighborhood of DCT. If all truths need to be explained by reference to his choosing to make them so, then this is the case with any moral principles, even supposing these are necessary.

Given one plausible assumption and some standard inferences, this position can be reduced to absurdity.<sup>29</sup>

V1. Necessarily, for all p, p only if God wills that p.	Assumed for <i>reductio</i>
V2. Necessarily, p.	Assumption
V3. Necessarily, God wills that p.	V1,V2: $[\Box p \wedge \Box (p \supset q)] \supset \Box q$
V4. For all actions a, God wills that a only if it is possible that it is not the case that God wills a.	Premise
V5. God wills that p.	V3: $\Box p \supset p$
V6. It is possible that it is not the case that God wills that p.	V4, V5

V7: It is not the case that it is possible that it is not the case V3: def of  $\square$   
that God wills that p.<sup>30</sup>

All sides, I take it, grant that there are necessary truths, so V2 is undeniable. V6 and V7 cannot both be true, yet they both follow from V1-V5. V3 follows from V1 and V2, so if V4 is true, the proof goes through, and we've shown that V1 is false. Viewed more simply, V1, V2 and V4 are an inconsistent triad. But it is evident that there is at least one necessary truth (V2), and V4 is more evident than V1, so V1 must go. The implausibly strong view of sovereignty and omnipotence embodied therein is false, and thus provides no support for DCT.

Many will object, 'I think that God can will in a way for which V4 does not hold, so why should I accept V4?' Is it possible for God to will that a necessary truth be true, or that a necessary state of affairs obtains? It depends on what 'willing' is supposed to be. 'Willing' is a vague term, and in the history and current practice of philosophy we find several incompatible conceptions of what 'willing' amounts to. When we go through these, we see that they provide no help for the objector.

### **A. willing = desiring**

First, to 'will' that P might mean to wish or desire that P.<sup>31</sup> This is a kind of longing for what one doesn't believe is presently so, or for what is presently so but which, for all one knows, may not continue. God doesn't wish or desire that any necessary truths be true, because he is omniscient, and this sort of mental event requires a lack of belief that P is true or actual, or that P is, but may possibly cease to be. Whatever is necessarily true is so at all times. It may be possible for a lesser

being to wish that all triangles have (or continue to have) three sides, if he's ignorant enough, but it is not possible for God.

### **B. willing = approving of or rejoicing in**

Second, to 'will' that P could be to be happy about P, or approve of P, or take some other positive mental attitude towards P, which is assumed to be true or actual. I suggest that rational beings *can* will necessary truths or facts in this sense. God may be glad about his own existence, not in the sense that he's relieved to find that he exists, but just because he sees that it is very good that he exists. Perhaps the medieval saying that *God wills his own existence* is true understood in this way. In the realm of mortals, a logician may delight in the fact that everything is identical to itself, or that *P* and *If P then Q* imply *Q*. Perhaps God is in some sense pleased or glad that *it is right for humans to obey God*, even if that is a necessary truth. But even supposing this is so, this doesn't seem relevant to the DCT. In general, a being can be pleased about some necessary moral principle without that principle's truth being identical with or in any way dependent upon his being pleased with it, and we haven't found any good reason to make an exception in the case of God.

### **C. willing = here-and-now intending**

Third, to 'will' that P could be to choose, here-and-now intend, or have a volition that P. (I take these various expressions, used by sundry early modern and contemporary philosophers, to

denote the same sort of mental action.) ‘Willing’ in this sense is a distinctive kind of mental event with intentional content, that something be so. This kind of willing may be intimately connected with the first kind. It is plausible that one cannot choose that P unless one has some sort of desire for P. Nonetheless, having a desire for P and willing/choosing P are two different events. It is impossible for a rational agent to will in this sense what she also wills in the second sense above. One cannot endeavor to make it the case that P, when one believes that P already obtains.

Does God in the present sense will that P where P is a necessary truth, as in the case of general moral principles? For instance, does God will that torturing innocent babies merely for the fun of it is wrong? He does not. To will something is to set out or endeavor to make it so, and it makes no sense to try to make a proposition true which is true in all possible worlds. Only an ignorant being could attempt such a thing. The same goes for willing a necessary truth to be false. It is conceivable that an uninformed human, for instance, could will that *modus ponens* be a valid form of argument. But short of severe irrationality or cognitive malfunction, so long as one is certain that P, one cannot will/try to bring it about that P. A necessary truth is so no matter what the state of the cosmos is, and even if there is no cosmos, but only God and any other necessary beings if there are such. Thus God, an omniscient agent, is never (at any time, or ‘before’ time) in a position to make such a proposition true by willing it. God, then, doesn’t will any necessary truth; the objects of his willings are never necessary events. Whatever he wills is contingent.

A further plausible assumption about divine willings also supports our conclusion: because he is omnipotent and omniscient, all of God’s willings are effective. That is, whenever God endeavors to do something, whenever he here-and-now-intends to accomplish something, he succeeds. This is not so with humans; one may awaken paralyzed, will to get up, and fail. A

willing can't fail when it is God's because God is omnipotent, uses no breakable body, and knows in advance any means necessary to his end. He won't try to do something, in the present sense, if he sees that a necessary condition for the action fails to obtain. Here, then, is our argument:

A1. Every object of God's willing is contingent.

A2. All of God's willings are effective.

A3. Therefore, all of God's willings are contingent.

In the language of possible worlds, whatever God wills doesn't obtain in some world. But in all worlds where he here-and-now intends an event, that event happens. Thus, in the world where the event doesn't happen, God doesn't will it. Thus, all of God's willings are contingent. This is the kind of willing which is at play in the main argument of this section, so V4 is true. Our argument against V1 goes through.

#### **D. willing = long-term intending**

If a fourth sense, one 'wills' that P just in case one plans or intends long-term that P. In this sense, parents may will that their newborn daughter attend college, and negotiators may will that there be lasting peace in the Middle East. If one wills/intends that P, one may or may not take steps to ensure that P, depending on the circumstances, and what else one wills (in any of our senses here). To will that P in the present sense is to have set up an enduring state of mind, or a long-term mental event, a more or less resolute plan or intention, by means of a will/plan-setting

here-and-now intention. Thus, to will in this sense is to decide/will that something should be so down the road, and then to maintain this set of mind, if need be, through further here-and-now intentions. In this sense, not everything God wills is done; he wills that evildoers repent and reform, and takes steps to make these things possible, but they often do not. God wills that everyone act according to the laws of morality. But does he will that those laws be true? Not in the present sense, for he won't will what he knows is already irrevocably the case.

Could a willing in this sense be necessary? Not if every willing/plan is initially set by a here-and-now intention. (See the argument of section C above.) But perhaps God just has certain plans by his nature. If God necessarily exists, is necessarily perfectly good, necessarily has complete moral knowledge, and necessarily creates a cosmos with rational beings, perhaps he necessarily wills/intends/plans for at least some of them to be happy. Supposing all this to be so, V4 is still true. Further, this wouldn't provide materials for a defensible DCT. On this scheme, it is in no sense up to God what he wills; the plans he has are not something he can control. If the truth of moral principles logically depends on such plans/intentions, then he won't control those either. A main intuition driving DCT is that God must be a moral legislator, able to enact or dismantle moral laws, but on the present scheme, God wouldn't be that at all; he'd be a kind of 'source' of the moral principles, but not an intelligent controller of them. This brings us to our final interpretation of 'willing'.

#### **E. willing = emanating**

Some philosophers conceive of willing as a kind of metaphysical origination without control. We can call this sort of relation between a being and some truth or fact 'emanation'. Under the

influence of neoplatonism, some theists have thought that God willed the existence of the cosmos in this sense. On this sort of view, God doesn't freely will or choose to create the cosmos, but rather the cosmos necessarily 'comes out of' him. There are serious worries about whether this is a theologically acceptable doctrine of creation, but in any case it seems that this sort of willing isn't relevant to DCT. If God 'wills' the necessary moral truths in this sense, he doesn't choose or command that various actions be done or not done, in the manner of an absolute monarch whose decrees are law. Rather, these principles are supposed to be true in some mysterious sense 'because of' him, but not in a voluntary or controlled way.

Suppose that God necessarily exists and is essentially omniscient. On these suppositions, it follows that the proposition *God knows that he exists* is necessary. It is necessary, however, because of the 'prior' truths that *God exists* and *God is essentially omniscient*. Here, there is an intelligible connection between the three truths, with the final one being true *because of* the first one, and this amounts to more than just the first two implying or necessarily implying the third. Even the theory of possible worlds is too crude to capture the difference between the first two and the third. All three are true in all worlds, and yet the third is true precisely because of the first two. To put it another way, the first two truths seems necessary in a different and deeper way than the third.<sup>32</sup> This insight is solid, though hard to account for.

Now compare with the case of God's willing/emanating a moral truth such as *It is morally wrong to torture innocent babies merely for the fun of it*. Suppose that God exists and God is essentially perfectly good and omniscient. In this case, there is no intelligible connection between these truths and the moral principle; we can't 'see' that the principle must be true *precisely and only because of* the other truths. Of course, most would agree that from those truths it logically follows that God disapproves of the said acts of torture. But what is at issue is whether that moral principle is true *just because of* more fundamental necessary truths about

God. It appears there is nothing to be said for this claim.

Some philosophers may reply that God is a mysterious and transcendent being, who is so mind-bogglingly good that we have little if any grasp of his goodness, or of his other essential features. It shouldn't surprise us, then, if we can't see what it is about God that makes it true that it is morally wrong to torture innocent babies merely for the fun of it.<sup>33</sup> In reply, if we grant that God is mysterious to that extent, we render the moral claim in question unsupportable. A conspiracy theorist may posit the existence a secret society pulling the strings behind major world events, and go on to specify that this cabal is so secretive that it never leaves behind significant evidence of its crafty workings. When challenged on the lack of evidence for his claims, he'd say, 'It's no surprise that the evidence is lacking! My theory explicitly says that evidence for the existence and work of this secret society should be lacking.' And this would be perfectly consistent. But it remains that there's no good reason to believe his thesis. Similarly, theists who insist on our inability to comprehend any or most of God's attributes won't be surprised at the lack of intelligible connections between God and moral principles. But then, what kind of evidence could anyone have for the claim that God wills the necessary moral truths? It is hard to see how religious experience or sensory experience would support that claim. A mere appeal to authority won't do. It seems that it must be based, if it is based on anything, on divine revelation, i.e. written scriptures. But generally, one's firm philosophical intuitions such as those discussed in section II.C above guide one's interpretation of scriptures – a uncertain matter at best. And two of these (the independence and variety intuitions) cut directly against any kind of DCT, including the version at hand.

## **F. A defensive point**

We've seen that V4 holds up under scrutiny. But suppose we grant that there is *some* reason to doubt V4. Is there any chance that V1 will turn out to be *more* justified than V4, thus licensing the denial of V4 instead of V1? It appears not, because it's hard to see any motive for holding V1 other than the vague feeling that if it is false, then God's perfection (sovereignty, independence, omnipotence) will be compromised. This worry is a clear case of perfect being theology run amok. Why think that if not all truths depend on the will of God then God's glory or greatness or perfection is thereby lessened? It seems he is subject to the limitations of logical necessity, which is in no way a defect in greatness, perfection, or power. A few recent philosophers have denied this,<sup>34</sup> but the issue is not dark or difficult. Just as it is no limit (in any interesting sense) on his power to be unable to make  $2 + 2$  equal 5, and it is no limit to his knowledge that he doesn't know that  $2 + 2$  equals 5, it is no limit on his power, sovereignty, or moral authority to be unable to make it right to torture innocent babies merely for the fun of it. No doubt some caution is required in saying that *God* cannot do something, but I submit that none of the proposed 'limits' ascribed to him smack of anthropomorphizing or impiety.<sup>35</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In sum, the two attractive arguments for DCT (sections II-III) fail. They conflict with powerful intuitions which together outweigh those driving arguments for DCT. Some theists are driven towards DCT by the belief that God will be irrelevant to ethics if anything but DCT is true, but philosophical insight completely dissolves this worry. Even if DCT is false, then the existence of

God is still highly relevant to ethics in at least four ways. That is, if atheism is not known to be true, then in ethical thinking one must consider the possible relevance of God in several ways. First, because what he desires would be nearly coextensive with what is right (it may also include supererogatory actions), any revelation of his preferences by way of commands would be a guide to what sorts of actions are right. Second, the property of being commanded by God would be one (and an important one) among the many non-moral features of an action which are necessarily connected with its moral features. Third, God would be a legitimate moral authority with respect to us; such a being would have the moral right to command us. According to theistic religions, he has in fact issued commands, which are expressed in revealed laws. Hence fourth, if there are divine laws, these are good laws because most tokens of the action types commanded (forbidden) therein are ‘already’ right (wrong). Should God exist, then, this fact would be highly relevant to theoretical ethics, to say nothing of the practical endeavor of becoming a moral person.<sup>36</sup>

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1. Philip Quinn, ‘Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory’ in *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Janine Idziak (New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1979), pp. 305-25.
  2. Mark Murphy, ‘Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation’, *Faith and Philosophy* 15.1 (1998), pp. 3-27; Philip Quinn, ‘God and Morality’ in *Reason and Responsibility*, 11th ed., ed. by Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), pp. 664-79.
  3. ‘Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again’ in his *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 128-43.
  4. I ignore a number of actual arguments for DCT which I consider obviously wrongheaded, unclear, or unintelligible, or which do not clearly lend any support to DCT. Many such historical arguments are dutifully catalogued by Janine Idziak, ‘In Search of “Good Positive Reasons” for an Ethics of Divine Commands: a Catalogue of Arguments’, *Faith and Philosophy* 6.1 (1989), pp. 47-64, and ‘Divine Command Morality: A Guide to the Literature’ in her *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings*, pp. 1-38. Recent arguments which don’t clearly support DCT are in Philip Quinn, ‘The Primacy of God’s Will in Christian Ethics’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), pp. 503-8, and Robert Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 111-2. I regard as unintelligible claims that God is identical to the property of goodness or rightness. For these, see Norman Kretzmann, ‘Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality’ in *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John M. Cresset* ed. by Donald V. Stump (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1983), pp. 42-6; Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, ‘Being and Goodness’ in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* ed. by Scott MacDonald, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 122-3.
  5. See Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* ed. Sarah Hutton 1996 (Glasgow: Cambridge University Press, [1731] 1996), pp. 9-32; Richard Price, *A Review of the Principle Questions in Morals* ed. D.D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1787] 1974), pp. 13-7, 85-91, 104-13; Joseph Glanvill, ‘A Letter Concerning George Rust’s *A Discourse of Truth*’ [1682], in *Divine Command Morality: Historical and*

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*Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Janine Idziak (New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1979), pp. 189-90. Joseph Glanvill, *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (London: John Baker, 1675), p. 21; Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation in British Moralists 1650-1800* [1728], ed. by D.D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), pp. 192-207. A nice catalogue of historically and recently popular objections - some of which in my view work - is given in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* pp. 13-21.

6. Richard Taylor, 'Action and Responsibility' in *Action Theory* ed. by Miles Brand and Douglas Walton (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), p. 296. Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651], in *British Moralists 1650-1800*, p. 38; Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, p. 13. Somewhat non-standardly, I am using 'right' in this paper for acts one is obligated to perform.
7. Cf. the weaker argument by analogy in Idziak, 'In Search of "Good Positive Reasons"' p. 56 and Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* II.1 q. 100 a. 8 obj. 2.
8. Taylor, 'Action and Responsibility' pp. 295-9. The classic sources for such distinctions are Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* II.26 and John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* II.28.4-19.
9. Taylor, 'Action and Responsibility' p. 304. In a similar vein, John Mackie says

...the requirements of morality go beyond what any human authority demands of us, and they sometimes require us to resist all human authorities... They must therefore be commands of some more than human, and hence supernatural, authority. (*The Miracle of Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 102.)

10. Taylor, 'Action and Responsibility' pp. 306-7.
11. Further, something like L4 underlies some arguments for other 'divine command theories', according to which L4 is true, but the property of being right is not identical to the property of being commanded by God.
12. Taylor offers feeble support for L1 in his *Good and Evil: A New Direction* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 67-8. (In 'Action and Responsibility' he merely asserts it.) Peter Forrest makes a beautifully clear case for DCT which depends crucially on a similar premise, what he calls the 'Extrinsic Value Thesis': the claim that no actions have their moral qualities intrinsically. ('An Argument for the Divine Command Theory of Right Action', *Sophia* 28 (1989), p. 8) Like Taylor, he offers little in support of that claim.
13. A DCT which identifies rightness with being willed by God faces a difficulty not shared by a DCT involving God's commands. Presumably, God wills the performance of some supererogatory actions. But these by definition are not right, not morally obligatory. Thus one cannot identify being morally obligatory with being willed by God, because some actions are willed but not obligatory
14. I thank Dave Estlund for pointing out this large third class of cases to me. Contrary to Robert Adams ('Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again', p. 140), it does not seem that the commander would have to possess the general quality of being loving in order for his commands to be binding. A commander might be quite unloving, and yet both have the right to command and command rightly or neutrally. Hence it will not do to identify wrongness with being forbidden by a loving God. (*ibid.*)
15. This tack is taken by William Alston, 'Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theories', in his *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 256-65. Ockham also claims that God has no obligations. (*On the Four Books of the Sentences* II. q. 19 in Idziak 1979, p. 57.)
16. 'Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theories', p. 265.
17. For example: Genesis 17:19; Deuteronomy 7:9; Joshua 23:14; Ezekiel 16:8, 59-60; Daniel 9:4-14.
18. E.g. Jeremiah 31:32; Ezekiel 16.
19. 'Suggestions', pp. 262-4.
20. See Carlton Fisher, 'Because God Says So' in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 360-4 for a good account of such a view. A similar dilemma will arise if we replace 'commands' with 'wills'.
21. 'Suggestions', p. 269.
22. 'Suggestions', pp. 270-1.
23. 'Suggestions' p. 271.
24. It may be that the wrongness supervenes on the badness. So the appeal to badness may be a more ultimate explanation than the appeal to wrongness.
25. For a good summary of why one should think there are such truths, see Robert Adams' 'Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again' in his *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 133ff.

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26. More formally, using A for the set of moral properties and B for the set of non-moral properties: ‘ $\Box(\forall F \text{ in } A) (\forall x) [Fx \supset (\exists G \text{ in } B)(Gx \wedge \Box(\forall y)(Gy \supset Fy))]$ ’. (James Dreier, ‘The Supervenience Argument Against Moral Realism’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30.3 (1992), p. 14) Dreier points out that this can be a metaphysical or a conceptual claim, depending on whether one interprets the second box as expressing metaphysical (what others call ‘broadly logical’) or analytic necessity. (*ibid.* p. 15.) I endorse the principle reading broadly logical or metaphysical necessity for both boxes. While I endorse the strong supervenience thesis, I am not sure whether or not the non-moral properties also strongly supervene on the moral ones! If there are an enormous number of ways that actions can be right then it may be that necessarily for every (super-specific) moral property, there is a set of non-moral properties such that necessarily, whatever has the moral property has the non-moral ones. In sum, I am not interested in whether one set of properties is more primary than the other or is reducible to the other. I am only insisting, in the tradition of ethical rationalism, that there are some discoverable necessary connections between moral and non-moral properties. (cf. Clarke’s *Discourse* p. 226)
27. I thank Edward Wierenga for raising this objection in correspondence. I would attribute the simplicity of many moral theories to our practical goal of finding a simple to apply method of separating right from wrong actions. This desire pushes us to formulate simple criteria for deciding the moral status of actions, and it is in tension with our theoretical aim of discovery what sorts of things make right actions right and wrong actions wrong.
28. Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* pp. 23-4. See Price, *Review* pp. 85-6 and Quinn, ‘The Primacy of God’s Will in Christian Ethics’ pp. 496-9, for serious theological difficulties that immediately arise from this claim.
29. The following argument is inspired by a similar argument in James Van Cleve, ‘Descartes and the Destruction of the Eternal Truths’, *Ratio* 7 (1994) pp. 58-62.
30. It is easy to see the validity of the argument formally:

- V1.  $\Box \forall p (p \supset W(g,p))$
- V2.  $\Box p$
- V3.  $\Box W(g,p)$
- V4.  $\forall a (W(g,a) \supset \Diamond \neg W(g,a))$
- V5.  $W(g,p)$
- V6.  $\Diamond \neg W(g,a)$
- V7.  $\neg \Diamond \neg W(g,a)$

31. This tradition derives from Aristotle, and is prominent in medieval Christian philosophy. In the latter, ‘The will itself was defined as the rational appetite, or the desire for the good apprehended by reason, and not in terms of a capacity for choosing between alternatives.’ (J.B. Korolec, ‘Free Will and Free Choice’ in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, et. al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 630.
32. It seems there is a parallel among truths to Aquinas’ distinction between beings which are necessary through themselves and necessary through another. (*Summa Theologiae*, I. q2, a3, resp. 3 [his ‘third way’])
33. My thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting this objection.
34. Thomas Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) and Christopher Menzel, ‘Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics’, in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 208-29.
35. One final note about divine independence: it is important to see, as eighteenth-century opponents of DCT did, that DCT neither implies nor is implied by either the doctrine of theistic Platonism, or its denial. As Price observes, ‘It by no means follows, because [necessary truths] are independent of [God’s] will, that they are also independent of his nature.’ (Price, *Review* p. 87) In particular, one may deny DCT and yet be a theistic Platonist who holds that all propositions (or all abstract things) are God’s thoughts, or that they all metaphysically depend on his nature in some way. (See Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* I.3 pp. 26-7 and Price, *Review* pp. 85-91, 293.)
36. My thanks to Mark Case, James Dreier, David Estlund, Neil Feit, Peter Forrest, Stephen Kershner, Michael Levine, David Matheson, Philip Quinn, Richard Swinburne, James Van Cleve, Edward Wierenga, and an audience at the Society of Christian Philosophers Eastern Regional Meeting for their helpful comments on various drafts of this paper.