

24.231 Ethics – Handout 1 Plato, “The Euthyphro”

I. Plato’s Dialogue

Plato’s Question:

What is it to be pious?

- He is not looking for a list of things that are pious
- He is not looking for a property that (even all) pious things have.

Euthyphro’s (best?) answer:

To be pious is to be loved by all the gods.

Plato’s Argument against Euthyphro’s answer:

Perhaps all and only those things/actions that are loved by the gods are pious. But why is that? Are pious things loved by the gods because they are pious, or are they pious because they are loved by the gods?

☞ Socrates and Euthyphro agree that they must be loved by the gods *because* they are pious.

But, says Socrates, in that case, being pious cannot be the same thing as being god-beloved. Because something that is god-beloved is so *because* it is loved by the gods. But something that is pious isn’t so *because* it is loved by the gods; rather, it is loved by the gods *because* it is pious. Being loved by the gods *causes* god-belovedness, but being loved by the gods *does not cause* piety. So god-belovedness and piety cannot be the same thing.

(This kind of argument will be relevant again in the selection from Moore that we’re reading for Wednesday.)

II. The “Euthyphro Problem”

Socrates’ question about whether what’s loved by the gods is pious because it is loved by them, or loved by them because it is pious, forms the lynchpin of an important contemporary debate about what moral philosophers call “Divine Command Theory.”

According to DCT, morally good actions are good *because* they are commanded by God. But this invites a question: Why does God command those actions?

One answer (Socrates’s) is that God commands them *because* they are good. But if this is so, DCT must be wrong, because then there must be an independent standard of goodness that God uses to decide which actions are good.

But what if we instead say that there is no such independent standard – that God's will determines which actions are good: the good ones are good *because* he has commanded them?

This answer avoids the problem of the independent standard. But it seems to invite three new problems:

(1) The problem of *arbitrariness*:

Since, according to this answer, God can't be deciding what to command on the basis of what is morally good (since this has yet to be determined), his decision seems *arbitrary* – we might worry he's commanding on a whim. But in general, commands issued on a whim and for no good reason do not generate moral obligations. Why think we have reason to follow the arbitrary commands of a whimsical God?

(2) The problem of *triviality*:

We might be tempted to say that God wills as he does because he is good. But if, as DCT claims, God's will is the source of goodness, to say God is good-willed is just to say that God's will is as he wills it to be. But that seems (at least close to) tautologous – it seems like an empty claim. And we would have thought that divine command theorists intended to say something more substantive than this when they called God good-willed... (But it's worth noting the claim that God's will is as he wills it to be is not quite a tautology...)

(3) The problem of *abhorrent commands*:

If God's will determines what actions are good, and there are no independent moral standards guiding God's choice of what to command, then DCT seems to entail that God could have commanded us to rape, murder, and pillage, and then those actions would have been good. But that seems clearly false – those actions, surely, could never have been good.

Relatedly, it seems like once we fix all of an action's "natural" properties – how much pain it causes, and who commits it, and why, and when, and whether any promises were broken, etc., that should be enough to determine its moral properties: whether or not it's good. It doesn't seem like a good action might have had all the same natural properties but might not have been good. But DCT seems to contradict this: DCT suggests that had God willed differently, the same action that is in fact good might have been bad, despite having all of the same natural properties.

Replies: The proposal that God doesn't command according to an independent moral standard needn't entail his commands are arbitrary – e.g., perhaps he commands as he does out of love; and a loving God might not have been capable of issuing abhorrent commands. And perhaps a divine command theorist could hold that if God had not been loving, his commands would not have given rise to moral obligations...? (But why think this, if not because we think only a loving God's commands would live up to independent standards of goodness?)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM CONTEMPORARY DEBATES
IN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
MICHAEL L. PETERSON &
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Is Morality Based on God's Commands?

This set of essays considers two major theistic views on the relation between God and morality. The first view, endorsed by Janine Marie Idziak, is known as the "divine command theory." It answers the above question affirmatively: an act is morally right because God commands it and morally wrong because God forbids it. Craig Boyd and Raymond VanArragon defend a view known as the "natural law theory." It answers the question negatively: human nature determines what is right or wrong so that, roughly, an act is morally right because it helps to fulfill human nature and morally wrong because it prevents this fulfillment. Idziak and Boyd and VanArragon draw out their theories and define them against popular objections.

Divine Commands Are the Foundation of Morality

Janine Marie Idziak

In Plato's *Euthyphro* Socrates raises the question, "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?"¹ This question is the beginning of a debate among philosophers and theologians about the *foundation of morality*. Is an action right (or wrong) because God commands or prohibits it, or does God command (or prohibit) the action because it is already right (or wrong)?

1. In Janine Marie Idziak (ed.), *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1980), p. 41.

A divine command ethicist takes the position that the standard of right and wrong is the commands and prohibitions of God. According to the divine command theory [DCT], "an action or kind of action is right or wrong if and only if and because it is commanded or forbidden by God."² This ethical theory maintains that "what ultimately makes an action right or wrong is its being commanded or forbidden by God and nothing else."³ An ethics of divine commands is frequently expressed in terms of right and wrong being determined by the *will of God*.

While divine command ethics bases morality on *God*, an alternative approach to ethics bases right and wrong on *human nature*. This is natural law ethics. According to natural law theory, the basic principles of morals are objective, accessible to reason, and based on human nature.⁴ An action is right if it serves to fulfill human nature, and wrong if it goes against human nature.⁵ Our human nature includes various inclinations and tendencies. The task of reason is "to discover, sort out, and order these inclinations in accord with appropriate human fulfillment."⁶ This essay will present the case that an ethics of divine commands provides a more plausible account of the foundation of morality than does natural law theory. It will do this by setting out a wide range of arguments providing positive support for the divine command theory, drawing comparisons with natural law theory. Several objections against the divine command position of particular appeal to natural law ethicists will also be answered.

1 Arguments for Divine Command Ethics

In the history of divine command ethics, formal arguments in support of this ethical theory are presented which draw from the realm of metaphysics. Various philosopher and theologians from the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Puritan era invoke the concept of God as *first and uncaused cause* in defense of an ethics of divine commands. One example is the Puritan theologian John Preston, who reasoned in the following way. God is the first cause. God's status as *first cause* implies that God is *uncaused*: that is, that God cannot be causally affected by anything. If God were to choose something because God perceived it to possess goodness or justice, then God would be causally affected by something external to himself, which is impossible. Therefore, it is not the case that God wills something because it is good or just; rather something is good or just because God wills it.⁷

In the Middle Ages, Peter of Ailly took the familiar cosmological argument for the existence of God and constructed an analogue of it supporting an ethics of divine commands. "Just as the divine will is the first efficient cause in the class of efficient

2. W. K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 28.

3. *Ibid.*

4. D. J. O'Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 57.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-73.

6. Edward Collins Vasek, SJ, "Divine-Command, Natural-Law, and Mutual-Love Ethics," *Theologic Studies*, 57 (1996), pp. 633-53: p. 639.

7. Janine Marie Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: Catalogue of Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), pp. 47-64: pp. 48-51.

cause," so, Ailly contends, "in the class of obligatory law, it is the first law or rule."⁸ Another medieval philosophical theologian, Andrew of Neufchateau, constructed an argument in support of the divine command position which draws an analogy between the metaphysical notion of God as "first being" and the ethical notion of God as "first good."⁹

These types of arguments in defense of an ethics of divine commands may leave the impression that this ethical theory belongs to the "God of the philosophers." However, divine command ethics has a solid foundation in the life of the religious faith community.

A biblical basis has been claimed for an ethics of divine commands. The twentieth-century theologian Emil Brunner remarks that the search for the basis of the Good "led us out of a eudaemonistic and anthropocentric definition of the Good — away from the Aristotelian and Thomist conception [that the Good is that which is adapted to human nature] — back to the truth of the Bible, namely, that only that which God wills is good; and that we are to will what God wills, because He wills it."¹⁰ The same position is articulated by another twentieth-century Protestant theologian, Carl F. H. Henry: "This notion of an 'intrinsic good' is alien to biblical theology. The God of Hebrew-Christian revelation is the ground of ethics. He is the supreme rule of right. He defines the whole content of morality by his own revealed will."¹¹ Like Brunner, Henry contrasts biblical ethics with the natural law tradition: "The good in Hebrew-Christian theistic ethics is not that which is adapted to human nature, but it is that to which the Creator obliges human nature."¹²

Exactly what in the Bible serves as a grounding for an ethics of divine commands? In the Old Testament there are cases in which holy people perform actions which are normally regarded as morally wrong. These include Abraham preparing to kill Isaac, the Israelites despoiling (i.e., stealing from) the Egyptians on their way out of Egypt, the prophet Hosea committing adultery by taking a "wife of fornication," Samson killing himself, Jacob lying to deceive his father, the Israelites divorcing foreign wives, and the patriarchs engaging in polygamy. These are cases in which the action violates a prohibition laid down by God himself in the Ten Commandments, yet is performed *under a divine command* and is not considered morally wrong.¹³ The most straightforward interpretation of these cases is to conclude that "divine commands can and do determine the moral status of actions."¹⁴ Indeed, in commenting on these biblical cases, the fourteenth-century divine command ethicist Andrew of Neufchateau describes them as "actions which, known *per se* by the law of nature and by the dictate

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁰ Brunner, in Idziak (ed.), *Divine Command Morality*, p. 137.

¹¹ Henry, in *ibid.*, pp. 143-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹³ Andrew of Neufchateau, OFM, *Questions on an Ethics of Divine Commands*, ed. and tr. Janine Marie Idziak (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. xxii, 91; Philip L. Quinn, "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50 (1990, suppl.), pp. 345-65; pp. 354-9; *idem*, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," in James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 6: *Ethics* (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1992), pp. 499-503.

¹⁴ Quinn, "Primacy of God's Will," p. 501.

of natural reason, appear to be prohibited," contending that "it is possible that such actions not be sins with respect to the absolute power of God."¹⁵

Grounding for an ethics of divine commands can also be found in the New Testament. The contemporary philosopher Philip Quinn finds such a foundation in the well-known command of Jesus to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself:

The love of neighbor of which Jesus speaks is unnatural for humans in their present condition. It does not spontaneously engage their affections, and so training, self-discipline and, perhaps, even divine assistance are required to make its achievement a real possibility. For most of us most of the time, love of neighbor is not an attractive goal, and, if it were optional, we would not pursue it. It must therefore be an obligatory love with the feel of something that represents a curb or check on our natural desires and predilections. Because the divine command conception holds that all obligations depend on God's will, such an obligatory love is properly represented as subject to being commanded by a divine lawgiver. It is, then, no accident that the love of neighbor the Gospels propose to us is a commanded love.¹⁶

Natural law ethicists base rightness and wrongness on human nature. Quinn essentially makes the point that the obligation to love all other people as we love ourselves (an obligation which natural law ethicists in the Christian tradition would not deny) does not seem to be derivable from our human nature. Quinn describes the love of neighbor which Jesus commands as "unnatural" for humans in their present condition, as something which does not spontaneously engage our affections, as something that represents a curb on our "natural desires and predilections." Since not all people "are alike in erotic attractiveness" to us, "nor are they all equal with respect to the charms of a virtuous character," Quinn infers that "a nondiscriminatory love of all alike is bound to go against the grain of our natural affections and their partialities." What is the case is that "it is God's will, made known to us by Jesus, that we humans love one another in this manner." In other words, Christians "seem to be committed to the view that the obligation to love the neighbor as oneself is a duty imposed by a direct divine command." And since "this commanded love is foundational for Christian ethics" and "what sets Christian ethics apart from all its rivals," Quinn proposes that we "find in what is most distinctive about the Christian ethics of the Gospels another reason for Christians to favor a divine command conception of moral obligation."¹⁷

When defining an ethics of divine commands, we stated that it is often expressed in terms of right and wrong being determined by the will of God. Down to the present day, conformity to the will of God is an important theme in Western spirituality. Hubert van Zeller, a monk at Downside Abbey in England, begins a book of popular spirituality with these words:

There can hardly be a better practice in the spiritual life than that of meeting everything as an expression of the will of God. Phrases like 'if God wills' and 'it must be the will

¹⁵ Andrew of Neufchateau, *Questions on an Ethics of Divine Commands*, p. 91; italics added.

¹⁶ Quinn, "Primacy of God's Will," p. 504.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 506-7.

2 Critique of Natural Law Ethics

Natural law theory has been the dominant ethical tradition in Roman Catholicism. A criticism of natural law ethics which has come from the Protestant tradition is that "natural law is unbiblical."²⁵ Hence, the biblical bases we have found for an ethics of divine commands seem to provide an argument in favor of this theory in opposition to natural law ethics. However, natural law theorists might well retort that a biblical basis can likewise be found for their ethical system. They might cite Paul's letter to the Romans (especially 2:14), which speaks of persons who have not heard of the revealed law of God being "led by reason to do what the Law commands" and of a law "engraved on their hearts." Or again, they might point to the work of contemporary theologians like Josef Fuchs, who takes up the biblical concept of the *imago Dei* (that is, of human beings being made in the *image of God*) and incorporates it into natural law theory.²⁶ Thus, if a decisive case is to be made in favor of an ethics of divine commands, we must inquire further. Are there additional types of arguments which can be offered in support of an ethics of divine commands? Can we find any ways in which an ethics of divine commands is clearly superior to natural law theory?

Divine command ethics can be defended on the grounds that it follows from certain beliefs we have about God's nature and status and about the character of the relationship between God and human beings. John Locke saw following divine commands as a correlate of our dependency on God as *creator*. According to Locke, "it is proper that we should live according to the precept of His [God's] will" because "we owe our body, soul, and life — whatever we are, whatever we have, and even whatever we can be — to Him and to Him alone."²⁷ Since "God has created us out of nothing and, if He pleases, will reduce us again to nothing," we are, Locke proposes, "subject to Him in perfect justice and by utmost necessity."²⁸

Moreover, theists regard God as *sovereign* over all. There cannot be anything which is independent of God, to which God might be subject and which would constitute a limitation on God.²⁹ God's dominion over the contingent has long been recognized. Everything which is contingent "depends on God's power for its existence whenever it exists."³⁰ Some philosophers have recently gone even further, to argue that necessary truths also depend on God.³¹ An ethics of divine commands rightly extends God's sovereignty to the moral realm.³² Indeed, "when human beings stake a claim to the independent validity of moral law, they deny God's supremacy as the only King and the only worthy object of devotion."³³

25 James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 103.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-3.

27 Locke, in *Idzikak, Divine Command Morality*, p. 182.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Idzikak, Divine Command Morality*, p. 9.

30 Quinn, "Primacy of God's Will," p. 495.

31 Quinn, "Recent Revival," pp. 359-61; *idem*, "Primacy of God's Will," pp. 495-7.

32 Quinn, "Recent Revival," pp. 361-3; *idem*, "Primacy of God's Will," pp. 497-8.

33 Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, "Divine Command Morality and Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 23 (1995), pp. 39-67; p. 41.

of God' and 'may God's will go with you' come naturally to the devout. People in certain traditions of Christian life say these things all day long and mean them. *God's will becomes for them the standard of everyday decisions* and the background against which life happens. Nothing furthers the supernatural point of view so effectively as the cultivation of such a habit. It can be seen as an extension of the *Our Father*, as an identification with the disposition of Christ, as the application of 'I came not to do my own will but the will of my Father who is in heaven' to our own human concerns. It can be made to sum up the whole of our Christian service.¹⁸

Van Zeller goes on to say that "the merit attaching to any work is measured solely by its conformity to the will of God."¹⁹ "I pledge myself wholly to the will of God" is the "attitude of mind which you would expect to find in a saint."²⁰ "The highest thing a human will can do," van Zeller claims, "is freely to will God's will."²¹ In sum, an ethics of divine commands can be defended as the *philosophical formalization of an important theme of the spiritual life: namely, conformity to the divine will*.

Furthermore, this kind of spirituality is itself *biblically grounded*. Van Zeller calls our attention to the Psalms: "In the head of the book it is written of me," he says in the thirty-ninth psalm, 'that I should do your will. O my God, I have desired it, and to have your law in the midst of my heart.'²² Or again, we find "in the 142nd Psalm: 'Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.'²³ Van Zeller traces the theme of doing God's will through the New Testament gospels and epistles:

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; Christ explains when pointing out that a tree is judged by its fruits, 'but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.' . . . Again there is that vivid scene given by St. Mark which shows our Lord so pressed with his work of preaching that Mary and some of his relations have to send messages to say they would like to speak to him: 'Who is my mother and my brethren? . . . whosoever shall do the will of God, he is my brother and my sister and my mother.'

We could go through the epistles, combing them for references to the necessity for surrender to the Father's will. 'He who does the will of God,' says St. John, 'abides for ever.' That doing the will of God, we read in Hebrews, 'you may receive the promise.' St. Paul to the Romans: 'Be not conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God.' 'Not serving the eye,' St. Paul warns the Ephesians, 'but as servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart.' He tells the Colossians how Epaphras is constantly praying for them that they 'may stand perfect and full in all the will of God.'²⁴

Thus we have found yet another biblical grounding for an ethics of divine commands in the biblical theme of *doing the will of God*.

18 Dom Hubert van Zeller, *The Will of God in Other Words* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1964), p. 7; italics added.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10.

Concomitantly, an ethics of divine commands satisfies the religious requirement that God be the supreme focus of our loyalties. As Robert Merrihew Adams has pointed out, "If our supreme commitment in life is to doing what is right just because it is right, and if what is right is right just because God wills or commands it, then surely our highest allegiance is to God."³⁴

In basing ethics on a human nature common to all people and in using the human faculty of reason to discern ethical principles, natural law theory seems able to address "all people of good will" independently of the particularities of the various religious traditions.³⁵ Such universality would seem to be an advantage of the natural law approach to ethics. On the other hand, the anthropocentric focus of natural law ethics leaves open the possibility of *doing ethics without any reference to God*. This criticism has been forcefully stated by the contemporary ethicist Edward Collins Vaccek, SJ:

When Aquinas wrote, in an oft cited line, "We do not offend God except by doing something contrary to our own good," he himself opened the possibility of making our relationship with God superfluous for doing ethics. If the religious question of "offending God" depends on the prior moral question of "our own good," then the moral question may be settled independently. . . . Natural-law ethics can proceed under a rubric of "methodological atheism."³⁶

Doing ethics in complete independence of God cannot be a satisfactory option for a theist. Such a stance ignores the centrality that God is supposed to have in the life of a theist. It fails to recognize God's sovereignty over all realms and flies in the face of the religious belief that God should be the supreme focus of human loyalties.

3 Criticisms of Divine Command Ethics Answered

On the other hand, divine command ethics has not gone without criticism from natural law theorists. For one thing, "natural-law ethicists criticize divine-command theory for distorting . . . the idea of God." Vaccek continues:

The intention behind this theory, as John Mahoney explains, is "to glorify the transcendence and majesty of God, and his supreme freedom of activity." The consequence, as John Reeder observes, has been that this voluntaristic theory "too radically separates God from his own creation." The idea of God behind this theory seems closer to that of an Oriental potentate issuing edicts accompanied by promises and threats than to that of a person who so loved the world as to become incarnate.³⁷

This view of the divine command position is contradicted by the work of the twentieth-century theologian and divine command ethicist Karl Barth. Barth explic-

34 Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John F. Reeder, Jr. (eds), *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), pp. 318-47; p. 334.

35 Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, pp. 61-2; Vaccek, "Divine-Command," pp. 640-1.

36 Vaccek, "Divine-Command," pp. 640-1.

37 Ibid., pp. 639-40.

itly rejects the divine-power as an adequate basis for adherence to divine commands ethics,³⁸ and grounds the divine command position in *God's graciousness to us in Jesus Christ*. According to Barth, the basis of God's ethical claim on us lies in the fact that "God has given us Himself." In other words, it lies in the fact that "although He [God] could be without us - He did not and does not will to be without us"; in the fact that "He has taken our place and taken up our cause."³⁹ In sum, taking divine commands as defining what we ought to do is the fitting response to the way in which God has first reached out to us.

A frequent criticism of the divine command theory is that morality becomes an *arbitrary and capricious enterprise* if right and wrong are determined solely by God's commands or will. A corollary of this line of criticism is that God could will or command actions which intuitively seem abhorrent and wrong to us but which would have to be considered right because of the divine edict. These concerns about an ethics of divine commands have been voiced by the popular spiritual writer C. S. Lewis:

To make this position perfectly clear, one of them even said that though God has, as it happens, commanded us to love Him and one another, He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one another, and hatred would then have been right. It was apparently a mere toss-up which he decided to do. Such a view in effect makes God a mere arbitrary tyrant.⁴⁰

The contemporary philosopher Robert Burch has articulated the problem in the following way:

One [objection] claims that theories like DCT make morality merely an arbitrary and capricious matter. For such theories seem to imply that anything whatsoever might be morally good if only it be willed by God. . . . Yet it is absurd, so the objection goes, to hold that such actions as the gratuitous infliction of pain, the breach of promise for no reason, and the termination of the life or freedom of the innocent are possibly morally good; and even God's willing could not make them so.⁴¹

A natural law ethicist might here claim superiority for his theory over an ethics of divine commands. On the natural law scheme there can be no question of arbitrariness, since rightness is determined on the basis of what is in accord with human nature and serves to fulfill it. Furthermore, the requirement of consistency with human nature would seem to preclude certain types of actions (for example, the gratuitous infliction of pain) from ever being considered morally right.

Divine command ethicists have developed several different replies to this line of criticism. In addressing the first objection, one approach takes issue with the idea that there is something reprehensible about making determinations through the will alone,

38 Barth, in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, pp. 126-7.

39 Ibid., p. 130.

40 Quoted in James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar, "What Enthyphro Couldn't Have Said," *Faith and Philosophy*, 4 (1987), pp. 241-61, at p. 243.

41 Robert Burch, "Objective Values and the Divine Command Theory of Morality," *New Scholasticism*, 54 (1980), pp. 279-304; p. 289.

as the words "arbitrary" and "capricious" imply. In the Middle Ages the divine command ethicist Andrew of Neufchateau took over from Thomas Bradwardine descriptions of cases in which human beings perform just actions stemming not from a decision of reason, but from a sheer choice of will. Suppose, for example, that John has been given the power to pardon one, and only one, of two persons placed under a death sentence. Suppose further that no relevant differences can be found between the two condemned persons. In such a case, there is no better reason for pardoning the one than for pardoning the other. However, John justly frees the one whom he chooses to pardon, although reason did not move his will to make this choice. And from the very fact that John wills to free this particular one, the act of freeing him is just. The same sort of situation occurs when someone is in a position to bestow some gift or benefit on only one of two or more persons who are equally worthy of receiving it. The point of these cases is that, since we allow that justness can stem from sheer will in the case of human beings, there is surely nothing inappropriate or reprehensible about the same thing occurring in the case of the divine will.⁴²

Another, very different type of reply to the first objection coming from medieval philosophical theology invokes the concept of the divine *simplicity*. Most basically, simplicity means that there are no parts distinguishable in God. Thus intellect and will are not separate faculties in God, as they are in human beings. Hence, when God wills something to be right (as the divine command ethicist claims), God's reason is also operating. Recognizing this takes away the sense of arbitrariness alleged to characterize the divine command theory. Heiko Oberman has developed this line of defense in his book on the medieval theologian and divine command ethicist Gabriel Biel:

At this point, however, we must remember Boethius's defense of Occam . . . : the set order is for the *Venerabilis Inceptor* by no means a product solely of God's will; will and intellect are two different names for God's essence. This defense appears to be applicable also to Biel. Against the Thomistic emphasis on the priority of God's intellect, the priority of God's will is not stressed as much as the simplicity of God's being and the resulting unity of his intellect and essence. As the simplicity of God's being also implies a unity of essence and will, God's very essence guarantees the unbreakable relation and cooperation of intellect and will in God's *opera ad extra*. . . . Biel constantly tries to make clear that, whereas the will of God is the immediate cause of every act, these acts are certainly no arbitrary products of God's will alone. On the contrary, God's will operates according to God's essential wisdom, though this may be hidden from man.⁴³

A third type of reply addresses both of the aforementioned objections. It consists in pointing out that what God wills and commands will be *consonant with and directed by God's nature and character*. God is "defined as perfect in knowledge, justice and love," and God will "by definition will in accord with these several attributes."⁴⁴ This means, first of all, that the commands of God in establishing moral right and wrong

⁴² Andrew of Neufchateau, *Questions on an Ethics of Divine Commands*, p. xvii.

⁴³ Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, *Divine Command Morality*, 1963), pp. 98-9.

⁴⁴ Brown, in Idiaz, *Divine Command Morality*, p. 250.

will be anything but arbitrary and capricious.⁴⁵ Second, if God wills in accord with the divine nature as *loving*, this means that God will not in fact command such acts as the gratuitous infliction of pain. Hence, God commanding such intuitively abhorrent and immoral actions reduces to a mere theoretical possibility which will never in fact be realized and, consequently, which need not trouble the divine command ethicist.⁴⁶

4 Conclusion

In sum, what can be said in favor of adopting an ethics of divine commands as our account of the foundation of morality? First, an ethics of divine commands is biblically based. There are incidents recorded in the Old Testament in which an action normally regarded as immoral is made the right thing to do by a divine command. In the New Testament the central prescription to love our neighbor as we love ourselves goes against our natural inclinations and seems to be a duty imposed on us by a direct divine command.⁴⁷ Further, an ethics of divine commands is grounded in the biblical theme of doing the will of God. Concomitantly, conformity to the will of God is an important theme in Western spirituality. In these respects an ethics of divine commands, as a theory of philosophical ethics, reflects the life and experience of the religious faith community.

An ethics of divine commands follows from beliefs we have about God's nature and status and from the character of the relationship between God and human beings. Specifically, it is related to our dependence on God as creator, to God's sovereignty over all, and to the religious requirement that God be the supreme focus of our loyalties.

Unlike natural law theory, an ethics of divine commands does not suffer from the defect of methodological atheism — that is, of making it possible to do ethics without any reference to God. Further, it is inaccurate to denigrate an ethics of divine commands on the grounds that it distorts our concept of God and makes morality arbitrary and capricious. It is likewise incorrect to portray an ethics of divine commands as entailing that intuitively abhorrent acts could be made the morally right thing to do by God. The beneficent and loving God who does the commanding would simply not give such commands.

Ethics Is Based on Natural Law

Craig A. Boyd and Raymond J. VanArragon

Most theists believe that God commands us to perform certain acts and forbids us from performing others. Those acts that God commands us to perform are morally

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 250-1.

⁴⁶ Adams, "Modified Divine Command Theory," pp. 320-4.