

human conscience. How obtuse that conscience can be, even when illumined by revelation, is startlingly illustrated by the long centuries in which Christianity tolerated the institution of slavery. In view of the constant tendency of man to exploit his fellow men and use them as the instruments of his greed and selfishness, two things are certain. First, that the Scriptural revelation of the innate inalienable dignity and value of the individual is an indispensable bulwark of human freedom and growth. And second, that our knowledge of the implication of this revelation is far indeed from being perfect; there is constant need for further refinement of our moral perceptions, a refinement which can only emerge as the fruit of a deeper penetration of the Gospel of God's love into human life and thought.

Another illustration of the effect of Scripture upon ethics is given by the surrender of the principle of exact retribution in favor of the principle of mercy. Natural justice would seem to require exact retributive punishment, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The codes of primitive peoples, and the long history of blood feuds show how the human conscience has approved of this concept. The revelation of the divine love and the explicit teaching of the Son of God have demonstrated the superiority of mercy, and have pointed the proper role of punishment as correction and not vengeance. Because of the revelation that in God justice is never unaccompanied by mercy, in Christian ethics there has always been an emphasis on the patient endurance of wrongs in imitation of Calvary, and on the suppression of all emotions of vindictive anger. As a means to soften human relations, as a restraint of human anger and cruelty, so easily disguised under the cloak of justice, the history of the world has nothing to show comparable to this Christian emphasis on patience and mercy, this insistence that even the just satisfaction of our wrongs yields to the divine example of forbearance. We are to be content with the reform or at least the restraint of the evil-doer, never to seek or demand vengeance.

DOES MORALITY DEPEND ON GOD'S COMMANDS?

Mark Timmons

*Mark Timmons is professor of philosophy at the University of Arizona and author of *Morality without Foundations* (1999) and *Moral Theory: An Introduction* (2002). In this selection, Timmons first presents a version of the divine command theory and then, after evaluating various arguments in favor of the theory, he raises what has come to be called the Euthyphro Dilemma. This dilemma, which confronts theists, concerns the relationship between morality and God's commands. Either morality depends on God's commands or it does not. As Timmons explains, the dilemma for the theist is that both options involve having to sacrifice certain theistic claims about the nature of God. Timmons goes on to explain how the dilemma can be avoided, but its avoidance requires rejection of the divine command theory.*

According to the Christian, the commandment to love our neighbor is right not in virtue of the fact that God requires it; God requires it in virtue of the fact that it is naturally right.

—FRANZ BRENTANO¹

In the minds of many people, there is a deep connection between morality and religion. Historically, of course, religious world-views contain a moral outlook as part of an overall vision of the place and purpose of human beings in the world. People brought up in a religious community thus come to associate morality with religion. In addition to the historical connection between morality and religion, there are other possible connections between them that are worthy of consideration but are often not distinguished.² In this chapter, we are primarily interested in a particular way in which morality has been thought to depend on religion, or more precisely, on the commands of God. The thought, central to the divine command moral theory, is that morality itself—what is right and wrong, good and bad—depends on God's commands. It is God's act of commanding that we avoid certain types of action that *makes* those actions wrong, and so forth for other moral concepts.³

The Theory

Let us focus for the time being on the theory of right action—that branch of moral theory that concerns the nature of right and wrong action. The main idea is that what makes an action right or wrong depends on (and thus can be expressed in terms of) God's commands. Theologian Robert C. Mortimer explains the view this way:

From the doctrine of God as Creator and source of all that is, it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is, still less because it seems to be expedient. It is right because God commands it. This means that there is a real distinction between right and wrong that is independent of what we happen to think. It is rooted in the nature and will of God (8/36).⁴

Mortimer mentions the rightness of actions being based on God's commands (by which he means an action's being obligatory), but all the other moral categories can be similarly characterized. In order to focus on the divine command theory, it will help if we express the essentials of the theory in terms of a set of basic principles.

Theory of Right Conduct

An action A is *obligatory* if and only if God commands that we A.

An action A is *forbidden* (*wrong*) if and only if God commands that we not A.

An action *A* is *optional* if and only if it is not the case that God commands that we *A* (thus, not obligatory), and it is not the case that God commands that we not *A* (thus, not forbidden). Less clumsily: if and only if God neither commands that we *A* nor that we not *A*.

Turning for a moment to the divine command theory's account of value—the goodness and badness of persons, things, experiences, and states of affairs—it is again facts about God's will that make certain things good and others bad (or evil). Typically, in presenting a theory of value, we are concerned with the nature of *intrinsic* goodness and badness. However, in connection with the divine command theory, it would be misleading at best to talk about what is intrinsically good—good in itself—since the very idea here is that nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Rather, on this theory it is something extrinsic to whatever is good or bad that confers upon it the value it has, namely, God's commands.⁵ With this in mind, we can set forth the divine command theory of value.

Theory of Value

Something *S* is *good* if and only if God commands that we bring about or preserve *S*.⁶

Something *S* is *bad* if and only if God commands that we refrain from bringing about or preserving *S*.

Something *S* is *value-neutral* if and only if God neither commands that we bring about or preserve *S* nor that we refrain from bringing about or preserving *S*.

What is crucial for understanding the divine command theory is the idea that what makes an action right or wrong, or makes something good or bad, is nothing but brute facts about God's commands. The mere fact that he commands that we not kill, rape, torture, and so forth is what makes such actions wrong; their wrongness consists entirely in the fact that he commands that we not do such actions. Thus, the above principles represent an attempt to provide criteria of the right and the good. (You may recall the theoretical aim of a moral theory explained in the introductory chapter.)

How might the theory be used in leading us to correct moral verdicts about what is right or wrong, good or bad? One obvious way involves appealing to some source, such as the Bible, which purports to contain evidence of God's commands. According to Mortimer, for example, there are three principal ways in which the Bible provides moral guidance. First, "it recalls and restates in simple and even violent language fundamental moral judgments which men are always in danger of forgetting or explaining away. It thus provides a norm and standard of human behavior in the broadest and simplest outline" (15/36). For instance, the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament and Christ's teachings regarding love for fellow human beings in the New Testament provide general moral rules for all human beings.

Second, in addition to moral rules—which we might call the letter of the moral law as commanded by God—we find evidence of the proper spirit for following God's commands. Ideally, humans are to strive toward holiness by following God's commands not out of fear or self-interest but out of love for God. Because the moral goodness of persons has to do with their motives, this point about the spirit of morality presumably reveals the divine command theory's account of moral goodness: the moral goodness (and hence moral virtue) of individuals is measured by how closely they come to fulfilling God's commands out of the motive of love for God.

Finally, according to Mortimer, biblical revelation "suggests new emphases and new precepts, a new scale of human values which could not at all, or could not easily, have been [otherwise] perceived" (16/37). As an example, Mortimer notes that the Incarnation, signifying the restoration of fallen human nature, instructs us that God has equal concern for all human beings, including the outcast, downtrodden, and despised. This equal concern means that all human beings have a special dignity and that consequently all humans are to be treated as ends in themselves. The idea of human dignity is a moral idea that might otherwise be obscure to human beings except for revelation.

Thus, the divine command theory's principles of right conduct and value are intended as criteria—indicating what it is about an action or other item of evaluation that makes it right or wrong, good or bad. And, as we have just seen, these principles are the basis of a decision procedure, thus guiding our choices and actions.

Defending the Theory

Let us now consider why anyone might accept the divine command theory—or at least anyone who is already a theist. There are three types of arguments worth considering.

According to what I will call the *linguistic argument*, the divine command theory is true simply because "obligatory," when used in its moral sense, just means "commanded by God" (and so on for the other moral concepts). So consider someone who would deny the truth of any of the theory's moral principles. According to the linguistic argument, such a denial would be like denying the general claim that all bachelors are unmarried. If one denies this latter claim, while also intending to use the term "bachelor" as it is ordinarily used, then one shows a lack of understanding of the concept of a bachelor. Similarly, it might be claimed, if one denies the principles of the divine command theory, one thereby shows that one does not understand basic moral concepts like "obligatory," "good," and so on.

However, this appeal to meaning is implausible. Indeed, its implausibility is easily revealed by comparing the bachelor example with any of the divine command theory's principles. It certainly would show a lack of understanding on the part of someone to deny that all bachelors are unmarried, for it is manifestly clear that part of what we mean by the term "bachelor" is "someone who is unmarried." If we know that someone is a bachelor, the question of whether he is also unmarried is settled. Or to put it another way, if one claims that someone is a bachelor but then goes on to claim that he is married, one can be accused of contradicting oneself.

But similar points cannot be made about moral concepts. If one claims that some action is obligatory but that the action is not commanded by God (perhaps because the speaker does not believe there is a God), one has not thereby contradicted himself. So, the linguistic argument under consideration is not persuasive.⁷

Religious arguments for the theory appeal to theistic premises, for example, premises about the nature of God. We have already encountered one such argument in the first quote from Mortimer. He infers the truth of the divine command theory from the theistic claim that God is creator of all. We can elaborate Mortimer's line of thought as follows. God must be the creative source of morality and hence the divine command theory must be true, because if he were not the source of morality, then there would be some moral standards or principles independent of God. And if there are moral standards and principles independent of God, it follows that he would not be creator of all things. So, if God is creator of absolutely everything (except himself), then we are committed to the divine command theory. I will pass over this argument for now since we return to it in the next section where I will argue that the theist has good reason to question one of its basic assumptions.

We come finally to what I will call the *argument from moral objectivity*. This argument claims that the only moral theory that provides an objective basis for a single true morality is the divine command theory. According to monotheism, there is a single God who issues a set of commands to all human beings, regardless of culture and historical setting. This means that, unlike moral relativism, there is a single set of true moral principles, and hence the kinds of problems that infect relativism⁸ do not apply to the divine command theory.

The problem with this argument is that it is premature. The other theories presented in this book (except for moral relativism) can each be understood as attempts to articulate and defend some single true morality and whose moral principles are thus put forth as objectively correct. Thus, in order for the argument from moral objectivity to have any real force, it would have to be true that the other various nonrelativist moral theories somehow fail. This remains to be seen; hence the argument is premature. Moreover, because there are serious problems with the divine command theory, we do have good reason to examine other theories. Let us now turn to a major criticism of the theory.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

Many thinkers (both theists and nontheists) have claimed that the divine command theory should be rejected owing to a dilemma that takes its name from the title of one of Plato's dialogs, the *Euthyphro*.⁹ In this dialog, Euthyphro professes to know what piety is and Socrates questions him about it. After Euthyphro gives examples of what he takes to be pious actions, the dialog continues:

SOCR: Remember, then, that I did not ask you to tell me one or two of all the many pious actions that there are; I want to know what is characteristic of piety which makes all pious action pious. You said, I think, that there is one characteristic

which makes all pious actions pious, and another characteristic which makes all impious actions impious. Do you remember? (7)

After some discussion, we get Euthyphro's answer:

EUTH: Well, I should say that piety is what all the gods love, and that impiety is what they all hate. (11)

Socrates then poses the crucial question:

SOCR: Now consider this question. Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it? (11)

Here, Socrates is asking about the relation between piety and the love of the gods. But the same question can be raised in connection with the relation between morality generally and the commands of God: Does God command that we do obligatory actions because they *are* obligatory, or is some action obligatory *because* God commands that we do it? To fully appreciate the force of the dilemma, it will be useful to pause for a moment and review a few of the key tenets of traditional theistic belief.

According to many versions of theism, there is a single personal God who is an all-perfect being, possessing every perfection to the highest degree. God's perfections include omniscience (all-knowing), omnipotence (all-powerful) as well as:

- G1. *Creator*: God is creator of everything (other than himself): God's omnipotence ensures that he can bring about anything possible, and his being creator is a matter of his realizing his omnipotence in bringing about this particular world from among the possible worlds he might have created instead.
- G2. *Full Rationality*: There is a sufficient reason for all of God's actions—everything he does, he does for a reason and with complete wisdom.
- G3. *Perfect Moral Goodness*: God, as a being, is morally good in the fullest possible sense: He possesses every moral perfection to the highest possible degree. If we were to make a list of these perfections, we could begin by saying that he is all-just, omnibenevolent (all-loving), all-merciful, and so forth.

I won't pause to elaborate these tenets, hoping that my readers will find them clear enough for present purposes.

The Euthyphro Dilemma is a dilemma for the theist who accepts these claims about the nature of God. And, as noted above, it arises in connection with the question: How is morality related to God's commands? There are two possibilities. Either morality depends on God's commands or it doesn't. To be more precise, the two options are these. Either:

1. What is right and wrong depends on God's commands in the sense that his commands alone are what *make* actions right or wrong (similarly for goodness and badness),

OR

2. God commands us to perform certain actions and refrain from performing others because certain actions *are* right and others *are* wrong and being fully rational he knows what is right and wrong and being completely good he issues commands to humanity that conform to his moral knowledge (similarly for goodness and badness).

The first option represents the divine command theory; the second option represents the rejection of the divine command theory because it presupposes that, independently of God's will, certain actions are right and others wrong.

The dilemma can now be easily explained. In response to the question about how God and morality are related, either the theist accepts the divine command theory (option 1) or not (option 2). Whichever option one takes, one runs afoul of one or more of the basic theistic tenets mentioned above. Let us see why.

First, if one embraces the divine command theory, then one is forced to give up G2—the claim that everything God does he does for a reason. To grasp this point is to grasp the very idea of the divine command theory. As I have been saying, according to the divine command theory, what makes an action obligatory is the mere fact that God commands that we do it. This means that God's commands are arbitrary—he has no reason for commanding that we keep our promises and avoid hurting others; he might just as well have commanded us to ignore our promises and ignore how our actions affect others.

We can perhaps bring out this point more clearly if we suppose that God does have reasons for his commands; for example, suppose he has some reason for commanding that we help others in need. But what sort of reason might that be? Apparently, it would be some fact about the action—some fact that makes that action an action we ought to do. But then if God is basing his commands on reasons of this sort, we are committed to saying that God commands what he does because certain actions are right or wrong and, given God's nature, he conforms his commands to what is (independently of his commands) right or wrong. So in supposing that God has reasons for his commands we are in effect rejecting the divine command theory. Thus, implied by the divine command theory is the idea that God's commands are arbitrary—that they are issued without reason.

Furthermore, if we accept the divine command theory, we cannot make good sense of God's goodness, which means that we are forced to abandon G3. Consider the claim that God is good. According to the divine command theory and, in particular, its principle about what makes something good, God is good if and only if God commands that we bring about or preserve him. Surely this is not correct, and not just because it is nonsense to talk about human beings bringing about or preserving an all-sufficient being. God is good in virtue of possessing certain characteristics, not as a result of commands he issues. For instance, the quality of being omnipotent is a good-making quality precisely because possession of knowledge is

intrinsically good. The goodness of possessing knowledge, we might say, is an inherent property of such possession. God's goodness, then, is explained by the fact that he has various good-making qualities.

Since the divine command theory forces the theist to give up G2 and G3, the theist has reason to reject this theory.

What about the other option that involves rejecting the divine command theory? Notice first of all that it does not represent some alternative moral theory. Rather, all it says in effect is that God conforms his commands to what is right and wrong, but it does not tell us what it is that makes actions right or wrong. It leaves that open. However, this option also seems to be at odds with theism because it seems to conflict with G1—the idea that God is creator. After all, if we admit that right and wrong, good and bad are not a matter of God's will, aren't we saying that there exists a moral code or standard independent of God? Thus, he is not creator of everything, contrary to G1. Mortimer's religious argument, recall, was to the effect that we have to accept the divine command theory in light of the idea of God as creator.

Whether the theist accepts the divine command theory (option 1) or not (option 2), it looks as if she must give up an important tenet of theistic belief about God. Hence, the dilemma.

A Way Out

What are the theist's options at this point? It would be too much for the theist to give up the claims expressed in G2 and G3 to the effect that God is fully rational and is perfectly good. In particular, the theist cannot give up the claim about God's goodness since it is the basis for devotion and worship. If this is correct, the theist must reject the divine command theory.

But what about the other option? If we give up the divine command theory, must we compromise the idea of God as creator? Many philosophers and theologians do not think so. Let us see why.

The gist of the solution to the dilemma that I shall propose involves two claims. (1) There is an important sense in which what is right and wrong, good and bad, depend on God's creative choices, and so there is a sense in which morality depends on God. (2) However, the theist should accept the idea that there are basic facts about what is right and wrong, good and bad that are independent of God's commands. Maintaining both of these claims requires that we refine our understanding of God as creator; but (so I shall maintain) the theist need not give up anything essential to her theism in doing so. Let us take this one step at a time.

Given God's omnipotence, there are many possible worlds he might have created, much different from the actual world he did create. In particular, not only might he have created a planet in place of Earth with a very different environment, he might have created intelligent beings whose natures are importantly different from human nature. However, as a matter of fact (and for good reason) God created human beings—beings that are mortal, whose bodies are such that they can be harmed in various ways, who must work to develop certain talents and

capacities, and so forth. Moreover, he placed humans in a certain kind of natural environment in which they must toil for food and shelter and that, because of limited resources, leads to competition among such beings. For a theist, all of this depends on God's will; it might have been different.

Now because humans are of a certain nature and find themselves in a certain environment, there are certain actions that, for example, it would be wrong to do owing to their effects on human well-being. Moral rules against murder and theft thus apply to human beings, but notice that part of the reason they apply has to do with the fact that God created humans with a certain nature and put them in a certain environment. Had he created another type of being who was, for instance, unharmable and where there was no need of property, rules against murder and theft would not apply. Thus, in a sense, God has control over what moral rules correctly apply to human beings. Hence, in a sense, God has control over morality, that is, over what is right and wrong for us to do.

Still, *given* that human beings are the way they are, there are certain moral principles or rules that are true or correct, and their truth or correctness is independent of God's commands. For creatures who can be harmed in all the ways humans can be harmed, certain actions are morally wrong perhaps because of how such actions adversely affect human well-being, or perhaps for some other reason. (It is the task of moral theory to discover what the reason is.) What God does in creating human beings is make it the case that a certain set of moral principles (those appropriate for humans) are the true or correct ones when it comes to questions of human morality.

At this point, an analogy might help. Suppose that I want to build a machine of some sort but that there are various ways in which I might design the machine's motor. I might construct it so that it runs on gasoline, or I might make it so that it runs on vegetable oil, or on beer, or whatever. The worth of the machine is its running well, and if I make the one that runs on gasoline, I should fill its tank with gas, but if I make the one that runs on vegetable oil, I should fill its tank accordingly. The idea is that whether I should fill the machine with one fluid or another depends on two factors: (1) facts about various sorts of motors and (2) my decision about what sort of motor to create. The suggestion, then, is that for various sorts of possible creatures subject to moral requirements, there are basic moral principles whose truth or correctness does not depend on God's will. (Just as facts about various motors and what they will run on is not up to me.) However, since God has control over the kind of creature he will create, he does exert control over which set of principles is to be followed. (Just as it is up to me to decide what kind of motor to build.)

Can a theist be happy with this solution? After all, although it grants that God has a kind of control over morality, it still maintains that basic moral principles are independent of God's will. It is not God's commanding that we refrain from murder that makes murder wrong, rather it is wrong because of how it affects the interests and lives of human beings. But should we understand the claim that God is creator to mean that, in addition to the physical universe that theists believe that he created, he also created moral standards and such abstract things as mathematical truths and the principles of logic?

Many philosophers hold that such standards, truths, and principles are not only true but are *necessarily* true. A truth is necessary when it is not possible for it to be false. Consider the mathematical proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$. This is not only true, but necessarily so: it is not possible for the equation to be otherwise. God couldn't make $2 + 2$ turn out to be 5 given the quantities designated by 2 and by 5 and given what we mean by '+' and '='. But so what? The fact that God cannot do or bring about what is impossible represents no genuine limit on God's omnipotence, as many theologians, including Aquinas, have argued. And so, if we understand basic moral principles to be necessarily true, we can likewise point out that it is no real limit on God's omnipotence that the truth of those principles does not depend on God's will. If we reconsider the claim about God (as creator as expressed in G1), we should reformulate it to say that as omnipotent God has power over everything that is not a matter of necessity. In particular, God is creator of the entire physical universe including human beings whose existence is certainly not a necessary fact.

Some theists might be reluctant to embrace this solution. But embracing the divine command theory is going to force the theist to reject or modify G2 and G3, and I've already mentioned why doing so is unattractive. Moreover, the reluctant theist should reflect on the fact that many theologians and philosophers embrace a solution like the one I have offered.¹⁰

Conclusion

The divine command theory is initially attractive for two reasons. First, it purports to set forth a single true morality for all human beings—a moral code that applies to all human beings regardless of their culture. Second, at least for theists, this theory comports with the sense that there is a deep-going connection between religion and morality.

However, we have found reason to reject the divine command theory. First, as we saw, the rightness or wrongness of actions cannot be properly explained simply in terms of their being commanded by God. It is not merely the fact that God commands that we perform some action that makes it obligatory. Thus, the principles of the divine command theory fail to specify a correct criterion of the right and the good; they fail to give us a proper explanation of what makes something right or wrong, good or bad. (You may recall the criterion of explanatory power that was explained in the introductory chapter.)

Second, we have found reason why, despite initial appearances, the theory is at odds with some basic tenets of theism and so the theist has reason to reject this theory. (Again, recall from the introductory chapter, the criterion of external support.) However, rejecting the divine command theory does not mean that religion generally and God's commands in particular are of no importance for morality. Indeed, we might even use the divine command theory's principles of right conduct and value as the basis of a decision procedure in ethics. Certainly, assuming there is a God of the sort believed in by many theists, one can look to revelation for some moral guidance. Moreover, one can look to revelation for some indication of what makes an action right or wrong, or some state of affairs good or bad.

Christ's teachings concerning love might be construed as advocating an ethic of universal benevolence—the idea behind the utilitarian moral theory (see Chapter 5). Mortimer, you may recall, claims that the Bible contains the idea that all humans possess a kind of dignity—an idea that is central in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (see Chapter 6). The idea that human beings are created by God and designed to fulfill certain purposes is, of course, an idea to be found in the Bible and this idea is featured in Aquinas's version of the natural law moral theory that is the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

1. *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* (1889).
2. For instance, it is sometimes claimed that acquiring moral *knowledge* requires appealing to religious authority or that being *motivated* to do what is right depends on accepting a religious outlook. These claims about knowledge and motivation are distinct from the divine command theory and will not be discussed in this essay.
3. Throughout this essay, and merely for convenience, I will use the masculine pronoun to refer to God.
4. All quotes from Mortimer are from *Christian Ethics* (New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), and, for convenience, I will incorporate page references into the text, followed by page numbers from Mortimer's excerpt in this collection.
5. We might attempt to capture something of the contrast between things with intrinsic value and things having extrinsic value by distinguishing those things with regard to which God issues commands—things having what we might call *fundamental goodness or badness*—from those things which, because they are instrumental in bringing about what is fundamentally good or bad, can be said to have derivative value. But since this complication does not matter for our purposes, I will ignore it.
6. Strictly speaking, this characterization of nonmoral goodness makes everything that is nonmorally good something that human beings are in a position to do something about. But surely there could be things or states of affairs that are nonmorally good but that are beyond the range of what humans can either bring about or preserve (perhaps because they are in some remote corner of the universe that we will never experience). I thank Robert Audi for calling my attention to this problem. To fix this defect, either we can restrict these characterizations to only those things, experiences, and states of affairs that humans can do something about or we could replace reference to what God does and does not command with reference to what God does and does not *approve* of. (God may approve of all sorts of things that simply do not relate to human existence.) Since it is the divine command theory, I have chosen to express both the principles of right conduct and the principles of nonmoral value in terms of God's commands. So we are to understand the principles of nonmoral value as restricted in the manner just explained.
7. This does not mean that all possible versions of the linguistic argument are as easily refuted. Sophisticated linguistic arguments that cannot be considered here are to be found in, for example, Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder (eds.), *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973). Reprinted in Paul Helm (ed.), *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
8. Moral relativism is the subject of the following two selections.

9. Plato, Euthyphro, in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, F. J. Church, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976). All page references to this work are incorporated into the text.
10. See, for example, R. G. Swinburn, "Duty and the Will of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1974): 213-27. Reprinted in Paul Helm (ed.), *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

A DEFENSE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Ruth Benedict

Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) was a pioneering American anthropologist and wrote Patterns of Culture (1935), an important work in comparative anthropology. Benedict argues that careful study of the cultural practices of different peoples supports the idea that what is and is not behaviorally normal is culturally determined. She argues for a similar point in connection with such moral distinctions as good and bad, and right and wrong. She suggests that phrases like "it is morally good" should be understood as being synonymous with "it is habitual."

Modern social anthropology has become more and more a study of the varieties and common elements of cultural environment and the consequences of these in human behavior. For such a study of diverse social orders primitive peoples fortunately provide a laboratory not yet entirely vitiated by the spread of a standardized worldwide civilization. Dyaks and Hopis, Fijians and Yakuts are significant for psychological and sociological study because only among these simpler peoples has there been sufficient isolation to give opportunity for the development of localized social forms. In the higher cultures the standardization of custom and belief over a couple of continents has given a false sense of the inevitability of the particular forms that have gained currency, and we need to turn to a wider survey in order to check the conclusions we hastily base upon this near-universality of familiar customs. Most of the simpler cultures did not gain the wide currency of the one which, out of our experience, we identify with human nature, but this was for various historical reasons, and certainly not for any that gives us as its carriers a monopoly of social good or of social sanity. Modern civilization, from this point of view, becomes not a necessary pinnacle of human achievement but one entry in a long series of possible adjustments.

These adjustments, whether they are in mannerisms like the ways of showing anger, or joy, or grief in any society, or in major human drives like those of sex, prove to be far more variable than experience in any one culture would suggest. In certain fields, such as that of religion or of formal marriage arrangements, these