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Divine Command Moral Ontology

According to Socrates, the most important thing a person can do in life is to pursue the Good. The most important question is, “How are we to live?” Indeed, the history of ethics has been the presentation of one theory after another attempting either to ground morality, show us how we know moral truths, or some combination of the two. The former concerns moral ontology, or the existence of moral values and duties along with their foundation. The latter concerns moral epistemology, or how we come to know what these values and duties are. It seems to me that, prior to forming a sound moral epistemology, it is necessary to discern the foundation of moral values and duties, if they exist at all. The aim of this essay, therefore, will be to provide a moral ontology that successfully grounds morality.

The theory to be defended in this essay is a form of Divine Command Theory. The essay will be divided into three sections. In the first, I argue that objective moral values and duties exist only if God exists. In the second section, I argue that objective moral values and duties do exist. In the final section, having then proven that objective moral values and duties exist with God as the necessary condition, I will lay out a theory of moral ontology that grounds moral values in God’s nature and moral duties in his commandments, all the while answering objections to the view.

Before beginning, it would be helpful to define the terms to be used in this essay. First off, I divide morality into *values* and *duties*. By value, I mean good and evil, whereas by duty, I mean right and wrong. Good and right do not mean the same thing, nor do evil and wrong. Values have to do with the worth of something, while duties concern obligations. For example, it would be good for one to become a doctor, but that does not mean it is one’s duty to become a doctor, for it would also be good for him to become a diplomat or a police officer, but it is impossible to become them all. Moreover, sometimes all that are available are bad choices, but that does not mean that it is wrong

for a person to choose one, since they must choose. Thus, there is a difference between values and duties.

Second, there is a distinction between something's being *objective* or *subjective*. By objective I mean "independent of people's opinions," and by subjective I mean "dependent on people's opinions." In other words, if something is objectively true, then it is true whether or not anybody believes it or not, but if something is subjectively true, it is true only because people believe it to be so. So to say that there are objective moral values and duties is to say that certain things are good and evil, and right and wrong, whether everyone believes them to be so or no one does. An example will serve to illustrate this point. Imagine that the Nazis had succeeded in winning World War II and exterminated or brainwashed everyone who thought the Holocaust was wrong, so that everyone thought that it was right. To say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong no matter who won World War II and no matter what those people believed. In my first section, I will argue that if God does not exist, then moral values and duties are not objective in that sense.

Finally, by *God* I mean the God of classical monotheism, who is a person that has the properties of transcending space and time, being omniscient, omnipotent, free, necessary, worthy of worship, and so forth. In this context, God is understood to be, as St. Anselm put it, the greatest conceivable being, which entails being perfectly good. Moreover, by atheism I mean the proposition that "God does not exist." With our terms thus defined, we may turn to see whether or not God is necessary for the existence of objective moral values and duties.

God is Necessary for Objective Morality

It is virtually undeniable that we all live our lives according to a set of values. The real question is, however, whether these values are objective or not. To discover this, we must ask, what is the basis for thinking that certain things are right and wrong? In other words, what is the foundation of morality? It seems to me that the question of the existence of objective moral values and duties is contingent on whether or not certain worldviews are true. If God exists, then we have good grounds for supposing that

objective moral values and duties exist. However, if God does not exist, then any sort of foundation for objective moral values and duties seems removed. We may act the same way, but the difference would lie in whether our sense of the moral realm is real or a mere illusion. Thus, in this section I seek to defend the following proposition:

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Now an important distinction is due. I am *not* saying all atheists are bad people, or that we must believe in God in order to know moral truths or live good moral lives. Rather, I am arguing that the *existence* of God is necessary for the existence of objective moral values and duties. This is a question of the ontological foundation of morality, as the humanist Paul Kurtz recognizes: “The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns their ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they purely ephemeral?” (65). It is my contention that if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Consider first moral values. Theism seems to provide a sound foundation for moral values, with them being grounded in the highest good, which is God himself. But if atheism is true, why think that human beings have objective moral value? On the atheistic or naturalistic scheme of things, there does not seem to be anything significant about human beings that would give them any moral worth. After all, they are just accidental byproducts of a purposeless universe. While *homo sapiens* may well evolve a morality that functions as the social norm, that would do nothing to prove that these values are objective rather than mere useful fictions. Philosopher of science Michael Ruse explains:

The position of the modern evolutionist...is that humans have an awareness of morality...because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth...Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” they think they are referring above and beyond themselves....Nevertheless,...such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction,...and any deeper meaning is illusory (“Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics,” 262, 268-89).

On the naturalistic story, *homo sapiens* developed a sort of practical morality as a result of social and biological pressures. But because these values are gradually created, not discovered, they may only be said to be subjective. If we were to rewind the tape of human history and restart it, a whole different set of values may well have evolved, which further illustrates the fact that these values are not objective, but dependent on what humans want them to be. Thus, if God does not exist, then there seems to be no basis for regarding the moral values evolved by *homo sapiens* as being objectively true.

Second, consider moral duties. On theism, our moral duties may plausibly be taken as deriving from God's commandments. But in the absence of God, what basis is there for thinking that we have objective moral duties? Duties are obligations, and obligations are imperatives laid upon us from some competent authority. However, if God does not exist, what authority is there that would be the source of our moral duties? In other words, who or what obligates us to do anything? Even the atheist ethicist Richard Taylor recognizes this point:

A duty is something that is owed....But something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation....The idea of political or legal obligation is clear enough....Similarly, the idea of an obligation higher than this, and referred to as moral obligation, is clear enough, provided reference to some lawmaker higher...than those of the state is understood. In other words, our moral obligations can...be understood as those that are imposed by God. This does give a clear sense to the claim that our moral obligations are more binding upon us than our political obligations....But what if this higher-than-human lawgiver is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation...still make sense?...the concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone (83-4).

On atheism, then, the best we have is a subjective impression of a moral duty that we are to follow, but nevertheless, there is no basis for thinking that we are truly obligated to do anything, for any attempt ground moral duties in this worldview is open to the playground bully's retort, "who says?" Hence, in the absence of a moral lawgiver, there

can be no moral law to obey; if God does not exist, then objective moral duties do not exist.

There have been many attempts on the part of atheists to ground moral values and duties in the natural realm. While it is impossible to consider every particular attempt, it is possible to consider the general categories of attempts that there are, because if those categories fail to adequately ground morality, then the particulars contained therein will fail as well. The two primary categories of attempts to ground moral values and duties are Atheistic Moral Platonism and Humanism. The former tries to ground moral values and duties in a transcendent but non-theistic base, while the latter tries to ground them in some sort of human flourishing. These views will be considered in turn.

Take first, Atheistic Moral Platonism (hereby AMP). This view may be said to find its origin in the works of Plato, who thought that there was a self-existent idea called the Good. On AMP, then, there are abstractly existing moral values, like justice, love, self-sacrifice, and so on. These values just exist, without any foundation. A view such as this is not normally developed in detail, so it seems very vague and even unintelligible. Nevertheless, three points may be made in response to this theory. First, moral values seem to be properties of persons, not mere abstractly existing ideas. When we think of justice, we generally think of just actions of persons, but how does it make sense to say that some abstract idea, Justice, exists on its own without any persons around? This view therefore does not provide an adequate foundation of moral values but rather leaves them floating arbitrarily. Second, AMP provides no basis for moral duties. Even if moral values do exist in this way, there is still lacking any sort of moral lawgiver to obligate us to follow these principles. Moreover, on this view, evil values such as hatred, selfishness, and greed also exist abstractly. Who or what would obligate us to follow one set of values rather than another? There is thus no foundation on this view for moral duties. Finally, it is enormously improbable on naturalism that the blind evolutionary process would produce precisely those creatures which align with these abstract, independently existing values. It is much more probable that the natural realm and the moral realm would be designed to fit each other than to think that these realms coincided by mere happenstance, but that sort of explanation is one that is inconsistent with AMP. For these reasons, then, AMP fails as an adequate foundation of objective moral values and duties.

But if this view does not work, what about Humanism? According to Humanism, whatever contributes to some sort of human flourishing is good. In other words, human beings are the ground of morality. In response to this view, it seems highly arbitrary that human beings should be taken as the stopping point in explaining moral values and duties if atheism is true. As we have seen, the atheistic worldview does not paint a picture of human beings that would give them any sort of moral worth. On atheism, the only real difference between us and bees is that we are more complex physical systems than them, but that does nothing to prove that we would have any more *moral* worth. One may reply that it is because we are rational that we have more moral worth. But why should rationality be considered the benchmark of moral worth any more than, say, running speed or flying ability? Nevertheless, even if rationality is taken to be the benchmark of moral worth, we can easily conceive of extra-terrestrial rational beings for whom actions like rape are not immoral, as Michael Ruse has argued (“Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda?”). Were they to visit Earth, why should they be expected to adhere to the morality evolved by *homo sapiens* rather than their own? All this serves to further underline the arbitrariness of Humanism as a moral ontology. When it comes down to it, the atheistic humanist must simply take human flourishing as the explanatory stopping point without any justification which alleviates the arbitrariness. However, it is not enough to recognize that humans do indeed have moral worth, and reason that because atheism is true, it must imply that humans have moral worth. Rather, the question is, *would* humans have moral worth *were* atheism true? And I have argued thus far, it seems most plausibly that they would not. As such, Humanism remains unjustified and fails in its attempt to provide an adequate ground of morality.

In summary, atheism lacks the conditions necessary to provide an adequate foundation for objective moral values and duties. The most prominent categories of theories that seek to ground morality in an atheistic worldview, AMP and Humanism, were evaluated and found to fail. As such, my first contention stands defended, that if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Morality is Objective

Thus far I have argued that the existence of God is necessary if morality is to be objective. At this point, we come to my second contention in which I argue that morality is in fact objective. In this section, I seek to defend the following proposition:

2. Objective moral values and duties exist.

The best argument for thinking that this contention is true seems to lie in our moral experience. As such, I will argue on the basis of this while answering objections from a relativistic viewpoint.

In our moral experience, it seems clear that we do apprehend a realm of objective moral values and duties. Some things, at least, like rape, child abuse, and gratuitous torture are really wrong, not just socially unacceptable behavior. On the other hand, love, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness seem to be truly good. We know that these values and duties exist by intuition, or a direct awareness of them, much like we know mathematical truths. As such, these intuitive principles are fundamental and basic, so that all rational persons know them. Therefore, in the absence of some overriding defeater, we are justified in believing in the objects of our immediate experience, which includes objective moral values and duties.

The relativist may respond that we cannot know for certain whether these intuitions are really true or not since we cannot validate them empirically, so this argument fails (this may be called the problem of uncertainty). This objection, however, is a weak one. Just because it is logically possible that we are wrong about our intuitive beliefs does not prove that we should doubt them. Moreover, we have no more reason to distrust what our intuitive faculties tell us about the moral realm than we do for distrusting what our five senses tell us about the physical realm. Just as I cannot get outside of my own experience and look down on it to see if it is giving me accurate information about the physical world, neither can I do so for the moral realm. But in both cases, it seems quite rational to trust our faculties of experience in the absence of some reason to distrust them. Furthermore, our moral experience seems so strong that we will have more justification for regarding it as true than for any potential defeater lodged against it, which will also rely on intuition. For this reason, almost nobody consistently

believes that there are no objective moral values and duties, even the self-professing relativists. Michael Ruse, who was quoted earlier as arguing that morality is illusory in light of naturalistic evolution, nevertheless in another writing admits, “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, $2+2=5$ ” (*Darwinism Defended*, 275). So here, in sacrifice of being inconsistent with his relativistic view of ethics, Ruse concedes that raping little children is really wrong, as objectively as two plus two does not equal five. This example shows to highlight the general truth that our apprehension of objective moral values and duties is so fundamental that it is practically impossible to live consistently as if they did not exist.

Another objection raised against my second contention would be what may be called the problem of moral disagreement. As this objection goes, many different societies across human history have had contradictory views of what values and duties are objectively true. If morality were truly objective, then everyone should agree on what it is, but since they do not, it must be relative. The failure of this objection lies in the fact that it makes an invalid inference between what people believe and what really is the case. It may well be the case that some people disagree about which values and duties are objectively true, but this does nothing to prove that there are no such objective values and duties at all. To use the previous analogy, many people disagree over the nature of the physical world (i.e. the shape of the Earth), but we do not infer from that that there is no objective truth in the matter. In the same way, the fact of disagreement over moral truths does not imply that there are no moral truths. To give an obvious example, it is conceivable that some society thinks that torturing children for fun is morally permissible, while most of us would think it is a moral abomination. In light of this disagreement, the right conclusion to draw is not that torturing children for fun is morally relative, but that they are mistaken in their moral beliefs, for we can see clearly that such an action is immoral. Therefore, in light of the invalidity of the problem of moral disagreement, this objection fails as a defeater for my second contention.

In summary of this section, my second contention, that objective moral values and duties exist, is supported by our strong experience of such a moral realm. This intuition, in the absence of some overriding defeater, gives us strong justification for thinking that such a realm exists. Two common objections to moral objectivism, the problem of

uncertainty and the problem of moral disagreement, were considered and found to fail as defeaters for our intuitive apprehension of the objectively existing moral realm.

Divine Command Theory Explained and Defended

Having shown that my first two contentions are true, they may be put together in a moral argument for the existence of God that goes as follows:

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Hence, with it being shown that there is an objective morality that is grounded in God, we may begin to provide a more detailed moral ontology which explains how this works.

The theory that I aim to develop in this section is a form of Divine Command Theory (hereby DCT) defended in recent times by philosophers such as Robert Adams, William Alston, Philip Quinn, William Lane Craig, and others. On this view, our moral duties are constituted by the commands of an essentially good God. In other words, God as the supreme moral authority issues commands to us which serve as the basis for our moral obligations. This may be illustrated as follows, taking *A* to be any moral action and *S* to be any moral agent:

A is required of *S* iff an impartial and loving God commands *S* to do *A*.

A is permitted for *S* iff an impartial and loving God does not command *S* not to do *A*.

A is forbidden to *S* iff an impartial and loving God commands *S* not to do

A. (Craig, "Theistic Critiques of Atheism").

Thus, moral requirement, permission, and forbiddenness are understood in light of God's commands. It may be added that "command" here is meant broadly, referring to any kind of expression of the divine will. In other words, it is the divine will which constitutes our moral duties, and this can be expressed to us in many forms, such as written rules, intuition, and so forth. Finally, these commands are not arbitrary; rather, they are necessary expressions of God's essentially good nature - God is essentially loving, just, kind, and so forth. Therefore, on DCT, God's essentially good nature serves as the

ultimate standard of objective moral values, while his commands constitute our objective moral duties.

A number of objections have been raised against this view, and the answers to such objections may already be found in the formulation of DCT. Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, I will consider three objections to this view and then provide answers to them. The first two objections, the Euthyphro Dilemma and the arbitrariness objection are closely related and shall be considered together. This will be followed by a consideration of the epistemic problem.

The Euthyphro Dilemma finds its origins in the writings of Plato, where Socrates and Euthyphro are discussing how the gods can be the foundation of piety. To put the dilemma in the terms of this essay, it may be stated as follows: is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good? As the argument goes, if we say that something is good because God wills it, then the good becomes arbitrary, and God could have willed that rape was right, which is absurd. But if God wills something because it is good, then that implies an independently existing moral standard to which God must measure up to. Each option is said to be fatal to the theist. The first thing to be said in reply to this is that this dilemma is a false one. True dilemmas are such that the two options to choose from are *A* and *not-A*, and either one is unacceptable. This dilemma, however, presents us with two options *A* and *B*, so we may rightly ask whether there is another option *C*, and this is that option: God wills something because *he* is good. Something is *right* or *obligatory* because God wills it, but it is *good* if it aligns with God's essentially good nature. For example, love is a virtue because God, as the maximally great being, is essentially loving. However, if God commands us to love one another, then it becomes our duty to do so. Moreover, these commands are not arbitrary, as the late philosopher William Alston explains:

If God is good in the right way, especially if God is essentially good, then there will be nothing arbitrary about his commands; indeed it will be metaphysically necessary that he issue those commands for the best (285).

Thus, we need not worry ourselves with moral scenarios with logically impossible antecedents such as, "If God were to command rape..." because those actions (in this case, rape) are inconsistent with the essentially good nature of God, so that he cannot and

will not command them. Taking the arbitrariness objection another route, the objector may argue that it is arbitrary to take God as the ultimate standard of moral values and duties. In reply, however, it may be said that unless we are moral nihilists, we must all recognize some explanatory stopping point, and as I have argued so far in this essay, God is the least arbitrary of those.

Another objection, or rather class of objections, made against DCT may be grouped into what is here called the epistemic problem. Roughly, this problem centers on the idea that we do not need to have a knowledge of God in order to recognize that objective moral values and duties exist. Moreover, the different theistic religions disagree about what God has commanded. Even more radically, people often have performed horrible actions while thinking that it was God's will for them to do so. In light of such considerations, the objector argues, DCT cannot be correct. In response to these objections, it is important to again emphasize that the focus of this essay, and of DCT in general, is to provide a moral *ontology*, not necessarily an *epistemology*. DCT provides a foundation for the existence of objective moral values and duties. As such, it holds regardless of how we may come to know these. The Divine Command Theorist may be open to different theories of moral epistemology while still holding that morality is grounded in God's nature and commands ontologically. Thus, it is no defeater to point out that people often come to know moral truths apart from knowledge of God, as Alston agrees: "[DCT] does not imply that explicit knowledge of God is the only sound basis for [moral] judgements" (293-4). Rather, as Alston continues:

[The Divine Command Theorist] is free to recognise that God, being the source of our being and governor of the universe as well as the standard of value, has so constructed us and our environment that we are led to form sound value judgements under various circumstances without tracing them back to the ultimate standard. Analogously, we are so constructed and so situated as to be able to form true and useful opinions about water, without getting so far as to discern its ultimate chemical or physical constitution (294).

Now of course the Divine Command Theorist will also believe that divine revelation or other expressions of God's will, *if authentic*, provide us with further knowledge of the

moral realm, but that is a separate issue to be investigated on its own terms. DCT as a moral ontology, however, stands on its own and is consistent with various epistemologies. As such, it is also consistent with any of the theistic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Finally, the Divine Command Theorist and the atheist will have the same reply to those who commit atrocities in the name of God, namely, that God did not command them to do what they did. Of course, the atheist says so because he thinks God does not exist, but the Divine Command Theorist says so because God cannot command things that are inconsistent with his essentially good nature. In sum, then, the epistemic problem fails as a defeater for DCT because DCT does not imply that we must know God in order to come to know certain moral truths.

To summarize this third and final section, having proven that objective moral values and duties exist with God as the foundation, I have articulated and defended Divine Command Theory, which says that our moral duties are constituted by the commands of an essentially good God, whose nature is the standard of goodness. Three objections, the Euthyphro Dilemma, the arbitrariness objection, and the epistemic problem were examined and found to fail as defeaters for this theory.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to provide a moral ontology that successfully grounds morality. I began with two contentions: first, if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist; second, objective moral values and duties exist. From these two contentions it follows logically that God exists. In defense of the first contention, I argued that atheism does not provide a sound foundation for the objective moral realm because it has no basis for the intrinsic worth of human beings to ground values and no moral lawgiver to ground duties. Following this, I then refuted the two primary attempts to ground morality in the natural realm, Atheistic Moral Platonism and Humanism. In defense of the second contention, I argued that we have a strong intuitive apprehension of the objectivity of the moral realm. Therefore, in the absence of some overriding defeater, we are justified in believing in the objects of our immediate experience, which consist of these moral truths. Two potential defeaters, the problem of

uncertainty and the problem of moral disagreement, were examined and found to fail. Having proven then that objective moral values and duties exist with God as the foundation of these, I articulated and defended a moral ontology, Divine Command Theory, which details how it is that the moral realm is grounded in God. On this theory, our duties are constituted by the commands of an essentially good God, whose nature is the standard of goodness. Three objections to this view, the Euthyphro Dilemma, the arbitrariness objection, and the epistemic problem, were raised and shown to fail as defeaters for Divine Command Theory. With a sound foundation of objective moral values and duties now in hand, we are free to conduct further inquiry into the important questions posed by Socrates, all the while having the insights of Divine Command Theory close by.

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*Note: many of the insights of this essay were inspired by the work of the philosopher William Lane Craig, so I have taken the liberty to include in the works cited a source from him not specifically referenced in this essay.