

DIVINE COMMAND THEORY AND METAETHICS¹

TEORIA DO MANDAMENTO DIVINO E METAÉTICA

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Abstract

I will outline an application of metaethics to the debate about *Euthyphro's dilemma* and divine command theory (DCT). Metaethics elucidates how we should understand what are objective moral judgments and moral truths. I argue that the normative content of morality does not depend on God's approval/command. This is so because moral objectivity does not depend on any approval and command, what I try to show by the nature and the logic of evaluative/normative concepts (*good, bad, right, wrong, ought to* etc.). Other aspects related to DCT and morality are briefly debated.

Keywords: Metaethics. Moral Objectivity. Divine Command Theory. Subjectivism.

Resumo

Esboçarei uma aplicação da metaética ao debate sobre *dilema de Eutífron* e teoria do mandamento divino. A metaética elucidada como devemos entender o que são juízos morais objetivos e verdades morais. Arguirei que o conteúdo normativo da moralidade não depende da aprovação ou mandamento de Deus. Isto é assim porque a objetividade moral não depende de quaisquer aprovações ou comandos, o que tento provar pela natureza e lógica dos conceitos normativos/avaliativos (como *bom, mal, certo, errado, deve-se* etc.). Outros aspectos ligados à teoria do mandamento divino e à moralidade são brevemente debatidos.

Palavras-chaves: Metaética. Objetividade Moral. Teoria do Mandamento Divino. Subjetivismo.



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Divine command theory (DCT) is an obvious option for theists in ethics and philosophy or religion. While for most religious theists God's commands determine what is required, prohibited or permitted to do, for most moral philosophers DCT holds that an action is morally right/good if and only if God commands/approves it. The main challenge to DCT comes from so called *Euthyphro's dilemma*, a dilemma Plato poses in the dialog *Euthyphro*. There, Socrates asked Euthyphro: do the gods love actions because they are pious, or actions are pious because the gods love them? That is the same we can ask today before DCT, according to Shafer-Landau (2015: 67): Does God command us to do actions because they are morally right, or the actions are morally right because God commands them? (Shafer-Landau 2015: 67). Here the *Argument from Euthyphro's dilemma* according to him (2015:69):

- 1) "Either God has reasons that supports His commands, or God lacks reasons for His commands.
- 2) If God has not reasons for His commands, then God's commands are arbitrary – and that renders God imperfect, undermining His moral authority.
- 3) If God has reasons that supports His commands, then these reasons, rather than the divine commands, are what make actions right or wrong - thereby refuting the Divine Command Theory.
- 4) Therefore, or God is imperfect, or the Divine Command Theory is false.
- 5) God is not imperfect.
- 6) Therefore, the Divine Command Theory is false."

Some theists and ethical objectivists think morality depends necessarily on existence of God and His divine approval/command, without which it could not have sound foundations. Call this a *dependence thesis*, the natural position of theists before the *Euthyphro's dilemma Argument*. They argue that if God does not exist, we have not a sound foundation for morality, but if theism is true, we have. For them objective moral values, objective moral duties, and objective moral accountability depend on divine approval/command (cf. Craig 2009: 30-31, 168-176). Here an *Argument from Theism*:

- 1) If objective morality is illusory, then God does not exist.
- 2) God exists.
- 3) Therefore, objective morality is not illusory.

Some atheists and ethical skeptics take a similar path arguing against the existence of objective morality (cf. Shafer-Landau 2004: 75, 140). In fact many people think only

God could be the source of the objective morality, and, as they do not think God exist, they conclude that morality is not objective. We can put here the *Argument from Atheism*:

- 1) Morality is objective only if God exists.
- 2) God does not exist.
- 3) Therefore, morality is not objective.

The first premise in the arguments from theism/atheism is very problematic, for both atheists and theists. Morality could be objective even if God does not exist. For one hand, skeptics and atheists take many laws as objective, even they have not an author or lawmaker. This includes normative standards of logic and reasoning. So, skeptics and atheists do not need to think that moral laws must have an author or a lawmaker for being objective. For the other hand, if morality is not an independent standard for the subject's approval (I mean, for his particular will and command), there would not be clear reason for taking His Will and Command as morally important, and so, no clear reason to call God an all-good God: that God is good would be something like "God approves God". Why to adore God for this? Leibniz and Kant suggested this: if it is the will alone, completely free from any moral standard, the divine morality is only a matter of power, and right ca not come out might, what undermines any reasonable motive to admire God. According to Leibinz, (1991) in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*:

"So in saying that things are not good by any rule of goodness, but sheerly by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing, all the love of God and all His glory. Why praise Him for what He has done, if He would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the contrary?" (quoted in Rachels 2003: 51-52)

The problem is that the argument from theism/atheism has a bad assumption: that objective morality needs approval/command from someone. But moral objectivity does not need it. Moral objectivity does not require, logically, any particular approval and command. As other common forms of objectivity, it requires only facts and logic. Facts are objective, and logic disciplines what follows from what in moral sentences. Assume, for sake of the argument, that a certain moral conclusion, based on non-moral (natural) facts and logic, is a better conclusion than another one. Why this would not be a sufficient reason for a moral truth? Moral truth would not be like natural truth about planets, but it would not be like arbitrary desires. Moral truth would be a kind of rational truth (se for this Rachels 2003, p. 41).

Contemporary metaethics offers explanations about the nature and logic of evaluative words, and establish what we are doing when we emit moral judgments. Philosophers do this with philosophical theses and argumentation, and thus metaethics is a good rational tool to elucidate how we should understand what objective moral judgments and moral truths mean. I assume here that such metaethical theses can be applied to the debate about DCT, rendering good fruits.

Consider three important aspects of moral judgments as commonly used, and with which any meta-ethical theory has to deal. (1) Moral judgments refer to non-moral facts (actions, rules, institutions, agents etc.); they have a predicative function and a descriptive meaning. (2) Moral judgments evaluate these facts (actions, rules etc.) and have so a practical function and a non-descriptive meaning. (3) There is a necessary covariance between moral properties M (good, right, bad, wrong, for example) of actions, agents, institutions, etc., and its non-moral or natural properties N, a necessary logical covariance called the supervenience (S) of moral properties.

All the time we have MN covariations (or dependencies) in our moral judgments. This is S. According to S, there must necessarily be some non-moral difference between two situations if we express different moral judgments about them. A meta-ethical theory falls or not depending on accommodation and coherent explanation of S. The accommodation and explanation of S in a given theory make it possible, for example, that *impossible moral worlds* may exist. If yes, it is a bad theory. But the theory that good means what is approved by the subject makes it possible. Then, it is a bad theory. (see Bonella 2016). Since subjectivism is a bad metaethical theory, DCT is also a bad theory, because, taken as a metaethical theory, DCT is a kind of subjectivism, one that goodness and rightness is completely dependent on the attitudes and beliefs of a particular subject/observer, God.²

Subjectivists argue that moral judgments cannot be objectively true because they make the content of moral beliefs necessarily relative to the opinions and approvals of the individuals (subjects) who possess them. In Subjectivism, when a subject S states “genocide is wrong”, he is reporting that he disapproves of genocide. If he really does, the judgment is true, but true *for this subject*. If he does not disapprove, the judgement is false, and, in that case, subjectivists must say it is not true that “genocide is wrong”. Its content will never be true regardless of the opinion or approval of the subject of approba-

² “This is worth pointing out, since theory is often seen as the arch-nemesis of cultural relativism, whereas in fact the two are variants on the same basic metaethical approach” (Huemer, 2005, p. 54-55)

tion. Both nihilism (there are not moral truths) and subjectivism (moral truths depend on subjective approbation) share the denial that there are objective moral truths, truths that are independent of individual subjective opinions.

Huemer (2005, p. 48) explains subjectivism is a kind of metaethical reductionism: it takes moral properties as reducible to psychological properties, the main idea being that the attitudes or reactions of someone makes an object, good. For him, “x is good” equates “the speaker approves of x”, and an example of subjectivist theory is DCT, where “x is right” equates “x accords with God’s wishes”. According to Rachels, subjectivism states that “X is morally acceptable” means “I (the speaker) approve X”, “X is morally unacceptable” means “I (the speaker) disapprove X” (2013, p. 34). In a similar way, according to Craig, about moral obligations, DCT states,

“for any agent S and action A:

A is required of S if and only if a just and loving God commands S to do A”.

“A is permitted for S if and only if a just and loving God does not command S not to do A”.

“A is forbidden to S if and only if a just and loving God commands S not to do A” (2009, p. 172).³

In metaethical subjectivism, a possible world, with the same natural properties as another world, could have different moral values and moral truths depending solely on the approval or disapproval by the subjects present in these worlds. Even inside a unique world, there could be different values and moral truths with the same natural properties. One action, in the future, with the same natural properties as now, or in the past, could have its moral content modified from right to wrong (or from wrong to right) regardless the objective facts being the same. Naturally identical worlds (such as having genocidal national leaders), may be, if subjectivism is true, morally approved/disapproved in different ways, via particular decisions, which do not depend on descriptive properties of genocide, for example. So, a simple subjectivist approval also cannot be disciplined by logic (in this case, by the logic of prescriptive universalizability, what follows from S. For this see Hare 1999), since evaluative properties depend on arbitrary decisions of subjects.

³ Craig differentiates moral values, based on God’s nature, and moral duties, based on God’s commands, calling our attention that values have its content in objective good nature of God, while duties receive objectivity from commands. But the subjectivist structure is the same. See that Rachels is talking about “wrong” and “right”, not only “good and bad”. See below about to beg the question using God’s *god* nature strategy before *Euthyphro dilemma*.

Compare with rationalist objectivism: *good* is a concept (or word) we use to express objective evaluations (evaluations disciplined by prescriptive universalizability and reasoning). We cannot think *good* a situation 1, and *bad* a situation 2, if 1 and 2 have the same non-evaluative or descriptive features: it would be like to call *red* a singular car, and after call *yellow* another singular one, that have, both, the same universal properties, including the same color. My children would not learn to use *red* or *good*, and they could not learn what they ought to do if a situation 2 is *bad* (or the action 2 is *wrong*), and the situation 1 is *good* (the action 1 is *right*), having both the same (universal) descriptive properties. This explains S easily, and it is a candidate for a good metaethical theory.

Since evaluative/normative concepts/words (*good*, *right*, *bad*, *wrong* etc.) supervenes facts, they implies this principal logical aspect (S), one aspect that gives us a logic of the moral words we use in our thinking and discourse, the logic of prescriptive universalizability. So, conjoining facts and logic render rational objectivity (see Hare 1997, 1999). The ethical rationalist think “genocide is wrong” as something really wrong and true regardless of subjective opinion or subjective attitude on whether it is wrong or not. The judgment “genocide is wrong” express an objective evaluation that all of us who mobilizes logically moral judgments would, by the light of facts about genocide, endorse. A moral judgement that all moral thinkers (God included) can endorse if they are thinking logically (universalizability) by the light of facts (universal properties of the actions, agents etc.) is an **objective** moral prescription. The reason instantiated in this objective prescription lies in the facts-*cum*-logic instance(s), not in the commands and approvals instances.

This rationalist conception of moral truth is part of ethical objectivism, and moral truth is agent-neutral: it requires rational arguments by the light of facts as evidence for truths. Here there is not *begging question* against theism or atheism: God can exist and you can believe in God, or God cannot exist and you cannot believe, but moral truth is objectively there, independent of your opinions and God’s opinions. Then, nihilism is not the unique option if we do not believe in God and have no divine commands. On the same way, theistic and religious objectivism is not the unique option if we believe in objective morality. These are good reasons for theists and atheists agree with it, and it seems good that rational theism could accept that there are independent moral reasons that grounds moral judgments and moral truths.

Theist philosopher Richard Swinburne takes partially this path. In his paper “What Difference Does God Make to Morality?”, Swinburne affirms there are reasons that ground necessary moral truths, and that such are independent reasons we can discover from experience and reflection. These reasons and necessary moral truths do not depend on the existence of God (see Swinburne 2009, pp. 151-155, 156-157). The reason Hitler was a bad man lies in what he did (genocide, for example), in our social experience with this kind of acts (of genocidal leaders) and in the moral reflection about similar cases. These normative reasons argue *contra* Hitler and *pro* humanitarian leaders, and all this renders moral truth independent of existence of God. Other possible world with the same facts will have the same moral truth and God could not changes this, so, the will of God is not the main point in the immorality of genocide and genocidal leaders. William Craig seems to take, also partially, a similar path, claiming that theists agree that we do not need to know God neither to believe in God to discern objective moral values and moral obligations. (see Craig 2005, p. 645)

Despite of this acceptance, Craig thinks, since God is the unique ontological ground for objective morality and for the content of morality (that has been established by divine commands), God makes great difference to objective morality. Human morality should be based on divine commands, and, since for Craig Christian theism is true, human morality depends on Bible commands. More: Divine commands do not obligate God himself. As the Supreme Being, God could command us to do acts that would be immoral without his command. I call this a pure DCT: God creates the right and wrong by His commands. Meanwhile, since God’s nature is all-good, and God’s will is holy, God will not state immoralities, Craig thinks. In an apparently conflation between ontology and metaethics, Craig thinks to have solved *Euthyphro’s dilemma*: God will not have (by definition) immoral commands. Because God is morally perfect, the challenge of arbitrariness would not follow. Torture will be wrong in all possible worlds because God will exist in all these worlds with His same all-good nature. (see Craig 2005, p. 645-647).

However, Craig is wrong, that is not the point. If *good* means (analytically) “what is approved by someone”, - or if the good reduces (synthetically) to “what God approves”, both conceptions are reductionists and are subjectivists - , then, a same action could be approved differently accordingly the subject, even if the non-moral facts of the situation are the same. This is a kind of *logical* arbitrariness. The morality of the action would be in the subject’s will, not in the objective facts itself, or in the objective facts-*cum*-logic

reasons. These are problematical moves in metaethics, and are not ontological or moral moves. There is, so, a vicious circle in assuming a good nature of God as solving the *Euthyphro dilemma*: good still means what God commands/approves. Whether a supremely good God means (analytically) a God approved by Himself (sic) or means a God with the character He has, then in both cases we have a reduction of goodness to what God decides. Why should morality lie in God's nature, or, why the nature of God is morally good? Either there are reasons showing that God's actions, intentions, commands, etc. – the features of God's character/nature – are good, or there are not. If there are, DCT in its pure form is false, and we should obey God because God is good in the appropriated non-subjectivist sense. If there are not reasons, DCT in its pure form is true but with, at least, this strong burden: we should obey God just because He is God. (That is the circle).⁴

There must be normative reasons for God being a *morally* good God, and that reasons cannot be that He has a holy will or because his nature makes good his commands (this would beg the question), since we need independent evaluative reasons for justify a will or a character (nature) as *morally* good. Goodness, holiness, generosity, equality are all evaluative expressions lacking evidence supplementation, the knowledge of non-moral facts *plus* the logical reflection to understand which actions or traits of character we see as good, holy, etc. in God. Even if an all-good God is the creator of the world, and ontologically higher than His creation, since morality is the set of objective moral tru-

⁴ We should ask what would follow in metaethical terms if God were to command something morally problematic. For instance, if God were to disapprove of gay marriage (as Craig believes He does, following a plausible interpretation of the Bible), or to command that wives should be submissive to their husbands (as Swinburne believes He does, also following a plausible interpretation of the Bible). That slaves should be submissive to their owners is more than problematic, in my view, but seems to follow the same plausible interpretation of the Bible, and, I suppose, Craig and Swinburne should believe this too, but I am not sure. If we are sure that God will not command these kind of things, as I think He will not, if He exists, then we may still propose plausibly the argument *What if He were to command* etc., to test its metaethical implications. But the metaethical implications here depend on what solution we accept – what horn we take - to *Euthyphro's dilemma*: if God's commands make an action a right one, then, *were* God to ask some immoral thing, this thing would become obligatory for us. Remember Craig accepts God can state apparently immoral actions (because in His perfection, He can), actions that we have no authorization to do without His command (sic). It appears to be the reason for Craig seeing as acceptable some God's commands of genocide or killing a son, found in the Bible. So, God's commands can make *immoral-acts-for-us* obligatory. "Therefore, God's moral perfection is not obstacle to his issuing such a command: a morally perfect being is not debarred from commanding people to do things that are morally correct as the time he commands them" (Huemer 2005, 57). We should note however that many Christians and Jews (and probably Muslims) do not take so literally the Bible (or Koran), at least when the passages conflicts with other relevant parts of the text. One philosophical position is to take objective morality as a source among many for judging interpretations of the Bible. For example Jesus Himself and the author of John's letters in New Testament seems to have taken the idea that the mutual love is the higher criterion to understand commands and other moral and religious injunctions. In this sense, autonomous ethics (as other autonomous science) would be an objective standard for religious morality, being also a very good metaethics for theism. For autonomy of ethics, *Euthyphro's Dilemma*, and religious morality, see Brink 2007.

ths, God Himself is not normatively necessary for the content itself of moral judgments. Therefore, if someone, even God, morally approves/commands an action, then there will necessarily be facts-*cum*-logic instances (the natural facts involved in the situation *plus* prescriptive universalizability) as reasons for this.

However, if someone claims that God is all-good by nature, and thus claims His commands would always be prescribing what is good in its appropriated sense - because there are reasons for them - then this person is adopting the rationalist solution, and the *independence thesis* for *Euthyphro's dilemma*. The right actions are right independently (so the name *rationalist* solution: God commands certain actions because they are right), and DCT *merely* states that if we accept God's commands or consult God's commands, we would be doing the right thing. Call this a conciliation interpretation of DCT or mitigated DCT. There is no vicious circle here because a good God is a God that follows morality and morality is an objective standard for evaluating our beliefs about the goodness of God.⁵ Pure DCT holds that right actions are right because God approves/commands them, it adopts a voluntarist (*subjectivist*) solution. In this case, the morality of the action would essentially depend on the divine approval or commands, and God would establish by will what is right and what is wrong. In this solution is implied *the dependence thesis*, and a pure DCT.

A lightly different way to argue against pure DCT, a way that poses clearly the metaethical implication, we find in Huemer (2005: 58), could give us a bit more help:

- 1) "If no characteristics of God ground an obligation to obey God's commands, then there is no obligation to obey God's commands.
- 2) The morally neutral characteristics of God do not ground an obligation to obey God's commands.
- 3) If the morally significant characteristics of God ground an obligation to obey his commands, then some moral facts are independent of God's commands and attitudes.
- 4) If either (a) there is no obligation to obey God's commands or (b) some moral facts are independent of God's commands and attitudes, then the divine command theory is false.
- 5) Therefore, the divine command theory is false".

⁵ This looks like a solution we find in Robert Adams. God's commands are moral commands if there exist a *loving* God, but a *loving* God is a God that does not command wrong actions, being its wrongness determined by moral reasons, despite of Adams' affirmation of God's commands as a necessary condition for an action being right. (see Adams 1981, 1999) For other theories about DCT and metaethics, see Zangwill (2015) and Smith (2015).

In summary, either the features of God Himself (his nature or his will) are morally neutral or they are morally significant. If morally neutral, like his simple commands (imperatives) that we do certain thing or His Omnipotence, then they do not create any *moral* obligation. If morally significant, like His goodness, benevolence, justice, etc., these values are normatively independent and prior to commands and attitudes. As Adams suggests, if a god states to murder, he is not a loving God, and has not moral commands we need to obey except for non-moral reasons. Maybe that, assumed that all God's singular commands are not immoral ones, simple (arbitrary) commands pose at least a good non-moral reason to obey, for example, that simply someone asks us to do something or to obey.⁶ If God exists, obviously His wishes and commands are among the wishes that any being could ask to us, and this creates a presumption in favor of doing or obeying. Why not? Swinburne has suggested something like this: God is a like a father (and for Christians He is God the Father) and we in general obey our fathers. God is also a benefactor in giving us existence, and we in general should respond with generosity to our benefactors. (see Swinburne 2009: 156-159). This position imply the rationalist solution to *Euthyphro's dilemma*: only commands that not conflict with morality are accepted, and like a human father has moral limits for what he asks his children, God would have moral limits too. Swinburne accepts this (see page 157), and believes that beyond morality, there are other reasons for obeying God's commands.

If we believe in moral objectivity, then commands/approvals depend on normative/evaluative reasons, not the opposite, at least for being morally good commands. Of course God, if exists, is good, the most good Being that exists, but the reasons we have for saying God is *morally* good are: the wishes and commands of God have certain features that the logic of prescriptive universalizability *plus* the facts of circumstances constrain all rational beings to endorse. Factual experience and logical moral reflection about genocide is what make genocide objectively wrong in a strong moral sense. So, a good God, if exists, will necessarily disapproves genocide because genocide is immoral. A good and perfect being will think and act accordingly objective morality. If we are looking for moral objectivity, then commands/approvals depend on normative/evaluative reasons, not the opposite. This, however, is an independent standard for moral reasoning and for the normative content of moral truths.

⁶ Related to non-moral reasons and DCT, See Zangwill 2015. For contemporary metaethics and DCT, see also Smith 2015.

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