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An Analysis of Divine Command Metaethics

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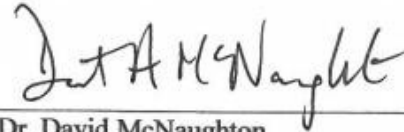
By

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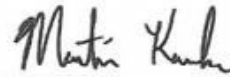
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Introduction

It has been taken as fact by nearly all traditional monotheists that an action is morally wrong if and only if it is against the commands of God. The question famously posed by Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*¹ is which way the explanatory relationship here runs; does the moral law direct God to command, or does God determine what the moral law is? The Abrahamic traditions support the notion that God is the ultimate lawgiver, and therefore at least appear to align with the view that God decides which actions are morally obligatory and which ones are not. This second view is called divine command metaethics.

Aims

Divine command metaethics comes in various forms. In this paper I will examine three previously proposed relationships between morality and divine commands - Analysis, Causation, and Reduction - and determine which of these relationships is most likely. I will also seek to defend the view as a whole against some of the perennial objections against it.

I find divine command metaethics attractive because I am a Christian and I feel that it aligns with my religious convictions better than other explanations of morality. Since this paper is not a presentation of Christian apologetics or of biblical interpretation, I will not seek to directly motivate a belief in the theory. However, I will show that it is defensible and therefore a reasonable candidate account of morality.

Assumptions

In the course of this discussion, I am assuming first and foremost that God exists necessarily, i.e. God exists in all possible worlds. By God, I mean the being that is omnipotent,

¹ Plato/Jowett, 2015

omniscient, and rational.

I think it is strange for a divine command theorist to assume that God is by necessity good. This is because in order for this to be meaningful, there must be some conception of goodness outside of God's intentions, and what typically motivates divine command metaethics is the belief that God's sovereignty implies his sovereignty over morality. It seems odd, then, to argue that he is sovereign over one aspect of morality but not another.

It is true that God is good, since no rational being would determine what good is and decide not to be good, but the statement seems somewhat redundant.

I also assume a basic freedom in God's intentions. In other words, God is free to choose what His aims are in creation, so long as those aims are consistent (God cannot intrinsically intend x and not x) and possible (God cannot intend the existence of a round square). I do argue, however, that certain intentions are inconsistent and therefore impossible.

I will often refer to the notion that God cannot intrinsically intend two contradictory things, so I will explain it here. I use 'intends intrinsically' to mean 'intends for its own sake' and 'intends extrinsically' to mean 'intends for the sake of something else.'

It is clear that extrinsic desires (intentions) can conflict. For example, let's say a man named Bill is on a diet and has two intrinsic desires: to eat tasty food and to lose weight. Bill sees a piece of chocolate cake, and he wants to eat it because it is tasty, an extrinsic desire. However, he also has an extrinsic desire to not eat the cake because he is on a diet and wants to lose weight. Bill decides that his desire to lose weight is more important and does not eat the cake.

This example seems normal to us, however, it would seem rather strange if Bill both desired to eat tasty food and desired to not eat tasty food intrinsically. This would seem irrational

to us. Since God is perfectly rational, then He would not have any irrational intentions or perform any irrational actions. Therefore, God does not intrinsically intend two contradictory things. It also follows from similar logic that God cannot ultimately intend two contradictory things (intend, all things considered, to both perform an action and not perform an action.)

Analysis View

Robert Adams defended a version of the analysis viewpoint. His view was that the word ‘wrong’ is typically used to mean ‘contrary to the commands of God’ by a Christian. According to this definition, in a possible world where God commands cruelty for its own sake, the Christian's conception of right and wrong will break down because God would cease to be loving, and the Christian’s conception of God includes that He is essentially loving. Adams does not claim that such a world is impossible, only that the typical Christian usage of the words right and wrong will no longer be useful.²

The main problem with the analysis viewpoint is that it implies that religious people and atheists never really have moral disagreements because they are using two different definitions of wrong.³ For the divine command theorist, the statement ‘murder is wrong’ means ‘murder is contrary to God’s commands.’ But for the atheist who believes in right and wrong, the statement ‘murder is wrong’ must mean something entirely different, because they do not believe that murder is contrary to God’s commands, but they do believe it is wrong. It seems, however, that each person is agreeing about some quality called wrongness, even if they disagree about its source.

Adams himself abandoned this view later on for another, stronger view which we will

² Adams, 1987, pg 128-129

³ Murphy, 2014

explore later.

Causal Theory

In his paper “Divine Command Ethics,” Philip Quinn argues for a different kind of divine command metaethics. The theory is fairly simple: God’s acts of forbidding or commanding are sufficient and necessary causes of an action being obligatory/forbidden.⁴

Benefits

One objection to Divine Command Metaethics is that it leads to moral skepticism. This objection argues that since no one knows the will of God, and the will of God is what determines what is right and wrong, no one knows what is right and wrong. One obvious reply from a religious standpoint is that some know at least part of His will through religious texts (the Bible for Christians, the Koran for Muslims, etc...). The problem, the objector will point out, is that it seems that only those who follow the correct religion can know what is right and wrong in this view. However, it seems as though an atheist and a Christian and a Hindu can all equally know that it is wrong to murder even if they disagree on major theological statements.⁵

Quinn’s reply to this objection is that one can know about the effect of God’s will before knowing that it is, in fact, caused by God’s will. For example, a person can know that dogs exist without believing that God created them. Therefore, one can know that it is wrong to murder before knowing that God willed it to be wrong to murder.⁶

Moral Contradiction Objection

One other problem posed for divine command metaethics is the possibility of moral contradictions. In the Bible, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, He then stops

⁴ Quinn, 2006, pg 43

⁵ Murphy, 2014

⁶ Quinn, 2006, pg 44-46

him and later condemns child sacrifice.⁷ This exemplifies a problem: if God can command contradictory morals, can morality contradict itself? As an argument, it looks as such:

1. If it is obligatory that ϕ , then it is not obligatory that $\sim\phi$.
2. God can command both ϕ and $\sim\phi$.
3. Therefore, if God's commands are sufficient causes of obligation, it is possible that it is obligatory that ϕ and obligatory that $\sim\phi$.
4. Therefore, God's commands are not sufficient causes of obligation.

Where ϕ is a placeholder for some possible action by a morally accountable agent. This argument is valid, so in order to escape the objection, one must deny either statement (1) or statement (2). Quinn argues against (1) by giving examples of cases where one can be obligated to both ϕ and $\sim\phi$ and by saying that there are no direct logical contradictions in them both being true.⁸

Quinn's rejection of (1) seems incorrect to me, as it has some good qualities that Quinn does not mention. Quinn agrees, as far as I can tell, that there is always at least one right thing to do in any situation. Even when there are conflicts in obligations there is at least one action that better fulfills as many obligations as possible or that takes into account which obligations are more important. It seems reasonable to conclude that the obligations that you should ignore lose their obligatory status in these situations. The alternative to this is to say that when moral obligations conflict, there are no right actions whatsoever because no matter what you do you are breaking the moral law.

There is a moment in the movie *American Sniper* when the main character, the sniper

⁷ Genesis 22:1-14, Leviticus 18:21

⁸ Quinn, 2006, pg 50

Chris Kyle, is watching a convoy of marines moving through a city in Iraq, and sees a boy and his mother walk out and view the convoy. Kyle watches as the mother hands the boy a grenade and tells him to run to the convoy to kill them. Kyle is forced to shoot and kill the boy to protect the convoy. The movie uses the tension between two of Kyle's moral duties: to protect children and to protect his fellow soldiers. It is clear that Kyle did something difficult and perhaps terrible, but I don't think that he did anything *wrong*, if wrongness is to be understood as the quality possessed by acts contrary to the moral law. This reveals that some moral obligations cease to hold in difficult situations because they are superseded by other obligations. Kyle's obligation to protect and be gentle with children is overridden by the fact that that child is carrying a grenade and is seeking to harm his fellow soldiers. I think that all of these moral conflicts that Quinn uses to reject (1) have this same quality: that though the acts that are right in this circumstance are normally forbidden by certain obligations, these obligations do not hold in the situation.

In other words, morals have two qualities: a) what they command/forbid, b) in what situations they command/forbid it. For two moral commands to contradict in the sense that they do in (1), they have to command directly opposite actions (to murder, and simultaneously not murder) in the same situation. Quinn's examples do not hold this quality, and are therefore not reason to reject (1).

However, (2) appears to be a perfectly reasonable statement, and surely any divine command theorist would not want to say that there are things God can't make obligatory. But yet, if God were to command murder and forbid it simultaneously, we would wonder if He had somehow lost His heavenly stability and gone insane.

God's commands, and therefore the moral law, are a direct result of God's intentions. In

order for God to command and forbid the same thing, He must both intend for that action to be performed and intend for it to not be performed simultaneously. This is what is impossible, as no rational being can ultimately intend two directly opposite things simultaneously.

I believe that this answer successfully defends against the objection for the causal theorist, and for other versions of DCT as well.

The No Precedent Worry

There are a few worries about the causal version of divine command metaethics specifically. One is called the ‘no precedent worry’ in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.⁹ It states that there is no other instance where a nonmoral fact brings about a moral fact so simply and totally. There are, however, instances where a nonmoral fact contributes to bringing about a moral fact. For example, assume a man named Sam promises another man named Phil that he will not eat the last piece of pie. Sam now has a moral obligation to not eat the last piece of pie that he would not have had otherwise. However, this is only possible because there is prior moral fact that Sam ought to keep his promises. This case is not analogous to the way the causal theory supposes God causes morality, because there are no prior moral facts that give Him the ability to do so. The objection challenges the theorist to come up with a reason why it is possible for God to do so.

Let's assume that the moral law is contingent - as divine command metaethics traditionally supposes - and that God is omnipotent. Let's define omnipotence as the ability to actualize all possible contingent truths (except for those that can only be determined by other free agents, i.e. ‘Smith freely chooses to eat’). Since the moral law is contingent and is not determined by any other free agent, God can actualize any logically possible set of morals.

⁹ Murphy, 2014

The objector may argue that a particular moral law is a necessary truth, but he will simply begin to bicker with the divine command theorist as neither can prove either way this nature of morality without access to the divine mind. I simply wish to show that it is easy to move from a contingent morality and an omnipotent God to the His ability to create morals.

No Authority Worry

Another objection to the causal theory in particular is that it seems to contradict the idea that God has authority. In his book *An Essay on Divine Authority*, Mark Murphy defines practical authority as constitutive decisive control over another's reasons to perform an action.¹⁰ Constitutive here means that the authority's commands themselves constitute reasons to perform actions, and are not merely causes of those reasons. For example, if a mugger commands you to give him your wallet while threatening you with a gun, his command doesn't in itself constitute a reason, even though the fact that he gave you that command tells you that if you disobey it he may shoot you, which gives you a reason to give him your wallet. However, you are only performing this action for fear of your life, and the command is simply giving you reason to believe that if you don't give him your wallet, you will be shot. An authority, however, gives you reason to perform an action simply by commanding that action. In other words, if an authority does nothing other than command you to perform an action, then you have reason to perform that action, but if the mugger commands you to perform an action, you do not have reason to perform the action unless the mugger also threatens you in some way.

The problem with the causal version of divine command metaethics, as Murphy points out, is that God, to most theists, is a practical authority. However, if God merely causes the moral law to come into existence, His commands lose practical authority because the commands

¹⁰ Murphy, 2002, pg 15

cause a person to have reason to perform an action (by making it obligatory) but are not themselves reasons to perform the action. This reduces God's commands to those of the mugger, who brings about a reason to act, but only through causality, not authority.¹¹

The supporter of causal theory could argue that Murphy's definition of authority is wrong. Even if Murphy's precise definition is incorrect, however, the problem seems to be with exactly where moral authority lies in the causal theory. A divine command theorist wishes to say that God has authority, however, Murphy's objection states that it in fact lies with the moral law that God created. As with the mugger, in this view, God's commands only bring about reasons to act if they in fact cause morals to come into being.

If we redefine authority to mean simply "the ability to create laws" we escape Murphy's objection, however this results in other problems. First, does the moral law itself have authority? By this definition it does not, because the moral law does not itself have the ability to create laws. Second, does anyone other than God have authority? Surely no one else can create morals, and therefore God is the only authority. Both of these results seem incorrect.

Another way of looking at this, however, would be in arguing that God's authority is what causes the moral law to have its authority in the first place. This means that God still has authority, but simply exercises it through the moral law. This is analogous to how a legislature exercises its authority over a nation by passing laws that govern that nation.¹² Let's call this kind of authority *legislative authority*.

If we allow for legislative authority, the causal theory does seem to provide an explanation for God's authority. However, legislative authority is not the only sort of authority

¹¹ Murphy, 2002, pg 74-75

¹² Suggested by Dr. David Mcnaughton

there is. Murphy's definition seems to fit what I will call executive authority. This sort of authority is more akin to a general on the battlefield commanding his soldiers than that of a legislature. Through orders, the general can tell his soldiers where to go and who to fight, as opposed to laws. I will use the words *order* and *law* in contrast to one another and *commands* to mean either or both of them.

In the famous story in Genesis, God orders Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to Canaan.¹³ Later, in Exodus, God gives standing laws, written in stone, to Moses.¹⁴ Both of these displays of authority seem intuitively different. God's command to Abraham to leave his homeland is an immediate, one-time request from the deity that is directed to a specific person. The law God gives to Moses is a standing decree that places a demand on a group of people. The former is an act of executive authority, the latter is an act of legislative authority.

Note some of the typical differences between orders and laws in these examples. Firstly, their scope: the ten commandments are intended to be the moral basis for the nation of Israel for a very long time, but God's order to Abraham to go to Canaan only lasts a few years. Secondly, the medium with which they are communicated: the law is written on stone, which represents a sense of permanence, while the order is spoken, which conveys urgency and impermanence. Thirdly, the order can be accomplished, but the Ten Commandments cannot. What I mean by this is that the order gives a mission for Abraham to perform, namely, go to Canaan, and once he has accomplished it, he is no longer obligated by the order. However, the Ten Commandments, for example "do not steal," lack this quality because no matter how many times someone refrains from stealing, they are still obligated by the law to not steal.

¹³ Genesis 12:1

¹⁴ Exodus 20

There is a sense in which the difference between these two is in their scope, i.e. orders are temporary commands to an individual, while laws are longstanding commands to a group, but there is another sense in which is not picked up by this. A general can assign a unit of the military, or the entirety of a military, to remain in a particular place indefinitely. This might not be a law, but it is a longstanding command to a group.

The other key differentiators between laws and orders is that laws are intended to establish a standard of behavior while orders are intended to provide temporary direction. “Thou shalt not steal” establishes the standard of not stealing. God’s command for Abraham to go to Canaan tells Abraham where to go in that particular moment.

A law, then, is a command from an authority that establishes or adds to a standard of behavior for the members of a group. An order is a command from an authority that temporarily directs an individual or a group. A standard of behavior is a list of generally obligatory, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for each member of the group.

If we suppose that legislative authority and executive authority are different, and suppose divine command metaethics, then we must agree that God has both executive and legislative authority. To do otherwise would be to say that there is a sort of authority that God doesn’t have.

If God merely causes the moral law when He commands and this is the only way He does so, then it seems that He only has legislative authority. Also, if God legislates that He has executive authority (i.e. God creates a moral that states “it is obligatory to obey God’s orders”), His executive authority is derived from the moral law instead of basic. This is not what a divine command theorist wants.

One possible way out of the problem is to argue for two coexisting ways in which morals are defined. Basically, to combine the causal theory to legislative authority, and some other

version of the theory to executive authority. However, by Occam, if it is not necessary to assume more than one version of morality, then we have likely gone wrong. Therefore, this should be a last resort.

Another way out of this may be to argue that the two sorts of authority are actually the same. Within the causal theory, this means to argue that each time God orders, He is actually legislating. For example, when God orders Abraham to go to Canaan, He is creating a law that is specific to Abraham, and specific to that time in his life.

This means that the only real difference between the orders of God and the laws of God is their scope. However, it seems that in the two examples presented earlier, there is something different about the two acts God is performing. By arguing the two are the same, we are rejecting that intuition.

Reduction View

Another version of divine command metaethics, however, gives a much more intuitive account of executive authority. The reduction version, in which the property "is obligatory" is identified with the property "is commanded by God," implies that God's commands constitute reasons for an action quite obviously.

The reduction version of Divine Command Metaethics was originally proposed by Robert Adams in his paper *Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again*. In it, he argues:

*"Ethical wrongness is (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. I regard this as a metaphysically necessary, but not an analytic or a priori truth."*¹⁵

He also says, more generally, that ethical obligation is the property of being commanded by a

¹⁵ Adams, 1987, pg 139

loving God and that ethical permissiveness is the property of not being forbidden by the commands of a loving God.

When he says "I regard this as a metaphysically necessary, but not an analytic or a priori truth," he is arguing that though this is the correct definition of right and wrong, this definition is not discoverable merely through thought experiments, but must be found through experience. The classical example of this sort of reasoning is water. The chemical formula of water is H₂O. This, arguably, is a necessary truth, and water can be defined as "the compound consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom." However, the chemical formula of water was not known until it was discovered through scientific experimentation. No one is able to merely sit down and think about water to discover its chemical formula. They must first interact with it. But, the chemical formula of water is a necessary truth about water.

A necessary truth is one that is true in all possible worlds, while a contingent truth is true in our world but is false in at least one possible world. To say that it is a necessary truth that water is H₂O is to say that in no possible world where water exists is any water molecule not composed entirely of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. Also, if either hydrogen or oxygen do not exist in some possible world, water does not exist in that world.

Similarly, to say that it is a necessary truth that ethical wrongness is identical with the property of being forbidden by God is to say that in every possible world where there is moral wrongness, it is always identical with being forbidden by the commands of a loving God.

In regards to the worry about authority, this version of divine command metaethics very easily accounts for God's executive authority. Since God's commands are the very thing that define obligation, it follows that God's commands constitute reasons to perform actions, and

therefore God has executive authority.¹⁶ God also, when he declares a law, is able to establish a standard of behavior and therefore also has legislative authority because his laws, by definition, determine what is obligatory.

Objections

One of the challenges to this view is that the water/H₂O analogy fails because the chemical formula for water is clearly a posteriori while the identification of morals with God's commands is a priori.¹⁷ This is a concern because it appears that a person with no knowledge of God's involvement in morality fails to use the concept of morality in a masterful way, while those who use the term water without knowing that water is H₂O just don't know this interesting fact.

Since the reduction theory defines what is morally right as that which is in accordance with God's orders/laws, morality is, in this view, defined by an act of communication. Because of this, it seems that the main way one comes to know whether something is morally right or wrong is by having an experience where they come to the knowledge that God has in fact commanded or forbidden it. This can be either because God tells them so or because someone else reports to them what God has said. This means that knowledge of what is morally right and morally wrong is a posteriori, or known by experience.

The question however, is not about the knowledge of what particular things are moral or immoral, it concerns how the knowledge of the nature of morality itself is attained.

Water has multiple descriptions one could use as its definition. First is "that clear liquid

¹⁶ Murphy, 2002, pg 82

¹⁷ Murphy, 2014

we drink.” This is the definition that we all learn first. This definition tells us little about the nature of water, and we can deduce very little about how it acts from it. The more precise definition is “the chemical with the formula H₂O.” This definition we learned after carefully studying water. Also, if one were to know all the physical laws of the universe and know precisely what hydrogen and oxygen are, I suppose that one could deduce a priori that H₂O is a clear liquid that humans can drink (though not whether humans do, in fact, drink it).

With regards to morality, there are also multiple definitions one can use. The one we learn first is “that which obligates us.” This definition also tells us very little about what the nature of morality is and how it works. The more precise definition is “that which is in accordance with God’s orders/laws.” I propose that this is learned after one carefully studies morality and interacts with it. And that if one knew what sort of being God is and knew what ordering and legislating are they would be able to deduce a priori that God’s orders are in fact obligatory.

One can identify other qualities of morality based on their experience, like “what is morally wrong tends to bother my conscience.” Or, “it is morally wrong to harm others for no reason.” These things provide ways for those who do not know about God’s involvement in morality to discover that certain things are morally wrong. And one might even be able to discover a crude definition of morality that lines up with nearly every one of God’s orders/laws that actually exist. These crude definitions are not necessary truths about God’s commands, but can be helpful guides in the actual world.

A crude definition of morality may give one the ability to say things like “that’s wrong” with a high degree of accuracy. However, unless one uses the actual definition of morality, they are unable to answer certain metaethical questions. For the sake of example, let’s assume that a

harm-based ethic, which asserts that morally incorrect actions are those that harm others, is a crudely correct definition of morality. The person who uses this definition might be able to answer the question "is it wrong to murder?" correctly, but they won't be able to answer the question "why is it wrong to murder?" completely. Though "it harms another person" is certainly true, a more complete answer, in the eyes of the divine command theorist, is "God intends human dignity and doesn't want us to harm each other." Without the knowledge that God's commands are the definition of morality, one is unable to give this answer.

This account of the difference between a moral atheist and a moral theist seems rather plausible.

Supervenience Objection

Another objection to the reduction view comes from Mark Murphy's Essay on Divine Authority. He argues that if reduction DCT is true, it cannot be true that the moral supervenes on the nonmoral and that God is free to make whatever commands He chooses simultaneously.¹⁸

'The moral supervenes on the nonmoral' is a phrase that means that any possible world with all the same nonmoral properties will have the same moral properties. In other words, no possible worlds exist that have the same nonmoral properties and not the same moral properties. If this is true, and moral properties are defined as God's orders/legislations, then it appears that God's commands are fixed by the way the world otherwise is.

This fixing of God's commands is a problem because God is supposed to be free to make His own choices.

This objection fails because even if everything is exactly the same physically in two possible worlds, and there are moral differences between them, there are also non-moral

¹⁸ Murphy, 2002, pg 83-89

differences that are related to the moral ones. Supervenience does not mean that the nonmoral causes the moral, only that the two coincide. Let's consider two possible worlds that are entirely the same physically. In these worlds, on the evening of September 29th, a man named Smith is studying the gospel of Matthew and reads the phrase "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ At that moment, in one such possible world, God orders Smith to be a missionary in a foreign land by implanting a thought in his head. Smith completely disregards the thought and ignores the order of the sovereign God and becomes a philosopher instead. In the other possible world, God does not order Smith to be a missionary, and Smith has all of the same emotional and physical experiences, including becoming a philosopher. Both worlds appear to be physically equivalent and have different moral properties. However, in one world, Smith ignores an order from God on the evening of September 29th and in the other Smith does not ignore an order from God during the same evening. This is a nonmoral difference. God freely made the choice to order Smith and, even if the order made no physical difference, there was still a nonmoral difference between these two possible worlds. Note that it immediately follows that there is at least another nonmoral difference between these two possible worlds: in one, God decided to order Smith to become a missionary, and in the other, God did not decide to do so. This allows for God's freedom of choice, since the moral difference would not have happened if God chose otherwise, and the nonmoral difference is God's act of choosing itself.

One might say at this point that supervenience is concerned with physical nonmoral properties, not these nonphysical properties. It seems doubtful that these two possible worlds have exactly the same physical properties as well. In order for God to communicate His order to

¹⁹ Matthew 28:19

Smith, Smith would have to be able to perceive it in some way. This would require a change in Smith's psychological state. As modern neuroscience suggests, changes in psychological states are at least intimately connected with changes in physical ones, if they are not fully equatable with such changes. Hence, God's act of ordering Smith would involve some kind of physical change in Smith's brain, and therefore, a physical difference in these two possible worlds that is causally connected with the moral difference.

Since the version of the reduction view that I am arguing for involves both orders and laws, and that the example I have just used involves two close possible worlds with the major difference being an order and not a law, one might wonder whether God's act of legislation involves similar differences in a possible world. I think it does. This is because both laws and orders are acts of communication.

In order for a law to come about, it must be expressed, just like an order. Intuitively, however, a successful law is not necessarily perceived by all people who are obligated by it. However, in order for an expression to be communicated at all, someone has to perceive it, and that someone would then in turn have a physical difference in their brain, just like Smith in the previous example had.

It seems, then, that we should expect that both orders and laws necessitate differences in the nonmoral world, and so supervenience holds without any strange implications for divine command metaethics.

An Answer to Perennial Objections

God is Caring

In the course of this discussion on divine command metaethics, I am assuming a definition of God that consists of three qualities:

i) God is omnipotent

God is able to actualize all logically possible states of affairs other than the free choices of other free beings.

ii) God is omniscient

God knows all facts about the universe.

iii) God is rational

God cannot hold two directly contradictory intentions or perform actions He does not intend. His intentions are also consistent.

I will now seek to show that the statement ‘God is caring’²⁰ can be derived from these three qualities. I define caring here as ‘x cares for y if x intends the well-being of y.’ Therefore, *God is caring* means that for all rational beings in the universe, God intends their well-being.

The term ‘well-being’ has a more controversial definition.

One proposed definition of well-being is *the state in which all of the person’s desires are fulfilled*. But with this definition, well-being for any suicidal person is death, even those without any reasons to want to die, but that is absurd. A more plausible version of this theory is that well-being is what a person would desire if they were fully informed of all the relevant descriptive facts about the state of being. The problem with this attempted solution is that it tries to rule out the malady of a person’s desires by ruling out a malady of their reason. John Rawls famously proposed the example of a Harvard mathematics professor, who, knowing all the options available to her, develops a prodigious desire to count blades of grass. In this view, well-being

²⁰ I do not use the word *loving* here as many divine command theorists do, because I do not find the strength of the word necessary for the argument, nor am I sure that it follows from the premises. Loving appears to me to mean “cares for well being to its own detriment.” The idea of detriment does not make sense unless one also supposes that God has something to lose.

for her would be to do nothing all day but eat, sleep, and count grass. This does not seem correct to me.²¹

Another proposed definition is that well-being is *the state in which a person experiences the minimum amount of pain and the maximum amount of pleasure (including emotional pleasure)*.²² Imagine a brain surgeon who is able to switch the perceptions of pleasure and pain around in a person's brain, so that whenever they experience something that would normally cause them pain, they experience pleasure, and when they experience something that would normally be pleasurable for them, they experience pain. For such a person to be in a state of well-being, they must repeatedly harm themselves so that they can experience pleasure, and avoid even the simplest pleasures that might cause them pain. Also, does the brain surgeon's action reduce or increase the person's well-being? By this definition, that seems to depend solely on how the person's behavior changes after the surgery. In fact, if the person responds by breaking both of their legs and only eating by swallowing food whole, they may actually increase their well-being. These are absurd implications.

It seems as though well-being involves a state of affairs that is independent of how the person considers them or experiences them. I will therefore define well-being as the originally intended state of the person. This means that well-being is equated with whatever state of affairs the being's creator intended, and therefore only makes sense if there is a creator.²³ In the example of the surgery that reverses pleasure and pain, the original design of the person is that they experience pleasure and pain in the original way. Thus, perverse surgery decreases the well-

²¹ Crisp, 2015

²² Crisp, 2015

²³ There is another view, suggested by Aristotle, that well-being is defined by achieving human perfection (Crisp, 2015). It seems to me that the concept of perfection is only understandable in reference to design and therefore this view simply dissolves into the view presented.

being of the person. Even though it isn't limited to it, the well being of a person does involve them not being in pain (I will justify this later). So, it does seem that a person who has undergone this surgery must then avoid acts that they would normally perform purely for the sake of pleasure, or minimize the things that would normally be pleasurable about a particular act in order to remain in a state of well being. But, they would still want to avoid unnecessarily harming their bodies in order to obtain pleasure, since this would reduce their well-being. This seems to be how we would intuitively navigate this situation.

Since well-being is defined by whatever state a person's creator intended them to be in, and all persons are created by God, then well-being is whatever state God originally intended a person to be in.

Since the originally intended state of a person is by definition the state God intended them to be in when He created them, and God's intentions for a person are consistent, God always intends the well being of every being He has created. And since every person is created by God, God is therefore caring.

This does not imply that God intends the well being of every person more than He intends their harm, e.g. if B has become a murderer, God could have a desire for justice that might lead Him to punish B because His desire for justice is stronger than His desire for B's well-being.

Desiring Pain

God might want to cause someone pain for the sake of justice, or for some other indirect reason, but I will now argue from the axioms in the previous section that, in regards to His creation, God cannot intrinsically intend pain.

God cares for His creation, which means that He wants all His creations to be in the state

that He originally intended them to be in. But how do we know that God did not originally intend His creations to be in a state of constant, unfathomable agony?

In order to answer this question, we must have a functioning definition of both pain and pleasure. I will define pain as the category of physical and emotional sensations that are always intrinsically undesired for the person experiencing them, and I will define pleasure as the category of sensations that are always intrinsically desired. Nothing belongs to both categories because it is absurd for something to be both intrinsically desired and undesired.

There does exist a psychological disposition known as masochism that desires pain, but I assume such a disposition is derived either from an intense self hatred or from an association between pain and an even stronger pleasure, either from sex or some sort of adrenaline rush. Therefore, the masochist desires intrinsically to avoid pain but desires pain extrinsically even more.

Pain and pleasure function as motivators that encourage us to perform one action over another. Since pain is intrinsically undesired by us, we typically want to avoid painful situations. And since pleasure is intrinsically desired, we want to be in pleasurable situations.

The action a person chooses to perform is the one that they are most motivated to perform. They might freely choose some things that they intrinsically desire or be confused about what they should extrinsically desire, but they will always perform at least what they believe is the best action to attain what they desire most in that moment.²⁴ This means that to want someone to attempt to perform an action is to want them to desire, all things considered, to

²⁴ My account of weakness of will is that a person's greatest momentary desire might be contradictory to their greatest desire in another moment. This means that a person can want to remain faithful to their diet in most situations, but when they encounter a piece of chocolate cake, their desire for the cake becomes their strongest desire and they break their diet.

perform an action. And vice versa. A creator therefore always designs his creation to attempt to avoid pain, if the creation has the ability to feel pain.

It seems consistent for one to intend anything one creates to try to perform what it is designed to do, and irrational to intend a creation to avoid what it is designed for. For example, an engineer designs a clasp made out of two magnets so that when the two sides of the clasp come close to each other they will attract. But instead of using opposite polarity magnets to make them attract, he uses magnets with the same polarity so that they never attract on their own and so he must force them together. This seems rather irrational.

Creating beings with free will is more complicated than clasps, but the same sort of principle applies. Assume God wants a man named James to become an architect, so He gives him a very strong desire to not be an architect. That seems absurd, as James will never, on his own, become an architect.

If you want someone to be in pain, you want them to avoid the situation they are in. If you create a being to be in pain, you want it to avoid the situation you want it to be in. This is irrational. Therefore it is irrational for God to create a being to be in pain.

It would be odd to design something to avoid an experience the creator feels fully neutral about, as it would be to design something to avoid something he has no intention for it to avoid. In fact, if God designed all humans with a ferocious hatred of carrots, we would wonder if He intended for us to not eat carrots. Therefore it would be irrational for God to design His creation to experience pain in situations He felt neutral about as well.

Therefore, since it would be irrational for God to design His creation to experience pain in both situations He wanted them to be in, and situations He felt neutral about, the only rational place for Him to design His creation to experience pain is in a situation that He doesn't want His

creation to be in.

Therefore, God necessarily creates something with the intention that it not be in pain. And so He cannot intrinsically intend pain on His creation, as that would be a contradictory intention.

Essentially what I have just argued is that pain is, necessarily, not part of well-being. Pain is intrinsically undesired and, when functioning as designed, is an indicator of a loss of well-being. If well-being means to be in pain, then it is well-being to not be in well-being. This is a contradiction. Since God is caring, God intrinsically desires that humans not be in a state of pain.

I must note here, that I am not saying that God never desires painful states or commands his creation to endure such pain, only that the pain itself is never what God ultimately desires.

Implications

One of the common objections to divine command metaethics is that it makes the moral law arbitrary. In other words, God's will, which determines the law, is not determined by anything else, therefore the moral law is determined ultimately by nothing.²⁵ However, what I have shown is that when God creates something, He necessarily desires to maintain it. Therefore, there is at least one motive for God that would lead Him to make certain commands. This does not imply that this is an exhaustive list of His will, however, it does follow that any set of orders and laws that God makes will take this intention into account, and will have at least one obligation that is motivated by this intention.

Another perennial objection to divine command metaethics is a dilemma: can God command seemingly immoral things, like the gratuitous torture of innocents? If He can, then the divine command theorist is compelled to accept the gratuitous torture of innocents as a morally

²⁵ Murphy 2014

obligatory act in such a world. If God cannot, then He appears to not be free to make commands.²⁶ I take the latter horn of the dilemma, because I think in order to command such an arbitrarily evil thing, God must desire His creation's pain for its own sake, which is irrational. Therefore, to say that God is not free to make such a law or order something like it is essentially saying that God is not free to do what He doesn't want to do. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to believe.

²⁶ Murphy, 2014

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