DIVINE COMMAND THEORY
IN THE PASSAGE OF HISTORY

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Abstract. Are actions that are morally good, morally good because God makes them so (e.g., by commanding them)? Or does God urge humans to do them because they are morally good anyway? What is, in general, the relationship between divine commands and ethical duties? It is not an uncommon belief among theists that morality depends entirely on the will or commands of God: all moral facts consist exclusively in facts about his will or commands. Thus, not only is an action right because it is commanded by God, but its conformity to his commands is what alone makes it right. An action is right (wrong) solely because he commands (forbids) it, and solely in virtue of his doing so. This view has come to be known as the „divine command theory of morality". This paper is devoted to a brief reconstruction of claims and controversies surrounding the theory, beginning with Plato's Euthyphro, which is the historical initiator of the debate and to a reconstruction of the various lines of argument that have been set forth to defend the theory.

I. The Euthyphro Dilemma

Historically, the first debate on the divine command theory of morality appears in Plato's *Euthyphro*,[1] in which Socrates is in discussion with a young Athenian called Euthyphro.[2] Socrates meets the young man outside the office of the king Archon, where they explain to one another why they are to appear in the court. Socrates says that he is being prosecuted for impiety. Whereas, Euthyphro calmly says that he intends to prosecute his father on the charge of homicide and claims that his action is a model of piety (5d).

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[1] Plato (1997).

[2] This is not a consensus. Some like Robert G. Hoerber believe that Euthyphro was of a mature age of about 50 years and his father possibly 75 years old (1958, p. 95).

He states that in a drunken brawl on his family farm estate in Naxos, a farm labourer quarrelled with one of his father's slaves while he was drunk and killed him. His father arrested the killer, tied his hands and feet, and threw him in a ditch. He then sent a man to ask the religious authorities in Athens what ought to be done. Meanwhile, the father neglected the health of the labourer, thinking him a murderer, and that it wouldn't matter if he died. As a result, before a reply came back from the mainland, the prisoner died from starvation, cold, and his bonds.[3] I found it, Euthyphro says, very difficult to sit at my father's fireside and pretend that nothing had happened. To the indignation of all of my family, I thought I had a duty to prosecute my father. This is the only way that I can make my family and father clean of blood-guilt. I have, therefore, decided to prosecute my father on the charge of murder on a murderer's behalf.[4] Euthyphro continued– according to my father and my relatives, my father did not even kill the man. And even if he did, since the victim was a murderer, I shouldn't be troubled on behalf of such a person because it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. Euthyphro here accused them of lack of knowledge as to what constitutes piety and impiety (5e).[5]

Socrates expresses surprise at Euthyphro's intention and the judgement that such an act is pious and that what his father has done is impious. Socrates asks, how and why do you think you have exact knowledge of religion and of things pious and impious? Euthyphro answers that prosecuting a wrongdoer is pious, whether it is your friend, or your parents, or a stranger

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[3] Whether the person Euthyphro and the story that he wanted to prosecute his father is a historical fact or not is not known for sure. Some commentators like B. Jowett and A. E. Taylor believe that the story is true. According to A. E. Taylor the scene „must be a historical fact; the situation is too *bizarre* to be a natural fiction" (1949, 95 note 4, 146) and B. Jowett states: „An incident which may perhaps really have occurred in the family of Euthyphro, a learned Athenian diviner and soothsayer, furnishes the occasion of the decision" (96 note 1) III 59. The name Euthyphro like most of the other names in Plato's dialogue is probably a real name. Euthyphro is mentioned several times in the *Cratylus* as an enthusiastic etymologist (96 note, III 59).

[4] It is interesting to note that Euthyphro's intention of prosecuting his father did not arise out of anger or hatred towards his father, but out of the desire to cleanse himself and his father from blood guilt. See Robert Hoerber, (1958, p. 97) and A. E. Taylor (1949, 95 note 4, 146-7). Also, the age of his father which was estimated at around seventy-five and the fact that the crime was not intentional and happened five years previous, all substantiate this view. Peter Geach also endorses this position (1966, p. 370).

[5] In some texts the Greek word is translated sometimes as „holy" and „unholy", sometimes as „piety" and „impiety", and some commentators, such as William S. Cobb (1985) and C.C.W. Taylor (1982) translated it as „religious" and „not religious". This chapter uses the term „piety" and „impiety" as it is more common among translators.

does not make a difference. And not prosecuting such a person is impious (10d). But Socrates says that he is looking for a formula by virtue of which something is pious or impious, and calls for further explanation. After some challenges, Euthyphro claims that not only is prosecuting wrongdoers pious, but also that there are other kinds of acts that can be regarded as pious. He then presents his definition – „What is agreeable to the gods is pious and what is not agreeable to them is impious" (7a).

Euthyphro, as represented in the dialogue, is a simple and earnest believer in the traditions of the Hellenes, and the reply manifestly echoes his belief in those traditions. Yet, it is also part of this mythical tradition that the gods often quarrel and fight with each other. Euthyphro is portrayed as a person who maintains that the stories about quarrels among the gods are literally true. Socrates immediately realises that Euthyphro's belief in the occurrence of quarrelling among the gods would undermine his characterisation of piety and gets him in one move. To show this, he begins by making a distinction between questions of fact and questions of value. He asserts that men do not quarrel about questions of fact, like accountancy, geometrical measurement, or weighing, for which there are clear decision making procedures, but there is disagreement over values such as fairness and unfairness, or good and bad. Similarly, if the gods quarrel about anything, as Euthyphro believes they do, they would presumably quarrel about questions of value, not matters of fact. In that case, there is no guarantee that the gods all agree whether the act of prosecuting one's father is an act of piety. Some gods may consider it as pious and some as impious. Therefore, the proposal that an act is pious if the gods like it cannot be considered as a satisfactory characterisation of piety.

Euthyphro protests, claiming that all the gods would agree that wrongful homicide must be punished. For the sake of argument Socrates agrees with Euthyphro and endorses the view that the gods all agree on the wrongfulness of homicide. Socrates proposes to Euthyphro, that he can, if he likes, modify his assertion by saying, „the pious is what *all* the gods love" so as to rule out the possibility that the same act might be both pious and impious. Euthyphro happily accepts this proposal, apparently unaware of Socrates' next move (9d-e).

At this point, the dialogue reaches the most profound and the most fundamental part of the discussion. Socrates asks Euthyphro whether the pious is loved by all the gods because it is pious, or it is pious because it is loved by all the gods (10a). The question shows that Socrates here is seeking to find what is the nature of piety and impiety, and whether being loved by the gods constitutes the nature of piety or not. Socrates, of course, wishes

Euthyphro to choose the first option; that is, the pious is loved by all the gods because it is pious, but Euthyphro fails to understand the question. To make the point clear Socrates provides him with some examples.

To refute Euthyphro's definition that 'the pious is what all the gods love', Socrates begins by noting that in everyday language we speak of 'a thing being carried' and 'a thing carrying', 'a thing being led' and 'a thing leading', 'a thing being loved' and 'a thing loving' etc. The first member of each pair is a passive participle while the second an active participle, each member functioning differently. This distinction, as it stands, does not directly play any substantial part in the rest of the argument. Socrates mentions it just to use it as a parallel for the notion of love.

Having said this, Socrates argues that something is in a state of 'being loved' because the gods love it, not the other way around. Piety is something that is being loved by the gods but this does not explain why the gods love piety just as saying that something is being carried does not explain why it is being carried.

Now Socrates brings forth an argument to support his claim, but it has proved highly difficult to understand its nature (10a-11b). The argument has been regarded by commentators to be one of the most elusive arguments in all of Plato's writing.[6]

In what follows, I will present the reconstructions of this argument offered by Peter Geach, Mark Cohen and Richard Sharvy respectively, and I will argue that Sharvy's interpretation is most likely closer to the truth.

Peter Geach's recapitulation of Socrates' argument goes as follows: According to Geach, Socrates aims to show that Euthyphro should agree that the following pair of propositions is true:

(1) What is pious is loved by the Gods because it is pious
(2) What is God-loved is God-loved because it is loved by the Gods

and that the following pair are false:

(3) What is God-loved is loved by the Gods because it is God-loved
(4) What is pious is pious because it is loved by the Gods.

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[6] Marc Cohen: „This difficulty has reduced translators to babble and driven commentators to despair" (1971, p. 4).

Now, we get (3) from (1) by substituting 'God-loved' for 'pious', and (4) from (2) by reversing the substitution. Consequently, (3) and (4) ought to be both true if *God-loved* and *pious* were the same; „but in fact it is quite the opposite," so *God-loved* and *pious* cannot be the same.

Peter Geach claims that this argument is based on the Leibnizian principle of *substitutivity of identicals*.

The principle underlying the argument appears to be the Leibnizian principle that two expressions for the same thing must be mutually replaceable *salva veritate*-so that a change from truth to falsehood upon such replacement must mean that we do not have two expressions for the same thing (Geach, 1966, p. 376).

Peter Geach observes that Socrates' argument is not explicitly based on Leibniz's law but holds that we may still „discern a *use* of the principle" in the argument (1966, p. 376).

Richard Sharvy (1972) argues against Peter Geach's interpretation of Socrates for the following reasons. Peter Geach claims that 'piety = being god-loved' is taken as the assertion that 'pious' and 'god-loved' are „expressions for the same thing". But Sharvy argues that the validity of this principle is in doubt. As an illustration, he gives the following example: the sentences 'I hit him because he was the man who hit me', and 'the man who just hit me = my father' do not imply that, 'I hit him because he was my father,' which follows the substitution of identicals. This example, Sharvy claims, shows that substitutions may fail in the second conjunct of statements of the form '*p* because *q*'. Another example meant to show that 'because' produces opacity within its first conjuncts is this: 'the number of planets is greater than 7 because there are more than 7 planets' and '9 = the number of planets' do not imply that '9 is greater than 7 because there are more than 7 planets' (1972, Pp. 123-4).

Peter Geach himself accepts the above criticism, and points out that the principle fails in contexts that are not „securely extensional", and that the term 'because' as a connective word generates such contexts. He then tries to patch things up by adding to the principle of substitutivity the principle that substitutivity should hold even in such intentional contexts if we have two terms that have the same *connotation* or *sense*, or which denote the same *Form*. Socrates' argument would then be interpreted as saying that 'pious' and 'god-loved' are not synonymous, or do not express the same Form. But this interpretation, Peter Geach suggests needs quite a bit of stretching, since Plato didn't make connotation-denotation distinctions or sense-reference distinctions, and would not admit the Form *god-loved*. So Sharvy argues that

the substitutivity principle does not seem to be the principle that underlies Socrates' argument (Sharvy, 1972, p. 124).

Geach's interpretation also comes under attack by Marc Cohen. Criticising Geach, Mark Cohen writes:

> [T]he principle which Socrates' argument depends on is not, as Geach thinks, „the Leibnizian principle...” Rather, it is a principle which might be formulated roughly as follows: two expressions, one of which is a definition of the other, must be mutually replaceable *salva veritate*. We might call this the principle of substitutivity of definitional equivalents, understanding definitional equivalents to be a pair of expressions one of which is a definition of the other (1971, pp. 171-2).

According to Sharvy, Cohen seems to be on the right track (1972, p. 125). Socrates' argument is not about the *identity* of piety and god-lovedness, rather it is that piety cannot be *defined* or *analysed* as god-lovedness. Even so, it is not difficult to think of counter examples to Cohen's principle. Father = *df* male parent, is a correct definition. Now suppose that Herbert is a father. Then, it is true that

(5) Herbert is a father because he is a male parent,

for being male and a parent is what makes Herbert a father. Yet it is false that Herbert is a father because he is a father. Consequently, we can not validly substitute 'father' for 'male parent' in the second conjunct of (5), and so it is false that

(6) if father = *df* male parent, then, if Herbert is a father because he is a male parent, then Herbert is a father because he is a father.

It is also false that Herbert is a male parent because he is a male parent, which means we cannot substitute 'male parent' for 'father' in the first conjunct of (5), and so it is false that

(7) If father =*df* male parent, then if Herbert is a father because he is a male parent, then Herbert is a male parent because he is a male parent.

So Cohen's principle of substitutivity of definitional equivalents fails in contexts composed with the term 'because' (Sharvy, 1972, p. 125-6).

Another problem with Cohen's principle is that the idea of „definitional equivalents” suggests that the phrase 'is defined as' is symmetric. But it is not. The concept *male parent* is the analysis or definition of the concept

father, but not vice versa. An analysis of the concept „*male parent*" would involve the further analysis of the concepts „*male*" and „*parent*" themselves: being of the sex that performs the fertilizing function, and having produced offspring (1971, p. 127-8). Also there is no need in Socrates' argument for a symmetric relationship. His claim is that the gods love *a* because *a* is pious, and not that *a* is pious because the gods love *a*.

Criticising the principles proposed by Geach and Cohen, Sharvy (1972) proposes an alternative principle that seems more plausible . To illustrate Sharvy's analysis of Socrates' argument, it is worthwhile to introduce six premises.

(8) *a* is loved by the gods because *a* is pious (10d 6-8, 10e 2-4),
(9) *a* is not pious because *a* is loved by the gods (*loc. cit*).
(10) *a* is god-loved because *a* is loved by the gods (10e 5-8),
(11) *a* is not loved by the gods because *a* is god-loved (*loc. cit*),
(12) If piety= god-lovedness, then if *a* is loved [by the gods] because *a* is pious, then *a* is loved [by the gods] because *a* is god-loved (10e 9-11al), and
(13) [if piety = god-lovedness, then] if *a* is god-loved because *a* is loved by the gods, then *a* is pious because *a* is loved by the gods (11al-3).

Conclusion:

(14) piety is not the same as = god-lovedness.

The word-for-word translation of the actual Socratic statements which makes the first four premises is this: „The pious is loved by the gods because it is pious; the pious is not pious because it is loved by the gods; the god-loved is god-loved because it is loved by the gods; the god-loved is not loved by the gods because it is god-loved". It then follows that the pious is not equal to the god-loved.

 But the premises (12) and (13) are two disjoint sub–arguments. (12) is of the form: if piety = god-lovedness, then if (8) then not (11); and (13) is of the form: if piety = god-lovedness, then if (10) then not (9). So from (12), (8) and not (11) the desired conclusion follows. Also, from (12), (10) and not (9) the desired conclusion will be achieved. Sharvy tries to find a correct principle to justify these two (12 and 13) rather complicated premises.

The question is then whether there can be found a plausible principle that allows the move from (8) through (12) and (13) to (14) – a principle which can plausibly be attributed to Socrates (Sharvy, 1972, p. 121).

To this end, Sharvy first rewrites premises (12), (13) and (14) changing '=' to '=*df*'. Accordingly, he argues that (12) and (13) can be justified by a theory of definitions as a species of formal cause.

According to Sharvy the crucial thing in understanding Socrates is to understand the meaning of the term „because" in the premises above. In the sentence „*p* because *q*" there are several ways in which q can be given as an explanation for p. Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of explanatory elements: matter, form, agent, and end:

> We say we know each thing only when we understand its first cause, and causes are spoken of in four senses. One of these means the essence, or its what-it-is-to-be, for the question 'why' leads in the end to a definition (Metaphysic, A3, 983a25-29).[7]

'Because' here, Sharvy says, has the sense of a 'formal-cause', for Socrates asks Euthyphro: to offer „the actual feature that makes all pious actions pious" (6d).

Sharvy adds that although for Aristotle definitions are not the only formal causes, they are an important category of formal causes. He states that for Socrates and Plato there are two elements in a definition: (1) a definition states a kind of cause, and (2) such causation is transitive (p. 129). These two principles will lead the person to the conclusion (14) (p. 129). The justification for (12) and (13) is that '=*df*' entails a kind of 'because', and the 'because' is a transitive kind (p. 128).

One might object by asking why Socrates went to the great trouble of introducing (8), (9), (10), and (11) rather than just (8) and (9)? (8) and (9) say although *a* is pious, *a* is not pious because *a* is loved by the gods (p. 129). However Socrates' conclusion is the denial of „*a* is the same as god-loved". So, the conclusion does not come directly from the second premise (9). But what is the reason for this?

The reason, Sharvy explains, seems to lie in the structure of Greek language. Recall that Euthyphro's original definition of piety, which was rejected by Socrates, was in an *active* voice, saying that a thing is pious just in case the gods love it. But Socrates rejects this definition for the reason that he wants to know what piety itself is. According to Sharvy, he does not want a *contextual* definition which merely shows how to eliminate the

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[7] Quoted from Richard Sharvy (1972, p. 128).

word 'pious' from sentences containing it, or even one which defines or analyses the whole sentence (1972, p. 130). He wants to know *what piety is*! A definition of a form like „piety is x". Therefore, Socrates shifts Euthyphro's definition of piety to fit this form. But due to the structure of Greek language, he only produces an *adjective* 'god-loved' which has the meaning of 'loved by the gods'. That is the reason why there are three sentences rather than two in Socrates' argument, which are related causally: P (*a* is pious), L (*a* is loved by the gods), and GL (*a* is god-loved). The argument concerning being carried or being seen leads to one point of the argument: that a passive verb statement is causally prior to a passive *participle* statement. From this Socrates concludes that L is *causally prior* to GL, for the adjective 'god-loved' was produced by analogy with passive participles, and L is constructed with a passive verb. So we get the third and fourth premises of the argument: GL because L, and not L because GL. L is *causally prior* to GL. Then, L because P, not P because L. P is strictly prior to L. Now there is a causal series of

$$P < L < GL.$$

By transitivity it follows that P is strictly causally prior to GL, i.e., that GL because P, and not P because GL. That is, *a* is god-loved because *a* is loved by the gods, and *a* is loved by the gods because *a* is pious.[8]

The remainder of the dialogue is less important. By now Euthyphro's definition of piety has been refuted, since it has been shown that it leads to a contradiction. Socrates therefore invites Euthyphro to give another definition of piety, but Euthyphro is (not surprisingly) in complete bewilderment and cannot do so. So Socrates steps in and gives a suggestion. Doesn't it seem to you, he says, that whatever is pious is just? (ed-5) Euthyphro agrees on this and so Socrates asks whether it is true in a reverse case, that is, whether whatever is just is pious as well. Euthyphro is again unable to answer this and so Socrates gives an example to make the matter simple. All odd numbers are numbers, but not all numbers are odd numbers. Euthyphro understand and settles for the thesis that every pious action is just but not vice versa.

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[8] Many commentators see Socrates argument simply as a fallacy, which does not stand up to logical scrutiny. Robert Hoerber, for instance, states that the argument is an illogical argument (1958, p. 102). John Brown holds that Socrates argument is fallaciously unequivocal (1964, p. 2). Whereas Richard Sharvy (1972), as it is presented here, defends Socrates and take his argument as a sound one.

Socrates then asks what kind of just acts are pious. Euthyphro answers that acts which have to do with ministering to the gods, are just and pious, while the rest have to do with ministering to human beings. Socrates says that ministering is not a clear word. Horse-training is ministering to horses and dog-trainers know how to minister to dogs. Does piety mean ministering to the gods, in this sense? Euthyphro protests that this is not what he meant; rather we serve the gods as slaves their master (13a-d). Socrates raises a further question about Euthyphro's answer. For a doctor the servant's work is directed towards health, for an architect towards building a house and so on. What is the purpose of us being a servant to the gods (13e-14)? What would be achieved by service to the gods? What would the achievement of the gods be in employing humans as slaves? Euthyphro does not provide a direct answer to this question and instead states that praying and sacrifices are pious actions and do not benefit the gods. They are acts of honour and courtesy that please the gods. Here Socrates takes Euthyphro to the original definition of piety, which was rejected earlier. He says that the pious is gratifying, but not beneficial or loved-by-the-gods. Euthyphro answers that this is the most loved by the gods. Socrates complains that they had earlier agreed that piety is not the same as loved-by-the-gods, but Euthyphro is again equating them. He asks for more clarification of the notion of piety, but Euthyphro says he is in a hurry and has to go to the court. The dialogue is regarded as a victory for Socrates.

It is interesting to note that the personality of Euthyphro is an ideal contrast to that of Socrates. There are only these two characters in the entire dialogue. Euthyphro is the one who claims full knowledge in religious affairs, whereas Socrates disclaims such knowledge. Euthyphro is going to prosecute his father on the charge of impiety whereas Socrates is to be prosecuted for being impious. Euthyphro believes in the literal meaning of fables and mythology, whereas Socrates doubts these. Euthyphro believes in the absolute standard of divine commands, whereas Socrates rejects it.

Although the dialogue finishes with no satisfactory definition of piety, one thing is clear, and that is Socrates' theoretically important argument that piety cannot be based on the gods will or approval. This is an important claim not only in ancient theology but also in contemporary ethical theory. For Euthyphro, in order to find out whether or not he ought to prosecute his father is to determine whether or not it is an act of piety, but to determine whether or not it is an act of piety is to find out if it is approved by the gods or not. For him ethical theory is a normative authoritarian theory, and he wishes to endorse an authoritarian meta-ethical theory, since for him 'piety' is defined in terms of the approval of an authority. He regards these authori-

ties as extremely wise and knowledgeable, and therefore their wisdom is the reason why they are moral authorities. Socrates argues that if piety is based on the gods' approval it cannot also be based on the reason upon which the gods' approval is based. If the gods' approvals have any rational bases, it is those rational bases that determine the piety of an action. In other words, if one's normative ethics is authoritarian, and one's authority is rational, and she uses her wisdom and knowledge in determining the right course of action, then one's meta-ethics cannot be authoritarian.[9]

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Historically Socrates' argument is the first argument against any theory which tries to base ethics on divine approval, whether it is that of one God or many gods. For a religious thinker this has serious implications. If one's reason in following divine commands is divine absolute sovereignty and freedom, then one can face the possibility of God commanding actions which are not acceptable by humans such as killing innocent children just for fun. One may argue that, as God is wise and omniscient, he has reasons to command his creatures, and therefore his commands are not arbitrary. This line of argument faces Socrates' challenge that if those reasons are the basis of God's commands, it is then those reasons which determine the validity of moral actions not the commands of God.

This problem aside, interpreting moral goodness in this way would make it impossible to attribute moral goodness to God. Logically speaking „God is good" would be an analytic statement, not a synthetic statement. The statement „God is good" does not offer a meaningful, informative sentence.[10] Finally, the divine command theory would undermine any possible reason for obeying divine commandments. If it is asked why one should obey divine commandments, it cannot be answered because God is morally good. One may obey him on the basis of his absolute power and the fact that if one does not obey him, one will be punished, but this is not a moral reason for a person to obey anyone's commands. On the other hand, if the theist takes moral rules as objective– independent of God's will and commandments, this would allow them to retain the belief that God is good, and safeguard human beings against receiving wrong commands. However, the position would set limits on the idea of divine omnipotence, sovereignty and freedom. These attributes would all be restricted by moral laws.

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[9] See Stephen Darwall (1998, p. 39-42).
[10] See Charles R. Pigden (1991, P. 426) and Stephen Darwall (1998, p. 34-35).

A thorough analysis of some aspects of this dilemma, which has come to be known as the *Euthyphro* dilemma, needs a separate paper. The remainder of this paper briefly explores the main avenues that have historically been taken to defend the divine command theory of ethics, and thereby reconstructs three general lines of argument in defence of the theory. Specifically, in reading the historical literature, three lines of reasoning can be discerned in support of the divine command theory. These are called 1) Scriptural, 2) Metaphysical and 3) Meta-ethical.

II. The Scriptural Argument

A characteristic feature of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is the overwhelming emphasis on the activity and power of God. The idea that 'All things are possible for God' appears in almost every passage of the biblical literature, including Gen. (18:14), Phil. (3-21), Jer. (32-17), Luke (1:37), Job (42-2), Mark (14: 36), and Matt. (19:26). God's unparalleled deeds in creation and redemption, the miracles reported in the Bible, more importantly the resurrection of Christ, the way in which he is praised as king of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15) all indicate an unlimited power. Accordingly, the classical view of the biblical text represents God as an all-powerful and free agent. This view of divine power and freedom not only stresses God's reign over the created realm but also his unlimited ability for action. Biblical interpreters, such as Emil Brunner (1952, p. 248-250), have argued against the idea that God's power in the original biblical context is limited to what has actually been exercised, emphasising that God is in fact capable of doing more than what he has actually done.

Another related feature of these religions recorded in the Holy Scriptures (Old and New Testament and the Qur'an) is that they contain divine commands that either intuitively appear to be immoral or directly violate a prohibition or permission that God himself has laid down elsewhere. A famous instance of such an intuitively immoral command is the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, reported in the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an. Another well-known instance, which contradicts God's commands elsewhere, is the command to the prophet Hosea (stated in Hosea 1:2) to have sexual relations with an adulteress. Over the course of the history of religious thought, these features of the Holy Scriptures have led many religious scholars to reject any limits on divine freedom, including ethical limits and, therefore, either implicitly or explicitly to advocate the divine command theory of ethics.

A notable example among scholastic divine command theorists in the west is William of Ockham, and another is Duns Scotus. Copleston, in his commentary on Ockham endorses the view that in the case of Ockham his theory of ethics is an espousal of his conception of divine omnipotence and liberty: „This personal conception of the moral law was closely connected with Ockham's insistence on the divine omnipotence and liberty" (1963, p. 115). However, the reason that Ockham emphasise divine liberty and absolute power is his understanding of the Holy Scripture which exhibit God as an arbitrary commander, without any exterior element to limit him. Pluzanski, in his *Essai Sur La Philosophie de Duns Scot* (1888, p. 273-74), points out that the basis of medieval theologians who adhere to divine command theory is a non-philosophical scriptural view. Janine Idziak reports Pluzanskie's view on this matter as: „…he connects the espousal of divine command morality with the unwillingness of the medievals to take liberties in interpreting Scripture, which contains accounts of actions which clearly seem to contradict moral laws and which yet are presented as accomplished under the direct order of God" (Idziak, 1979, p. 11).

This line of support for the divine command theory is not unique to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and can be seen more vividly in Islamic tradition. Although there are frequent passages in the Qur'an endorsing the fact that God is just and merciful, and that he is morally good (16:90; 7:28; 10:4; and 8:51), there are numerous verses that strongly seem to attribute to God arbitrary will and absolute power. Particularly, the frequent Qur'anic passages that 'God guides whom he wishes and misguides whom he wishes (14:4)' and that '[he] seals the hearts (6:2)' and the deeds of the creatures are preordained by God: „he has created you and what you make" (37, 94) portrays a very powerful God who is not subject to any moral boundaries, and seems to leave no real scope for human freedom. This ubiquitous emphasis on God's overwhelming power, which taken literally leads to the impression that nothing limits divine power, and thus that he is the source of everything including morality, led in the early days of Islam to the emergence of the Ash'arites school, which holds that God's commands follow no independent moral principles, and considers morality to be entirely dependent on divine will.[11]

In recent times, some Christian theologians have suggested that the existence of intuitively immoral commands and inconsistent prohibitions in Holy Scriptures provides the essential elements for a direct argument in support of the divine command theory of ethics. The underlying idea is

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[11] See R. J. McCarthy (1953, p. 238 f).

that there is no doubt about the authenticity of Scripture, and that it is possible and in fact imperative to provide a consistent interpretation of the text. Therefore, because of divine conflicting prohibitions, the only way to preserve consistency of the Scriptures, and retain the commonly held divine attributes is to hold that God is the source of morality, and fully endorse the divine command theory of ethics.[12]

In what follows, this line of reasoning will be termed the scriptural argument, as the claim is that the belief in the authenticity of the Scripture and that God speaks consistently, necessarily leads to the idea that God is the source of moral obligation. Undoubtedly, an implicit assumption behind the scriptural argument is that even though certain parts of the Scripture can be interpreted allegorically (metaphorically), for certain reasons, the passages regarding absolute divine power and the intuitively immoral commands must be taken as they are, and interpreted literally. If such assumptions cannot be justified satisfactorily, the stories and commands in question can be interpreted metaphorically, and in that case alternative theories of the nature of ethics can sit well with the rest of the text. In fact, the same stories and passages from the Scriptures have historically been interpreted in many different ways, some manifestly inconsistent with the divine command theory.[13] Consequently, a thorough defence and scrutiny of the scriptural argument calls, among other things, for a satisfactory theory of textual interpretation, which prescribes where or when metaphorical interpretation of a text is justified.

III. Metaphysical Arguments

The second line of argument begins by considering the nature of God, his attributes, and relation to the rest of the world in order to demonstrate that a correct philosophical understanding of the divine nature and God's relation to the created realm leads to the divine command theory of ethics. Descartes is a prominent defendant of this approach.

Theists customarily insist on a sharp distinction between God and the world, between the creator and the created realm. According to traditional accounts of creation, contingent being depends on God's power for its ex-

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[12] See Philip Quinn (1992, p. 500).

[13] Mu'tazilites, another group of Muslim theologians, had taken as their first principles some other dominant ideas in the Qur'an, especially the unity and justice of God. Accordingly, they have made interesting attempts to validate moral objectivism, and refute the theory of divine command. See George Hourani, (1971 and 1985).

istence. God, in contrast, depends on nothing external to himself for his existence. He has absolute sovereignty over contingent existence. The basic idea that contingent things for their existence entirely depend on God is a common philosophical belief among all theists. Notwithstanding this, there has been a great deal of disagreement regarding what is in principle contingent with respect to God. The most notable theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Moses Maimonides (1963, p. 460), were moderate in this case, and regarded divine power within the confine of logically possible states of affairs. God is thought by them to not be able to make logical impossibilities possible. This limitation of God's power was bound to meet resistance from theologians with more fideistic tendencies. How can the laws of logic really set limit to divine power? How can humans argue with their limited reason, that God could not do certain things simply because it contradicts *their* logic?

Descartes took the doctrine of divine power to a most extreme limit, arguing that God is the author of everything including eternal truths. He maintained that everything is contingent with respect to God and nothing ever constrains the scope of his creative activity. God is thought to be able to create everything including, to give an example, a world in which two plus two equals five. It must not be thought, he argued, that it is logically or metaphysically impossible for God to create such a world.[14] Since the truth of logical, metaphysical, and mathematical necessities is also entirely contingent on the will of God, these truths are true just because God has willed them to be so. He could have equally willed them to be otherwise. Ethical truths are no exceptions; they are also dependent on God's will and commands.

The natural conclusion, which follows from this extreme form of the creation doctrine, is that God has no essence, if by essence we mean a necessary and fixed nature which, as such, limits his actions. The only characteristic of God is his absolute will, unlimited by internal or external elements. Therefore, divine commands and activity cannot be based on rational grounds. In consequence, God's will also determines what is moral. By the very fact that God wills something, this becomes the right thing to do, and therefore, if he had commanded robbery and adultery, they would have become virtues.

The creation doctrine is a metaphysical doctrine, and so is the purported defence of the theory of divine commands. It is a metaphysical defence because it relies on a specific metaphysical characterisation of the divinity

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[14] Rene Descartes (1970).

and an analysis of his attributes, from which the doctrine of divine command theory inevitably follows. The defence does not begin with scriptural considerations or questions regarding the nature of morality. Whether the attempt to establish the divine command theory on the doctrine of creation is successful depends primarily on the existence of a convincing metaphysical justification in support of the doctrine of creation thus understood.

The Cartesian idea that moral truths are dependent on divine command or will (on the ground that denying this would infringe God's sovereignty) is to many an incoherent claim, to say the least.[15] But even to intelligibly speak of divine omnipotence it is necessary to consider divine will as limited within the confines of logical necessities or perhaps other sorts of necessary truths. It only makes sense to speak of the infringement of God's sovereignty in circumstances where, say, God is unable to do what it is logically possible for him to do. Any defence of a theory of morality must start with a discussion of the nature of morality, not with a consideration of divine attributes, since the Cartesian position supposes that moral truths are as objective as mathematical or logical truths (supposing that they are objective). Establishing this claim calls for a satisfactory understanding of the nature of morality prior to discussing its relation to the divine nature and God's attributes.

For non-Cartesian theists a view that sees a divine arbitrary will in charge of eternal truths and the universe and more importantly in charge of moral truths is simply abhorrent.[16] They feel that to praise God is not to heap the greatest possible metaphysical compliments upon him. The idea that God prohibited, for instance, the killing of innocent children, only because God arbitrarily wished it, with no moral or non moral reason, is just improper. This is, to many theists, an unacceptable view and has prompted some scholars recently to modify it.[17] They have tried to preserve the central theme of the creation doctrine, which is the dependence of eternal truths, logical, mathematical and ethical on God but, to uphold the view that God cannot annihilate or alter these truths. This would safeguard the view from the threat of arbitrariness. Thomas V. Morris and Christopher H. Menzel (1986) took this view and called their position *theistic activism*.

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[15] Peter Geach (1973, p. 10).

[16] Maimonides argues that if one claims that there is no reason for God's will and commands, one therefore denies God's wisdom. Divine actions thus conceived would be classified as futile or even worse than that (*Guide*, III: 25, 1963, p. 504).

[17] For criticism of Descartes view see E. Stump (1983), G. Brink (1993) and A. Plantinga (1980).

These authors have argued that God created the eternal truths and no law or principle governs his will. He is responsible for the existence of all necessary truths, logical, metaphysical, mathematical as well as contingent truths, planet, stars and electrons… However, abstract objects, they claim, are necessary entities, and cannot be altered by divine power. These truths are dependent on him, but cannot be altered in any way by his will.[18]

IV. Meta-ethical Arguments

To explain what is meant by a meta-ethical argument, one needs to first introduce some distinctions. Recall Euthyphro's moral conviction that 'to prosecute a murderer is a pious thing', or 'we should help needy people'. Such moral convictions inevitably give rise to typical questions like what the word 'should' means here; how is 'piety' to be defined; how can it be determined that a particular action ought to be done morally, and so on. Systematic resolution of these issues calls for a moral theory that satisfactorily explains the nature of moral judgements and clearly guides its advocates to resolve moral conflicts. Any attempt at defending such a theory in turn leads to questions which do not directly have to do with the meaning of moral terms, justification of moral judgements, or resolution of moral conflict. Instead the new questions concern the criteria that an ethical theory must satisfy to be ranked as a plausible ethical theory. These new questions are about ethical theories, and for this reason it is quite appropriate to name them meta-ethical. A meta-ethical argument for the divine command theory of ethics, therefore, will be an argument that asserts that the theory satisfies the basic criteria better than any other ethical theory. Such an argument does not begin with any religious assumptions, or with metaphysical presumptions about the nature of divinity, and is thus of special interest to moral philosophers.

Accordingly a meta-ethical argument is completed in two stages. The first stage focuses on those features of morality that a satisfactory ethical theory is required to explain. The second stage demonstrates that the meta-ethical theory in question, for instance the divine command theory, offers a better account of the features than alternative theories. Such a move on the part of defenders of the divine command theory inevitably challenges other

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[18] For criticism of this view see Scott Davison (1991), Stephen Davis (1983), Matthew Davidson (1999) and G. Brink (1993).

meta-ethical theories. In this line Robert M. Adams should be regarded as one of the most influential philosophers, if not the most influential.

Robert M. Adams (1987) has so far offered the most sophisticated and elaborated form of a meta-ethical theory in defence of divine command theory. Adams maintains that the divine command theory would not be acceptable until it satisfactorily explains basic characteristics of morality. Thus, he first attempts to show that the divine command theory explains the most basic features of morality, better than any other ethical theory. According to him, in order for a moral theory to be acceptable, it must fulfil the following conditions:

1. Ethical values are taken to be objective.
2. Common intuitions regarding the wrongness of actions are by and large reliable.
3. An acceptable ethical theory must explain how we come to realise the wrongness of actions.
4. Moral judgements have an element of sacredness.
5. Understanding the nature of moral wrongness must offer additional motives for avoiding the action.
6. One salient feature of morality is that transgressions are typically accompanied by a feeling of guilt.

A satisfactory theory of the nature of moral wrongness should explain all these features of morality. Adams suggests that *identifying ethical wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God* most satisfactorily accounts for all the above characteristics.

Adams's defence of the divine command theory rests on a fundamental assumption. It explicitly supposes that God holds non-ethical reasons for commanding an action. Basically, it assumes that God is a loving agent[19] and only chooses or commands actions that are motivated by love. This presumption is meant to show where Euthyphro went wrong and why he wrongly exposed himself to Socrates' criticisms. According to Adams, one may say, Euthyphro failed to take note of a distinction between ethical values and non-ethical values like love. To love human beings, for instance, is a good thing. But there is no ethical obligation to love them. It is true that ethical values must be determined and defined in terms of divine actions and commands. But the same does not apply to non-ethical values; they are valued independently of divine commands.

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[19] Love is regarded as a non-ethical value.

Thus, whereas God entertains no ethical reason in issuing a command, he holds non-ethical reasons in preferring certain actions. As a result, God does not command x, because x is morally good, but because x is, for example, a loving action. On this basis, Euthyphro should not have accepted that gods love x, because x is a pious thing. Rather, he should have said that x is pious just because x is loved by the gods, and the gods have non-moral reasons for loving x. Having done so, Socrates would have had no reason to bring the charge of inconsistency against Euthyphro as a divine command theorist.

Adams' theory has been the subject of a great deal of discussion, and has been criticised from a variety of perspectives. Notably, critics have pointed out that to be successful, Adams needs to establish, among other things, a conjecture that has come to be called the „co-extensiveness thesis".[20] That is to say that he ought to demonstrate that the extension of loving actions and being morally right is the same, or in other words, an action is a loving action if and only if it is morally right. Without this assumption, there could be actions which are loving but are not morally right or vice versa. Critics have also noted that Adams' theory is vulnerable to the Karamazov problem, suggesting that in other possible worlds where there is no God there is no morality. [21]

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The history of philosophical debates has witnessed also strong opposition towards the divine command theory, which started with Socrates' dialogue with Euthyphro, with the former inventing an ingenious argument to overturn the theory. Others, such as the Mu'tazilites school in the Islamic tradition and Moses Maimonides in the Jewish tradition lined up in support of the Socratic position. Yet, the most notable of all the opponents is Kant, who in his celebrated work (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) challenged the theory, arguing that following commands just because they are commanded by God cannot be counted as moral behaviour.[22] Moral action cannot be heteronymous; it has to be autonomous, legislated by the person's practical reason. For Kant, the notion of revealed morality is a contradiction in terms. Also Ralph Cudworth (1979, p. 155-171), the Cambridge Platonist, devoted part of his work to arguing for an absolute

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[20] John Chandler (1985, pp. 231-39).

[21] For this see Robert Westmoreland (1996, p. 29-30) and Scott Davis, (1983, p. 294), Stephen Sullivan (1994).

[22] Immanuel Kant (1964, p. 100).

standard of right and wrong independent of God's commandments. Other recent figures such as A. C. Ewing (1979, pp. 224-230) and Richard Price (1974) have also argued for independent standards of right and wrong, but from different angles.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at a reconstruction of various possible lines of arguments for the divine command theory of ethics. It started with a constructive review of Socrates' ingenious criticism of the theory. The core of his criticism was said to be the view that either God holds some independently plausible reasons to command some thing or he does not. If he does, then it will not be possible to claim that ethical judgements are determined by God's commands. Rather, it is in fact those reasons that determine the validity of moral judgements, and as a result, it would not be possible to argue for a comprehensive divine command theory of ethics. However, if God entertained no reason at all in the usual sense of the word, although it would not be inconsistent to entertain a comprehensive theory of divine commands, such a theory would surely fail to safeguard and account for our most entrenched moral intuitions. This is because if divine commands were really arbitrary and followed no reason whatsoever, there would be no guarantee of God not commanding actions that fly in the face of our intuitions such as killing innocent children for no reason. In that case, believers would inevitably be obliged to regard such an act as morally good.

The paper then briefly surveyed three attempts at getting around the *Euthyphro* dilemma or, in other words, at defending the divine command theory. These are called scriptural, metaphysical and meta-ethical arguments.

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