

Lesson 5

Divine Command

America is a religious country: 92% of Americans say they believe in God, and 56% say that religion is essential in their lives. In America, members of the Christian clergy are often treated as moral experts: they sit on ethics committees at hospitals, and it was the clergy who helped create the rating system used for TV shows and movies. So why are clergy viewed in this way? It is not that they have proven themselves or that they are wiser. The popular thinking is that religion and morality are inseparable. People believe that morality can be understood only in the context of religion. And it is not hard to see why people think this. When viewed from a non-religious perspective, the universe seems to be a cold and meaningless place devoid of value and purpose. In his essay "A Free Man's Worship," Atheist Bertrand Russell expresses what he calls the scientific view of the world:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his love, and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms, that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.¹

¹ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 8th Ed. Pg. 50-51

From a religious perspective, however, things look very different. Judaism and Christianity teach that a loving, all-powerful God created the world to provide a home for us and that we were created in His image (Genesis 1:21). But for Bertrand Russell, his objection to Christianity, or all religion, is that people base it on fear. He states that coming to faith through fear is not faith at all. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote in *Pensées*, "the heart has its reason which reason does not know...it is the heart which experiences God, and not reason."

As we look at how ethics and religion can intersect through the Divine Command Theory, we first want to understand that this theory will only be applied to three major world religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. All three believe that God has told us to obey specific rules of conduct, and God does not force those rules on us but created us as free-will human beings. But if we live as we should, we must follow God's laws. The basic idea of Divine Command Theory is that God decrees what is right and wrong.

When it comes to understanding Divine Command, we should start with two advantages that will come from following this theory:

1. **It Solves The Old Problem Of Objectivity Of Ethics:** Unlike Ethical Subjectivism (Lesson 4), which states that the individual determines what is right and wrong. Or even Cultural Relativism (Lesson 6), which says that right and wrong are determined by the consensus of the majority. Divine Command removes that, stating that God is the determiner of what is right and wrong.
2. **Explains Why Any Of Us Should Bother With Morality:** If we violate God's ethical and moral principles, we could fear the final judgment day. Proverbs 3 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and that if we want to be wise, we will have a reverent fear of the Lord and follow His commands.

We can define religion as beliefs about a transcendent God (God). One reason Eastern Religions are not included in Divine Command is that they are more philosophical and are occasionally referred to as nontheistic religions. In Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the concept of God is connected and interwoven through the sacred texts of each religion. In Islam, the sacred text is the Quran (Koran); in Christianity, the Bible (Old and New Testament); and in Judaism, the TaNaK. There are countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran where the Quran is what governs the laws.

In his book *The Divine Imperative*, Emil Brunner said, "The good consists in always doing what God wills at any particular moment." The divine command can be defined as morality being dependent on or relative to God's commands and, therefore, can change from time to time and person to person. Even with that definition, there are difficulties even for believers. Plato, writing 400 years before Jesus Christ, tried to discuss this in a dialogue titled *Euthyphro*. In the dialogue, Socrates and Euthyphro discuss how the gods determine morality and what is right and wrong. This is one of the most famous questions in the history of philosophy.

Euthyphro

Plato²

SOCRATES: Then tell me. How do you define the holy [moral] and the unholy [immoral]?

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, I say that the holy is what I am doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits a murder or a sacrilegious robbery, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father, or your mother, or whoever it may be. And not to prosecute would be unholy...

SOCRATES: . . . my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed—namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.

EUTHYPHRO: And, Socrates, I told the truth.

SOCRATES: Possibly. But, Euthyphro, there are many other things that you will say are holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Because they are.

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by

² Excerpts taken from dialogue *Euthyphro* by Plato.

which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, tell me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.

SOCRATES: Perfect Euthyphro! Now you give me just the answer that I asked for. Meanwhile, whether it is right I do not know, but obviously you will go on to prove your statement true.

EUTHYPHRO: Indeed, I will.

Socrates has now received an answer to his question. Euthyphro has finally proposed necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being holy. Socrates proceeds to test this proposal by trying to determine whether the conditions identified really are necessary and sufficient.

SOCRATES: Come now, let us scrutinize what we are saying. What is pleasing to the gods, and the man that pleases them, are holy; what is hateful to the gods, and the man they hate, unholy. But the holy and unholy are not the same; the holy is directly opposite to the unholy. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: It is. . .

SOCRATES: Accordingly, my noble Euthyphro, by your account some gods take one thing to be right, and others take another, and similarly with the honorable and the base, and good and bad. They would hardly be at variance with each other, if they did not differ on these questions. Would they?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: But it is the same things, so you say, that some of them think right, and others wrong, and through disputing about these they are at variance, and make war on one another. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, it is.

SOCRATES: Accordingly, so it would seem the same things will be hated by the gods and loved by them; the same things would alike displease and please them.

EUTHYPHRO: It would seem so.

SOCRATES: And so, according to this argument, the same things, Euthyphro, will be holy and unholy.

EUTHYPHRO: That may be.

SOCRATES: In that case, admirable friend, you have not answered what I asked you. I did not ask you to tell me what at once is holy and unholy, but it seems that what is pleasing to the gods is also hateful to them. Thus, Euthyphro, it would not be strange at all if what you now are doing in punishing your father were pleasing to Zeus, but hateful to Cronus and Uranus, and welcome to Hephaestus, but odious to Hera, and if any other of the gods disagree about the matter, satisfactory to some of them and odious to others.

British philosopher Antony Flew suggests that "one good test of a person's aptitude for philosophy is to discover whether he can grasp the force and point of this question." We will be discussing this in class. Ultimately, morality depends on or is relative to God and does not exist

independently of God's will. God's command makes truthfulness right, which is the essence of the Divine Command Theory. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet says that nothing is good or bad in itself, but thinking makes it so. According to the Divine Command Theory, nothing is good or bad, except when God's thought makes it so.

Those following the Divine Command Theory will make these claims: God is perfect and just, morality is dependent on and relative to God's will, and God's commands to particular people and groups override universal moral principles when there is conflict.

1. **God is perfectly good, and** whether someone decides to follow Divine Command Theory, we can certainly agree with this statement. The view that God does not make mistakes and that He rightly judges the world has been the chief cornerstone of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity from their foundation.
2. **Morality is dependent on and relative to God's will**—Divine Command Theorists will state that God's commands at that particular moment are correct. Still, as we will discuss, that makes them arbitrary to the situation. Many Christians believe that abortion is wrong and do not believe God is telling them to blow up abortion clinics like Matthew J. Goldsby and James T. Simmons did in 1985. Similarly, most Muslims do not think that Allah tells them to fly planes into the World Trade Center buildings as terrorists did in 2001. The same is true when discussing groups like the Branch Davidians and David Koresh. Each of those ideas will make God's commands arbitrary.
3. **Groups override universal moral principles when there is conflict.** In the same sense, where God commands something suitable for one group, God could easily command it is wrong for another group.

Critiques

There are three critiques to consider on Divine Command Theory:

1. **The concept of morality is mysterious**—What does it mean to say that God "makes" truthfulness right? Truthfulness cannot be rearranged to make it fit into a particular environment. Take child abuse for a moment; we can come up with all the things wrong with child abuse, but in Divine Command, all that matters is whether God will make the harming of a child okay.
2. **The concept of morality makes God's commands arbitrary**—Probably most of us have heard from our parents or said this to our children, "because I said so." As a parent, I may say to one child that it is not okay to play outside but let another child play outside. In that instance, I have made it wrong for one and right for the other without explaining.
3. **The concept of morality provides the wrong reasons for moral principles**—as discussed in number 1, there are many bad things about child abuse, but Divine Command does not care about any of those things; all it cares about in the end is whether child abuse runs counter to God's commands. There are two ways of confirming that something is wrong here. First, the theory implies that child abuse wouldn't be wrong if God didn't exist. Second, even a religious person might be genuinely in doubt about what God has commanded.

Civil Religion

In the next lesson, we will discuss how culture impacts our understanding of ethics. The idea of civil religion connects a religious aspect with our culture. Civil religion claims that morality, at least to some extent, is relative to a particular culture or nation. The primary role of civil religion

is to create a sense of cultural or national identity and purpose. It can be defined as institutionalized beliefs, symbols, and rituals that provide a religious dimension to a nation's collective life. When we say the Pledge of Allegiance, it contains "one nation under God." Throughout history, the idea of civil religion has impacted the Egyptians and Roman empires. The founding of America on the Judeo-Christian principle has been a cornerstone of our nation's collective life. Most presidents have ended speeches by saying, "God Bless America." Some ethical theorists believe that mixing Divine Command (religion) and culture has led to sexism and racism. The ideas of sexism and racism have not necessarily been through the roles of religion but more of cultural aspects and accepted norms. However, extremist religious groups have propagated these ideas very dangerously.

So, does morality need religion? C.S. Lewis said, *"If no set of moral ideas were better than another, there would be no sense in preferring civilized morality to Nazi morality. The moment you say one lot of morals is better than another, you measure them by an ultimate standard."*³

As discussed in Lesson Two, morality beyond what is normally expected of an individual is known as supererogatory. So, is there a difference between being religious and spiritual in applying morality and religion together? Religion is more of a surface-level understanding, and it involves the social aspect of those beliefs.

On the other hand, being spiritual or having spirituality is a deeper understanding of the ultimate moral worth and belief in God. C.S. Lewis stated that, yes, morality and religion need to intersect. This idea will also be explored in Lesson 8 on the Natural Law.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pg. 13