theism


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theological ethics

Any ethical doctrine that makes theistic assumptions is theological. The ethical theories characteristic of the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are thus theological. However, ethics can be religious without being theological. Because Theravāda Buddhism does not make theistic assumptions, its ethical thought is religious but not theological. There are theological versions of most of the standard ethical views. So, for example, the natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas (1225?–1274) is theological because Aquinas thinks that natural law depends upon God’s eternal law. And the utilitarianism of William Paley (1743–1805) is theological because Paley is a divine command theorist.

There are also theological virtue theories. They often differ with their secular counterparts over which traits of character count as virtues. Unlike Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), for example, Aquinas holds that obedience to God is the greatest of the moral virtues. In the Summa theologiae (1266–1273), he argues that “properly speaking, the virtue of obedience, whereby we contemn our own will for God’s sake, is more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues, which contemn other goods for the sake of God.” The Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity seems to be akin to the Christian vice of pride and directly opposed to the Christian virtue of humility. And even when theological and secular virtue theories agree that a certain trait is a virtue, they often offer different accounts of it. Thus, while for Aristotle death on the battlefield is the highest expression of courage, for Aquinas suffering martyrdom is its highest expression. Important recent work in virtue ethics that stems from traditions of Christian theology has been done by Alasdair MacIntyre and by Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches.

A form of theological ethics that has been prominent in Christianity and Islam but less important in Jewish traditions is theological voluntarism. According to this view, morality depends, at least in part, on God’s will. In Christian ethics, theological voluntarism often assumes that this dependence is specifically on the divine will as promulgated by divine commands, and so the position has come to be known as divine command ethics. Divine command theories are found in the Franciscan ethics developed by John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347). Andrew of Neuchâtel (c. 1340–1400), another Franciscan, conducted the lengthiest and most sophisticated known medieval defense of an ethics of divine commands. It is also to be found in the ethical theory of William Paley and in the distinctively Christian ethics of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).

The last three decades of the twentieth century saw a revival of philosophical interest in divine command ethics. Among those who have contributed significantly to this revival are Robert M. Adams, Janine M. Idziak, and Philip L. Quinn. Both the attractive features and the points of vulnerability of theological ethics stand out in particularly sharp relief in the case of divine command ethics, and for that reason the remainder of this article will focus on this particular variety of theological ethics.

Divine command ethics is best understood as an account of the deontological part of morality that concerns duty or obligation. Moral deontology’s chief concepts are moral requirement (obligation), moral permission (rightness), and moral prohibition (wrongness). On a divine command conception, actions are morally wrong just in case and only because God forbids them; actions are morally right just in case and only because God does not forbid them; and actions are morally obligatory just in case and only because God commands them. Contemporary divine command theorists disagree about how to conceive of the precise relation between, for example, being morally wrong and being forbidden by God. On one view, the property of being morally wrong is identical with the property of being forbidden by God; on another, the former property is dis-
tinct from but supervenes on the latter. A third view is that God’s forbidding an action causes it to be morally wrong.

Monotheists of all stripes should, at least initially, be sympathetic to an ethics of divine commands. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the view that the Hebrew Bible has authority in religious matters. Both Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21, which recount the revelation of the Decalogue, portray God as a commander, instructing the Chosen People about what they are to do and not to do by commanding them. It seems natural enough to suppose that the authority of the Decalogue depends on the fact that it is divinely commanded. It is possible, of course, to understand these divine commands as nothing more than God’s emphatic endorsement of a moral code whose truth is independent of them. Being omniscient, God would know such moral truths, and being supremely good, God would want to communicate them to the Chosen People. On this view, commands are God’s way of transmitting important moral information to humans. But it is also possible to understand the truth of the moral code expressed by the Decalogue as dependent on the divine commands.

Moreover, there are other stories in the Hebrew Bible on which an argument to the conclusion that the deontological status of at least some actions depends on divine commands can be based. These stories recount the incidents commonly described as the immoralities of the patriarchs; they are cases in which God commands something that appears to be morally wrong. The most famous of them is the divine command to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 22:1–2, to sacrifice his son Isaac. According to a medieval exegetical tradition, Abraham did no wrong in consenting to slay Isaac and would have done no wrong if he had slain Isaac. Thomas Aquinas explains that,

when Abraham consented to slay his son, he did not consent to murder, because his son was due to be slain by the command of God, Who is Lord of life and death: for He it is Who inflicts the punishment of death on all men, both godly and ungodly, on account of the sin of our first parent, and if a man be the executor of that sentence by Divine authority, he will be no murderer any more than God would be.

In other words, Thomas thinks that, because Abraham would have been carrying out a death sentence imposed by God if he had slain Isaac in obedience to the divine command, he would not have committed a murder and so would not have done wrong if he had killed Isaac.

Andrew of Neufchateau reaches a similar conclusion. He argues that there are actions, such as homicide, which, when examined by natural reason, seem to be wrong but are not necessarily sins with respect to God’s absolute power. Abraham, he says, “wished to kill his son so that he would be obedient to God commanding this, and he would not have sinned in doing this if God should not have withdrawn his command.” In other words, for Andrew, because God’s absolute power determines whether a homicide is a sin, Abraham would not have sinned and so would have done no wrong if he had killed Isaac in obedience to the divine command.

What the two medieval exegetes share is the conviction that the slaying of Isaac by Abraham, which would be wrong in the absence of the divine command, would not have been wrong and, indeed, would have been obligatory, given its presence, if it had not been withdrawn. And it is hard to see how Thomas or Andrew could resist the conclusion that any divinely commanded homicide would be obligatory. Lordship over life and death and absolute power, which are the divine attributes they take to explain why God’s command to kill Isaac imposes an obligation on Abraham, would be properties of God even if divine commands to kill were numerous. So it seems that the considerations mobilized to defend Abraham against the charge of immorality can be generalized to support the conclusion that whether any action is morally obligatory depends on whether it is divinely commanded.

Divine commands play an important part in Christian ethics. It is a striking feature of the ethics of love set forth in the New Testament that love is commanded. In one Gospel Jesus says: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39). Similar commands are reported in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. In his last discourse, recorded in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that “the command I give you is this, that you love one another” (John 15:17). This is a divine com-
mand if, as orthodox Christians believe, Jesus is God the Son. Hence, the foundational documents of Christianity teach that the distinctively Christian ethics of love (agape) of neighbor is expressed in the form of a divine command.

In *Works of Love* (1847), Søren Kierkegaard gives two reasons for thinking that agape must be a matter of duty or obligation. His discourse on Matthew 22:39 draws a sharp contrast between erotic love (eros) and friendship (philia), on the one hand, and Christian love of neighbor, on the other. Both erotic love and friendship play favorites; love of neighbor is undiscriminating. Kierkegaard says

> Therefore the object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference’s name, “the beloved,” “the friend,” who is loved in contrast to the whole world. The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion.

But our spontaneous affections will not move us to love everyone without distinction. Love of neighbor must therefore be a duty in order that we can be motivated to it by our sense of duty. What is more, erotic love and friendship are mutable because they depend on characteristics of the beloved and the friend that can change, while love of neighbor is supposed to be invulnerable to changes in its objects. If the beloved loses the traits that made him or her erotically attractive, erotic love withers; if the virtuous friend turns vicious, friendship dies. Love of neighbor must remain unchanged even when such changes occur. If it is to do so, it cannot depend on the ways in which mutable features of the neighbor naturally attract or repel us.

According to Kierkegaard, it can have the independence of these features it needs only if it is obligatory, for only then can it derive from a stable commitment to doing what one is obliged to do. It is in this way, he says, that “this shall, then, makes love free in blessed independence. Such a love stands and does not fall with the contingency of its object but stands and falls with the Law of eternity—but then, of course, it never falls.” So, for Kierkegaard, Christian love of neighbor must be a dutiful love because only a love motivated by a sense of duty can be both extensive enough to embrace everyone without distinction and invulnerable to alterations in its objects. And what makes love of neighbor a duty is a divine command.

An ethics of divine commands thus has roots in the scriptures of the monotheistic religions and has been developed by means of philosophical and theological reflection on those scriptures. Such an ethics ought to seem attractive to people within the religious communities that regard such scriptures and the traditions of thought that interpret them as normative. There are, however, serious objections to divine command ethics, and they may undercut or even eliminate the attractiveness.

One objection is that divine command ethics is either useless or unacceptably divisive in a religiously pluralistic society. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) presses the point about uselessness. He says

> We may be perfectly sure, indeed, that whatever is right is conformable to the will of God: but so far is that from answering the purpose of showing us what is right, that it is necessary to know first whether a thing is right, in order to know from thence whether it be conformable to the will of God.

If Bentham’s view is correct, divine command ethics is of no practical use because we can never learn what is right by first learning that something is conformable to God’s will and then inferring that it is right. But, of course, most divine command theorists will disagree with Bentham and argue that we can sometimes learn that something is conformable to God’s will from sources such as revelation and then use this information to determine that it is right. If the appeal to revelation is allowed against Bentham, however, the fact that religiously pluralistic societies contain rival views about what, if anything, has been revealed and competing claims about what, if anything, has been divinely commanded must be taken into account. When it is, it seems that allowing the appeal will be divisive because it introduces religious controversy into ethics and eliminates the prospect of coming by rational means to agreement on moral principles. It is worth noting that, if this is a successful objection to divine command ethics, parallel objections will succeed against other forms of theological ethics. For in a religiously pluralistic society, there are also disagreements about what vir-
tues and vices there are and what natural laws, if any, hold.

A divine command theorist can say three things in response to this objection. First, religious disagreement does not inevitably give rise to disagreement about moral principles. A divine command theorist and a nonreligious Kantian can agree on the principle that torturing the innocent is always morally wrong. They will, to be sure, disagree about why it is always wrong. The divine command theorist will say that it is wrong because God forbids it, and the Kantian may say that it is wrong because it is a failure to treat the humanity in another as an end in itself. But disagreement in the metaphysics of morals is consistent with overlapping consensus at the level of moral principle. Second, not all moral disagreement is divisive. A Kierkegaardian Christian may think that Mother Teresa was only doing her duty toward her neighbor as specified by the Love Commandment, while one of her secular admirers believes that much of the good she did was supererogatory. But if they agree that she did a great deal of good, their disagreement about whether some of it was supererogatory is not apt to be particularly divisive. And third, introducing religious considerations into ethics does not destroy prospects for rational agreement that would otherwise exist. The history of modern secular ethical theory gives us no reason to expect that agreement on a single comprehensive ethical theory will ever be achieved in a climate of free and rational moral inquiry.

Another objection may reveal a way in which divine command ethics is vulnerable that is not shared by other forms of theological ethics. Its main claim is that divine command theories make morality unacceptably arbitrary. One way of developing the objection is to note that divine command ethics conjoined with atheism implies a kind of moral nihilism. If there were no God, there would be no divine commands and, in particular, no divine prohibitions. Hence, according to divine command ethics, if there were no God, nothing would be morally wrong. In other words, given divine command ethics, Ivan Karamazov was right in thinking that if there were no God, everything would be permitted. But surely, the objection goes, murder would still be wrong and would not be morally permitted even if God did not exist.

Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) spells out the arbitrariness objection in a different way. He takes it to be a consequence of divine command ethics that “nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this Omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that Hypothesis forthwith become Holy, Just and Righteous.” Consider some grossly wicked and foully unjust action, for example, torturing an innocent child to death. According to divine command ethics, if God were to command a person to torture an innocent child to death, it would be obligatory for the person to torture the child to death. But surely, the objection in this form goes, it would not be obligatory to torture the child to death even if God were to command it.

One sort of reply to these objections rests on an appeal to the theological doctrines of divine necessary existence and essential perfect goodness. Because God exists and is perfectly good in every possible world, there is no possible world in which God commands grossly wicked and foully unjust actions and no possible world in which God fails to forbid them. In short, the divine essence constrains the divine will. So the counterfactual that everything would be permitted if there were no God is trivially true in virtue of a necessarily false antecedent, and the counterfactual that torturing the innocent would be obligatory if God were to command it is also trivially true because, it being impossible for God to command torture of the innocent, its antecedent is impossible. A difficulty with this reply is that it seems to undercut what Thomas Aquinas and Andrew of Neufchateau say about the case of Abraham and Isaac. If God cannot command grossly wicked and foully unjust actions, then it would seem that God not only does not but also cannot command Abraham to slay Isaac.

Another reply to the objections insists that God does in fact forbid murder and torture of the innocent and so they are wrong, but allows that there are possible worlds in which there are no divine commands and everything is permitted, and possible worlds in which, torture and killing of the innocent having been divinely commanded, they are obligatory. This is probably the line that would be taken by extreme Ockhamists who want morality to depend on the absolute power of God and place few limits on divine absolute power, though it is disputed whether it is the view of Ockham himself; and this is the view that Cudworth and others find so objectionable.
Those who raise the arbitrariness objection against divine command ethics are likely also to object to any form of theological ethics that makes morality depend on something about God that could have been different. Thus, for example, if what character traits are virtues depends on God’s purposes for humans and those divine purposes could have been different, then there will be an arbitrariness objection to theological virtue ethics. The only form of theological ethics acceptable to friends of what Cudworth thinks of as eternal and immutable morality would be one that makes morality depend on something about God that could not have been different. If there is no plausible form of theological ethics that satisfies this condition, then the friends of eternal and immutable morality will, even if they are theists, insist that morality is independent of God.

See also: AGNOSTICISM; ATHEISM; BENTHAM; CALVIN; CHRISTIAN ETHICS; CUDWORTH; DUNS SCOTUS; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; HUMILITY; ISLAMIC ETHICS; JESUS OF NAZARETH; JEWISH ETHICS; KIERKEGAARD; LOVE; LUTHER; MACINTYRE; NATURAL LAW; PALEY; PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION; PRIDE; THEISM; THOMAS AQUINAS; VIRTUE ETHICS; VOLUNTARISM; WILLIAM OF OCKHAM.

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Philip L. Quinn

theory and practice

The idea that some things are fine in theory but do not work in practice was already an “old saying” when Kant (1724–1804) wrote about it in 1793. Kant, who was annoyed that a man named Garve had criticized his ethical theory on this ground, responded by pointing out that there is always a gap between theory and practice. Theory provides general rules but it cannot tell us how to apply them—for that, practical judgment is needed. “[T]he general rule,” said Kant, “must be supplemented by an act of judgment whereby the practitioner distinguishes instances where the rule applies from those where it does not.” This means that those who lack judgment might be helpless, even though they know a lot of theory. “There are doctors and lawyers,” Kant explains, “who did well during their schooling but who do not know how to act when asked to give advice.”

The point is especially important for the kind of absolutist ethic that Kant defends. Kant held that moral rules have no exceptions; on his way of thinking, we may never lie, we may never break a promise, and so on. This is a clear example of an ethic that seems not to work in practice, for sensible people recognize that, in extreme circumstances, even very serious rules may have to be broken.

But the “gap” that Kant identifies has often been exploited to soften the impact of such harsh pre-