Divine Command Theory

**Euthyphro’s Dilemma:** Scotus, asking about the status of the Ten Commandments, refers to an old dilemma from *The Euthyphro*, a dialogue by Plato. In that dialogue, Socrates asks Euthyphro, “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” Basically, what is being asked is this:

**Euthyphro’s Dilemma:** Are morally right actions right because God commands them, or does God command them because they are right?

This is a dilemma. A dilemma has two “horns,” or two possible answers, neither of which are desirable. Let’s look at both of them:

**Horn 2: God Commands Actions Because They Are Right:** We might think that things like stealing and murder are just plain morally wrong. On this view, God perceives that there are certain necessary moral truths, and then He issues certain commands to us based on those truths. Scotus writes, on behalf of the proponent of this claim:

> [A]ll the things commanded in the Decalogue [Ten Commandments] have a formal goodness by which they are ordered, in and of themselves, toward the ultimate end, so that through them human beings are directed toward that end. And all the things prohibited in the Decalogue have a formal badness that turns people away from the ultimate end. Thus, the things commanded by the Decalogue are not good merely because they are commanded, but rather the reverse: they are commanded because they are good. And the things prohibited by the Decalogue are not bad merely because they are prohibited; rather, they are prohibited because they are bad. (*Ordinatio*, III.37)

On this view, actions are right or wrong independent of what God thinks or says. That is, there is a set of right actions that are right regardless of what God commands us to do. As it happens, God commands us to perform those actions, and He does so because they are right actions.

**Objection #1: God is Powerless to Change (and is subject to) Morality:** First, this commits us to the existence of some objective standard of morality “outside” of God. As such, morality is not dependent on God. Many theists will find this horn unappealing, because it seems to conflict with God’s omnipotence. It places moral truths outside of or “beyond” God, such that He does not decide them. Therefore, He is powerless to change them. Furthermore, He is in some sense “beneath” morality, and subject to its standards just as much as we are. Scotus writes,
If the precepts of the Ten Commandments ... had such necessity—say, if the following were necessary: “One’s neighbor is not to be killed or hated,” “Theft is not to be done,” and so on— it would follow that, independently of any willing whatsoever, they would be necessary for any intellect apprehending such propositions. The divine intellect, apprehending such propositions, would necessarily apprehend them as true in and of themselves. And then the divine will would necessarily conform to the apprehended propositions; otherwise, it would not be upright. (ibid.)

In short, it would then follow that:

Precepts belonging to the law of nature ... have necessary truth. Therefore, God cannot make them false. Therefore, he cannot make what they mark out as good to be anything but good, and he cannot make what they prohibit to be anything but bad. (ibid.)

Objection #2: God DID Issue Contrary Commands: Scotus gives three examples:

(a) Killing: God commanded Abraham to kill his son. (“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac ... Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering ...” Exodus 22:2)
(b) Stealing: God commanded the Israelites to steal from the Egyptians. (“You shall plunder the Egyptians” Exodus 3:22).
(c) Adultery: God commanded adultery to Hosea. (“Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution” Hosea 1:2)

The assumption is that God is morally perfect. So, it must not be the case that these types of actions are NECESSARILY wrong, independent of what God says. For, in that case, it would appear that God is acting WRONGLY by issuing such commands.

Horn 1: Actions are Right Because God Commands Them: Given the objections above, perhaps certain actions are morally right simply because God says they are. Likewise, wrong actions are wrong simply because God says they are.

Ockham’s View: Ockham seems to take this view. He says that things like theft and adultery are presently wrong because God has commanded us not to do these things. However, he admits that, if God commanded us to DO these things (rather than refrain from doing them), they would become “meritorious”! Furthermore, it seems that, on Ockham’s view, God is incapable of sinning—for, good is BY DEFINITION just whatever God does, or approves, or commands. He writes,
Hatred, theft, adultery, and the like may involve evil according to the common law, in so far as they are done by someone who is obligated by a divine command to perform the opposite act. ... [However] they can ... be performed meritoriously by someone on earth if they should fall under a divine command, just as now the opposite of these, in fact, fall under a divine command. God can perform them without involving any evil. ... God is a debtor to no one, and therefore he is not obligated to cause either that act or the opposite act; nor is he obliged not to cause that act. Therefore, however much he might cause that act, God does not sin.

Ockham is very concerned with preserving God's omnipotence. Ockham suggests that God is capable of commanding ANYTHING, so long as it does not involve a contradiction; for instance, of another command, he writes, “If God can command the thing in question—as it seems he can without contradiction...”

[An Exception: Ockham says that there is one act that, whenever performed, is ALWAYS virtuous and NEVER a sin: Namely, loving God above all things.

Objection: You might be thinking, “But, what if God commanded us NOT to love Him? Wouldn’t it be a sin to love God above all else in that case?”

Ockham’s Reply: Ockham admits that God COULD command this, in which case loving God WOULD be a sin. However, if He did so, it would render everyone INCAPABLE of loving God above all else.

Why? Ockham thinks that (a) loving God above all else entails ALSO (b) loving all and only those things that God wants us to love. If one tries to fulfill (a) in this case, they will automatically violate (b). Therefore, any attempt to love God above all else in this scenario will result in a contradiction—and it is therefore impossible.]

This view (Horn 1 of Euthyphro’s Dilemma) is known as Divine Command Theory:

**Divine Command Theory:** Actions are morally right if and only if God commands us to do them, and they are morally wrong if and only if God commands us NOT to do them.

Scotus’s View: Duns Scotus mostly agrees with Ockham, but ultimately adopts a more moderate hybrid approach. Two main differences:
(1) Contrary to Ockham, Scotus admits that 3 of the 10 commandments are necessary, eternal truths that God is powerless to change. These are the commands about how we ought to act toward God. The other 7 (the “second table” are commands about how we ought to act toward others). They are:

**First Table**
1. Do not worship other Gods.
2. Do not be take the Lord’s name in vain; i.e., don’t be irreverent toward God.
3. Do worship God (on the Sabbath).

Scotus thinks that it just follows from the fact that God is the perfect, supreme creator that one ought not be irreverent toward such a being, or worship any other lesser being as God. Furthermore, such a being is clearly worthy and deserving of worship, so we ARE obligated to worship God. *(Though, he admits that the TIMING of that worship is probably not a necessary truth.)* He concludes, “Consequently, God himself cannot give dispensations from these precepts so that someone could [licitly] act contrary to this or that prohibition.”

(2) Strictly speaking, Scotus agrees with Ockham that commandments 4 – 7 are not necessary, eternal truths. Rather, they are subject to God’s commands (they MUST be! After all, God commanded Abraham to BREAK commandment #5!). Nevertheless, he says that they are still “highly consonant with first practical principles that are known necessarily.” There might just be some more fundamental principle that IS an eternal truth—and commands 4 – 7 are really good (but not REQUIRED) at helping us adhere to that principle.

For example, imagine that “You ought to live in peace” were a fundamental principle of morality. Well, allowing people to have property is not NECESSARY in order to fulfill this obligation. After all, it is POSSIBLE for a communal society to live in peace. However (so Duns Scotus believes), society is more likely to be peaceful if people are allowed to have some property.

So, ultimately, he concludes: “I concede that all the precepts belong to the law of nature in the wider sense.”
Objections to Horn 1:

1. On this view, God seems to have no reason to say one thing is right over another, since, before He gave His commands, no action was more right or wrong than any other; i.e., His commands are arbitrary.

   Why Arbitrary?: On this horn, God COULD NOT have objective reasons for making the commands that He does. If God DID have such reasons for His commands, then horn 2 would be the correct view—not horn 1. Remember, horn 2 says, “God commands actions BECAUSE of some reason—namely, because they are right.”

2. Furthermore, it seems like there ARE good, objective reasons for why we ought not perform certain actions; reasons like, it would cause an enormous amount of suffering. But, horn 1 implies that they’re only wrong because God said so. So, according to this theory, things are wrong for counter-intuitive reasons.

3. As mentioned, DCT must deny that there are any reasons independent of God for why certain actions are morally wrong. But, then, on DCT, if God did not exist, there would be no such thing as moral right or wrong. As a famous paraphrase of Dostoyevsky puts it, “If God is dead, then all things are permissible.” So, if atheism turns out to be true, then stabbing children for fun turns out to be morally permissible—seemingly, a very counter-intuitive result.

4. Ockham readily admits that this view entails that God could make seemingly horrible things (e.g., rape, murder) morally right just by saying that they’re right! Since there are no moral reasons or rules prior to God’s commands, acts such as rape and murder would NOT be morally wrong PRIOR to, or INDEPENDENT of, God’s commands. So, if God SAID rape and murder were morally right actions, then they would BE morally right actions. But, can we really stomach such a view?

   It is worth pausing on this question. Imagine that God commanded us all to rape and kill each other. If God commanded rape and murder, would rape and murder suddenly become morally right (i.e., obligatory) actions? If divine command theory is correct, then they would.

   Ask yourself this question: If God commanded such things, would you think that they were right actions, or rather, would you think God had suddenly become an evil God? If the latter, then you are judging God by an external moral standard. In other words, your ethical intuitions (or what Aquinas would call the “natural laws” written upon your heart) are telling you that DCT is false.
Interesting side notes: Ockham expresses agreement with Abelard in claiming that sin is located in INTENTIONS rather than actions. He writes, Every act is “indifferently able to be praiseworthy and blameworthy” and “no act is praiseworthy or blameworthy except because of a good or evil intention.” He gives an example of the action: Going to church. This seems to be a good action. And it IS... IF the intent behind it is to worship God. But, the same exact action can also be evil; e.g., if the intent behind it is to try to hook up with a married person.

Furthermore, he says, an action is only sinful, or blameworthy, if it is under your CONTROL. He gives an example of jumping off a cliff to commit suicide, and then immediately regretting it and repenting on the way down. Initially, this action is sinful. But, it ceases to be a sin as soon as you repent—EVEN THOUGH you continue to PERFORM it! This is true because you are powerless to prevent yourself from performing it.]