

The Divine Command Theory

The Divine Command Theory (DCT)

- What is Socrates asking from Euthyphro in this dialogue?
- What is Euthyphro's answer?
- Does it really matter to Euthyphro's answer whether we talk of many gods or one god?
- Substitute for "piety" the word "just" or "good". And for "impiety" substitute "unjust" or "bad". Does this make the argument easier to understand?

Socrates' Question

- Is the pious or holy beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.
- Is the good beloved by God because it is good, or is it good because it is beloved by God.
- Direction of influence:
 - Does God influence morality?
 - Or, do facts about morality influence God?

DCT

- DCT says that which is morally right is commanded by God and that which is morally wrong is condemned by God
- It is God's say-so that determines the moral goodness or badness of actions

Benefits of DCT

- Solves issue about the basis of ethical truths
- Ethical truths are tested against a higher authority: If God commands it, it is right. If God forbids it, it is wrong.
- Provides an answer to the question, “Why be moral?”

Problems for DCT

- Socrates’ question is one of the most famous philosophical questions in history.
- Socrates understands that accepting the DCT forces us into a dilemma
 - Is conduct made right or wrong solely based on God’s commands? or,
 - Does God command us to act in certain ways because these actions are right and others wrong?

First Horn of the Dilemma

- SUPPOSE: An action is made right or wrong solely based on God’s commands?
 - Torturing babies for fun is wrong because God said it is wrong.
- Could God have commanded otherwise? Could God have commanded that torturing babies for fun is morally permissible?
 - If so, then God’s commands are arbitrary.
 - Remember, there’s no right or wrong to a particular action until God commands it.

Would God Ever Command Such a Thing?

- Why would God not command, “Torturing babies for fun is permissible?”

If one answers “Because God is good” or “Because it is wrong,” then one has admitted that there’s a standard independent of God.

If one thinks these answers are correct, then it is not God’s command that makes actions right or wrong.

Another Problem . . .

- If we suppose DCT is true, then God's goodness is nonsense.
- What does it mean to say, "God's commands are good."
 - According to DCT, what does "good" mean?
 - Plug the DCT's definition of goodness into "good" in the phrase, "God's commands are good."
 - What do you get?

Empty Truism

- Truism: an undoubted or self-evident truth too obvious to mention
- Once we plug DCT's definition of goodness into our conception of God, then we get the empty truism, "God's commands are God's commands."
- Does this really tell us anything about the good, just, or the nature of morality?
- Is God worthy of being praised if his goodness could have been otherwise? Is God's goodness really arbitrary?

More Problems...

- There are many religions.
- If these different religions disagree about God's commands, then how is one supposed to figure out God's commands--what is right and wrong?
- Which religion might have the right commands is unknown and unknowable.

Second Horn of the Dilemma

- Socrates wonders if God commands us to act certain ways because those ways are right.
- The reason God commands us not to torture babies for fun is because he realizes that it is wrong.
- Taking this horn of the dilemma avoids the problems from the first horn: namely, the arbitrariness of God's commands and the emptiness of the conception of God's goodness

Consequences of Taking the Second Horn

- Forces us to abandon a theological conception of right and wrong
 - Right and wrong not a result of God's commands
 - Right and wrong are independent of God
 - Rightness and wrongness depend on a standard that is independent of God
- What is the result for DCT?

DCT Argument

1. If God commands us to do what is right, then either (i) the rightness of an action is the result of God's command, or (ii) God commands what is right because it is right.
2. If (i), then God's commands are arbitrary and the concept of God's goodness is empty.
3. If (ii), then there's a standard of right and wrong independent of God.
4. If God commands us to do what is right, then either (a) we consider God's commands as arbitrary and discard the concept of God's goodness as meaningful, or (b) admit that there is a standard for right and wrong that is independent of God and God's will and give up a god-based conception of right and wrong.
5. From a religious perspective, an arbitrary God and a God without a meaningful conception of goodness is unacceptable.
6. Therefore, from a religious perspective one must accept a standard for right and wrong independent of God and God's will.

Final Attempt to Rescue DCT

- God's ways are mysterious: How God brings ethical facts into being is mysterious. Nonetheless, God brings them into existence.
- If this response is true (if the matter about ethical truths really is mysterious), then we should not argue for the DCT.
- One cannot provide a justifying reason to accept DCT, if the process is mysterious.