

On the other hand, rationalistic theology claims that something is right, and since God knows this (being omnipo- tent), He therefore commands it (being omni-beneficent). So God is not arbitrary at all. The natural law of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for instance, is like this. All that said, this theory has two problems of its own.

1. God’s role as a lawgiver is diminished:

2. We still don’t know the source of morality:

Interestingly, similar dilemmas can be seen in a variety of different contexts—some of which we have already seen:
The Moral Conventionalist’s Dilemma: Is an action right because society commands it, or does society command it because it is right?

x is socially permitted ↔ x is morally right

The Moral Subjectivist’s Dilemma: Is an action right because a person’s emotions command it, or does a person’s emotions command it because it is right?

x “feels” right ↔ x is morally right

The Naturalist’s Dilemma: Is an action right because it is natural, or is it natural because it is right?

x is natural ↔ x is morally right

I leave it to you to work out the sorts of problems these dilemmas might raise for a moral conventionalist, a moral subjectivist, or a naturalist. These problems may be similar, though they will not all necessarily have the same force. Regardless, the serious problem with moral relativism, whether conventionalist or subjectivist, as well as with divine command theory is that they all severely restrict the reasons that one can appeal to when making moral justifica- tions. They close the conversation off to further moral inquiry, and make violent conflicts (between cultures, be- tween individuals, or between religions) over values seem the only viable alternative.
“Cognitivism”, on the other hand, is appealing to Plato, as well as to James Rachels, because it precisely does not close the conversation. Instead, it lets the conversation continue concerning what sort of moral reasons a person should find compelling. Of course, we still require a lot of details, but what we have seen so far should at least give us a sense of how to proceed.

Introduction to Philosophy

Divine Command Theory

Ethics is concerned with answering the practical question: what ought I do? This naturally raises a whole host of questions, one of which involves identifying the fundamental source of right and wrong. Moral relativists respond that there is no objective and universal foundation for morality that applies to all people. They instead argue that the source is found in either one’s own society (the theory of moral conventionalism) or one’s personal emotional responses (the theory of moral subjectivism).

Religious people, however, typically believe that it is the will and commands of God that are somehow connected to the source of morality. However, just as we have already seen with conventionalism and subjectivism, the assertion that “morality is commanded by God” may be understood as either a *descriptive* claim about the contents of God’s commands or a *normative* claim about morality itself. We must therefore be careful to distinguish the following:

Descriptive Moral Theology:

Divine Command Theory:

Rationalistic Theology:

As we shall see today, it is only divine command theory that really makes a claim concerning the absolute foundation of morality. If you are religious, this theory might seem attractive, and, indeed, many religious people do seem to advocate it as the correct understanding of morality. Plato was certainly aware of the theory, but his dialogue called the *Euthyphro* suggests that religious people (and not simply atheists) should remain skeptical of its veracity.

Before delving into this argument, it is worth considering the dramatic structure of the *Euthyphro*. Before turning to philosophy, Plato was apparently renown for writing poetry, and indeed he does try to ensure that the dramatic ele- ments of his dialogues reinforce the substantive arguments. So where and when does the dialogue take place? What are Socrates and Euthyphro doing there? Why does all this naturally lead to a dialogue about the nature of piety?

After setting things up, the dialogue gets going with Euthyphro, the self-proclaimed expert on all things pious and holy, starts offering various definitions of piety to Socrates. Why is Socrates not satisfied with these two?

Definition 1: *The pious is to do what I am doing right now, to prosecute the wrongdoer.*

Definition 2: *What is dear to the gods is pious.*

While discussing the second of these definitions, Socrates makes explicit a distinction between two different types of conflicts and quarrels that may occur between people. What are the two types of conflicts and quarrels that he mentions? To what deeper distinction (that we have now seen repeatedly in this course) does it correspond? Why is the reference to conflict give urgency to finding a method of moral inquiry?

When the third definition of piety is presented, things really get interesting.

Definition 3: *The pious is what **all** the gods love.*

In response to this definition, Socrates realizes that there are two completely different ways of understanding what Euthyphro is saying. In giving these two interpretations, Socrates presents Euthyphro with a famous dilemma, which we can, in turn, apply as a dilemma about morality (instead of simply about piety).

Euthyphro’s Dilemma: Is an action right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?

The importance and significance of this dilemma cannot be understated, nor can the difficulties it raises for those who believe that God and morality are intimately connected. The literal meaning of “dilemma” comes from the Greek *dia* and *lemma*, meaning “two opposing paths”. We can label the two paths that Socrates offers Euthyphro:

Divine Command Theory: An action is right because God commands it.

God commands x \longrightarrow x is morally right

Rationalistic Theology: God commands an action because it is right.

x is morally right \longrightarrow God commands x

Both of these paths cannot be simultaneously true, so if you believe God is connected to morality you must choose one and only one of these. Unfortunately, this is named a dilemma for good reason, as each option has its own difficulties.

Divine command theory asserts that God’s commands, and *nothing* more, determine what is right and what is wrong. There are at least two serious problems with assuming this.

1. God’s “goodness” is meaningless:

2. God’s commands are arbitrary without reason: