

*RELIGION AND META-ETHICS**

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Religious accounts of ethics are as diverse as religious views themselves: think, for example, of the differences between the views of Muslims, Jews, Biblical literalists, Roman Catholics, Unitarian Universalists, Buddhists, and Hindus. Though God's existence, where God is understood to be the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, creator of everything, is crucial to both the religious view itself and the ethical facts according to some sub-groups of these, it is totally irrelevant to either or both according to others. Since it would be impossible to comment on the implications of even a representative sample of such different views in one brief essay, my task will of necessity be severely circumscribed.

The question on which I will focus is very much a contemporary philosopher's question, but one that I hope will be of interest to both religious and non-religious readers alike. What should we make of the relationship between the existence of God as understood above, on the one hand, and our ethical obligations, on the other, in the light of views about the nature of ethical facts that have become almost standard in contemporary metaethics? Is the view that God's existence is crucial to the existence of ethical facts inconsistent with the views of contemporary metaethicists? Alternatively, and at the other extreme, do the views of contemporary metaethicists commit them to thinking that God's existence is crucial to the existence of ethical facts? The answers to these questions turn out to be at least somewhat surprising.

Let me begin with the metaethical background. For much of the twentieth century, the dominant view in metaethics was some form of anti-realism (Ayer 1936; Hare 1952, 1963, 1981; Blackburn 1984). Simplifying somewhat, anti-realists held that ethical judgements don't express beliefs about what the ethical facts are, but instead express our fundamental desires and hopes about the non-ethical nature of the world. Suppose we want very much for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing on condition that their taking up that opportunity doesn't preclude others from having it as well—from here-on I will ignore this desire's complicated condition—and suppose that we express this aspiration by judging that it would be good if people were given that opportunity. According to the anti-realists, our use of the ethical word 'good' in such a judgement doesn't refer to an additional ethical feature, *goodness*, possessed by the state of affairs in which people are given the opportunity to live a life of their choosing, a state of affairs otherwise characterizable in wholly non-ethical terms, but rather encodes in language a switch from a context of assertion in which we use our words to express our beliefs about how the world is, to one in which we use our words to express our desires about how the world is to be. Anti-realists thus hold that there are no *ethical* facts, as such, and that the role of ethical judgements was never to express beliefs about a domain of such facts in the first place. The role of such judgements is and always has been to express our hopes and dreams concerning the non-ethical nature of the world.

Various important consequences were supposed to follow from this. It is agreed on all sides that our beliefs are rationally evaluable, as they are supposed to be based on reasons that bear on their truth: evidence favours our believing what is likely true given the evidence. This is an objective relationship that holds between evidence and belief. But our fundamental desires and hopes, since they are not capable of being true or false, were supposed by the anti-realists not to be

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rationally evaluable in this or any other way. The anti-realists admitted that we disparage those who don't care about things like people being given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing. We say that they are insensitive to the considerations that favour their desiring such things, where these considerations are the non-ethical features of the states of affairs themselves—that is, what it would be like for people to lead lives of their own choosing—but the claim that they are insensitive to these considerations, and the further claim that these considerations favour such desires, were themselves supposed by the anti-realists to be just expressions of further desires or hopes. So even though anti-realists thought that when evidence favours belief, this entails that there is a reason for the belief, they rejected this entailment in the case of desire.

The picture that emerges is thus one according to which those of us who make ethical judgements have a complex array of desires: we desire that people be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, we desire that everyone desires that people be given that opportunity and are averse to those who lack the desire, and we desire that those who lack the desire acquire it by imagining what it would be like for people to lead lives of their own choosing. According to the anti-realists, desires like the first get expressed in the judgement that the state of affairs is good, and desires like the second and third get expressed in the judgement that the nature of that state of affairs favours people desiring it and that people who lack that desire are insensitive. The insensitivity of those who lack such desires was thus supposed to be nothing like the insensitivity of those who believe contrary to the evidence. Evidence favours our believing things in a very different way from the way in which that the non-ethical natures of the states of affairs that we desire were supposed to favour our desiring that those states of affairs obtain, according to the anti-realists. The first is a matter of reasons, which is an objective relationship between evidence and belief, whereas the second isn't.

The contrast with the views of metaethicists at the end of the twentieth century, and even more so in the twenty-first century, couldn't be more stark. The dominant view is now a kind of realism (Smith 1994, 2013, forthcoming; Scanlon 1998, 2014; Shafer-Landau 2003; Enoch 2008; Parfit 2011). The exact form that this realism should take is a matter of considerable dispute, but according to nearly all parties to this dispute, ethical judgements do express beliefs about ethical features possessed by states of affairs. Indeed, many who remain sympathetic to anti-realism now also admit that this is so as well, something that makes their disagreement with realists difficult to state (Gibbard 1990, 2008; Blackburn 1998; Dreier 2004). What brought about this radical change in view? The explanations vary. Some came to be realists because they thought that the sense of 'favouring' in which considerations favour our believing certain things can't be distinguished from the sense of favouring in which considerations can be said to favour our desiring certain things. Since favouring is what reasons do, they concluded that there are reasons both for believing and for desiring. Others came to be realists because they thought that they could show that certain desires are constitutive of optimally functioning agents, and that the premises of this argument turn out to favour our having such desires in the very same sense in which the old anti-realists thought that evidence favours believing. Such theorists thus also came to the conclusion, albeit by a different route, that there are reasons for both believing and desiring.

How does realism follow from there being reasons for both believing and desiring? Realism follows because, once these claims are granted, an ethical feature of a state of affairs, such as its being good, can be seen to be nothing over and above its having a certain feature we can

characterize in terms of reasons and desire. To give just one example, a state of affairs' being good might be taken to be nothing over and above its being a state of affairs that there is a reason to hope or desire obtains. The existence of the ethical fact follows by definition from the existence of the reason to desire or hope that it obtains, a reason that might be taken to consist in the non-ethical nature of the state of affairs itself. And what goes for a state of affairs' being good goes for an act that brings about this state of affairs being obligatory as well. Any act that is obligatory is an act that brings about a state of affairs with a non-ethical nature that there is reason to desire obtains, where that reason is once again the non-ethical nature of the state of affairs. It thus turns out to be no surprise that theorists who convince themselves that there are reasons to desire and hope for things end up being realists.

On the face of it, this would seem to be very bad news for the view that the existence of ethical facts depends in some fundamental way on the existence of God. Consider the following part of a speech made by Pope Francis. He begins by explaining how his concern for the poor led him to choose his name, but then continues:

...there is another form of poverty! It is the spiritual poverty of our time, which afflicts the so-called richer countries particularly seriously. It is what my much-loved predecessor, Benedict XVI, called the "tyranny of relativism", which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples. ... There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others, of everyone, on the basis of the nature that unites every human being on this earth. One of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is Pontiff, that is, a builder of bridges with God and between people. ... My own origins impel me to work for the building of bridges. ... In this work, the role of religion is fundamental. It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God. (Francis 2013)

What should contemporary metaethicists make of this? They should stand firm with Pope Francis in eschewing relativism. If there are reasons to care about the good of others, then these are reasons for everyone to care about the good of others, and all that is required for them to come to care about their good is that they be sensitive to the reasons that there are in the formation of their cares and concerns. Contemporary metaethicists should, however, take issue with Pope Francis's suggestion that it is impossible for people everywhere to come to care about each other while ignoring God. What is he imagining God's role to be?

Consider once again our example. As we have seen, if there is a reason for everyone to want very much for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, then all that's needed for people to care about others in this way is for them to be sensitive to the reasons that there are for their wanting this, where these reasons are provided by the non-ethical nature of that state of affairs. If God has a role to play then it would seem to be at best an *enabling* role. Openness to God might get people to see that there is this independent reason for caring about others. But it isn't clear why God is the only one who could play this enabling role. Any people or institutions capable of educating people could play it, even institutions and people who ignore God. For example, the family might play this role, as might various community-oriented organizations. Many atheist parents seem to do a pretty good job of bringing up their children to be sensitive to the reasons that there are for caring about others, and many Unitarian Universalist ministers do a pretty good job of helping their congregations acquire that sensitivity as well, even those who make a point of not mentioning God in their ministering out of respect for the atheists

in their congregations. The idea that it "is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God" would seem to be an empirical claim at best, and a fairly implausible one at that.

But it isn't only claims made by religious leaders that are undermined. Philosophical views according to which obligations must be defined in terms of God's will or commands are also undermined (compare Quinn 1978 with Hare 2007, and for commentary see Murphy 2012). Consider first the Divine Will Theory; we will return to the Divine Command Theory later. According to the Divine Will Theory, people ought to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them so to act, where willing is in turn understood to be either desiring or intending. For present purposes we can ignore the differences between these two formulations of the theory, and assume that it is God's desires that are important. The official argument against this is a version of Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma (Plato 2002). Either God desires that people act in a certain way for a reason, or he doesn't, and that no matter which it is, the Divine Will Theory turns out to be false.

Suppose that God desires that people act in a certain way for a reason. What could the reason be? The only plausible candidate, according to the official argument against the Divine Will Theory, is that people are obliged to act in that way. But if the act's being obligatory is God's reason for desiring that people act in that way, then it isn't true that it is obligatory for them to act in that way because God desires them so to act. The dependence goes the other way around: God's desire depends on the independent obligation. The Divine Will Theory is therefore false. The Divine Will Theory doesn't fare any better on the other horn of the dilemma either. Suppose that God desires people to act in the way that is supposed to be obligatory for no reason at all. He has a completely arbitrary whim that people act in that way. It is hard to see how this could make their acting in that way obligatory. Imagine people who fail to act in that way and then cite as their reason the fact that they had an arbitrary whim of their own to act in a different way, and that God's contrary arbitrary whim provided them with no reason to act in accordance with his whim and contrary to their own. How could God fail to accept this justification? God's whim doesn't obligate God. He could change his whims on a whim. So how could his whims obligate others?

Of course arbitrary whims, whether possessed by God or ordinary people, do provide reasons when it is a mark of respect to go along with them. Consider, for example, the arbitrary rules that apply in certain households when people have dinner together: hands must be washed; men must wear shirts with collars, rather than wear crew-neck t-shirts or go bare-chested; hair must be neatly combed; people must sit up straight on all four legs of their chairs, rather than leaning back on the rear two legs; elbows must be kept off the table; and so on. Some of these rules may be conventional, but others are more idiosyncratic, tied to practices within particular families. To this extent, these rules can be seen as expressing arbitrary preferences about how people are to behave at the dinner table. Such arbitrary preferences can, however, be reason-providing, if satisfying them is a mark of respect. Similarly, the fact that God has a certain whim may provide all of us with a reason to do what he whimsically wants us to do if so acting is what we would have to do to show respect for him. Importantly, however, though God's arbitrary whim would, to this extent, be reason-providing, it would only be reason-providing given its connection with the reason we have to show God respect, where that reason isn't based on an arbitrary whim. The Divine Will Theory, which in effect seeks to ground all reasons in arbitrary whims, is thus plainly false (compare and contrast Carson 2012).

Despite the fact that the dilemma argument, as just described, is much cited, there is an obvious problem with it, given the views of contemporary metaethicists. Look again at the first horn of

the dilemma. It falsely assumes that if God has a reason for desiring that people act in the way that is supposed to be obligatory, then the only plausible candidate for that reason could be that it is independently obligatory for them to act in that way. But, as we have seen, God's reason for desiring that people act in that way could be the non-ethical way the world would be if people were to act in that way. This, to repeat, is the sort of view that is taken by many contemporary metaethicists. The non-ethical way the world would be if people were to act in the way that it is obligatory for them to act provides everyone, God and other people too, with a reason to desire that the world be that way, and it is obligatory that people act in that way because there is this reason for them to desire that the world be this way. No circularity there.

Far from undermining the Divine Will Theory, it might therefore be thought that the views of contemporary meta-ethicists provide defenders of the theory with all the materials they need in order to defend it against the objection based on the *Euthyphro* dilemma. If God exists, where God is understood to be the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, creator of everything, then God's being all-good could only consist in his being fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are in the formation of his desires. If God's will is a matter of what he desires, and God would only have desires if there are reasons for them, then it seems that it will indeed be obligatory for people to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them to act in that way. This is just the Divine Will Theory. So, at any rate, it might be thought.

Unfortunately for the defenders of the Divine Will Theory, however, the argument just given for the theory has a false premise. If God is all-good, all that follows is that he has no desires that there are reasons *for him not to have*, not that he only has desires that there are reasons *for him to have*. He could still have all sorts of whims about how people are to act based on no reason at all, and these could be whims that we have no reasons to satisfy out of respect for him. These whims would be part of his will but, for the reasons given earlier, it would be implausible to suppose that God's having these whims give rise to obligations. God's whims don't obligate God, and they don't obligate others either, if satisfying them isn't a way of showing him respect. So there is still a residual problem with the Divine Will Theory, even as revised in the light of the views made salient by contemporary metaethicists.

Of course, it might be thought that this problem with the Divine Will Theory also suggests how it should be revised so as to make it more plausible. It needs to restrict God's willings to desires for which there are reasons. Imagine a variation on the Divine Will Theory that is so restricted. According to this view, which we might call the Divine Rational Will Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them so to act *on the basis of reasons*. If God exists, as understood above, then is this theory true? The answer is that it is not true, but the explanation of why it isn't true is a little more complicated. It also turns on an assumption about the nature of the reasons that there are to act. Let me explain.

So far we have been working with a specific example of an obligatory act: the obligation everyone has to do what they can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. This obligation provides what's called a *neutral* reason to act. The reason is neutral because it is grounded in a reason everyone has to desire that the *same* state of affairs comes about, namely, the state of affairs in which people have the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. But—and this is the assumption mentioned above—not all obligations provide neutral reasons to act. Some provide what are called *relative* reasons, where relative reasons are reasons everyone has to desire that *different* states of affairs obtain. Relative reasons make trouble for the Divine Rational Will Theory.

Consider the obligation each of us has not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing on condition that their leading that life doesn't preclude others from doing so as—from here-on I will ignore the complicated condition. This obligation provides each of us with a relative reason to act because the reason is grounded in a reason each of us has to desire that a *different* state of affairs obtains: *I* have a reason to desire that the state of affairs in which *I* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing obtains; *you* have a reason to desire that the state of affairs in which *you* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing obtains; and so on. These relative reasons are natural counterparts to the neutral reason we all have to do what we can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. Part of what might be required to do, given the neutral reason, is to try to persuade others not to interfere with people, and perhaps even that we join together and institute a system of laws that prevents people from engaging in flagrant acts of interference. But acts of both these kinds would need to be constrained by a special reason each of us has to ensure that *we* do not interfere ourselves. That's the obligation to which the relative reason gives rise.

Note that both neutral and relative reasons are universal. *Everyone* has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which people lead lives of their own choosing, and *everyone* has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere. The difference between the neutral and relative reasons doesn't lie in the fact that one is universal and the other isn't, but rather in what there is universal reason to desire. The relative reason provides everyone with a reason to desire a state of affairs whose characterization requires ineliminable mention of the person who has the desire: everyone has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. This isn't true of the neutral reason. The neutral reason provides everyone with a reason to desire a state of affairs that we can characterize without mentioning the person who has the desire. Everyone has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which people lead lives of their own choosing. To the extent that desirers with this desire have a desire about themselves, it is only about themselves in virtue of the fact that they count as one of the people. This isn't true of the relative reason.

We are now in a position to state the problem with the Divine Rational Will Theory. What makes it the case that people have obligations that give rise *relative* reasons to act, according to this theory? For example, what makes it the case that people have an obligation not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing? According to the Divine Rational Will Theory, this is obligatory if and only if and because God wills that people act in this way on the basis of reasons. But if God's will is a matter of God's desires, then this amounts to the claim that what makes such acts obligatory is the fact that God has a desire that *people* do not interfere, where this desire is based reasons. Yet this can't be what makes it obligatory, as this would make the obligation give rise to a neutral reason rather than a relative reason. If there really were a reason to desire that *people* not interfere, then not only God, but all of us would have reason to desire that people not interfere. We might even be willing to interfere ourselves if that were a way of getting fewer people to interfere. This plainly isn't a relative reason.

So what does ground the obligation not to interfere? The answer is that the obligation is grounded in the fact that everyone, God included, has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. This means that if God's will is based on reasons, God's will would have to be restricted to *his own* acts on non-interference. His own rational will could therefore ground his own obligation not to interfere, but it couldn't ground the obligation that others have not to interfere. The ground of others'

obligations would instead have to be facts about what *they* would desire, based on reasons, if *they* were fully sensitive to the reasons that there are for desiring. This is a flat out denial of the Divine Rational Will Theory. It amounts to the secular view that people have an obligation not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing if and only if and because they themselves would have a desire, based on reasons, that the state of affairs in which they don't interfere obtains if their desires were fully sensitive to the reasons there are for desiring. For obvious reasons, let's call this the Rational Will Theory.

According to the Rational Will Theory, God's will has no special role to play in the existence of the obligation that gives rise to a relative reason. God's rational will grounds the obligation that God has not to interfere, but it doesn't ground the obligation you have, or I have, not to interfere, as our obligations are grounded in facts about *our* rational wills. But if a secular view like this is needed in order to account for the existence of obligations that give rise to relative reasons, then we should suppose on grounds of simplicity that that same secular view accounts for the existence of obligations that give rise to neutral reasons. Why does everyone have an obligation to do what they can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing? Everyone has this obligation if and only if and because everyone would have a desire based on reasons that the state of affairs in which people have the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing obtains if *their* desires were fully sensitive to the reasons there are for desiring. God's will thus has no special role to play in the existence of the obligation that gives rise to neutral reasons either. The Rational Will Theory is thus preferable to the Divine Rational Will Theory. God's will has no special role to play in the existence of obligations beyond his own.

In its most general form the Rational Will Theory tells us that people have an obligation to act in a certain way if and only if and because they would have a desire, based on reasons, that the state of affairs that results from their acting in that way obtains if their desires were fully sensitive to reasons. Since in order to be fully sensitive to reasons people would have to have knowledge of all the relevant non-ethical facts, it might be thought that the Rational Will Theory in effect says that people have an obligation to act in a certain way if and only if and because they would desire themselves to act in that way if they were God-like. The *idea* of God might therefore be thought to be relevant to the concept of an obligation, even if the *existence* of God is not. It is, however, important to note this is not so either. The Rational Will Theory does not entail that our obligations are fixed by facts about what are like in possible worlds in which we are God-like.

To be sure, the Rational Will Theory does make the existence of ethical facts contingent on there being possible worlds in which our desires are fully sensitive to reasons and we know all of the relevant non-ethical facts. But this is not to imagine ourselves as being God-like. God is also the all-powerful creator of everything. According to the Rational Will Theory, by contrast, the ground of people's obligations lies in the desires they would have in possible worlds in which, for all that the Rational Will Theory tells us, they could be the weakest person in that world. People may thus be very far from being God-like in the possible worlds in which the Rational Will Theory tells us that their desires ground their obligations. For example, it is plainly a contingent fact that our desires are fully sensitive to reasons and that we know all the relevant non-ethical facts in the worlds that ground our obligations. There are plenty of possible worlds, the actual world being prominent among them, in which we are ignorant, and our desires are not sensitive to reasons. God, by contrast, is *essentially* such that he has knowledge and desires that are sensitive to reasons. We are no more God-like in the possible worlds in which our desires and knowledge ground our obligations than we are in the actual world.

Let's now turn from variations on the Divine Will Theory to the Divine Command Theory. According to the Divine Command Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God commands them to act in that way. It might be thought that all of the reasons that have been given for supposing that various versions of the Divine Will Theory are implausible will carry over and show that the Divine Command Theory is implausible as well. If our obligations don't depend on God's existence, they can't depend on God's commands either. In fact, however, this thought is mistaken. Because commands can have normative significance in their own right, a significance that willings lack, a revised version of the Divine Command Theory might still be plausible. To see why this is so, consider three very different contexts in which commands have normative significance in their own right.

Imagine a parent walking along a city street with a young child. The child blows his nose and throws his tissue on the ground. Imagine that the city employs street sweepers and that this is a matter of common knowledge between the parent and the child: perhaps a street sweeper is in plain view in the distance. Even so, it is easy to imagine the parent believing that the child has an independent reason to pick up the tissue and put it in the trashcan, and that the best or even only way to get him to act in accordance with this reason in the circumstances is by commanding him to do so. Does the parent's command have independent normative significance in this situation? That depends on whether the parent merely takes himself to be a legitimate authority, in Joseph Raz's sense, or whether he really is such an authority (Raz 1986).

The parent really is a legitimate authority, in Raz's sense, if two conditions are satisfied. The first is that she has the power to issue commands that will have a certain effect. She is in a position to get the child to ignore the reasons that he thought he had for acting in this situation, reasons to do with his own convenience, and to pick up the tissue merely because of her say-so: the power to make the child forgo weighing his parent's say-so against his own reasons of convenience, and instead to take her say-so as preempting any consideration of reasons of his own convenience. This would be for the parent to have the power to make the child treat the reason provided by her command as an *exclusionary* reason, in Raz's sense. The second condition is that the parent and child satisfy what Raz calls the 'normal justification thesis':

The normal way to establish that a person has authority over another involves showing that the alleged subject is likely to better comply with the reasons which apply to him (other than the alleged authoritative directive) if he accepts the directives of the alleged authority as authoritatively binding and tries to follow them, rather than by trying to follow the reasons which apply to him directly (Raz 1986, p.53)

In other words, the parent is a legitimate authority only if, in addition to her having the power in question, the child satisfies a certain condition as well. The child must be more likely to do what he has reasons to do by obeying his parent's command than he would merely by doing what he thinks he has reasons to do. If these two conditions are satisfied, then not only does the child treat the reason provided by the parent's command as an exclusionary reason, it really is an exclusionary reason.

It is easy to imagine that the condition specified in normal justification thesis is satisfied in the case of the parent and the child. The reason not to drop trash on city streets when the city employs street-sweepers requires some sophistication and subtlety to appreciate. The street-sweepers are not there to clean up everyone's trash, but only the trash left by those who don't recognize that everyone has an independent reason not to drop trash, a reason that is in turn

grounded in the reason we all have to do our fair share in the maintenance of a pleasant environment in which to live. Needless to say, the child we are imagining may well lack the sophistication required to appreciate such a sophisticated and subtle reason, even though he is sufficiently sophisticated to appreciate that his parent is a legitimate authority on the matter of reasons created by her commands. If so, then when the child picks up the tissue and puts it in the trash, he acts on a reason, namely, the fact that his parent issued an authoritative command, and, by acting on this reason, he thereby better acts on the reasons that apply to him, in particular, the reason to do his fair share in the maintenance of a pleasant environment in which to live.

The situation involving the parent and the child just described is parallel to the situation some people think human beings are in with respect to God's commands. God is like the parent and we are like the child. Their idea that, since God is fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are, but we aren't, God is in a better position than we are to know what we have independent reason to do and hence what our obligations are. Since God is in this position of superior knowledge, it therefore follows that we would do a better job of acting on our independent reasons by simply obeying the commands he issues to us, and this is sufficient to make his commands authoritative for us. Moreover, since we are a position to know that God knows what we have reason to do, and hence that his commands are authoritative, we can also know that his commands are authoritative, and hence that they provide us with reasons to act, even while admitting that we aren't in a position to know what God's reasons are for issuing those commands. Would an account of our obligations along these lines, assuming for a moment that its various empirical claims are true, be sufficient to prove the truth of the Divine Command Theory?

According to the Divine Command Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God commands them to act in that way. An initial problem with the Divine Command Theory, so formulated, when it is defended in the way just suggested should be immediately apparent. Since the defence assumes that we are in a worse position to know what we have reason to do than God, it gets no purchase at all in those possible worlds in which we are in as good a position as God to know what we have reason to do. Consider, for example, those possible worlds in which we are fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are. In those possible worlds, God has no reason to issue any commands to us, so in those worlds our obligations are grounded directly in the desires we have that are based on reasons. The correct story of our obligations, in those possible worlds, is the Rational Will Theory. The 'only if' part of the Divine Command Theory is thus false. At best a revised version of the Divine Command Theory is plausible, one that restricts itself to making the sufficiency claim. We have an obligation if God commands us. This version of the theory doesn't make the existence of obligations depend on God's existence.

Once we fully digest this initial problem, however, a deeper problem with even this watered down version of the Divine Command Theory emerges. The problem is not so much metaphysical, as epistemological. Why should we suppose that the actual world is a world in which God must issue commands to us if we are to do what we have reason to do? Is it true that God is in a better position to know what we have reason to do than we are ourselves? It would seem not. One of the main achievements of the Enlightenment was to show that though knowledge of reasons is beyond infants and the mentally infirm, it is well within the grasp of adults. Enlightenment figures demonstrated this, more or less successfully, by giving arguments for various substantive claims about what we have reason to do. Moreover, when rigorously pursued, many of these arguments support substantive views in the ballpark of the two principles

we have assumed to be correct here (see for example Rawls 1971, Scanlon 1998, Hooker 2000, Parfit 2011). This is not to deny that adults can disagree with each other about what they have reason to do, but the mere fact that there is disagreement about reasons doesn't show that one of the parties to that disagreement lacks knowledge any more than disagreement about mathematics, or economics, shows that neither party to a disagreement has knowledge. The deeper problem with the Divine Command Theory, when it is motivated by the need to think of ourselves as having childlike epistemic powers, is thus that it is predicated on a claim about the limitations of our epistemic powers that we have no reason to believe is true.

Consider now a second sort of context in which commands have normative significance in their own right. Let's continue with the assumption that we have reason to desire two things: that people be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, and that we do not interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. How are we to see to it that we do what's required for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing? One possibility would be for each of us to do what we believe would lead to that outcome. But since there are many things we could do that would lead to this outcome, and since the success of many of these require the cooperation of others, it is crucial, if we are to do what's, that we coordinate our efforts. If we don't coordinate, we would be at cross-purposes, and many of our efforts would be in vain. But when there are several equally good options, how is such coordination to be brought about? One answer is that God could pick one of the equally good alternatives and then command us all to pursue that one. Now imagine that this is the only, or if not the only then the most efficient, way for us to coordinate. Raz's normal justification thesis would come into play. God's commands would be authoritative in virtue of their coordinating role.

Note that a defence of the Divine Command Theory along these lines would once again only show that we have obligations *if* God commands us, not *only if* he commands us. Since not all obligations require us to coordinate with others, God would have no reason to issue commands on matters that do not require coordination, so these obligations would exist, but wouldn't be grounded in God's commands. But even this more restricted sufficiency claim seems unlikely to be true. The claim that we lack the ability, absent God's commands, to coordinate our efforts in the way required to do what we have reason to do seems to be false. Think of all the coordination that goes on without God's apparently having any view on the matter: the members of orchestras manage to play together, sports teams manage to compete with each other, kitchen workers in large restaurants manage to prepare multiple meals in a timely fashion, the fashion industry manages to design, create and sell new looks year-in, year-out, and so we could go on. To my knowledge, no one thinks God has issued commands on these matters. Nor does the claim that God's issuing a command is the most efficient way to get us to coordinate seem to be true either. How could having to deal with an extra layer of doctrinal disagreement concerning God's existence, and the content of the commands he issues, be more efficient for the purposes of coordination than the more pragmatic methods, whatever they might happen to be, employed by musicians, those involved in sports, restaurants, and the fashion industry?

Consider, finally, a third sort of context in which commands have normative significance in their own right. Focus this time on the reason to desire that we do not interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. What, precisely, do we have reason to desire? There is, after all, a continuous series of actions in between touching someone harmlessly and assaulting them, and at some point in this series we cross the boundary between determinately not interfering with them

and determinately interfering with them. The boundary between non-interference and interference is thus vague. This means that if we are each to be in a position to know when others have acted towards us in a way that that we know and they know that they have reason not to act, something that it is crucial if we are to police each other's behavior, then we need to have a shared understanding of how the concept of interference is to be precisified. How is this precisification to be achieved? God's commands might once again provide the answer. The argument for the Divine Command Theory would then proceed much as it did in the previous cases, but this time the crucial empirical claim would be that God's commands provide us with the only, or if not the only then the most efficient, means by which to precisify what we have reason to do in the ways needed if we are to police each other.

Unsurprisingly, the problem with this attempt to defend the Divine Command Theory is much the same as that with the previous defence. God's commands aren't needed to ground our obligations in cases in which our reasons are determinate, so at best this provides us with a defence of a version of the Divine Command Theory that abandons the necessity claim and restricts itself to the sufficiency claim. However the crucial empirical claim needed to defend even this restricted version of the theory seems also to be false. We evidently do not lack the ability, absent God's commands, to precisify what we have reason to do in the ways required to police ourselves. There is, after all, vagueness in what musicians, those involved in sports, cooking, and the fashion industry have reason to do too, and yet they manage to an agreed precisification of what they have reason to do to the extent necessary for them to police each other without any help from God. Moreover their more pragmatic methods of precisification, whatever they are, would seem to be more efficient than those that require us to iron out the extra layer of doctrinal disagreement concerning God's existence, and the content of the commands that he issues.

Let me sum up the discussion. We have considered various views according to which our ethical obligations depend upon, or are grounded in, God's existence, and we have evaluated these views in the light of claims about the nature of our ethical obligations that are widely accepted by contemporary metaethicists. Some of these views—versions of the Divine Will Theory—have turned out to be conceptually confused, though not for the reasons philosophers have usually thought. Others—versions of the Divine Command Theory—have turned out not to be conceptually confused, but to depend on empirical claims that I have suggested we have no reason to accept. This is important, as it shows that there is no deep tension between the views of contemporary metaethicists and those who accept these versions of the Divine Command Theory. Moreover, since others might disagree with my assessment of the empirical facts, the arguments given against these versions of the Divine Command Theory are by their nature more controversial. Weak versions of the Divine Command Theory are far more plausible than many contemporary ethicists have thought.

Finally, what should we make of the idea that, if God exists, then our having a relationship with him would be one of the most important things in our lives? What has been said here suggests that, even if this conditional claim is true, the choice whether or not to have such a relationship is severely constrained on all sides by our ethical obligations. If, as we have been assuming, each and everyone of us, including God if he exists, has reasons not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing and to do what we can to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to lead such a life, then those who believe that God exists, and who choose to have a relationship with him, would seem committed to the conclusion that those who don't believe, and so choose

not to have such a relationship, are ethically permitted to make that choice, and others are ethically obliged to let them make it. Ethics, it seems, is secular through and through.

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