

# **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 7, Divine Command Theory**

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 7, Divine Command Theory.

Okay, having now surveyed the major moral theories, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, and social contract theory, let's turn now to more religious or theological approaches to ethics, beginning with Divine Command Theory.

And from there, we'll talk about natural law ethics. So, Divine Command Theory, simply put, is the view that particular actions are right or wrong simply because God says so. God has issued all sorts of commands in scripture.

Some of these are very general commands, such as to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Some are very specific commands, such as the various exhortations that we get in the Pauline epistles and other biblical books. In the book of Leviticus, we get all sorts of case laws that spell out very specific situations that might involve molds or bodily emissions and what to do in those particular circumstances.

There are scores, if not hundreds, of these. So, from the most abstract and general moral principles to very concrete particular commands about specific situations, scriptures are full of commands. The significance of divine commands, when it comes to just thinking about ethics and making sense of our concepts of moral obligation and duty, is that these commands bind us to a certain standard.

You might say that divine commands have a binding effect. In the word obligation, the root term is *legare*, which means to bind. That Latin term literally means to bind.

Anyone who has an obligation, etymologically, would look at that. Well, it makes sense that we would have that association with being bound somehow. We use the phrase *duty bound*.

I can't go with you to the movie tonight. Why? Because I'm *duty-bound* to do this other thing. I told my friend I would run this errand for him or do this or that.

There's a kind of binding that we associate with an obligation. Divine commands impose obligations in the sense that they bind us to whatever God's standard is. So, that's a basic idea in divine command theory.

God makes commands, and just because God has made these commands, we are bound to obey them. Now, this is a popular theory among Christians, and I think it's even clearer in the fact that when Christians are asked what their view is on a particular issue, some moral issue, even if they wouldn't call themselves a divine command theorist, the fact that their first impulse is to go to scripture and see what God says about this particular issue. Or what is it within scripture that might apply to this issue, whether it's abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, drug legalization, or whatever it is?

We go to the scripture and see what God has instructed us to do. He's telling us how we should live our lives. We'll consult that, and then we'll know what the right course of action is.

Well, for a long time, skeptics, religious skeptics, atheists, and agnostics have pushed back on divine command theory using an argument that Plato gave us, actually Socrates, in one of Plato's dialogues, the Euthyphro. That is now called the Euthyphro Dilemma, which, if you go on any atheist website, at some point, you're going to see this argument made against divine command theory. You don't need atheists to maintain that you Christians are so naive and foolish to think that you could find ethics in God.

Don't you know that Socrates refuted that 2,500 years ago? So, the Euthyphro Dilemma basically argues that if you are a divine command theorist, you are forced to choose between one of two different options, both of which are quite unsavory. In the context of Plato's dialogue, the Euthyphro, this emerges from a conversation between Socrates and an individual who is waiting outside the hall of King Archon, who's a magistrate who presides over religious disputes. Socrates waits to see this particular magistrate himself, and Euthyphro and Socrates start this conversation. Euthyphro asks him why he's there.

He explains he's been brought up on charges of impiety, corrupting the youth, and inventing false gods, as it turns out because Socrates only believed in one god rather than the whole Greek pantheon. Well, what are you doing here, Socrates asks Euthyphro. He says, well, I'm prosecuting my father for murder.

Is that right? Wow, your own father? Yep. What did he do? Well, he killed a servant. Well, what had that servant done? Was there something that he had done that made your father react so strongly? Yes, in fact, he had killed another servant.

So, you have a slave who killed a slave, and your father killed the slave who murdered. How'd that happen? Well, he bound him up. He was going to get some authorities, get some help, and he bound him up and threw him in a ditch, and while he was going to get some help, that servant died.

So, your dad killed a murderer, and you're prosecuting him now. That's right. Wow, that's impressive.

You really must have a good sense of the right and the just and the good to be so bold as to prosecute your own father for murder. Euthyphro's response is, well, as a matter of fact, yes, I do have a good, acute sense of right and wrong, and I know I'm right here. Well, could you help me out here and just tell me, since I, Socrates, am being persecuted for impiety, I could really use your insight on what's the difference between what's pious and what is not.

Could you just define for me what piety is and what goodness is? And Euthyphro begins with a pretty lame definition that's way too specific. He initially defines goodness as prosecuting the wrongdoer for his crime. Okay, we're looking for something more general than that.

Okay. The best definition he comes up with is goodness or piety is what all the gods love and what all the gods hate. That's impiety.

That's badness, wrongness. Oh, okay. Socrates says it's definitely better than your other definitions.

Just one more thing. Could you answer this question for me? Sure. Do the gods love piety because it's good, or is it good because they love it? What? That seems like a kind of trifling question.

Actually, it's not. If they love it because it's good, that shows there's something else besides the gods loving that made it good. If it's good because it's loving, if it's good because they love it, then the question is, well, why do they love it? So, either way, you're kind of stuck.

Eventually, Euthyphro leaves, very irritated, as is often the case with Socrates and his interviews. That's probably what got him killed. It was people just annoyed with the guy.

So, we can adapt, as many have, this Euthyphro problem to a monotheistic context, specifically one that has to do with divine commands. Here it is. Does God command something because it's good, or is something good because God commands it? Now, if we say that God commands X, whatever it is, because it's good, that implies that goodness is defined independently of God's will.

And that defeats the position from the outset. If you take the latter view and say that something's good because God commands it, then that just begs the question, why does God command it? And that returns us back to the original question. Or you

could, as actually, Muslims take this approach. They would say that God purely and simply commands what he does.

He could make anything righteous if he wanted to. He could have commanded rape, he could have commanded torture, he could have commanded child abuse, and all those things would be good. But he just so happens to have commanded the things that he did.

And that seems problematic to a lot of us. Wait a minute, it seems something is so wrong with those things that God's commanding them wouldn't by itself make those things good. So, how do we escape this dilemma? Looks like either choice is a bad one.

What do we do? Contemporary philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne approaches this by saying that the two horns of the dilemma apply to two different kinds of moral truths. So, he distinguishes between necessary and contingent moral truths. Necessary moral truths are true in all possible worlds.

They had to be true, and they could not be otherwise. Contingent moral truths, though, are true because of certain facts about this world. So, according to Swinburne, God commands necessary obligatory actions just because they're good in themselves.

Act justly; be truthful, for example. But contingent obligatory actions are good because God commands them specifically that you should pay this debt to this person.

You should tell the truth to this particular person; these are contingent on life circumstances. And so, God has commanded us to abide by certain rules in certain contexts.

Those would be contingent obligatory actions as opposed to those which are necessarily so and couldn't be otherwise. That's Swinburne's way of dealing with it. I'm not a big fan of that.

I much prefer Aquinas' solution. His way of dealing with this is to say that God commands the things he commands not because of the nature of the actions but because of who he is. It is his nature that is the standard for goodness.

His commands simply apply his nature, as it were, or tell us what his nature implies about that particular situation or life context. So, his commands make known to us God's nature. In so many ways, they tell us to conform to the nature of God.

So, when he says not to murder, it is because God is alive and he is justice. When he tells us to honor him above all things, that's not arbitrary. It's because the nature of God is such that it is always right and best to regard him first above all things.

And so on for all of the commands that God makes. There are just so many ways of communicating the nature of God to us. He is the standard for goodness.

So, God commands what he commands because of who God is. So, the purpose of biblical commands is not to create certain moral truths. These moral truths are eternal.

The purpose of biblical commands is epistemological, to inform us as to what is morally true and good. And, of course, all of that is an outflow of who God is and what his nature is. So, biblical commands are essentially epistemological.

They don't create moral truths, and they don't report to us what some of the standards above God have told us. No, they're reporting to us the implications of the divine nature for our various modes of conduct. That's the Thomistic way of solving the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Peter Geach, a long-time Catholic philosopher, has an interesting take on divine command ethics. He maintains that not all moral knowledge depends on the knowledge of God because he says any alleged divine revelations must be evaluated in moral terms, philosophically, in order for us to recognize that that is a plausible communication from God. We bring certain philosophical, moral intuitions to our reading of scripture, and that's why those of us who judge scripture to be from God, that's why we judge it to be so.

So even our evaluation of the scriptures and the moral standards we have there are themselves philosophical, he says. Again, he's a devout Catholic. He was the husband of G.E.M. Anscombe, who was the philosopher who challenged C.S. Lewis in a chapter in the first edition of his book on miracles that had such a strong effect on Lewis.

He took it very seriously. He was a first-rate philosopher, and Geach and Anscombe were a great team. So, anyway, it's Geach's view that since certain moral knowledge precedes the knowledge of God, some moral knowledge is independent of the knowledge of God.

I'm not particularly sympathetic with that, but that is an important viewpoint that would be more at home in the natural law tradition. We'll talk about natural law ethics next. So, the general undesirability of certain acts like lying, infanticide, adultery, he says, quote, is itself a promulgation of the divine law absolutely forbidding such practices.

And this is true, he says, even if one does not realize that this is a promulgation of the divine law, even if he does not believe that there is a God, and that, again, that's just straight-up natural law ethics. That God is written on our hearts. The law of God, I mean, that's the Apostle Paul's metaphor in Romans 2, I think, written upon our hearts is the law of God.

Even independently of reading the scriptures, we know basic right and wrong, and that's why when we approach the scriptures, we bring a certain moral framework that might enable us to assess what the Bible is telling us about how we should live morally is basically on the right track. That's because of this innate awareness of the law of God. So next time, we'll talk about natural law ethics, but that's divine command theory.

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