Many people believe that things are right and wrong because of what God commands or forbids. This view is called the Divine Command Theory, but there are believers and non-believers who think that it gets the relationship between religion and morality wrong. We examine the strengths and weaknesses of several versions of the Divine Command Theory.

It’s almost impossible to imagine what it must have been like for that man, bringing his son to that remote place, binding him up like a trussed animal and standing over him with the knife. Nothing the boy had ever done could have called for what was happening to him. The father loved the boy and our hearts ache when we try to imagine the ache in his heart. But it had to be done. God had commanded it, and if God had commanded it, it had to be right.

Or so it must have seemed to Abraham as he stood ready to sacrifice his son Isaac at what he took to be God’s command. The story has a happy ending: at the last minute, God told Abraham to free Isaac and instead to sacrifice a ram that was caught in the bushes. But what are the lessons of this strange tale?

1 MORALITY AND GOD’S COMMANDS: THE PROBLEM

Perhaps the story of the binding of Isaac occurred just as reported in Genesis, or perhaps it’s religious fiction. For our purposes, it doesn’t matter. The story raises thorny questions. What, if anything, would
make it right for Abraham to kill his son? Would the fact that God commanded it be reason enough?

Suppose there’s a God who sometimes gives commands. We could wonder if what God commands has to be right at all, and later on we will. For the moment, suppose that whatever God commands really is morally required. We can ask why. Does God command things because they’re right? Or is what God commands right because God commands it? It’s worth being clear about the difference.

Imagine a country whose laws are determined by a legislature. In this country, there is a Chief Judge. She never makes legal mistakes, and she never bends or breaks the law. Sometimes she issues certain orders. Because her command of the law is so flawless, we can say: if the Chief Judge orders something, then it’s obligatory; it’s the law.

Now imagine a different country, run by an absolute monarch. Laws are determined and changed by the monarch’s decrees. In this second country, we can say: if the monarch commands something, then it’s obligatory; it’s the law. Still, there’s an important difference between the judge and the monarch. The judge commands things because they’re the law. Her orders don’t make things required independently of the existing law. Even though she has never made a legal error, it could still make sense to wonder in a particular case whether she got things right. The monarch, on the other hand, makes the law. The reason his commands are legally binding is that in his country, that’s what the law is. Things like slips of the tongue aside, it makes no sense to wonder whether he has made a mistake about the law. What he commands is the law because he commands it.

When it comes to the law, there’s a difference between something’s being required because it’s commanded—the case of the monarch—and being commanded because it’s required—the case of the judge. We can raise much the same issue about morality, and the origins of the issue go back to Plato. In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato depicts an encounter between Socrates and a man named Euthyphro, who is prosecuting his own father for murder. The charge seems flimsy and Plato clearly wants us to feel uncomfortable about what Euthyphro is up to, but Euthyphro insists that he’s doing what piety demands. Socrates asks what piety is. At first, Euthyphro maintains that piety is what the gods hold dear, but Socrates persuades him that even if the gods approve of whatever is pious, they approve of it because it’s pious and not the other way around.
Now piety isn’t the same thing as morality. Still, we can ask: are things morally right because God commands them? Or does God command things because they’re right? The view that God’s commands are what make things morally right or wrong is called the Divine Command Theory and superficially, our analogy with the law might seem to favor it. God we might say, is like the absolute monarch; moral requirements are God’s laws. Because God is the supreme lawgiver, if God commands or forbids something, that makes it right or wrong and unless God commands it or forbids it, it isn’t right or wrong.

A little thought makes clear that things can’t be quite this simple. The monarch may be able to make something a law by commanding it, but that isn’t enough to make it a moral requirement. Suppose the monarch commands that no family shall have more than two children, and that any further children born into a family are to be put to death. This might be the law but most of us would think that it’s an outrageous and deeply immoral law.

This sharpens the issue. Someone might say: the world is God’s kingdom, and as the most Absolute of Monarchs, God’s commands settle the law for the kingdom that we call the world. But can’t we ask if the Divine Law meets the demands of morality? And in asking that, aren’t we presupposing that there’s a difference, at least in principle, between what God commands and what’s morally right? Aren’t we presupposing that morality is independent of God’s will?

It’s in the nature of morality that what’s right and wrong isn’t just arbitrary. Torturing innocent people is wrong; being kind to children isn’t. Stealing is wrong; giving birthday presents is not wrong. It’s hard to find anyone who seriously thinks that stealing could have been right and gift-giving wrong, torture right and kindness wrong. The implication seems clear: if God’s commands are morally right, then this is so not simply because God gave the commands. Otherwise, no matter what God commanded and no matter how outrageous or perverse it seemed, it would be right. If the Divine Command Theory of morality allows that, then the Divine Command Theory is wrong.

2 SOME OBJECTIONS

It’s not unusual for people to resist this conclusion. Let’s look at some reasons why.
2.1 Objection #1: God Would Never Command Evil
One reason for resisting the conclusion that the divine command theory fails is that people can’t imagine God commanding anything evil. However, this misses the point. Opponents of the Divine Command Theory might agree that as a matter of fact, there’s a God who never commands anything wrong. Their point is that this means that God meets some objective, independent standard. If God is perfectly good, then it would be no surprise that whatever God commands is right. God has the moral wisdom to know what’s right and the goodness to command it. But in that case, God commands things because they’re right and not the other way around.

2.2 Objection #2: God Is the Creator
A second reason for doubting that morality is independent of God’s will insists that we’re ignoring something important. After all, if God exists, God isn’t a mere earthly monarch. God is the creator of all there is. Doesn’t that give divine commandments a special status? As creator, the story would go, God can command as God will and we’re obliged to obey. What would give the creature the right to rise up against the creator?

The answer is that it depends on what the creator is like. Imagine a universe made by a deity who is perfectly powerful but perfectly cruel. Sometimes this god commands horrible things out of sheer perversity. It might be smart to go along but it certainly wouldn’t be morally required. In fact, in a universe like that, the noblest and most moral act imaginable might be to rebel against the cosmic sadist who assembled the whole sorry scheme to begin with.

Someone who believes that the world was made by an evil being may be wrong, but we can at least imagine what it would mean for her to be right. In a world like that, the fact that the creator commanded something wouldn’t make it moral. And so if our world was made by a God whose commands are morally binding on us, the binding force isn’t simply because God is the creator.

2.3 Objection #3: Morality Needs Religion
A third reason why people resist the objections to the Divine Command Theory is a worry about what happens to morality if we don’t yoke it to religion. As Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov never quite put it, the point is that if there’s no God, then everything is permitted. In other words, some people think that if no God exists, then we don’t have any moral obligations at all. That’s a view that many of us would like to avoid.
Why think this way? Some people would say that unless there’s a God to threaten punishment, no one could ever have a reason to act morally. This seems wrong, as we’ll explain in a moment. It’s also morally confused. If someone does the “right” thing just because he’s afraid of being punished, he isn’t acting for moral reasons at all. However, let’s turn to the main complaint that unless a God exists, there’s no basis for morality. Plenty of thoughtful, philosophically sophisticated atheists believe that there’s a real difference between right and wrong. For example, plenty of atheists would agree that stealing from someone for no better reason than because you want what they have is just plain wrong. In fact, most of us—atheists or not—can give reasons for our moral beliefs that don’t appeal to religion at all. Why shouldn’t I steal your purse? Because it would cause you a lot of trouble, because I would be upset if anyone stole my wallet, and because I have no basis for thinking it would be right for me to steal from you but not right for you to steal from me. Atheists can reason this way just as well as theists can, and they can be just as motivated to act accordingly.

2.3.1 The “Queerness” Problem

Does this sort of reasoning prove that we have moral obligations? Perhaps not. What we’ve pointed to are various non-moral facts—facts about what would cause you trouble, about how I would feel if the tables were turned, and about my inability to come up with an argument for making a special case of myself. Most of us find these sorts of facts morally relevant, but there seems to be a logical gap between them and the existence of an objective moral obligation not to steal. Philosophers have sometimes phrased the difficulty by saying that you can’t derive an “ought” from an “is.” This raises a puzzling theoretical issue. Moral truths don’t seem like what we ordinarily call “facts.” They don’t just tell us how things are. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

You have the facts (how men do behave) and you also have something else (how they ought to behave). In the rest of the universe, there need not be anything but the facts (Lewis 1949, pp. 17–18).

J.L. Mackie saw this difference as fodder for what he called the argument from queerness. “If there were objective values, then they would be entities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (Mackie 1977, pp. 38). Accordingly, the way we know them would have to be completely different from the
way we know other sorts of facts. Mackie uses the phrase “objective values,” which is broader than the idea of obligation, but part of what puzzles Mackie is the “action-guiding” character of these facts. In any case, when we use the phrase “queerness problem” here, we will mean the problem of understanding how there could be such a thing as moral obligation.

There’s a deep puzzle here. How could moral obligation rest on what we usually think of as the facts? Superficially, this makes it easy to see a point in Ivan Karamazov’s slogan. If no God exists, all we seem to have are the facts. In that case, or so the argument goes, there aren’t any moral obligations. If God determines morality by issuing commands, the thought might go, the “queerness problem” goes away.

This thought may seem compelling at first, but we can wonder how good it really is. Suppose God gives a command. As we already saw, even if a supernatural creator commands something, that wouldn’t automatically make it morally right. The fact that God commands something is just another fact—a striking fact, to be sure, but one more fact.

We’ll have more to say later about the queerness problem. In the meantime, a good many philosophers who are aware of the problem still think there’s a real difference between right and wrong. Perhaps that’s a mistake, but let’s proceed on that assumption for the time being.

3 PHILIP QUINN: DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS FOR THEISTS

So far, things don’t look good for the Divine Command Theory, but in recent years philosophers have offered newer, more sophisticated versions. An ambitious divine-command theorist might try to convince philosophers in general that morality requires religion. However, as Philip Quinn points out, a less ambitious goal might be to develop divine command theories from within a religious framework and not to worry about whether religious skeptics will be convinced (Quinn 1990, p. 345). In Quinn’s view, divine command theories are the most plausible way for theists to look at morality (Quinn 1992, pp. 493–513).

3.1 Three Reasons

Quinn’s first argument appeals to the notion of divine sovereignty. Many theists maintain that God is sovereign over creation. Part of what they mean is that God’s will is completely effective: what God wills must
come to pass. If that's so, they claim then moral truths in particular should be up to God.

Quinn’s second reason for saying that theists should accept the Divine Command Theory is the so-called “immoralities of the patriarchs.” This second argument only applies to theists who grant authority to the Hebrew Bible (which Jews call the Tanakh and Christians call the Old Testament). There are several points in the Hebrew Bible where God apparently commands things that violate biblical commandments. God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but this violates the commandment against killing (Genesis 22:1–2). God apparently orders the Israelites to plunder the Egyptians (Exodus 11:2), though the meaning of the verse is not entirely clear. This seems to violate the commandment not to steal. God also orders Hosea to have sex with a prostitute (Hosea 1:2 and 3:1), in what some say amounts to a violation of commandments against adultery or fornication. Quinn’s idea is that unless God had commanded these things, they wouldn’t have been right.

The third argument is based on the role of love in Christian ethics. Quinn takes Matthew 22:37–40 as his text:

You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well.

Quinn points out that elsewhere (John 15:17) Jesus commands us to love: “the command I give you is this: you shall love one another.”

This ideal of love isn’t unique to Christianity; we can find similar themes in other religions. Quinn might well agree with this, but his thought is that the love Jesus has in mind is profoundly unnatural for human beings. It tells us to treat everyone as our neighbor and tells us to love everyone as much as we love ourselves. Erotic love, love of friends and family—all of these are partial and are based on special circumstance or special facts about the loved one. As Quinn puts it, “only a dutiful love can be sufficiently extensive in scope to embrace everyone without distinction” (Quinn 1992, p. 507). None of us ever succeeds completely in this dutiful love, but Quinn says, “loving everyone as we love ourselves is ... obligatory in Christian ethics, and it has this status, as the Gospel indicates, because God has commanded this all-inclusive love.”
3.2 Three Reasons Challenged

Quinn claims that these three reasons give theists a strong argument for accepting a Divine Command Theory, whatever non-believers might think. Should the theist be convinced?

There's an obvious objection to the argument from God’s sovereignty: there are some things that even God isn’t sovereign over. As Quinn himself points out, there’s lots of room to doubt that God is sovereign over necessary truths such as $2 + 3 = 5$. Quinn considers a suggestion that necessary truths are determined by what God strongly believes, but most philosophers are likely to think that God “strongly believes” that $2 + 2 = 5$ because it’s necessary rather than the other way around.

It’s plausible that moral truths are necessary truths. Technical language aside, it’s even more plausible that there are certain things God couldn’t make right. What would it mean to for vicious cruelty to be right? Wouldn’t a god who commanded it be like the evil creator we imagined above? In Chapter 1, we already saw that God’s omnipotence doesn’t have to mean that God can do absolutely anything. Why think that God’s sovereignty calls for a mysterious “ability” to make things that seem patently evil morally required?

What about the immoralities of the patriarchs? The examples are supposed to show that God can override the usual moral rules, but suppose God had commanded the Israelites to torture as many innocent Egyptian babies as they could. Would this have been right? If the answer is no (as we suspect most people would agree), then there are limits to how far God could go in overriding moral rules.

Beyond that, moral principles often allow for exceptions, and it doesn’t take a Divine Command Theory to see this. For example, usually we shouldn’t lie. But imagine someone during the Second World War who was hiding Jews from the Nazis. The storm troopers come to the door. They ask if there are any Jews in the house. Most of us think this situation would call for setting aside the usual rule against lying.

A theist who doesn’t accept the Divine Command Theory can point out that in the case of the plundering of the Egyptians, God could have had very good reasons for commanding the plunder. After all, the Egyptians had enslaved the Hebrew people and the Pharaoh had consistently refused the just demand to let them go. God may have commanded the “plunder” as a way of extracting just reparations. A theist could say very plausibly: it was those reasons, and not the mere fact that God gave a
command, that made the command morally acceptable. As for Hosea, he married Gomer; he didn’t just have sex with her. It’s not clear that any moral rule got broken to begin with.

The case of Abraham and Isaac is tougher. Isaac hadn’t done anything to deserve to be killed, and so the familiar exceptions to the rule against killing don’t apply. The story is usually read as a test of Abraham’s willingness to trust God. Understood in that way, it’s important to keep in mind that God didn’t make Abraham go through with the sacrifice: Abraham’s trust was well-placed. But what if the story had ended differently? What if God had sat back while Abraham went through with it, plunging the knife into his son and then burning the body as a sacrifice?

It’s hard to know the answer to this sort of hypothetical because so much depends on the details. However, taking the story at face value, Abraham knew some very important things. One is that God is almighty and so can bring good out of any situation. Another is that all of Abraham’s experience showed God to have been completely and utterly trustworthy in the past. Remember also that on the concept of God that Jews, Christians, and Muslims share, it’s within God’s power to take care of Isaac even in death.

Abraham could have trusted that God had a good reason for this command—a reason that if he only knew it, would convince him that carrying out this order would be for the best. But once again, in that case it would be the reasons that made the act acceptable and not God’s mere command. If that’s so, the so-called “immorality of the patriarchs” don’t really support a Divine Command Theory because in none of these cases would God’s mere commands be what made it right to do what was done.

Turn now to the case of commanded love. This example also has a limitation. The most it could show is that God’s commands can add to the requirements of ordinary morality, making it our duty to do things that most people would see as beyond the call of duty. This wouldn’t show that there’s no morality independent of God’s will; it wouldn’t show that ordinary moral reasoning can’t provide the basis for countless real obligations.

The example also raises a question of interpretation. Just what is this “commanded love?” Is it the same as the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you? In that case, we have a principle that’s very widely accepted, even by non-believers. In fact, some people
would say that this principle is part of any acceptable system of morality. However, let’s suppose that this commanded love calls for something much more extensive—a kind of care for one’s neighbors that many decent people would see as beyond anything that ordinary moral reasoning could require. If that’s what’s at stake, just how does the example support the Divine Command Theory? It’s not exactly clear that it does. First, we can find a call to this kind of compassion outside the theistic traditions. The Mahayana Buddhist idea of compassion evokes a concern for our fellow beings that is at least as extensive as what Jesus demands. However, for the Buddhist the basis for compassion isn’t the commands of a deity. It’s something that the Buddhist believes expresses our own deepest nature.

However, suppose that God does command this sort of love. Within ordinary moral thinking, there’s a way of understanding why the believer might feel compelled to obey. Start with a simple case. Suppose you and your best friend are sitting in a room reading. You have your favorite CD on in the background and your friend asks you to turn down the volume. This is the sort of request you ought to go along with even if the person in the room with you had been just a stranger. But the fact that it’s your friend gives you a reason all by itself to do what she asks, and this is something that ordinary moral reasoning accepts.

Now change the example slightly. Suppose your friend is filling out her tax returns and gets stuck on some complication. She feels confused, so she asks you for help. (We’ll suppose you’re good at this sort of thing.) Most people would agree that unless you’re doing something really important, you should help. Most people would also agree that if she wasn’t your friend but just someone who happened to be in the room, then it would be very nice of you to go along, but you wouldn’t be obliged to.

Special relationships create special obligations, and we don’t need a Divine Command Theory to see this. Most of us think that we have special obligations to our parents and to our children. Many of us believe that we have special obligations to our friends or our co-workers or our fellow citizens. These special obligations don’t lower the bar on what we owe to other people, but they raise the bar for how we treat the people we’re specially related to. More important, these special relations sometimes mean that we should treat the wishes and even commands of these other people as giving us reasons to do as they say. [Thanks to Chris Morris for useful discussion of this point.] Ordinary morality makes
room for the idea that in certain special cases, what other people ask of us can give rise to moral obligations.

A theist who rejects the Divine Command Theory can use this idea to explain why we should do what God wills. If you’re a theist, then you believe that your relationship with God is absolutely unique. Without God, none of the goods in your life would be possible. Without God, you wouldn’t even be! No one cares for you more than God, no one is more faithful to you than God, and no one—including you—understands your needs better than God. God is so wise, so faithful to you, and so loving toward you the thought would go, that all by itself this explains why you should do as God wills. This explanation doesn’t appeal to the Divine Command Theory. It appeals to two things: the familiar idea that special relationships create special obligations, and the extraordinarily special character of your relationship with God.

Now bring this around to the particular case Quinn has in mind: loving your neighbor as yourself. Suppose that ordinary morality by itself doesn’t require this. However, the argument would go, if the God who creates us, sustains us, and loves us wills this love, then what reason could we possibly have for saying no? Refusing the request would be wrong because it would not do honor to our extraordinary relationship with God.

If we focus on our special relationship with God, the divine-command theorist gets at least some of what he wants: God’s commands make a moral difference. We can be obliged to do things that we wouldn’t be obliged to do unless God commanded them. Nonetheless, we haven’t reduced morality to divine commands. First, we can appeal to ordinary moral ideas to explain why God’s commands might make a difference. Second, there seem to be many things we’re morally obliged to do whether or not God commands them.

4 GOD, LOVE, AND MORAL OBLIGATION

Robert Adams has offered a version of the Divine Command Theory that attempts to tighten the connection between moral obligation and what God commands—at least, for theists. Adams points out that for believers, talk of what we should do is pretty much interchangeable with talk of God’s will. Believers who are trying to solve a moral dilemma often describe themselves as trying to figure out God’s will. This suggests that believers mean the same thing by “what’s morally right” and
“what God wills.” If Adams is correct, for believers these two phrases are two different ways of saying the same thing.

However, there’s an important limitation. Adams agrees that we can imagine—as a bare possibility—that God might command cruelty for its own sake. If that happened, believers would no longer see what’s right and God’s will as the same thing. That’s because a crucial presupposition of how believers think about God would have failed. Theists of the sort Adams has in mind believe that God is perfectly loving, and if they didn’t believe that, they wouldn’t equate what’s right and wrong with what God commands and forbids.

The opponents of divine command ethics won’t be satisfied. “What if there was no loving God?” they’ll ask. “Would there be no such thing as morality?” Adam’s answer is complicated but it boils down to this: the nature of what “right” and “wrong” refer to depends on the nature of reality—just as the nature of what the word “water” refers to depends on the nature of reality.

Assuming a loving God does exist, Adams thinks the best theory of the nature of right and wrong equates them with what God wills and forbids. However, if there were no God, there might still be a practice like what we call morality and some other, non-theistic theory might give the best account of what terms like “right” and “wrong” refer to. Assuming that God does exist, Adams thinks that God’s will is the crucial part of reality that underpins the nature of right and wrong.

It’s not immediately clear why we should think this. Consider Adams’s own caveat: if God were to command cruelty, the believer would no longer think that what’s right is what God wills. But it’s plausible that we can go even further: cruelty is wrong, period—whether a God exists or not. It’s plausible, in other words, that we’re back to the Euthyphro argument: cruelty isn’t wrong because a loving God forbids it. A loving God forbids cruelty because it’s so clearly wrong.

What about the fact that many believers seem to see deciding what’s right as discerning God’s will? By itself, this won’t settle the matter. If it’s part of God’s very nature that God is perfectly loving and good, then necessarily what God wills would be right. This would mean that discerning God’s will really would be discerning what’s right because the two couldn’t differ, even though God wills things because they’re right and not the other way around. Moreover, if the believer loves God, then the believer wants to do God’s will not just as a way of doing right but also as an expression of that love. The fact that believers talk in the way
that Adams says they do may not provide a very strong reason for saying—as theists need to say—that divine commands are what make things right or wrong.

5 NATURAL LAW THEORIES

Even if what’s right isn’t simply determined by God’s commands, a God of the sort that the major theistic traditions conceive of isn’t morally irrelevant. We’ve already seen some reasons for saying that. However, so far we’ve said nothing about a very important tradition of thinking about the relationship between morality and God. This is the natural law tradition, whose most important advocate was St. Thomas Aquinas (C. 1225 – 1274). Our discussion here is indebted to the very useful essay on natural law theories by Mark Murphy in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, though it offers a particular take on natural law that Murphy might not accept.

5.1 Providence

At the root of natural law theories is the idea of divine Providence. God has arranged the world according to a plan—a plan that’s wise and good. This plan includes a harmonious relationship between our needs and desires. For example, our desire for food serves our need for nutrition. Gluttony thwarts that natural ordering. Given the existence of this plan, certain things are objectively good for us and are objectively good ways of behaving. Furthermore, according to natural-law theorists, we come equipped by nature with the ability to tell the good from the bad. This isn’t to say that every case is clear, but it is to say that for what we might call the straightforward cases, we can know if what we are doing is good or bad—if it accords with the providential design of the universe.

As for right and wrong, they depend on good and bad for natural-law theorists, though there are different ways of working out the connection. The point is that for the natural-law theorist, not just anything can be morally required. It depends on what’s good and what’s bad.

Whatever we make of natural law theories in detail, it seems reasonable to say that what’s good and bad depends in part on how the world is organized. For example, the fact that something is poisonous—and therefore bad for us—depends on how our biology actually works. If nature at large is organized according to a providential design, that will make a difference for good and bad, and therefore for right or wrong. This is another way in which God can make a difference for right and
wrong, even from the point of view of someone who rejects the Divine Command Theory. And for reasons that we’ve already explored, God’s will could create special obligations for us because of our special relationship with God. Taking all this into account, a theist who rejects the Divine Command Theory will have to concede that what God has done and what God wills makes a significant moral difference. And a non-theist will also have to concede that if a God did exist, it would matter morally. All in all, we see again that it’s possible for a theist to defend a good deal of what the divine-command theorist wants without simply accepting the Divine Command Theory.

6 GOD, OBLIGATION, AND THE “QUEERNESS PROBLEM”

In this somewhat more advanced section, we turn to a problem that we raised earlier but set aside, the so-called “queerness problem.” The facts deal with how things are. But moral claims deal with how things ought to be. What makes a statement like “birds aren’t mammals” true is something about the way that things are arranged in space and time. But what makes a statement like “stealing is wrong” true? In this section, we explore a possible way of addressing that question.

6.1 Value

Start with the distinction between value and obligation—between good versus bad, and right versus wrong. Other things being equal, happiness is good and depression is bad; health is good and illness is bad. However, to say something is good isn’t the same as saying that it’s obligatory. It might be a good thing if Cecilia Bartoli recorded a new CD. That doesn’t mean she’s obliged to, nor that she would be acting wrongly if she didn’t. Showing courage when you’re in serious danger might be a good thing. If you don’t, that doesn’t automatically mean you failed to do something you were obliged to do; maybe the level of courage called for was too much to ask.

People can also be good and when we say that they are, we don’t have to mean that they do what’s right or wrong. A loving, thoughtful, considerate person is a good person, at least in the sense that she makes the world a better place—whether or not we think it makes sense to talk about moral obligation.

Some people think that the idea of goodness itself is puzzling. Perhaps those people are right, although most of us aren’t puzzled by
the idea that happiness is good and unhappiness isn’t, for example. For many people, right and wrong are murkier. For example, even if we can agree that happiness is generally a good thing, showing that anyone is obliged to promote your happiness is a different matter.

6.2 Legal Obligation, Moral Obligation, and Legitimate Lawgivers

How could bringing God into the picture help? Our discussion owes a debt to an essay by Jeffrey L. Johnson (Johnson 1994, p. 39–55), though what we describe is not a view that he would accept, nor is it exactly the one he discusses. Start with the queerness problem: it’s difficult to see what sort of facts moral facts could because they seem so different from ordinary facts. In particular, it’s hard to see what sorts of facts “oughts” or moral obligations are. But now think about legal obligation. Legal obligation is like moral obligation in many ways but it seems much less mysterious.

Legal obligations come from legal authorities—from lawgivers, as we’ll say. (These might include monarchs, legislatures, or even common-law traditions.) A bad way of proceeding would be to argue that all obligations must come from a lawgiver. That would be a bad way to proceed because some obligations don’t seem to work that way. For example, if you believe some statement—say, “Ishmael is in Nantucket”—then you shouldn’t also believe its denial—“Ishmael isn’t in Nantucket.” But that rule (a rational principle, if you will) doesn’t seem to come from a lawgiver. However, talking about lawgivers can cast light on at least some kinds of obligations.

As we noted, ordinary laws can’t exist without a lawgiver or legal authority of some sort. It might be a good thing if there were a law that made selling cars that get less than 10 miles to a gallon of gas illegal, but unless the legislature or the ruler or some other appropriate authority makes it a law, it isn’t one. And once we have a lawgiver, we usually don’t think legal obligation is mysterious. (Perhaps we should, but for the moment, we’ll stick with our usual reactions.) Laws become “real” because people accept or “recognize” this source of authority. And at this point, we might add that laws are legitimate if they come from an authority that we not only accept but that’s overall good enough to deserve our respect. (Johnson’s discussion of the point is much more sophisticated.)

All of this is complicated. For example, what counts as law isn’t a matter of each and every person agreeing that the legal authority is legitimate.
If some resident of Baltimore says, “I think the laws of the State of Maryland are a bunch of hogwash,” that doesn’t mean those laws don’t legitimately apply to him. Spelling out a full theory of legal authority is a very big job and is well beyond our expertise. But let’s suppose that the notion of legal authority makes sense.

6.3 Divine Obligation

Someone who holds a Divine Command Theory may think that just as a legal requirement—a civil or criminal law—must be backed by a legal authority, so a moral requirement—a moral law, if you will—must be backed by a moral authority. However, there is another approach. Perhaps moral obligation can be explained without having to invoke the idea of a moral authority, but the search for a suitable theory hasn’t produced much agreement. However, the theist can say this: if the God of classical theism exists, then it would be entirely rational to treat God as the ultimate lawgiver, whether we use the word “morality” to describe God’s laws or not. After all, God would be perfectly good and perfectly wise. To submit to God’s authority could hardly be less reasonable than to the authority of an earthly lawgiver. And in fact, it’s difficult to see how it could be rational not to submit to God’s authority.

Call the kind of obligation we’re under if we grant authority to God divine obligation. The theist we’re imagining says this: anyone who grants God’s existence should, in all rationality, recognize God’s authority—treat God as the ultimate lawgiver. Divine obligation would be no more mysterious than ordinary legal obligation, but it would have an advantage over legal obligation. Suppose there is some other way of making sense of moral obligation—of solving the queerness problem. Given God’s wisdom and goodness, it’s difficult to see how fulfilling our divine obligations could ever conflict with the demands of morality. We can’t say this about ordinary legal obligation because the best earthly lawgivers are inevitably flawed. However, if solving the queerness problem by other means proves impossible, divine obligation would be a genuine kind of obligation that could do the job that we wanted moral obligation to do.

Isn’t this really just a version of Adams’ theory? That is, doesn’t it simply amount to saying that the nature of what’s right is that it’s what God wills? Not really. Our theist’s point is that thinking about legal obligation gives us a way of understanding how a sort of all-encompassing obligation could exist—like legal obligation, but vastly more powerful. Perhaps divine obligation is moral obligation, or
perhaps it’s the perfect substitute for moral obligation. Our theist can insist that he don’t have to decide.

6.3.1 Objections and Replies

A critic might say that moral requirements don’t have to be backed by a moral authority. Our theist would reply that maybe the critic is correct. But even so, accepting divine authority would never lead to conflict with genuine moral requirements. And if the critic is wrong—if moral obligation doesn’t make sense without a moral authority who imposes the obligation—divine authority provides us with all we could ever need or ask. What our theist wants to stress is the way that theism can leverage the idea of legal authority into something more all-encompassing.

A critic might say that the decision to recognize God’s moral authority is already a moral decision—the decision that one ought to obey the commands of a perfectly good and loving God. The believer would say that it’s certainly a rational decision. Assuming that God exists, there is no reason why we shouldn’t grant God ultimate authority over our actions. Whether it’s “already” a moral decision is more-or-less beside the point.

Of course, all this applies only if theism is correct. And even if it is, we will see in the next section that difficult problems remain.

7 Knowing What to Do

For the divine-command theorist, God’s will is the source of moral obligation. For the person we described in Section 6—the one who grants authority to God and accepts divine obligation—God’s will is an ultimate source of obligation whether or not we call this obligation “moral.” We’ve also seen that even for theists who favor ordinary understandings of morality, our special relationship with God provides the basis for special obligations. It’s hard to see how theism can fail to grant very significant authority to God’s will. But now an obvious problem arises: how should the theist decide what counts as the will of God?

Clearly, this isn’t a problem for the non-theist. The non-theist obviously won’t grant authority to God’s will. And though there are serious considerations in favor of theism, serious considerations are also found on the other side. But let’s return to the theist for the moment.

The natural-law theorist thinks that everyone has a basic knowledge of right and wrong, but that won’t settle the difficult cases in any simple
way. For example, Catholic moral theology provides arguments based in natural law for saying that homosexual relations and birth control are wrong. Many atheists disagree, but some theists also disagree. With questions like this, sorting out just what the providential order really is and what it obliges us to do or not do is highly controversial.

More generally, many things done in the name of God have serious consequences, and if they aren’t God’s will, they may be very wrong indeed. If you kill your son under the false impression that it’s God’s will, then you’ve committed a horror. Abraham might have been so intimate with the Almighty that he couldn’t mistake God’s will. Most of us aren’t in that position. Worse, we live in a world with plenty of false prophets. Separating true revelation from crackpot delusion is a serious issue.

The theist has some guidance. On the sort of theories we’ve been considering, if God weren’t loving we wouldn’t be obliged to do God’s will. That gives the theist a test: is this supposed divine command the sort of thing a loving God would will? If not, that’s a reason for thinking that it’s not a real revelation.

### 7.1 What Would God Want?

Here something is worth noticing: asking in a purely hypothetical spirit, “what would a perfectly loving, perfectly knowledgeable God want us to do?” might be morally useful for believers and non-believers alike. It might force us to ask good questions about the facts as best we can ascertain them, and about what real, deep sympathy toward our fellow creatures calls for. Thinking hypothetically about God’s will might be a useful tool for solving actual moral problems more-or-less independently of what we take the foundations of morality to be—and independently of whether we think God exists.

#### 7.1.1 Revelation vs. Moral Reasoning?

Of course, the theist believes that there have been genuine revelations, and the theist cares about what God actually wants. So imagine that Sarah, a believer, is faced with a serious moral dilemma. She reasons to the best of her ability in a hypothetical way, asking what would a good and loving God tell her to do. But members of her church tell her that God has provided a revelation on the question she’s facing, and wants her to do something very different from what her hypothetical reasoning has led her to think is right. What should she do?
If the revelation is accompanied by some reasons, Sarah might revise her own views about what a good and loving God would want. But what if the supposed revelation isn’t accompanied by reasons? If the “revelation” isn’t a real revelation, it could lead Sarah to do something very wrong. How should she decide?

This is not a simple question. Return once again to the questions of homosexuality and birth control. If, as some liberal theists believe, birth control and homosexual relations do not violate the providential plan, then heaping shame upon or passing laws against people who engage in either practice increases the sum total of the world’s misery for no good reason. Needless to say, the more conservative theist will argue that the stakes are at least as high in the opposite direction. Reasoning about what a good and loving God would want us to do only gets us so far—especially because the reasoning may depend on how we assume this God designed the world, and with what grand plan.

7.2 Coda
For the believer, there’s no simple answer. A mere appeal to revelation won’t do. If the source of the revelation seems trustworthy enough, the believer might set any qualms aside. But how trustworthy is trustworthy enough? When would setting ordinary moral reasoning aside and replacing it with appeal to moral revelation be appropriate? For the non-believer, the question doesn’t come up. For the believer, the question can’t be avoided—even if the answer is formed in fear and trembling.

AT A GLANCE: GOD AND MORALITY

1. Morality and God’s Commands: the Problem
   • Suppose what God command is in fact morally right.
   • We can ask: Does God command things because they’re right? Or is what God commands right because God commands it?

1.1. The Divine Command Theory
   • The Divine Command Theory says that things are right or wrong because God commands or forbids them.
   • Problem: Morality is not arbitrary. If God commanded cruelty, it would still not be right.
   • Implication: The Divine Command Theory is wrong; if God’s commands are morally right, then it’s not simply because God gave the commands.
2. Some Objections

2.1. Objection #1: God Would Never Command Evil
• Reply: this misses the point. The question is whether things are evil because God forbids them or whether God forbids them because they are evil.

2.2. Objection #2: God Created Us, Therefore We’re Obliged to Obey
• Reply: we can imagine an evil creator whose commands were morally abominable.

2.3. Objection #3: Morality Needs Religion
• Reply: it’s not difficult even for atheists to give good reasons for saying that, e.g., stealing is wrong.

2.3.1. The “Queerness Problem”
• Moral facts seem “queer”: if moral facts existed, they would apparently be different from all other sorts of facts.
• It’s difficult to see how moral obligation could rest on non-moral facts.
• Apparent solution: let God’s commands determine right and wrong.
• Problem: God’s commands would simply be further facts.

3. Philip Quinn: Divine Command Ethics for Theists
• Quinn argues that the Divine Command Theory is the best way for theists to understand right and wrong.

3.1. Three Reasons
3.1.1. Sovereignty
• If God can’t make things right or wrong, then God isn’t completely sovereign.

3.1.2. Immoralities of the Patriarchs
• In the Bible, God commands things that violate usual moral rules.
• Therefore, God must have the power to make things right or wrong.

3.1.3. Commanded Love
• The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself goes beyond any ordinary human love.
• It is a duty for Christians.
• But it could only be a duty because it’s commanded by God.

3.2. Three Reasons Challenged
3.2.1. Sovereignty and Necessary Truths
• Moral truths are arguably necessary truths.
• It’s doubtful that God is sovereign over necessary truths.

3.2.2. “Immoralities of the Patriarchs?”
• It’s not difficult to imagine good moral reasons for commanding the Hebrews to plunder the Egyptians. And Abraham:
At a Glance: God and Morality

i. Knew that God could take care of Isaac even in death, and
ii. Could have had excellent reasons to trust God.

3.2.3. Commanded Love

- The most this example could show is that God can require things that go beyond ordinary duty.
- Ordinary morality can account for special obligations in cases where special relationships exist.

4. Robert Adams

- Adams thinks that for believers, “what’s morally right” and “what God wills” mean the same thing.
- Caveat: this is on the presumption that God is loving; if God commanded cruelty, believers would abandon this view.
- Reply: cruelty is wrong, period. This suggests that God forbids cruelty because it’s wrong. No need for Divine Command Theory.

5. Natural Law Theories

- Natural law theories offer another way of thinking about how God might be relevant to morality.

5.1. Providence

- Natural law theories assume divine Providence: God has ordered the world in a wise and good way.
- Natural law theories assume that we have a basic ability to tell right from wrong.
- Right and wrong depend on good and bad.
- Other theorists can agree: if a providential order does exist, it makes a moral difference.

6. God and Obligation

- Question: could appealing to God’s will help solve the “queerness problem”?

6.1. Value

- We can distinguish between value (good and bad) and obligation (right and wrong).
- Good and bad are (arguably) less puzzling than right and wrong.

6.2. Legal Obligation and Moral Obligation

- Legal obligations don’t exist without lawgivers.
- Legitimate laws come from legitimate authorities—authorities good enough to deserve our respect.

6.3. Divine Obligation

- Call “divine obligation” the kind of obligation we would be under if we submitted to God’s authority.
- If God exists, then it would be perfectly rational to submit to God’s authority
- Recognizing divine obligation would never conflict with any genuine moral obligations there might be
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- Divine obligation would be no more mysterious than legal obligation.
- The theist need not decide whether divine obligation is moral obligation or is simply the perfect surrogate for it.

7. Knowing What to Do
- If the God of classical theism exists, then God’s will makes a moral difference—whether or not we equate morality with God’s will.
- For the theist, this raises the problem of knowing God’s will.
- Mistakes about this—or mistakes about the nature of the providential order—could have serious consequences.

7.1. Hypothetical Reasoning
- Reasoning hypothetically about what God would want could be useful for moral reasoning whether or not we think God exists.

7.1.1. Reason vs. Revelation
- The theist faces a potentially difficult problem: the results of this kind of hypothetical reasoning could conflict with supposedly genuine revelations.
- There may be no easy way for the theist to solve this problem.

7.2. Coda
- The non-believer doesn’t have to try to solve conflicts between moral reasoning and revelation.
- The believer has no way to avoid the problem.

WEB RESOURCES

You can read Plato’s *Euthyphro* online at http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html.

On the fact that not all obligations must come from a lawgiver, see “Moral Arguments for the Existence of God,” Section 1.1 in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, found online at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god.

For more on natural law from the Roman Catholic perspective, go to http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09076a.htm.