Divine Command Theory— Potentiality and Limits

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ABSTRACT

Thesis. Divine Command Theory (hereafter DCT) is a metaethical theory belonging to the category of moral realism of the non-cognitive type, whose popularity is growing. In this thesis, we show some of the reasons that have triggered the need to address the normativity of ethical concepts, because of which DCT receives its justification.

Concept. Our argument begins with an analysis of a critical moment in contemporary ethical discourse, the question of normativity, relating Hume's law to the contemporary problem of solipsism, philosophical pluralism, and epistemic reductionism in moral philosophy. We show the strengths of the moral reasoning offered by Divine Command Theory and point out its weaknesses, which have to do with the fact that God is not a perfect system of moral axioms, but a being who acts morally and perfectly.

Results and conclusion. Divine Command Theory is an important metaethical approach that offers a solid space for the establishment of different ethical frameworks with normativity weights, but on the other hand harbours question marks that should not be overlooked. These are questions of justice and love in terms of God's model of reasoning, since both aspects are paradoxical from a theological point of view and, moreover, run the risk of a self-referential fallacy on the part of the interpreter of God's commandments. The problematic aspects of this theory that we point out do not in any way undermine its validity, but rather anticipate an even deeper level of reflection on ethical realism.

Keywords: Divine Command Theory, metaphysics, metaethics, God, theology, moral realism, non-naturalism

Introduction

Divine Command Theory (hereafter DCT) has in recent years attracted the attention of scholars in the fields of ethics, philosophy, and even metaphysics. This is because it represents a metaethical concept that links the field of moral reasoning, the search for answers to fundamental philosophical questions, and current trends in understanding the nature and essence of the world. From a metaethical perspective, it is not at all clear that we can trust our moral intuitions with the absolute seriousness that is commonly assumed. This is because recent research in the field of experimental psychology suggests that many moral judgments and ethical attitudes that a person or society arrives at through moral intuition are inherently based on processes and characteristics that are not morally anchored, and therefore cannot be treated as definitive moral authorities (Fisher, 2014, p. 80). The overall situation in ethical discourse in all its constituent schools has reached a point where DCT opens interesting and stimulating horizons of moral reasoning that advance our understanding, not only in the field of anthropology, but especially in the field of moral philosophy. Scholarly research and discourse in these fields is entering an interesting constellation in which it is possible to raise the question of the relationship between God and morality in the academy at all. There are several reasons for this.

The first reason is the ethical implications of philosophical pluralism.

> Even at the academic level, ethicists who are fully committed to pluralism are eager to create a consensus morality based on certain social commitments: On the recognition that human beings are persons who demand mutual respect, for example, or on the assumption that reason is sufficient to evaluate the relative merits of concrete elements of competing moral systems, but insufficient to evaluate the moral systems themselves—since that would be a violation of philosophical pluralism. (Carson, 1996, p. 24)

According to Donald A. Carson, the consequence of philosophical pluralism is the loss of a common basis for a universal understanding of what morality is, but of which moral premises we should regard as crucial for the formulation of legislative norms and principles in applied ethics (Krupa et al., 2023). Contractualist conceptions of ethics reach their own limits because of the relativisation of moral principles, since it is precisely the denial of absolute truth that is one of the features of consistent philosophical pluralism. By its very nature, philosophical pluralism makes it impossible to determine which contractualist ethical concept is superior to others, since no social or cultural entity or interest group preference can be inferior to the whole (Kondrla et al., 2023). Radical individualism and the emphasis on hu-

man autonomy have even had a strong influence on the understanding of religion. The solipsistic approach to spirituality shifts the emphasis from an objective transcendence to a subjective one in which man himself defines the divine, its character and intentions (Maturkanic et al., 2023).

The second reason has to do with the epistemological limitations of human rationality. Alister McGrath points out that "reason cannot provide a morality that is adequate to the real world in which we live" (McGrath, 1996, p. 180). He argues that relativism in ethics is a consequence of radical philosophical pluralism. The preference for partiality within the considered whole ultimately leads to a loss of the ability to perceive the whole, and the picture of reality in its complexity is reduced to the internal world of the interest group. Since the reality of which human beings are a part is in the nature of a "social phenomenon" (Barbour, 1990) in which all events, phenomena and occurrences are interrelated in an organic unity, it is not possible to establish as absolute any of the possible ethical perspectives that emerge within the moral reasoning of human beings in the context of their own culture, prejudices, and tradition of thought (Kralik et al., 2022).

The third reason is the ongoing discourse on the nature of the world and the universe in its entirety among scholars in the natural and human sciences. Stephen Hawking's and Leonard Mlodinow's cosmological postulate, presented in *The Grand Design* (2010), has provoked fierce controversy in the scientific community, and not only within the humanities, since his strict naturalism not only entails a denial of human free will, but also calls into question the legitimacy of philosophy as a scientific discipline, and thus the legitimacy of research within the other humanistic sciences (Pavlikova, &Ambrozy, 2019). Voices from the scientific community of mathematicians and physicists reiterate the belief that moral reasoning cannot be reduced to the form of scientific axioms and knowledge of the world to the language of mathematics or physics alone (Lennox, 2011). It is noteworthy that it is from the mathematical sciences that the argument for non-naturalistic realism in the conception of morality emerges, since some mathematical facts in epistemology are "true and yet unprovable" (Chaitin, 2006, p. 55). Strict naturalism in the natural sciences thus paradoxically attacks the foundations of ethical naturalism and, from the perspective of contemporary knowledge, creates a philosophical position in which the anticipation of a reality beyond the mandate of naturalism is natural. This is also why DCT, which belongs to the field of moral realism and represents a non-naturalistic ethical conception, comes into focus. It provides a solid justification for the objectivity, universality, and especially the normativity of morality (Lee & Evans, 2022). As with any concept, DCT opens a discourse in which it is possible to identify the positive aspects it brings, while at the same time raising controversies that advance moral reasoning and knowledge.

Humean Perspective

One argument in favour of DCT is the question of normativity, which has become a pressing issue in the discourse of moral philosophers. In the classical mode of argumentation, the ethical normativity that 'is' now becomes a commitment and an indicator of future argumentation, i.e. what one 'ought' to do, how one ought to behave. According to George Edward Moore's open-ended argument, the normativity of morality cannot be understood in terms of ethical reflection on a closed system of observed phenomena and signs, based on which he declared that the good is not identical with any natural property (Moore, 1993). The question of the relationship between description and prescription in the consideration of moral normativity is thus put into a different perspective. Hume consistently elaborated this relationship and concluded that description cannot determine prescription, since historical development cannot be reduced to a closed system of relations and known factors. Factors beyond the horizon of time may appear in the future and change the logic of moral reasoning. But not in the sense of teleological perspectivism in ethics. This opened the space to justify the starting position of DCT as a non-consequentialist ethical theory, in which God's command will be the key factor in judging the morality of an act, and God's will become the basis for the formation of moral laws (Valčová et al., 2021).

A good example of the principles of DCT is Bonhoeffer's Inner conviction, received from God, to kill the Führer. If killing a man is morally wrong, then Bonhoeffer's act cannot be justified in terms of classical deontology or in terms of Moore's open question argument. However, Hume's view does offer room for justifying Bonhoeffer's decision to kill Hitler. And, for the justification of the British secret services, who not only let Hitler live, but even protected him. In a metaethical conception of ethical realism of the non-naturalistic type, such as DCT, such inconsistencies are permissible and justifiable. For the Humean approach, there is an abysmal difference between the image of the world that 'is' and the image of the world that 'ought to be', thus creating the possibility of arguing for actions that move from 'is' to 'ought to be' (Stilley, 2010). Such a future perspective is not identical to the Aristotelian teleological perspective in which the telos is relatively clear, temporally fixed, and arrived at through logically reasoned steps. The goal of DCT is the doing of God's will and the agent's conformity to the commandments that have their origin in God (Valčová et al., 2023). For if there are moral properties as such, then these justify certain actions, lead us in a certain direction, and do so despite the psychological state our minds may be in. Alvin Plantinga, who believes that naturalism does not provide the tools for judging right and wrong, has stated, in addressing the normativity of moral judgments, that "to think that naturalism is true while accepting current evolutionary views about our origins and our cognitive capacities is precisely to deny one's own claims-namely, that one's cognitive capacities are trustworthy" (Plantinga, 1998, pp. 356-357). DCT, with its conviction that moral values are real and lie beyond the possibility of present human reach, mainly because

their metaphysical grounding transcends human beings, offers a very attractive way of grasping moral normativity.

Theological Perspective

DCT advocates are aware of the weaknesses and internal contradictions of this meta-ethical position. DCT is not a defence of Christianity, nor is it an apologetic tool for asserting the relevance of God's commandments to the world of moral philosophy. There are many critical voices among the protagonists of DCT that challenge the theory, and it is equally true that being a Christian does not automatically make one a proponent of DCT. An example is Thomas Aquinas, who believed in God, knew, and respected, for example, the Decalogue and other normative ethical postulates contained in the Bible, but in reflecting on the moral world of man in his mind and consciousness, he elaborated the theory of natural law, which he preferred and advocated in his teachings. In the past, many have had to deal with this moral theory in the context of considering the validity of Christianity. Proponents include Augustine, William of Ockham, Duns Scotus, but also Calvin, Brunner, Buber, Barth, Niebuhr and Bultmann. The theory itself, however, can be used as an argument both for and against Christianity (Martin, 1993). The interesting thing is that this criticism comes from where we would least expect it.

One of the most serious problems with DCT has to do with the basic premise that moral goodness is tied to God (Lenovský & Slobodová Nováková, 2023). Put simply, what God has ordained is good and what God has forbidden is evil. The first natural question arises in relation to who God is, what His character and nature are. How are those who do not believe in God to relate to this meta-ethical theory? How are moral categories, values, and virtues to be viewed in the light of different social and cultural as well as religious contexts? On what precise basis should the Judeo-Christian grounding of ethical normativity be determinative and binding, given the plurality of religious systems in the world? Answering these pertinent questions is beyond the scope of this study.

DCT presupposes the coherence and internal connection of two relatively separate theoretical approaches — ethical and theological. Using Immanuel Kant as an example, it can be shown that although his ethical theory is significantly intertwined with Christian theology, it would not be correct to declare Kant's ethics to be Christian ethics (Hare, 1996). If we were to consider DCT as an ethical theory from the category of Christian ethics, it would have to start from Christian theology in its argumentation and assumptions, and move towards Christian theology in its application, which ultimately fully integrates it. Even in this consideration there is the question of degree — to what extent should the two paths be connected? To what extent should one refer to the other, or the other integrate the first?

Experts in Christian ethics are not clear about this. Oliver O'Donovan (1986) believes that Christian ethics must be grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ; Nigel Biggar (2011) believes that it must be under the dominion of the panorama of salvation history; while others stress the importance of creation theology for a proper understanding of human morality (Finnis, 2011). Christopher J. H. Wright proposes a so-called ethical triangle with God as the guarantor of the theological perspective, Israel as the paradigm of the social dimension, and the Promised Land with an intrinsic economic horizon in ethics, believing that the canonical texts of the Old Testament are a sufficient starting point for the reconstruction of Christian ethics (Wright, 1992). The problem is further complicated by the fact that even within the category of 'theology' there are many theological approaches interpreting biblical texts with great variability. Contemporary discourse among theologians in ethically sensitive areas — divorce, homosexual relationships, monogamous and polygamous family models, the relationship to politics, euthanasia, issues of bioethics and transhumanism — shows how difficult it is to reach an ethical consensus, even though "God's decrees" are available to all. Hermeneutics and the interpretation of the texts in question come into play. Moreover, Christology and pneumatology as theological disciplines have a strong framework for understanding ethical issues. The question remains how far they can be implemented in DCT or otherwise — how large and inclusive a space does DCT offer and what range of opinions can it accommodate to remain a meta-ethical theory? DCT seems to raise more questions than it answers.

From the perspective of biblical theology, a Christocentric interpretation of the canon of Scripture is important. The life, death and resurrection of Christ is the "speech of God". As God incarnate, he gives content to God's commandments by the example of his life. From this position, John E. Hare argues that God's commandments are revealed in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. It is only because Christ became the moral agent of God's commandments that we can understand what God's will is. Without Christ, we would never have concluded that we should love our enemies "simply by analysing human nature" (Hare, 2011, p. 151). Hare goes further. According to him, moral principles cannot be derived from the creation narrative. As human beings, we need something transcendent to tell us what fulfilment we should and should not seek in life. Thus, in Hare's ethics, it is possible to identify a dimension of God's commandments that compel human beings to act in a certain way and, on the other hand, a dimension of God's commandments that attract and appeal to human hearts. This is the relationship between Creator and creature, and the agent of this relationship is God incarnate, Jesus Christ. On the one hand, man experiences the power of God's authority and its urgency; on the other hand, he longs for the companionship of love, because God is love. The dialectic of respect and passion is thus an important element in the robustness of Hare's ethics.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether DCT can be regarded as a Christian moral theory. We see the main problem in the question of knowledge of God. If morality

depends on God's commandments, and these are in fact a visualisation and a kind of materialisation of the nature of God's being, then knowledge and understanding of God's commandments are intertwined with knowledge of God himself. In such a case, we distinguish between the so-called general revelation and the special revelation of God, because in a theological sense one can approach God as the Creator, the Author of all being, the Source of morality — general revelation, but one cannot see God as one's Saviour, Redeemer, and Protector — special revelation (Judák et al., 2023). On closer examination the two categories of revelation, i.e. the epistemological levels of human knowledge, have different ethical implications. DCT is therefore seen as more in line with general revelation. For this reason, we find it more appropriate to refer to it as a theistic rather than a Christian concept.

Razor of Love

As with Occam's razor, which helps to resolve the problem of the two competing hypotheses, we consider Christian love to be a crucial factor in determining whether DCT's metaethical theory falls within the category of Christian ethics. God presents himself to us as "love". If "love" gives the commandments, then "love" must form an implicit continuum across all divine commandments. Love for one another, responsibility for one's neighbour, is generally considered to be a commandment that forms the core of Christian ethics. At the same time, however, the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself points to the fact that love, by its very nature, is not natural to human beings. Søren Kierkegaard distinguishes erotic love from friendship, over which stands the imperative of Christian charity (Kierkegaard, 1995). Erotic love and friendship open relationships based on sympathy, proximity of personalities, congruence of interests, value preferences, etc. Kierkegaard refuses to oscillate between Hegelian theses and antitheses, the synthesis of which does not correspond to the dynamics of God's revelation in Scripture or to God's dealings with human beings. He introduces a teleological suspension of the ethical that has a "precise religious expression" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 226), and thanks to such a teleological perspective — different from that of Aristotle — even apparently contradictory moral commands such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the genocide of the nations and the various atrocities present in the Old Testament stories can be interpreted plausibly without in any way calling into question the image of God as love (Pavlikova, 2018; Pavlikova & Tavilla, 2023).

But the love of which Jesus speaks is not optional; it is framed by the commandment because it is not natural to man. Kierkegaard speaks of how sin distorts the "optics" with which we view those around us and even ourselves. Sin prevents people from loving their enemies. Therefore, the natural preference in every person is to not love rather than to love the enemy, and it is precisely for this reason that such love must be couched in the form of a commandment (Quinn, 1992). Such a love commandment

or duty becomes a safe zone for a dignified human relationship. It is an unconditional love that reaches all people indiscriminately, regardless of conscious or unconscious preferences. This is the *agape* love which is God's love for human beings in Christ. A love that sacrifices itself for others (Pavlikova, 2017). It is the dimension of self-sacrifice for the good of others that is a moral category whose justification is problematic from the point of view of many ethical theories. This is mainly due to the desire to live, the ambition for self-realisation and self-development, whose moral justification is clear and well-founded, for example, in the principle of the right to life (Martín et al., 2018; Martín et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Our critical analysis of some aspects and contexts of Divine Command Theory is not intended to question its relevance and place in the field of metaethics, but neither is it intended to close our eyes to the problems it raises. One of its undeniable strengths is its grounding in moral realism. It also offers an interesting way of thinking about how to work with the non-natural paradigm in moral philosophy. With its emphasis on the non-natural origin of moral judgements, it brings a normativity which, in the chaos of ethical relativism, becomes a necessary indication of metaethical reasoning. It thus fills the space that arises whenever perspectivist ethics and contractualist conceptions of ethics encounter the cultural contingency of their moral judgments (Tkacova et al. 2021). On the other hand, it is shown to blur the tension between law and morality, since divine commandments as a normative parameter remain an object of search and discovery for human beings, thus opening epistemological challenges that need to be addressed. We have also shown that DCT cannot easily be placed within the family of Christian ethics unless the questions of its relation to Christological theses are satisfactorily resolved from the perspective of biblical theology. Finally, we argue that DCT raises questions about our understanding of love and justice. This is because the theory brings its normativity, anchored in the transcendent, into a discourse dominated by anthropocentric and autonomous concepts, which may not be unfamiliar with the trap of self-referentiality.

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