

Handout 4: Morality & Religion

1. Divine Command Theory

Divine Command Theory (DCT) is the theory that morality and religion cannot be separated since what is morally right and wrong is determined by God's commands. Something is morally right if and only if God says that it is right, while something is morally wrong if and only if God forbids it.

DCT is an attractive moral theory for several reasons:

1. It allows for objective moral truths (in contrast to cultural relativism and subjectivisms)
2. It has a straightforward answer to the "why be moral" question. Answer: God will punish you if you aren't.
3. It coincides with how many people understand the universe and their place in the universe.

Initially, there is a question that DCT needs to answer:

Is an action morally good **because God commands it** or does God command us to do an action **because it is morally good**?

If we say that God's commands determine moral goodness, then we have a *voluntaristic interpretation* of DCT. This version of DCT says that something is morally right or wrong *because* God commands it. In other words, an action is morally permissible because God makes it so.

If we say that God commands us to do action because it is morally good, then we have an *intellectualist interpretation* of DCT. This version of DCT says that God commands/prohibits certain actions *because* God recognizes that action as morally right/wrong. In other words, God does not make moral rightness or wrongness, he simply recognizes what is right and wrong and commands us accordingly.

CDQ #1: How does religion shape your views about morality? You need not be religious to have an answer to this question.

2. Objections to Divine Command Theory

In considering objections to DCT, let's first consider the voluntaristic version of DCT:

Objection #1: God's commands seem arbitrary

According to DCT, what makes something right or wrong is God's will. We might ask *why does God will that action as opposed to some other action*? There really can be no answer to this question since giving a reason explain *why* God commanded *x*, and so it would no longer be the voluntaristic version of DCT.

This strikes many people as unreasonable and against our idea of God as a perfect being. It also means that God could have chosen otherwise, i.e. he could have made it reckless murder morally acceptable and helping your neighbor morally wrong.

Objection #2: DCT is counter-intuitive on the assumption that God doesn't exist

P1: If God didn't exist, there would be no morals.

P2: There are morals (and God doesn't exist) or there would be morals (even if God didn't exist).

C: Therefore, DCT is false

CDQ#2: *For those that believe in God:* If it were discovered that God *does not exist*, would your views change on morality? If yes, give an example. If no, explain why.

CDQ#3. *For those that don't believe in God (or are agnostic):* if it were discovered that *God does exist*, would your views change on morality? If yes, give an example. If no, explain why.

Objection #3: We have a clearer idea of what is right and wrong than God's will

P1: If morality is determined by God's will, then our knowledge of good and bad should be identical with our knowledge of God's will.

P2: Our knowledge of good and bad is not identical with our knowledge of God's will (we have a clearer idea of what is good and bad).

C: Therefore, morality is not determined by God's will (DCT is false).

Next, let's consider the intellectualist version of DCT.

Objection #1: God's command is no longer the basis for morality

If God says that "x is wrong" because God *recognizes* that *x is wrong*, then the ultimate basis for morality is not rooted in God's will but is instead rooted in something else. Since moral goodness and badness depend upon some other factor besides God's will, it is not clear why we need to consider God's commands at all. God appears to be a middle man. This raises a problem for DCT because it seems to undermine its crucial claim that religion and morality cannot be separated.

CDQ#1: Sometimes individuals appeal to a religious text to justify that a particular action is morally right or wrong. Given what we have talked about above, how might you respond to that?

3. Natural Law Theory

Natural Law Theory (NLT) consists of three key claims.

1. The universe is an ordered system where everything has a specific purpose determined by God.

There are two key components to this claim. **First**, everything in the universe has a *purpose*. That is, for any object in the universe, there is an answer to the question "what is it for?"

1. a fork – it is for eating
2. a home – it is for living in.
3. a television – it is for watching

The above have easy answers because these objects are made by humans to fulfill some need specific need/purpose. Other objects are a bit more difficult:

1. the eye – for seeing
2. the heart – for pumping blood
3. the hand – for ... typing, painting, etc.

Still others are more difficult:

1. a human being – ?
2. gravity – ?
3. the universe – ?

The second key component is that all of these purposes are determined by the designer of the universe, namely God.

2. A thing's purpose not only specifies what it is for, but also how it should be.

If the heart is for pumping blood, then a heart should pump blood. If it doesn't, then it isn't behaving as it *should*. We say that there is something *wrong* with the heart if it doesn't pump blood. In other words:

- P1: If x is a natural object, then as a natural object, it has certain "natural" purposes a, b, c.
- P2: Failing to fulfill a natural purpose is to do something wrong (it goes against God's plan)
- P3: Assume that x is a natural object not fulfilling one of its purposes.
- C: Therefore, x would be doing something wrong.

Let's apply this to human beings.

- P1: Human beings are natural objects and as natural objects, they have certain "natural" purposes.
- P2: [insert some natural purpose here]
- P3: Failure to fulfill a natural purposes is to do something wrong (it would go against God's plan)
- C: Therefore, if John is a human person and he doesn't fulfill one of his natural purposes (he goes against his nature), then he has done something wrong.

This sort of argument can be applied in all sorts of ways. Here is one:

- P1: Human beings are natural objects and as natural objects, they have certain "natural" purposes. One of these is to socialize, to have friends, to forge relationships.
- P2: Failure to fulfill socialize, to have friends, and to forge relationships goes against our nature and goes against God's plan.
- P3: Failure to fulfill a natural purposes is to do something wrong (it would go against God's plan)
- C: Therefore, if John is a human purpose and he doesn't socialize, then he goes against his nature and has done something morally wrong.

3. We determine what a thing's natural purpose is through reason

Thus far, the above theory has a strong religious tint as we have said that a thing's natural purpose is determined by God. This prompts the following question: how do we know what a thing's natural purpose is? A proponent of NLT might say that this requires we know God's will. However, NLT contends that while all natural purposes are determined by God, *we determine what our natural purposes are*

through the use of reason. The idea then is that God has given us all (even those that don't believe) the power to determine what is morally right and wrong by giving us the power of reason. We use reason to determine what natural purposes a thing has, and then reason that if a thing violates these purposes, it has done something wrong.

4. Objections to Natural Law Theory

There are several objections, religious and non-religious in nature, to NLT:

Objection #1: What is natural is not always good.

There are many seemingly natural behaviors that seem wrong and so NLT is counter-intuitive. People seem naturally selfish, but selfishness seems wrong. As people age, their body naturally breaks down, but we don't think of bodily deterioration and disease as naturally good.

In addition, some behaviors get classified as "unnatural" but they aren't clearly wrong. Homosexuality sometimes gets classified as "unnatural" because it involves sexual activity that cannot lead to procreation, but it is not obvious that being homosexual (or engaging in homosexual sex) is wrong.

Objection #2: There is no such thing as a natural purpose

P1: Empirical science specifies all that there is and how everything behaves.

P2: There is no need to appeal to natural purposes in empirical science; everything can be explained molecules in motion according to physical laws that do not say what something is for.

C. Therefore, there is no such thing as a natural purpose (NLT is false).

READING QUESTIONS

1. What is divine command theory?
2. True/False: Natural law theory says that human beings do not have a purpose given to them by God.
3. What is one reason that divine command theory is an attractive moral theory?
4. What are the two ways in which divine command theory can be understood?
5. What is one objection to divine command theory?