

IMPOSSIBLE COMMANDS

[Preliminary Draft: Comments Welcome. Please do not cite without permission.]

1. Introduction.

Theological voluntarism is committed to the view that the deontic and axiological properties of actions, events, or states of affairs depend on the commands of God.¹

Restricting our discussion to actions, we will say that, for any x , God commands x if and only if x is morally right or obligatory.² But unrestrictedly we will say that, for any x at all, God commands that x if and only if x exemplifies some deontic or axiological property. On this version of theological voluntarism, there are no properties other than the commands of God that are necessary or sufficient to the moral status of actions, events, or states of affairs.

The position that God's commands are necessary and sufficient for moral obligation has been a major obstacle to theological voluntarism since at least the *Euthyphro*. If God's command is necessary and sufficient for moral obligation, then there are no limits on what might be obligatory other than the limits on the power to command. There are no moral constraints on the kinds of actions that could be commanded. And since there are no moral limits on the kinds of actions that could be commanded, even actions that are necessarily not obligatory—actions that *could not* be morally obligatory—could be commanded by God. Call that the *moral objection* to theological voluntarism.

The following seems to me to be the gravest objection to the divine command theory of ethical wrongness . . . Suppose God should command me to make it my chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no reason other than that He commanded it . . . Will it seriously

be claimed that in that case it would be wrong for me not to practice cruelty for its own sake? . . . (Adams, 2003, 463)

According to the moral objection there are some actions or kinds of actions that could not be morally obligatory. Unjustifiable harms, for instance, such as cruelty for its own sake or pointless injury are candidates for actions that could not be morally obligatory. Since theological voluntarism places no moral limits on the kinds of actions that might be commanded, and since there are otherwise no non-logical limits on what God can do, the moral objection concludes that God *might* command an action that could not be morally obligatory.³

In section (2) I show that God cannot command cruelty for its own sake or any other unjustifiable harm. There are no non-logical limits on the commands God can issue, but there are no possible worlds in which theological voluntarism is true and God commands the performance of an unjustifiable harm. God cannot command unjustifiable harms not because God is essentially perfect or essentially loving, but because commanding an action that is necessarily not obligatory entails a contradiction. The argument is shown to be an instance of a valid and uncontroversial counterfactual sequent. If theological voluntarism is true, then there are commands that an omnipotent being cannot issue.

In section (3) I argue that God also cannot issue commands that are inconsistent with *contingently impermissible* actions. There are no possible worlds in which theological voluntarism is true and God commands an action that is inconsistent with some action that, as a matter of contingent fact, is not morally obligatory. If it is a contingent requirement in world *w* that you keep your promise to Jones, it is impossible that God issue in *w* the command that you not to keep your promise. Theological voluntarism does

not entail that God can command actions that, as a matter of contingent fact, entail a contradiction.

In section (4) I consider the logic of divine commands and moral requirements developed in Philip Quinn and Bas van Fraassen. I argue that there is no credible way to weaken the logic of divine command to permit the possibility that God commands an unjustifiable harm. I offer some concluding remarks in section (5).

2. Is Theological Voluntarism Impossible?

The moral objection to theological voluntarism aims to show that theological voluntarism entails a moral absurdity. If theological voluntarism were true, according to the objection, then there would have to be possible worlds in which God commands necessarily non-obligatory actions. In those worlds, an action that is necessarily not obligatory would be morally obligatory. So theological voluntarism must be false. Wes Morriston offers the following version of the moral objection.

What if, for example, God were to command the annual sacrifice of randomly selected ten-year-olds in a particularly gruesome ritual that involves excruciating and prolonged suffering for its victims? According to the simplest and most straightforward version of divine-command meta-ethics, it would be morally obligatory to sacrifice many children in the prescribed way. But surely only a terrible deity – one who does not deserve our obedience – would command such a terrible thing. It follows – doesn't it? – that the divine-command theory is false. It is no use responding that God has not, in fact, commanded any such sacrifice. For the divine-command theory (hereafter, the DCT) still has the seemingly

unacceptable implication that if God did command them, cruel sacrifices would be morally required . . . (2009, 249-50).⁴

According to Morriston's moral objection, theological voluntarism is true only if it could be morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual. Since it could not be morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual, it follows that theological voluntarism is false.

The moral argument assumes that theological voluntarism is true in (1) and offers as an obvious moral truth the proposition in (2).

- (1) Were God to command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual, then it would be morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual. [Theological Voluntarism]
- (2) It is necessarily not morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual. [Moral Fact]

Theological voluntarists are committed to (1). It is part of theological voluntarism that commanding the sacrifice of ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual is the sufficient condition of its being morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual. But there might be some moral dispute concerning (2). It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which sacrificing some ten-year-olds is required to prevent the sacrifice of even more ten-year-olds, and other things are equal. But it is not a problem for theological voluntarism to concede that (2) is true or, otherwise, to concede that some action or other is necessarily not obligatory.

Nevertheless it is difficult to see what moral objection is supposed to follow from (1) and (2). Morriston argues that there is no evading the moral problem.

It is no use responding that God has not, in fact, commanded any such sacrifice. For the divine-command theory . . . still has the seemingly unacceptable implication that if God did command them, cruel sacrifices would be morally required . . .(2009, 249-250)

Of course it is true that if God were to command such a sacrifice, then cruel sacrifices would be morally obligatory. That is just premise (1) above. But it is still not obvious what moral problem is presented by (1) and (2). In fact, (1) and (2) together entail that it is *impossible* for God to command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds in a gruesome sacrifice. Lines (1) and (2) entail (3). The inference from (1) and (2) to (3) is an instance of the valid sequent $C \Box \rightarrow B, \Box \sim B \vdash \Box \sim C$.

(3) It is necessarily false that God commands the sacrifice of ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual.

Robert Adams has urged that there aren't any good arguments for the position that it's logically impossible for God to command a morally terrible action.

It might be claimed that it is logically impossible for God to command cruelty for its own sake . . . This solution to the problem seems unlikely to be available to the divine command theorist, however. For why would he hold that it is logically impossible for God to command cruelty for its own sake?' (2003, 463)

But the argument from (1) and (2) to (3) is certainly valid. The argument shows that, if theological voluntarism is true, then it is impossible that God commands the sacrifice of ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual.

Of course, it might be argued that, under the assumption of theological voluntarism, there is independent reason to believe that God can command just anything he wishes, including the sacrifice of ten-year-olds. Theological voluntarism guarantees that there are no moral limits on what God can do and God's essential omnipotence ensures that there are no non-logical limits on what God can do. But line (3) does limit what God can do. (3) entails that God *cannot* command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds. The objection then is that (3) is false. But if (2) is true and (3) is false, then theological voluntarism must be false.

But how exactly does (3) unacceptably limit what God can do? Given (3), God necessarily does not command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds.⁵ Does essential omnipotence guarantee that God can command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds? Among the logical limits to what an omnipotent being can do we include that an omnipotent being cannot bring it about that a logical contradiction is true or that a logical truth is false. If it is necessarily not obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual, then it is only under the assumption that theological voluntarism is false that an omnipotent being could command the sacrifice of ten-year-olds. But of course that presents no problem for theological voluntarism. Assuming theological voluntarism is true and that it could not be morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds, issuing the command to sacrifice ten-year-olds would exceed a logical limit on what God can do.

So, theological voluntarism is not committed to the moral absurdity that it might be morally obligatory to sacrifice ten-year-olds in a gruesome ritual. The argument to (3) does not depend on any assumptions about the nature of God. The argument does not depend on God's essential moral perfection or essential loving nature or anything of the kind. The argument depends instead on an uncontroversial counterfactual inference. Assuming

theological voluntarism is true, then God cannot command an unjustifiable action without contradiction. But not even omnipotent beings can make a contradiction true.

The counterfactual argument in (1) and (2) generalizes to any necessarily non-obligatory action. If A is any action or kind of action that could not be morally obligatory, then, if theological voluntarism is true, then God could not command A. The argument also generalizes to any version of theological voluntarism. No matter how God's will is related to moral obligation, it cannot be the case that God wills A.

3. Contingently Non-obligatory Actions.

The moral objection from contingently non-obligatory actions argues that (1.1) is inconsistent with (2.1), since there is nothing preventing God from commanding actions that are contingently non-obligatory. Let A be some contingently non-obligatory action.

(1.1) Were God to command that A, then it would be morally obligatory that A.

(2.1) It is contingently non-obligatory that A.

It's of course true that God *does not* issue the command that A, since (2.1) ensures that it is contingently non-obligatory that A. So, if God does issue the command that A, then a contradiction is true, and that's impossible. And, for exactly the same reasons, it is a *necessary truth* that God does not *actually* command that A.

But it is false that, in the closest worlds in which God does issue the command that A, (2.1) is true. It's uncontroversial that there are no possible worlds in which a contradiction is true. So, the closest worlds in which God commands A are worlds in which it is not contingently non-obligatory that A. Commanding A counterfactually implies

that A is morally obligatory and it is not necessarily non-obligatory that A, and that presents no problem at all for theological voluntarism.

God cannot issue a command that is inconsistent with the contingently non-obligatory. In fact, God *cannot* issue commands that are inconsistent with any contingent moral requirements. There are no possible worlds, then, in which God commands A and A is either contingently or necessarily not obligatory, since there are no possible worlds in which contradictions are true.

4. On the Logic of Commands.

Philip Quinn and Bas van Fraassen have both argued that it is at least possible that God issues conflicting commands.

Included in the Decalogue is a prohibition on killing that comes from God, and so we may . . . suppose . . . that God commands that Abraham does not kill Isaac. . . Given these assumptions, [divine command theory] tells us that it is forbidden that Abraham kills Isaac.

But we are also told that God commands that Abraham kill Isaac (Genesis 22) . . . (1978)

According to van Fraassen and Quinn, the moral obligation not to kill innocent children and Abraham's moral obligation to kill an innocent child are conflicting obligations, but not logically *inconsistent* obligations. But how could an action be both necessarily not morally obligatory and also contingently morally obligatory? The suggestion of van Fraassen and Quinn is that while killing innocent children is necessarily forbidden, it is not necessarily not obligatory. Moral obligations of the form $OA \ \& \ O\sim A$ are not explicitly inconsistent.

But in normal deontic logics, the formula $OA \ \& \ O\sim A$ is inconsistent with the theorem in (1.2).

$$(1.2) \quad OA \rightarrow \sim O\sim A$$

van Fraassen and Quinn both urge us to reject (1.2). (1.2) ensures that, if an action A is forbidden—something that takes the form FA or $O\sim A$ —then it cannot also be morally obligatory. If it is morally forbidden to kill Isaac, for instance, then (1.2) guarantees that it is not also morally obligatory to do so. There are no actions that are both forbidden and obligatory. So, if (1.2) is true, then a command to kill Isaac would counterfactually imply the contradiction, OA and $\sim OA$. We can infer from the fact that it is forbidden to kill Isaac and (1.2) that $\sim OA$. Since the command to kill Isaac would entail a contradiction, God simply could not issue the command that Abraham kill Isaac.

There are lots of counterexamples to (1.2) having the same structure as the case of Abraham and Isaac. Both van Fraassen and Sayre-McCord have argued that (1.2) is not a logical theorem at all, but a substantive metaethical principle. (1.2) is not, on this view, a neutral principle governing moral theories in general, but a principle applicable to some moral theories and not others depending on the normative commitments of the theories. The rejection of (1.2) permits us to reformulate the moral objection to theological voluntarism.

(2.2) Were God to command that Abraham kill Isaac, then it would be morally obligatory to kill Isaac.

(3.2) It necessarily morally forbidden that Abraham kill Isaac.

If we reject (1.2), then (2.2) and (3.2) are consistent with the assumption that God can command Abraham to kill Isaac.

(4.2) God can command that Abraham kill Isaac.

And from (2.2), (3.2), and (4.2) we derive the conclusion (5.2) central to the moral objection. Let A stand for the proposition that Abraham kills Isaac.

(5.2) $\Diamond(OA \ \& \ \Box FA)$

According to (5.2), it might be obligatory that A and necessarily forbidden that A. (5.2) does not entail a contradiction without the consistency theorem. So, if we reject (1.2), then God can command some horrendous action A and generate a moral obligation that A, despite the fact that it is necessarily forbidden that A. So, we seem to have a serious version of the moral objection to theological voluntarism after all.

The central problem with the van Fraassen and Quinn version of the moral problem is that it rejects the thesis that unjustifiable actions are necessarily not morally obligatory. If unjustifiable actions—cruelty for its own sake, for instance, or inflicting pointless harms—are possibly morally obligatory, then it is difficult to see how commanding that Abraham kill Isaac could be a *moral* problem for theological voluntarism. The fact that an action is necessarily forbidden does not entail, on this view, that it could not also be morally obligatory.

So, suppose that it is necessarily morally forbidden that Abraham kills Isaac. If we reject (1.2) then it follows from the logic alone that the proposition that it is necessarily forbidden that Abraham kills Isaac is consistent with the proposition that it is morally obligatory that Abraham kills Isaac. If we assume that the logic for \Box is S5 and the logic for O is D, then we can derive (6.2).⁶

(6.2) $\Box FA \rightarrow \Diamond OA$

(6.2) entails that, for any necessarily forbidden action A—no matter how morally horrendous— there is some world in which A is morally obligatory. If it is forbidden that Abraham kills Isaac, then the rejection of (1.2) ensures that there is some possible world in which it is morally obligatory that Abraham kills Isaac. (6.2) does not depend on the assumption of theological voluntarism. (6.2) is a direct consequence of rejecting the consistency theorem in (1.2).⁷ If it is true as a matter of logic that any morally horrible action could be morally obligatory, then it presents no problem for theological voluntarism that God might command a morally horrible action. The fact is that every possible horrible action is possibly morally obligatory.

There are, of course, several adjustments in the logic of ethics that are required to accommodate the rejection of the consistency principle in (1.2). In order to allow genuine moral conflicts of the form $OA \ \& \ \Box FA$ the logic of ethics must be weakened and the truth-conditions for moral obligation substantially changed. If we allow the set of commands to be inconsistent—the command that A and the command that $\sim A$, for instance—and if we reject the consistency theorem in (1.2), then (5.2) is indeed possible. It might be the case that moral obligations genuinely conflict.

The problem is that the possibility that $OA \ \& \ \Box FA$ requires, in addition, the rejection of 'ought-can' axiom $\sim O \perp$ or the agglomeration principle $(OA \ \& \ OB) \rightarrow O(A \ \& \ B)$ or the closure principle $\Box(A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow (OA \rightarrow OB)$. None of these principles can be credibly rejected. $\sim O \perp$ encodes the weakest version of the Kantian ought-can requirement. It states effectually that it cannot be a moral requirement to bring about a contradiction. If we are prepared to abandon $\sim O \perp$ and $OA \rightarrow \sim O \sim A$, then there are worlds in which it is true that $OA \ \& \ \Box FA$. But the cost of permitting $OA \ \& \ \Box FA$ is implausible. In worlds

where $OA \ \& \ \Box FA$ is true, God has commanded everything and, despite that, nothing is permissible. The consequences of rejecting the agglomeration and closure principles are equally untenable.

5. Concluding Remarks.

A successful moral argument against theological voluntarism must establish that God could command some action A that is, in fact, necessarily not morally required. But there is no version of the moral argument that establishes that God could command such an A . Morrision offers no argument at all that God could command A , but urges simply that were God to command A , then A would be morally required.

Theological voluntarists of course agree with Morrision on this point, since they affirm line (1) above. But line (1) is unproblematic—it is just a consequence of theological voluntarism—since it is impossible that God command A .

Alternatively, Robert Adams suggests that there's no obvious argument against the suggestion that God could command X . But of course we have offered a valid argument from (1) and (2) to the conclusion that God cannot command A . Indeed even a God that exemplifies essential omnipotence could not command A , since commanding A entails a contradiction.

Bas van Fraassen and Philip Quinn suggest that we should weaken the logic of divine commands in ways that make conflicting obligations consistent. The moral objection reemerges on the revised logics since OA conflicts with $\Box O\sim A$ but $(OA \ \& \ \Box O\sim A)$ is consistent. The logical revisions invalidate the inference from $\Box O\sim A$ to $\sim OA$ and contradiction is avoided. But the resulting moral objections to theological voluntarism are not especially interesting. It is possible to get genuine conflicts, but that requires affirming

that moral agents might be required to do the logically impossible. The proposal does not present an interesting moral objection to theological voluntarism.

If theological voluntarism is true, then it is impossible for God to command any action that is necessarily not morally required. It is impossible for God to command any action that is inconsistent with a contingent moral requirement. And there is no interesting way to modify the logic of divine commands to permit otherwise inconsistent moral requirements. It is reasonable to conclude that there is no cogent moral objection to theological voluntarism.

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¹ I have in mind command versions of theological voluntarism, but the forthcoming objections apply to non-command versions as well. I leave aside aesthetic properties and non-moral evaluative properties generally. Broad theological voluntarism makes the moral properties of actions depend on the will of God *in some sense*, places no restrictions on the moral properties that depend on the will of God, and places no restrictions on the possible objects of evaluation. The relation between moral properties and the will of God has been described variously as a composition relation, an a priori semantic relation, and a causal relation. The latter does seem unlikely since God willing that x entails that x is obligatory (good, right, virtuous, etc.) whether or not there exist any causal laws.

² It is compatible with the forthcoming discussion that $\forall x(\text{God commands } x \text{ just if } x \text{ is morally right})$ is a posteriori necessary or a priori necessary.

³ This is not the view that some action whose moral justification we cannot imagine might be morally obligatory. This is the view that some action that objectively lacks any possible moral justification might be morally obligatory. The latter does seem a genuine possibility on theological voluntarism, since it makes God's commands (alone) a sufficient condition of the moral rightness of actions.

⁴ See Wes Morriston, (2009) my emphasis.

⁵ But compare section (4), 'On the Logic of Commands'.

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|---|--------------------------|
| (i) $\Box FA$ | Assumption |
| (ii) $\Diamond (FA \ \& \ OA)$ | Rejection of Consistency |
| (iii) $\Diamond OA$ | From (ii) |
| (iv) $\therefore \Box FA \rightarrow \Diamond OA$ | From (i), (iii) |

⁷ There is actually a conclusive argument against the possibility of moral dilemmas in these considerations. The rejection of (1.2) entails that there are necessarily no actions that could not be morally obligatory. Since there are many examples of actions that are necessarily not obligatory, for instance cruelty for no reason at all, it cannot be true that (1.2) is false.