Divine Command Theory without a Divine Commander
(Published version in *Journal of Value Inquiry* available at https://rdcu.be/c3JKo.)

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Philosophers often treat divine command theory dismissively. Kirchin's recent text (2012) gives it no sustained treatment. It was "supposedly laid to rest by Kant if not by Socrates." (Westmoreland 1996, 15) *Euthyphronian challenges* – the Euthyphro problem and its relatives – are widely agreed to be weighty, and many theists believe in a divine commander but doubt the divine command theory. Yet, some distinguished contemporary philosophers defend a divine command theory. (Adams 1979; Wierenga 1983; Quinn 1990; Baggett and Walls 2011; Evans 2014) According to these *new divine command theorists*, a sophisticated or modified divine command theory can answer Euthyphronian challenges and may also be superior to its secular alternatives, especially in accounting for the objectivity of obligations. If so, the modified theory may be pressed into apologetic service: Reasons to affirm objective obligations will also count in favor of the theism that divine command theory presupposes.[1]

I remain unconvinced, but I do not dispute the adequacy of the new divine command theorists' response to Euthyphronian challenges, nor do I deny their theory's metaethical advantages. Instead, I think that once we modify the divine command theory (DCT) to immunize it against Euthyphronian challenges, we will have all the resources we need to secure the same metaethical advantages without the divine commander. The divine commander is metaethically superfluous: subtracting the commander leaves the metaethics intact. Or so I shall argue.

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[1] See (Adams 1987b; Evans 2014). A representative version comes from (Moreland and Craig 2009, 495):

1. If there is no God, there are no objective moral duties.
2. There are objective moral duties.
3. Therefore, there is a God. [adapted]

Elsewhere, Moreland and Craig endorse the divine command component: "God makes sense of moral obligation because his commands constitute for us our moral duties." (2009, 493)

My argument unfolds in several stages.

Very briefly, in §§I-IV, I motivate, introduce, and delineate parameters for a modified DCT. In §V, I use Robert Adams's version of a DCT to illustrate the key features and metaethical appeal of a modified DCT. In §VI, I compare Adams's DCT to an ideal observer theory (IOT) and argue that an appropriately characterized IOT delivers the *same* metaethical advantages, plus a *comparative* advantage in ontological parsimony. In §VII, I consider and respond to the most important objections. Finally, in §VIII, I draw together the threads of my argument and reflect more generally on its course and implications.

I. Preliminaries: Divine Command Metaethics

Metaethics is concerned with truth conditions for moral claims such as those about rightness, wrongness, permissibility, and allied notions, and divine command metaethics assigns a central role to divine commands in explaining when those moral claims are true. It is not the project of explaining value or moral value in general. Divine command theorists seek to explain the metaethics of obligation but need not explain all value in terms of divine commands.

According to a DCT, all moral obligations correspond to the content of commands from God – content which is obligatory only *because* God commands it. To bring the issue into focus, consider a *crude* DCT that satisfies the following four conditions:

1. A command from God is *sufficient* for the existence of a moral requirement. Thus, stealing is

wrong *because* God prohibits it.

2. A command from God is *necessary*: there would be no moral prohibition or requirement without a divine command. Thus, stealing would not be wrong if God did not prohibit it.

3. God's commands do not track or depend upon any prior rightness or wrongness. Thus, God does not prohibit stealing because stealing is, apart from the command, already wrong.

4. Finally, there are no restrictions upon what God might have commanded or prohibited. How we state this condition is a bit delicate, and I shall not try for precision. The idea is just that any intelligible semantic content for a command could have been the content of God's command, and if it had been God's command, then compliance would have been obligatory. Thus, if God had commanded stealing, those who did not steal would be acting wrongly.

II. Euthyphronian Challenges

The new divine command theorists agree that a crude DCT is *too* crude: it faces crippling Euthyphronian challenges. To illustrate, I sketch four representative Euthyphronian challenges, inspired by Socrates' dilemma for Euthyphro. Euthyphro had claimed that the pious is what is loved by the gods, but Socrates asks whether the pious is loved by the gods *because* it is pious or whether it is pious *because* the gods love it. (Plato 1997)

The first Euthyphronian challenge, modeled closely upon the Socratic original, is the *Arbitrariness* problem. If rightness is coextensive with the content of God's commands, does God command something because it is right, or is it right because God commands it? Either answer appears problematic. If something is right solely because God commands it, rightness is arbitrary. Had God commanded differently, something different would have been right – obligatory – instead, even if the command were to engage in something terrible such as deliberate cruelty or something silly such as avoiding stepping on sidewalk cracks. But if we *deny* that God could make cruelty or sidewalk-crack-avoidance obligatory just by commanding them, then it appears that God may be commanding attitudes

and performances, such as kindness or courage, *because they are right*.[2] In that case, God's contribution would be dispensable: the same attitudes or performance would be right, even without divine commands. Understandably, divine command theorists prefer to avoid both lemmas.

Second, there is the problem of *Absent Commands*. If divine commands can be arbitrary, so can their omission. We all agree (I hope) that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun, but if God had not prohibited such torture, it would not be wrong.

Third, there is the problem of *Evil Commands*. Again, we agree that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. But on a DCT, torturing babies for fun would be obligatory, were God to command it. (Torturing babies would differ only in its alignment with a divine command but not in its motivations, causes, or consequences.)

Last, there is the *Regress* problem. If I need a command from God to make it obligatory not to steal, do I need *another* command to make obedience to the first obligatory? The reason I am obligated to obey God's command is presumably *not* that I am obligated to obey any commands and, therefore, any command from God. But if not, there must be some difference between God's and other commands in virtue of which obedience to God's commands is obligatory, while obedience to other commands is not. (Cudworth 1996, 20–26; Wainwright 2005, 80–83) What distinguishes God's obligating commands from the Godfather's non-obligating commands?

Prima facie, there is something to each of these challenges, but diagnosis is needed. Why do such challenges appear forceful, not just to doubters but also to theists sympathetic to a DCT? If the diagnosis succeeds, we will have identified common ground among otherwise disparate metaethical thinkers. Two linked features, arbitrariness and badness, run through the examples. Arbitrariness is a possible feature of divine commands and badness a possible feature of their content, of what is commanded.

A command is arbitrary when there is no sufficient rationale for its being one way rather than another. Arbitrariness need not be problematic if it is only a matter of arbitrary selection among options,

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[2] I set aside purely coincidental matches between what is right and what God commands: they would not be helpful to a DCT.

each of which is good enough. That would be *restricted* arbitrariness, but we enter the thicket of Euthyphronian challenges with the question: Can God's commands be *unrestrictedly* arbitrary? Without restrictions on what God's commands can be, they are possibly bad, and more disturbingly, were a crude DCT correct, bad divine commands would obligate us to act badly.

Unrestricted arbitrariness opens the door to badness in the content of divine commands and, therefore, in the content of our obligations. This is counter-intuitive since much of our interest in having a satisfactory account for the objectivity of obligations connects to what we already confidently take to be wrong. We want to know *why* pointless cruelty is wrong. If the class of wrongful actions is unified only by an unaccountable will – which might equally well command pointless cruelty and thereby make compassion, kindness, or mercy wrong – we may wonder what reason we have to avoid wrongful action. Terrifying punishment, of course, might *motivate* compliance but would not warrant thinking that compliance is *right* rather than merely expedient. Such compliance would evince fear rather than conviction. Such divine commands would not explain what we sincerely care about. As Robert Adams puts it:

> The property that is wrongness should belong to those types of action that are thought to
> be wrong – or at least it should belong to an important central group of them. It would be
> unreasonable to expect a theory of the nature of wrongness to yield results that agree
> perfectly with pre-theoretical opinion. One of the purposes a metaethical theory may
> serve is to give guidance in revising one's particular ethical opinions. But there is a limit
> to how far those opinions may be revised without changing the subject entirely; and we
> are bound to take it as a major test of the acceptability of a theory of the nature of
> wrongness that it should in some sense account for the wrongness of a major portion of
> the types of action we have believed to be wrong. (Adams 1979, 74–75)

The scorched-earth strategy that denies that our prior judgments about what is wrong even fallibly track a real property of wrongness makes it less plausible that the DCT is explicating the property in which we are interested. Our conviction that it is wrong to torture babies for fun is far more certain than any theory

according to which it might not be wrong. Since the crude DCT implies that if God did not prohibit baby-torturing for fun, it would not be wrong, we reasonably reject the crude theory.

If complete arbitrariness admits badness, we might suppose that excluding arbitrariness will exclude badness, but that inference would commit the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Instead, we should infer the contrapositive, that if God's commands are not possibly bad, they cannot be completely arbitrary.

III. Responding to Euthyphronian Challenges

The new divine command theorists do not bite the crude DCT bullet; rather, they seek to show that they can *meet* Euthyphronian challenges and avoid horrifying or counter-intuitive consequences for our obligations without unmooring rightness from God's commands. Broadly speaking, it is clear how to do this. Rightness can depend upon God's commands without either arbitrariness or possible badness, provided that rightness or obligatoriness is not the *only* part of our normative or evaluative theory. God's commands will be necessary for obligation but not, unless some further evaluative condition is met, sufficient.[3] The evaluative condition will ensure that there will be no problematic but still obligating commands.[4] We will have a *sophisticated* DCT that accepts the first three but rejects the fourth defining characteristic of the crude theory and so admits restrictions on the possible content of God's obligating commands. Thus, in accepting a DCT, we will not have to agree that God might have made paradigmatically bad action, such as pointless cruelty, either obligatory or permissible.

A sophisticated DCT can address each of the four representative Euthyphronian challenges. It can explain why God's obligating commands will not be merely arbitrary. If arbitrariness is excluded in the

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[3] The further condition could explain either why God would not command merely arbitrarily or why, if God were to command merely arbitrarily, compliance would not necessarily be obligatory. See (Wierenga 1983, 393–96). This distinction will not occupy us, and for most purposes does not matter, since divine command theorists who think God *could* issue bad commands do not believe that God ever *does*. I shall speak only in terms of explaining why God will not command arbitrarily.

[4] Presumably, it will explain as well why there will not be objectionable permissions. Objectionable permission might be given explicitly by God, or implicitly, due to the absence of a needed command.

right way, via an appropriate evaluative condition, there will be less reason to worry about Absent (but still needed) Commands. Evil Commands can non-arbitrarily be ruled out. Regress appears more tractable. What makes God's commands non-arbitrary may also provide reason to obey without appeal to another command. It may be that only *qualified commands* obligate and that God's commands are qualified, or even necessarily qualified – for example, by being good. (Commands from the Godfather may not be.)

IV. Evaluative Conditions

Of course, just alluding to 'an appropriate evaluative condition' cannot address every variant of the Euthyphronian challenges – details would need to be worked out. Still, some appropriate evaluative condition is needed. As we saw, arbitrariness is objectionable because it admits badness in the content of commands. Bad commands cannot be blocked by additional commands without some way to ensure that additional commands will not themselves be bad. Nor, consistently with basic commitments of a DCT, can bad commands be blocked by some obligation that does not derive from a divine command since a DCT is supposed to account for all obligations. The content of obligating divine commands will need to be constrained or filtered by some evaluative condition, which itself is neither a command nor an obligation.[5]

The theist may plausibly hold that God's *perfect goodness* ensures there will be nothing bad in the content of divine commands. This is a step in the right direction, but we still need to assume an *evaluative explanation* of what it is for God's character or commands to be good.[6] The value of God's

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[5] Divine command theorists agree that comprehensive theological voluntarism about value is implausible. According to Adams, "[d]ivine command metaethics is not about the nature of all ethical properties and facts but only about the nature of those that we may call 'the obligation family' of ethical properties and facts, those expressed by such terms as 'right', 'wrong', and 'duty'." (Adams 1987a, 262) Or, per Evans, "a DCT … is far from constituting a complete ethic. It rests on a framework of normative truths, including an account of the good, such as a natural law theory provides, and it needs an account of the virtues as well." (Evans 2014, 87)

[6] Why could God's character not be cruel, malicious, or arbitrary? Or, if God is definitionally good, why could there not exist, instead of God, *Clod*, an all-powerful, all-knowing creator of our world, whose character is cruel, malicious, or arbitrary?

character traits or the goodness of divine commands must not themselves be alterable by God's action or choice. If, say, the goodness of compassion for suffering or the badness of malicious hatred could be controlled or altered by divine action, then the fact that God's character constrains his commands would not ensure that there will be no commands that we would, by our current best lights, now classify as bad. The command to torture babies might be bad today but good tomorrow. Security against Euthyphronian challenges requires some facts about goodness or value to be unalterable, even by God.

Now, if a fact cannot be altered by an all-powerful being, it is either a necessary truth or a necessary consequence of a contingent truth. In either case, if goodness is unalterable by God, then some fundamental evaluative truths are necessary,[7] and if some are necessary, they hold in all possible worlds, including any possible worlds without a God.

I do not raise this issue to criticize DCT. Rather, the point is that a plausible version of DCT will presuppose evaluative truths which are not alterable by God. I do not contend that theists need to demonstrate such truths in order to rely upon plausible evaluative conditions in their theory. Theists are entitled to employ plausible and uncontentious evaluative claims without having proofs in hand. But, equally, neither do other theorists need to demonstrate the truth or necessity of plausible and uncontentious evaluative claims.

V. Adams's Divine Command Metaethics

Questions remain about the evaluative conditions upon which the divine command theorist needs to rely, but it is at least plausible that a satisfactory answer to the arbitrariness problem solves the divine command theorist's other Euthyphronian issues as well, so I provisionally assume that the new divine command theorists *can* satisfactorily meet the Euthyphronian challenges.[8]

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[7] To illustrate, it is contingent that immersing one's hand in boiling water causes pain. Our nervous systems might have been wired differently. However, the badness of pointless pain, and hence, the badness of pointless pain caused by immersion of one's hand in boiling water, is not contingent. Alternative wiring could not keep pointless pain from being bad.

[8] For some doubts, see (Westmoreland 1996).

To illustrate the metaethical advantages of a sophisticated DCT, I take Robert Adams's version as representative.[9] Here are the critical components. Building on widely accepted accounts of property identity developed by Donnellan, Putnam, and Kripke, Adams holds that the property of *being wrong* is the same property as *being contrary to a command of a loving God*. Like all property-identity claims, if it is true at all, it is necessarily true, though its truth cannot be known *a priori*:

> What we can discover *a priori*, by conceptual analysis, about the nature of ethical wrongness is that wrongness is the property of actions that best fills a certain role. What property that is cannot be discovered by conceptual analysis. But I suggest that theists should claim it is the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. This claim, if true, is a necessary but not an *a priori* truth. (Adams 1979, 66)

Adams's version possesses several virtues. First, since it is not a semantic claim about the meaning of deontic predicates,[10] it sidesteps objections based on the fact that non-believers competently employ deontic predicates without supposing that wrongful acts are contrary to divine commands. Second, it is not an epistemic claim. Adams need not commit himself as to how we identify the property of wrongness. Even if wrongness is, in fact, disobedience to God's command, that does not entail that we cannot *recognize* wrongness unless we recognize its contrariety to a divine command. God *might* speak from the stereotypical burning bush, but also (or instead) through the counsel of others, through institutions, through conscience, through moral reasoning, and so forth. Third, it is relatively modest in being committed just to God's character as loving, rather than to more contentious claims, such as God's necessary goodness. Adams's theory allows but does not require the stronger claims: If God is necessarily loving, then he is loving. Such theoretical modesty makes the DCT more plausible.

Further, we get an intelligible account of what it is for an obligation claim to be true. An act will

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[9] There are somewhat different approaches to producing a sophisticated DCT, but there will be no important differences with regard to the metaethical features and advantages that it can deliver.

[10] The deontic predicates are those dealing with the obligation "family" of moral terms, such as what is obligatory, permissible and impermissible.

be wrong just in case it is contrary to a divine command, a property it will have or lack regardless of any human opinion or sentiment. Thus, the truth of the wrongness claim will not be relative or subjective, nor the claim itself non-cognitive. More specifically, the new DCT provides a kind of *non-mysterious non-naturalism*. Ethical naturalists often struggle to explain how ethical properties can also be natural properties, such as those investigated and explored by the sciences. Non-naturalists also struggle when the question is how to go beyond the somewhat mysterious bare denial that ethical properties are natural. DCT identifies wrongness in terms of the relation of an act to a divine command, which seems non-natural if anything is, but which also seems intelligible and non-mysterious, insofar as intelligent agents issuing commands is non-mysterious.[11]

Finally, though the existence of requirements is a *datum* for which any metaethics of obligation needs to account, they are also puzzling: evaluative distinctions might, it seems, range only over degrees of *better* and *worse* with nothing being required or prohibited. Infinitely many evaluative distinctions can be represented as locations on a better-to-worse spectrum, so what picks out a single location to mark a binary distinction between what is acceptable and what is not?[12] Perhaps the most straightforward answer is to appeal to something that makes an *already* well-understood binary distinction. *Commands* can mark the distinction between what is compliant or not, so the parallel to moral requirements and corresponding deontic statuses is very close:

Commands	Moral Requirements	Deontic Statuses
Action compliant with command	Action compliant with requirement	Obligatory
Action contrary to command	Action contrary to requirement	Prohibited
Action not contrary to any command	Action not contrary to any requirement	Permitted

A DCT, in which the commands of an ideally wise being play a central role, seems well-suited to

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[11] Of course, there may be mysteries regarding unembodied intelligent agency, but those are at least *different* mysteries than those pertaining to non-natural ethical properties.

[12] We can put the puzzle schematically this way: Suppose there is an evaluative scale running from 0 to 100 and that 75 marks the point of requirement. Action that achieves at least 75 on the scale is required; lower-scoring actions are prohibited. Thus, there is some special significance to a move from 74 to 75 that is not exhibited in larger moves below the point of requirement, such as that from 60 to 74. Similarly, in the worsening direction, a small change from 75 to 74 is prohibited, while a larger change, such as that from 100 down to 75, is not prohibited. What bifurcates the evaluative scale when it is evidently *not* mere increase or decrease in value?

explaining deontic distinctions. Divine commands, as *commands*, are suited to bifurcate an evaluative spectrum. As commands of an *ideally wise being*, they are not in any way defective in where they bifurcate the evaluative spectrum.

Adams and other new divine command theorists have made a reasonable case. If there is a loving God and if wrongness is the property of being contrary to God's commands, there will be details to work out about what a loving God would command, but Euthyphronian challenges evaporate. There is no obvious reason for God's commands to be objectionably arbitrary, absent when needed, evil, or in need of some unavailable, further reason to merit our obedience. As Adams puts it,

> The gravest objection to the more extreme forms of divine command theory is that they imply that if God commanded us, for example, to make it our chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no other reason than that he commanded it, it would be wrong not to obey. Finding this conclusion unacceptable, I prefer a less extreme, or modified, divine command theory, which identifies the ethical property of wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. Since a God who commanded us to practice cruelty for its own sake would not be a loving God, this modified divine command theory does not imply that it would be wrong to disobey such a command. (Adams 1987b, 147)

VI. The Divine Commander and the Ideal Observer

As indicated, I do not aim to cast doubt upon the adequacy of the new divine command theorists' response to Euthyphronian challenges. Instead, I shall argue that if the divine command theorist can defend his view in these terms, it will be because he has, in essence, adopted an ideal observer metaethics for obligations.

Ideal observer theories can be developed in various ways. What they have in common is that ethical properties are identified via the responses of an idealized observer. The observer is idealized in being unlimited in ways that human observers are often limited, biased, or partial. According to Roderick

Firth's influential version, for example, the ideal observer is omniscient about non-ethical facts,[13]

omnipercipient (vividly aware of relevant facts as they would be experienced by those affected),

disinterested (so judgments are not distorted by the observer's interests), and dispassionate (so judgments

are not distorted by passions, such as revenge or cruelty). Ethical properties are then identified in terms of

the favorable or unfavorable attitudes of the ideal observer toward what is being ethically assessed. (Firth

1952, 333–41) According to Firth, "any plausible description of an ideal observer will be a short

description of God, if God is conceived to be an infallible moral judge." (Firth 1952, 333) Charles

Taliaferro makes the parallel to Adams's metaethics yet closer by "adding that the ideal observer is loving

and replac[ing] the notion of being dispassionate and disinterested with the stipulation that the observer is

impartial. I will thus represent the IOT as claiming that 'X is good' should be analyzed as 'X would be

approved of by a being that is omniscient, omnipercipient, impartial, and loving'." (Taliaferro 1983, 3–4)

Since we are here concerned with deontic properties, such as rightness and wrongness, we need not

commit ourselves to an analysis of goodness. I shall adapt Taliaferro's conception directly to the analysis

of moral requirement: "X is required" should be analyzed as "X would be commanded by a being that is

omniscient, omnipercipient, impartial, and loving."[14]

Everything critical to the new DCT, so far as it succeeds in avoiding the Euthyphronian

challenges, is available to this kind of IOT. Adams himself notes the possibility:

> It may be objected that the advantages of the divine command theory can be obtained
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> without an entailment of God's existence. For the rightness of an action might be said to
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> consist in the fact that the action would agree with the commands of a loving God if one

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[13] Why must omniscience be supposed when, presumably, some facts make no difference ethically? I take Firth to be representing the ideal observer as a kind of functional operator, that takes non-ethical facts as input and delivers ethical facts as output. Since "being morally relevant" is an ethical fact, distinctions in whether something is morally relevant can't be made on the input side. Hence, the ideal observer needs to be omniscient about non-ethical facts. Of course, for *us*, limited in knowledge as we are, the omniscience of the ideal observer serves only as a reminder of the epistemic possibility of morally relevant facts that we do not yet know or properly take into account. For us, it is an encouragement to open-mindedness and willingness to pursue inquiry, not a demand that we achieve impossible levels of knowledge.

[14] Action contrary to or compatible with what an ideal observer would command serve respectively to analyze wrongness and permissibility as well.

existed, or does so agree if a loving God exists. This modification transforms the divine command theory into a nonnaturalistic form of the ideal observer theory of the nature of right and wrong. (Adams 1987b, 148)[15]

In the terms I prefer, we can replace "the commands of a loving God" with "the commands of an omniscient (or sufficiently well-informed), omnipercipient, loving, and impartial observer." The ideal observer will have the same properties of character and intellect that are traditionally ascribed to God. Importantly, though, the ideal observer may be entirely hypothetical. There need not be an actual ideal observer for there to be facts about what an ideal observer would command. There is no reason to expect the ideal observer's commands to differ from the commands of a loving God. If there is no difference – no difference in content, no difference in objectivity, no difference in its capacity to account for deontic distinctions – then an appropriately characterized IOT is metaethically on a par with the DCT. Other things being equal, ontological parsimony makes it preferable.[16]

VII. Objections and Replies

My argument for metaethical parity between an IOT and a sophisticated DCT has not, to my knowledge, been articulated elsewhere in comparable detail, but others, including Adams (1987a; 1987b), Morriston (2012), and Taliaferro (1983), have considered the possibility. I know of three significant objections.

1. According to the *Moral Ontology Objection*, moral objectivity is not secured unless grounded in a way for which the IOT does not provide.

2. According to Adams's *Indeterminacy Objection*, an actual loving God could provide needed

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[15] It is not clear to me why such an IOT is nonnaturalistic.

[16] An anonymous reviewer comments that "if one is a theist … there is no gain in parsimony by accepting ideal observer theory. If one believes in God on other grounds, then there is no reason God cannot be viewed as playing a role in ethics." I agree: my claim is only that there is a gain in parsimony, other things being equal. In addition, details matter about other grounds for belief. An ontological arguer could think a Greatest Possible Being well-suited to be a perfect divine commander. It is less clear that a cosmological arguer could say the same about a First Cause. A theory that requires the First Cause to also be perfectly good appears less parsimonious than one that does not.

moral guidance when there is no corresponding possibility for an ideal observer.

3. The *Social Theory of Obligation*, endorsed by Adams and some other divine command theorists, allows for embedding the DCT within a broader account of obligation. Then, the claim is that obligations are essentially requirements emerging in social relationships and that our relationship to God best accounts for moral obligations.

Moral Ontology

Divine command theorists claim that moral values have their basis in the character of an actual being, God, and that our duties are grounded in God's nature and commands, so it is perfectly objective that we have certain duties or that specific actions are wrong. By contrast, ideal observer theorists do not presuppose any actual good being or wise commands, so it is sometimes argued that the theory cannot support objective values and duties. According to William Lane Craig, theism provides a "sound foundation" for objective moral values and obligations:

> On the theistic view, objective moral values are rooted in God. He is the locus and source of moral value. God's own holy and loving nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions are measured. . . . God's moral nature is expressed toward us in the form of divine commands that constitute our moral duties. Far from being arbitrary, these commands flow necessarily from his moral nature. On this foundation we can affirm the objective goodness and rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality, and condemn as objectively evil and wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression. (Kurtz and Craig 2009, 30)

Craig also argues that alternatives that do not rely upon the existence of God do not credibly explain how value and obligation can be objective. However, he does not provide anything like a thorough survey of non-theistic accounts and says nothing directly about why ideal observer theories should be regarded as inadequate. In particular, little or nothing is said about what makes for a "sound foundation," so it is unclear just why he thinks non-theistic accounts fall short of identifying a sound foundation. The bulk of

Craig's discussion focuses on sociobiological debunking accounts of the *appearance* of moral obligation. To say the least, debunking is not the only non-theistic option. (Murphy 2009, 122 and Morriston 2012)

Briefly, we can address the issue of moral ontology in this way. We have an ontology for wrongness (and thus for obligations) if there is something for wrongness to be. On Adams's DCT, the wrongness of an action is the same property as its being contrary to a command of a loving God. The wrongness of an action consists in – is identical to – a fact about a relationship of contrariety between the action and a divine command. A parallel treatment works for the present IOT: the wrongness of an action is the same property as its being contrary to what an ideal observer would command. If there are facts about what an ideal observer would command, wrongness consists in – is identical to – a fact about a relationship of contrariety between the action and what an ideal observer would command. Either there are facts about what an ideal observer would command, or there are not. If there are, then it is possible for something to be contrary to what an ideal observer would command, and so, there is an ontology for wrongness (and for obligation). If there are no such facts, then appeal to a loving God does not help in avoiding Euthyphronian challenges since an actual loving God is a realized ideal observer. If there are no facts about what an ideal observer would command, neither are there any about what a loving God would command.

Thus, if there is a divine commander, immune to Euthyphronian challenges, there will also be facts about what the ideal observer would command, which will settle what obligations we have in the same way and with the same content as divine commands might.[17]

Indeterminacy

Adams's main reason for rejecting an IOT turns upon *indeterminacy* as to what the ideal observer would command. Adams acknowledges the possibility of an ideal observer counterpart to his DCT but doubts the parity between the two. Thus, in order to defend the superiority of the DCT, he needs to

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[17] Indeterminacy, as discussed below, may produce divergence between the output of a DCT and of an IOT but turns out not to make a difference to the parity of the two theories.

identify some DCT-favoring difference between the DCT and the IOT. Adams's objection is premised

upon doubt that the necessary counterfactuals about what a loving God would command all have truth

values: "If there is no loving God, what makes it the case that if there were one, he would command this

rather than that? Without an answer to this question, the crucial counterfactual lacks a clear sense."

(Adams 1987b, 148) Adams acknowledges clear cases: A loving God would not command cruelty for its

own sake, for example. But, he says,

> . . . I do not believe in the counterfactuals. I do not believe that there is a unique set of
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> commands that would be issued by any loving God. There are some things that a loving
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> God might command and might not command. In particular, among the things that I
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> believe actually to be valid moral demands, there are some that I think might have been
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> arranged differently by a God who would still be loving, and who would still satisfy the
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> additional requirements of the metaethical theory. For example, a loving God could have
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> commanded different principles regarding euthanasia from those that I believe are
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> actually in force. (Adams 1987a, 273)

Thus, in some cases, there is no fact as to what a loving God would command. I shall suppose Adams is

correct but shall argue that, even so, Adams has not shown why a DCT should be preferred to an IOT.

We can illustrate with the euthanasia example.[18] When euthanasia is a plausible option, clashing

values may be at stake. Consider a woman determined by competent medical opinion to be terminally ill.

If we keep her alive as long as medically feasible, she will endure great suffering, and medical resources

that might save other lives will be consumed and therefore unavailable to others. Protecting life in the

sense of not deliberately ending it may require keeping her alive. Protecting life in the sense of

maximizing lives saved may require allowing euthanasia. Preventing suffering may require allowing

euthanasia. Respecting autonomy may require allowing euthanasia but only if chosen by the patient. And

so on.

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[18] The same themes and structural considerations can be applied elsewhere.

If we ask what a loving God would command for such cases, no answer stands out as uniquely correct. Let us suppose that no answer *is* uniquely correct. In that case, there is nothing that the ideal observer would uniquely command. Adams sees an advantage for DCT here. The hypothetical ideal observer cannot choose when there is no fact about what the ideal observer would choose, but an actual loving God could guide us. There could be a fact about what God *does* command even when there is none about what an ideal observer *would* command.

What should we make of this? Consider the terminally ill woman again. Clearly, some commands would be inappropriate. *Paternalistic involuntary euthanasia*, in which a competent, well-informed patient wishes to remain alive but is "euthanized" upon a third-party determination that her life is not worth living, will serve as an example. Neither a loving God nor an ideal observer would permit such paternalistic euthanasia.

Thus far, both would prescribe identically. For Adams's concern to arise, there must be *other* alternatives, at least two mutually exclusive, possible commands governing euthanasia, either of which *could* be selected by a loving God. To have convenient labels without worrying over the details, let's call these *Total Prohibition* and *Partial Prohibition*. An actual loving God could pick one while the hypothetical ideal observer could not. Here is a genuine difference: God could issue an *undermotivated command*, one which is compatible with but not required by what a loving God would command; the ideal observer could not. This difference does not automatically favor a DCT over an IOT. If what a loving God (or ideal observer) would command favors neither Total Prohibition nor Partial Prohibition, what need is there for a command at all?

Consider this parallel. There are bad ways to support oneself, such as by stealing, which a loving God would prohibit. Once bad ways are excluded, there are many acceptable ways but no need for a command to specify which acceptable way to adopt. Similarly, there are bad ways to deal with terminal illness, such as paternalistic involuntary euthanasia, which a loving God would prohibit. It is plausible that once bad ways are excluded, there are multiple acceptable ways with no need for a command to select one of the acceptable ways.

Instead of Total or Partial Prohibition, God could select *No Command*. If No Command is to be ruled out, it must be relevantly better for one of the potential practices to be obligatory than for neither to be obligatory. If it is just as well for neither to be obligatory, the IOT can deliver that.

So, Adams must be assuming that it would *not* be just as well for neither to be obligatory. Since God could command either, both are fit to be commanded.[19] Since the need for a command is not explained by the greater value of one option, the argument against No Command must be that there is some advantage to *having* a uniform requirement, without regard to *which* is uniformly required. Perhaps, a uniform requirement would avoid confusion or facilitate coordination.[20] Benefits from a uniform requirement seem possible, so I shall assume them. Then, Adams could argue that an actual loving God could secure the benefits of uniform requirement, while the hypothetical ideal observer could not.

The argument remains unsatisfactory. The superiority of the DCT is supposed to consist in the fact that God could make an arbitrary choice among options that are otherwise good enough. But if only an arbitrary choice is needed, no deity is required to make it. The advantage of having some command, even an arbitrary one, would be recognized by the ideal observer. Hence, the ideal observer would also endorse some way of making the needed arbitrary choice – for example, through institutions of civil society, such as a majority vote. If a loving God would endorse introducing a measure of arbitrariness to secure some advantage, so would the ideal observer. Since arbitrary choice is within our capacities as well as God's, we could make it as well as God. Adams cannot object that an admittedly arbitrary choice would be defective if not made by God.

Social Theory of Obligation

Another objection to an IOT stems from a different strand of Adams's account. He situates the

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[19] Even if one is superior, the other remains good enough. Whatever value difference there may be between the options, it is not such that God *would not* command one and therefore *would* command the other, for then, the ideal observer would do likewise.

[20] Uniformity might result in greater benefit from a network effect, just as telephones and internet access are more valuable the greater the number of *other* people with telephones or internet access. (Banton 2020)

DCT in a *social theory* of obligation according to which obligations are essentially social: they always arise and are owed to others within social contexts.[21] Murphy explains Adams's position:

> [f]or an action to be morally obligatory is . . . to be an action that one properly incurs guilt for failing to perform. But guilt is social: to be in a state of guilt is, at least in part, to have strained or ruptured one's relationships with some others. Thus . . . for an action to be morally obligatory it must be an action [the failure to perform which] sets one at odds with another party. And . . . the particular way in which one sets himself or herself at odds with another in cases of violated obligations is by the knowing failure to conform to the other party's demands or requirements. (Murphy 2009, 128, endnotes omitted)

This theory appears well-suited to underwrite a DCT by requiring something *like* a demand as a condition of any obligation and also requiring that the demander be an actual party to a social relationship.

I shall not generally criticize social theories of obligation. Instead, I shall distinguish and address two relevant versions of a social theory, the *social demand* and the *social obligator* versions.[22] The social demand version, according to which demands from social parties are central to the nature of obligation, is sketched above. I shall first explain why its support for a DCT is problematic. Then, I shall turn to the more intuitive *social obligator* version, which might also be thought to be at odds with an IOT. As I shall show, the social obligator version does not threaten the IOT.

Consider the social demand version. Leaving aside whether it can be reconciled with the IOT,[23]

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[21] See Adams 1987, 2010, especially chapters 10 and 11. "Others" should be understood to include institutions.

[22] There is less interest in a *social accountability* version according to which a condition for the reality of obligation is the existence of someone able to censure or hold accountable those who violate the obligation. Murphy suggests that "[t]o account for the social element, we need to know who it is that has the power to hold humans (universally!) subject to censure for failing to perform their moral obligations." (2009, 129) If he holds that obligation depends on someone having the universal power to censure or hold wrongdoers accountable, the question can be pressed whether the censure (etc.) would be justified or not. If not, then there are no violated obligations, and if censure would be justified, there are already violated moral obligations, so the reality of obligations cannot depend upon the possibility of censure.

[23] A *crude* social demand version faces much the same problems as a crude DCT. Social demands may be arbitrary, absent when needed, evil, or in need of support which cannot be supplied by other social demands. If *either* the commands of a loving God *or* the commands of an ideal observer will serve to repair the weaknesses of the crude DCT, it is plausible that the *same* theoretical posits will, *mutatis mutandis*, serve to repair the weaknesses

there is an issue whether the social demand version provides support for the DCT. Consider the following attempt, the Social Demand Argument:

1. All obligations derive from social demands.

2. At least one obligation does not derive from any natural party's social demand.

3. Therefore, at least one obligation derives from a social demand by some non-natural party.

By way of explanation, I take "social demands" to be "demands by a party in a social relation" and take "natural parties" to include human beings and possibly other animals.[24] A non-natural party would be some party in a social relation with us but not human (etc.) – hence, plausibly, a god. That conclusion is not yet a DCT, but if we accept it on the strength of the two premises, there may be no plausible *non-divine* candidate to be a demanding, non-natural party. The conclusion lends support to, even if it does not entail, a DCT.

The Social Demand Argument is plainly valid, so if the premises are true, so must be its conclusion. Moreover, divine command theorists who wish to deploy the social demand version to support a DCT will be committed to the truth of both premises. The first premise comes directly from the social demand theory. The second premise, though equally necessary to the argument, is problematic. How do we know that some obligation *does not* derive from any demand by natural parties? The only plausible answer is by way of example: a case is needed where it is clear both that there is an obligation and also that there is no relevant demand from a natural party. Instances might be obligations to a baby or to future generations.

Obligations now owed to babies and future generations are sufficiently clear and obviously

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of the crude social demand version. Working out the details is a project for another time.

[24] I do not mean that only *individual* humans or animals can participate as natural parties in social relations with us. There may be groups, aggregates, institutions, etc., that can plausibly participate with us and make demands of us. Among natural parties, I also mean to allow for other possible social partners and demanders, such as intelligent extraterrestrials.

cannot correspond to demands made now by those babies or future generations. However, that does not show that demands from *non*-natural parties are needed to address such cases in the framework of the social demand version. Though babies and future generations cannot make demands in advance of the demanded performance, others can. Demands might be indirect, made by some on behalf of others, might be society's demands, or, idealizing further, might be the demands of "all of us," so far as we are well-informed and rational. The relevant demands might still come from natural parties. Since a good example in support of the second premise needs to be clearly a case of obligation and clearly *not* something demanded by any natural party, it will be difficult to satisfy both conditions together. What we call clear cases of obligation are almost always cases in which we agree, with high confidence, that some performance is obligatory. But if we, who are natural parties, already agree, why cannot we, or our societies, be the source of the demand from which the obligation stems? The need for agreement in order to identify a clear case of obligation militates against finding one which does not correspond to any natural party's demand. And if all obligations can be traced to sources in the demands of natural parties, the second premise is false, and so, the Social Demand Argument would be unsound.

If we turn to the less committal social obligator version, it will remain true that "obligations are essentially social: they always arise and are owed to others within social contexts." A moral obligation is always owed *by someone* and *to someone*.[25] The one to whom an obligation is owed is the *obligator*. This might be thought problematic for an IOT: no obligation can be real without an actual obligator, so a merely hypothetical ideal observer cannot occupy the role of the obligator. I do not, for example, owe gratitude or reciprocal favors to *hypothetical* benefactors.

However, ideal observer theorists need not countenance obligations to a merely hypothetical ideal observer. It would be a quantifier scope confusion to suppose that if every obligation is owed to someone, there must be someone to whom every obligation is owed. The key to seeing how there can always be an actual obligator for every obligation, even in an IOT, is to read the claim distributively: *For each*

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[25] I take "someone" to range over individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and collectivities.

particular obligation, there is an obligator to whom that obligation is owed. That is, I owe the keeping of a promise to the promisee, fairness to those with whom I deal, compassion to those who need it, and so on. Those obligations will be ratified by the commands of the ideal observer, but their performance is owed to others, not to the ideal observer. There is no problem explaining who is the singular obligator of every obligation because there need not be any singular obligator – and so, there is no need for the ideal observer to also be actual in order for obligations to be real.

VIII. Conclusion

A sympathetic and, I hope, fair examination of modern attempts to articulate and develop a DCT makes it plausible that the modified theory can meet its Euthyphronian challenges. Success in the face of serious challenges makes the theory more credible, and if the DCT is also a leading metaethical contender for explaining objective obligations, that further increases its plausibility.

Nevertheless, I argue that a DCT is not sufficiently supported. So far as it delivers on its metaethical promise, a simpler theory does just as well. In order to meet Euthyphronian challenges, we need to guard against unrestricted arbitrariness in God's commands. In Adams's version, only compliance with the commands of a *loving* God is obligatory. Inevitably, this presupposes that it is not unrestrictedly arbitrary what a loving God would or could command. Without substantive limits upon the content of divine commands, Euthyphronian challenges return in full force. In order for Adams's modification to work, the truth about what a loving God could or would command must not depend wholly upon voluntary divine acts.[26]

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[26] There might be partial dependence, given facts about what God creates. Evans writes:

> On [one] reading of Aquinas, given the truths about the good, once God has decided to create a world in which the created objects, including humans, have the natures they have, then his commands for that world are determined. Of course God could have given humans different commands on such a view, but in order for him to do so, he would have to create different natures for some things, thereby changing what is good for them. (2014, 34)

Such dependence does not affect the current argument. What God would command will depend upon what he has chosen to create, and therefore upon what exists; what the omniscient ideal observer would command will depend

The point generalizes. Adams's modified DCT is not the only contemporary version of a DCT that purports to offer metaethical advantages while escaping Euthyphronian challenges. What the others share with Adams's theory is the need to ensure that God's commands will not be unrestrictedly arbitrary. Arbitrariness must still be avoided in the right way. To do that, there must be truths about what God could or would command, which do not depend upon God's will but ultimately upon the satisfaction of some evaluative condition or conditions. But if so, we can construct an appropriately specified IOT that relies upon the same evaluative condition or conditions and secures the same metaethical advantages as the DCT without presupposing a loving God.

We can put this point somewhat differently. The IOT, with an appropriately characterized ideal observer, is *embedded within* the modified DCT. The modified DCT just *is* an IOT with an added postulate to the effect that the ideal observer is actual – that *God* is the ideal observer. The metaethical advantages, however, are secured by the ideal observer, not by the ideal observer's actuality. What a loving, omniscient, omnipercipient, and impartial observer would command is the same whether or not that observer is actual. Since the metaethical advantages are the same, but ontological commitment to the existence of a supernatural person is avoided, the IOT should be preferred, other things being equal. Whether other things *are* equal is a different question and best pursued on other occasions. If my current argument is correct, though, any advantages for theism need to be sought elsewhere than in divine command metaethics.[27]

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upon knowing the same relevant facts about what exists.

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