The Divine Command Theory and Objective Good

Bruce R. Reichenbach

THE GEORGETOWN SYMPOSIUM ON ETHICS:

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF HENRY B. VEATCH

Rocco Porreco, ed.

A central issue in the continuing discussion of the relation of ethics to religion concerns the divine command theory of ethics. Repeated are a number of charges: the divine command theory makes the standard of right and wrong arbitrary;[[1]](#endnote-1) it traps the defender of the theory in a vicious circle;[[2]](#endnote-2) it violates moral autonomy;[[3]](#endnote-3) it is an infantile relic of our early deontological stage of moral development, a stage now superseded by an adult teleological ethic.[[4]](#endnote-4) In what follows I will evaluate these objections with an eye to noting the relation of ethics to an ontological ground. I will then briefly suggest how Henry Veatch’s view of good as an ontological feature of the world provides a context in which the divine command theory can be reasonably justified.

My intent is not to present an argument to establish the truth of the divine command theory, in the sense of showing that ethics is logically dependent on religion, either for its particular moral judgments or for the moral concepts appealed to. Rather, I will attempt to respond to criticisms of that theory. Of course, response to such criticisms will not by itself show that the theory is true; that would depend on whether a reasonable case can be made for it. However, my effort does serve to remove certain objections to the theory, objections that purportedly evidence its indefensibility.

There are numerous versions of the divine command theory; in the course of our presentation we shall have occasion to refer to several of them. What they all have in common is the belief that certain acts are obligatory, forbidden, or permitted either wholly or partly because God wills or commands them to be such.[[5]](#endnote-5) This analysis of the divine command theory leaves open the question as to why God wills as he does; as we shall see, a variety of possible answers are provided to this question.

The Arbitrariness of God’s Will

The charge that the divine command theory entails that moral standards are arbitrary is a common one. For example, Patrick Nowell-Smith writes, “To make morality dependent on religion in this way is to assume first that law is a product of the arbitrary will of a lawgiver.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Similar, A. C. Ewing comments, “If what was good or bad as well as what ought to be done were fixed by God’s will, then there could be no reason whatever for God willing in any particular way. His commands would become purely arbitrary.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Thomas Mayberry puts the argument in the form of a dilemma.

One must face the objection that God’s commands, on this view, lose their moral force, since there is no criterion by which they can be said to be morally right or justified. On the one hand, it seems that God must have had or be in a position to give a moral reason for issuing a given command; otherwise, his command would have been arbitrary. On the other hand, if he can issue a morally obliging command without having a moral reason, he must be able to make an action right just by commanding it. In the one case, he uses an independent criterion; in the other case, he acts arbitrarily: to issue a command without being able to give a justifying reason is to issue an arbitrary command. Our concept of God is such that it seems inconceivable that God would issue arbitrary commands.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Mayberry’s demand that God, as a rational being, must have a reason for requiring or forbidding or permitting certain actions is consistent with the more general thesis that the standards or principles of moral conduct, whatever they may be, need rational justification. As Alan Gewirth writes, “The question whether a moral principle can be rationally justified has long had a central place in philosophical ethics. On its answer depends the possibility construing the difference between what is morally right and what is morally wrong, or objective and universal, and hence as knowable by moral judgments on which all persons who use rational methods must agree.”[[9]](#endnote-9) When applied to the divine command theory, this means that “we would not and should not think that our ethical beliefs were justified by being shown to rest on and follow from certain religious or theological beliefs unless we thought that those were themselves in some way rationally justifiable.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

What kind of justification lies open to the divine command theorist? Mayberry suggests that the only option open to the theorist, if he is to avoid arbitrariness, is to opt for justification in terms of an autonomous ethic—which is in effect to abandon the divine command theory. But might there not be something about certain states of affairs in the created world or about the nature of God that provides the needed justification and thus enables the divine command theorist to escape the dilemma? Let us consider these in turn.

A Natural Law Ethic

With respect to the first it might be argued that God has created things with specific natures and potentialities. Further, being omniscient, he understands both the natures of the things he has created and what fulfills or completes their potentialities. In particular, he knows what potentialities human beings have and how best those potentialities are actualized. This applies to the individual human person just as well as to the species. On the basis of this knowledge, God wills and commands that which will best complete or fulfill and hence perfect human persons, and these commands provide the criteria for determining the rightness or wrongness of human actions.

Not only would God’s commands then be justified and not arbitrary, but their justification would be grounded in the kind of thing a being is and what it would be if fulfilled. As such, God’s commands are grounded in objective good. This would mean that moral judgments would then be true or false, depending upon whether that judgment coincided ultimately with what would really fulfill that particular person or bring about his self-realization, i.e., with what would be good in fact for him.

Further, this view also removes the common objection to the divine command theory that it is false to contend, as the theory seemingly does, that one could not determine the good for human persons without some divine revelation that embodied the divine command regarding obligations and prohibitions.[[11]](#endnote-11) On our view, the non-believer could in fact discover by reason his moral obligations through an analysis of the nature of human persons, their potentialities, and their fulfilling ends. As such, a non-theistic ethic could be constructed. Such an ethic would then be similar to ethics classically conceived. Ethics would be “the science which…enables men to understand how they make the transition from [man as he happens to be] to [man as he could be if he realized his essential nature]. Ethics on this view presupposes some account of potentiality and act, some account of the essence of man as a rational animal, and above all some account of the human *telos*. The precepts that enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices that are their counterparts instruct us how to move form potentiality to actuality, how to realize our true nature and to reach our true end.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Divine revelation would be sufficient for ascertaining what is morally obligatory or forbidden but would not be necessary. For the theistic *philosopher*, for example, it might be seen in a confirming role, i.e., confirming what practical reason has determined to be morally obligatory, whereas for the theistic *non-philosopher* it would be the source of knowledge concerning divine commands and moral good.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Two objections might be raised against this position. First, if moral goodness is determined by divine commands that are justified in terms of created nature, how can one make sense of such theological assertions as “God is essentially good,” “when God created he saw that all was good”, and “God has created the best possible world”? Supposing the latter makes sense (which I doubt),[[14]](#endnote-14) one might suggest that the good referred to in all these statements has nothing to do with moral good, but rather refers to a kind of ontological perfection. The created world is good or best in the sense that, for example, it is ordered rather than chaotic, that it has proper means-ends adaptation, or that it provides an arena for the development of life or of moral values. Likewise, the goodness herein predicated of God has to do with his ontological and not his moral perfection, that for example he is eternal and not subject to essential change.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The other objection has to do with whether the kind of justification here envisioned is feasible. More particularly—and for a post-Humean and post-Moorean age—can facts provide a basis for determination of moral good? Would not the attempt to justify God’s commands in terms of the natural order and the way things would be if fulfilled or perfected be guilty of deriving an ought from an is, or at least grounding an ought on an is? Since we shall have more to say about his toward the end of our paper, we shall postpone our discussion of this critical objection until then.

Finally—and in passing, since Nowell-Smith’s charge of “being infantile” scarcely merits reply—it can be readily seen that this justification of the divine command theory (as with those to follow) appeals to teleological rather than deontological justificatory considerations, and hence the divine command theory cannot be smugly subsumed under any simplistic deontological analysis and correlative quasi-Freudian refutation

Obligation-Creating Properties

An alternative response to the demand for justification is to contend that there is something about certain properties of God or his relation to creation that provides such a justification. Philip Quinn embodies something of this sort in his T2 analysis of the divine command theory.

(T2a) It is necessary that, for all *p*, it is required that *p* if and only if God makes the universe and God commands that *p*.

(T2b) It is necessary that, for all *p*, it is permitted that *p* if and only if it is not the case that God makes the universe and that God commands that not-*p*.

(T2c) It is necessary that, for all *p*, it is forbidden that *p* if and only if God makes the universe and God commands that not-*p*.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The point of this particular formulation of the divine command theory is that it is not merely God’s command that makes an action obligatory, forbidden, or permitted, but that there are additional factors that either provide necessary conditions for the rightness of certain actions or in terms of which the commands themselves can be justified. In Quinn’s formulation the additional factor is the contingent fact that God is the creator of the universe. Unfortunately, Quinn fails to develop what there is about the fact that God creates the world that would provide a justification.

A fuller discussion of this view can be found in Baruch Brody, who argues that God’s being our creator can be a reason for obeying God’s commands. The analogy he draws is one with children and parents. The fact that our parents have brought us into existence provides a reason why we have special obligations to obey their commands. Similarly, since God is creator, we owe obedience to him. But what specifically is the relation between God’s being creator and the obligation of the created to obey him? Brody develops his thesis along the lines that one comes to own property and thus to have property rights by virtue of mixing one’s labor with unowned objects. God, by virtue of the fact that he is the creator, owns the entire universe. Consequently, he has property rights over it. Human beings were created and appointed stewards over that property, with certain obligation and restrictions with regard to their use of that property. God “allows men to use for their purposes the property that they mix their labor with, but he does so with the restriction that they must not use it in such a way as to cause a great loss to other people.”[[17]](#endnote-17) As stewards, obedience to those property obligations and restrictions imposed by the owner is expected. The ground for the divine commands, then, is found in the fact that God as creator is owner of the creation and that as divine appointed stewards over that property, we are obligated to obey his commands.

But, it might be objected, does not his view again attempt to ground obligation in certain facts, this time certain contingent facts about God being the creator and owner of property? In what sense does having a certain property (being creator) entail that one ought to be obeyed? Brody himself admits that we are not obligated to obey all the commands of our creators (our parents), only in “some cases.” Indeed, one could make the case that we are obligated only to obey those commands of our parents that are moral. Similarly, we are obligated to obey only those commands of God that are moral, and should what he commands not be moral, our obligation to obey him as creator at that point ceases. Similarly, the owner of a piece of property cannot do anything he pleases with that property, despite the fact that he owns it as the result of his labors. Ethical considerations impose limits on his use of that property. Likewise, God cannot use his property just anyway he pleases; his use of what he has created is subject to moral limitations. Brody himself seems to want to impose moral limits on the extent of God’s property rights when he queries whether it would be consistent with God’s being all-just to allow or order the life of a piece of property (human or animal) to be taken by another.[[18]](#endnote-18) But then this justification is inadequate by itself; the obligation to obey does not follow simply and solely from the creator-created relationships. Again, the specter of deriving values from factual states of affairs haunts the attempted justification of the divine command theory.

Brody’s appeal to an all-just God indicates that something more than merely the creator-created and property-steward relation is required to make this justification work. Something must be said not only about God’s being the creator, but also about the essential properties that this creator possesses. It is to this now that we turn.

Essential Properties of God

A third possible response to Mayberry dilemma lies open to the divine command theories. Instead of introducing ethical considerations based on contingent states of affairs, he might contend that the justification for God’s commands being good is that they are commanded by a good God, by a being who is essentially and necessarily good. Philip Quinn has embodied this formulation in the following argument.

(46) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good, then for all actions a and for all agents p, if a has the property of being commanded by God, then a is what p ought to do.

(27) Necessarily, God is perfectly good.

(47) Necessarily, for all actions a and for all agents p, if a has the property of being commanded by God, then a is what p ought to do.[[19]](#endnote-19)

God’s commands would accord with his nature, which is essentially and necessarily good. Since God could not command anything that was contrary to his nature, God could not require or prohibit anything that was contrary to his essential goodness. Thus, rather than being arbitrary, God’s commands are grounded necessarily in his own being, which is good. And as grounded in his nature, they are not independent of God. Consequently, one could adequately reply to Mayberry’s dilemma by contending that God can justify his commands in terms of his own nature.

Mayberry might reply to this by restating his dilemma as follows: either God can justify the goodness of his nature, which would require appealing to an independent standard of good, or else God cannot justify the goodness of his nature, in which case that he is good is arbitrarily decided. Two responses might be given at this point. First, the series of justifications must come to an end somewhere; otherwise, one is caught up in an infinite regress. But if the ethical autonomist can draw the terminus at some fundamental fact about what humans desire or human language or human intuition requires, the divine command theorist can draw it at some fundamental fact about the nature of God. Secondly, one might accept the challenge of requiring a justification for contending that God is good, and in turn choose to follow the example of someone like Thomas Aquinas and give reasons why God is good. We shall have more to say about this shortly.

Circularity and the Divine Nature

Enough has been said to show that Mayberry’s dilemma is both hornless and toothless: justification in terms of something other than autonomous ethic is at least possible. However, we still must face A. C. Ewing’s objection that the divine command theorist’s argument is caught in a vicious circle. The divine command theorist who grounds God’s commands in his goodness, Ewing writes, exposes himself “to the charge of being guilty of a vicious circle, since he should in that case have defined both God in terms of goodness and goodness in terms of God.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Elsewhere he writes, “Obviously we cannot deduce our ethics from belief in any sort of God: it must be a good God, but how could we possibly reach the conception of a good God without presupposing the independent prior validity of our ethical thought? Without that we could have no notion of what goodness meant, or what kinds of things were good, so that the word would be meaningless to us and give us no indication that, e.g., God was a God of justice rather than of injustice…”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Ewing’s objection here is couched in the terminology of meaning; his thesis is that one must have a standard of meaning for ethical terms such as “good” independent of God in order to understand what it is to call God good. Unless we know what “good” means independent of God, we are caught in a vicious circle of defining “God” and “good” in terms of each other.

The introduction of the question of meaning catapults us into the thicket of the problem of meaning, with all its disputes, unclarities, confusions, and disagreements. To explore the question of meaning in depth would take us too far afield—so far in fact that we should never return to the substance of our topic. However, in lieu of dismissing or avoiding the issue entirely, it might be profitable to refer to a discussion of this very issue by Peterson Brown. Brown argues that the divine command theorist is not making a claim about the meanings of moral terms such as “right” and “good”; rather, he is advancing a claim about the criteria for application of such terms. “My analysis presupposes the doctrine that moral terms have meanings or definitions which, not being descriptive, entail no criteria of application. So that merely knowing the dictionary definition of, e.g., ‘good’ does not suffice to tell one what is good. A criterion of application, a moral standard, is needed as well.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Brown here is making a distinction between the meanings of terms and the criteria or rules for their application. He contends that though it is usually the case that giving the meaning of a word includes giving the criteria for the application of that word to events or things in the world, there are some words for which this is not the case. Thus, whereas to give the meaning of “chair” and “to drink” is to include the criteria for the application of these terms, to give the meaning of terms such as “millimeter” (“one thousandth part of a meter”) or of “meter” (“a unit of length in the metric system”) fails to provide the criteria for application to the physical world. The criterion is supplied by markings on a certain platinum-iridium bar in Paris. Similarly, to give the meaning of value terms like “good” and “right” is not to provide the criteria for the application of these terms.

Moral words have meanings which do not provide criteria for their application, and yet they are properly applied to things, events, and so on in a systematic way. One can all too easily know the intertwining dictionary entries for ‘good,’ ‘right,’ ‘obligatory,’ ‘commendable,’ ‘evil,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘prohibited,’ ‘condemnable,’ etc., and yet be confused about or simply ignorant of standards for their application. Knowing the meaning of moral terms does not suffice in a search for what is moral. One must in addition have moral standards…”[[23]](#endnote-23)

Whether or not Brown is correct when he contends that to give the meaning is not necessarily to give the criteria for application, he is correct in holding that there is a distinction between meaning and criteria of application, and that the divine command theorist is not intending to provide the meaning of the terms “right” and “good” when he provides an analysis of the sort found in T2 above. Indeed, were he trying to do so, then to say that what God wills is good is to say “What God wills is what God wills,” which is a tautology.[[24]](#endnote-24) And if to say God is good is identical to saying that what God wills is good, then that God is good is likewise a tautology.[[25]](#endnote-25) Rather, T2 provides the criteria for determining whether an action is required, forbidden, or permitted, and this in terms of the commands of God, either *simpliciter* or along with other theological or factual considerations. Those who contend that divine command theories claim or necessarily entail that “God’s commands are *definitive* of moral obligation, that ‘I ought to do x’ simply *means* ‘God commands me to do x’”,[[26]](#endnote-26) are wrong. Divine command theories “ought not to be construed as expressing truths of meaning,”[[27]](#endnote-27) but rather as providing criteria for determining rightness of actions. Being commanded by God might be a sufficient reason for something being obligated, but it is not the meaning of “being obligated.”

However, this move does not free us from the fundamental charge leveled by Ewing and others, namely, that it is not the commands of just any being that can legitimately or reasonably be taken as providing the criteria for right actions. It is only the commands of a good being that can be so considered. Ewing’s objection, of course, is not novel. Precedents can be found in G. E. Moore[[28]](#endnote-28) and before that in Plato.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The point here is that if any given set of commands is to be justified in terms of the nature of the commander, the nature of the commander must be good. But then in terms of what is the goodness of the commander determined? It cannot be in terms of its own commands, for this truly would be circular. If it be in terms of some other standard of goodness, then the divine command theorist is forced to admit to an autonomous standard of good, to an autonomous ethic. The other option is that there is something about the being itself and the properties that it possesses essentially in virtue of which it is good. That is, because it possesses certain properties essentially, it is the sort of being whose commands can be taken reasonably as providing the criteria for right action. The properties that are commonly appealed to are God’s love, benevolence, perfection, and desirableness.

According to the first two options, God is viewed as being essentially a loving and benevolent being, a being who necessarily always seeks the good for his creation. Since what God commands is necessarily connected with his will, and since his will is necessarily connected with his nature as loving and benevolent, that which is commanded as being obligatory or forbidden is necessarily grounded in God’s very being or nature.[[30]](#endnote-30) Since God is by nature loving and benevolent, God is good—the sort of being whose commands can provide the criteria for determining human action.

The latter two properties are those appealed to by Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, God is good, first, because he is pure act. Whatever has actuality is perfect in the way and to the extent that it has actuality. God, as the uncaused necessary being, as the being in whom essence and existence are identical, is pure act, having no potentiality. Thus, he as pure act is perfect in the way in which he is pure act (in his essence) and to the extent to which he is pure act, i.e., necessarily and completely. God, by virtue of being perfect, is necessarily good.[[31]](#endnote-31) Secondly, insofar as God is the first producing cause of all creation, he is the end that all seek; all effects seek after God as their end in that all desire their own perfection, which is the likeness of divine perfection. God thus is desirable and hence good.[[32]](#endnote-32)

But what is there about the fact that God is loving, benevolent, perfect, or desirable that provides the ground or justification for the divine commands? Simply because God possesses these properties does not, in itself, suffice to justify his divine commands. This is because it is not necessarily the case that an object that has certain properties necessarily is identical to or the ground for another *qua* having those particular properties. For example, the number two is necessarily the only even prime; it is also necessarily the predecessor of the number three. But the number two is not the predecessor of the number three *qua* being the only even prime. Similar, Venus is the evening star; but it is not the morning star *qua* being the evening star. Given this, one might then query whether it is similarly the case that though God is both necessarily perfect, loving, and desirable, and the author of the divine commands, it is in virtue of his being the former that he is the latter. To show that this the case is different from the cases of number two and Venus, the divine command theorist must show what connects these necessary properties with the divine commands. The mere possession of these properties will not, in itself, suffice as justificatory.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Now it might be thought that the connection has to do with the fact that these divine properties are moral properties. As such, since God is perfect and loving in a moral sense, it would necessarily be the case that his commands would be morally perfect. Indeed, this is the basis for the justification that Ewing, Nowell-Smith and Mayberry have in mind in their objection. For them, divine commands can be justified only in terms of some prior moral good. But in fact, the good that, for example, Thomas Aquinas derives from God’s perfection and desirability is not moral but ontological good. But how is this ontological good to be linked to moral good? If it is by a standard invoking God’s own commands, the appeal would be circular: justifying God’s commands in terms of moral goodness and establishing that moral goodness in terms of his commands. But if it is by appeal to a standard other than God’s commands, some sort of autonomous moral good is invoked, which way is not open to the divine command theorist.

But what then is the connecting link between these divine properties and the divine commands? One possibility is to conjoin these properties with God’s being the creator of the natural order and with his knowledge. The connection then is that God created the natural order with certain potentialities that need fulfilling. God, as loving, wills that human beings obtain their fullest self-realization, given the kinds of being they are, both in terms of their being human and in terms of their being specific individuals. As omniscient, God knows both the natural order and individual human persons. On this basis, he issues divine commands that, if followed, would lead to the fulfillment and realization of individual human potential. Thus, it is in terms of God *qua* being the omniscient and loving creator of the universe that is a justification for the divine commands. But this returns us to the first justification given above. Indeed, it would seem that both the second and the third alternative justifications are contingent upon the meaningfulness and truth of the first justification.

If so, we must return to the objection against this first justification that we posed initially but delayed. This view justified the divine commands in terms of the *telos* of created natures. But this objectivist conception of ethics is viewed by most contemporary ethicists as “a frankly irrational position.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Yet is it irrational, as is claimed? Some contemporary ethical theorists are not so certain—and that brings us to Henry Veatch’s thesis that ontological considerations can provide a ground for moral goodness.

Goodness as a Consequential Property

In his writings Henry Veatch observes that contemporary ethical theorists have little sympathy for ethical theories that assert that ethics and ethical judgments have anything like an objective or ontological basis. “Neither goodness nor rightness is ever an objective feature of the world.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Yet, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, modernity is not tantamount to truth. Thus, we find Veatch looking back to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas for his insights into the possibility that the good is grounded in objective fact.

Veatch argues that goodness is not merely grounded in, but can be “defined directly in terms of certain of the features or properties of the real world… Value or disvalue…pertains to things as they are in themselves, and thus are possessed of a proper ontological status of their own.”[[36]](#endnote-36) He analyzes goodness in terms of the Aristotelean act-potency distinction. All actuality is correlated with potency, such that actuality is what a given potentiality is a potentiality for. Actuality is the fulfillment of potentiality; it is realization of the capacity or ability manifested in being the potentiality for something. The actual, then, is the completion or perfection of the thing, for in becoming actual vis-à-vis its potentiality it has reached its *telos*.

Since goodness lies in the completion or fulfillment of the existent potentialities, goodness is in some sense a property of things in the world. However, it is not like many other properties. “[G]oodness is not a property of things in the usual sense of property at all. To say that a thing is good is not like saying that it is round or square, or pink or blue, or late or early, or above or below… Instead, it seems to be what some...call a consequential or supervenient property.”[[37]](#endnote-37) That is to say, it is a property that a thing has in virtue of other properties which it possesses. “The properties of a thing can be the sources of its goodness or value…just insofar as they are properties that evidence the perfection or complete actuality of the thing in question.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Goodness, then, is a property that a thing has insofar as it has actualized its potential.

However, there must be a subjective dimension to the good as well. “Goodness is no mere objective property of things which can both be and be conceived quite apart from such feelings of approval…and such tendings toward it as are characteristic of potency with respect to their actualities.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Neither is the good to be identified merely with what is desired, as in Mill’s utilitarianism. The good is not made good by being desired; rather, the good is the desirable. “Goodness as such is neither an objective property that can either be or be understood apart from all reference to such subjective responses to it as desire, approval, commendation, etc.; nor is goodness to be simply equated with our subjective reactions to the object, being itself nothing objective at all.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Rather, good is the actuality of the potentialities found in the thing itself, the actuality that is the end or *telos* of those potentialities and as such desirable by that thing. The good, as Aristotle claimed, is that which all things seek as the completion or fulfillment of their nature, and, as Thomas Aquinas argued, that toward which we have a natural inclination.

In sum, his point is that “the worth or excellence of things is…an objective characteristic of things with which our likings and desires must needs be brought into conformity… The goodness of things is an objective feature of such things, and as such can provide an objective ground or reason for their being desired.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

How, then, can this be applied to the divine command theory? The answer is simply that if a justification for God’s commands is to be required, and if the divine command theorist is to reject justification in terms of some autonomous ethic, he must provide some sort of justification in term of ontology. Veatch’s claim is that not only is this possible, but modern Kantian, Utilitarian, and Prescriptivist attempts at justification having failed, this is the only way a reasonable justification can be given for ethical principles. Should he be correct, then the divine command theorist, in appealing to an ontological ground to justify God’s commands, has provided a response to the objections raised at the outset. Adequate justification for the divine commands can be found in certain objective facts about God himself (that as loving he wills our fulfillment and as omniscient he knows what will fulfill us) and his creation (what in fact will fulfill particular persons, given the kind of beings and individuals they are).

But what of the question of the particular relation of fact and value that this justification embraces? We have already noted that the major objection to this kind of justification of the divine command theory is that it grounds the divine commands in certain facts about God and the creation. But is this not to commit a fallacy—if not the infamous Naturalistic Fallacy, at least a logical fallacy of deriving something in the conclusion not contained in the premise? That is, does not this justification attempt the impossible of grounding the *ought* in the *is*? And is not Veatch’s ontological ethic guilty of the same? Veatch’s response is that this objection presupposes a distinction between fact and value that is overblown. Indeed, if good is, in part, objective, then facts about the world include facts about the good. There are states of affairs that constitute the perfection of a being; these states of affairs, if realized, fulfill the potentialities of that being and in so doing constitute its good. These actualities are describable and empirically ascertainable, and consequently are an objective good. A description of the facts about the world would include this objective good. Consequently, it is legitimate to ground values in facts, so long as these facts themselves contain or are related in some manner to the objective good. Thus, though one cannot ground or derive values from just any set of facts—for example, about what is desired by men—such can be done when the facts include a description of the *telos* state of affairs that is, by virtue of the nature of the being under consideration, what the being ought to be and that, if realized, would result in that being’s self-fulfillment.

Concluding Remarks

Several issues remain, four of which can be briefly discussed here, while the others must be addressed more fully at another time and another place.

First, in appealing to objective good in order to justify the divine commands, have we not in effect departed from the divine command theory? In fact, and more generally, does not any attempt to give a justification for the divine commands concede the very issue to the critic, namely, that the good in terms of which the divine commands are ascertained ultimately must be an autonomous good?

The response, I believe, is negative. In many instances where the appeal to some justification is made, this might be true. However, I do not think that the general thesis is necessarily true; neither is the objection sound in the case of an appeal to objective good in the fashion in which we have constructed it. The reason is that the creation is God’s creation, and the human *telos* is a *telos* built into creation by God. Thus, the objective good in terms of which the divine commands are, in part, justified is not independent of God; it is not an autonomous good, but rather a product of God’s creative activity. It is a good created by God. Above we noted that a divine command theory is defined as a theory that holds that certain acts are obligatory, forbidden, or permitted either wholly or partly because God commands them to be such. On our interpretation of the theory, God’s commands provide the criteria for determining right and wrong actions, and God’s commands are justified in terms of the objective good in divine creation. Neither the right nor the good stands independent of God; the first depends upon his commands, whereas the second depends upon his creative act and wisdom.

Secondly, is man’s nature determinate enough to enable the ethicist to ascertain the good of man? Man’s functions and operations are too diffuse, it is objected, to enable one by means of practical reason to ascertain man’s well-being, health, preservation of life, and the like, but these goods seem too general to be of much assistance in resolving the concrete moral questions. How does human happiness translate into a resolution of the problem of whether or not to preserve the life of defective neonatals? How does the general good of the preservation of life resolve the problem of the just distribution of scarce resources? Can ascertaining man’s *telos* enable us to determine whether homosexual acts are moral? In short, is the natural law theory of much specific help in resolving concrete questions concerning right actions?

Whether or not it is of help for the ethicist is beyond the scope of our discussion here. However, even if this objection be true of the natural law theory, this constitutes no criticism of the theory under discussion, for the truth of the divine command theory proposed does not rest on *our* ability to ascertain the right from an analysis of human nature. All that it requires is that an omniscient God be so able, and that God be able to translate that good into divine commands governing human action. Supposing that the problem of deriving specific moral guidance from human nature is a problem of knowledge, since God is omniscient, this should pose no difficulty. If, on the other hand, it is a matter of the indefiniteness of human nature, that is another matter. But the essentialist metaphysic that underlies this position would seem to rule this out, for according to the essentialist every being has an essence, i.e., a set of conditions individually necessary and jointly sufficient to make it the being that it is. Every essence is determinate, such that it is possible for a being with sufficient knowledge to ascertain what would fulfill that being.

This brings us to a third objection, namely, is there good reason to think that the kind of metaphysic presupposed by Veatch’s defense of objective good is correct? Should one buy into a worldview that analyzes the world in terms of actuality and potentiality, natures and *telos*? Veatch suggests that there is nothing untoward about such a commitment; indeed, this view is consistent with our ordinary or common perception of the world.

It is true that essences and such ilk are out of philosophical favor; yet the occurrence or antiquity of any particular theory is not the issue. The consignment of a philosophical or metaphysical position to the history of philosophy eventually happens to all; in this light history is both a great leveler and sorter of significance. But significance bears no parallel to time; hoariness is neither harbinger nor knell of truth. What needs discussion on its own merits is the adequacy not only of an essentialist, act-potency worldview, but also its nominalist and positivist alternatives.

The fourth and final issue concerns ascribing moral goodness to God. Even though one grants Thomas that God possesses ontological goodness, and even though one agrees with the divine command theorist that God’s love and benevolence provide part of an adequate justification for God’s commands, yet it remains to be shown how one is to understand God’s moral goodness. Merely possessing ontological goodness does not mean that one possesses moral goodness. Moral goodness must be understood in terms of actions, dispositions to act, intentions, and the virtues of character. To this end one might suggest that God is perfectly good in a moral sense because he always does and is disposed to do the good.[[42]](#endnote-42) But in what sense are we to understand the good here? What standard is to be provided; what criteria are appealed to to determine whether God’s actions are good?

Several possibilities might be suggested. On the one hand, we might suggest that God is good insofar as he desires to and achieves his *telos*. That is, God is good in that the potentialities of his being are realized. Traditional theology rejects this way of understanding the moral goodness of God, for God has no potentiality. God, as pure act, lacks nothing; there is nothing he can desire that would perfect his own being. However, to the Process theologian this approach might be appealing, for the Process theologian sees God developing and being fulfilled in the course of his interactions with actual entities in the world. Consequently, how one would assess this possible way of determining God’s moral goodness depends upon one’s view of God and his nature.

On the other hand, one might suggest that God is good in a moral sense in that he keeps his own commandments. Should God act contrary to the principles he has prescribed, his actions would be immoral by that very standard. Again, for traditional theology this way of assessing God’s goodness would be unacceptable, for God’s actions necessarily accord with his will. God cannot do anything except that which, if He did it, would be suitable and just.”[[43]](#endnote-43) In short, to determine God’s goodness by appealing to his commands yields nothing more informative than a tautology: God wills what he wills. However, if one holds that God is free to choose between doing good and doing evil, then to say that God wills and acts consistent with his commands is to provide a meaningful measure or standard for God’s actions. No tautology results, for here it is logically possible—although perhaps inconceivable—for God to act contrary to his own commands, to the criteria that he has established for right and wrong. There does seem something strange about this tack—but perhaps nothing more out of sorts than when we hold a monarch subject to the very rules that he has legislated for his kingdom, for the king stands not above his law.

Another option is to appeal to some autonomous ethical standard that is grounded in God but not dependent upon divine commands. It is a moral law eternally in the mind of God, though not created by him. Here the moral law partakes of the character of the necessary being: it can neither come into nor pass out of existence. It is eternally true, governing God’s moral actions. Yet it is not entirely independent of him. But this option runs contrary to the divine command theory, which is where we came in.

*Notes*

1. Patrick Nowell-Smith, “Religion and Morality,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* VII (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 155; Thomas Mayberry, “Morality and the Deity,” *Southwest Journal of Philosophy* 1 (Fall 1970), p. 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A.C. Ewing, *Prospect for Metaphysics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 41; A. C. Ewing, “Ethics and Belief in God,” *Hibbert Journal* 39, no 4 (July 1941), p. 375. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. C. A. Campbell, “Patterson Brown on God and Evil,” in *God, Man and Religion: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Keith Yandell (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 343; Nowell-Smith, “Religion and Morality,” p. 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Patrick Nowell-Smith, “Morality: Religious and Secular,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch Brody (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 581-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Burch suggests that those who hold that morality is what is willed by God, that “God will morally good things, because they are morally good,” hold a version or type of the divine command theory. [“Objective Values and the divine Command Theory of Morality,” *New Scholasticism* 54 (Summer 1980), p. 280.] This seems to be an unlikely explication, unless somehow what is willed by God is in turn the criterion by which humans determine moral or immoral actions. Robert Adams seems to agree. “According to the divine command theory, insofar as [facts of wrongness] are nonnatural and objective, they consist in facts about the will or commands of God. I think this is really the central point in a divine command theory of ethical wrongness. This is the point at which the divine command theory is distinguished from alternative theological theories of ethical wrongness, such as the theory that facts of ethics rightness and wrongness are objective, nonnatural facts about ideas or essences subsisting eternally in God’s understanding, not subject to His will or guiding it.” [“A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness,” in *Religion and Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1973), p. 328]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nowell-Smith, “Religion and Morality,” p. 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ewing, *Prospect for Metaphysics*, p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mayberry, “Morality and the Deity,” p. 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alan Gewirth, “Moral Rationality,” quoted in Henry Veatch, “The Rational Justification of Moral Principles: Can There Be such a Thing?”, *Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1975), p. 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. William K. Frankena, “Is Morality Logically Dependent on Religion?”, in *Religion and Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reader, Jr., p. 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. C. A. Campbell, “Does Religion Challenge Ethical Autonomy?”, *The Hibbert Journal* 47 (1949), pp. 344-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virt*ue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This might be conceived along the pattern of Aquinas’s doctrine of two-fold truth. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Must God Create the Best Possible World?”, *The International Philosophical Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (June 1979), pp. 203-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 131-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Philip Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Baruch Brody, “Morality and Religion Reconsidered,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch Brody, pp. 596-97 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Brody, “Morality and Religion Reconsidered,” p. 603. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements,* p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ewing, *Prospect for Metaphysics*, p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ewing, “Ethics and Belief in God,” p. 376. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Patterson Brown, “Religious Morality: A Reply to Flew and Campbell,” in *God, Man and Religion: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Keith Yandell, p. 380. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Patterson Brown, “God and the Good,’” in *God, Man and Religion: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 386. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Keith E. Yandell, *Basic Issues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), p. 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Burch, “Objective Values and the Divine Command Theory of Morality,” p. 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Nowell-Smith, “Religion and Morality,” p. 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements,* p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. “Yet it is obvious that if by a source of obligation is meant only a power which binds you or compels you to do a thing, it is not because it does do this that you ought to obey it. It is only if it itself is so good, that it commands and enforces only what is good, that it can be a source of moral obligation … However an authority be defined, its commands will be morally binding only if they are—morally binding; only if they tell us what ought to be or what is a means to that which ought to be.” G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Plato, *Euthyphro* 9d–11b. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Burch, “Objective Values and the Divine Command Theory of Morality,” pp. 332-33. Robert Adams has a similar view, except that he sees God’s property of being loving as being a logically contingent property; he leaves open the question whether it is causally contingent as well, i.e., whether God can act contrary to his character. Adams, “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness,” p. 322. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q3, arts. 2 and 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q5, art. 4; A6, art. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. This objection was suggested to me by Thomas Sullivan. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Campbell, “Patterson Brown on God and Evil,” p. 378. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Henry Veatch, “Language and Ethics; What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 44 (1972), p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Henry Veatch, *The Ontology of Morals* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), pp. 105-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Veatch, *The Ontology of Morals*, p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Veatch, *The Ontology of Morals*, p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Veatch, *The Ontology of Morals*, p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Veatch, *The Ontology of Morals*, pp. 116-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Veatch, “The Rational Justification of Moral Principles,” pp. 235, 238. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. I am using “God” here as a proper name and not as a title. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q25, art. 5, ad 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)