

# DIVINE COMMANDS OR DIVINE ATTITUDES?

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In this essay, I present three arguments for the claim that theists should reject divine command theory (DCT) in favor of divine attitude theory (DAT). First, DCT (but not DAT) implies that some cognitively normal human persons are exempt from the dictates of morality. Second, it is incumbent upon us to cultivate the skill of moral judgment, a skill that fits nicely with the claims of DAT but which is superfluous if DCT is true. Third, an attractive and widely shared conception of Jewish/Christian religious devotion leads us naturally to an attitude-based conception of morality rather than a command-based one.

Many philosophers who believe that morality requires a theistic foundation have embraced divine command theory (DCT). By my lights, this is a mistake. There is an alternative account—divine attitude theory (DAT)—that can lay claim to many of the advantages of DCT but which is not liable to the same objections. The central claim of DAT is that (moral) deontic facts are constituted by facts about divine attitudes, such that it is morally wrong for S to  $\phi$  in C iff God would be displeased by S's  $\phi$ -ing in C, it is morally obligatory for S to  $\phi$  in C iff God would be displeased by S's failure to  $\phi$  in C, it is morally optional for S to  $\phi$  in C if God would be neither pleased nor displeased by S's  $\phi$ -ing (or failing to  $\phi$ ) in C, and it would be supererogatory for S to  $\phi$  in C iff God would be pleased by S's  $\phi$ -ing in C but not displeased by S's failure to  $\phi$  in C. Elsewhere, I have contrasted DAT and DCT in some detail and argued that DAT is preferable because of its ability to accommodate the modal status of fundamental deontic principles.<sup>1</sup> In the present essay, I will offer three further arguments for the superiority of DAT vis-à-vis DCT.

The first argument appeals to a general feature of commands: they must be *recognized* as commands in order to function as commands. This leaves the divine command theorist in the awkward position of maintaining that some cognitively normal human persons (namely, atheists) are exempt from the dictates of morality. DAT is immune from this challenge because the relevant conceptual constraints on commands do not apply to attitudes. The second argument is based on the uncodifiability of moral principles. It is plausible to maintain that the complexities of the

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<sup>1</sup>See Matthew Carey Jordan, "Divine Attitudes, Divine Commands, and the Modal Status of Moral Truth," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012), 45–60.



moral life require us to develop the skill of moral judgment, a skill that fits nicely with the claims of DAT but which is superfluous if DCT is true. The third argument appeals to a conception of the religious life that should be attractive to Jewish and Christian theists. If the ideal human relationship with God is one of significant intimacy, and if there is overlap between the moral life and the spiritual life, then it is natural for a theist to prefer an attitude-based conception of morality to a command-based one.

### I. A Difficulty with Divine Commands

In explaining the idea of a divine command, divine command theorist *par excellence* Robert Adams identifies three key features:

- (1) A divine command will always involve a *sign*, as we may call it, that is intentionally caused by God. (2) In causing the sign, God must intend to issue a command, and *what* is commanded is what God intends to command thereby. (3) The sign must be such that the intended audience could understand it as conveying the intended command.<sup>2</sup>

This account seems correct, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. In general, commands need to meet at least one further condition: they need to be such that persons who are subject to them are able to recognize their *source*.<sup>3</sup> If A commands B to  $\phi$ , then B knows (or at least can reasonably be expected to believe) that A commands B to  $\phi$ . Otherwise, A fails to actually issue a command. A may make an imperative statement of some kind, and A may intend for that statement to be somehow communicated to B, but if B is not in a position to recognize A's statement as a command from A, and A knows that B is not in a position to understand that statement as a command from A, then no *command*, strictly speaking, has been issued.

Suppose, for example, that Sarge is authorized to command Johnson to clean the latrines. Johnson knows that Sarge has this authority, and therefore knows that if Sarge commands him to clean the latrines, then he has a (non-moral) duty to clean the latrines. One afternoon, Sarge (who does intend to command Johnson to clean the latrines) prints the sentence "Clean the latrines!" on a sheet of paper. He seals it in an envelope, carries it into the woods, and places it in the hollow of a tree. As Sarge had hoped he would, Johnson goes for a hike in the very same woods later that day.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 265.

<sup>3</sup>This sort of objection to DCT has been pressed by Erik Wielenberg in his *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60–62, and by Wes Morriston in "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-Believers," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 65 (2009), 1–10, and has been raised in conversation by Don Hubin and Steve Brown. Arguably, there is a fifth condition that also must be satisfied by a command. John Austin argues that the difference between issuing a command and merely expressing a wish is that issuing a command implies that some kind of penalty will be imposed on the person who is subject to that command if he fails to obey it (see *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* [London: J. Murray, 1832; reprinted Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000], 17). If this is true, it need not worry Adams, since he has room to maintain that violations of moral requirements bring with them such penalties as pangs of conscience and the fracturing of interpersonal relationships.

He notices the envelope, picks it up, opens it, and reads the note. Yet—even though Adams’s three criteria for a command are met (with Sarge in the role of God, obviously)<sup>4</sup>—Johnson has *not* thereby been commanded by Sarge to clean the latrines. For all Johnson knows, the paper is a practical joke of some kind, written by a person other than Sarge who has no authority to command Johnson to do anything. Alternatively, it might be a command from Sarge, but a command issued to someone other than Johnson. It might also be a coded message of some kind that actually has nothing to do with cleaning latrines. It might be something else entirely. Sarge can successfully issue a command to Johnson to clean the latrines only if the command is issued in such a way that Johnson can be expected to recognize it as a command *from Sarge*. Otherwise, Sarge fails to issue a command at all.

The same principle about commands applies in the divine case as well, and therein lies a problem for Adams and other divine command theorists. Some persons are not in a position to recognize *any* moral imperative as a command of God, because they do not believe in God. Therefore, it is impossible for God to issue a command to them; the very nature of commands prohibits it. No moral imperative will be interpreted by the atheist as a command from God, God knows that no moral imperative will be interpreted by the atheist as a command from God, and therefore no moral imperative to the atheist can *be* a command from God.

Adams is aware of this problem, and tries to solve it by supposing that “it is enough for God’s commanding if God intends the addressee to recognize the command as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.”<sup>5</sup> But this solution does not work. For one thing, we could amend the story above in a way that accommodates this suggestion but does not render more plausible the suggestion that Sarge has successfully issued a command to Johnson: we could suppose, for example, that Sarge has arranged for Johnson to be psychologically conditioned such that Johnson would treat any written statement ending in an exclamation point as being “extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.” Upon reading Sarge’s note, Johnson would feel a compulsion to clean the latrines, but the questions about the source of the note—and hence the legitimacy of the command—would not thereby be answered. Sarge still has not commanded Johnson to do anything.

The difficulty for Adams and other divine command theorists becomes especially vivid when we consider that many atheists take themselves to be justified in believing that the imperative force of putative moral requirements can itself be explained naturalistically. For instance, morality is thought by many informed persons to be, in the words of Michael Ruse

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<sup>4</sup>There is nothing unfair to Adams about replacing God with Sarge in this story; Adams takes his three conditions on the nature of divine commands to be derived from the concept of a command in general.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Adams, “The Concept of a Divine Command,” in *Religion and Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 68.

and E. O. Wilson, “an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate.”<sup>6</sup> If morality is a system of divine commands, then any person who justifiably believes Ruse and Wilson’s claim about the imperative force of morality will thereby be exempt from those commands by virtue of justifiably misidentifying their source. Thus DCT implies that atheists who justifiably accept nontheistic explanations of the imperative force of morality are exempt from the requirements of morality. God’s commands are not commands to such persons; they cannot be, because such persons will—through no fault of their own—fail to recognize the legitimacy of those commands, and God knows that they will do so.

Of course, things may be different if Ruse, Wilson, et al. are (culpably) *not* justified in believing what they do about the nature of morality. To modify again our story about Sarge and Johnson, suppose that Sarge has already said the following to Johnson: “Listen very carefully. Later today, I will leave a note for you in a sealed envelope in the hollow of a tree. That note will tell you what I want you to do. I expect you to read it and obey.” If Johnson subsequently finds the note and reads it, but then deliberately persuades himself that the note wasn’t really written by Sarge after all, then it is natural to say that Sarge *has* issued a command, but Johnson has failed to recognize that command. So long as it is true that Johnson really *should* recognize the command for what it is, then the claim that Sarge’s note counts as a command to Johnson is correct. Similarly, God can issue commands to atheists if atheists ought to recognize the legitimacy of those commands; atheists like Ruse and Wilson would still be subject to God’s commands in spite of their failure to recognize them *as* God’s commands.

In Erik Wielenberg’s discussion of this objection to DCT, he claims that this possibility is of no help to the divine command theorist. It does not matter, Wielenberg thinks, whether the atheist is justified or unjustified in disbelieving that moral requirements find their source in God, because the only appropriate form of criticism for an unreasonable atheist who misidentifies the source of moral requirements (or the imperative force of moral requirements) would be that he or she is guilty of being *irrational*, not immoral. There is, however, good reason to believe that this claim is mistaken. Failing to believe a morally significant proposition can sometimes be a moral failing *as well as* an intellectual failing—as when a person does not acknowledge the salience of moral considerations, or fails to acquire information we reasonably expect him to acquire<sup>7</sup>—and we ought not simply foreclose on the possibility that an atheist (or anyone

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<sup>6</sup>“The Evolution of Ethics,” *New Scientist* 1478 (October 1985), 50.

<sup>7</sup>T. M. Scanlon makes this latter point nicely in his *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 51–52: “The question of permissibility is a question that can be asked by a deliberating agent, and one that a normal agent can be expected to be able to answer. The answer to this question is not just a matter of what is in fact the case (whether anyone could know it or not). But at the same time, permissibility is not merely a matter of what a particular agent believes the facts to be. It depends also on what it is reasonable for the agent to believe in the situation, what it is reasonable for the agent to do to check those beliefs, and whether the agent has done these things.”

else) who fails to recognize a divine command *as* a divine command may be both intellectually and morally culpable for this failure.

This is good news for DCT insofar as it points the way to a strategy that can be employed to save the theory from the present objection. It is bad news insofar as that strategy appears to be an exceedingly difficult one to execute. First, the divine command theorist needs to argue that anyone who fails to recognize a divine command as a divine command is therefore irrational. Then, once this has been shown, the divine command theorist needs to make the case that such instances of irrational belief are also failings for which the person is morally culpable. Unless she is willing to embrace both of these claims, it appears that the divine command theorist will be forced to conclude that there are many human persons to whom God does not issue commands and who, therefore, are exempt from the requirements of morality.

So long as we appreciate that this problem stems from the nature of commands, and not from the fact that many people are atheists (and may be rationally justified in accepting atheism), we can see that there is no problem in this vicinity for the divine attitude theorist. Again, the central difficulty here is that the very nature of commands requires that they be recognized as commands in order to exist. Otherwise, whatever else we may wish to say about the speech act in question, it simply does not count as a *command*. The upshot for DAT is quite plain, for attitudes are not like commands in this way. Whether God is pleased or displeased with an agent for doing  $\phi$  need not hinge in any way on whether the agent recognizes that God is pleased or displeased with her for doing  $\phi$ .<sup>8</sup>

## II. Divine Commands and the Art of Making Moral Judgments

A second consideration in favor of DAT is grounded in reflection on the moral life. We often find ourselves in difficult situations in which the straightforward application of a general moral principle is insufficient for determining what we ought to do. Rather, what we need is the ability to appreciate the salient features of some situation and to act appropriately. To claim this is not to deny the existence of at least some general moral

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<sup>8</sup>This is a natural place to address a comment made by an anonymous reviewer on an earlier draft of this essay. The reviewer notes that one widely-noted strength of Adams-style DCT is its ability to explain the fittingness of feelings of guilt in response to one's own wrong actions. Correctly assuming that DAT shares this feature (cf. section III below), the reviewer wonders whether DAT may be susceptible to an argument akin to the one just deployed against DCT: since an atheist will not recognize her wrong actions as being displeasing to God, she is not (at least in some cases) in a position to feel guilty about what she has done. And if she is not in a position to feel guilty, then, *ex hypothesi*, she has not acted wrongly.

By my lights, this objection fails because it misconstrues the relationship between wrong action and guilt. What needs to be explained is why feelings of guilt *are* appropriate responses to our wrong actions. Any metaethical account according to which one's wrong actions are offenses against another person will be able to explain this relationship. Whether a person actually feels guilty or not is independent of whether her actions merit a guilt-response or not.

truths; it is simply to affirm (i) the uncontroversial proposition that such general truths can (and often do) come into conflict with each other, and (ii) the somewhat more controversial proposition that the right course of action cannot always be identified simply by ranking the importance of the conflicting principles or by appealing to a deeper, more fundamental moral principle. In short: reflection on the moral life gives us very strong reason to believe that moral principles are uncodifiable.

Although I do not hope to demonstrate this claim decisively, I will offer some brief reflections in support of the particularist thesis that no “reasonably adult moral outlook” can be reconciled with the denial of uncodifiability.<sup>9</sup> Let us acknowledge that deontic pluralism—i.e., the view that there is an irreducible plurality of fundamental moral principles—enjoys tremendous intuitive plausibility. This is seen most vividly when we contrast the kinds of counterexamples that are often presented as objections to monistic normative theories. Utilitarianism, for example, is thought by many to be undermined by the fact that it may license the killing of innocent persons when doing so has good consequences. Many reflective persons find this clearly unacceptable. But “respect for persons” moral theories, like Kantianism, are typically thought to go too far in the opposite direction. For instance, the notion that *no* good could justify the breaking of a promise seems absurd.

Some philosophers have sought to minimize these problems and blunt the force of these counterexamples by offering more nuanced versions of the theories in question. I cannot possibly survey all of their attempts here, and I should again emphasize that I do not pretend to be offering a decisive demonstration of deontic pluralism. Nevertheless, I do believe that reflection on simplistic counterexamples like the ones above yields important insights. The central idea is that the problem revealed by these disparate counterexamples is not a problem with utilitarianism or Kantianism *per se*, but with the assumption made by all advocates of monistic normative theories: namely, that we can expect to find exactly *one* informative basic principle which, when applied correctly, will tell us what act is morally right in any conceivable circumstance. For Kantians, this principle is the categorical imperative. For utilitarians, it is the principle of maximizing the good. Pluralism rejects this approach and insists instead on the existence of multiple basic moral considerations that can affect the rightness or wrongness of an act: beneficence, veracity, promissory fidelity, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Because these considerations are basic, genuine conflicts between them are possible. We can and do find ourselves in situations where beneficence recommends one action and promissory fidelity recommends another,

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<sup>9</sup>John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62 (1979), 336.

<sup>10</sup>The best-known articulation and defense of moral pluralism is W. D. Ross’s *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930). See Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) for a more contemporary approach.

incompatible action. For example, I have promised to meet you for coffee at 11:00, but on my way to our meeting, I encounter a person who is in genuine need and whom I am in a position to help. It may be the case that the person's need is very great, and that I can provide aid quickly, making myself only a few minutes late. If so, it might be morally right to break my promise and help the needy person. But in situations that are structurally similar, the opposite action might be appropriate. Suppose that the needy person is not in dire straits, that there are others available who will help if I do not, and that the necessary aid will be extremely time-consuming to provide. Or suppose that the person's needs are of moderate importance, requiring a significant-but-not-enormous amount of my time, and it is unclear whether others will aid if I do not. What should I do?

The point of these suppositions is not to support any particular answer, or set of answers, to this question, but to highlight the nature and extent of moral conflict. Although the degrees of benefit and promise-breaking vary in each of the scenarios imagined above, the principles in play do not: each represents a conflict between beneficence (as well as, perhaps, non-maleficence<sup>11</sup>) and promissory fidelity.<sup>12</sup> In this light it is easy to see the appeal of the pluralist thesis that no hierarchical ranking of principles will be adequate for our purposes, because sometimes our duty to keep our promises will trump our duty to do good and sometimes considerations of beneficence will outweigh concern for promise-keeping.<sup>13</sup> What is needed, if we are to determine the right course of action in many cases of moral conflict, is considerably more detail than I have provided here—e.g., specific information about the benefits and harms likely to be suffered by the needy person, the nature of the aid I am able to provide, and so on—and something more than a set of general moral truths. What is needed is the ability to make the right kind of moral *judgment* in light of

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<sup>11</sup>“Perhaps” because there is some reason to think that beneficence and non-maleficence are not distinct principles.

<sup>12</sup>One might be inclined to think that promise-breaking does not come in degrees, as one has either kept one's promise or one has not. In this context, I am relying on the intuitive idea that arriving at 11:01 for our coffee date is a “less serious” breaking of my promise than is arriving at 11:30 or failing to show up entirely. Whether a rigorous and philosophically satisfactory account of this idea can be developed is not a matter I will attempt to settle here.

<sup>13</sup>At the risk of belaboring the point, I note again that a very sophisticated monistic principle might be able to accommodate our reflective intuitions about these cases. (And I take it, not uncontroversially, as a constraint on any plausible normative theory that it be able to make this accommodation.) The problem with appealing to such a principle, in my view, is that any sufficiently nuanced principle seems to be *too* nuanced to do the work required of it; such a principle would not be the kind of thing a normal person—even a normal virtuous person—could or would easily wield in moral deliberation. Furthermore, appeals to sophisticated monistic principles reverse the proper order of knowing. If there is any informative general principle that allows us to resolve all cases of moral conflict, it is a principle that is known in virtue of our knowledge of correct judgments in particular cases of moral conflict, not the other way around. The importance of skillful moral judgment (of the sort described in the remainder of the above paragraph) is revealed by the role of sages in moral communities: we expect certain persons to be able to offer guidance because of their ability to perceive the morally salient features of situations, not because they have esoteric knowledge of a nuanced normative principle of which the rest of us are ignorant.

these details, the ability to properly understand the situation and to respond to it in an appropriate way. My suggestion is that this need cannot be comfortably met by the divine command theorist.

I do not claim, however, that this need cannot be met by the divine command theorist *at all*. After all, divine commands need not be understood merely as general moral principles; to the contrary, God can issue—and, according to many religious traditions, has issued—particular commands to particular persons in particular circumstances.<sup>14</sup> There is no good reason to think (granted the truth of theism) that God *never* commands persons in situations of moral conflict to do one action rather than another. Indeed, it is theoretically possible that “moral occasionalism” is true: that *all* moral conflicts of the sort described above are, in fact, resolved by God commanding the agent in question to perform (or refrain from performing) some particular action.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the divine command theorist *must* embrace moral occasionalism if she is to accommodate the fact of uncodifiability, for if there really are moral conflicts in which the mere application of general principles is inadequate to determine what one ought to do, then either God resolves those conflicts by issuing some particularistic command, or there is no fact of the matter concerning what one ought to do. The divine command theorist will want to avoid the latter, since moral conflicts are common and often quite significant. For example, deciding whether to help the needy person is not, in the scenarios above, an unimportant question; it matters how we treat other people. Furthermore, we would like to think that there really is something you ought to do if you find yourself in one of those situations. It would be very strange for any moral theorist to conclude that all cases of moral conflict are such that there is no fact of the matter concerning what the agent in question ought to do.<sup>16</sup> Thus uncodifiability plus DCT yields moral occasionalism.

Unfortunately for the divine command theorist, moral occasionalism is a very unattractive view. Its suggestion that God issues a particular command to every individual who finds himself in a situation of moral conflict is inelegant, at best, and an implausible ad hoc refinement of DCT, at worst. If conflicts between general moral principles were rare, the problem would be much less serious. But such conflicts are anything but rare. Most of us need not look any further than our own daily lives to see that they are very common indeed. One might also note that the mere existence of professional and applied ethics as a philosophical discipline

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<sup>14</sup>In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams discusses such events under the heading of “vocations,” where “A vocation is a call from God . . . addressed to a particular individual, to act and live in a certain way” (301). Nearly all of what he says in that chapter is compatible with my argument here, as he does not address the more mundane—and undeniably frequent—kinds of moral conflict that motivate the present argument.

<sup>15</sup>Thanks to Don Hubin for suggesting the label “moral occasionalism.”

<sup>16</sup>This claim is compatible with the view that there are *some* moral conflicts in which multiple (and incompatible) actions are all morally permissible.



is evidence of such conflicts' prominence in human life. Each and every one of these conflicts must be the subject of a distinct divine command, if DCT is true.

Even worse for the divine command theorist: it is an open question whether God's commands in cases of moral conflict are fixed by the other facts of the situation. If it is the case that moral principles are uncodifiable, then there is reason to believe that God may not issue the same particularistic command in one scenario that he issues in another, otherwise indistinguishable, scenario; to deny this is to deny that God has meaningful freedom with respect to the commands he issues or refrains from issuing.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it would be right for me to help the needy person and thereby break my promise, but wrong for you to break yours in an indistinguishable situation, even though the two needy persons' circumstances are identical in all respects other than God's decision to command you (but not me) to keep your promise in that context. To put it rather mildly, this seems odd. It comes close to being a rejection of the traditional view that moral judgments must be universalizable, a view that many philosophers have taken to express a platitude of moral discourse.

Universalizability, of course, is the idea that if it is right for an agent *S* to perform an action  $\phi$  in circumstances *C*, then it is right for all agents relevantly similar to *S* in circumstances relevantly similar to *C* to do  $\phi$ . At first glance, it might seem that this is no problem at all for the divine command theorist. In response to my challenge, she might point out that even if you and I do have friends who are in relevantly similar situations, and we find ourselves wondering whether promissory fidelity or beneficence is the more pressing of our concerns, *you and I* are not in relevantly similar situations if God commands me to help and commands you to keep your promise. As long as we incorporate *all* of the relevant facts—including God's particular commands—there is no reason whatsoever to think that DCT and universalizability are incompatible.

The flaw in this reply is its failure to appreciate the nature of the problem. The problem here is generated when we consider the perspective of an agent who is deliberating about what to do in a situation of moral conflict. In situations of this kind, we need to exercise moral judgment. This judgment is a kind of skill; one might say that it is "more art than science," insofar as it is not merely a form of abstract or theoretical reasoning but a practical ability cultivated and manifested by virtuous persons. It involves responding appropriately to the morally salient features of various circumstances. The person who successfully develops this skill—the sage or virtuous person—perceives the relative importance of (for example) the particular needs in question, the urgency of those needs being satisfied, and the character of the promise that has been made, and acts accordingly.

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<sup>17</sup>I discuss God's freedom in issuing commands in greater detail in "Divine Attitudes, Divine Commands, and the Modal Status of Moral Truth."

The difficulty for the moral occasionalist—and, ipso facto, the divine command theorist—is that this kind of skill is completely superfluous if moral occasionalism is true. What moral occasionalism requires is the ability to hear and discern God’s particular commands: an undeniably useful and important ability, but one that seems obviously different from our ability to be properly sensitive to the morally salient features of a situation so that we can determine what ought to be done in that situation. It tells us to turn our attention away from the considerations that we would normally take to be decisive for establishing what should be done and focus instead on determining whether a divine command has been issued to the agent who is deciding what to do. If God’s decision to issue such a command is not determined by the other morally salient features of the situation, so that which command God issues cannot be settled merely by appealing to those features, then moral occasionalism seems to render the virtuous person’s skill in moral judgment “totally futile and useless.”<sup>18</sup> Being able to weigh the relative importance of the morally salient considerations does not matter one whit so far as being able to determine what to do is concerned. What really matters, it turns out, is one’s ability to determine whether God has issued a command in these particular circumstances. This is a surprising and undesirable result.

DAT does not have the same consequence because it does not imply moral occasionalism. It is natural for the divine attitude theorist to suppose that God’s pleasure and displeasure are fixed by the very same features of situations to which the virtuous person has learned to respond. (Unlike the supposition that God’s commands are fixed by those features, this claim does not threaten divine freedom in any problematic way. DCT is a voluntaristic theory; DAT is not.) The skill employed by a virtuous person in determining what to do in any particular case of moral conflict may thus be taken to reflect God’s own attitudes, and on DAT it becomes wholly unsurprising that this skill successfully tracks the moral facts.<sup>19</sup> Far from being “totally futile and useless,” the judgment exercised by a

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<sup>18</sup>This phrase is used by Leibniz in an explanation of his rejection of metaphysical occasionalism (i.e., the view that created substances are never efficient causes). He writes, “I do not grant that God alone acts in substances, or alone causes their changes, and I believe that that would be to make the creatures totally futile and useless” (quoted in Robert Adams’s *Leibniz* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], p. 95).

<sup>19</sup>As a reviewer for *Faith and Philosophy* has pointed out, some may perceive a Euthyphro-style problem lurking just below the surface here: if the virtuous person is assessing and responding to certain non-moral (and non-divine) facts, is it not those facts that are doing the real moral work? What does divine pleasure or displeasure add to the equation? The short, mostly uninformative, answer to this question goes as follows. Moral properties have a number of peculiar features that need to be explained: they are categorical, authoritative, objective, and so on. Theistic metaethical accounts like DAT can explain why they have these features (e.g., why your suffering is a reason *for me* to act) and can also explain what unifies the seemingly disparate class of wrong (or permissible, or right, or supererogatory) actions as a class. The longer, more informative answer, is presented by Adams in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (especially chapters 1, 2, and 10), and in my essays “Theistic Ethics: Not as Bad as You Think,” *Philo* 12 (2009), 31–45; and “Some Metaethical Desiderata and the Conceptual Resources of Theism,” *Sophia* 50 (2011), 39–55.

virtuous person in determining what to do in cases of moral conflict mirrors the nature of the moral facts themselves. Thus anyone who believes that skilled moral judgment is necessary for determining what to do in a case of moral conflict, and who believes that God has significant freedom in deciding whether to issue a command in some particular cases of moral conflict, has reason to favor DAT over DCT.

### III. *The Religious Life: Intimacy with God*

Finally, it is fair to say that a metaethical account grounded in divine attitudes fits more naturally with the sort of intimate, personal relationship between God and his creatures that religious thinkers often present as an ideal than does a command-based account. Consider for example the difference between wanting to please a loving father versus trying not to run afoul of the local magistrate. There is a richness and depth to the former sort of action that is absent from the latter. Both kinds of action find their roots in concrete relationships between persons, but obedience to a lawgiver is impersonal in a way that filial affection obviously is not. This is not to say that mere obedience—especially obedience to God—is necessarily a *bad* thing (a defender of DAT is certainly under no pressure to deny the reality or importance of God's commands), but many thoughtful and even pious people find it incomplete, unsatisfying, and shallow as an account of the essence of religious devotion.

The Jewish-Christian tradition, of course, is replete with images that convey the idea of a divine-human relationship far more intimate than the relationship between a sovereign and his subjects. That tradition *does* maintain that God is the ultimate ruler of the universe and that we owe him our allegiance, and I have no desire to minimize that feature of theistic morality. It would be an enormous mistake, however, to think that this metaphor is the only one to which we might appeal in order to understand the nature of the religious life. To take one obvious and familiar example, traditional Jews and Christians have thought of God as a loving parent for millennia: "from a Christian perspective, no relationship is more mysterious and more wonderful . . . than that of fathers and sons."<sup>20</sup> For an equally orthodox image, one might think of the prophet Hosea, whose marriage to the unfaithful Gomer was a living parable about the ancient Hebrews' faithlessness in worship, or of the Song of Solomon, in which sexual intimacy is presented as a model for the love between God and his people.<sup>21</sup> In the early Christian era, the Apostle Paul spoke of the Christian community as the "bride of Christ," and Jesus himself referred to his followers as his *friends*, praying that they might be one with him just

<sup>20</sup>Os Guinness, "Fathers and Sons," *Books and Culture* 14 (March/April 2008), 32.

<sup>21</sup>At least, very many commentators have read it this way (cf. Anne Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990]). This interpretation need not be understood as a rejection of the view that the Song of Solomon is also about the value and beauty of sexual intimacy itself.

as he is one with God the Father, his “Abba,” or, in contemporary English, his daddy.<sup>22</sup>

All of these images are significant for our thinking about God as the ultimate source of moral obligation. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to be raised by a loving parent, or who has been in a happy marriage, or who has known real erotic intimacy, or who has experienced the rich friendship the Greeks called *philos*, knows well that such relationships can (and often do) generate reasons for acting that are every bit as motivating as the commands of a legitimate authority. Very often—perhaps more often than not—these reasons for acting are generated by something *other* than a speech act, something other than an actual command. In a good marriage, for example, one does not act in ways known to be displeasing to one’s spouse and then expect to be excused merely on the basis that one was not *commanded* (or even asked) to refrain from doing so. Meaningful relationships do not work like that. And yet DCT seems to be committed to this sort of picture of the religious life, at least insofar as that life is thought to have straightforwardly moral implications. DCT seems to diminish, or at least fail to appreciate, the richness of the ideal divine-human relationship described in the Jewish-Christian tradition, a relationship that is as intimate as the relationship between lovers, between friends, between parents and children.

In light of all this, one is reminded of a line from one of history’s most famous prayers, offered by Jesus of Nazareth and recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John. “Now this is eternal life,” said Jesus, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” If, when push comes to shove, the Christian story really is as simple as all that—if eternal life, the “life that is life indeed,”<sup>23</sup> is an essentially *relational* state involving non-propositional knowledge of God—then we ought to expect that any theistic metaethical account purporting to be consonant with orthodox Christian theology will accommodate the complexity and depth that is characteristic of intimate relationships between persons. DAT is preferable to DCT because it successfully does just that.

In addition, and in closing, it is worth repeating that the nature of commands themselves make it difficult for divine command theorists to explain how a reasonable atheist can be subject to moral obligations, and that conflicts between general moral principles are very difficult to adjudicate on the basis of DCT. DAT, which can lay claim to many of the advantages of DCT, does not face these problems. For theistic philosophers who believe that moral facts require a supernatural foundation, divine attitude theory is a very attractive alternative.

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<sup>22</sup>See 2 Corinthians 11:2; John 15:15; John 17:21; and Mark 14:36, respectively. On the Aramaic word “abba,” see Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>23</sup>1 Timothy 6:19.