

Applying Divine Command Theory

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will look at the relationship between our everyday ethical views and the commands of God, before considering how divine command theory evaluates specific ethical situations. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Agreement with Everyday Morality

To begin with, recall that divine command theory says that we can only know if an action is right or wrong on the basis of God's commands. If you want to evaluate actions according to this ethical theory, then you must find out what God has to say about it. If you cannot find a command for a certain action, then it is neither wrong nor right.

Sometimes our standard or everyday understanding of right and wrong agrees with what God commands.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Most people consider cheating on your wife or husband to be morally wrong. This agrees with God's command against adultery.

Another common ethical view is that stealing is wrong. Again, this is in agreement with divine command theory since there is a prohibition against stealing in the Ten Commandments.

2. Disagreement with Everyday Morality

There are actions or practices that many people would think are neutral (in the moral sense of being permissible, but not obligatory), which God commands against.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Consider someone that admires their favorite artist and finds spiritual fulfillment because of this. Although many people may not understand this relationship to art, they wouldn't usually object to it morally. For a divine command theorist, however, this is morally impermissible since God commands against idolatry (the worship of created things, such as images).

It may also happen that there are things you would find morally impermissible, but divine command theorists would say are obligatory because they are actions that God commands you must do.

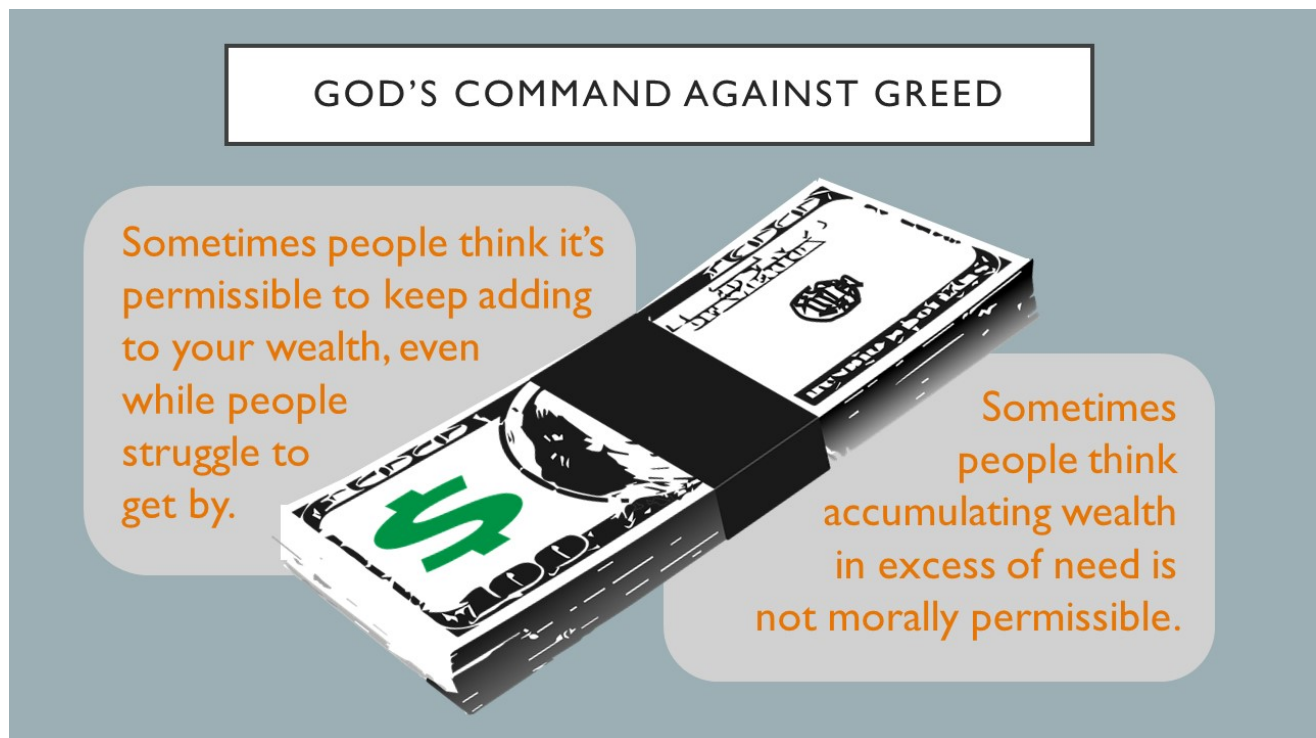
➞ **EXAMPLE** If you sacrificed your son, most people would think this is morally terrible. But God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (even though God's command is withdrawn before Abraham fulfills his duty).

3. Some Uncertain Cases

Sometimes it is not clear whether or not our everyday moral views fit with divine command theory. For instance, we just saw that human sacrifice was commanded by God and that many people would object to this because they find killing morally wrong.

But God also commands that we shouldn't kill. It is thus uncertain or ambiguous what would be permissible or impermissible according to divine command theory here.

It is also uncertain whether most people would agree with the command against greed. The illustration below shows two examples of everyday views on wealth, which go against each other.



The cases considered in this section show that it is not always clear how our ethical intuitions fit with God's commands.

4. Topics in Applied Ethics

Philosophers working in ethics often try to apply ethical theories to specific situations. Let's consider how a divine command theorist might apply their ethics to the following issues.

1. The moral permissibility of suicide
2. The moral permissibility of abortion
3. The moral permissibility of war

Here are the positions that divine command theorists take on these issues.

Divine Command Theorists and Applied Ethics	

Issue	Position
Suicide	Although God doesn't command against suicide, God does command against killing, which is thought to include killing ourselves.
Abortion	God doesn't command against abortion. But <i>if</i> it is assumed that unborn fetuses count as people, then it is the same as killing.
War	God Commands war under certain circumstances. However; understanding what circumstances justify war can be difficult.

If you disagree with God's commands and the judgments drawn from them, then you may not think divine command theory is the best ethical framework for judging which actions are right and wrong.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by seeing how divine command theory can be in **agreement with everyday morality**, and then how it can be in **disagreement with everyday morality**. We saw how some of God's commands sometimes fit with our common judgments, and sometimes do not.

Then we looked at **some uncertain cases** where it was not clear whether there was complete agreement between God's commands and our usual ethical judgments. Finally, some **topics in applied ethics** were considered from the perspective of divine command theory.

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