

# Commitments of Divine Command Theory

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will see how divine command theory evaluates different actions, and consider some of the limits of this approach. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Review of Divine Command Theory](#)
2. [Commitments of Divine Command Theory](#)
3. [Application of Divine Command Theory](#)

## 1. Review of Divine Command Theory

To begin with, recall that divine command theory says that we can know if an action is right or wrong on the basis of what God commands we should, or should not, do.

If you want to evaluate actions according to this ethical theory, then you must find out what God has to say about it. This could cause you some problems at times—and not just because you don't want to read the entire Bible before you do anything. Even if you knew all scripture by heart, there are some actions that appear to have no direct commands.

### IN CONTEXT

Consider the following ethical dilemma: you have two job offers. One is your dream job and requires a lot of travel; the other is close to home, but you are not excited by it.

Imagine that you are worried about the environmental factors of taking your dream job. There does not seem to be any clear command from God that would help you choose one job over another.

As you can see, there are definite limits to how God's commands can guide our ethical actions.

In the next section we will look at the various ways a divine command theorist can evaluate actions. But before doing so, let's remind ourselves of the terms that ethical theorists use to evaluate actions.

## PERMISSIBLE

An action that is **not** wrong to perform

- **OBLIGATORY**  
An action that must be performed (i.e. that is wrong not to perform)
- **NEUTRAL**  
An action that is neither right nor wrong to perform
- **SUPEREROGATORY**  
An action that morally exceeds what is obligatory

**IMPERMISSIBLE** An action that **is** wrong to perform

## 2. Commitments of Divine Command Theory

As we have seen, divine command theorists evaluate actions on the basis of the commands of God. If you want to find out what is permissible on this account, then you need to know what God does not command against.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Most people do not recognize a divine command against the study of nature and the universe. If we know of no command God has made to say that we shouldn't do this, then it is permissible.

Now, if you want to know what is impermissible on this account, then you need to know what God has commanded that we shouldn't do.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Most people think killing other humans is wrong. But there are many different reasons for believing this. If you are a divine command theorist, then you say that we shouldn't kill because God commands that we shouldn't.

Permissible and impermissible are the most general evaluative categories you can use. Once you've established that something is permissible, you can evaluate it further still. The illustration below specifies two forms of permissible action and how they relate to God's command.

	Obligatory	Neutral
God's Command	An action you must do because God has commanded that you perform it.	An action that is neither right nor wrong because God has neither commanded you to do it, nor commanded you not to do it.
Example	An obligation to honor your parents is one of God's commands. Therefore, you should respect your parents and not insult them.	Since God doesn't indicate whether or not you should vote in elections, voting is neither obligatory nor forbidden.

The final type of permissible action is one that goes beyond what you are obliged to do. This is called supererogatory action. Divine command theory has more difficulty dealing with this form of permissibility. This is because, if we wanted to go above and beyond our duty, then we would be faced with the difficulty of not having God's commands to guide us. Instead, we would need to somehow learn about God's will.

## 3. Application of Divine Command Theory

Now that you have seen how following God's commands leads to certain ethical evaluations, you can think about using this in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about how you would evaluate each action if you were a divine command theorist.



TRY IT

Imagine that you are producing an advertisement for your business. You work on it every day, except for Sunday. In an effort to increase your customer base, you include false information about your competitors so that people will not want to go to them.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. The act of advertising would be neutral since there is not a command by God either for or against it.
2. The act of stopping work on Sunday is obligatory since this is the day God commands to be reserved for rest and worship of God.
3. The act of spreading false information about someone else in order to damage their business is impermissible since God commands against lying.



## SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of divine command theory**, focusing on the limits of ethical guidance based on God's command. The **commitments of divine command theory** were outlined in terms of the actions that are permissible and impermissible on this account.

Finally, we put this ethical theory into practice through the **application of divine command theory** to a specific situation. This showed how you could use God's commands to evaluate several different actions.