

# Divine Command Theory

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin looking at a specific ethical theory that bases right and wrong in God's authority. We will look at some of the features of this ethical theory and its relationship to religion. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introducing Divine Command Theory](#)
2. [The Freedom of God's Commands](#)
3. [Religion and Divine Command Theory](#)

## 1. Introducing Divine Command Theory

To begin with, recall that ethics is the branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong. There are many different ethical theories that compete to determine what is right and wrong. One of them is **divine command theory**. It says that what is right and wrong is given by what God freely commands of us.

In this account of ethics, everyone ought to follow God's commands. This means that God's commands are universal ethical truths. Recall that any ethical theory that holds there to be at least some universal ethical truths is called objectivist (in opposition to relativist theories).

It should be noted that it is often assumed that someone is a divine command theorist if they believe in a good God. As we will see in the third section, this is a mistaken assumption.



### BIG IDEA

Divine command theory says that what makes an action good or bad is solely its relation to God's command. In this ethical view, an action would be neither good nor bad if God gave no command about it.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Divine Command Theory

A theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are determined solely by God's free command.

## 2. The Freedom of God's Commands

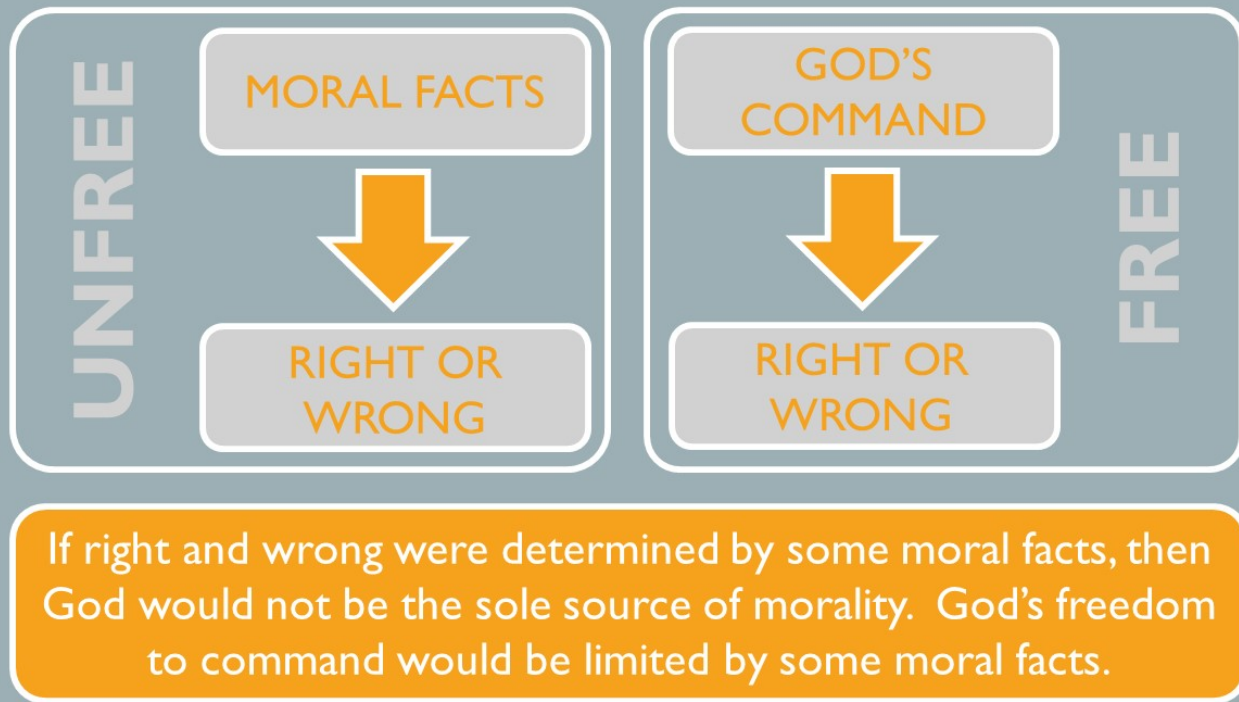
It is important to stress that God's commands are free. This does not just mean that God makes a decision free from interference. It also means that God doesn't depend on anything to make commands. This makes God's freedom very different from our own.

### IN CONTEXT

Imagine someone asked you to choose the car that is most likely to keep you safe, and you picked the one with more airbags and better brakes.

No one forced you to choose that one. But your decision was determined by the features of the car. You didn't freely command which car was the safest; rather, you responded to which one is in fact the safest.

If God were to respond to some features of what is good or bad, then there would also be no free command.



The kind of complete or absolute freedom God has in commanding what is right or wrong in divine command theory has led to this ethical position also being called theological voluntarism.

### 3. Religion and Divine Command Theory

Divine command theory bases ethics in religion, but ethics and religion do not have to be related like this. For instance, even if you believe in a God that is good, you do not have to think that all ethical actions are commanded by God.

➔ **EXAMPLE** You could think that God gave you the ability to reason and discover truth (including ethical truths) for yourself. In this case, you would be directed by your own activity in finding out what is right or wrong.

It could also be the case that you do believe that God freely commands what is right and wrong, but you do not follow any particular religious practices.

Divine command theory is the only account of ethics that ties to religion in such a close way. You can see how religion and ethics are separated by thinking about various religious practices that are not usually thought of as having ethical significance.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage are common features of many religions. But these three practices are not normally thought of as being ethical issues.



#### SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by **introducing divine command theory**, noting that it is an objectivist form of ethical theory. Then **the freedom of God's commands** were considered, showing that God must be free in an absolute sense when making commands.

Finally, we distinguished **religion and divine command theory** by pointing out that belief in God and ethics do not need to be brought together in the way that divine command theory does.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Divine Command Theory

A theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are determined solely by God's free command.