

# Refutations of Divine Command Theory

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will consider a problem that faces the divine command theorist, namely that there appears to be no good way to understand the relation between God's command and what is good. Our discussion will break down like this:

## 1. The Euthyphro Dilemma

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 there isn't a command for a certain action, then it is neither wrong nor right.

One question that arises here is: does God choose to command something because it is good, or is it good just because God wants to command it? The ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote a text in which Socrates asks a similar question to Euthyphro—often called the Euthyphro question.

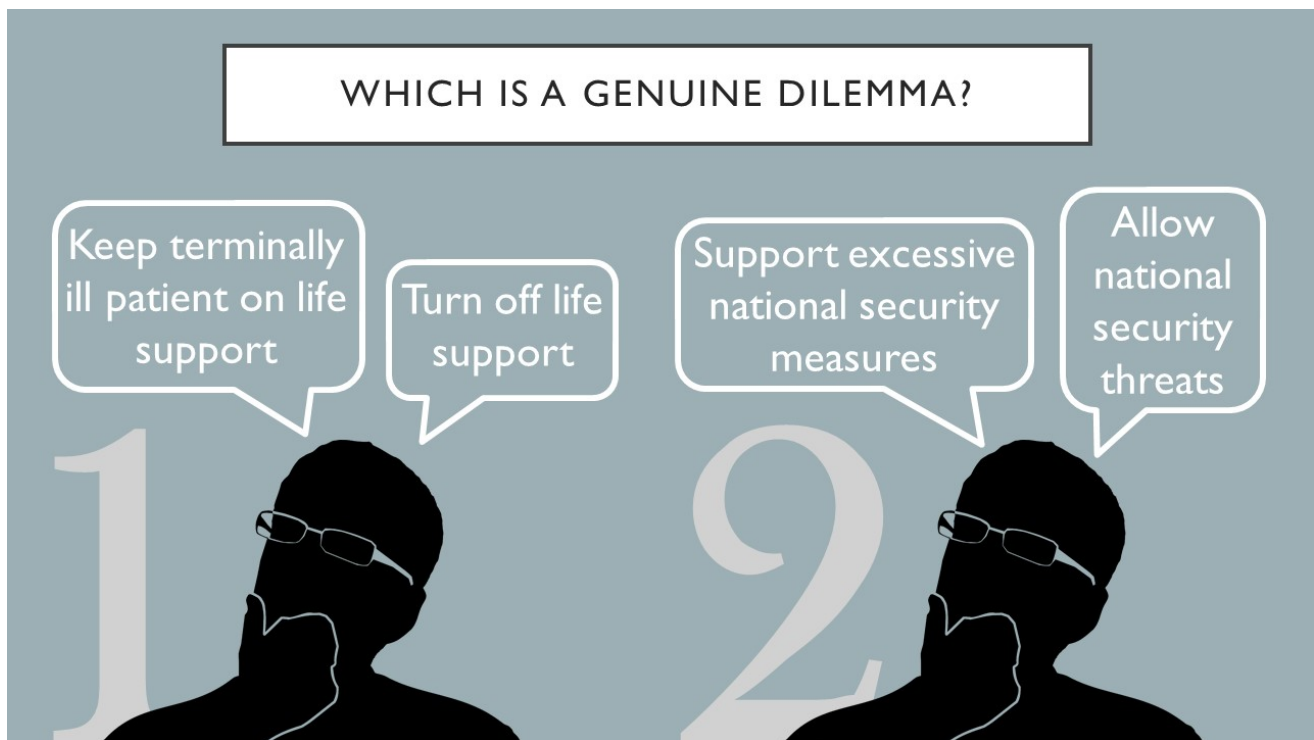


### DID YOU KNOW

Plato's texts were in the form of a conversation or dialogue between Socrates and another person (or persons). Although Plato was a pupil of Socrates, we do not know how much of his dialogues represent his own views or those of Socrates.

In the dialogue relevant to our discussion, Euthyphro fails to give Socrates an answer, and since he could not choose between the two options presented in the question, this is referred to as the Euthyphro dilemma.

A dilemma is a specific form of a problem where two options are presented, but both are equally undesirable.



1. This is a genuine dilemma since both options (either suffering or death) are undesirable. Also, there is no possible third option.
2. This isn't a genuine dilemma since many people wouldn't think both options are undesirable: some would happily choose the first option (excessive security). Moreover, there are other possible options. For instance, you might think more moderate security will work, or you could think that changing foreign policy will be more effective at tackling security threats.

Now that the idea of a dilemma has been clarified, let's go back to Euthyphro. His two options are:

1. Say that something is good just because God freely decides what is good. This is called the voluntarist option because it's based on God's own volition or will.
2. Say that God doesn't decide what is good, but rather commands something because he sees that it is good. This is called the intellectualist option because God thinks about what is good (i.e. uses intellect), rather than simply willing it.

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## 2. Problems with the Voluntarist Option

If something is good because God says it is, then you might worry that basing our ethical ideas and principles on a chance decision leaves it on shaky ground. For why should God choose one way rather than another? In the end it seems arbitrary.

### IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you had to choose between dedicating your life to helping others or to looking after your family, and God commanded you to look after your family. You might wonder why this is the morally better way to go. All you have is God's word that it is.

You have no way of knowing why God didn't choose the other option. Further, what if God has a

change of heart, and now tells you to dedicate your life to helping others? You would surely be confused.

There are other problems you might find when trying to base ethics on God's commands. Reliable ethics should guide you in all your moral decisions. But it is very difficult to find a command in sacred texts for all of the ethical situations you find yourself in.

➞ **EXAMPLE** God commands that you honor your parents, and the Bible teaches charity. What if your parents are completely selfish and demand that you should be also? Should you honor your parent or should you be charitable?

If you don't have God on call to tell you which way you should go in every situation, then you're going to have to get used to struggling with the interpretation of scripture.

One final worry is that, if something is good because God wills it, then the claims that "God is good" or "God's actions are good" lose their meaning. We don't need to say God is good because it is obvious from the fact that goodness is only produced by God's commands.



#### BIG IDEA

The voluntarist option succeeds in keeping God's command as the basis of moral judgments, but the resulting ethical framework struggles to deal with all the challenges of producing an ethical theory.

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## 3. Problems with the Intellectualist Option

If divine command theory cannot go for the voluntarist option, then it might try to go for the intellectualist option. If the good is no longer just a product of God's will, but is good before God says it is, then we would no longer have to worry about the arbitrary or unstable nature of God's decision.

But if something is good before God commands it, then it becomes independent of God. It undermines the divine command theorist's claim that the good is dependent on God's free command.

It should be noted that this is only a problem for the divine command theorist. Someone with a different ethical framework might be happy to accept that the good is independent of God's free choice or will. In fact, you don't even need to give up on religious ethics in order to accept this.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You could think that we learn about what is good by uncovering the purpose of God's creation. Perhaps God's purpose for creating the world was to have creatures that would share caring relations with each other. In this case, to care for one another would be based in the nature of creation, not in God's commands.

Another example of how you can connect ethics with God without being a divine command theorist is through the belief that ethical action aims to be like God in the sense of being selfless rather than selfish. Again, what is good would not be based in God's commands, but in following God's example.



#### BIG IDEA

The intellectualist option succeeds in providing a more stable ethical framework, but undermines the basis of the good in God's free command.



## SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by looking at how **the Euthyphro dilemma** presents us with a choice if we want to say that God commands the good. We then considered the **problems with the voluntarist option** and the **problems with the intellectualist option**. This showed that neither option is a desirable one for the divine command theorist.

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