

Let us suppose that we are in a discussion with a subscriber to the Divine Command Theory, who tells us, when asked how we can determine if something is good or not, that discovering the rightness of something is easy: “Something is good or right if God commands it.” We then ask, like Socrates of yore, “Does God commands that thing because it is good, or is that thing good because God commands it?” Our interlocutor answers, “It is good because God commands it.” Ah ha! Feeling smug at having found a profound weakness in this person’s argument, we respond that of necessity then, all of morality is arbitrary. God could, at any moment, or on any whim, command that murder is good and just -- and we would have to accept it! Doesn’t this go against our intuitions, that murder is bad no matter what? Without skipping a beat, our Divine Command theorist says, “Ah, that’s easy: God would never command that murder is wrong, because God is all-good and all-just, and therefore could never make a mistake about moral commands.” How should we respond to this new claim?

First, let us examine what someone is saying when they make a claim like “God is all-good.” They are speaking about a certain property, that of all-goodness, that can be applied successfully to God. God has the property of being all-good, they say. But to examine something, and say that it has a certain property, don’t we need to have a conception of that property independent of the thing being examined? For example, in order for me to make a claim like “That apple is green,” I need to first be able to understand the idea of “green” independent of the apple itself. This is important, because our Divine Command theorist uses God’s all-goodness to guarantee that the moral commands he makes are not arbitrary. The concept of all-goodness, then, must come from somewhere outside of God, because if it doesn’t, then God defines his own all-goodness! So when someone makes a claim like “God is all-good, and that is why anything that he deems good is good,” they are actually saying “God is all-good because God has commanded that he is all-good, and anything he commands is good.” This cannot be right, since the statement “God is all-good” cannot support the claim that “Something is good if God commands it” because each premise depends on the other, in circular fashion, in order to be true. Therefore, we must conclude that if there is a standard of morality, it must be completely separate from God, and that what he commands has no bearing whatsoever on the goodness or rightness of an action.

One objection to this argument might be that God doesn't need to make a command that he is all-good. He simply is all-good, with or without a command. But by stating that God is all-good without his commanding it, we are again appealing to an outside measure of all-goodness, one wholly independent of God -- otherwise, how could we know that all-goodness is good, if he didn't command it?