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Comments on Tyron Goldschmidt's "Commanding Belief"

In his paper "Commanding Belief", Tyron Goldschmidt puts forward novel arguments for three very interesting theses: (i) we cannot comply with God's command to believe in God; (ii) God cannot command us to believe in God; (iii) divine command theory is false. Since Goldschmidt's arguments for (ii) and (iii) rely on the success of his argument for (i), I shall focus here just on his argument for (i).

The argument (see p. 167) goes like so:

(1) Complying with God's command to believe in God means conforming with the command because we believe He commanded it – which means conforming with the command prior to believing in God.
(2) But conforming with a command because God commanded it means having a prior belief that God commanded it, which means having a prior belief in God – which means believing in God prior to conforming with the command.
(3) So conforming with the command is prior to the belief, and the belief is prior to conforming with the command – which is impossible.
(4) Therefore, we cannot comply with God's command to believe in God.

Goldschmidt claims that (1), (2), and (3) are analytic truths — and hence necessary truths — which fall out of the very meanings of the words *compliance*, *because*, and *priority* (p. 168). But I suspect that (1) is false, and necessarily so: complying with A's command to φ does not require that one *believes* that A has commanded us to φ.

Consider the following example. A teacher of a primary school class instructs her class to prepare their homework journals for handing in tomorrow. (Let's suppose that this instruction amounts to a command). Now, young Charlie is a little hard of hearing. He is fairly confident he heard the teacher instruct the class to prepare their homework journals for handing in tomorrow, but he isn't fully sure that that's what she said as he knows that occasionally he mishears people. Charlie's level of confidence in the proposition ⟨the teacher told me to prepare my homework journal for handing in tomorrow⟩ falls slightly below the threshold for belief. Still, Charlie goes ahead and prepares his homework journal for handing in tomorrow, and *the reason* he did so is that he thought it more likely than not that the teacher had told him to do so. Charlie has complied with his teacher's command.

In fact, then, it seems that complying with A's command to φ does *not* require that one has full belief in the proposition that ⟨A has commanded me to φ⟩. All it seems to require, rather, is that one has a level of confidence somewhat greater than a half in that proposition, and that one φ-s *because of* one's greater-than-half level of confidence in that proposition.

In light of this, let's consider a way that someone could comply with God's command to believe in God, *without* already believing in God. First, though, a few preliminaries. Assume, as many philosophers do, that believing that *p* involves having a level of confidence in *p* that is above some threshold. Who knows what the threshold is exactly, but let's just suppose for the sake of the argument that it's .8. (Nothing of what I'm about to say turns on assigning this value rather than some other nearby value to the threshold.) Accordingly, for God to command humans to believe the proposition ⟨God exists⟩ is for God to command humans to have a level of confidence greater than .8 in that proposition. Now, I just argued that complying with A's command to φ requires only that one has a level of confidence somewhat greater than half in the proposition ⟨A has commanded me to φ⟩ and that one φs *because of* one's somewhat-greater-than-half level of confidence in that proposition. It is very plausible that the proposition ⟨A has commanded me to φ⟩ entails

the proposition ⟨A exists⟩. And for any pair of propositions p and q where p entails q, one cannot rationally have a level of confidence in p that is higher than one's level of confidence in q. (This is known as *the rule of consequence*. Formally it says that if $(p \supset q)$ then $\mathrm{Prob}(p) \leqslant \mathrm{Prob}(q)$.) So, one cannot rationally have a level of confidence in the proposition that ⟨God has commanded me to have a level of confidence greater than .8 in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩⟩ which exceeds one's level of confidence in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩. And let us assume that God would not want his command to believe in God to be obeyed in a way that would require a human being to violate a rule of rationality. So, someone who has a level of confidence of less than n in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩ cannot rationally have a level of confidence in the proposition ⟨God has commanded me to have a level of confidence greater than .8 in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩⟩ which is n or greater — and we can suppose that God would not expect her to violate this rule of rationality.

Now consider Aaron, who thinks that it is more likely than not that there is a God who has commanded humans to believe in him. Aaron's level of confidence in this proposition falls somewhat below the threshold for belief, as does his level of confidence in the existence of God. More precisely, let's say that Aaron's level of confidence in the proposition ⟨God has commanded me to have a level of confidence greater than .8 in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩⟩ is .67. And let's suppose that his level of confidence in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩ is slightly higher, at .7. (Hence, Aaron's levels of confidence are in accordance with the rule of consequence — a rule we can suppose God wouldn't expect Aaron to violate.) Like the rest of us, Aaron can't straightforwardly change his beliefs at will, but let us suppose that he takes determined steps — praying, reading the scriptures regularly, spending time with people who believe in God, and so on — to increase his level of confidence in the proposition ⟨God exists⟩, so that he ends up successfully raising his level of confidence in that proposition to somewhere above the .8 threshold for belief. Let's suppose, further, that the *reason* Aaron took these steps was that he thought it somewhat more likely than not (specifically, .67 likely) that God had commanded him to do this. It seems, then, that Aaron has complied with God's command to believe that God exists, and has done so *without* already having had the belief that God exists. All of this seems perfectly possible.