

Some Brief Thoughts on “Commanding Belief”

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Tyron Goldschmidt’s paper “Commanding Belief” is clear, rigorous, and bold. I agree with much of what he has to say, and in what follows I will just raise a few questions to stimulate further discussion.

As a preliminary matter, I should say that in recent work I have advocated a version of divine will theory as opposed to divine command theory (Miller 2009a, 2009b). So I am glad to hear that, if Ty’s arguments are sound, they do not bear on my preferred view. Indeed, they may give advocates of divine command theory (such as Robert Adams) some additional reason to move over to the divine will camp. That is all for the better, I think.

Having said this, I do want to raise just a couple of points in order of increasing significance, starting with a very minor one.

The Scope of Divine Command Theory (DCT). Ty writes that “the divine command theory has morality depend entirely on God’s commands” (172). But every advocate of DCT I know of would reject this claim. Ty also writes that “morality can’t depend entirely on divine commands” (174). Every advocate of DCT that I know of would accept this claim. The reason why in both cases is that morality has to do, in part, with obligations, but it also has to do with axiology (goodness, badness, etc.), character (virtue, vice, etc.), rights, and other properties as well. But these days DCT is typically proposed only as an account of moral *obligation*. For instance Robert Adams, the most prominent contemporary advocate of DCT, is very clear that he is giving a resemblance account of goodness which has nothing to do with divine commands.

Having said this, Ty’s main argument pertains to moral obligations, and so if it is sound, it should worry all advocates of DCT.

The Formulation of “Complying with a Command.” On Brown and Nagasawa’s formulation, complying with a command happens when, “(i) we conform with the command, and (ii) our reason for so conforming is the command itself” (quoted on page 166). This second clause is puzzling. Suppose a king commands me to “Pick up that trash.” What does it mean to say that I conform to the command for the reason of picking up the trash? That does not make any sense. Surely what B&N should have said instead is something like, “our reason for so conforming is the fact that such-an-such an authority figure has issued the command.”

I think B&N can accept this as a friendly amendment. And it seems to be what Ty has in mind too in understanding their account (166). So let’s move on.

The Compliance Principle. B&N also formulate the Compliance Principle, which connects a command from God to a moral obligation to comply with the command. If I were a divine command theorist, I would find this principle to be highly questionable. Ty himself offers one good reason why, namely the case of atheists who can fulfill moral obligations (166). Another reason, which bears on subsequent sections of Ty’s paper too, has to do with the second clause in

the formulation of complying with a command. It seems right to say that if God commands us to do something, then we have a moral obligation to *conform* with the command (so says DCT, I assume). But why think that we have a moral obligation to conform, *and* to do so for the reason that God (the authority figure in this case) has issued the command? I can't think of a good argument for this off the top of my head. And the actual arguments for the Compliance Principle that have been given, like the one Ty outlines in his paper (170), seem highly dubious to me, for reasons I could elaborate in a longer discussion.

So I don't think that, when God commands us to act, we have a moral obligation to conform for the reason that God issued the command (or indeed, for any reason that explicitly appeals to God, as Ty's objection shows). What might be true instead is that that we have a moral obligation to conform, and to do so for the *reasons for which* the command was made. In other words, perhaps a more plausible principle in the neighborhood of the Compliance Principle is this:

The Justification Principle. For any act X, if God commands us to do X (or refrain from doing X), then we have a moral obligation to conform with His command to do X for the reason(s) for which God commanded X (or refraining from doing X).

Now I doubt this principle is true too, or at least it needs further refinement. But it has the virtue of avoiding Ty's objection, since the reasons for which God commanded X may not have anything to do explicitly with God, and so could be endorsed by an atheist as well. And compared to the Compliance Principle, it has more intuitive plausibility to me as well. Suppose, for instance, that God commands me to help my best friend. And God has issued this command because it would be an expression of loving my neighbor for me to do this. Then by the Justification Principle, I have a moral obligation to help my friend, and to do so for the reason that it would express love of neighbor (rather than, say, because it would make me look good to my girlfriend). That is a lot more plausible than saying that I have a moral obligation to help my friend, and to do so for the reason that God issued the command. Plus I don't see anything about the Justification Principle which is in tension with either the letter or the spirit of divine command theory, especially since God's commands are not arbitrary but formed for the best justifying reasons.

Ty, though, believes his argument against DCT does not have to depend on the Compliance Principle (173). So let's keep going a bit further.

DCT and Beliefs. My last set of comments are the most speculative, and are largely just invitations for further discussion. DCT is a view about moral obligations which pertain to *actions* (typically, human actions). And B&N capture this in their Obligation Principle ("a moral obligation to do \emptyset "). Ty seems to agree that this principle is the correct way to understand this part of DCT (172).

My first question is whether the formation of a belief in God is an action. It is clearly not in the ordinary sense of 'action' which pertains to bodily movements, or bodily movements done for reasons. And in the case of many beliefs, it could seem strange to say that their formation was an action that I performed. Consider, for instance, the formation of perceptual beliefs, such as my belief that there is a computer in front of me. So does some cognitive belief formation count as (intentional) mental action, and some does not? If so, what is the principle distinction between

the two types, and where does the formation of a belief in God come out? If not, then is it just a category mistake to talk about the application of DCT to something like a belief in God?

The second question is related. Let's grant that the formation of a belief in God is an action. And let's even grant that there is an obligation to form this belief. It is not immediately clear why this obligation would have to be *moral*. Why not think of it as an epistemic obligation, or perhaps a religious obligation? And are there cases of moral obligations to believe anything else? Does it sound plausible, for instance, to say that we are morally required to believe that all humans have equal rights?

More generally, perhaps the Obligation Principle should be put in terms of obligations (unqualified) being linked to God's commands, and not specifically moral obligations. After all, as formulated, the principle entails that God's commands couldn't be the basis for any other kind of obligation, such as an epistemic or a prudential one. Yet some advocates of DCT would want to allow room for God's commands grounding more than just the moral obligations.

Finally, suppose that we provisionally accept the idea that there is a moral obligation to believe in God, which is grounded in God's commands. Then what becomes of faith? In a number of recent articles, philosophers such as Daniel McKaughan and Daniel Howard-Snyder have developed accounts of legitimate faith in God, accounts which do not require belief in God. Suppose one of these accounts of faith in God is correct. Then would it follow that someone who has faith in God (without belief in God) is doing something morally forbidden? That seems like just as bizarre a consequence (if not more so) than denying that there is a moral obligation to believe in God in the first place.

Miller, Christian. (2009a) "Divine Desire Theory and Obligation," *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion*. Eds. Y. Nagasawa and E. Wielenberg. Palgrave Macmillan, 105-124.

_____. (2009b). "Divine Will Theory: Desires or Intentions?" *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. Volume 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 185-207.