Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 19 | Issue 1

Article 2

1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Mark C. (2002) "A Trilemma for Divine Command Theory," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20021914

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol19/iss1/2>

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A TRILEMMA FOR DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

Mark C. Murphy

In this paper I present a trilemma for any property identity version of divine command theory, that is, any version of divine command theory that asserts that the property **being obligatory** is identical to the property **being commanded by God**. It seems highly plausible that God's commanding acts are not entirely determined by other facts about the world. And it seems highly plausible that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties. But of these three claims — that **being obligatory** is identical to **being commanded by God**, that God's commands are not entirely determined by other facts about the world, and that the moral supervenes on the non-moral — one must be false. I argue that it is divine command theory that should be rejected, since rejecting either of the latter two undercuts what motivation there is to affirm divine command theory in the first place.

A property identity divine command theory is a view that asserts at least the following: the property **being obligatory** is identical to the property **being commanded by God**.¹ This view has been defended by Adams,² and has been commended by Alston as one of the more promising formulations of divine command theory.³ (Unless otherwise noted, whenever I refer to divine command theory, or DCT, I am referring to the property identity formulation of the view.) My aim in this paper is to present a trilemma that poses an extremely serious threat to DCT. In Section 1 I set out what I take to be a weak and highly plausible view on the freedom of God's commanding acts. In Section 2 I set out in a summary fashion the doctrine of moral supervenience, according to which there are no differences in moral properties without differences in non-moral properties. In Section 3 I show that one must reject *either* DCT *or* the weak and highly plausible view on the freedom of God's commanding acts set out in Section 1 *or* the doctrine of moral supervenience set out in Section 2. In Section 4 I argue that in the face of this trilemma it is DCT that ought to be rejected, at least in its property identity formulation.

1. God's commanding acts are not wholly determined by the world

God is a free being. On most views, God could have refrained from creating anything at all; on all views, God could have created a world different

in some ways from the world that God actually created. Not only is God's action in creating a world free; God's action within the created world is free as well. God has intervened miraculously in the world, but God could have failed to intervene miraculously, or could have intervened miraculously in different ways than God in fact did.

Among God's free acts are acts of commanding: at least some divine commands are free. What I mean by saying that God has at least some freedom in commanding is that even if the world were in relevant respects otherwise the same, God might have given slightly different commands: God could have given an at least slightly smaller or larger number of such commands, or could have given commands at least slightly different in content, or could have given commands to an at least slightly different group of people. What God commands is not entirely fixed by the way the world otherwise is.

Now, one might say: there is nothing objectionable about holding that God's commands are wholly fixed by the way the world otherwise is. For the way that the world otherwise is is determined by other free choices that God has made. Consider the following analogy. God is truthful. So God's assertions are wholly fixed by the way the world otherwise is. But that is no restriction on God's freedom, because the way the world otherwise is is determined by God's own free choices.

The objection does not succeed. First, to assert is to perform a speech-act with a mind-to-world direction of fit: in successful acts of assertion, one has to describe the world the way it is, so it is not surprising that the content of God's assertions would be fixed by the way the world is. But to command is to perform a speech-act with a world-to-mind direction of fit: commanding is thus not (wholly⁴) constrained by the way the world is. So the fact that it is unsurprising that God's assertions are fixed by the way the world is would not make it less surprising that God's commands are fixed by the way the world is.

Second, God's truthfulness in assertion constrains God, if at all, only in the following way: *if* God chooses to assert something to somebody on some occasion, *then* what God asserts will be true. It does not, of itself, entail that God must assert anything, or to any specific person, or on any specific occasion. But to say that God's commands are wholly fixed by the other features of the world is to say that every relevant detail of God's commanding — not just the content, but whether, to whom, and on what occasions — is determined by those other features.

Third: there are reasons to suppose that God's commands are not entirely determined by other features of the world other than that it would constitute a real constraint on God's freedom. For it just seems massively implausible that other features of the world could entirely fix God's commands. Think about it this way: how would we explain how it could be that the other features of the world entirely determine every last detail of God's commanding — whether God commands, on what occasions, to whom, and with what precise content? It seems that we would have to say something like the following: given the features of a world other than what God in fact commands in that world, it is either the case that God lacks power to command other than God does in that world, or it is the case that

God simply will not, perhaps on the basis of there being decisive reasons for God to command just as God does. It is hard to imagine that the former could be true: how could other features of the world limit God's power, so that God can give only that particular set of commands, on just the occasions that God gives them, and to just the people to whom God gives them? It is also hard to imagine how the latter could be true: how could it be simply impossible, true in no possible world whatever, that the reasons that God has for giving commands could leave God indifferent between one of two slightly different commands, so that God might choose to give either one? That God lacks any discretion in commanding in light of the other features of a world appears to be a highly implausible claim.⁵

2. Moral properties supervene on non-moral properties

Moral properties supervene on non-moral properties. There is some confusion over why this is so, and what modal strength this supervenience is supposed to have, and what the ultimate philosophical significance of supervenience is, but there is no doubt whatever that it is a fixed constraint on any adequate accounts of the concept of the moral and of what properties are identified as moral properties that they recognize this truth. Here is Michael Smith:

Everyone agrees that moral features of things supervene on their natural features. That is, everyone agrees that two possible worlds that are alike in all of their natural features must also be alike in their moral features; that the moral features of things cannot float free of their natural features. Moreover, everyone agrees that this is a platitude; that it is an *a priori* truth. For recognition of the way in which the moral supervenes on the natural is a constraint on the proper use of moral concepts.⁶

The supervenience relationship between moral and non-moral properties is susceptible to more than one interpretation: it can be interpreted as either weak or strong supervenience. Following Kim, we can say that a set of properties A (the supervenient family) *weakly supervenes* on a set of properties B (the supervenience base) if and only if

necessarily for any property F in A, if an object x has F, then there exists a property G in B such that x has G, and if any y has G it has F.⁷

Again following Kim, we can say that a set of properties A *strongly supervenes* on a set of properties B if and only if

Necessarily, for any object x and any property F in A, if x has F, then there exists a property G in B such that x has G, and necessarily if any y has G, it has F.⁸

If the supervenience relationship between moral and non-moral properties is that of strong supervenience, then it is an *a priori* truth that for any

item⁹ *i* and any moral property *M*, if *i* has a moral property *M*, then there is a set of non-moral properties *N* that *i* exemplifies such that necessarily any item that exemplifies the properties in *N* will exemplify *M*. On the other hand, if the supervenience relationship is that of weak supervenience, then it is an *a priori* truth that for any item *i* and any moral property *M*, if an item *i* has moral property *M*, then there is a set of non-moral properties *N* that *i* has such that any item that has *N* will have *M*. The difference between the claims that the moral strongly supervenes on the non-moral and that the moral weakly supervenes on the non-moral consists simply in the modal strength of the condition that there be no difference in moral properties without some difference in non-moral properties. On strong supervenience, if an item has a certain moral property due to its having a certain set of non-moral properties, then any item in *any* possible world that has that set of non-moral properties in that world will have that moral property in that world. On weak supervenience, if an item has a certain moral property due to its having a certain set of non-moral properties in some possible world, then any item in *that* possible world that has that set of non-moral properties will have that moral property.

3. A trilemma for DCT

God's commanding acts are not entirely fixed by the other features of the world. Any adequate account of the moral must accommodate the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. But if DCT is true, this view of God's freedom in commanding is false or the moral does not supervene on the non-moral. Of these three theses — DCT, the doctrine of moral supervenience, and God's freedom in commanding — at least one must be false.

There is no consensus in favor of construing moral supervenience as strong rather than merely weak supervenience, or vice versa; we will therefore consider both possible readings, beginning with strong supervenience. Assume that DCT is true and that the moral strongly supervenes on the non-moral. **Being obligatory** thus strongly supervenes on the non-moral. Necessarily, then, whether an act is obligatory is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include **being obligatory**. Now, if DCT is true, then **being obligatory** just is **being commanded by God**. And so, by substitution, necessarily, whether an act is commanded by God is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include **being commanded by God**. It thus follows from the conjunction of DCT and the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral that God's commands are wholly fixed by features of the world other than those commands themselves. But to accept this last claim is to reject God's freedom in commanding.

This, then, is a trilemma with respect to DCT: one must reject either DCT, the notion that the moral strongly supervenes on the non-moral, or God's freedom in commanding. Now, one might say: all that this shows is that the defender of DCT ought not allow that the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral is to be interpreted as strong supervenience. Some philosophers have held that moral supervenience is weak supervenience,¹⁰ and if moral supervenience is weak supervenience, then all that is entailed by the conjunction of DCT and the doctrine of moral supervenience is that

being commanded by God weakly supervenes on other features of the world. But the notion that **being commanded by God** weakly supervenes on other features of the world is not, the defender of DCT might insist, objectionable at all. For while God's commands are *free*, are not fixed by other features of the world, God's commands are also *rational*, for God is a rational commander. To be a rational commander is, at least in part, to exhibit consistency in commanding. So if in a world God commands ϕ -ing, then any act in that world that displays the relevant properties that ϕ -ing displays would also be commanded by God, on account of God's consistency. To command ϕ -ing but to fail to command an act identical to ϕ -ing in all relevant properties is to command inconsistently. But God is surely a consistent commander, and so the weak supervenience of God's commands on other features of the world is guaranteed by God's rationality in commanding.

But the appeal to weak supervenience is unpersuasive for two reasons. The first is that there are good reasons to move beyond weak to strong supervenience as an account of moral supervenience. By weak supervenience alone, one who says that ϕ -ing is obligatory commits him- or herself to the view that there is a set of non-moral properties that ϕ -ing exemplifies, and any act of ψ -ing in this world that has that set of non-moral properties will also be obligatory. But when asked why having that set of non-moral properties guarantees that ψ -ing will be obligatory in this world, but having that set of non-moral properties would *not* guarantee that an act of χ -ing would be obligatory in some other world, surely there must be some answer: it will not be a brute fact.¹¹ But there are only two possibilities. Either the explanation is wholly in terms of non-moral properties — ψ -ing exhibits some non-moral property that χ -ing does not, or vice versa — in which case the presence or absence of that non-moral property would be part of a base for strong supervenience.¹² Or the explanation is at least partly in terms of moral properties, which would have to be grounded in non-moral properties, leading us back to the first possibility. So it is hard to escape the impression that a retreat from strong to weak moral supervenience would constitute a concession that DCT cannot adequately accommodate the formal features of moral concepts.

A second, entirely independent reason that the move to weak supervenience does not save the defender of DCT is that it is part of the concept of the moral that it supervene not on individual but only on *general* properties. In Section 2 I quoted Smith's description of the consensus about the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. In restating his point, he continues:

If two possible worlds are alike in the kinds of individuals who occupy them, the motivations and aspirations they have, the extent to which the world lives up to their aspirations, their relative levels of well-being, and if the worlds are otherwise identical in natural respects as well, if they differ only in which *particular* individuals and objects have these various natural features, then there is a conceptual confusion involved in supposing that these worlds could differ in their moral standing.¹³

R. M. Hare's account, the *locus classicus* for treatments of supervenience in moral philosophy, is also the *locus classicus* for this view.¹⁴

The relevance of this point is that even if we allow the propriety of the move to weak moral supervenience, the fact that the supervenience base includes only general properties makes trouble for the defender of DCT. For while it is part of the concept of the moral that the moral weakly supervenes on non-moral general properties, it is not a plausible thesis about God's commanding activity that God's commands must weakly supervene on non-moral general properties. For the only argument that God's commands must weakly supervene on non-moral properties is that it is a constituent of rationality in commanding that such commands display consistency. But it is not a constituent of rationality in commanding that such commands exhibit consistency *with respect to general properties*. It can be perfectly rational to issue a command to one party and to fail to issue that command to another party, even though those parties, and the acts commanded of them, differ in no relevant *general* property.

Here is a case that illustrates this point. Suppose that I see a small child drowning, but I am a poor swimmer, and would botch the rescue. There are nearby two stronger swimmers, Jane and Tom, each of whom could surely save the child, but if both attempt to jump in, the attempt will be less likely to succeed: each will get in the other's way. So, I give a command: "Jane, jump in and save the child! Tom, stay on the bank!" This is a reasonable act of commanding: I had a reason to command one and only one of them to save the child; but there was no relevant general property to distinguish Jane and Tom; so I gave a command that was not determined by their general properties. It was random; I just picked. There is no basis to think that *God's* commands, even though God is a supremely rational commander, would always have reasons determined by general properties for issuing one command rather than another; we have no basis to think that God never just picks.

If the supervenience basis for moral properties contains only non-moral general properties, then the weak supervenience of the moral on the non-moral requires that an act be obligatory only if every other act that has the same relevant general non-moral properties is obligatory as well. But we have no basis to believe, and some basis to doubt, that the fact that an act is commanded by God entails that every other act that has the same relevant general properties is commanded by God as well. And so, in addition to the worries raised above about weak supervenience as an adequate account of the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral, it seems that DCT is unable to accommodate even the weak supervenience of the moral on the non-moral.

4. *How should we respond to the trilemma?*

Either DCT is false, or God wholly lacks freedom in commanding, or the moral does not supervene on the non-moral. We must embrace one of those disjuncts. We should embrace the first: the rejection of DCT. Part of the reason for this is that God's freedom in commanding and the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral are uncontroversial claims, affirmed

(so far as I can tell) by all those taking part in the debates over DCT, whereas DCT is a highly contentious claim. But even if the defender of DCT should be inclined to dig in, it is worth noting that the defender of that view ultimately gains nothing by embracing one of the latter two disjuncts: for if he or she embraces either of the latter two disjuncts, he or she loses what motivation he or she had to affirm DCT in the first place. What motivates the affirmation of DCT are sets of interlocking theological concerns and conceptual considerations, neither of which is alone enough to provide support for DCT. If one rejects God's freedom in commanding, the theological motivation for DCT is undercut. If one rejects moral supervenience, the conceptual analysis motivation for DCT is undercut. To attempt to save DCT by embracing one of these implications is self-defeating.

The theological motivation that pushes toward DCT is, in the main, the aim of preserving God's sovereignty over the moral. If the moral is an autonomous domain, it may appear that God lacks adequate control over the moral; God's commands must fall in line with what is otherwise morally required. DCT sets things right from a theistic point of view by identifying the moral, or at least that part of the moral that calls for moral agents' unflagging allegiance, with what God commands: the moral thus cannot constitute an independent constraint on God's commanding activity. But if we embrace the notion that God wholly lacks freedom with respect to God's commands, then it appears that what now generates a constraint on God is not the moral but the non-moral. For now the non-moral *entirely* determines God's commanding activity. If, then, the main part of the theological push for DCT is the preservation of God's sovereignty over morality, the force of this push is largely undercut by the admission that God lacks freedom in commanding.

The considerations from conceptual analysis that militate in favor of DCT are that the formal and substantive features of God's commanding activity seem to coincide neatly with the formal and substantive features of obligation. There would be little temptation to identify **being obligatory** with **being commanded by God** unless there were substantial overlap between the extensions of these concepts, and there would be little temptation to identify **being obligatory** with **being commanded by God** unless these concepts displayed similar formal features. But with the exception of their evaluative character, there is no formal feature that is as central to the grasp and employment of moral concepts as that of supervenience. The failure to exhibit the requisite supervenience relationship would be enough to disqualify any property as a candidate for identification with some moral property; that the candidate property is **being commanded by God** does not improve matters a whit. So, while the rejection of God's freedom in commanding strips one of the motivation to offer a *theistic* account of obligation, the rejection of supervenience denies one the resources to make a plausible claim that what one is offering is really an account of *obligation* at all.

One might, of course, consider tinkering with the doctrine of moral supervenience in order to produce a modified formulation of that doctrine that would enable the defender of DCT to avoid the trilemma. Consider, for example, the property identity version of DCT set out in Adams's recent work.¹⁵ Adams allows that God might have given commands that

differ from those that God in fact gave: God might have forbidden or permitted euthanasia, and might have required or failed to require certain religious rituals.¹⁶ If we ascribe to Adams an affirmation of the doctrine of moral supervenience as it was set out in Section 2, then Adams's views are subject to the trilemma. But one might note that while Adams explicitly endorses the view that an object's axiological properties — its goodness, its value, etc. — supervene on its non-axiological properties,¹⁷ he does not explicitly endorse the view that an act's deontic properties — its rightness, its obligatoriness, etc. — supervene on its non-deontic properties. Since I have understood DCT to be a view about the identity of deontic properties, not about the identity of axiological properties, if a defender of DCT refrains from endorsing the view that deontic properties supervene on non-deontic properties, then he or she will not find him- or herself trapped in the trilemma.¹⁸

It would be a very bad idea, though, for the defender of DCT to avoid the trilemma by modifying the doctrine of supervenience so that it excludes deontic properties from the supervenient family. The presumption against tinkering in this way with the doctrine of supervenience is extremely high, because the overwhelming intuitive support for the notion that axiological properties supervene on non-axiological properties extends just as readily to the notion that deontic properties supervene on non-deontic properties. Just as it appears straightforwardly obvious that one lacks a grip on the concept of goodness if one allows that two objects are alike in all non-axiological features yet holds that one is good but the other is not, it appears just as straightforwardly obvious that one lacks a grip on the concept of obligation if one allows that two acts are alike in all non-deontic features yet holds that one of those acts is obligatory but the other is not. In the absence of a genuinely compelling reason to alter the standard formulation of the doctrine of moral supervenience, it would be simply an *ad hoc* maneuver, constituting special pleading on the part of the defender of DCT, to adjust the doctrine of moral supervenience to allow DCT to avoid the trilemma.

How could one think that there could be compelling reason to adjust the doctrine of moral supervenience so that it does not apply to deontic properties? Perhaps what might tempt one in this direction is that we want to allow that God's commanding is free, and that what God commands us to do, we are obligated to do. In one possible world, God commands us to perform religious ritual R_1 , and we are thus obligated to perform it; in another possible world, God commands us to perform a distinct ritual R_2 — though R_2 , in itself, differs from R_1 in no morally relevant way — and we are thus obligated to perform R_2 . Our being obligated to perform one of these rituals or the other does not supervene, then, on the intrinsic features of the rituals. But this is obviously no basis to adjust our views on the supervenience of deontic properties on non-deontic properties; we want to say here that the property that distinguishes the required ritual from the non-required ritual in each world is **being commanded by God**. But that appeal is precisely what the defender of a property identity formulation of DCT is barred from making. By *identifying* the property **being obligatory** with the property **being commanded by God**, defenders of the property

identity formulation of DCT remove the property **being commanded by God** from that set of non-moral properties on which the property **being obligatory** can supervene.¹⁹

The trilemma established in this paper is sufficient to kick the legs out from under DCT in its property identity formulation. To say that it undercuts DCT in its property identity formulation is obviously not to say that all formulations of DCT are thereby implausible. Other formulations of DCT — those built on relationships of supervenience or causation rather than identity, or those built on fundamental moral requirements to obey God — may be fully compatible with God's freedom in commanding and the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. Whether these other formulations are defensible, or are even sufficiently distinctive to count as versions of divine command theory,²⁰ is a different question altogether.²¹

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NOTES

1. There are alternative formulations of divine command theory; I discuss these briefly below in n. 19.

2. See Robert Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979), pp. 71-79.

3. See William Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," in Michael Beatty, ed. *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 303-326, pp. 303-304.

4. Though commands characteristically have some presuppositions that are truth-valuable (e.g. that the person commanded exists, that the act commanded is possible, etc.), and thus have a mind-to-world direction of fit. These do not constitute anything like the absolute constraint on the content of commanding acts that the alleged analogy with assertive acts would suggest, though.

5. This is *especially* likely to seem implausible to someone who is concerned to argue that moral obligation is determined entirely by God through God's commanding acts. More on this point in Section 4.

6. Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994), pp. 21-22.

7. Jaegwon Kim, "Concepts of Supervenience," in *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 53-78, p. 64.

8. Kim, "Concepts of Supervenience," p. 64.

9. I apologize for 'item' here, but what better term is there to capture the range of x's (persons, character traits, mental states, actions, states of affairs, events) that exemplify moral properties?

10. See, for example, R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (1952), p. 145 and Simon Blackburn, "Supervenience Revisited," in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell, 1988), pp. 59-75, p. 63.

11. See Blackburn's discussion in "Supervenience Revisited," pp. 61-63. Blackburn resists the line of argument that follows in my text.

12. For example: suppose that stabbing's being *prima facie* wrong supervenes on stabbings' tending to cause bodily damage. Weak supervenience entails that any act that causes bodily damage in our world will be *prima facie* wrong. But why would we not go for strong supervenience here? Not because there is some other world in which it is just brutally the case that what tends to

cause bodily damage is not *prima facie* wrong. Perhaps in this other possible world what tends to cause bodily damage is immediately compensated by increase in vigor. But if that were the case, we should say that stabbing's being *prima facie* wrong strongly supervenes on stabbing's causing bodily damage that is not immediately compensated. In this way any claim that a moral property only weakly supervenes on the non-moral can be transformed into a claim that a moral property strongly supervenes on the non-moral.

13. Smith, *The Moral Problem*, p. 22 (emphasis in original).

14. Hare, *The Language of Morals*; see also *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 38-40.

15. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford, 1999).

16. *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 255-256.

17. *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 61.

18. Note: I am not ascribing this view to Adams. I mean only to say that it is a possibility for avoiding the trilemma that is left logically open by Adams's text.

19. Note, by contrast, that there are a number of ways to accommodate God's freedom in commanding and the variability of moral requirements in light of God's commands that do not require anything like the rejection of the standard understanding of the doctrine of moral supervenience. Here are a few. (1) One could defend a *supervenience* version of divine command theory, on which moral obligations supervene on divine commands. The supervenience of moral obligation on divine commands could account for the differences in moral obligation in terms of the differences in what God freely commands. (2) One could defend a *causal* version of divine command theory, on which moral obligations are caused by divine commands. If God were to give different commands, different moral obligations would be brought about. (3) One could defend a *normative* version of divine command theory, on which all other moral obligations ultimately result from a primitive obligation to obey God's commands. If God were to give different commands, the requirement to obey God's commands would generate different specific obligations. (4) One could, without defending any version of divine command theory, hold that it is a moral requirement to obey God. (One might hold, that is, that there is a moral requirement to obey God but that it is not the ultimate source of all other moral requirements.) If so, again, differences in God's commands would result in differences in specific moral obligations. Because none of these alternatives identifies **being obligatory** with **being commanded by God**, each is free to leave **being commanded by God** as a member of the set of non-moral properties on which the property of **being obligatory** supervenes.

20. For an argument that the causal formulation of DCT is not sufficiently distinctive, see my "Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998), pp. 3-27, pp. 14-15.

21. Thanks to Phil Quinn, Trenton Merricks, Joe Shaw, and an anonymous referee at *Faith and Philosophy* for helpful comments.