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# What if God commanded something terrible? A worry for divine-command meta-ethics

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**Abstract:** **If God commanded something that was obviously evil, would we have a moral obligation to do it? I critically examine three radically different approaches divine-command theorists may take to the problem posed by this question: (1) reject the possibility of such a command by appealing to God's essential goodness; (2) avoid the implication that we should obey such a command by modifying the divine-command theory; and (3) accept the implication that we should obey such a command by appealing to divine transcendence and mystery. I show that each approach faces significant challenges, and that none is completely satisfying.**

Divine-command theories seek to raise moral principles above the shifting sands of human preference and convention, making them objectively binding and giving them a kind of sanctity that is not easy to achieve without bringing God into the picture. Other attempts to pull this off (non-theistic Platonism, for instance) appear to compromise God's sovereignty by making Him subject to independent moral requirements. So it is hardly surprising that many philosophically minded theists are attracted to a meta-ethics in which our moral obligations are wholly determined by God's commands.[1]

Critics of divine-command meta-ethics are not in short supply. Among other things, they deny that divine-command theories have one of the principal advantages claimed for them. Instead of securing the objectivity of morality, they say, such theories avoid one kind of subjectivism merely to fall into another. If we can place no moral limits on what God might command, then divine commands and preferences may be arbitrary or even cruel.

What if, for example, God were to command the annual sacrifice of randomly selected ten-year-olds in a particularly gruesome ritual that involves excruciating and prolonged suffering for its victims? According to the simplest and most straightforward version of divine-command meta-ethics, it would be morally



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obligatory to sacrifice many children in the prescribed way. But surely only a terrible deity – one who does not deserve our obedience – would command such a terrible thing. It follows – doesn't it? – that the divine-command theory is false.

It is no use responding that God has not, in fact, commanded any such sacrifice. For the divine-command theory (hereafter, the DCT) still has the seemingly unacceptable implication that if God *did* command them, cruel sacrifices would be morally required. So say the critics.

Friends of the DCT give strikingly different responses to examples like this one. The first and most obvious is to deny that God *could* issue such a cruel command, on the ground that it is incompatible with the perfection of His nature. A second response, prominently associated with the name of Robert M. Adams,[2] is to modify the DCT in such a way that obedience to the sort of God who might issue such commands would not be morally required. A third response is simply to bite the bullet and insist that horrific actions would indeed be morally obligatory if God commanded them.

In this paper, I develop and assess the merits of each of these responses. The discussion will be primarily exploratory, rather than dispositive. I do not pretend to have settled all the relevant issues. Nevertheless, I hope to show that all three ways of elaborating and defending the DCT face significant challenges.

To avoid unnecessary repetition, I shall refer to the gruesome and painful sacrifice of randomly selected ten-year-old children as X. If this is not sufficiently disturbing, the reader is invited to substitute her own example of something a deity worthy of our devotion and obedience could reasonably be expected *not* to require of us. So, then, *what if God commanded X*? Would we have a moral obligation to obey?

## The appeal to God's essential goodness

Let us consider, first, the suggestion that the perfection of God's nature makes it impossible for Him to command X. If God is a perfect being, then He is essentially good, and there is no possible world in which He commands anything like X.

At first glance, this may seem to be quite a weak response to the critics' charge. Even if God couldn't command X, doesn't the DCT still have the counterintuitive implication that if He *did* command X, X would be morally obligatory?

At this point, some divine-command theorists appeal to the Stalnaker/Lewis semantics for counterfactuals, according to which counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents are all true, but only vacuously so.[3] I do not find this to be a particularly helpful suggestion. It seems to me that there are lots of non-vacuously true 'if *per impossibile*' counterfactuals.[4] We needn't let that detain us, however, for there is a more perspicuous way to state the critics' objection to the DCT – one that does not involve counterfactuals with impossible antecedents,

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and has the additional merit of making the precise relevance of the claim that God is essentially good much clearer. Consider the following simple argument.

(1) The DCT entails that whatever God commands is morally obligatory.
(2) God could command X.
(3) So if the DCT is true, X could be morally obligatory.
(4) But X could not be morally obligatory.[5]
(5) Therefore, the DCT is false.

Premise (1) is undeniable. Step (3) follows from premises (1) and (2). So it looks as if (2) and (4) are the potentially vulnerable premises.

I'll take up matters relating to premise (4) in later sections of the paper. Here the target is premise (2). If God's essential goodness makes it impossible to for Him to command X, then (2) is false and the friends of the DCT do not have to swallow hard and say that God could have made X is morally obligatory. There are, however, at least three hurdles that must be gotten over if this solution is to be accepted.

## First hurdle: A worry about divine omnipotence

The first problem concerns the degree of power God is generally thought to possess. Few divine-command theorists would want to give up the claim that God is omnipotent, but I believe that quite a strong case can be made for saying that omnipotence entails the ability to command X, in which case premise (2) must be true.

Admittedly, there is an unproblematic sense in which even an essentially good God has the ability to command X. *If* He chose to command X, He would succeed in doing so.[6] What an essentially good God could *not* do is *choose* to exercise this power. Given His essential goodness, such a choice is impossible for Him. This is where the problem lies.

So, then, should an omnipotent God be able to *choose* to command X? In my opinion, an affirmative answer is dictated by the following considerations. If a person A can do everything another person B can *and* can do something further that B cannot do, then A is more powerful than B. Now suppose that God cannot choose to command X. Can we not then conceive of a being that can do everything God can do but can also choose to command X?[7] Would such a being not be more powerful *overall* than God? But if a being more powerful than God is conceivable, it follows that God does not have the maximum conceivable degree of power. And from this, it surely follows that God is not omnipotent.[8]

If this is correct, then one must either give up the view that God could not choose to command X, or replace the claim that God is omnipotent with something weaker – perhaps with the claim that God has as much power as is compatible with His essential goodness.

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The second alternative may not be all that bad, however. Even if the weaker claim about God's power is accepted, one might still consistently say that He has the *best possible combination* of attributes. So perhaps this particular implication is not a deal-breaker.

### Second hurdle: worries about divine transcendence

Some divine-command theorists cannot deal with the possibility of terrible divine commands by appealing to God's essential goodness. They may agree that God is essentially good, and that He is incapable of doing anything that is incompatible with the goodness of His nature. But – and this is a very important 'but' – they insist on the radical transcendence of the divine. Precisely because God is transcendent, mysterious, 'wholly other', He can be somewhat unpredictable, and His reasons may be utterly inaccessible to finite intellects.

On this view, we can be very sure that God would not command X unless He had excellent reasons for doing so – reasons that are entirely compatible with all His superlatively good moral attributes. What we cannot be sure of is that God could not have such reasons or that He could not choose to command X. So if (contrary to all expectation) God commands us to do X, then however horrible X might seem from our limited perspective, we will be morally obliged to do it. I discuss (and reject) this approach to our problem in a later section of the paper.

### Third hurdle: divine sovereignty and essential goodness

If we appeal to God's essential goodness to explain why it is impossible for Him to command X, we will have to find some way, apart from God's commands, to specify what it is for God to be *good*. As critics of the DCT like to point out, if goodness itself were defined merely by reference to God's commands, it would be only too easy for a 'good' God to command a thing like X. All He would need to do is command it, thereby making X a good thing to command.

Of course, restricting the scope of the DCT in this way raises the further problem of God's relation to the good. Among traditional theists, one of the primary motivations for a divine-command theory is a desire to protect the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty. If God is the supreme law-giver, then there is no higher law to which He is subject, and that goes a certain distance toward satisfying the sovereignty desideratum. It may not go far enough, however. Theists who embrace the divine-command theory will probably not want to concede that there is an independent standard of goodness that God must satisfy in order to be good.

In order to deal with this problem, some philosophical theists *identify* God (or God's nature) with the Good.[9] Other things are said to be good insofar as they, in relevant ways, resemble or 'image' God. Unfortunately, this proposal generates a

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new difficult problem. If it is simply *God* – that is, the individual being picked out by the word, 'God' – who is identified with the Good, we run the risk of trivializing the claim that God is good. God will be 'good' simply in virtue of being identical to Himself, which does not clearly rule out anything – not even the possibility of God's commanding X. If, on the other hand, it is only God's *nature* that is identified with the Good, it is not clear that the view is consistent with a strong view of divine sovereignty. Let me explain.

Since we are focusing on God's *moral* goodness, the relevant aspect of His nature would appear to be a cluster of moral good-making properties that God perfectly and essentially instantiates. God is necessarily (morally) good insofar as He necessarily possesses such properties as loving-kindness, mercy, compassion, justice, and so on. But now it looks as if it is the intrinsic good-makingness of these properties – and not God – that constitutes the ultimate standard of moral goodness. What matters to the degree of one's moral goodness is the degree to which one possesses these good-making properties. If God exists and perfectly instantiates them, then He is perfectly good. But even if there is no God, finite persons are morally good to the degree that they possess these same properties. Or so it seems to me.

It may help to put the point a bit differently. Those who see God as the ultimate standard of goodness must think that God's goodness somehow includes all the above-mentioned properties. The question, then, is this. Is God good because He has these good-making properties? Or are they good-making because God has them? The first alternative seems, intuitively, to be the right one. Why should it make any difference to the good-makingness of compassion, say, if there is (or isn't) a supremely compassionate God?

If this is the right way to look at the matter, then moral goodness supervenes directly on the good-making properties, and it makes not the slightest difference to their good-makingness who has them. A person is morally good to the degree that she possesses these properties. That goes for God as much as for anyone else. But then we are right back in the box we were trying to get out of. God is subject to an independent standard of goodness, and the worry about divine sovereignty returns with full force.

I do not see how to answer this objection short of *identifying* God with His essence. That God *is* His nature is of course one of the implications of the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, a doctrine with a distinguished history that is still vigorously and ingeniously defended by some philosophers. I do not myself think it makes much sense to identify God with His essential properties, or even with a 'tropish' instantiation of them, but these are deep waters and I leave it to others to struggle with this difficult doctrine.

For the present, I shall content myself with pointing out that divine-command theorists who say that God cannot command X because He is essentially good need to provide a satisfactory account of God's moral goodness – one that gives it

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enough positive content to rule out the possibility of hideous divine commands, but does so without compromising the strong view of divine sovereignty that provides so much of the motivation for the DCT.

### A modified DCT?

Let us turn to the second of the above-mentioned options for dealing with the problem posed by the possibility of horrific divine commands – that of modifying the theory in such a way that it does not have the counterintuitive implication that we should obey such commands. At this point, it will be instructive to take a close look at the work of Robert M. Adams.

Like many other divine-command theorists, Adams is inclined to think that God necessarily exists and that God is essentially good (in a rich and non-trivial sense[10]), but he does not want the success or failure of the DCT to depend on this being so. Consequently he wants to have something to say about counterfactual scenarios in which there is no God, or in which a God who is not good issues dreadful commands. Using child sacrifice as his example, Adams puts the matter this way:

> I would not claim … to have offered a *proof* that God absolutely could not command something evil. So I had better face the question, What if God did command something evil? Suppose child sacrifice is evil but God really did command it; would it still be wrong to do it? Would it then be wrong *not* to do it?[11]

Adams's basic move is to modify the DCT in such a way that moral obligation is not fixed by the commands of just any God, but only by the commands of a God who satisfies certain stringent conditions. In the earliest versions of his modified DCT, Adams identified moral wrongness with contrariety to the commands of a *loving* God. In the most recent version, moral wrongness is identified with contrariety to the commands of a God who by nature possesses properties that make Him 'an ideal candidate, and the salient candidate, for the semantically indicated role of the supreme and definitive Good'.[12]

Adams's God *is* the ultimate standard of goodness, and we are good insofar as we resemble or 'image' Him in ways appropriate to creatures. But in order to play that role, God must be loving and wise and a lot of other things. If God did not possess those properties, He could not be identified with the supreme Good, and His commands could not constitute our moral obligations.

So what if God commanded X? Adams wants us to see that there are two distinct questions here: (i) Would it still be wrong to do X?; and (ii) Would it instead be wrong *not* to do X? On the basis of his modified DCT, Adams can give an intuitively satisfying answer to the second of these questions. If God were to command X He would not be loving or wise, and nothing would have the property of being required by a person who *is* the supreme Good – in which case, it would not be wrong to *disobey* the command to do X.

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But for a parallel reason, Adams must – and does – concede that it would not be wrong to *obey* such a command. If God commanded X, He would not be perfectly good, and nothing would be contrary to the commands of the right sort of God. So X would not be wrong.

Further implications of Adams's modified DCT should also be noted. If God merely remained silent on the subject of X (and on anything else that might have a bearing on the permissibility of doing X), X would not be wrong; and if God failed to issue commands at all, nothing would be morally wrong. A fortiori, if God did not exist, no actions would be wrong.

For some, these implications will by themselves be sufficiently counterintuitive to constitute a refutation of Adams's theory. We may, of course, be able to think of some remotely possible situation in which it would not be wrong to be cruel to someone – a situation, say, in which a madman threatens to blow up the entire planet if one refuses to torture a child. But even in a situation like that, it remains the case that the cruelty of the act tells heavily against its being permissible. I myself can think of no possible situation in which cruelty is not at least a prima facie wrong-making characteristic. More generally, it seems to me that, although their particular applications are contingent, the most fundamental principles of morality are necessarily true. Adams must deny this, and for some of us this will by itself be a sufficient reason to reject his modified DCT.

Adams is well aware of this line of attack, and he admits that he must deny that 'what is wrong is eternally and necessarily wrong'. The interesting question, he says 'is not whether I should reject this view, as I obviously must, but how far I can satisfy intuitions that may lie behind it'.[13]

Well, how far can he? What can Adams say on behalf of the claim that some of our most fundamental moral principles are merely contingent? His discussion of this issue is nuanced and somewhat non-committal, and he makes a number of different suggestions. Here I will concentrate on what I take to be the most promising of these.

One of Adams's suggestions is that we can view cruelty in possible worlds lacking the right sort of God 'from our standpoint in the actual world'.[14] God himself – the loving God who actually exists and is the ultimate standard of goodness – is well aware of the possible worlds in which cruelty is not wrong and, we may assume, strongly disapproves of any cruelty in them. This may – at least to some degree – accommodate our moral intuitions about cruelty in possible worlds in which God does not exist or is not good, and give them a kind of objective backing.

If you are not satisfied by this response, Adams thinks you may have failed to make an important distinction. 'The objector may have failed to distinguish sharply two claims he may want to make: that some acts *would* be wrong even if God *did* not exist, and that some acts *are* wrong even if God *does* not exist. *I grant*

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*the latter.*'[15] This is initially puzzling. If the indicative conditional that Adams 'grants' is allowed to stand, his theory must (already) be declared false. On Adams's theory, wrongness *is* the property of being contrary to the commands of the right sort of God. Any world in which such a God does not exist is a world in which no acts are wrong. How, in such a world, could it be true in any interesting way that *if God does not exist, some acts are wrong*?

This may be only a small misstep on Adams's part, however. The sentences immediately following the passage quoted above point us in a potentially more fruitful direction.

> Even if divine command metaethics is the best theory of the nature of right and wrong, there are other theories which are more plausible than denying that cruelty is wrong. If God does not exist, my theory is false, but presumably the best alternative to it is true, and cruelty is still wrong.

Perhaps all Adams really *meant* to say was that if *he* had to choose between his modified divine-command theory and saying that cruelty is wrong, he would take the latter option and look for a better theory of moral wrongness.

A simple analogy may help here. Imagine somebody who theorizes that water is identical to XYZ. For the moment, it's the best theory around. This theory entails that if there is no XYZ, there is no water either. But now suppose this same theorist discovers strong new evidence showing that the stuff we've all been drinking is not XYZ because there is no such thing as XYZ. The right thing for him to say in such a case is probably *not*, 'Well, I guess there isn't any water.' The right thing to say may be, 'Well, it looks as if my theory about the nature of water is mistaken. I'd better look for a better one.'

This suggests a rather different way for Adams to try to explain and blunt the force of the intuitions that incline us to reject his theory. To get a clear view of this new strategy, let us return to the question, *What if God commanded X?* Why does this question initially seem to pose such a problem for the DCT? Part of the answer may be that when we ask it we imagine *ourselves* suddenly being 'informed' that God has commanded X. But *we* are not blank slates – we already have strong views about the moral status of X. We take ourselves to know that X is as wrong as wrong can be. Given this knowledge, it naturally seems outrageous to suggest that God could make X right just by commanding it.

At this point, Adams may want to say, the critic is apt go astray. Instead of sticking with the original question, *What if God commanded X?*, he may substitute for it an importantly different question, viz. *What if we were 'informed' that God had just commanded X?* He then considers what our attitude to this new piece of 'information' should be. Should we conclude that X is morally obligatory, or at least not wrong? If this is the question, it seems obvious that there are two much better alternatives: conclude that the DCT is mistaken, or conclude that the alleged 'information' about what God has commanded is bogus.

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It is important to see that both alternatives are available to Adams. Let's begin with the possibility that the 'information' is bogus. Commenting on God's supposed command to sacrifice Isaac, Kant said:

> Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.'[16]

Genesis 22 says nothing at all about how Abraham 'received' the command to sacrifice Isaac. But Adams thinks that Kant's main point is essentially correct. Whatever one's source of information may be, if it indicates that God has commanded something truly terrible, one of the possibilities that should be considered is that we have been misinformed about the commands of the true God.

Now if the thing allegedly commanded is bad enough, and if one holds the view that God is essentially good, it might seem that one would be fully justified in drawing the conclusion that this *could not be* a genuine divine command. But for purposes of discussion, at least, Adams wants to leave open the possibility that God is only contingently good. Even so, he thinks there is a good deal to be said for the Kantian alternative.

How could this be? Well, let's imagine that 'information' about a cruel divine command to do X has just been 'given' to a twenty-first century Christian believer. This believer takes herself to know that God is in fact loving and wise, and she also believes that God has commanded us to love our neighbours. She may not know how stringently to interpret this command, but she is sure that this new piece of 'information' is utterly inconsistent with it, and indeed with virtually everything she takes herself to know about God's character and God's commands. Even if she does not subscribe to (or does not know about) the doctrine of God's essential goodness, her estimate of the probability that God would command X is *so* low that it would take an extraordinary act of God to convince her that He had commanded such a thing. Only divine intervention, manipulating her mental processes directly, could produce such a belief in such a person.[17]

This view of what a twenty-first-century Christian could – and should – say about a purported divine 'command' to do X is perfectly consistent with the view that wrongness consists in contrariety to the *genuine* commands of a God who satisfies the conditions enumerated above. It seems, then, that such a believer could consistently subscribe to Adams's modified divine-command theory without being in the slightest degree prepared to recognize the cruel command to do X as having a divine origin.

This need not be taken to imply that our current moral views are incorrigible, or that they should never be revised in light of new information about what God requires of us. However, in the case of each such 'surprising' command, we must be able to think of the new divinely appointed 'duty' as something that

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a loving and wise creator – a God who is the ultimate standard of goodness – might conceivably command us to do. And – on Adams's view – we should *never* be willing to relinquish our most fundamental moral principles on the basis of some purported revelation. It could never be reasonable to overturn our entire moral outlook in light of supposed new information about God's requirements.

By way of illustration, Adams expresses admiration for members of the Purka clan, which apparently switched gods rather than accept their tribal god's demand for human sacrifice.[18] No doubt some friends of the DCT would follow Adams and reject the DCT altogether rather than obey a hideous command *if they were sure that one had been given*. But absent any such certainty, they may see no need to give up the DCT.

Reverting to my original example, Adams's point can perhaps be put in the following way. While we are – and should be – more certain that X is wrong than that the modified DCT is true, it does not follow that we should be more certain that X is *necessarily* wrong – wrong in all possible worlds – than that the modified DCT is true. Adams supposes that only the latter claim would – as things actually are – force us to reject the modified DCT.

How far does this go toward undermining the intuition that X would still be wrong even if God were not a suitable candidate for being the supreme Good? Not very far, in my opinion. It's good to know that Adams takes the probability of a hideous divine command to be extremely low, and that he would give up his allegiance to God before obeying such a command. But while this makes me think better of *him* than I otherwise would, I still see no good reason to accept the possibility that X is not wrong.

Let me put this point more carefully. Being-an-instance-of-X, I claim, is a *very* strong prima facie reason for declaring an act to be morally wrong. That does, of course, leave open the theoretical possibility that this reason might be overridden by other considerations. If we knew that a mad deity would torture all ten-year-olds for all eternity if and only if we failed to obey the command to do X, then it might be right to do X (though not out of devotion to the mad deity!). However, in the absence of any such overriding consideration, doing X is morally wrong. In that sense, being-a-case-of-X is what I shall call an *intrinsically wrong-making characteristic*.

Consider next a more general moral principle.

> S Causing intense and prolonged suffering is intrinsically wrong-making.

Error theorists aside, one would have thought that no philosopher who holds a cognitivist account of moral obligation would deny that (S) is true. But on the modified DCT, things are not so clear. For one thing, it might seem that on this theory there is only one *intrinsically* wrong-making characteristic – viz.

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contrariety to the commands of a certain sort of God. (This is of course compatible with other characteristics being *derivatively* wrong-making.) But even if the friends of the modified DCT can find a way to affirm something close enough to S, they are still left in the position of saying that S is at best *contingently* true, since in worlds without the right sort of God, S is not true.

Could S have been false? Could causing intense and prolonged suffering have failed to be a very serious wrong-making characteristic? It seems to me (and I hope to you) that the answer is 'No' – that S is a clear example of a necessarily true moral principle. We can, of course, conjure up imaginary worlds in which nobody *thinks* that S is true, but it seems perfectly clear to me that the persons existing in such worlds are seriously mistaken, or at least are ignorant of a bedrock moral principle.

If this is right, then we needn't wait for the certainty that God has commanded X in order to be justified in rejecting Adams's modified DCT.

## The appeal to transcendence and mystery

As noted above, some theists think that we should not be so quick to rule against divine authorship of 'commands' that we would otherwise have believed to be horribly wrong. We might be unable to see *how* the 'commanded' action is good. We might even be unable to conceive of any way – however far-fetched – in which it could be good. This would be a compelling reason for *wondering* whether we might have made a mistake in thinking that God had commanded the horrible deed. But we must remember that God is utterly transcendent. His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts.[19] Sometimes His reasons are so deep and complicated as to be inscrutable to any merely finite mind. We must therefore be prepared to take seriously the possibility that God might have a perfectly good reason for commanding X.

James D. Rissler has recently defended such a view:

> Perhaps philosophers are better than most at imaging strange circumstances that might justify particular actions, but even we might have difficulty attempting to conceive how a command to torture innocent children, for instance, could be justified. It is in cases such as these that it might be possible to conceive that a command is good, despite being unable to conceive how it is so. To suppose that it is true that an abhorrent command really is good, when one cannot conceive how it could be so, may require faith approaching Abraham's … , but I see no reason to think it impossible, especially if we remind ourselves of how meagre our epistemic abilities are. And if a person can conceive *that* God has a good purpose for a seemingly evil command, believes that God is perfectly good, and is certain that God is issuing the command, then that person should faithfully obey the command … , trusting that it *is* good, no matter how abhorrent and seemingly evil it appears.[20]

Rissler is not here thinking of someone who has unpleasant and abnormal urges. He is thinking of a person like you or me – a person who is horrified by the

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thought of torturing anyone, to say nothing of little children. Nevertheless, Rissler thinks I should torture children if two conditions are met:

(1) I am 'psychologically certain' that God has commanded me to torture children. I have done my best to doubt that God is commanding this thing, and have found that I simply cannot doubt that He wants me to do it.
(2) Even though I am unable to conceive *how* this could be a good command or what good purpose might be served by obeying it, I am able at least to conceive of the possibility *that* God has some good purpose in view.

You might wonder how conditions (1) and (2) could be met for any non-psychotic and morally decent person. But Rissler doesn't seem to be much worried about this. With respect to (1), he assumes that God could directly intervene in my mental life in such a way as to produce the requisite 'psychological certainty'. With respect to (2), he thinks that all I need to do is remind myself of how 'transcendent' God is and of how 'meagre' my own 'epistemic abilities' are.

Rissler does envisage one type of scenario in which condition (2) cannot be satisfied, so that the right thing for me to do is to disobey a command that I am (psychologically) certain that God has given. If the command in question is such as completely to undermine all my moral evaluations, then I will not be able conceive of the possibility that God's purposes are good. If, to take the most extreme case, God were to tell me that from now on, I am to do what hitherto I have taken to be evil and refrain from doing what I have hitherto taken to be good, then I would lack the conceptual resources to make sense of the idea that God's command is good. Another kind of case would be a command that strikes at the very heart of morality. If all my judgments about good and evil spring from some fundamental principle or set of principles, and I am certain that God is telling me that *those* principles do not hold, then the correct conclusion to draw is that God is not good and that I have no obligation to obey Him.

One might have thought that acquiring the belief that it would be a good thing to 'torture innocent children' *would* tend to undermine one's entire moral outlook. And perhaps Rissler would agree that a command requiring that everyone torture children as a matter of standard practice would do just that and should not be obeyed. But, at least as I read him, Rissler is concerned only with the possibility of a particular exception – with the possibility of a temporary suspension of the rules that rightly govern our behaviour in ordinary cases. In this special kind of case, Rissler's emphasis on the radical transcendence of the divine, combined with a striking (and, some might say, excessive) degree of epistemic humility, forces him to bite what looks to be a pretty bad bullet to bite. He thinks that condition (2) is rather easily satisfied, and that God is perfectly capable of making sure that condition (1) is satisfied. So I really do have to reckon, not with the

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likelihood, but with the possibility in principle that God might put me under an obligation to torture children.

Suppose, then, that the improbable takes place. I become certain that God is commanding me to torture some children. I am epistemically humble enough to conceive of the possibility that God has good (but wholly mysterious) reasons for wanting me to do this, and I go about the business of fulfilling my God-imposed obligation. If you find out about my plans, what should *you* do about me? Interestingly, Rissler's position is that *your* obligation would be to do everything you can to prevent me from harming children.

> … it will always be appropriate for third parties to attempt to stop [such] persons from committing the atrocities they claim to have been commanded to perform. It may well be that, like Kierkegaard's Abraham, a person who has been commanded to do something abhorrently evil cannot defend her actions to the ethical community which she inhabits. Thus, while anyone who is certain that God has commanded her to commit some evil act is justified in doing so, her justification will be before God, not before the ethical community. For it seems both likely and appropriate that the ethical community would, in any case in which a person claims to have been commanded to do the abhorrent by God, judge that that person is either mistaken … or is consciously lying. For given that the members of the ethical community are not certain that God has issued the command to perform this act (since *they* have not received the command), … they [should] infer that God has not so commanded.[21]

It is not often that a leader of a major political party says anything that might be of interest to philosophers of religion, but Rissler's position here reminds me of a remarkable passage in a speech by Barack Obama:

> We all know the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is ordered by God to offer up his only son, and without argument, he takes Isaac to the mountaintop, binds him to an altar, and raises his knife, prepared to act as God has commanded. Of course, in the end God sends down an angel to intercede at the very last minute, and Abraham passes God's test of devotion. But it's fair to say that if any of us leaving this church saw Abraham on a roof of a building raising his knife, we would, at the very least, call the police and expect the Department of Children and Family Services to take Isaac away from Abraham. We would do so because we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason.[22]

It's hard to disagree with the main point here. If an 'Abraham' claimed that God had instructed him to sacrifice his son, we would be quite sure that he was mad. The same goes for Rissler's would-be child-torturer. It wouldn't (and shouldn't) occur to us that God had anything to do with it. The judgment of the ethical community, whether religious or secular, would be that Abraham was either very bad or very mad. Why? Partly because this is a heinous crime – the very sort of thing that a good God would be expected to forbid, and partly because, as Obama succinctly puts it, 'we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be'.[23]

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But isn't there a problem here? The individual who does the terrible deed is 'psychologically certain' that God wants him to do it. But isn't the ethical community simply right about him? Isn't it obvious that he is stark raving mad? Mustn't there be something deeply irrational about his current mental state? To all appearances, he is in the grip of an *idée fixe* for which he has no rational support, and his behaviour is that of a lunatic. Even if God caused him to have this particular *idée fixe*, neither he nor we are in a position to *know* that this is so. What we are in a position to know is that human sacrifice (to say nothing of torturing children) is a terrible evil.[24]

Rissler's response to the 'irrationality' objection takes it to be primarily a worry about the consistency of the man's beliefs. The man starts out believing that God is good and that child sacrifice (or, more generally, cruelty to children) is 'abhorrently evil' – the sort of thing God would never want anyone to do. Then, to his great surprise, he finds himself with the belief that God has commanded him to sacrifice his son (or to torture children, or whatever). These beliefs are inconsistent. If he continued to hold all of them, he would be irrational. But he doesn't. He 'reflects', does his best to doubt that God has actually commanded the abhorrent act, and finds that he cannot. He is 'psychologically certain' that God has issued the command in question. He 'reflects' a bit more, takes note of the fact that God is 'transcendent' as well as good, and concludes that God must have some very good reason for issuing this command and that obedience would not after all be 'abhorrently evil'. Since our man has gone through an appropriate period of 'reflection', and since consistency is restored, Rissler thinks that he is perfectly rational. It's true that the rest of us would have no way of knowing that this is so. But that is only because *we* are not 'psychologically certain' that God has commanded the abhorrent act. The man to whom God has spoken acts as he ought. His reasoning and his behaviour are indeed justified – but only 'before God', not 'before the ethical community'.

I am not persuaded. For one thing, mere consistency is insufficient for rationality. Even a madman may have consistent beliefs, and the very fact that he is willing to move everything else around to make room for the craziest of his beliefs can be one of the principal marks of his irrationality. To see this, let's imagine a Rissler-approved case in some detail. A man – call him 'Abe' – comes to believe that God wants him to torture children. As part of his 'reflection' on the matter, Abe tells his pastor about what God has told him to do and subsequently invites comment from all the members of his church. Unanimously, they tell him that it couldn't possibly be God who is telling him to torture children and that he should seek psychiatric help (or perhaps the services of an exorcist). In spite of this sound advice, Abe finds that he simply cannot help believing that God wants him to torture some children. He is 'psychologically certain'. So Abe resolves the inconsistency in his belief set by concluding that God has a good reason for

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commanding him to torture children and that – at least in this particular case – torturing children is a good thing for him to do.

Abe's belief set may be logically consistent, but I find it preposterous to suggest that he is rational. To see why, ask yourself this. What, if anything, does Abe know that his pastor and the other members of his church do not know? Not that he is 'psychologically certain' that God wants him to torture children. He has told them all about that. Not that God is good. They all agree that God is good. Not even that God sometimes has reasons that are beyond our ken. They know that as well. Nevertheless, they are unwilling to consider such a possibility in this case. They think that Abe has lost his mind.

As anyone can plainly see, there is an 'overriding' defeater for Abe's belief – viz. 'God is good, and it is – to put it conservatively – extremely unlikely that God would command any sort of torture.' The only defeater Abe has for this defeater is, 'But God is transcendent, and so He *might* have inscrutable reasons for wanting me to torture children.' But you can't defeat an overriding defeater with the bare possibility that something else might be so.

Even if divine transcendence and mystery and the bare possibility of inscrutable but good reasons did provide an appropriate defeater-defeater in our little story, it would be equally accessible to the rest of Abe's ethical community. How, then, can it be 'rational' for Abe to draw one conclusion while it is (I presume Rissler would say) equally 'rational' for the rest of the community to draw the opposite conclusion?

As far as I can see the only difference between Abe and the rest of his ethical community is that he can't help believing this one – obviously crazy – thing. So far from making him rational, the fact that he is prepared to revise other important beliefs to make room for this one 'psychological certainty' shows that he has indeed lost his mind.

But what about the fact that – in the sort of scenario envisaged by Rissler – *God* is responsible for giving Abe this weird belief? If Abe *knew* that was so, it might make a difference. But the fact is that *nobody but God* knows how Abe came to have this belief. *Abe* knows only that he can't help believing this crazy thing. His 'certainty', as described by Rissler, is purely 'psychological'. (The word, 'certainty', in Rissler's discussion, does *not* function as a term of epistemic appraisal.)

Abe has no *insight*, no *evidence*, no *argument* to back up his crazy belief. It is not the product of any 'properly functioning' cognitive faculty. It does not conform to the standards of his ethical community, and it is not the product of any reliable doxastic practice that I know of. In line with the way Rissler describes the kind of case he is interested in, we must say that God has simply implanted a rogue belief in Abe's mind – a belief that he can't make proper sense of, a belief that he cannot defend to his 'ethical community'. That the belief happens to be true doesn't make Abe any less irrational. He is 'psychologically certain' of

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something that not only lacks proper epistemic credentials but flies in the face of other things that do have proper epistemic credentials. Even at the end of his process of 'reflection', Abe is in a highly irrational state. Mere 'consistency' will not save him.

Of course, it isn't Abe's fault that he has this belief, since God has made it impossible for him to doubt it. It would be very wrong for God to blame Abe, or to punish him for it if he does what he believes God is 'commanding' him to do. But this doesn't make it rational for Abe to believe that God is commanding him to torture children. Nor does it make it right for him to do this terrible thing.

In this sort of case, I do not think that God has even succeeded in issuing a genuine *command*. You've successfully commanded someone to do something only if it is *reasonable* for that person to believe that you have commanded him to do it. In this case, I do not think it is reasonable for Abe to believe that God has commanded him to torture children. Poor man. He just can't help believing it anyway.

So why does Rissler expend so much 'spiritual energy (and not merely philosophical cleverness)'[25] on this project? Why bother to think about what someone should do if God made him 'psychologically certain' that God wants him to torture children? Rissler explains that he is concerned about 'numerous accounts in the Bible of God commanding or acting in ways that seem recognizably evil'.[26] As examples, Rissler mentions God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and God's commanding the Israelites to practice genocide against the Canaanites. Because Rissler believes that 'the Scripture on which one's faith in God is based should be considered in determining the moral beliefs one holds',[27] he thinks this is an important issue. His reverence for 'Scripture' is apparently what drives him to embrace the view that 'God is so transcendent that our conception of a loving God does not preclude Him from commanding us to perform actions that seem abhorrently wrong to us'.[28]

If Rissler wants to defend unpleasant passages in the Old Testament (OT), it seems to me that he has chosen the wrong method. The God of those parts of the OT just doesn't seem all that 'transcendent'. His reasons for giving some of the most shocking commands are often quite explicit. One may worry that they are *bad* reasons, but one can hardly say that they are beyond human comprehension.

In Genesis 22, God doesn't really want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. He just wants to 'test' him (v. 1), and Abraham passes God's test by showing that he is willing to obey and by showing how much he is willing to give up for the sake of his relationship to God (vv. 16–18). Testing Abraham for these qualities may or may not be a good reason for God to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but there is no mystery here about what God is up to. Training in devotion and obedience are not *that* hard to understand.[29]

What about the Canaanite genocide? Here, again, the biblical rationale is fairly clear. The Canaanites are being driven out of the land because they are supposedly

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guilty of practices abhorrent to Yahweh: sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual period, having sexual relations with the wife of a kinsman, sacrificing children to Molech, homosexual behaviour, and bestiality (Leviticus, 18.19–25). The very real danger that Israelite men would marry Canaanite women and adopt some of their 'abominable' practices is often stressed as well. Once again, these may not strike us as particularly good reasons for exterminating an entire nation, but there is no great mystery about what the reasons are supposed to have been. It's right there in the text. If there is a problem here, it springs from the fact that God's reasons are only too humanly comprehensible.

Here is another example from a much later period of Israelite history. The prophet Samuel instructs King Saul to exterminate the Amalekites. 'Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass' (1 Samuel, 15.5). Why? Here is the answer: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt' (1 Samuel, 15.3). According to the best Bible arithmetic, the crime for which the Amalekites – men, women, children, and animals – are to be punished was committed some 400 years previously (see Deuteronomy, 25.17–19). Again, there is nothing 'transcendent' or God-sized about this kind of reason. It resembles only too closely the blood feuds and revenge killings that stretch across generations of human beings.

Rissler wants to believe that these stories faithfully represent the wishes of a good and loving God, and not the relatively low level of moral development of the people who did these things and told stories about them. He thinks he has to believe this because his 'faith' is based on 'Scripture'. But it is hard to see how the appeal to mystery and transcendence can get a footing in such treacherous terrain.

## Concluding remarks

We have taken a close look at three ways in which divine-command theorists can respond to the challenge posed by the question, *what if God commanded X?* The least plausible of the three, it seems to me, is the overworked appeal to transcendence and mystery. If the claim that God is good is to mean anything, it must have implications for God's behaviour. One such implication is that He would never command us to torture children. If we can't even be sure of that, then how can we be sure that God won't tell lies? Or that He will keep His promises? Or that anything in the Bible is true?

In contrast, Adams's modified divine-command theory requires the existence of a God who never actually commands cruelty. That is certainly an improvement. But Adams's theory has one – to me, at least – extremely counterintuitive implication. It allows for possible worlds in which being-an-instance-of-X is not

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an intrinsically wrong-making characteristic. More generally, it allows for the possibility that cruelty is not wrong.

I conclude that the appeal to God's essential goodness is the divine-command theorist's best bet. Whether it can produce a satisfying result depends mainly on our ability to give an account of God's goodness that does not trivialize it and that does not make God subject to an independent standard of goodness. I do not see how to do that. But perhaps people cleverer than I will succeed where I have not.[30]

## Notes

1. Different versions of the divine-command theory take different positions on just what this 'determining' amounts to. According to some, God's commands cause us to have moral obligations, on others moral obligation supervenes on divine commands, and on still others God's commands are constitutive of moral obligation. Most of what I have to say in this paper will apply regardless of which view of the 'determining' relation one takes.
2. See Robert M. Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York NY & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 233–238. See also C. Stephen Evans *Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4, and William P. Alston 'Some suggestions for divine command theorists', in *idem Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 254.
3. See Edward Wierenga 'A defensible divine command theory', *Noûs*, **17** (1983), 387–487.
4. Suppose that it is indeed a metaphysically necessary truth that God is good. Then it is impossible for God to be evil. But surely it is true that if (*per impossibile*) God were evil, He would be not be good, and false that if (*per impossibile*) God were evil, He would be good.
5. This premise needs refinement. Philosophers are adept at conjuring up unrealistic scenarios, and it would not be too difficult to come up with one in which it is not wrong to do X. What is clearly true – at least by my lights – is that there is no possible situation in which being-an-X does not count in favour of saying that a particular X is wrong.
6. This is another example of a non-vacuously true 'if *per impossibile*' counterfactual.
7. I assume here that choosing to exercise a power is itself an act.
8. I develop this argument much more fully (and respond to a number of objections) in 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, **37** (2001), 143–160. For an opposing opinion, see T. J. Mawson 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston', *Religious Studies*, **38** (2002), 215–223. For my response, see 'Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson,' *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 441–449.
9. See Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods*, ch. 1. Alston makes a similar suggestion in 'Some suggestions for divine command theorists'.
10. In ch. 1 of *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams also offers a sophisticated and rather complicated defence of the view that God is the ultimate standard of goodness. I am unable to tell what he would say about the precise problem raised at the end of the previous section of the paper.
11. *Ibid*., 280.
12. *Ibid*., 250.
13. *Ibid*., 280.
14. *Ibid*., 46.
15. Robert M. Adams 'Moral arguments for theistic belief', in *idem The Virtue of Faith and other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York NY & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 147 [my italics].
16. Immanuel Kant *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Ak VII, 63. Cited in Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 284.
17. See Evans *Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love*, 306–315. I am not sure whether Adams would accept this precise formulation.
18. Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 282.
19. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your

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thoughts' (Isaiah, 55.8–9). These are some of the most used and abused words in the Bible. The key to understanding them can be found in the word 'higher' and in the immediately preceding verse, which reads, '[L]et the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' (All biblical quotations in this paper are from the Revised Standard Version.) The suggestion here is not that God's 'ways' and 'thoughts' are mysterious and inscrutable, thereby opening the door to 'apparently evil' commands. It is rather that they are vastly 'higher' in a sense that we do understand. Precisely because God is so much more merciful than any of us, He will 'abundantly pardon' the repentant sinner.

20. James D. Rissler 'A psychological constraint on obedience to God's commands: the reasonableness of obeying the abhorrently evil', *Religious Studies*, **38** (2002), 125–146, 141.
21. *Ibid*., 131–132.
22. Barack Obama Keynote Address delivered on 28 June 2006 at the Call for Renewal Conference, sponsored by the 'Sojourners'. See http://obama.senate.gov/podcast/060628-call_to_renewal_1/ (accessed on 13 July 2008.)
23. One possibly significant difference between Rissler and Obama is that the latter, but not the former, speaks of things a person like Abraham 'sees' or 'hears'. In the kind of case Rissler describes, the person merely has a belief that he can't shake. There need be no experiential phenomena – internal or external – that he has to interpret.
24. I take the wrongness of child sacrifice and child torture to be based on straightforward applications of very general moral principles like the one mentioned toward the end of the second section of the paper: (S) Causing intense and prolonged suffering is intrinsically wrong-making. How can we know that such principles are true? My preferred position is old-fashioned moral intuitionism. At a certain level of moral and cultural development, human beings (lots of them, anyway) acquire a degree of moral insight, and they are able to 'see' that certain types of behaviour are evil. I do not, of course, claim that we possess an infallible faculty of moral intuition. We make mistakes about moral matters, as about other things. But that we have got it wrong with respect to S seems to me to be about as likely as that we have got it wrong with respect to the 'intuition' that nothing could be both red and green all over (at the same time). For an able defence of the kind of moral intuitionism I favour, see Michael Huemer *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
25. Rissler 'A psychological constraint on obedience to God's commands', 143.
26. *Ibid*., 143.
27. *Ibid*.
28. *Ibid*., 144.
29. It may be hard for us to understand or to justify God's methods here. However, it is important to remember that if Abraham is an historical figure at all, he lived in a time and place in which no one knew that Yahweh was opposed to human sacrifice. In this historical context, the sacrifice of a cherished son would have been seen as the best one could offer a deity. As late as the period of the Judges, the Israelites still do not seem to know that Yahweh would not be pleased by such a sacrifice. Consider Jephtha's foolish vow to sacrifice the first person to meet him after success in a battle (Judges, 11.30–40). Of course, human sacrifice to Yahweh was eventually denounced by the great Hebrew prophets. (See, for example, Jeremiah, 7.31.)
30. I wish to thank the Editor and an anonymous referee for this journal for very stimulating comments and queries. I would also like to thank Chris Heathwood and Michael Huemer, who read an early draft of this paper, and made numerous helpful suggestions.

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