

## **I CAN'T MAKE YOU WORSHIP ME**

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...I can't make you love me if you don't

You can't make your heart feel something it won't

Here in the dark in these final hours

I will lay down my heart, and I'll feel the power

But you won't

No, you won't

And I can't make you love me

If you don't

Bonnie Raitt

### Abstract

This paper argues that Divine Command Theory is inconsistent with the view, held by many theists, that we have a moral obligation to worship God.

There is a wide consensus among theists that it is obligatory for us to worship God. For example, Richard Swinburne writes, 'Worship is obligatory—it is the proper response of respect by man to his creator' (Swinburne 1981, p. 126). On the other hand, many theists endorse the Divine Command Theory, according to which the difference between moral rightness and wrongness is simply that the former is that which is commanded by God, while the latter is that which is prohibited by God. However, as we shall argue, theists cannot consistently hold both of these views; for the Divine Command Theory implies that it is not morally obligatory to worship God.

The Divine Command Theory states that it is obligatory for us, for example, not to murder and steal because God prohibits murder and stealing. In particular, the bible reports God as saying ‘Thou shalt not murder’ and ‘Thou shalt not steal’ in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 13 and 15). Similarly, it is obligatory for us to worship God and not to worship anything else, according to the Divine Command Theory, because God commands us to worship Herself and prohibits our worshipping anything else. Again, the bible reports God as saying ‘Thou shalt not worship any god except me’ in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3).

Thus, the Divine Command Theory includes the following principle:

**The Obligation Principle.** For any act  $\phi$ , we have a moral obligation to do  $\phi$  (or refrain from doing  $\phi$ ) if and only if God commands us to do  $\phi$  (or refrain from doing  $\phi$ ).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, we shall assume that the the Divine Command Theory includes the following principle:

**The Compliance Principle.** For any act  $\phi$ , if God commands us to do  $\phi$  (or refrain form doing  $\phi$ ), then we have a moral obligation to comply with Her command to do  $\phi$  (or refrain form doing  $\phi$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> It might be objected that, according to the Divine Command Theory, an act might be obligatory even when not commanded by God, since the act might be necessary for some other act that is so commanded. However, this objection is easily accommodated. We could simply revise OP as follows: for any act  $\phi$ , we have a moral obligation to do  $\phi$  (or refrain from doing  $\phi$ ) if and only if there exists an act  $\psi$ , such that (i) God commands us to do  $\psi$  (or refrain from doing  $\psi$ ), and (ii) our doing  $\phi$  (or refraining from doing  $\phi$ ) is necessary for our doing  $\psi$  (or refraining from doing  $\psi$ ). (A similar revision might be required in the case of the Compliance Principle below.) In the simple

It may appear that the Compliance Principle is simply implied by the Obligation Principle. It is important to note, however, that this is not so; the Compliance Principle states a distinct moral requirement, which is not already contained in the Obligation Principle. Consider, for example, God's command to honour the sabbath. Given this command, the Obligation Principle implies that

(1) we have a moral obligation to honour the sabbath.

Whereas the Compliance Principle implies that

(2) we have a moral obligation to comply with God's command to honour the sabbath.

Yet we may fail to fulfill the latter obligation even when we succeed in fulfilling the former. In order to fulfill the obligation stated in (1), it is sufficient that we do, in fact, honour the sabbath; it sufficient that we conform to God's command, as we shall say. It does not matter what our reason for so conforming is: perhaps we honour the sabbath because God has commanded us to do so; but perhaps we honour the sabbath for some independent reason—because we want to impress our neighbours, say.<sup>2</sup> In the latter case we need not believe that God has commanded our honouring the sabbath, nor even that God exists. Nonetheless, regardless of what our reasons are for conforming to God's command, if we do so conform, we will have fulfilled our

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case,  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  will be one and the same action. In the interests of simplicity, we shall leave out this complication here.

<sup>2</sup> By reason is here meant what is commonly termed a 'motivating reason.' As Smith (1994, p. 96) puts it, motivating reasons are 'psychological states, states that play a certain explanatory role in producing action.' Motivating reasons are usually distinguished from "normative reasons."

moral obligation, as stated in (1).

However, in order to fulfill the obligation stated in (2), mere conformity is not sufficient. As we use the term ‘comply’ here, compliance requires more than conformity. In particular, we may be said to comply with God’s command to honour the sabbath just in case (i) we conform with the command, and (ii) our reason for so conforming is the command itself. In order to comply, God’s commanding our honouring the sabbath must be our reason for honouring the sabbath. If we conform to God's command for some other reason, then we will fail to fulfill our moral obligation, as stated in (2).

There is some textual support for the view that the Divine Command Theory contains both the Obligation Principle and the Compliance Principle. For example, The Catholic Encyclopedia says:

The Divine command is set forth in the most stringent terms by Christ, and the failure to comply with it is visited with the supreme penalty of eternal damnation. (Delany, 1911, emphasis added)

Similarly, John Madden writes:

[T]here is an all-powerful God who created the entire cosmos--everything and everybody--and he laid down rules for how to live. Things are right or wrong to the degree that they comply with what God has commanded--or forbidden. This approach to ethical thinking is commonly called the Divine Command theory. (Madden, 2003, Ch. 1, emphasis added)

It is unclear, though, that these authors have in mind the distinction introduced above between

conformity and compliance. In any case, it is independently plausible that the Divine Command Theory contains both the Obligation Principle and the Compliance Principle. If it did not contain the latter, then a committed atheist, who was wholly opposed to the idea of divine commands, might nonetheless happen to act by pure fluke in a way that was entirely beyond moral reproach, by the lights of the Divine Command Theory. Indeed, we can imagine a case in which a person sets out willfully to violate God's commands as an act of defiance, but who accidentally conforms with those commands (perhaps because she is mistaken as to the content of the commands). Again, absent the Compliance Principle, the Divine Command Theory could have no moral quarrel with such an individual. These possibilities seem inimical to the spirit of the Divine Command Theory; hence, we shall assume that the Compliance Principle is included.

Our argument shall rest on the ubiquitous, and quite uncontroversial principle that 'ought' implies 'can'; call this principle the Ought-Can Principle. In the moral realm, this principle says that, if it is impossible for a person to perform some act  $\phi$ , then it cannot be the case that she morally ought to do  $\phi$ , and, more particularly, it cannot be the case that she is under any moral obligation to do  $\phi$ . This principle is very widely accepted, and so we shall make no effort to defend it here.

Notice that the Compliance Principle and the Ought-Can Principle jointly place certain limits on what God can command us to do: specifically, God cannot issue any command with which it would be impossible for us to comply. Suppose, for example, that God were to command us to ride a camel through the eye of a needle. The Compliance Principle implies that it we would then have an obligation to comply with the command. But it is clearly impossible for us to do so; hence, the supposed command would violate the Ought-Can Principle. Given these two principles, therefore, it cannot be the case that God has issued any such command. In this way, the Compliance Principle excludes God's issuing certain commands: specifically,

those with which it would be impossible for us to comply.

We shall argue that the command to worship God is one of the commands so excluded. However, unlike the previous example, the impossibility of our complying with the command to worship God is not due to any inability on our part. Rather, as we shall argue, the latter command is, in an important sense, self-defeating. Because of the very nature of worship, it would not be possible for us to comply with a command to worship God.

Worship is, just like love or admiration, always voluntary. It is logically impossible for one reluctantly or unwillingly to worship anything. One might pretend to worship God by following certain religious rituals, but that does not mean that one actually worships God. Consider the following scenario. Suppose that John wants Kate to worship him as much as he worships her. In order to satisfy his desire John points a gun at Kate and commands her to worship him. In this situation, it is logically impossible for Kate to comply with John's command. Kate might go through the motions of worshipping John—singing his praises and so on—but if her reason for doing so is solely John's command, then her behaviour will not count as genuine worship. Behaviour that is 'worship-like' cannot constitute genuine worship, unless it is motivated in a certain way. Kate's reason for singing John's praises must be that she believes John to be praise-worthy. Thus, John's command is self-defeating; its very utterance removes the possibility of Kate's complying with it.

Notice, however, that it *is* possible for Kate to conform to John's command (in the sense defined earlier); that is to say, it is possible for Kate to worship John. As it happens, she may have independent reasons for worshipping him. She may actually believe John to be praise-worthy (even though she doesn't let it show), and if she were to sing his praises for that reason, then she may be said to genuinely worship him. Nonetheless, as we have said, conformity is not sufficient for compliance. In this latter scenario, where Kate genuinely worships John, her reason for doing so is not John's command; hence, although she worships

John, she does not comply with his command to do so.

The problem may be put as follows. In order for Kate to comply with John's command, there are two necessary conditions: (i) Kate worships John; and (ii) Kate's reason for worshipping John is John's command. However, these two conditions are inconsistent. For (i) implies that Kate's reason for worshipping John is something other than John's command; and this implication contradicts (ii). It is not possible both that Kate's reason is John's command and that it is not John's command.

However, putting the problem in this way suggests an objection. We have been speaking of 'the reason,' as though there could be only one. But perhaps Kate could have more than one reason to conform. For instance, it might be objected that Kate could have two reasons: one reason is that she believes John to be worthy of worship, and the other is that John has commanded her to worship him. In that case, conditions (i) and (ii) might both be satisfied. But we deny that such a case is possible. We accept that Kate may have more than one reason, but we deny that one of those reasons can be John's command. As far as we can tell, the very same considerations that show that John's command cannot be Kate's sole reason also show that it cannot be one of many reasons she has. Thus, just as John's command cannot be the reason, it cannot be a reason either. It may be a reason for Kate to act as if she worships John. But it cannot be a reason to worship him.

Clearly the case of God is directly analogous to that of John and Kate. If God commands us to worship Her, it is logically impossible for us to comply. Hence, given the Compliance Principle and the Ought-Can Principle, it cannot be the case that God commands us to worship Her. But if that is so, the Obligation Principle implies that we have no moral obligation to worship God. Therefore, the Divine Command Theory is inconsistent with the theistic view that we have an obligation to worship God. The theist might resist our conclusion by disputing our analysis of worship; in particular, she might deny that worship has a necessary motivational

component. But if so, she would save the moral obligation to worship God only at the expense of robbing it of all significance, by making worship into an empty gesture. And it seems unlikely that theists would welcome the claim that we have a moral obligation to perform empty gestures.<sup>3</sup>

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