

AN EXPLORATION OF METAPHYSICAL GROUNDING AND DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

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ABSTRACT The concept of metaphysical grounding refers to a dependence relation—a relation between facts that is asymmetrical and non-causal. I aim to apply this concept to a Divine Command Theory (DCT) of moral obligations. Divine command theorists say that moral obligations arise from God's commands. I argue that the three main views on the relation between the divine command and the obligation—causal, supervenience, and identity—do not capture all that we desire in a moral theory of obligations. After attempting to clarify metaphysical grounding in general, I articulate the distinction between what I call normative grounding and metaethical grounding. I then use this distinction to criticize Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of DCT and to highlight the compatibility of DCT with other ethical theories.

KEYWORDS: Metaphysical Grounding, Divine Command Theory, Moral Obligation, Dependence, Relation

So I asked my wife, who is not a philosopher, what a moral obligation was. She thought about it for a few seconds and said, 'It's what you *should* do.' This seems right to me. It makes sense to say that an obligation is what you should do. Suppose we ask another question, 'Why do we have moral obligations?' There are a variety of answers that philosophers give to this metaethical question, but philosophers who embrace Divine Command Theory (hereafter, DCT) are going to answer this question by saying something like this: we have moral obligations because God commands us to do certain things. That is, moral obligations depend on God's commands. Moral obligations, or moral duties, have value, but I will not be focusing directly on axiological issues in this essay; the focus is specifically on the nature of the deontological items we call moral obligations.

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The ever-increasing literature on DCT is often focused on responding to objections from non-theists and theists alike, but divine command theorists also present arguments among themselves, trying to discern the precise nature of DCT. One leading proponent of DCT is John Hare, and he poses an important question: ‘What is the relation between the divine command and the obligation?’ (2015: 18) Divine command theorists, in articulating their positions, have set forth three main answers to this question: the relation between the divine command and the obligation is either a causal relation, a supervenience relation, or an identity relation. In this essay, I would like to explore the concept of metaphysical grounding, a concept that represents a gap in the literature. [While the leading proponents of DCT mentioned in this paper sometimes use the term ‘grounding,’ they do not typically use it in a technical way. The terms ‘grounding’ and ‘metaphysical grounding’ are not found in the indexes of the works cited in this paper by Quinn, Hare, Adams, and Evans.] I propose that the relation between the divine command and the obligation is a grounding relation, which, as I will explain, refers to *asymmetrical, non-causal dependence*. [Following Copan and Flannagan, I want to make an important qualification: ‘Note well: *a divine command theory is not the claim that morality is based on knowledge of, or belief in, commands revealed in a sacred text such as the Bible, Torah, or Qur’an*. While most divine command theorists accept that God has revealed his commands through a sacred text, this is due to other theological commitments they have, independent of belief in a divine command theory’ [2014: 153f (emphasis in the original)].]

First, I will discuss why we need to investigate the concept of metaphysical grounding, and then, in the second section, I attempt to gain some clarity on grounding in general. Third, I will articulate the distinction between normative grounding and metaethical grounding, which I believe is key to responding to some objections to DCT and to seeing the compatibility of DCT with other ethical theories. In the final section, I put the notion into practice by aiming to show how Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s discussion of DCT fails to distinguish between these different kinds of grounding.

Why Grounding?

If some version of DCT is actually true, then different aspects of the theory will likely be able to be stated by appealing to all of the relations just mentioned (and more): they are overlapping concepts to be sure. [Truth-maker theorists, for example, claim there is a relation between a truth-maker and a truth-bearer: *e* is the truth-maker for the proposition *e exists* (Hallvard Lillehammer and Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2003: 2). Some have proposed an equivalence between truth-making and grounding (see Correia and Schnieder, 2012: 25ff), but I am not necessarily

making that claim, nor am I asserting truth-maker maximalism (every truth has a truthmaker).] Causation is typically described as a relation between events, and certainly there are events going on with DCT. Commands themselves, after all, are causal entities. If I tell the reader, ‘Keep on reading my article to the end,’ I cause them to think certain thoughts—and hopefully to keep reading to the end! Supervenience is usually described as a relation between properties, and we can sensibly speak of the property of being commanded, whatever view we end up taking. And as for identity, even if I were to take a supervenience view, say, I could still claim that a particular command of God is identical to itself, just as God is identical to God. So I am not saying that everything I argue for in this paper is incompatible with each of the three main views, and I am not necessarily arguing for a fourth view. But I do hope this work contributes to the excellent discussions that have been going on in analytic philosophy about divine command metaethics, perhaps bringing us closer together or allowing us to see our conceptual differences more clearly—all to the glory of the infinitely good God who commands.

So then, why investigate grounding? Because, I think each of the three main views runs into difficulty in accounting for all that we want in a moral theory. A book-length treatment would not be enough to evaluate the three views, so all I can hope for in this section is to point out a few of my concerns in hopes of motivating the reader to consider grounding.

One worry that arises in considering the causal view is that causes are different from their effects. If God’s command is the cause, then what exactly is the effect? The effect must be the obligation that is created by the command. But what exactly is this thing that is created? It is not clear, which is why Mark Murphy in *Theological Voluntarism* argues that the view is mysterious. John Hare (2015: 19, emphasis his) rightly points out that ‘causation seems wrong because it suggests two different events, in logic separable (though one always comes after the other under physical law).’ Grounding would avoid this problem because it is *non-causal* dependence.

There are concerns with supervenience as well. In the opening paragraph of this essay, I introduced DCT as a view that claims our moral obligations depend on divine commands. Hence, we are interested in *dependence*. But supervenience may not be best suited for articulating dependence relations because they are asymmetrical. Kathrin Koslicki (2012: 187) notes that supervenience is not ‘in and of itself an asymmetric relation’ and ‘serves to mark merely a relation of necessary covariance between its relata.’ Citing no less an authority than Jaegwon Kim, she writes that after decades of ‘lively interest in supervenience, even its most committed champions were forced to conclude that this notion is not strong enough and lacks the right formal profile to yield a relation of genuine and asymmetric dependence.’

Dependence also does not seem to be captured merely by appealing to an identity relation—a relation that is symmetrical. [Matthew Flannagan first pointed this out to me.] Suppose I am hiking in Alaska with a friend, and we see before us that majestic highest peak in North America. We might argue about whether it should be called ‘Mount McKinley’ or ‘Denali,’ but we are not going to argue whether the mountain we see before us is identical with itself, for everything is identical with itself. So in making an identity claim about the mountain, we are not saying anything about what the mountain *depends* on; we are just saying it is identical with itself. Robert Adams, another seminal thinker in the DCT literature, articulated in an early essay this view: ‘ethical wrongness *is* (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God.’ (1987: 139, emphasis in the original) Highlighting the way the same property can be referred to with different words, this notion has enabled divine command theorists to powerfully respond to certain objections, especially those that [rightly] claim ‘wrong’ does not *mean* ‘forbidden by God.’ As John Hare (2001: 34) notes, ‘[T]he failure of property identity does not follow from the failure of meaning identity.’ [Hare is summarizing the new-wave argument of David Brink who is not a divine command theorist.] So property-speak is useful to be sure, but properties are not the same as *true propositions*.

Derek Parfit (2012: 264) seems to have been correct when he wrote that ‘any true claim about something can be restated as a claim about this thing’s property.’ For example, while the *properties* ‘redness’ and ‘ethical wrongness’ may not be true in themselves, propositions referring to those properties may be. So the proposition ‘my truck is red’ could be true, and so could this one: ‘It is wrong for us to harm other people just for fun.’ And divine command theorists want to say that this last proposition *is* true, and it depends upon God’s command. In fact, divine command theorists in the Adamsian tradition of the identity view sometimes write this way. [For example, see Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan: ‘[I]f God commands something, we have a duty to do it—that is, *God’s commands generate obligations*’ (2014: 170 (emphasis added)). Compare also, J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig: ‘[O]ur moral duties are grounded in the divine commands...’; and ‘[O]ur duties are determined by the commands...of a just and loving God’ (2003: 531 (emphasis added)).]

In this section, I have tried to show that each of the three main views of DCT in the literature runs into some difficulty in accounting for what is desirable in a moral theory of obligations. Now, we turn to the concept of metaphysical grounding more generally.

Introduction to Metaphysical Grounding

Mark Murphy (2009: 121) aptly explains, ‘When we ask what grounds the ex-

istence of some thing x , we are asking whether there is some thing y that is more ontologically basic than x and explains x 's existence.' Consider some propositions:

- (1) Legal facts are grounded in non-legal, e.g. social, facts. (Correia and Schnieder, 2012: 1)
- (2) The fact that Mike's action is wrong obtains in virtue of the fact that it was done with the sole intention of causing harm. (Fine, 2012: 37)
- (3) A true conjunction is grounded in its true conjuncts.
- (4) Monica is sick because she has the flu. (Bliss and Trogon, *Metaphysical Grounding*)

(1) – (4) illustrate what many philosophers call a grounding relation, which is a dependence relation between facts or propositions. (Correia and Schnieder, 2012: 11) [Grounding theorists differ on what they believe to be the relata of grounding. For example, Paul Audi embraces what he calls the 'worldly conception of facts,' where facts are not true propositions but 'obtaining states of affairs' (2012: 103). For the sake of this paper, I will not take the worldly conception of facts but the *conceptual* view of facts, where 'facts will differ if they pick out an object or property via different concepts' (Audi, 2012: 103); these conceptual facts I am taking to be true propositions.] The sentential connective 'because' can be useful in trying to understand grounding. To say that one fact x is grounded in another fact y is to say that x obtains *because* y obtains. In a statement that illustrates a grounding relation, the portion immediately following the 'because' expresses the fact that does the grounding, and the other portion of the sentence expresses the fact that is grounded.

So I see (1*) as equivalent to (1):

(1*) Legal facts obtain because non-legal, e.g. social, facts obtain.

(1) and (1*) indicate that it is the non-legal facts that explain why the legal facts obtain. So if some group of official government lawmakers enacts some law forbidding a certain action z , then given this notion of grounding, we could say that the fact that z is illegal is due to the fact that the lawmakers forbid z .

Regarding proposition (2), we can say that the fact that Mike acted solely from harm grounds the fact that his actions were wrong. (2*) is equivalent:

(2*) Mike acted wrongly because he solely intended to harm someone.

Now let us use (2*) to highlight another point about grounding, namely, that

grounding relations behave *asymmetrically*. In other words, if x is grounded in y , then the opposite does not hold: y is *not* grounded in x . (2^*) is plausible, but (2^{**}) is obviously absurd:

(2^{**}) Mike solely intended to harm someone because Mike acted wrongly.

This gets the priority of things exactly wrong! It shows the asymmetry of grounding. And as we saw with (1), Social facts give rise to legal facts, but the converse is not so. The dependence involved in grounding goes only one way.

'Dependence' is an apt word to describe grounding, but we are talking about *non-causal* dependence. Take (5),

(5) Carlos crashed his car because he fell asleep.

Even though we are using the connective 'because,' this is not a case of the grounding we have in mind. Carlos fell asleep while driving his car, and this caused him to drift off the road and crash his car. His falling asleep is causally related to the car crash, but when we say, for example, in (3) that a conjunction is grounded in its conjuncts, we do not mean that the conjuncts together *cause* the conjunction to be true. (6) is not right:

(6) The proposition p and the proposition q cause the proposition $p \& q$ to be true.

But it is appropriate to say that p and q jointly ground the proposition $p \& q$. That is, because p is true and because q is true, the proposition $p \& q$ is true.

Other deductive rules of implication may allow grounding to be seen more clearly. Consider the rule Addition. We can deductively infer that since p is true, then $p \vee q$ is true. However, we cannot deductively infer that since $p \vee q$ is true, therefore p is true.

Now on to the next example of grounding from above, (4), that Monica is sick because she has the flu. This was designed to show that grounding is quite common in ordinary language. The fact that Monica has the flu explains why she is sick. And the asymmetry of (4) can be seen as well since it does not capture what we mean by (4) if we say that Monica has the flu because she is sick. 'Being sick' just means 'having ill health,' and (4) means that Monica has ill health because she has the respiratory disease of influenza. And the converse is not so.

Having introduced the concept of grounding, I will now offer my definition:

(G) Fact g grounds fact f if and only if g 's obtaining makes it the case (asymmetrically, non-causally) that f obtains.

Normative Versus Metaethical Grounding

In order to understand the distinction between normative and metaethical grounding, let us further analyze the grounding example given in (2).

(2) The fact that Mike's action is wrong obtains in virtue of the fact that it was done with the sole intention of causing harm.

I said (2) shows a grounding relation, which means that there are two distinct facts, one grounding the other. Here they are, with (2b) grounding (2a):

(2a) Mike's action is wrong.

and

(2b) Mike acted with the sole intention of causing harm.

One thing that should stand out to us immediately is that these two propositions are different in an important way—(2a) is normative and (2b) is not. (2a) says that Mike did something that he ought not to have done; his action violated a moral norm or obligation. (2b) merely describes what Mike did; he aimed to cause physical and/or mental damage to someone.

However, something else should stand out to us about these two facts—they are both particular statements about Mike. In ethics, we are, to be sure, concerned with statements about particular individuals. But that is not all we are concerned with. We are interested in general statements about morality, and we call those general statements *moral principles*. [Not everyone is interested in setting forth general statements or principles of morality, however. There are those who deny that such general principles exist; they are called *particularists* about morality. For a discussion, see Timmons (2013 Ch. 11).]

Lewis Vaughn (2013: 22) has some good comments on how when we engage in moral reasoning, the natural pattern is to appeal to moral principles in order to make a judgment about particular cases. He writes,

'Notice how natural this pattern seems. If we want to argue that a particular action (or kind of action) is wrong, for example, we must provide a reason for this moral judgment. The natural (and logical) move is to reach for a general moral principle that supports the judgment. Why is performing surgery on Mrs. Johnson without her consent wrong? Because, we might say, treating people without their consent is a violation of their autonomy (a moral principle), and performing surgery on Mrs. Johnson without her consent would be an instance of such a violation (a nonmoral fact).'

Vaughn's comments seem right to me—that is how we engage in moral reasoning about particular cases. And notice the appeal to grounding: performing surgery on Mrs. Johnson without her consent is wrong *because* it violates the principle of autonomy.

Now that we have highlighted the importance of principles in moral reasoning, let us apply this idea to the case with Mike's having the sole intention of causing harm. A more complete picture of the reasoning would look like this:

- (7) It is wrong for us to act with the sole intention of causing harm.
- (2b) Mike acted with the sole intention of causing harm.
- (2a) Therefore, Mike's action is wrong.

[The 'for us' in (7) is apt and is intended to show that the moral obligation is one that *we have*; that is, I am referring to a principle—one of the principles (see note 45)—of what Quinn (1978: 164) called 'the human moral law.' What I am getting at here is similar in one sense to what T.M. Scanlon (2014: 3) calls the 'relational character' of reasons: 'Reasons are reasons *for* an agent.' Scanlon writes in the context of an atheistic view about practical reason, but I think it is helpful to say something similar in the context of DCT about moral obligations: obligations are obligations *for* a human person (at least one that has sufficient cognitive capacity); I do not say 'agent' because God is an agent, and it does not make sense to say God has obligations like we do because it does not make sense to me that God would command himself to do anything.

(7) seems like a plausible moral principle—and I am taking a moral principle like the one expressed in (7) to be the same thing as a moral obligation—and it is normative. [If someone is defending themselves, for example, against a dangerous home intruder, they are not solely intending harm; they may be intending to harm the intruder, but they are doing so in order to protect themselves or their family. So I do not see the home-intruder case to be an instance of acting with the sole intention of causing harm. Harkening back to my introduction, I indicated that it makes sense for the divine command theorist to say that moral obligations depend on God's commands. So the obligation is not identical with the command, strictly speaking, since the obligation depends on the command. Thus, I am taking an obligation to be a particular kind of fact or true proposition. I think it makes sense to talk this way because a command is not the sort of thing that in itself can be true, but a proposition can be true. That is to say, God's command itself cannot be true, but *the fact that God commands* something can be.] It is fairly common in ethics to take a moral principle about what is right or wrong for us to be the same thing as an obligation or duty or rule (see Frankena, 1973: 2–3 and Timmons, 2013: 4). Another way to speak about

obligations is to speak in terms of moral *properties* (see Copp: 2006). Interestingly, Vaughn (2013: 8) speaks of a principle *both* in terms of a proposition as well as—separately—a command (or imperative) on the very same page, indicating that some philosophers speak loosely in this area. (2b) is a non-normative fact describing the particular actions of Mike. And (2a), the conclusion, is normative—it expresses a moral judgment about a specific case. So the moral principle, (7), and the non-moral facts expressed in (2b) jointly ground (2a). We can call this an instance of *normative grounding* because a normative fact was involved [along with the non-moral facts of (2b)] in the grounding of another fact.

To proceed with our argument, let us further analyze (7). From the *Law of Excluded Middle*, it follows that (7) is either grounded or it is ungrounded. If (7) is grounded, then it is grounded either in a further moral principle or it is not. Some, like Kant, would say that (7) is true, but (7) is true because harming someone violates a further moral principle, the Categorical Imperative. A virtue ethicist would also agree with (7), and they would agree with Kant that (7) is true in virtue of a further moral principle. However, they would say something along these lines, that (7) is true because to harm someone is to act in a way that is unkind or perhaps unloving. There are other ways to look at this, and my point here is not to decide this matter but to highlight the difference between a moral principle and a *fundamental* moral principle.

I said that (7) was a moral principle because it is a general moral proposition that we can appeal to in deciding specific cases. That is to say we can apply this general moral truth in a variety of scenarios. I take it that what would make (7) a fundamental moral principle are all of those things plus the fact that it is not derived from a further moral principle. It would be basic or fundamental because it is underived or ungrounded in some further *moral* claim. We would have reached a kind of bedrock, morally speaking, or what some have called the ‘bottom-most level of ethics.’ (Shafer-Landau, 2003: 98)

Now, let us grant for the sake of argument that (7) is a fundamental moral principle. Even though (7), then, would not be grounded in another moral principle, (7) would still be either grounded or ungrounded. So we would have an important question on our hands: What, if anything, grounds this fundamental moral principle? [The ‘if anything’ is important here to make sure I am not question-begging against those views that say fundamental moral principles are not grounded; for example, see Shafer-Landau (2003: 96–7).] And when we undertake to provide an answer to this question, it seems to me that we are shifting gears. We are not doing what Vaughn was talking about when we reach for a general moral principle because (7) is fundamental and thus not further grounded in another moral principle. I take it that we would be moving from a normative ethical question to a metaethical question.

In understanding the distinction between normative ethical questions and meta-ethical questions, I want to use an excellent illustration from Andrew Fisher (2014: 1-2). He invites us to imagine ethics as football. The players on the field are the ones directly playing the game and making particular decisions. They are like the ones engaged in applied ethics who are making specific decisions about, say, whether it is wrong to have an abortion, whether hunting is wrong, or whether we have an obligation to give money to charity. The referees are the ones who help interpret the rules that the players are following; they are similar to the one doing normative ethics who is interested in the principles that guide the applied ethicist. Finally, we have the analysts or pundits. They are not playing the game and are not directly involved in interpreting the rules for the players, but they are related to the game! They are making comments about the game in various ways. And we can imagine the pundits acknowledging that the rules of the game are such and such, but they would be interested in further questions about [for instance] how those rules came to be—along with many other questions.

Mark Timmons and Alexander Miller would generally agree with this way of thinking about ethics. Timmons (2013: 19; emphasis his) sees normative ethics as attempting to answer ‘moral questions,’ whereas metaethics attempts to answer ‘*non-moral* questions about morality.’ And since normative ethical questions are directly about what actions are right and wrong, Miller (2017: 1) would regard those questions as *first-order* questions. However, metaethical questions are not directly about what is right and wrong; metaethical questions are *second-order* questions. He quotes Michael Smith:

‘In metaethics, we are concerned not with questions which are the province of normative ethics like “Should I give to famine relief?” or “Should I return the wallet I found in the street?” but with questions about questions like these.’

Among the many second-order questions that are investigated in metaethics are questions related to the existence and nature of moral facts; the branch of metaethics that deals with these questions is *moral metaphysics*. [Timmons (2013: 16-20) discusses three main branches of metaethics: moral semantics, moral metaphysics, and moral epistemology. Miller (2017: 2) mentions six kinds of metaethical questions in a list he says is not intended to be exhaustive: meaning, metaphysics, epistemology and justification, phenomenology, moral psychology, and objectivity.] And when we inquire about the grounds of some fact, we are doing metaphysics; thus, when we inquire about the grounds of some fundamental moral fact, we are doing moral metaphysics. So previously, I mentioned the question about what, if anything, grounds (7), which we were taking as a fundamental moral principle. In attempting to answer

that question, we are not searching for what Vaughn was after, the general moral principle that grounds (7), because no such principle exists, by definition, since (7) is fundamental. Rather, we are inquiring into a nonmoral, second-order question about (7).

And now I am prepared to formally distinguish between *normative grounding* and *metaethical grounding*. Recall my definition of grounding:

(G) Fact g grounds fact f if and only if g 's obtaining makes it the case (asymmetrically, non-causally) that f obtains.

We have fact g , which is the fact that does the grounding, and fact f , which is the fact that is grounded by g . Following this scheme, normative grounding entails that g is some normative proposition—a moral principle or fundamental moral principle—that makes it the case that f obtains. Thus, we have normative grounding, (NG), defined like this:

(NG) Moral fact g grounds fact f if and only if g 's obtaining makes it the case (asymmetrically, non-causally) that f obtains.

Now let us define metaethical grounding. If on some view a fundamental moral principle is grounded, then there is some non-moral fact that grounds the fundamental moral principle. The non-moral fact that grounds the fundamental moral principle would be involved in a case of metaethical grounding. Hence, we have (MG):

(MG) Non-moral fact g grounds fact f —a fundamental moral principle—if and only if g 's obtaining makes it the case (asymmetrically, non-causally) that f obtains.

Assuming this distinction between normative and metaethical grounding makes sense, if a philosopher makes an argument that rests on a confusion between these two concepts, then we can show that their argument fails. I think Walter Sinnott-Armstrong makes this very mistake.

Sinnott-Armstrong's Discussion of Divine Command Theory

Divine command theorists have responded to several objections by pointing out that the objectors have failed to distinguish between certain concepts and that this failure renders their objections to Divine Command Theory (DCT) unsuccessful. For example, divine command theorists have responded to objections by noting a failure to distinguish between moral epistemology and moral ontology (Peoples, 2011), moral semantics and moral ontology (Mileo, 2018: 75-78), moral motivation and moral ontology (Craig, 2009: 86), and the right and the good (Milliken, 2009).

This section takes a similar approach and argues that Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's objection to DCT depends on a failure to distinguish between *normative grounding* and *metaethical grounding*, which invalidates any argument that depends on this equivocation.

In Sinnott-Armstrong's book *Morality Without God?*, he argues for a version of morality he calls a 'secular harm-based morality' (2009: 65), which is opposed to Divine Command Theory. The question he is after is not '*whether* rape is immoral, but *why* it is immoral,' and the answer he gives is simple: 'Rape is wrong because it harms the victim for no adequate reason' (57). Sinnott-Armstrong notes that most people agree that harm involves death, pain, and disability (58), and he does a nice job reflecting on the expansive nature of harm. He shows that his harm-based view accounts for a wide variety of actions that are commonly thought to be immoral, such as stealing (58), lying (58), breaking promises (66), neglecting the care of one's elderly parents (77–78), disobedience to parents (78), and disobedience to most laws (78); he even claims to be able to derive some positive duties from his harm-based position (67–68). While there are many different kinds of immoral acts, what 'makes them all immoral is some relation to harm to others for no adequate reason' (68).

In addition to setting forth his 'secular view' (55), his aim is to contrast it with DCT, or what he calls 'the religious view,' which he says is not necessary for the 'existence of objective moral values and wrongness' (56). Here is how he contrasts the views:

'Consider rape, again. According to the harm-based account, what makes rape morally wrong is roughly the harm it causes. According to the divine command account, what makes rape wrong is that God commanded us not to rape. The contrast could hardly be more stark.' (96)

'In contrast [to the secular harm-based morality], many theists claim instead that what makes rape immoral is only that rape violates God's command.' (75)

He also claims the divine command theorist cannot say that 'God wants us not to harm each other, so He commands us not to harm others' (95). He thinks that this 'God cares' view is to be distinguished from DCT, which is the view that 'God's commands constitute moral wrongness as well as moral duties, obligations, and rights' (95). However, in this discussion, he does not give a reason why the 'God cares' view is to be distinguished from DCT; he merely states that. Perhaps he would say what he writes later in the chapter in a separate section, that if God were to have a reason to command us not to harm others (say, because he loves us and wants us not to harm each other), then 'that reason is what makes rape morally wrong, and the command itself is superfluous' (106). This is false and he rehearses a version of the supposed

Euthyphro dilemma, but I will not get into that here. [Sinnott-Armstrong is question-begging because he is assuming that ‘reason’ has to be taken as a moral obligation. While some philosophers may take ‘reason’ in that way, the divine command theorist can understand ‘reason’ in the sense that God simply desires something; this is what Blackburn (2014: 93-94) would call an ‘ordinary, everyday reason for acting.’ This everyday conception of “reason” is similar to what Fisher (2014: 179) calls a ‘motivating reason.’ Although I just said I am not going to get into the Euthyphro dilemma, I should point out that the Euthyphro question posed by Socrates is often given as a paradigm example of grounding (see Correia and Schnieder, 2012: 2–4; and Bliss and Trogon). So we already are in the neighborhood of Euthyphro.] What I want to do now is show that Sinnott-Armstrong is confusing what I have been calling normative grounding and metaethical grounding.

It is evident that Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that the following propositions are incompatible:

- (8) What makes rape morally wrong is the harm it causes.
- (9) What makes rape wrong is that God commanded us not to rape.

He says the contrast between these two views ‘could hardly be more stark’ (96). If (8) and (9) are incompatible, then this implies (10):

- (10) If rape is wrong because it harms the victim, then rape is not wrong because God commanded us not to rape.

If (10) is true, this could raise a serious worry for DCT because all we have to do is invoke another proposition to have an argument against DCT. (11) is intuitively plausible:

- (11) Rape is wrong because it harms the victim.

And by *modus ponens*, it would follow that

- (12) Rape is not wrong because God commanded us not to rape.

I am not saying that Sinnott-Armstrong explicitly gives this argument, but it seems to be implied by what he has written. But what should the divine command theorist say in response to this?

It seems to me that Sinnott-Armstrong is equivocating on ‘makes wrong.’ For (8) is plausibly taken as an instance of normative grounding, and (9) can plausibly be taken by the divine command theorist as an instance of metaethical grounding. And this means the two propositions do not have to be opposed to each other; thus, (10) is not necessarily true. First, let us look at (8). We can take (8) to mean that the moral

principle or fact—it is wrong for us to cause harm to someone—grounds the fact that rape is wrong. [I am trying to state (8) in the terms Sinnott-Armstrong uses to represent his reasoning, but as a moral principle, I would prefer (7), which includes the *intention* to cause harm rather than just *causing* harm.] That is, rape is wrong *because* it is wrong to harm someone. This is textbook normative reasoning; it is an instance of normative grounding. In fact, Sinnott-Armstrong himself refers to his own view by using the word ‘principle,’ indicating that I am on the right track here:

The *general principle* that it is immoral to cause harm for no adequate reason... (73, emphasis mine)

This *moral principle* can be true even at times when it does not apply to anyone... (93, emphasis mine)

Proposition (9), on the other hand, does not seem to be getting at what *principle* makes rape wrong. (9) is getting at the ultimate source of our obligation to refrain from raping; it is answering a second-order question about the ultimate nature of the moral fact of our obligation not to rape. (9) involves an instance of metaethical grounding. That is, the non-moral fact—God commands us not rape other people—grounds the moral fact that it is wrong for us to rape other people. (8) addresses the normative principle that makes the action wrong, and (9) addresses the fact that makes the normative principle true.

I stated above that (MG) entails a non-moral fact that grounds a fundamental moral principle. It may seem awkward for ‘it is wrong for us to rape other people’ to be seen as a fundamental moral principle. However, I said divine command theorists *can* take (9) that way, not that they have to. There are other options.

It seems to me that Sinnott-Armstrong is right that what makes rape wrong is that it harms the victim [but note my qualification from the previous footnote], but contra Sinnott-Armstrong, the divine command theorist *can* claim that God does not want us to harm each other, and so he commands us not to harm other people. We can accept (8) outright, taking it as a normative claim, and then we can add to it a metaethical claim about the grounding of the no-harm principle:

(8*) What normatively makes rape morally wrong is the harm it causes, and God’s command not to harm other people is what metaethically makes it the case that it is wrong to harm other people.

Or we could modify (9):

(9*) What makes rape wrong is that it ultimately violates God’s command to refrain from harming people.

I include the word ‘ultimately’ in (9*) to signal that I am making a metaethical claim. Still, there are more options. God is a loving being who no doubt wants us to be loving like he is. So the following could be true.

(9**) What makes rape wrong is that it ultimately violates God’s positive command to love other people.

Or this:

(9***) What makes rape wrong is that it ultimately violates God’s command not to use other people as a mere means to an end.

Additional moral principles are possible for the divine command theorist to appeal to here, including a utilitarian principle, which would also normatively make rape wrong because rape causes unhappiness. There is the historical example of William Paley who was both a utilitarian and something like a divine command theorist. [Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (2017: 3) note: Paley ‘argued that God wants us to promote the happiness of all, and we ought to obey God’s will.’ Janine Idziak also says it is worth noting that John Stuart Mill made reference to divine command morality: ‘If it be meant that utilitarianism does not recognize the revealed will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer that a utilitarian who believes in the perfect goodness and wisdom of *God* necessarily believes that whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals must fulfill the requirements of utility in a supreme degree. But others besides utilitarians have been of opinion that the Christian revelation was intended, and is fitted, to inform the hearts and minds of mankind with a spirit which should enable them to find for themselves what is right, and incline them to do it when found, rather than to tell them, except in a very general way, what it is; and that we need a doctrine of ethics, carefully followed out, to *interpret* to us the will of God’ (de Lazari-Radek and Singer, 2017: 28, as cited in Idziak, 1979: 34, note 112 (the italics are in Idziak’s quotation of Mill).]

A moral principle conducive to some versions of Natural Law Theory could work as well. According to Francis Beckwith, a common precept or general principle of the natural law is this: ‘it is morally wrong always and everywhere to kill an innocent person intentionally’ (2019: 15). I see no reason why this principle, if it is not ungrounded, could not be grounded in the commands of God. Not all theistic natural law theorists would agree that Natural Law Theory (NLT) is compatible with DCT, however. John Finnis (2018: 125) articulates his version of NLT in a way that explicitly denies that ‘principles and norms have their directive force precisely as the commands, imperatives, or dictates of a superior will.’

Even still, it is possible for the divine command theorist to appeal to more than

one principle at the same time to show that rape is wrong: God could issue multiple commands that cover the action of rape; thus, rape would be normatively wrong for a variety of reasons, and the multiple obligations that are violated in rape cases would still ultimately stem from God's commands. [If rape is wrong because it violates more than one moral principle, as I think is plausible, then the divine command theorist should be committed to a plurality of normative ethical principles.] As I indicated above, my point is not to decide upon the correct normative ethical theory here, which would take a lot of additional argumentation. My point in this section has been to highlight Sinnott-Armstrong's equivocation and to show that any argument depending upon this equivocation cannot succeed.

Summary and Conclusion

I opened this essay by reflecting on the nature of our moral obligations, claiming that divine command theorists believe those obligations depend upon God's commands. The main objective was to propose that the relation between the divine command and the obligation is a grounding relation, which I explained refers to asymmetrical, non-causal dependence. Trying to motivate readers to consider grounding, I tried to show that the three prevailing views on the relation between the command and the obligation—causal, supervenience, and identity—fall short in explaining all we desire in a moral theory. Appealing to the distinction between normative grounding and metaethical grounding, I critiqued Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of DCT and noted that this distinction helps us see how DCT is compatible with a variety of normative ethical theories.

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