

A Defense of The Divine Command Theory

1) Introduction:¹

The Divine Command Theory of Morality says, roughly, “Given that God exists, an act is good only *because* God commands it.”² The main problem with the Divine Command Theory is that raised by Plato’s *Euthyphro*. The *Euthyphro* argues that the gods command things *because* those things are good, rather than the other way around. While Plato’s view is right given his god-independent Form of the Good,³ this essay argues that the *Euthyphro* argument does not apply to the God of the Western monotheisms.

Plato’s argument, as adapted by Leibniz, Bayle and many others, is the following:

“ ‘Honoring one’s parents is good *because* God has commanded it,’ entails the counterfactual that if God had commanded other things, those other things would be good. And God, by the theory, could have commanded those other things, since He is all-powerful. According to the Divine Command theory, then, if God had said ‘You shall dishonor your parents’ then dishonoring your parents would be obligatory instead of forbidden. But that’s absurd. The divine command theory is thus committed to counterfactuals about what would have been good that are patently false. So although

¹ I am grateful to Philip Quinn, who read an earlier draft of this essay and suggested some of the places that draft needed further argument. Thanks also to Jay Mullen. I had thought that the Divine Command theory is an obvious commitment of monotheism, until Jay pointed out that my opinion is not only not obvious, but agreed to be false by all contemporary philosophers who have thought about it.

² I focus on “good” rather than “right” or “is obligatory” because the connection with intentionality I want to make is clearer in the case of “good” than with “right.” Given that God creates all things and so all values, the distinction between the Good and the Right will not be important. If good actions were determined by God’s commands, the distinction between what one ought to do and what one is obliged to do relative to those commands would disappear. Also, given that God’s commands include, for instance “love one another,” the extensions of doing good and obeying God will be very close. So an obligation to obey God is materially an obligation to do the good.

On the basis of some considerations on logical form that need not detain us here, I hold that “good” and “ought” are closely related notions resting on something like an inductive logic, whereas “is obligatory” rests on deduction. I thus hold that what one ought to do and what one is obligated to do can be distinct. Roughly, “ought” is analogous to inductive logic whereas “is obligatory” is analogous to deductive logic. That is, from “If A then B is obligatory” entails “If A and C then B is obligatory.” On the other hand, “If A, then you ought to B” does not entail “If A and C, then you ought to B.” See Davidson’s “How is Weakness of the Will Possible.” On the supposition that theism is true, it will turn out that what one ought to do corresponds exactly to what one is obliged to do. Since I hold “good” to be logically connected with “ought”, and hold “ought” to be the fundamental ethical notion, I discuss the Divine Command theory as a theory of what is good.

³ Plato, with Leibniz, has a god operating under constraints that he did not choose. Intentionality is still central, but not *the* central explanation of what is the case. The contemporary philosophers I have recently read on this topic pretty much agree with Plato, taking the argument to apply to the traditional Western Monotheist God. Even those who wish to hold the divine command theory generally weaken it to avoid *Euthyphro* problem.

God indeed commands the good, He does so *because* it is good, not the other way around.”

This essay argues that the above argument is unsound, and that the Divine Command Theory is a natural and coherent consequence of the core idea of Western monotheism. The *Euthyphro* argument assumes a Platonic version of monotheism that constrains god in ways that are incompatible with this core idea of Western monotheism.

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The Divine Command Theory is a special application of what could be called “The Divine Command Theory of Everything,” attributed to Descartes. This doctrine is likewise a natural extension of traditional monotheism.

An underlying thesis of the essay is that the *Euthyphro* argument supposes that to make moral necessities depend on intentions is to make them contingent. But eternal divine intentions turn out to be just as non-contingent as eternal brute facts about what is supposed to exist independently of intentions, for instance, possible worlds. Thus the Divine Command theory of moral and other necessities provides just as good a foundation for modalities as any theory of eternal unintended beings or states of affairs does. So the explanation “because God said so” in effect makes the modal and moral truths primitive.⁴

2) The basic monotheist affirmation

“Tell the Israelites that I am sent you.”⁵ Maimonides’ interpretation⁶ is that God, an agent,⁷ here tells Moses that He is the God of Being. If Being is, as it were, God’s franchise, God is that in virtue of which whatever is, is. Since God is an agent, God is the agent whose agent-causation explains all existents. The monotheistic affirmation is an

⁴ The Divine Command Theory of Everything agrees to a great extent with an account of modality that takes modalities to be primitive predicates of things said or thought, rather than conceiving of modal truths as reducible to non-modal truths about beings. Brute facts about beings, of whatever kind, give no satisfying account of modal truths.

⁵ Exodus 3:14 “I am that I am. And he said thus say to the children of Israel: ‘I am sent me to you’” The third “I am” is the really striking one. The oddity of this use of a verb-phrase as subject of a sentence is unique in the Tanakh, and could be taken as a grammatical marker of the significance of the text.

⁶ *Guide to the Perplexed*, Book I, chapter 63. I mention parenthetically that I think it more likely than not that the Maimonidean interpretation is correct as an account of Moses’ thought. The idea that only Greeks could think abstractly seems to me a Western prejudice. See *Black Athena*. Moses was, after all, an Egyptian, and heretical Egyptians had come up with a monotheism centuries before the Exodus. Monotheism, it seems obvious, is a natural extension of the universal notion that agent causality is primary.

⁷ Things would be very different if Moses had been informed that “it is sent you.”

affirmation of the priority of the intentional, the thesis that personal explanation is fundamental. So, whatever is the case ultimately (or directly) is the case because of some entity's will or decision. Behind everything that is, there is an intention that it be. Since there is a single world, a single⁸ intention must finally decide all questions about what is the case. Clearly, only one agent can have all that is as his franchise.

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3) What is the relation of God's intentions to God Himself?

The Divine Command theory follows from a rigorous understanding of the priority of the intentional. In particular, the features that characterize God Himself are to be explained in terms of an intention, namely God's. Otherwise, something about the universe, namely God Himself with the features He has, would be a kind of brute fact not to be explained in intentional terms. This aspect of what I take to be Descartes' conception of God requires that God be "the author of Himself" in the sense that God's existence is an instance of agent-causation or explanation.

The theory that everything that exists has an agent-explanation does not quite imply that God wills His own existence. God is in virtue of himself, and so his existence is a case of agent-causation, but this agent-causation must be understood as something other than by his *willing* his existence. God's conformity to his own intention can be understood as such that God's features are what they are in virtue of God's wanting it to be the case. For God, there is no distinction between intending something to be the case and it being the case, whether "will" is the appropriate term for the mechanism of conformity or not. I will continue to use "will" and "intend" interchangeably.

⁸ That God is One has, of course, independent scriptural grounds. Most importantly, the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4): Hear O Israel, Yhwh is our god, Yhwh is one." (Shema Israel adonai elohinu adonai echad) This is a unique passage, grammatically. With two exceptions which have oddities of their own, all other predicative occurrences of "one" in the Tanakh say that the extension of a general term is unified. On the Sages' hermeneutical principles, the redundancy of saying that a properly -named individual was "one" requires an explanation. (The odd remark: "Hear, America, Clinton is our president; Clinton is one" is odd in Hebrew also.) Maimonides' explanation is that the passage attributes the property Oneness to God. What exactly Oneness amounts to is a topic of much Islamic discussion. In any case, the Shema and similar texts give Descartes textual reason to declare that God's willing and understanding are the same.

Both the Exodus passage and the Shema are central and famous. The Shema is a twice-daily prayer. The Exodus passage is alluded to in John 8:58. Jesus responds to the Pharisees question who does he think he is by saying "before Abraham ever was, I am." John has Jesus say "ego eimi" quoting the redundancy in the Septuagint version of Exodus. The Pharisees get the allusion instantly and pick up stones to deal with the blasphemy.

For purposes of this essay, I presuppose a thorough-going monotheism that treats all truths, including truths about God, as dependent on God's intention. If truths about God and features of God are distinct from God Himself, then, if God is the only uncreated being, those truths and features are dependent on God. If "dependence" is ultimately to be understood in terms of the "making-true" of intention, then the conclusion that God explains his own existence is required by the thesis that whatever is the case is so in virtue of God's intention. If God is the God of Being, the agent in virtue of whose will all that exists exists, then God exists in virtue of God. If agent-causation is primary, then God's intention is that in virtue of which God is and is as He is. Otherwise, we are left with a limited monotheism positing a God whose features are just brutally factual.

Such a thorough monotheism allows the God of Being theory to answer the question "Where did things come from?" in a nice way, without a regress. It also determines the thesis that God is the only uncreated entity—every other entity, including every truth, is in virtue of something other than itself. God alone is in virtue of Himself.⁹

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Whether such a monotheism is coherent is difficult to tell. Because its self-reference makes it resemble familiar paradoxes, one might suspect that the claim that there is a being in virtue of which all beings exist that it is incoherent. But the familiar paradoxes can be *shown* to be paradoxical. Nothing has been proven about self-reference in general, and an analogy is not an argument. In any case, this application of self-referentiality is a part of the traditional monotheisms, so the extended self-referentiality of a god who intends his own features is not different in kind.

4) Suppose, as is surely the case, that there are objective values. Then values are real created entities. By the tradition, God creates values by asserting them. One way¹⁰ to assert values is by intentional action, bringing things about. For an agent to do something on purpose entails that the agent thinks something about the action or its consequences is

⁹ The monotheist assertion is not the same as the ontological argument. God is an entity that causes itself, and so in that sense, cannot fail to exist if he exists. But to argue that he therefore necessarily exists, i.e. that the monotheistic hypothesis is true, requires other premises.

¹⁰ Creation takes place by third person imperatives. When dealing with other agents, commands, that is imperatives in the second person, are appropriate. Both create and assert values.

a good idea. So, God created the world in His usual way¹¹. God makes things the case by uttering sentences in the imperative mood whose truth-conditions are the desired state of affairs.¹²

Given that God's creation process is the imperative, His imperatives *create* values there really are. That is, since He is omniscient, his assertions, including the implicit assertions of value in his imperatives, are true.

5) Could God have made dishonoring one's parents the right thing to do?

a) Possibilities

What is possible for God depends on the real possibilities. What are they? God might have made more or fewer angels, or other men and women, we think. Real possibilities exist. If God is a God of Being, and possibilities are beings, then real possibilities are real in virtue of God's willing them into existence.¹³ So whether something is possible, given that possibilities are real, is explained by God.

It is very important here, as an emendation of Descartes, that the possibilities about what possibilities exist for God are also existences, and so also exist in virtue of God's intention that they do so. Meta-possibilities are possibilities subject to the same argument. This is the self-referential addition to the self-referential traditional monotheist affirmation. If God wills His own possibilities, and the possibilities about His possibilities, the "meta"-levels of possibilities collapse, in the sense that the same account

¹¹ "Let there be light—and there was light" [Gen 1:3] and observed on completion that the whole works was good [Gen 1:25], as it was bound to be. Leibniz takes this remark to show that God recognizes an independent standard to which (being perfect) his works conform.

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¹² Creation of entities takes place by third person imperatives. When dealing with other agents, commands, that is imperatives in the second person, are appropriate. Both create and assert values.

For the special case of created agents, that is, beings who have free will and whose appreciation of God is crucial to the world being the best possible, the imperatives may not be obeyed. But the imperatives still assert values accurately.

¹³ Leibniz denies this by saying that God is not the author of his being. God's understanding exists independently of his will. So, since possibilities reside in God's understanding, the possible depends on God, but not on his will. This abandons the interesting feature of radical monotheism, that everything, God included, exists on purpose. (Note that Leibniz can also appeal to the senselessness of counter-legals to answer the question what status possibilities have in themselves, i.e. what would they be apart from God?)

is given at every level. Among God's infinite powers is the ability to bring about truths involving infinitely iterated modalities.

In particular, possibilities about God are explained by God being what He is, namely, the God of Being. So, possibilities about entities other than God are created by God, and possibilities about God Himself, while uncreated, exist in virtue of God's intention given that He Himself so exists. Likewise, the apparent possibilities that fail to exist because not willed into existence by God fail to exist because of God.

b) intentionally brought-about modalities

What can possibilities be, if God's intention explains them? I will argue that, on such a view, possibility and necessity are as primitive as actuality. Consider two metaphysical options for modalities that God could create, Lewis' possible worlds and a world of essences. Neither of these, given the power of God to create possibilities, seems to provide a reduction of the possible to the actual.

The argument that Lewis' possible worlds will leave modality unreduced if God brings about modal truths:

If God creates possibilities, and possibilities are analyzed in terms of real possible worlds, then God would be in all the possible worlds, since God would, as creator, have causal relations with items in each possible world. Strict monotheism would seem to contradict Lewis' account of modality, according to which no entity is in more than one possible world. The god Lewis contemplates in "Anselm and Actuality" is not the God of monotheism, but rather the god of a particular possible worlds. For a modal realist, such a god does not create everything distinct from himself.¹⁴

Lewis does have the resources to allow a real monotheistic God, if he treats God as an entity that is part of every world. According to Lewis, universals, if there were any, would be a part of every world in which they have an instance. Universals would not be subject to the features that prohibit overlap of worlds. Generally, a part of a world is a part of no other world. But the reasons that there cannot be overlap in the cases of, for instance, Humphrey, are that Humphrey has accidental intrinsic properties. Overlap, the existence of the individual Humphrey in more than one possible

¹⁴ Such gods may be Lewis-omnipotent, in the derived sense that, for any proposition, each "omnipotent" god in a world has a counterpart who brings about that proposition. The closest facsimile of monotheism, for Lewis, of "possible worlds" being created by a single God would be a single possible world with an infinity of world-size components.

world, is metaphysically incoherent because the same entity would have different intrinsic properties. An entity that has no accidental intrinsic properties, such as a universal,ⁱ could indeed be a part of every world in which it occurs. Such an entity would have external relations to entities in a number of worlds, as universals, if such there be, do. Such external relations are world-indexed features of the entity, and so do not count against the entity being self-identical. Thus, a universal that occurred in every possible world, i.e. that was a part of every possible world, would be a necessary being. Lewis could do the same thing with God. A theological Lewis could hold that God likewise is a part of every world. This is not to say that God is anything like a universal, but rather that since God does not have intrinsic accidents, God can be omnipresent, i.e. a part of every world.

The argument that postulating essences does not reduce modality:

A world of essences, natures, or Platonic Forms causes no such problems. However, a world of essences created by God needs God to create necessities and possibilities for such essences. Suppose God creates an essence, say that of the equilateral triangle. Such essences could be thought of either as collections of natures or as single natures connected to other natures.

Suppose that an essence is a collection of natures. God can will that He never will instantiate only a part of the collection. But this is to will that an accidental regularity obtains. If there is a difference between a conjunction that always obtains and a necessary connection, then there must be a distinction between what God wills to be always the case and what God wills to be necessarily the case. Presumably, if a gold ball one thousand meters across never occurs, but could occur, this distinction has to be in place. To will a necessary connection, God must will that He cannot instantiate only a part of the collection.

Suppose that the essence is a single nature, necessarily connected with other natures. Then God must will those necessary connections. It might seem that, having assigned certain natures to an essence, further natures are thereby assigned to that essence. But either those necessary connections with further natures are there independently of God's willing or God created them. That is, when God makes the

essence Equilateral Triangle, the necessity of the conditional, “If an equilateral triangle, then an equiangular triangle,” must either be independent of God, or a creation of God. On the monotheist hypothesis, God must create them. On the supposition that whatever is the case owes its existence to God’s will, then, essences are nothing but collections of necessities and possibilities willed by God. Creation of possibilities is therefore direct rather than done by doing something else. If God wills modal truths, God’s willing to necessities and possibilities is primitive and irreducible.

The Cartesian picture of divine commands, then, is that the *basic* means by which necessities and possibilities are to be explained is divine command. Essences are free, if a theorist wishes to postulate them in addition to God’s willing of modalities. Given that natures are created by God, there is a nature, just as eternal as God’s willing,¹⁵ to which his willing conforms, even though the causality runs in the other direction. The sum of God’s commands, as it were, bring into existence a nature, Good, to which those commands conform, since God is omniscient.

Notice that, if possibilities and necessities are willed, then the “modal logic” that is appropriate is very weak. From that fact that p is necessary, it does not follow that it is necessary that p is necessary. It might be that God might not have willed that p is necessary even though He did so will. From the fact that p is possible, it does not follow that it is necessary that p is possible. God might not have willed that He could lift rock A, even though He did will that he could.

Such an account of modalities amounts to what I have called “modal primitivism.”¹⁶ Since proposed reductions of the modal to the non-modal must leave a modal residue, no such reduction can be successful. If God brings about modal truths by willing them into existence, as thorough-going monotheism says, then modal truths are directly willed by God. That is, God does not will modal truths just by willing some non-

¹⁵ Torah and the Koran are traditionally argued to be either eternal or to have existed forever.

¹⁶ Modal primitivism is the view that, since modalities are not in general reducible to brute facts about beings, one may as well take modal predicates to be irreducible generally. On this account, applied in a monotheistic context, God making a carrot possibly red is as primitive as his making it actually orange. Making triangles necessarily three-sided is not reducible to, though connected with, making triangles three-sided. Likewise, for a truth to be a law of nature is for the predicate “is a law” to be true of it, leaving aside the details of a metaphysics of predication.

modal truths. In effect then, the monotheist hypothesis takes modalities themselves to be primitive.

b) moral possibilities

Now let's re-consider the counterfactual that if God had chosen to command that coveting one's neighbor's house was obligatory, it would have been. If God creates possibilities, this counterfactual may not be true. The possibility that God could have commanded that way may not exist because God did not will that possibility for himself. It may be that the counterfactual about what would obtain if God had willed an immoral commandment is like the counterfactual, "If eleven were even, it would be divisible by two." If the possibility about God that he could declare immoral things to be moral does not exist, then the supposition about coveting being obligatory would be a counter-legal, a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent. Such counterfactuals are obscure, to say the least, but not to be taken seriously.¹⁷

If possibilities are created by God, then, while we can often tell when things are possible, we have no general a priori method. This is especially true, as Descartes observes, when the possibilities are possibilities about what God can do. Even more especially, the possibilities about what God has willed about God's possibilities are not ones that a priori "imaginability" will produce much guidance about.

6) Why aren't such missing possibilities incapacities or limitations on God?

Since everything is due to God's will, given that He exists in virtue of himself, and all that exists does so in virtue of his will, these incapacities exist in virtue of his will. Do such limitations on God's possibilities contradict his omnipotence? No.¹⁸

¹⁷ On Lewis' view, for instance, since there are no possible worlds in which the antecedent is true, all the worlds closest to it have whatever feature, so all such counterfactuals are true. Aquinas wishes to distinguish among such counterfactuals those in which there is a "real connection" between antecedent and consequent. He regards "If God wanted to sin, He would sin" from "If God wanted to sin, He would be a potato." As a Fregean modernist Gricean, I would argue that with Lewis that all such counterfactuals are true, but trivially so.

¹⁸ The conundrum, "Could God have created a stone too heavy for Him to lift?" should be answered, "Maybe. It depends on God's will."

Descartes is inaccurate on this topic:¹⁹ "...The power of God cannot have any limits, ...[this] shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and *therefore that he could have done the opposite.*" Descartes is right that no outside factor or entity can be responsible for God's incapacity, but it does not follow that God could have done the opposite. If God brings about all possibilities, then He would have to bring about the possibility that He could have done something else. Since any of his incapacities owes its existence to his will, it does not follow from "nothing constrains him" that "he could have done otherwise."²⁰ That is, his being all-powerful accounts for the incapacity. Since He willed himself, with his incapacities, into existence, the limitations are his intentional doings, and so not a limitation on his all-powerfulness.

7) Theological Considerations in Support of Divine Possibility

a) Kenosis

Such a doctrine of self-imposed but completely real incapacities that are not divine shortcomings is required in order to make metaphysical sense of the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Christianity is unanimous since 325ce that Jesus is identical with God.²¹ Yet Scripture makes it clear that Jesus is ignorant of many things,²² powerless in some matters,²³ and capable of growth.²⁴ The Biblical explanation of these

¹⁹ See the appendix, Mesland 2 May 1644, for a fuller text.

²⁰ This "emendation" of Descartes goes against much Cartesian thought. In the Sixth Replies, section 6 and 8, he insists that God is "indifferent" to which sentences will be truths of logic and mathematics as well as to whether he will make a world or not. He takes this to be a condition of God's freedom. His argument seems to be that nothing God wills is part of his essence. But, given that God intends everything about Himself, the possibilities about His nature that are intended into existence are essential to him. If God and the possibilities about God are what they are in virtue of God's intention, Descartes would have to picture an indifferent God, deciding what he's going to be. Coherent or not, that picture might be more compatible with God being a person than the picture of an entity intending himself with his potentialities and necessities into existence.

The real problem with monotheism is whether it can be taken literally, so that it includes everything, and still preserve the crucial features of intentionality. Leibniz argues against Cartesian monotheism in a January 1680 letter: "The God of Descartes has neither will nor understanding, since according to Descartes he has not the Good as the object of the will nor the true as the object of the understanding." That is, Descartes' claim that "seeing and willing are one and the same thing" for God (Mersenne 27 May 1630) threatens to make God too unperson-like to qualify as an intentional agent. Leibniz therefore thinks Descartes' view leads to atheism.

²¹ This is complicated by the doctrine of the Trinity. Kenosis means that God Himself has really reduced His powers, even if other persons of the Trinity retain them.

²² Mark 13:32 "But as for that day and hour [of the eschaton], nobody knows it, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son; no one but the Father." Also, John passim.

²³ John 5:30 "I can do nothing by myself; I can only judge as I am told to judge."

incapacities in Jesus, i.e. in God, is kenosis, God's voluntary emptying of capacities.²⁵ The core idea of kenosis is the genuine humanity of God while incarnate. God is not pretending to be a human being, but actually is one during His incarnation. Humanity being limited, to be genuinely human is to be genuinely limited.

Kenosis is a genuine reduction of what is possible for God. Only if some real possibilities for what God can do are willed by God does kenosis make sense. If God "empties himself and assumes the condition of a slave," then, for instance, while it remains possible for Him to bring an entity into existence by a word on most occasions, it is not possible for Him to do so during the thirty-some years of the incarnation.²⁶ Descartes' doctrine can be construed as a generalization of what takes place in kenosis.²⁷

Some of God's restrictions on possibilities are not restrictions on categories of objects, but restrictions on the pure possibilities of individuals. That is, suppose that part of an individual essence is the set of possibilities and necessities that apply to an individual. Then God need not determine the essence of an individual by determining the essence of a kind of individual, but may determine an individual's essence directly. This is analogous to the occasionalism of the Mutakallimun. Just as God's willing of general laws is unnecessary according to the Mutakallimun, so God does not will that a necessity be a natural law of a kind of entity, but may rather will possibilities and necessities as predicates of individuals.

The other very important feature of kenosis is that it is voluntary. God chooses to directly make some of the things he could do things he cannot do, and likewise for things he knows. Whereas, if He had chosen otherwise, and appeared in Luke as He appears in Genesis, the scope of the miracles available to Him would be infinitely larger.

The limitation involved in kenosis may seem to be much weaker and less metaphysical than the sorts of necessities with which metaphysics is generally concerned.

²⁴ Luke 2:52 "And Jesus progressed in wisdom, in maturity, and in favor with God and men."

²⁵ Philippians 2:6-7 "His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave." "[ouk]...hegesato to einai iso theo, all' heauton ekenose"

²⁶ A human being can do this by doing something else. I can voluntarily drink too much, thus (indirectly) reducing my capacities for abstract thought for a while. God brings about changes in what is possible directly. In eternity, God directly wills possibilities and necessities that in effect determine essences.

²⁷ This discussion of kenosis has profited from the comments of Philip Quinn.

The impossibilities for Jesus are limited in time, and the impossibilities for God are limited to one person of the Trinity. About the second limitation, I have almost nothing to say. The relation of the persons of the Trinity to God is a mystery. About the first limitation, however, more can be said: Someone might argue that it is not really impossible for Jesus to bring about whatever situation He chooses by the divine imperative, it is only impossible for a time. But an impossibility at a time is a genuine impossibility to make a tensed sentence true. To make sense of important Biblical texts, it is crucial that it be genuinely impossible for Jesus to free himself from those crucifying Him.²⁸ The view that he was just holding back from the exercise of His powers on that occasion is close to docetism, the view that Jesus only appeared to suffer. If He was not, in the situation, helpless to save himself, also, his dying words make no sense.

Thus, Christian doctrine already recognizes that God can make things impossible for Himself and can limit His possibilities without losing His omnipotence.²⁹ If Christian theology is coherent, so is the generalized kenosis that is required for the Divine Command theory. This generalized kenosis is the power of God to will incapacities in Himself. Thus a voluntary real incapacity is consistent with an all-powerful God of Being.

b) Choices in the Text

God being able to create real possibilities goes some distance toward solving some other problems. For instance, the problem of the compatibility of human free will and divine foreknowledge looks very different once we take direct willing of possibilities seriously. Consider Exodus 32:10-14 (Golden calf), Numbers 14: 13-25 (another rebellion) and 2 Samuel 24. In the first two passages, the Israelites have seriously disappointed God, and God's says He plans to wipe them out and pick another people for Moses to lead. Moses talks him out of this idea. In the third passage, David has sinned (obscurely), and God gives him the following choice: 3 years famine or 3 months flight or 3 days pestilence. David chooses the pestilence.

Either God was being deceptive, and there was no real possibility of his wiping out the Israelites and inflicting famine, or his actions were contingent on Moses' making

²⁸ Most clearly, Matthew 27:46 "And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?'"

appeals and David's choosing the pestilence.³⁰ So, those real possibilities had to exist. In this kind of case, the possibilities clearly exist in virtue of God's intention, since God clearly chooses whether to offer these choices. So if God is not being deceptive about such offers, these possibilities exist in virtue of His will. So Scripture at least seems to require that God wills real possibilities into existence.³¹ If God can bring about real possibilities, both for Himself and for created beings, then the actual course of history is, by God's permission, partially up to Moses and David in these cases. God knows what they will choose, but that does not mean that they did not freely choose.

Some more needs to be said about how this might be conceived as possible: An ancient metaphor for God existing in eternity and acting in time among free agents is the World as Book. God has written a novel, the World. The whole novel is present to him at once, so He knows what happens on page 348. Meanwhile, this author has brought it about that some of the characters have helped write their own parts. "Helped write" means that the causality of some of what happens *is to be ascribed to the characters themselves*. In addition, the author writes himself into the novel and makes some of his own part contingent on what some other characters' parts "turn out to be."

One way among many for God to do this is to plan alternative possible worlds for each branch point of agent-choice. In His wisdom, He could do this in a way that would bring about the same overall result in the End. Roughly, God's total plan would resemble a Storrs McCall branching-time diagram. On this conception, human choices partly determine which branches are actualized and which are not.³² Among God's powers is the power to make some of what is actual depend on the causality of a created agent. That is, what it means for an alternative to be really possible is that the causality is (by God's will) dependent on a free agent.

²⁹ I can't find any passages in Descartes or Leibniz that talk about kenosis and its implications.

³⁰ Another famous case of an expressed intention being changed as a result of human argument is Abraham's attempt to give the Sodomites a better chance in Genesis 18. This is a less clear case, since God knows how many righteous people are in Sodom.

³¹ In some sense, it may be possible for Moses to convince God to retract some commandments. But that may not be really possible. Possibilities about what concrete entities, Gods and creatures can do are real possibilities. There is much to discuss here about whether, on Descartes' account, there is any difference between senses of possibilities. If God intends or wills all possibilities, it may be that the "logical" possibilities and "metaphysical" possibilities, are just ways of conjecturing a single kind of possibility.

Such an account retains the thesis that God's plan is immutable, given that mutability is changeability over time. The course of time is exactly one course, determined by God's unchanging plan. The construction of the plan itself, however, is contingent not only on God's free choices, but on the free choices of God's created rational agents. That is, since the agent's choices only take place in time from the agent's point of view, and since those choices are timelessly present to God, the causality of the agents' choices can be real *even though* God implements a single plan from eternity. All that the theory requires is that God have made it really possible that the agent's causality be implemented otherwise, i.e. that a contingency be causally dependent on the free choice of an agent. On this view, then, Adam's fall was not inevitable and was Adam's fault, even though God's plan as constructed by God (primarily) but with a contribution by Adam (and others) was immutable and existed from eternity.³³ That God has a single eternal plan is compatible with God having (unactualized but real) contingency plans. So the course of history can be contingent, since God can make it so, even though only a single plan is actual.

9) Moral Realism and Willing

Most people will still feel that some trick has taken place in this emended Cartesian argument. It still seems that if God decided that dishonoring parents is wrong and thereby made it wrong, He could have done otherwise. But an analogous difficulty afflicts any moral realism that depends on moral properties. What's the difference between a willed eternal creation of the nature Good and the eternal existence of Good? Does God's willing the Good into existence make the features of the Good contingent? One might argue that God's will, even if eternally enacted, could still have been different. But the same could be said about an eternal nature, Goodness. If there were a constraint independent of God, but equally eternal, as Plato perhaps thinks, why couldn't *that* have

³² In the case of the sequel to the Golden Calf episode, for instance, God would have had a plan in which the Ishmaelites come to play some of the roles of the Hebrews, since God will keep his promise to Abraham.

³³ A complication here is, of course, the doctrine of Grace. Perhaps the view sketched commits me to Pelagianism. There are no good things that are independent of God, but some good things are not *determined* by God. Some protestant versions of Grace seem to me incomprehensible, if they are supposed to make moral sense. Predestination, it should be noted, fits in with the suggested theory very easily. Those who are saved are saved from the beginning, even though their free choices are part of the reason they are saved. The only people from whom Grace is withheld, on the present view, would be those whose hearts are hardened by God for the sake of various projects

been different? Willed eternal natures are no worse than regular eternal natures.³⁴ The mere existence of the Good from eternity would be interesting, but *prima facie* no more motivating than the existence from eternity of the Naughty, or of Goodman variants of the Good that include kicking colleagues, for instance.

There *is* a trick in the amended Cartesian theory, but it is the same kind of trick Lewis uses. Consider Lewis' account of necessities in terms of brute facts about possible worlds: A modal claim is true if and only if the de-modalized claim is true in every possible world. The possible worlds are just entities, brute existences. To the questions, "Couldn't there have been more possible worlds" and "Couldn't there have been gaps in the possible worlds, so that things that are actually possible might not have been possible," Lewis can answer "No," *on the basis of his theory*. There are no possible worlds relative to which there are other possible worlds; there are no possible worlds relative to which there are fewer possible worlds.

The emended Descartes likewise can meet objections to his theory by invoking his theory: Could God have made necessities and possibilities other than the necessities and possibilities He in fact made? "No," says the emended Descartes, because the possibilities that would support the "could" would be things, and so God would have brought them about by his will, but we have faith that He did not.

In Descartes' case, a further defense of the "trick" is available: Descartes' conception is a consequence of creation *ex nihilo*. If God is really the sort of ground of being that monotheism asserts, there is really nothing, that is, no stuff, no structure, no nothing, that He works on or under the constraint of.

10) Faith and God's Goodness

One can still feel that there is a trick here. What is moral seems to be arbitrary, even if it could not have been otherwise. How do we know that God in fact has willed that He cannot trick us by providing commandments to do evil, as Descartes suggests? Most writers positively disposed toward the Divine Command Theory bring in other articles of faith at this point, for instance that God is necessarily perfectly good.

³⁴Perhaps the difference is in the intentionality. The argument would be: Brute facts have to be behind intentionality, and intentionality is contingent relative to those brute facts. But this argument just begs the question against the traditional monotheism, which asserts the exact opposite, that intentionality is prior to brute facts. All that is the case is the case in virtue of a will, a person.

I think we can be more economical, and derive what a believer needs from the monotheistic starting-point, that the cause of all existence is an *agent* in whose image we are created. If we are Davidsonians, as we ought to be, the very supposition that the cause of being is an agent requires that, at bottom, that agent's conception of the good and the true is not entirely alien to ours. That is, for any basic moral judgment we make, the supposition that God is an agent makes it more likely than not that God agrees with that judgment. (This is part of what it would be for us to be "made in the image of" God.) Furthermore, from the considerations in section 4), one could argue that a command makes sense as a command only if it can be interpreted as expressing the will of an agent, which agent, just on the basis of being an agent, must be an entity who (by and large) wants the good and believes the true.

This argument³⁵ is *not* that God is somehow bound by our conceptions of the good and the true. Rather, believing that we, as *agents*, are created in God's image, we can reasonably infer features of what we are modeled on. God is indeed an agent, and that has consequences. This Davidsonian transcendental argument is thus not an argument from prior constraint, but rather an argument from an effect.

This argument could be supplemented by other likely conjectures about the relationship of an agent who makes other agents to those created agents. Reflections on the parenthood relation, for instance, could make something like the Biblical love a likely conjecture. Turning these conjectures into a *belief* that the cause of everything is a perfectly loving entity of perfect goodness and perfect wisdom would require something more. Faith would be that something more.

The thesis that God is an agent something like us seems to run afoul of the theological claim that God is "ganze andere," wholly other than His creations. If "ganze andere" is taken literally to mean that the features that it is rational to ascribe to agents are not applicable to God, then it would seem that God is not an agent. Either the Davidsonian transcendental argument applies, and, however strange God is, He is still an agent whose actions are purposive, or the monotheist hypothesis is not an hypothesis that the cause of the world is personal at all.

11) Reality and Modality

³⁵ The argument here has been improved in response to comments by Philip Quinn.

If the supposition that the monotheistic/Cartesian God is a person is coherent then the divine command theory avoids the difficulty that God could have made immoral things moral. Moral truths can be so *because* God made them so, without it being the case that God could have made evil things good.

Descartes' argument goes far beyond morality. According to his monotheism, there are no necessities, logical, mathematical or metaphysical, that are independent of and so constrain God. Descartes writes to Mersenne, May 27,1630, "For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. ...but I know that God is the author of everything and *that these truths are something* and that consequently he is their author..."

Descartes wants to give an account of why truths are, i.e. why truths are truths. Modal truths are truths, so the truth of modal truths needs explanation. How does one explain modal truths? One way is to reduce modal truths to non-modal truths, to brute facts about beings. To what extent, if any, are modal truths supervenient on what exists? Lewis and Armstrong propose theories according to which *very many* possibilities and necessities depend on brute facts about beings.³⁶ For Lewis and Armstrong, though, some necessities are beyond explanation by their theories, since their theories assume them, and in fact beyond any explanation. Modal truths such as the necessity of the axioms of the part-whole relation, for instance, are assumed by both Armstrong and Lewis. So what makes *those* modal truths true? Armstrong and Lewis have to acquiesce in the obvious: These modal truths are true because they are true.

Descartes reduces modal truths to being, as well. All modal truths are true in virtue of being willed or intended so by God. Descartes' theory is more complete than Lewis' or Armstrong's in finding accounts of *all* modal truths. In this respect, it is superior to the partial accounts given by Lewis and Armstrong. More importantly, though, Descartes (as emended) doesn't reduce modality to being at all. Modalities are exactly on a par with other predications of properties. If God wills modal truths into existence, He wills them as primitive.

³⁶ In Lewis' case, most modal truths are supervenient on brute facts about possible worlds For Armstrong, most modal truths are truths about recombination.

For Descartes, then, the law of contradiction (for instance) is true and necessary because God intended it so. That does not, however, mean that He could have intended it otherwise. Why not? He may not (for all we know) have intended that he could have intended it otherwise.

Appendix: Descartes on God and modality³⁷

Descartes:

1) (Mersenne 15 April 1630) “The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates....It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. `But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.’—I make the same judgment about God. `But his will is free.’—Yes but his power is beyond our grasp....”

2) (Mersenne 6 May 1630) “As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him. [People]... could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless those truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed.”

3) (Mersenne 27 May 1630) “For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. ...but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and that consequently he is their author.....

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal—just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or if you reserve the word `created’ for the existence of things, then he

³⁷ It is worth looking also at some views of Leibniz relative to Descartes on these topics:

1) God is not the author of his understanding. (Theodicy 380) God’s understanding is not the product of his will, but of its own necessity.

2) Necessities and possibilities are ideas in God’s understanding. The question, “What is their status in themselves” is the question, “What would they be if there were no God?” But that is a counter-legal. Ideas and essences fill the function of Plato’s Necessity: the constraint on the activities of Mind. (Theodicy 20).

established them and made them. In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.”

4) (Mesland 2 May 1644) “I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to make possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it.

...But if would know the immensity of his power we should not...conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St Augustine: ‘They are so because thou see’st them to be so’; because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing.”

5) (Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648 [CSM 343])

“For it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.’ [6th replies CSMII 291]

[Burman] But what then of God’s ideas of possible things? Surely those are prior to his will.

[Descartes] These too depend on God, like everything else. His will is the cause not only of what is actual and to come, but also of what is possible and of the simple natures. There is nothing we can think of or ought to think of that should not be said to depend on God.

[Burman] But does it follow from this that God could have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do?

[Descartes] God could not now do this, but we simply do not know what he could have done. In any case, why should he not have been able to give this command to one of his creatures?”

¹ See section 4.2 of *On the Plurality of Worlds*.