



To Obey is to Worship: A Reply to Brown and Nagasawa

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Abstract

In their paper titled “I Can’t Make You Worship Me”, Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa (2005) argue that divine command theory is incompatible with the view that we have a moral obligation to worship God. In this paper I examine their concern and suggest ways we could reconcile the two views together.

Keywords: Divine Command Theory, Moral Obligation, Moral Ontology, Rational Norm, Worship.

İtaat Etmek, İbadet Etmektir: Brown ve Nagasawa’ya Bir Cevap

Öz

Campbell Brown ve Yujin Nagasawa, “I Can’t Make You Worship Me” başlıklı makalelerinde (2005), ilahî buyruk teorisinin Tanrı’ya ibadet etmenin ahlaki bir yükümlülük olduğu görüşüyle bağdaşmadığını savunurlar. Bu makalede söz konusu itiraz ele alınmakta ve bu iki görüşün nasıl uzlaştırılabileceğine dair bazı öneriler sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İlahi Buyruk Teorisi, Ahlaki Yükümlülük, Ahlaki Ontoloji, Rasyonel Norm, İbadet.

Introduction: The Concern

In their paper titled ‘I Can’t Make You Worship Me’ Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa present an interesting criticism of the meta-ethical view known as *Divine Command Theory* (DCT). They understand DCT to be the view ‘according to which the difference between moral rightness and wrongness is simply that the former is that which is commanded by God, while the latter is that which is prohibited by God.’¹ They assume that not

¹ Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa, “I Can’t Make You Worship Me,” 138.

only does DCT require that we *conform* to God's commands, it also requires that we *comply* with God's commands.² While this assumption is debatable, I shall be granting it for the purpose of this paper. They consider this notion of compliance to be satisfied only if the reason for conforming to some divine command is the fact; that it is a divine command. They then present a scenario where a person named John commands another person named Kate, at gunpoint, to worship him. They argue that since worship is supposed to be voluntary, behaviour that is worship-like is not the same as true worship. Thus, this command cannot be complied with, it can only be conformed to, as Kate can have separate reasons to worship John (like maybe he's rich). However, it would not count as compliance. In their own words:

The problem may be put as follows. In order for Kate to comply with John's command, there are two necessary conditions: (i) Kate worships John; and (ii) Kate's reason for worshipping John is John's command. However, these two conditions are inconsistent. For (i) implies that Kate's reason for worshipping John is something other than John's command; and this implication contradicts (ii). It is not possible both that Kate's reason is John's command and that it is not John's command.³

They further go on to state that:

Clearly the case of God is directly analogous to that of John and Kate. If God commands us to worship Her, it is logically impossible for us to comply. Hence, given the Compliance Principle and the Ought-Can Principle, it cannot be the case that God commands us to worship Her. But if that is so, the Obligation Principle implies that we have no moral obligation to worship God. Therefore, the Divine Command Theory is inconsistent with the theistic view that we have an obligation to worship God.⁴

As well written as the rest of their paper is, this part struck me as odd, for they simply assert that the case of Kate and John is analogous to the case of God without giving us any reason to believe this assertion. One may be justified in doubting their conclusion simply due to this reason alone, however, I shall provide some other potential solutions.

Before discussing potential solutions, it is important to point out what Brown and Nagasawa are not arguing. Brown and Nagasawa are not arguing

² Additionally, they also assume the famous (or infamous) principle that *ought implies can*. This assumption, without doubt, deserves its own separate treatment, but it is also one that may be safely granted for now.

³ Brown and Nagasawa, "I Can't Make You Worship Me," 142.

⁴ Brown and Nagasawa, "I Can't Make You Worship Me," 143.

that God forces us to worship him by threatening us. Rather, they only seem to be making use of such a scenario because it best illustrates their point, which is to divorce compliance from *mere* conformity. Had they been arguing the former, then one could appeal to the notion of free will to wiggle out of this. While freely choosing to conform should probably count as another *necessary* condition to establish compliance, to them, it will not count as a *sufficient* condition, the other necessary condition must also be present for compliance to be established, which is that at least one of the reasons to conform to a divine command, is the fact that it is a divine command. To illustrate with an example; while I may freely choose to worship God because I am happy about the fact that God created mountains, while being unaware of any potential disastrous consequence of not worshipping him, unless another reason behind my choice to worship him is the fact that he has commanded me to do so, I will have failed to comply with his command, at least according to them. Once again, one can question this assumption of DCT demanding compliance rather than mere conformity, but as I mentioned already, I shall be granting this assumption. With that clarification in place, what follows are four potential solutions, each of which may be seen as an opportunity for further research, but I shall only elaborate on them briefly.

Potential Solutions

a) Obedience as a Form of Worship

The first potential solution is born out of the fact that they do not provide any satisfactory definition of the term worship. To be fair, defining worship is a lot harder than it may seem. However, certain accounts of worship include obedience, most notably within Islam.⁵ If obedience is in fact a form of worship, then to obey God's command counts as worship. Thus, the concern regarding complying with God's command to worship him is misplaced, for it is making a false distinction between two things, one of which is simply a form of the other. If they were to reply to this by replacing worship in their argument with obedience, then their concern would be rephrased as; you cannot have a moral obligation to obey God on DCT. However, this new concern would also be misplaced for DCT by definition requires that acting morally means obedience to God. They may insist that this does not solve the issue, for whether or not one can have a moral obligation on DCT to obey God is what is in question. I still however find it to

⁵ Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, *The Divine Reality: God, Islam and The Mirage of Atheism*, 291.

be absurd to assert that; you cannot have a moral obligation to comply with God's command of complying with his command. If God commands compliance with his command and if DCT is true, then compliance with his command is a moral obligation simply given the definition of DCT.

b) The Details of Worship

This solution is possible due to their misconception that the sole result of God's command is a moral obligation, whereas that has not been shown. The solution is as follows; if man was created with an inclination to direct immense gratitude towards God but is not informed of how best to do so, it results in a kind of disharmony within man's psyche. Man would have this urge to be grateful, yet without knowing who to be grateful to and how best to express their gratefulness. God's commands serve as a means to facilitate the proper expression of this inclination. One of the reasons to behave in the way God commanded must be God's command itself, for the proper behavior or ritual may not be known otherwise. Thus, the idea that since worship is voluntary, therefore the reason to conform cannot be God's command is a non-sequitur. The scenario I presented provides a logically possible situation where one of the reasons for conforming to God's command is the fact that it is *God's* command, thus establishing compliance. This scenario assumes Man's inclination to worship something, however, one must only provide a scenario that is logically possible to rebut their concern.

c) When Conformity = Compliance

This solution stems from their decision to leave their assertion that the Kate and John case is analogous to God, unjustified. If God is understood as a maximally perfect being, and if that entails that God's command is maximally perfect, then one of the reasons to conform to God's command may be the fact that it is *God's* command. Suppose John were to command Kate, let it be some maximally perfect command. This case would still not be analogous to the God case, since the reason that Kate has to conform to the command would not be that it is *John's* command, rather it would simply be that the command is maximally perfect. However, we may make it analogous to the God case as follows; suppose Kate doesn't know whether a command is maximally perfect or not. Assume that John is maximally perfect, also assume Kate knows that John is maximally perfect. This would provide Kate reason to think that John's command is maximally perfect. While one of the reasons why Kate is conforming to the command is still the fact that the command is maximally perfect, this knowledge is contingent on the fact that the

command is *John's* command. Thus, in essence, Kate's reason to conform is *John's* command, rather than the command by itself. This scenario, which is relatively similar to the God case, illustrates that one of the possible reasons to conform to a command may simply be the fact that it is a divine command, thus establishing compliance.

d) Worship as a Rational Obligation

I wish to highlight a brief alternative route. Even if their argument is successful, someone who adheres to DCT may still believe that worship is an obligation, while maintaining that it is not a moral obligation. A possible route would be the suggestion that worship is a *rational* obligation. The concept of rational norms isn't alien to us. For example, consider the following rational norm; we *ought* to follow the evidence where it leads, clearly the word *ought* here, is not used in the moral sense. While this solution requires further development and divine command theorists would have to give a proper account of rational obligations for this to be considered seriously, it may still be potentially viable as it is fairly uncontroversial that it is irrational to disobey the command of a maximally perfect being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I first hope that I presented Brown and Nagasawa's argument justly. I explained what I understand them to be arguing and then proceeded to explain where I disagree with them. I presented some potential responses a Divine Command Theorist may make use of. They may object by saying that some of my responses conflate moral epistemology and moral ontology, however, that is not the case. On Divine Command Theory, the divine commands may serve both as the source of morality and the source of our knowledge of appropriate moral behavior via divine revelation (even though one does not have to go this route). If successful, then my responses make it clear that the obligation to worship God is compatible with Divine Command Theory. As for whether or not it is the correct meta-ethical view remains an open question.

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