Copping out on the Anything-Goes Objection

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Abstract: I suggest a strategy for defending the Divine Command Theory of morality against the familiar “anything goes” objection. The objection is that this theory of morality has counter-intuitive moral implications. I argue that the objection fails to notice the difference between a first-order expression of a moral proposition and a second-order metaethical account of what justifies moral standards. The objection treats the theory as if it were the former, when it is actually the latter.

The most important, troublesome, and popular of objections to the Divine Command Theory of morality (DCT) is the familiar “anything goes” objection (AG). DCT is thought to imply the following conditional:

\[(AG) \quad \text{If God were to command that we torture an innocent child to death, then torturing an innocent child to death would be morally right.}\]

Since, as most people think, AG is false because it would be morally wrong for us to torture an innocent child to death under any set of circumstances, moral standards cannot be appropriately justified in terms of divine commands. DCT does not provide the correct account of what justifies a moral standard and so does not provide the relevant
truth conditions for moral propositions. Any theory that implies that anything goes in morality is wildly counter-intuitive.

It seems true that AG is an implication of DCT. Therefore, proponents of DCT require some way of affirming consistently that DCT provides the correct account of what justifies moral standards, that AG is an implication of DCT, and that this result is not morally counter-intuitive. Is there any way to do this? David Copp has suggested one in the context of his own “society-centered” theory (SCT) of the justification of moral standards.\(^1\) The way he defends SCT against criticisms that it has morally objectionable normative implications can be adapted for a defense of DCT.

Copp’s moral theory is a standard-based theory. “Standard” is used in this context to name a rule or imperative, for example, “Do not torture innocent children to death.” Imperatives have no truth conditions. But this does not prevent a moral claim from having truth conditions. A claim endorsing the standard, like “It is wrong to torture innocent children to death” expresses a proposition about the standard. It asserts that a standard that calls upon people to avoid torturing innocent children to death is appropriately justified. This proposition is true only if there is a standard that calls upon people to avoid this behavior, and this standard is appropriately justified.\(^2\)

There are, certainly, many different accounts of the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified. The correct account will be the one that gets things right about what actually justifies the standard; it will determine the truth


\(^2\) Ibid., 124.
conditions of moral propositions. Copp’s moral theory is society-centered. This means that the theory justifies moral standards in terms of the needs of a society. By the lights of SCT, a moral standard is justified upon the condition that the society, given its needs, would be rationally required to select the standard as part of its moral system.³ By the lights of SCT, a moral proposition endorsing the standard, asserting in effect that the standard is justified, is true if and only if it would be rationally required for the society to select the standard given its needs. The proposition really is true if SCT provides the correct account of the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified.

I deny that SCT provides the correct account of the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified, but the reasons for this are beside the point of this essay. However, I will discuss one reason that has been offered for the rejection of SCT.⁴ The reason I will discuss, I think, fails to undermine SCT, and it turns out to be essentially the same “anything goes” objection that is frequently lodged against DCT. The objection is that the society-centered account of the justification of moral standards is supposed to lead to morally “nasty consequences”. Just like DCT, SCT may be vulnerable to the objection that it implies counter-intuitive normative propositions. Whether it is vulnerable will be contingent upon what standards a society would be rationally required to choose were it in very different circumstances, possessing very


different needs. For example, the objection may go, by the lights of SCT, torturing innocent children to death would not be wrong if our society were in circumstances in which its needs would be better served were we to have a moral system that permitted torturing innocent children to death. This, however, conflicts with our established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs. Therefore, SCT does not provide the correct account of the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified.

Copp responds to this criticism that his theory implies counter-intuitive normative propositions by noticing a scope ambiguity in statements having the following form, where X refers to something that conflicts with our established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs:

\[
(\alpha \Gamma) \quad \text{If circumstances were otherwise, then Xing would be morally right.}
\]

According to one interpretation of this, the scope of what Copp refers to as the “moral operator”\(^5\) is narrow:

\[
(\alpha \Gamma') \quad \text{If circumstances were otherwise, then \textit{morality would be such that} Xing is morally right.}
\]

The moral operator could also have a wide scope:

\[^5\text{Copp, “Morality and Society – The True and the Nasty,” 131.}\]
Morality is such that, if circumstances were otherwise, then Xing would be morally right.

Given the structure of the theory, \( \Gamma 1 \) is an obvious implication of SCT. If society were radically different such that its needs would be better served by torturing innocent children to death in some cases, then a standard that called for this would be justified. However, whether \( \Gamma 2 \) is true depends upon the actual needs of society. According to Copp, the moral proposition expressed by \( \Gamma 2 \) is false by the lights of SCT. SCT has it that torturing innocent children to death is morally wrong, and would be morally wrong in any society.\(^6\) Therefore, there is no conflict between SCT and our established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs.

Disambiguating \( \Gamma \) and being explicit about the position of the moral operator serves to distinguish a second-order account the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified, a metaethical theory proposition, from a first-order expression of a moral proposition. \( \Gamma 1 \) is an example of the former. As such, it is not in competition with, and cannot conflict with, a first-order moral proposition. The proposition “Morality is not such that, if circumstances were different, then torturing innocent children to death would be morally right”\(^7\) is in competition with, and does

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\(^6\) Ibid., 133.

\(^7\) This is a moral proposition. Above I explained what this means. It asserts that a moral standard prohibiting torturing innocent children to death is justified. This proposition is true by the lights of SCT only if it is rationally required for the society to select that
conflict with, AG2. But SCT does not imply AG2. According to Copp, SCT implies the moral proposition that torturing innocent children to death is wrong, period.

Therefore, normative objections to SCT, objections to the theory made on moral grounds, fail to notice the difference between a first-order expression of a moral proposition and a second-order metaethical account of what justifies moral standards. Copp’s strategy suggests an important lesson:

LESSON: Established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs can conflict with a normative proposition, but they cannot conflict with a metaethical proposition.

The normative objection to DCT suggested by AG makes this same mistake. Proponents of DCT can make use of the lesson in order to show that the “anything goes” objection to DCT fails.

Copp’s strategy suggests that AG is ambiguous between the following:

(AG1) If God were to command that we torture an innocent child to death, then

*morality would be such that* torturing an innocent child to death is morally right

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standard given its needs. It is *really* true only if the correct account of morality calls for this standard.
(AG2) *Morality is such that*, if God were to command that we torture an innocent child to death, then torturing an innocent child to death would be morally right.

AG1 provides the narrow reading where the moral operator governs only the consequent. AG2 provides the wide reading of AG where the moral operator governs the entire conditional.  

If DCT provides the correct account of the conditions under which a moral standard is appropriately justified, then AG1 must be true. Since the theory justifies moral standards in terms of God’s commands, if God commanded the torture of an innocent child to death, then morality would be such that the torture of that child to death is morally right. But this is simply a theoretical point. AG1 is a second-order, metaethical proposition, not a normative proposition. As such, it is not in competition with, and cannot conflict with, any of our established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs. In this case, the relevant pre-theoretical moral belief is “*Morality is not such that, if (circumstances were different and) God were to command that we torture an innocent child to death, then torturing an innocent child to death would be morally right.*” DCT does not imply that this belief is false. This belief is a moral proposition, like the one discussed above.  

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8 Another way to put the difference is that AG1 asserts that it is a metaethical fact that AG. AG2 asserts that it is a normative ethical fact that AG.

9 Cf. note 7.
innocent children to death is justified. This proposition is true by the lights of DCT if God has issued a command to avoid the behavior. If DCT provides the correct account of what justifies moral standards, then the proposition really is true.

If this is the case, that is, if our pre-theoretical moral belief is true by the lights of DCT because there is a standard forbidding that anyone torture an innocent child to death, and this standard is justified in terms of God’s commands, then the obvious implication is that by the lights of DCT, AG2 has to be false. AG2 and our pre-theoretical moral belief are first-order moral propositions. They conflict with each other and so they cannot both be true. Since our pre-theoretical moral belief is true by the lights of DCT, AG2 has to be false by the lights of DCT.

The purported problem for DCT is that it is supposed to be incompatible with many of our established, pre-theoretical moral beliefs. This incompatibility is merely apparent. “Do not torture innocent children to death” is a moral standard. Proponents of DCT claim, roughly, that moral standards are justified in terms of God’s commands. This claim is a metaethical proposition offering an account of what has to be true about a moral standard in order for the moral standard to be justified. As we discovered in the earlier lesson, it is not possible that a metaethical proposition could conflict with any moral belief, not even firmly established, pre-theoretical intuitions. A claim expressing a proposition about the standard, like “It is wrong to torture innocent children to death” may conflict with our moral beliefs, but in this case it simply does not.

Someone could respond that the pre-theoretical intuition is actually not offered as a first-order, substantive moral judgment. Rather, it is a second-order, metaethical theory claim. The idea is that what people really object to about DCT is that if God’s commands
had been different, then morality would have been such that a standard permitting the
torture of an innocent child to death is justified. Understood that way, the intuition really
is in conflict with AG1 and so the theory. However, this move would be somewhat
disingenuous. Originally, the intuition was offered by way of an argument that DCT has
counter-intuitive moral implications; it is most typically presented as an objection made
on moral grounds. Defenders of DCT should take such arguments seriously. But it is no
surprise that, and defenders of DCT need not take seriously the fact that many will have
theoretical intuitions incompatible with DCT. That is just to say they have a different
theory and that is no argument against DCT. It is merely the expression of disagreement.
Every standard-based moral theory offers a different account of what makes moral
standards appropriately justified. Even if the proposed standards are very similar under
alternative accounts, the facts that justify the standards will be different if the accounts
will be different. Therefore, it would be very strange indeed if people did not find
accounts that justify standards in ways different than their own to be counter-intuitive.

This is not to say that we must throw up our hands because there is nothing a
theorist can say to motivate accepting one account over another. It is just to say that the
anything-goes objection is not relevant here. A relevant critique would raise issues such
as the cogency of the theory’s semantics of moral judgment, its view of the nature of
moral properties, its identification of the properties on which moral properties may
supervene or refer to, or its story about the source of moral obligations. Concerning these
matters, proponents of DCT appeal to divine commands and there may be problems with
them doing so.\textsuperscript{10} However, moral intuitions cannot conflict with a meta-theory proposition; no normative considerations are relevant to an evaluation of a metaethical proposition.

Therefore, the only way to make the anything goes objection to DCT stick is to deny that it is possible to make a distinction between a metaethical position and a substantive normative position. However, this is implausible. Such a distinction is commonplace in ethics and made quite easily.\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11} The theories discussed in this essay are cognitivist theories. These theories may make the distinction in the way I have followed Copp: a metaethical proposition makes a claim about what justifies moral standards; substantive normative propositions express the belief that the standard is justified, a person’s endorsement of the standard, or perhaps both of these. Of course, noncognitivists also make the distinction. It remains true that substantive claims are the ones made within the realm of evaluative discourse and metaethical claims are strictly \textit{about} moral claims. The difference is that, for noncognitivists, only the latter are considered genuine propositions.