

## DIVINE COMMAND METAETHICS MODIFIED AGAIN

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### ABSTRACT

This essay presents a version of divine command metaethics inspired by recent work of Donnellan, Kripke, and Putnam on the relation between necessity and conceptual analysis. What we can discover *a priori*, by conceptual analysis, about the nature of ethical wrongness is that wrongness is the property of actions that best fills a certain role. What property that is cannot be discovered by conceptual analysis. But I suggest that theists should claim it is the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. This claim, if true, is a necessary but not an *a priori* truth. It also is a claim, not about the way in which some believers use the word 'wrong,' but about the wrongness that virtually everyone talks about. This position is distinguished from the author's previous views, and from a holistic development of the latter proposed by Jeffrey Stout.

In a recent issue of *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Jeffrey Stout (1978) has written about an earlier paper of mine (Adams, 1973) urging development and modification of the very point on which, as it happens, my own metaethical views have changed most. My thoughts have been moving in a rather different direction from his, however.<sup>1</sup> For that reason, and because of his paper's interesting and perceptive linkage of metaethical issues with the most fundamental questions in the theory of meaning, I would like to respond to him.

### *I. My Old Position*

My modified divine command theory was proposed as a partial analysis of the *meaning* of '(ethically) wrong.' Recognizing that it would be most

implausible as an analysis of the sense in which the expression is used by many speakers (for instance, by atheists), I proposed the theory only as an analysis of the meaning of 'wrong' in the discourse of some Jewish and Christian believers. In the theory that I now prefer, as we shall see, the identification of wrongness with contrariety to God's commands is neither presented as a meaning analysis nor relativized to a group of believers. According to the old theory, however, it is part of the meaning of '(ethically) wrong' for at least some believers that

- (1) (for any action *X*) *X* is ethically wrong if and only if *X* is contrary to God's commands,  
but also that
- (2) '*X* is wrong' normally expresses opposition or certain other negative attitudes toward *X*.

The meaning of 'wrong' seems to be overdetermined by (1) and (2). Conflicts could arise. Suppose God commanded me to practice cruelty for its own sake. (More precisely, suppose he commanded me to make it my chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no other reason than that he commanded it.) I cannot summon up the relevant sort of opposition or negative attitude toward disobedience to such a command, and I will not say that it would be wrong to disobey it.

Such conflicts within the religious ethical belief system are prevented by various background beliefs, which are *presupposed* by (1). Particularly important is the belief that

- (3) God is loving, and therefore does not and will not command such things as (e.g.) the practice of cruelty for its own sake.

But (3) is contingent. It is allowed by the theory to be logically possible for God to command cruelty for its own sake, although the believer is confident he will not do such a thing. Were the believer to come to think (3) false, however, I suggested that his concept of ethical wrongness would "break down." It would not function as it now does, because he would not be prepared to use it to say that any action is wrong (Adams, 1973:322-324).

Because of the interplay and tension of the various considerations involved in it, this picture of the meaning of '(ethically) wrong' is (as I acknowledged) somewhat "untidy." But its untidiness should not obscure the fact that I meant it quite definitely to follow from the theory that the following are necessary truths:

- (4) If *X* is wrong, then *X* is contrary to the commands of God.
- (5) If *X* is obligatory, then *X* is required by the commands of God.
- (6) If *X* is ethically permitted, then *X* is permitted by the commands of God.
- (7) If there is not a *loving* God, then nothing is ethically wrong or obligatory or permitted.

These four theses are still taken to be necessary truths in my present divine command theory.

## *II. Stout's Holism*

According to the theory of my earlier paper, as we have seen, what believers mean by 'wrong' depends, in some sense, on their belief about the truth or falsity of (3), which is admitted to be a synthetic and contingent matter of fact. To that extent I may be seen as having moved toward a breach in the wall that in earlier analytical philosophy separated analytical propositions, true by virtue of meanings alone, from synthetic propositions. Stout urges me to follow that path to what he calls 'holism.'

He suggests that the meaning of an expression is given by its role in "the evidence-inference-action game," which is a system of relations among "observational situations," inferences, "beliefs, desires, intentions," and actions, as well as sentences used in thought or speech (Stout, 1978:5-6). The expression derives its meaning from its relation to the system as a whole. The idea that the meaning is given by one or a few analytically true sentences, and/or by a well defined set of observations that would conclusively verify or falsify certain crucial sentences containing the expression, is discarded. For Stout seems to accept the view that if one has an experience that seems to conflict with something else one believes, there will be no belief that absolutely must be given up (none that will be falsified with absolute conclusiveness) and none of one's beliefs is so certain *a priori* that it can be immune from possible revision in the light of experience. One's system of beliefs constantly needs revisions to bring it or keep it in harmony with experience; but there is no set of purely *a priori* or analytic beliefs which cannot be revised.

This is not to say that all beliefs are equally revisable. Stout (1978:7-9) holds that there are "lawlike sentences" that "play a special role" in the evidence-inference-action language game, and that are particularly "deeply entrenched." Though not immune from revision, they are less likely than other sentences to be revised in most situations. They determine what is possible in the game, "relative to the entire scheme as it stands."

They are especially "important in determining conceptual role" (Stout, 1978:7). It seems to follow that the beliefs they express contribute more than other beliefs to determining the meaning of an expression—but not that they alone determine meanings. Every belief plays some part (perhaps too small to be noticeable) in the determination of meanings. "Holism...draws no sharp distinction between changes in meaning and changes in belief" (Stout, 1978:11).

The most important impetus for such holism has come from Quine--and specifically from the suspicion, defended in his famous 1951 essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine, 1963:20-46), that

- (8) The analytic/synthetic distinction cannot be made sense of in such a way as to allow for there being any analytic truths.

This suspicion does indeed strike, as Quine suggested, at one of the central dogmas of earlier 20th century empiricism. But Quinean holism has

commonly left standing another typical assumption of that school of thought, about the relation between necessity and analyticity. By 'broadly logical necessity' we shall mean logical (or absolute or metaphysical, as opposed to epistemic and causal) necessity, in a sense that embraces more than just validity relative to some system of formal logic. The empiricist assumption commonly retained by holists is that

(9) Broadly logical necessity can be understood only as analyticity.  
From (8) and (9) it clearly follows that

(10) It cannot intelligibly be supposed that there are any broadly logically necessary truths.

Both Quine and Stout seem to suspect, at least, that (10) is true, and to doubt the intelligibility of broadly logical modality in general (Quine, 1966:169; Stout, 1978:8f.).

Stout quite rightly leaves it an open question how far my 1973 paper was based on such a holistic view. The answer, I think, is 'Not very far.' Such departure from traditional empiricist assumptions about meaning as appeared in that paper was probably more of Wittgensteinian than of Quinean inspiration; and if my present approach is less Wittgensteinian, it is not more Quinean. I have never accepted (8) or (10), and have long doubted (9). I now reject (9), as will be explained at some length below.

But I admire Stout's ingenious development of my metaethical claims in terms of his holism. On the basis of his views about the special role of "those lawlike sentences deemed virtually unconditionally assertible by the linguistic community at large," Stout says that

it makes sense, according to holism, that the meaning of "wrong" in "Judeo-Christian ethical discourse" will be determined in large part by the role of this word in the following conditional: "For any  $x$ , if  $x$  is contrary to God's commands, then  $x$  is ethically wrong." And we may assume that this lawlike sentence is in fact widely accepted and deeply entrenched in "Judeo-Christian" epistemic communities. It is deemed virtually indubitable by believers. (Stout, 1978:9)

Deeply entrenched as it is, this conditional is still subject in principle to revision, and would be abandoned (as Stout seems to agree) if it came to be believed that God commanded cruelty for its own sake. According to Stout's holism, "implication will *always* be relative to background assumptions...Since it is possible that some of these background assumptions will be called into question by surprising events, it is also possible that familiar implications will someday fail to hold" (Stout, 1978:9f.).

Stout doubts, however, "that the meaning of 'ethically wrong' [for believers] would in fact break down quite so drastically" as I had predicted in such an "epistemological crisis."

The meaning of "ethically wrong" in Adams' discourse is determined not only by its role in deeply entrenched conditionals about God's commands, but also by its role in a host of other lawlike sentences, equally entrenched, which make no reference to God at all. Were this not the case, it would be unclear why Adams would be thrown for such a loop by a command of cruelty for its own sake.

These other entrenched sentences contribute to determining the meaning of 'ethically wrong.' "And they provide critical leverage in the event that God commands the unthinkable" (Stout, 1978:10). This criticism is perceptive and substantially correct; and I am no longer prepared to claim that my concept of ethical wrongness would break down in such an event.

But one of my sources of dissatisfaction with Stout's development of my position also emerges here. Many of my metaethical theses are rendered in his interpretation as claims about the *entrenchment* of "lawlike sentences," which seems to be the best approximation he thinks we can have to analyticity and broadly logical necessity. I take it that entrenchment is, at least in large part, an index of how strongly the relevant individual or community is disposed to resist additional epistemological pressures to abandon a belief; Stout speaks of a "deeply entrenched" sentence as "deemed virtually indubitable by believers" (Stout, 1978:9). On reflection, however, I think my central metaethical claims should not be about entrenchment in this sense. It was and is my view that the principle, 'Any action is ethically wrong if and only if it is contrary to the commands of a loving God,' is a necessary truth, whereas 'Any action is ethically wrong if it is undertaken for the sake of cruelty alone' is not. Yet I certainly agree with Stout's suggestion that the latter principle is at least as entrenched in my belief system as the former. Indeed, I think that divine command metaethics can as correctly be adopted by a believer or community whose theistic faith is quite shaky as by one that believes unquestioningly. But the principles that are treated as necessary in divine command metaethics, such as (4), may be much less entrenched for the doubting believer than many normative ethical principles, both general and specific, that should be contingent according to a divine command theory. I hasten to add that these considerations probably tell not only against Stout's interpretation, but also against the interpretation of my central claims as meaning analyses that I offered in my 1973 paper.

In the end, Stout thinks, the thoroughgoing holist has "no reason for speaking of *conceptual analysis* or of *meanings* at all." He welcomes "the passing of philosophy as a discipline devoted to conceptual analysis and the grasping of natures or essences," and proposes to replace "descriptive metaethics" with the history of ethics (Stout, 1978:15f.). Historical understanding can certainly illuminate philosophical problems, but Stout does not explain in any detail what he expects the historian to do for ethics. His insistence on the possibility of reasoned testing and revision of all beliefs, including ethical beliefs, would hardly be consistent with the sort of historicism according to which the scope of *wissenschaftliche*, academically respectable religious and ethical studies includes the description and causal explanation of religious and ethical beliefs, but excludes issues about the truth or acceptability of such beliefs. But the reasoned study of the latter issues is the task of the philosopher rather than the historian, even if it cannot be accomplished by analysis of meanings. I would welcome the

passing of the idea of philosophy as defined by a method of conceptual analysis. But that is not the passing of philosophy, and it leaves the philosopher with a task of grasping natures or essences (among other things).

### *III. The Separation of Necessity and Natures from Analyticity and Concepts*

An important group of recent papers (especially Donnellan, 1966 and 1972; Kripke, 1972; and Putnam, 1975:196-290)<sup>2</sup> has made a persuasive case for a view that there are necessary truths that are neither analytic nor knowable *a priori*. Among these are truths about the nature of many properties. And I am now inclined to believe that the truth about the nature of ethical wrongness is of this sort.

A case of individual identity or non-identity provides a first example of a truth that is necessary but empirical. In the Gospels according to Mark (2:14) and Luke (5:27-29) there is a story about a tax collector named 'Levi,' who left his business to follow Jesus. There is a tradition, supported by the relevant texts in Matthew (9:9 and 10:3) and by some important manuscripts of Mark (2:14), that this man was the Matthew who appears in the lists of the twelve apostles. This belief is naturally expressed by saying that Levi was Matthew, or that Levi and Matthew were the same man. But perhaps they were not; none of us really knows.

Suppose they were in fact two different men. That is a truth that is in principle knowable, but only empirically knowable. It is certainly not an analytic truth, which could be discovered by analyzing our concepts of Levi and Matthew. But there is a compelling argument for believing it to be a necessary truth if it is true at all. For suppose it were a contingent truth. Then the actual world,  $w_1$ , would be one in which Matthew the apostle and Levi the tax collector are not identical, but a world,  $w_2$ , in which they would be identical would also be possible. Since identity is a transitive relation, however, and since Levi in  $w_1$  is identical with Levi in  $w_2$ , and Levi in  $w_2$  is identical with Matthew in  $w_2$ , and Matthew in  $w_2$  with Matthew in  $w_1$ , it follows that Levi in  $w_1$  is identical with Matthew in  $w_1$ . Thus the hypothesis that the non-identity of Matthew and Levi is contingent leads to a contradiction. This argument is not completely uncontroversial in its assumptions about trans-world identity, but it seems to me to be correct. A similar argument can be given for holding that if Levi and Matthew were in fact identical, that is a necessary truth, although it is not *a priori*.

It should be emphasized that 'possible' is not being used in its *epistemic* sense here. Both worlds in which Matthew and Levi are identical and worlds in which they are distinct are epistemically possible; that is, either sort may be actual for all we know. But whichever sort is actual, the other sort lacks broadly logical possibility, or "metaphysical possibility" as it is often called by those who hold the views I am exploring here.

Another interesting feature of this example is that there is a property which our understanding of the meaning of 'Matthew' and 'Levi' in this context tells us Matthew and Levi must have had if they (or he) existed, but which is a property that they (or he) possessed contingently. By 'Matthew' we mean the individual who stands in a certain historical relation (not yet spelled out in a very detailed way by philosophers of language) to the use of 'Matthew' (on certain occasions known to us) as a name of a man believed to have been one of the disciples of Jesus. It is epistemically possible that Matthew was named 'Levi' and not 'Matthew,' or that he was not one of the twelve apostles but got counted as one by mistake. But no one who does not stand in an appropriate historical relation to the relevant uses of 'Matthew' counts as Matthew; that is what is settled by the meaning with which we use 'Matthew.' Standing in this relation to these uses of 'Matthew' is surely a contingent property of Matthew, however. Matthew could have existed in a world in which he was never called 'Matthew' during or after his life, or in a world which Jesus never had any disciples and the relevant uses of 'Matthew' never occurred.

Similar considerations apply to theories about the natures of properties, or of kinds of things. Hilary Putnam uses the theory that the nature of water is to be  $H_2O$  as an example in arguing that such theories, if true, are commonly necessary truths but not *a priori* (see also Kripke, 1972:314-331). (As it happens, this example was given a somewhat different treatment, hereby superseded, in Adams, 1973:345.)

Suppose a vessel from outer space landed, carrying a group of intelligent creatures that brought with them, and drank, a transparent, colorless, odorless, tasteless liquid that dissolved sugar and salt and other things that normally dissolve in water. Even if we non-chemists could not distinguish it from water, we might intelligibly (and prudently) ask whether this substance really is water. Our question would be answered, in the negative, by a laboratory analysis showing that the beverage from outer space was not  $H_2O$  but a different liquid whose long and complicated chemical formula may be abbreviated as *XYZ* (see Putnam, 1975:223).

Why is it right to say that this *XYZ* would not be water? I take it to be Putnam's view that it is not an analytic truth that water is  $H_2O$ . What is true analytically, by virtue of what every competent user of the word 'water' must know about its meaning, is rather that if most of the stuff that we (our linguistic community) have been calling 'water' is of a single nature, water is liquid that is of the same nature as *that*.

This view enables Putnam to maintain against Quine that substantial change and development in scientific theories is possible without change in meaning (although he agrees with Quine "that meaning change and theory change cannot be sharply separated," and that *some* possible changes in scientific theory would change the meaning of crucial terms—see Putnam, 1975:255f.). "Thus, the fact that an English speaker in 1750 might have called *XYZ* 'water,' while he or his successors would not have called *XYZ*

water in 1800 or 1850 does not mean that the 'meaning' of 'water' changed for the average speaker in the interval" (Putnam, 1975:225). This claim is plausible. Had the visitors from outer space arrived with their clear, tasteless liquid in England in 1750, the English of that time might wisely have wondered whether the stuff was really water, even if it satisfied all the tests they yet knew for being water. And the correct answer to *their* question too would have been negative, if the liquid was *XYZ* and not  $H_2O$ .

Although it is not an *a priori* but an empirical truth that water is  $H_2O$ , Putnam thinks it is metaphysically necessary. Suppose there is a possible world,  $w_3$ , in which there is no  $H_2O$  but *XYZ* fills the ecological and cultural role that belongs to  $H_2O$  in the actual world. *XYZ* looks, tastes, etc. like  $H_2O$ , and is even called 'water' by English speakers in  $w_3$ . In such a case, Putnam (1975:231) maintains, the *XYZ* in  $w_3$  is *not* water, for in order to be water a liquid in *any* possible world must be the same liquid (must have the same nature, I would say) as the stuff that we actually call 'water'—which is  $H_2O$ . We may say, on this view, that the property of being water *is* the property of being  $H_2O$ , so that nothing could have the one property without having the other, or lack one without lacking the other.

It should also be noted that on this view the property ascribed to water by the description that expresses the *concept* of water, or what every competent user of 'water' knows, is not a property that belongs to water necessarily. The description is 'liquid of the same nature as most of the stuff that we have been calling "water."' But it is only contingent that water is called 'water.' Water could perfectly well have existed if no one had given it a name at all, or if the English had called it 'yoof.'

This view of the relation between the nature of water and the meaning of 'water' seems to me plausible. And if we think it is correct, that will enhance the plausibility of an analogous treatment of the nature of right and wrong. But even if Putnam's claims about 'water' are mistaken, we certainly *could* use an expression as he says we use 'water;' and it would be worth considering whether 'right' and 'wrong' are used in something like that way.

#### *IV. The Nature of Wrongness and the Meaning of 'Wrong'*

I do not think that every competent user of 'wrong' in its ethical sense must know what the nature of wrongness is. The word is used—with the same meaning, I would now say—by people who have different views, or none at all, about the nature of wrongness. As I remarked in my earlier paper, "There is probably much less agreement about the most basic issues in moral theory than there is about many ethical issues of less generality" (Adams, 1973:343). That people can use an expression to signify an ethical property, knowing it is a property they seek (or shun, as the case may be), but not knowing what its nature is, was realized by Plato when he characterized the good as



That which every soul pursues, doing everything for the sake of it, divining that it is something, but perplexed and unable to grasp adequately what it is or to have such a stable belief as about other things (*Republic* 505D-E).

What every competent user of 'wrong' must know about wrongness is, first of all, that wrongness is a property of actions (perhaps also of intentions and of various attitudes, but certainly of actions); and second, that people are generally opposed to actions they regard as wrong, and count wrongness as a reason (often a conclusive reason) for opposing an action. In addition I think the competent user must have some opinions about what actions have this property, and some fairly settled dispositions as to what he will count as reasons for and against regarding an action as wrong. There is an important measure of agreement among competent users in these opinions and dispositions—not complete agreement, nor universal agreement on some points and disagreement on others, but overlapping agreements of one person with another on some points and with still others on other points. "To call an action 'wrong' is, among other things, to classify it with certain other actions," as having a common property, "and there is considerable agreement...as to what actions those are" (Adams, 1973:344). Torturing children for fun is one of them, in virtually everyone's opinion.

Analysis of the concept or understanding with which the word 'wrong' is used is not sufficient to determine what wrongness is. What it can tell us about the nature of wrongness, I think, is that wrongness will be the property of actions (if there is one) that best fills the role assigned to wrongness by the concept. My theory is that contrariety to the commands of a loving God is that property; but we will come to that in section V. Meanwhile I will try to say something about what is involved in being the property that *best* fills the relevant role, though I do not claim to be giving an adequate set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.

(i) We normally speak of actions being right and wrong as of facts that obtain objectively, independently of whether we think they do. 'Wrong' has the syntax of an ordinary predicate, and we worry that we may be mistaken in our ethical judgments. This feature of ethical concepts gives emotivism and prescriptivism in metaethics much of their initial implausibility. If possible, therefore, the property to be identified with ethical wrongness should be one that actions have or lack objectively.

(ii) The property that is wrongness should belong to those types of action that are thought to be wrong—or at least it should belong to an important central group of them. It would be unreasonable to expect a theory of the nature of wrongness to yield results that agree perfectly with pre-theoretical opinion. One of the purposes a metaethical theory may serve is to give guidance in revising one's particular ethical opinions. But there is a limit to how far those opinions may be revised without changing the subject entirely; and we are bound to take it as a major test of the acceptability of a theory of the nature of wrongness that it should in some sense account for

the wrongness of a major portion of the types of action we have believed to be wrong.

(iii) Wrongness should be a property that not only belongs to the most important types of action that are thought to be wrong, but also plays a causal role (or a role as object of perception) in their coming to be regarded as wrong. It should not be connected in a merely fortuitous way with our classification of actions as wrong and not wrong.<sup>3</sup>

(iv) Understanding the nature of wrongness should give one more rather than less reason to oppose wrong actions as such. Even if it were discovered (as it surely will not be) that there is a certain sensory pleasure produced by all and only wrong actions, it would be absurd to say that wrongness is the property of producing that pleasure. For the property of producing such a pleasure, in itself, gives us no reason whatever to oppose an action that has the property.

(v) The best theory about the nature of wrongness should satisfy other intuitions about wrongness as far as possible. One intuition that is rather widely held and is relevant to theological metaethics is that rightness and wrongness are determined by a law or standard that has a sanctity that is greater than that of any merely human will or institution.

We are left, on this view, with a concept of wrongness that has both objective and subjective aspects. The best theory of the nature of wrongness, I think, will be one that identifies wrongness with some property that actions have or lack objectively. But we do not have a fully objective procedure for determining which theory of the nature of wrongness is the best, and therefore which property is wrongness.

For example, the property that is wrongness should belong to the most important types of action that are believed to be wrong. But the concept possessed by every competent user of 'wrong' does not dictate exactly which types of action those are. A sufficiently eccentric classification of types of action as right or wrong would not fit the concept. But there is still room for much difference of opinion. In testing theories of the nature of wrongness by their implications about what types of action are wrong, I will be guided by my own classification of types of action as right and wrong, and by my own sense of which parts of the classification are most important.

Similarly, in considering whether identifying wrongness with a given property, *P*, makes wrongness more or less of a reason for opposing an action, I will decide partly on the basis of how *P* weighs with me. And in general I think that this much is right about prescriptivist intuitions in metaethics: to identify a property with ethical wrongness is in part to assign it a certain complex role in my life (and, for my part, in the life of society); in deciding to do that I will (quite reasonably) be influenced by what attracts and repels me personally. But it does not follow that the theory I should choose is not one that identifies wrongness with a property that actions would have or lack regardless of how I felt about them.

### V. A New Divine Command Theory

The account I have given of the concept of wrongness that every competent user of 'wrong' must have is consistent with many different theories about the nature of wrongness—for example, with the view that wrongness is the property of failing to maximize human happiness, and with a Marxist theory that wrongness is the property of being contrary to the objective interests of the progressive class or classes. But given typical Christian beliefs about God, it seems to me most plausible to identify wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. (i) This is a property that actions have or lack objectively, regardless of whether we think they do. (I assume the theory can be filled out with a satisfactory account of what love consists in here.) (ii) The property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God is certainly believed by Christians to belong to all and only wrong actions. (iii) It also plays a causal role in our classification of actions as wrong, in so far as God has created our moral faculties to reflect his commands. (iv) Because of what is believed about God's actions, purposes, character, and power, he inspires such devotion and/or fear that contrariness to his commands is seen as a supremely weighty reason for opposing an action. Indeed, (v) God's commands constitute a law or standard that seems to believers to have a sanctity that is not possessed by any merely human will or institution.

My new divine command theory of the nature of ethical wrongness, then, is that ethical wrongness *is* (i.e. is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. I regard this as a metaphysically necessary, but not an analytic or *a priori* truth. Because it is not a conceptual analysis, this claim is not relative to a religious sub-community of the larger linguistic community. It purports to be the correct theory of the nature of the ethical wrongness that *everybody* (or almost everybody) is talking about.

Further explanation is in order, first about the notion of a divine *command*, and second about the *necessity* that is claimed here. On the first point I can only indicate here the character of the explanation that is needed; for it amounts to nothing less than a theory of revelation. Theists sometimes speak of wrong action as action contrary to the "will" of God, but that way of speaking ignores some important distinctions. One is the distinction between the absolute will of God (his "good pleasure") and his revealed will. Any Christian theology will grant that God in his good pleasure sometimes decides, for reasons that may be mysterious to us, not to do everything he could to prevent a wrong action. According to some theologies nothing at all can happen contrary to God's good pleasure. It is difficult, therefore, to suppose that all wrong actions are unqualifiedly contrary to God's will in the sense of his good pleasure. It is God's *revealed* will—not what he wants or plans to have happen, but what he has told us to do—that is thought to determine the rightness and wrongness of human

actions. Roman Catholic theology has made a further distinction, within God's revealed will, between his commands, which it would be wrong not to follow, and "counsels (of perfection)," which it would be better to follow but not wrong not to follow. It is best, therefore, in our metaethical theory, to say that wrongness is contrariety to God's *commands*; and commands must have been issued, promulgated, or somehow revealed.

The notion of the issuance of a divine command requires a theory of revelation for its adequate development. The first such theory that comes to mind may be a Biblical literalism that takes divine commands to be just what is written in the Bible as commanded by God. But there will also be Roman Catholic theories involving the *magisterium* of the Church, a Quaker theory about "the inner light," theories about "general revelation" through the moral feelings and intuitions of unbelievers as well as believers—and other theories as well. To develop these theories and choose among them is far too large a task for the present essay.

The thesis that wrongness is (identical with) contrariety to a loving God's commands must be *metaphysically necessary* if it is true. That is, it cannot be false in any possible world if it is true in the actual world. For if it were false in some possible world, then wrongness would be non-identical with contrariety to God's commands in the actual world as well, by the transivity of identity, just as Matthew and Levi must be non-identical in all worlds if they are non-identical in any.

This argument establishes the metaphysical necessity of property identities in general; and that leads me to identify wrongness with contrariety to the commands of a *loving* God, rather than simply with contrariety to the commands of God. Most theists believe that both of those properties are in fact possessed by all and only wrong actions. But if wrongness is simply contrariety to the commands of God, it is necessarily so, which implies that it would be wrong to disobey God even if he were so unloving as to command the practice of cruelty for its own sake. That consequence is unacceptable. I am not prepared to adopt the negative attitude toward possible disobedience in that situation that would be involved in identifying wrongness simply with contrariety to God's commands. The loving character of the God who issues them seems to me therefore to be a metaethically relevant feature of divine commands. (I assume that in deciding what property is wrongness, and therefore would be wrongness in all possible worlds, we are to rely on our own actual moral feelings and convictions, rather than on those that we or others would have in other possible worlds.)

If it is necessary that ethical wrongness is contrariety to a loving God's commands, it follows that no actions would be ethically wrong if there were not a loving God. This consequence will seem (at least initially) implausible to many, but I will try to dispel as much as I can of the air of paradox. It should be emphasized, first of all, that my theory does not imply what would ordinarily be meant by saying that no actions *are* ethically wrong if

there *is* no loving God. If there is no loving God, then the theological part of my theory is false; but the more general part presented in section IV, above, implies that in that case ethical wrongness is the property with which it is identified by the best remaining alternative theory.

Similarly, if there is in fact a loving God, and if ethical wrongness is the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God, there is still, I suppose, a possible world,  $w_4$ , in which there would not be a loving God but there would be people to whom  $w_4$  would seem much as the actual world seems to us, and who would use the word 'wrong' much as we use it. We may say that they would associate it with the same *concept* as we do,<sup>4</sup> although the property it would signify in their mouths is not wrongness. The actions they call 'wrong' would not be wrong—that is, they would not have the property that actually is wrongness (the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God). But that is not to say that they would be mistaken whenever they predicated 'is wrong' of an action. For 'wrong' in their speech would signify the property (if any) that is assigned to it by the metaethical theory that would be the best in relation to an accurate knowledge of their situation in  $w_4$ . We can even say that they would believe, as we do, that cruelty is wrong, if by that we mean, not that the property they would ascribe to cruelty by calling it 'wrong' is the same as the property that we so ascribe, but that the subjective psychological state that they would express by the ascription is that same that we express.

Readers who think that I have not sufficiently dispelled the air of paradox may wish to consider a slightly different divine command theory, according to which it is a contingent truth that contrariety to God's commands constitutes the nature of wrongness. Instead of saying that wrongness is the property that in the actual world best fills a certain role, we could say that wrongness is the property of having whatever property best fills that role in whatever possible world is in question. On the latter view it would be reasonable to say that the property that best fills the role constitutes the nature of wrongness, but that the nature of wrongness may differ in different possible worlds. The theist could still hold that the nature of wrongness in the actual world is constituted by contrariety to the commands of God (or of a loving God—it does not make as much difference which we say, on this view, since the theist believes God is loving in the actual world anyway). But it might be constituted by other properties in some other possible worlds. This theory does not imply that no actions would be wrong if there were no loving God; and that may still seem to be an advantage. On the other hand I think there is also an air of paradox about the idea that wrongness may have different natures in different possible worlds; and if a loving God does issue commands, actual wrongness has a very different character from anything that could occur in a world without a loving God.

The difference between this alternative theory and the one I have endorsed should not be exaggerated. On both theories the nature of

wrongness is actually constituted by contrariety to the commands of (a loving) God. And on both theories there may be other possible worlds in which other properties best fill the role by which contrariety to a loving God's commands is linked in the actual world to our concept of wrongness.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The metaethical position to be presented here was briefly indicated in Adams (1979). Though not all the arguments given there in favor of the theory are repeated here, the position is much more fully expounded in the present essay.

<sup>2</sup>I have selected from these papers points that are relevant to my theory. I do not claim to give a comprehensive account of their aims and contents. I am also indebted here to David Kaplan and Bernard Kobes, for discussion and for the opportunity of reading unpublished papers of theirs.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Putnam (1975:290): "I would apply a generally causal account of reference also to moral terms..." I do not know how similar the metaethical views at which Putnam hints are to those that are developed in section IV of the present paper.

<sup>4</sup>I follow Putnam in this use of 'concept.' I have avoided committing myself as to whether English speakers in  $w_4$  would use 'wrong' with the same *meaning* as we do. See Putnam, 1975:234.

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