

Divine Authority

by William Werpehowski

God and Moral Obligation

BY C. STEPHEN EVANS

OXFORD, 202 PAGES, \$99

Divine command theory is hardly in fashion among ethicists these days. Secular scholars tend toward utilitarianism, the defense of human rights, or accounts of the social contract. Others may share with religious ethicists an interest in advancing an ethic based in natural law or the virtues or both. So it is intriguing and even bold for C. Stephen Evans to have written *God and Moral Obligation*, “a sustained argument,” as the author puts it, “that God does provide the best explanation for why there are moral obligations.”

Evans, who is University Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Baylor University, is a distinguished and prolific scholar, an expert in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, and, notably, an interpreter of the latter’s moral thought along the lines of a “divine command ethic” akin to what we find defended in this book.

While Kierkegaard is referenced at a few points in *God and Moral Obligation*, Evans’ main subject is what he calls an “intuition” belonging to the English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. In her classic 1958 essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” she urged her contemporaries to stop working with the concept of “moral obligation.”

The notion made sense, she claimed, only within a “law conception of ethics” that had its roots in Judaism and Christianity. With the

widespread loss of belief in God as law-giver, the idea of being morally bound or obliged—as if this or that *verdict* on your action hangs in the balance—loses its basic meaning, however much it might retain its compelling psychological effect.

In order to avoid the confusion and mischief made possible by a “morality” floating free of the historical and logical context affording its intelligibility, Anscombe suggested that moral philosophers follow Aristotle’s lead and try to come up with what they lack but most sorely need: a moral psychology that focuses on virtues, the goods of human flourishing to which they are directed, and accompanying understandings of “actions,” “intention,” “pleasure,” “wanting,” and the like.

In the modern intellectual environment that Anscombe found dominated by utilitarian moral calculation, the alternative position would be to permit an effectively empty idea of “moral obligation” to falsely authorize normative conclusions that the Hebrew-Christian divine law ethic will and should categorically reject. “For it has been a characteristic of that ethic to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever consequences threaten, such as choosing to kill the innocent for any purpose, however good.”

Utilitarian theory undermines the strictness of such prohibitions in principle—consequences finally are all that matter. And Anscombe, who powerfully protested Allied direct attacks on German and Japanese noncombatants during World War II—that is, choices to kill the innocent for the sake of “good consequences”—knew firsthand utility’s work on that score.

Evans addresses this issue, if perhaps not directly enough. He is more

intent on holding that moral obligations, properly understood, are inescapable facts that we encounter throughout our lives. We experience their *reality* as a burden when we would prefer to violate them. Even if we were to rationalize this reality away in such cases, we face and affirm their factuality when *we* are wronged, when someone has lied or cheated or broken a promise to us.

“The Anscombe intuition” that moral obligations have a law-like character is, moreover, right on target. They represent a kind of verdict on our behavior, and most often function to “bring reflection to a close” and motivate moral action. They generate a sense of accountability for what we do, and hold universally “for persons simply as persons” (in contrast to obligations of a particular legal or familial nature). Fundamentally, they present themselves to us as bearing an objective authority that overrides competing appeals or reasons to do otherwise.

Following up his self-described “phenomenology of moral obligations,” Evans sets out to explain it. He takes the bait offered by Anscombe, asking, “Do we need a law-giver to have law-like moral obligations?” and argues for the affirmative. God, the good and loving transcendent source of all that is, who both seeks fellowship with his human creation and wills that moral requirements serve that goal, best accounts for why there are moral obligations. One may conclude that God is “in fact” (ontologically) “the basis of moral obligations.”

Taking the idea of a “divine command” in an expansive sense, Evans holds that on the theistic conception of God described above, God “has a rightful claim on humans such that they have good reasons to obey his commands.” “Moral obligation” and “divine command” refer to the same reality, and “the primary reason for thinking this is the case is simply that viewing moral obligations as divine

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commands makes more sense of these obligations than any alternative account.”

The defense of this proposition operates on a number of levels. First, Evans identifies a positive fit between the distinctive features of the obligations to be explained and the divine command theory that would explain them. God’s will or command establishes moral objectivity; that right relation with God is the highest good establishes both why moral reasons are overriding and what grounds our motivation to act rightly.

Second, Evans is quick to block ready-at-hand objections based on the fact that moral agents who are not theists of any sort clearly can and do apprehend and act on their moral obligations. “The claim that God is

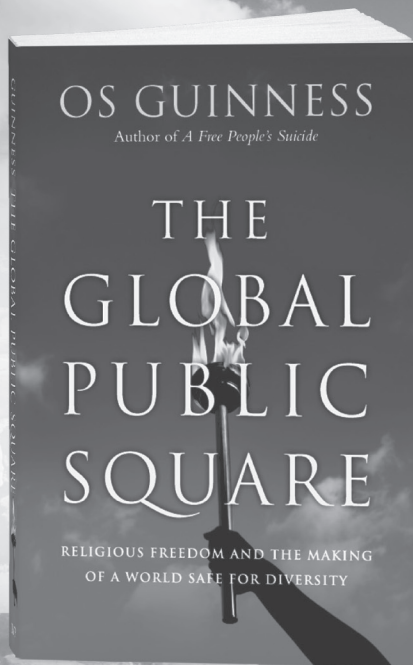
in fact the basis of moral obligations must be distinguished from the claim that one cannot believe in moral obligations without belief in God.” It remains reasonable for atheists to affirm their reality and act on the dictates of conscience, which Evans highlights as one highly important way in which divine commands may be communicated. “All humans are God’s creatures and thus all participate in the social relation that grounds moral obligations.”

A third strategy, one that I find especially helpful, is to bring alternative and seemingly opposing approaches to divine command theory into harmony with it. Evans shows plausibly how treatments of the moral life that focus on the natural law or an ethic of virtue are clearly compatible with his bottom-line thesis. Indeed, a divine

command theory can rest on a natural law theory, pointing us to “certain truths about human nature, truths with normative implications,” while completing the latter in explaining the unique character of moral authority and obligation.

And a virtue ethic may work to locate the limits and purpose of a life of moral duty by specifying the telos of that life. Analyzing to good effect an often-neglected theme in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, Evans suggests that “the purpose of duties is to help us become transformed into the kinds of people who no longer require the notion of duty at all.”

God and Moral Obligation is a success in a number of respects. Evans writes clearly, even brightly, avoiding technical philosophical jargon whenever possible. He is



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admirably capacious in his readiness to bring together positions often deemed at odds with one another at the same time as he offers a vigorous defense of divine command theory against its challengers.

The stated practical aim of the book is refreshingly modest; it is “to encourage contemporary thinkers to take seriously the role that divine authority might play in morality, and thereby perhaps to think seriously about the reality of God.” For the most part, the arguments we find there do just that.

Yet there is an area, as I intimated above, that may require more attention. Recall Anscombe’s caution that a counterfeit sense of “moral obligation” passes by exceptionless moral prohibitions and that the divine law conception above all preserves and enforces those requirements. I believe that human actors who fail to give pride of place to moral boundaries that must never be crossed, such as the direct killing of the innocent, and who instead are ready to see their obligations in terms of moving beyond them in favor of “good results,” will be harder put “to take seriously the role that divine authority plays in morality”; for they will to that extent lose a sense of the moral *limits* that remind us of our finitude and anticipate consideration of a law of our being that is not one of our making.

Evans concludes his fine book by recognizing that the “encouragement” of nonbelievers to “take a fresh look at the issues” will involve more than his arguments. It will “need religious people who live with moral integrity and show the power of their ideas in practice.” It is evident that he is thinking here of the contribution of displaying the link between moral obligations and their divine source. Every bit as important as that, however, is displaying in everyday life the truth and reality of moral obligations themselves. ■

Dante Decluttered

by David Bentley Hart

The Divine Comedy

BY DANTE ALIGHIERI

TRANSLATED BY CLIVE JAMES

LIVERIGHT, 560 PAGES, \$29.95

For me, the appearance of Dan Brown’s newest Robert Langdon novel, its dust jacket adorned with Dante’s flinty profile and a misappropriated title, poses a purely historical question: Has there ever been another case anywhere in the annals of the printed word of a literary figure as majestically imposing as Dante—or of a work as monumental as the *Inferno*—featuring as the central “motif” (or theme, or plot device, or MacGuffin, or whatever) in a book by a writer as ineffably horrid as Brown? (It seems unlikely, by several orders of statistical magnitude.)

Another question it prompts, and one probably of more immediate cultural concern, is whether Dante today can command the attention of even a vanishingly minuscule fraction of the readers that Brown can summon from the four quarters of the wind with a single inept metaphor. (Here too, I suppose, the answer is obvious.)

One should not worry, of course. The flame of Dante’s greatness will continue to shine out, quietly but persistently, through our current Dark Ages and long into the future, while the nerve-wracking fluorescent glare of Brown’s celebrity will turn pink and finally fade away whenever its mercury is exhausted. At least we have to believe that, as long as some vestige of civilization remains, readers will continue to return to *The Divine Comedy* for its astonishing imaginative scope, its moral and

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spiritual passion, its lyrical genius, and so on.

The few valid complaints against it, such as they are, will consistently recur: that the ghastly solidity of Dante’s imagined hells often seems so much more absorbing than those shimmering saints floating in his pale, impalpable heavens; that by the end dull theological discourses have largely crowded out the gripping personal narratives that had carried the poem all the way up from the dark wood of Dante’s midlife wanderings to the terrestrial paradise where Beatrice was waiting for him; that Dante’s final description of the Trinity encircled by the celestial rose conjures up an image about as engrossing as what one might see in a kaleidoscope bought on a boardwalk. But the poem will never lose its hold on the discerning.

All of which being said, it is nevertheless the case that the full power of the *Comedy* lies beyond the grasp of the great majority of readers, for two simple reasons: Most must rely on inadequate translations, and very few indeed possess the specialized knowledge necessary to make sense of Dante’s innumerable personal, political, historical, and theological allusions. Regarding the former problem, only so much can be done. No translator can ever satisfactorily render a poem of genius into another tongue.

In English, there are now far more versions of the *Comedy* than can easily be recalled, ranging in tone from the torpid fustian of Cary and Longfellow to the ostentatious virtuosity of Laurence Binyon to the fluent plainness of C. H. Sisson. None of them can do more than adumbrate, often only very wanly, the glittering concision and constantly varying music of Dante’s Tuscan.

Regarding the latter problem, the solution established over the past several decades is that of the critical apparatus. The standard form of recent editions of the *Comedy* includes the