

ФИЛОСОФСКИ НАУКИ. ЕТИКА

DIVINE COMMAND THEORY – A CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

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Абстрактен

Тибор Махрик. Теория на божествената повеля – критични рефлексии. Технологическото и цивилизационно развитие на обществото отправя неизбежни предизвикателства от междудисциплинарен характер, засягащи и хуманитарните науки. В етическия дискурс за съвременните трендове на моралното разсъждение на преден план на интереса на изследователите излиза метаетичната “Теория на божествената повеля”, която предлага интересни основания за решаването на някои етични проблеми и за разбирането на феномена на моралността. Статията критически отразява положителните и отрицателните страни на тази теория и очертава възможните пътища за решаване на дилемата на Евтифрон от гледна точка на херменевтиката на релевантните библейски текстове.

Ключови думи: метаетика; метафизика; епистемология; Евтифрон; етически реализъм; етически антиреализъм

Анотація

Тібор Махрік. Теорія божественного веління – критичне відображення. Технологічний і цивілізаційний розвиток суспільства приносить нагальні виклики міждисциплінарного характеру, що зачіпають також і гуманітарні науки. В етичному дискурсі про сучасні тренди морального міркування на передній план інтересу дослідників виходить метаетична «Теорія божественного веління», котра пропонує цікаве підґрунтя для вирішення деяких етичних проблем і розуміння феномену моральності. Стаття критично відображає позитивні і негативні аспекти цієї теорії, а також окреслює можливі шляхи вирішення дилеми Євтифрона з точки зору герменевтики релевантних біблійних текстів.

Ключові слова: метаетика; метафизика; епистемология; Евтифрон; етичний реалізм; етичний антиреалізм

Abstract

Tibor Mahrik. Divine Command Theory – a critical reflections. The technological and cultural development of society brings urgent challenges of an interdisciplinary character that also exert an influence over the humanities. In the ethical discourse on current trends in moral reasoning, the metaethical theory known as the Divine Command Theory, provides an interesting starting point for solving some ethical problems and enables us to better understand the phenomenon of morality. The study critically reflects positive and negative aspects of this theory, and outlines a possible solution to the Euthyphro dilemma in terms of the hermeneutics of relevant biblical texts.

Key words: metaethics; metaphysics; epistemology; Euthyphro dilemma; ethical realism; ethical antirealism

Introduction. We are currently witnessing a rather extensive discussion in the field of normative as well as applied ethics. In addition to an explosive development of technologies, it can also be ascribed to some other reasons. First of all, it is the strong individualism and the related loss of coherence, which is perceived by some researchers as a response to the crisis of the 19th century philosophy. The disappointment of rationalism and utopian forms of the humanism of the Enlightenment opened a space for a diversity of different philosophical assumptions and resulting conclusions, which frequently have contradictory ethical consequences. McGrath gives reasons for the current phenomenon of “otherness” at any cost, and refers to the reality of divergence of ethical frameworks, whereby the situational ethics and perspectivism of human sentiment and thinking take on radical forms: “Reason fails to deliver a morality suited to the real world in which we live. And with this collapse in confidence in universal and necessary criteria of truth, relativism and pluralism have flourished“ (McGrath, 1996, p. 180). It turns out that the traditional principle of “unity in diversity” deviates more in favour of diversity, whereby “the unity” has lost its point of reference, which implies a serious problem of non-consistency.

Another possible reason is the absence of absolute moral categories, which correlates with the problem of coherency of ethical systems. Ravi Zacharias sees the causes in pluralistic society in connection with the relativizing of values. At the same time, he emphasizes the need to search for the point of reference that would safely anchor this diversity. “Where there is no coherence, there is no meaning. We look for coherence between law and life. We look for coherence between word and deed. We look for coherence between promises and fulfilments. We look for coherence between love and trust. In short, there is a longing to find a connectedness in life“ (Zacharias, 1997, p. 113). The absolute point of reference for creating ethical frameworks can be postulated in different ways depending on one’s metaphysical and epistemological view of the world.

In this connection, Carson (1996, p. 50) points to an excessive dominance of personal autonomy, which becomes a decisive factor in establishing general ethical frameworks. It is the autonomous preferences of individuals that are considered to be one of the reasons why in western countries such a weak “consensus on the basis for moral behaviour” is present. At the centre of this dialogue is the metaethical theory known as Divine Command Theory (hereafter referred to as DCT), since Christian ethics “is a response to the challenges emerging from the reality of present life“ (Geisler, 2010, p. 16).

Phenomenon of reality. What is reality? How do we know that what we know about the world we truthfully know? What is the relation of the world as we know it to the reality in its absolute sense? The etymological background of the term knowledge (Gr. $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\mu\eta$ = knowledge, science, understanding; Gr. $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ = a word, principle, debate) indicates the content of the struggle of the process of cognition as well as learning in relation to truth, conviction and the justification of legitimacy of this or that concept. In the history of epistemology, various concepts of thought overlap, while there can be a dominance of assumptions that in explicit forms can be seen, for example, in Spinoza’s rationalism, Hume’s empiricism, Kant’s agnosticism, Plato’s idealism, Comte’s positivism, Kierkegaard’s existentialism, Plotinus’ mysticism and Hegel-Heidegger’s phenomenology. In the past, various dominating paradigms of understanding of both objective and subjective worlds prevailed, and these paradigms oscillated within the polarity defined by agnostic unknowability and realistic knowability of reality as such.

Nobel Prize Laureate in literature (1990) Octavio Paz Lozano is convinced that: “Reality is everything that we are and also everything that surrounds us, keeps us and, at the same time, absorbs and nourishes us; it is richer, and more changeable and livelier than any ideas and systems that try to express it. Therefore, as a matter of fact, we do not know reality; we know only the part we are able to reduce into a language and concepts“ (Octavio, 1994, p. 20). The issue of the nature of reality and our cognitive understanding of the perceived world currently presents an important task

dealt with by experts all over the world. Evans (1996, p. 32-65) perceives this challenge in the form of the triad of the greatest rational challenges of current science – a secret of reality complexity, a secret of reality purposefulness and a secret of moral arrangement of the world, which he considers to be the most important to create descriptive as well as prescriptive ethical concepts, while from the academic community's point of view, the theological concept continues to be justified and legitimate.

In his recent book titled *The Grand Design* (2010), Hawking presented the scientific community with a bold claim according to which the laws of nature are sufficient to explain not only all the phenomena in the universe but also their origins. The consequences of Hawking's naturalism are fatal: (a) free will is just an illusion, (b) philosophy is a dead science, (c) ethics is losing its legitimacy. An effort to reduce ethics to the form of a scientific system of claims is a serious error of strict naturalism. Moreover, such an effort collides with the inconsistency of thinking in terms of formal logic. An example is the so-called Haldane's reflection based on materialistic reductionism in epistemology: when my mental processes are clearly determined by the movements of atoms in my brain, then there is no reason for me to think that my ideas are true; therefore, there is no reason for me to assume that the processes in my brain are determined only by atoms (Collins, 2003, p. 22). The strict naturalism thus paradoxically implies anticipation of reality, which goes beyond the mandate of naturalism.

Epistemological impulses. It can be said that the optimism of knowledge from the times of the Enlightenment was gradually replaced by humility and reserve. With regard to the issue of epistemology Polkinghorn says: "Now we know that the world is not mechanical only, even though we have always known it in a way, because we ourselves are not any mechanisms or automata. We have the power to make a decision, to act in the world and to change it. It is a limited power, though. We certainly cannot fly, but we do have the tools for flying ...20th century science does not perceive the world just as a physical entity, but as a reality, the good of which we shall seek. However, moral categories are not part of science" (Tippett, 2010, p. 265). This is also the reason why in the last decades, individual scientific disciplines have been precisely specifying their epistemological mandates, which becomes a basis for the need of interdisciplinary dialogue, in particular with regard to applied sciences, such as ethics.

In his interpretation of Gödel's theorem in relation to knowing reality, Freeman Dyson claims that "there will always be problems to which there will be no solutions within given rules" (Dyson, 2008, p. 226), by which he sets the boundary in epistemology in the sense of approaches of formal logic. Similarly, Gregory Chaitin, Professor of Mathematics, in connection with the consequences of non-reducibility of a certain type of algorithmic information, points to the obvious limits of the cognitive potentiality of man and human logic as such, since some mathematical facts are, in terms of epistemology, "true and yet unprovable" (Chaitin, 2006, p. 55) under the rules of formal logic. This corresponds to Ratzsch's view of the limits of scientific knowledge. According to him, science "cannot provide real proof of its results" (Ratzsch, 2000, p. 92) because for the purpose of reasoning and logical procedures, natural sciences use basic methodological and logical assumptions which, however, are not created by science, and are brought into these processes from outside, i. e. from settings outside science itself.

Divine Command Theory. It is a metaethical theory which proposes that moral truths do not exist independently of God's will (MARTIN, 1993, p. 229). Divine Command Theory (DCT) thus creates a direct dependence of man's moral knowledge on his theological knowledge in the sense that without knowing God's commands, man cannot claim that he has a knowledge of moral obligations. By this concept, God is independent of the universe and stands above it as the Creator. At the same time, however, DCT as a realistic position is interesting also by claiming that moral the properties of good and evil are given by something which is independent of man, of man's mind, opinions, preferences, culture etc., and also not conditioned by man.

This offers a space for reflection on the normative basis of ethical principles, but paradoxically creates a problem for epistemological aspects of metaethics. If it were true that something is good or bad when and only when God explicitly commanded or prohibited it, then it would be obvious that moral realities could not be determined by means that are common in the environment of natural sciences, psychology or sociology.

In this concept, ethical categories are universal, absolute and indisputable. By DCT, God is an omnipotent being that knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what happened, what is happening and what will happen. Moreover, God has a mandate to respond to man's failure in a perfect and fair way. By this, the objectivity of all factors included is guaranteed. As God created everything, He did not create, for example, laws of mathematical logic that are created by man, while they correspond to the reality of the universe and, therefore, they are true and real in a way. Howard-Snyder (1999, p. 381) points to the analogy between the laws of mathematical logic and the truths of morality, whereby "both are true, and yet not created by anybody", which turns this theory into a concept very popular among current experts, pointing to fundamental problems in explaining the origin of moral rules.

Euthyphro dilemma. The Euthyphro dilemma presents a critical point of the DCT concept. This dilemma is discussed by Plato, who by artistic means rendered the dialogue between Euthyphro and Socrates at the royal court: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, 2002, p. 14). The essence of Socrates' contemplation can be reformulated as follows: Did God command this particular task because it is morally correct, or is it morally correct because it was commanded by God? Regardless of the direction of our arguments in trying to respond to the question put in this way, we will always be up against an intractable barrier.

If God commanded something because it was morally correct, then ethical rules do not any longer depend on God in the sense of DCT. God cannot be the fundamental source of morality, but His task is to differentiate between the categories of good and evil because "God discovers morality, and does not create it" (Arthur, 2004, p. 20). On the other hand, if something commanded by God is correct because it was commanded by God, then we face a problem of the arbitrary possibility of God issuing commands that are ethically unacceptable.

The formal aspect of the argument against DCT is of the following structure:

Claim A: Some things, such as ethnic genocide, are always morally bad.

Claim B: God can command anything, which means also ethnic genocide.

Claim C: If the concept of DCT is true, then ethnic genocide could be morally justifiable.

Under such a presumption, however, God loses, in men's eyes, the mandate of ultimate moral authority, and DCT becomes an untenable concept. A more consistent postulate of consequences can even lead to a claim that God cannot exist.

Craig offers a different construct of thoughts. He works on the basic premise that correlates with the reality of evil and corresponding ethical categories. His logical structure of the defence of DCT against its critics, who use arguments from the position of realists on the issues of evil, is as follows (Pojman, 2006, p. 197):

Claim A: If God does not exist, then no moral absolute values exist.

Claim B: Evil exists, which means that a negative absolute value exists, which implies the existence of an absolute positive value (God).

Claim C: It follows that God exists.

In a close study of Craig's sequence, one comes to an interesting conclusion – if God is not the ultimate source and authority of morality, then He cannot have an absolute position as an objective source of morality.

The possible solution to the Euthyphro dilemma. There have been several concepts seeking to solve this dilemma. Well-known is Aquinas's concept of the natural law theory (Clark

– Poortenga, 2003). Alston proposes a formulation of positive moral imperatives (Alston, 1990), while Adams suggests a modified DCT (Adams, 1987). There are also a number of variants and combinations of the above mentioned. To a certain extent, each attitude offers a satisfying solution of a certain aspect of the dilemma, but, at the same time, it offers another problem that is definitely not less serious. This paper offers the following solution.

The basis of the consideration is the interpretation of the biblical text of Ex 3:14 – God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ,I AM has sent me to you”.

ינחלש היהא לארשי ינבל רמאת הכ רמאיו היהא רשא היהא השמ-לא מיהלא רמאיו
םכילא:

God reveals himself to Moses not only as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob “ – where it concerns, the historical and religious aspect of self-revelation in time – but also by his own name היהא (ehje) deriving from the verb היה (hayah): I am who I am, which in a Hebrew way of thinking represents the important pointer to the very substance of being itself. The content of this word still presents a major problem not only for translators but also for theologians and philosophers. Variants in the interpretation of the word היה are as follows: the one who causes the existence of the others because he has being in himself; eternal being; the one who implicates the cause of events; release of power to make the initial intention happen; confirmation of a covenant between two partners; an eventuality better for you (Vine et al., 1985).

Etymological exploration opens here a mysterious conceptual dimension of self-reflection of ontological reality that goes beyond not only our imagination and empirical memory but also an abstract way of thinking. God enters the space-time continuum in a form of being that is not in space-time. As the creator of the universe, He enters the universe. Moses communicates with a being that is not graspable by the terminology used by man for a conceptual seizing of phenomenological phenomena and empiric experience that is common experience. Therefore, we have a problem with translating the text by which God expresses his essence.

On the other hand, Moses communicates with God, he tries to understand Him and to understand instructions given to him. The dialogue that takes place between Moses and God is a dialogue with a being that diametrically differs in nature from Moses himself. Although it is true that, according to the narrative of the Book of Genesis, man is created in the image and likeness of God (Imago Dei), but the being of man and the being of God fall within diametrically different categories, whereby we are not able to completely express or describe their difference. This is the reason why we have to be very careful in our reflections about what God can do and what not, or why God does something in a certain way, and not in a different way.

Conclusion. The Divide Command Theory (DCT) presents an intriguing metaethical concept that gives the researchers dealing with moral philosophy a thought-provoking and inspiring framework helping us understand the substance of man’s morality and of the world. It not only opens fundamental questions of anthropology but also outlines epistemological limits of man’s cognitive determinateness to be taken into account in reflecting on ethical frameworks when moral challenges of current society are to be addressed. Being the central paradox of DCT, the Euthyphro dilemma presents a problem whose final solution is not yet known to us. With an aim to contribute to this discourse, this study outlines a new view of the Euthyphro dilemma based on the hermeneutics of the key biblical text. The basis of our argument is the limitation of the human mandate for considerations with regard to DCT, due to the differences of substance between man and God. This limitation is not static, and can change depending on the cultural, social, political and religious conditions in which man is found. In spite of various contexts, there is always the ethical level which presents an absolute ethical imperative.

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