

**TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY, BUT NOT TOO
SERIOUSLY: THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY
AND WILLIAM JAMES'S 'THE MORAL
PHILOSOPHER AND THE MORAL LIFE'**¹

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ABSTRACT

While some scholars neglect the theological component to William James's ethical views in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," Michael Cantrell reads it as promoting a divine command theory (DCT) of the foundations of moral obligation. While Cantrell's interpretation is to be commended for taking God seriously, he goes a little too far in the right direction. Although James's view amounts to what could be called (and what Cantrell does call) a DCT because on it God's demands are necessary and sufficient for the highest obligations, this is a view with characteristics unusual for a DCT. It only holds for some obligations; on it moral obligation does not derive from God's authority; it is not obvious that James believes the God required by it even exists; we do not know what God's demands are; and, finally, since we do not know them, we cannot act on them.

William James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (hereafter "MPML") is a subtle work, and its interpretation requires subtlety. Scholars tend to focus on the text's relationship to utilitarianism, most taking the view that it does not commit James to any conventional version of utilitarianism.² While this topic is important, a thorough account of James's ethics in "MPML" requires careful analysis of its theological component, which scholars sometimes overlook or even denigrate.³ David E. Schrader thinks James's appeal to religion is "hard to maintain" because religion has often been a force for oppression and prejudice.⁴ In a recent edition of *William James Studies* focusing

on “MPML,” Harvey Cormier, Scott F. Aikin, and Robert B. Talisse seem to agree on little more than that God must not have any significant role in a pragmatic ethic.⁵

Yet there remains a strong theological component in “MPML.” Opposite Schrader’s discomfort with religion, Michael Cantrell has offered an original interpretation, saying “MPML” promotes a kind of divine command theory (hereafter DCT) of the foundations of moral obligation.⁶ Cantrell’s interpretation is a useful corrective to the occasional neglect of the vital role of religion in James’s ethics, for he takes James seriously when James takes God seriously. Yet Cantrell goes a little too far in the right direction, for he overstates God’s role in James’s ethics. While his thesis is largely correct, such DCT as “MPML” uses is heavily restricted in fact, knowledge, and practicality. James promotes a sort of DCT regarding *some* but not all obligations, and DCT is a poor description of James’s theory even where it does hold.

In what follows I shall examine and critique Cantrell’s thesis in order to uncover James’s understanding of divine commands and their relation to moral obligation and cast new light on the religious component of James’s ethics. In Part I, I shall briefly summarize “MPML.” In moral experience we find a multiplicity of demands and moral ideals that only God can integrate. The ideal God promotes is the obligation that overrides all others. As Cantrell says and as I shall explain in Part II, this ensures that the command of God is a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of this highest possible obligation. Although this amounts to a kind of DCT, it is a very unusual one, having several features not traditionally associated with DCT. I shall describe these unique parameters of a Jamesian DCT in Parts III through V. *First*, a Jamesian DCT does not hold for some genuine obligations. *Second*, that God’s moral outlook is binding is the source of God’s moral authority, not vice versa. *Third*, James may not believe that a God who commands these obligations exists yet, so there may be no obligation for which DCT holds. *Fourth*, we have no access to God’s perspective, and so the highest possible obligation is unknown to us. *Fifth*, to obey God’s commands is not the highest obligation we do know and can act on; that obligation is simply to find out what God’s commands are. These five limitations on a Jamesian DCT fall into three categories. The first three limitations are *factual*, and I shall discuss them in Part III; the fourth is a limitation on our *knowledge* of divine commands, and I shall discuss it in Part IV; the fifth is a *practical* limitation of a Jamesian DCT, and I shall discuss it in Part V. These considerations will leave us with a somewhat dubious link between James and DCT. Therefore, in Part VI, I shall attempt to bring things to an orderly conclusion, first by

suggesting a more detailed definition of DCT which excludes James's position and clarifies the differences between it and traditional DCTs; and, second, by remarking on the prospects for Jamesian support for a more traditional DCT.

I. OUR MORAL LIFE

For James morality is grounded in subjectivity. Any person with his own perspective and desires grounds a moral fact; what a person feels is good is, simply because he feels it, good. If that person should desire something of another person, the desiring is a demand which constitutes a moral *obligation* for that other person. The demand of a subject is necessary and sufficient for moral qualities to exist in the universe. It is *necessary* because "no world composed of merely physical facts can possibly be a world to which ethical propositions apply"; moral qualities only exist in "a mind which feels them."⁷ While the world is not limited to mere physical facts,⁸ James resists Platonizing abstractions as well as materialistic reductionism. A lifeless supernatural entity cannot ground morality; even if ultimate obligation is rooted in a divine being, it is that being's *perspective* and *wishes* that give its moral demands their legitimacy. In short, "nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right."⁹ The demand and wishes of any subject are also *sufficient* to ground a moral obligation: "Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be satisfied?"¹⁰ We are obligated to satisfy the demand of any sentient being.

Unfortunately, different people have different wishes, and so there are different ideals. We have different conceptions of the best world. A myriad of demands cry out for satisfaction. Thus there are a plurality of ideals to be realized, and a plurality of *oughts*. This presents a challenge for the moral philosopher, whose goal is to provide "an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view."¹¹ The moral philosopher needs to see the moral world as consistent and unified, to behold a coherent moral universe. This seems an insurmountable challenge since our demands are distinct and sometimes conflict. When one politician wants virtually unrestricted access to abortion and another wants abortion all but abolished, it is difficult to imagine a solution mutually palatable. Again, one philosopher may think all human beings should be treated equally as ends in themselves, while another may think educated Greek males superior.

How can we achieve a coherent moral universe when conflicting goals have equal status? A coherent system of moral obligations would make possible a maximum satisfaction of demands. For among all possible ideals there is a set of ideals that is the largest set of mutually consistent, and hence concurrently satisfiable, ideals. The task of the moral philosopher is to identify *that* set of ideals, the set of ideals which the most number of people either do, or could, desire to see satisfied.

Only divine wisdom could know what this set of ideals is; only God is able to know which ideals among all our competing ideals are a part of this moral system; so only God is able to desire this set of ideals; so God is necessary for this set of possible ideals to be actually desired. These are the ideals of God. If God exists, he wants us to satisfy this maximal set of consistent ideals, and our obligation to do what God wants overrides all others. Hence positing the existence of this set of ideals is tantamount to positing the existence of God, who alone can know what the maximal set of mutually satisfiable ideals is. For the present, since this set of ideals is not that which is currently sought by sentient creatures, God desires that we sentient creatures learn to seek them, that our imperfect world may eventually become that best possible world in which this set of ideals is satisfied. Such a world contains the only coherent moral universe, the one which the moral philosopher strives to achieve.

For this reason the moral philosopher must take a keen interest in God and “pray for the victory of the religious cause.”¹² For he must seek a coherent set of moral principles; to seek it he must believe that it exists and can be discovered; he must therefore believe that God exists.

II. A DIVINE COMMAND THEORY?

Cantrell observes that “MPML” promotes a kind of DCT. Cantrell lists four components of a divine command theory: first, that divine commands be sufficient for moral obligation; second, that they be necessary for moral obligation; third, that there be moral obligations which override all others; and, fourth, that they be objective “in the sense that we humans can be mistaken about them.”¹³ It is clear that James’s theory meets the first, third, and fourth conditions. Divine commands are sufficient for the highest obligation because it is *God’s perspective and desire* that make maximal obligation possible; the set of maximally realizable ideals, by definition, overrules all others; and it possible for us to err by seeking to realize lesser ideals.

But divine commands are also necessary for the maximal set of mutually satisfiable ideals. God’s demand that this set of

ideals be satisfied is necessary to make this exact set of ideals an obligation for us; without God, there simply cannot be a set of ideals so comprehensive. So God's perspective is necessary and sufficient for maximal obligation; in this sense, James does have a kind of DCT as regards one component of moral reality, namely maximal obligation, those highest obligations that override all others.

Of course, we are not necessarily talking about explicit commands when we say "commands." We do not have to *know* what God's commands are in order for them to exist.¹⁴ DCT, in its generic form, does not require this, though some versions of DCT may posit explicit commands from God.

Cantrell does well to identify a connection between DCT and James's metaethics, correcting the God-resistant tendency in some scholarship. He has also uncovered a Jamesian reason to believe in God which others have missed. Todd Lekan analyzes three reasons in "MPML" for believing in God, rejecting two as unconvincing and accepting the third only in some cases.¹⁵ Cantrell shows there is another reason: That the moral philosopher as such must believe in God in order to believe in the possibility of a genuine moral universe and work towards understanding it.¹⁶

Cantrell also avoids the subtle misunderstanding of D. Micah Hester, who attributes the highest ethical status to any desire that does not seem to conflict with any other.¹⁷ This is clearly not what James has in mind; the highest ethical status is that of obligations which override all others, not those which merely do not appear to conflict. Such obligations are the demands of God.

In short, Cantrell does well to take God seriously in interpreting James, but perhaps he takes God a little too seriously, for there are significant limitations of the Jamesian DCT. In the next three sections I shall explain these limitations, and in light of them I shall, in the final section, propose a definition of DCT which clarifies the differences between James's view and traditional DCTs.

III. FACTUAL LIMITATIONS ON THE JAMESIAN DCT

Such DCT as James promotes is limited in fact, for the moral facts of the universe, the metaethical realities James describes, are poorly captured by DCT. First, DCT fails to account for the vast majority of genuine obligations. Second, DCT fails to describe the source of obligation, which, even for the highest of obligations, is not God. Third, there is a good chance that these obligations do not yet exist for the reason that a God who demands them does not yet exist! I am not saying that Cantrell's contention

that James has a DCT is *incorrect*. DCT, as Cantrell defines it, is an *accurate* description of a real or possible component of moral reality as described by James. But it is an *inadequate* description.

A. DCT Only Holds for Some Obligations

First, although Cantrell's criteria for DCT properly describe James's view of the conditions for a very important class of moral obligations (the most important, in fact), they make up a tiny minority of moral obligations. God's perspective and wish are necessary and sufficient only for those obligations that override all others; for the demand of *any person* is sufficient for moral, but non-maximal, obligation. Each of these myriad obligations is binding on us. Of course, they often conflict; each moral agent is morally required to both perform and not perform certain actions. To perform one duty is to neglect another; yet each is obligatory, so we neglect our duty either way. The moral philosopher must hope that God can lead us out of this tangle of obligations, and the moral agent may hope to one day learn which obligations are best obeyed and which best flouted. Until then, however, we moral agents are guilty of breaking moral laws which have a lesser, but nevertheless moral, force.

B. DCT Does Not Describe the Source of Even the Highest Obligation

Second, on a typical DCT, the source of moral obligation would be God, but this is not what we find in James. Thus DCT poorly captures James's understanding of the metaethical grounding of obligation, which is the subjective preference of *all* sentient beings, not of God as such.

We have seen that this is true of lesser obligations. Yet even the highest obligations do not derive their overriding status from God, but from the fact that they do the best job of reconciling the subjective preferences of all sentient beings. God's desiring certain ideals is a necessary and sufficient condition for their being the highest of obligations; but God desires them because they are good, not vice versa. That they override all other obligations does not derive from God's preferring them, but from their ability to reconcile a maximal amount of these other obligations. Cantrell is, thus, mistaken when he comments on these words of James:

If there be such a [divine] consciousness, then its demands carry the most of obligation simply because they are the greatest in amount. But it is even then not *abstractly* right that we should respect

them. It is only *concretely* right--or right after the fact, and by virtue of the fact, that they are actually made.¹⁸

Cantrell contrasts the two sides of a version of Plato's ancient Euthyphro dilemma: "does God command what is right because it is (antecedently) right, or is what is right right because God commands it?"¹⁹ He concludes that James's view is the latter.²⁰ But this is not so. The Euthyphro dilemma Cantrell has in mind would contrast two conceptions of obligation, the idea that obligations are binding independently of God's authority and the idea that obligations are binding because of God's authority. James is not considering this contrast, but another: between, on the one hand, the idea that divine commands are binding in the abstract, independent of the divine personality; and, on the other hand, that divine commands are binding as a result of their grounding in personal desires. God's wishes carry weight because God is "a living personal God."²¹ Dispensing with the abstract theory of the origins of divine commands does not mean that they are only binding because God wills them. On the contrary: God's demands overrule others "simply because they are the greatest in amount." In other words, that these obligations override all others is a result of the fact that they are the best possible set of binding obligations *independently of God*. God commands them because they are right. His command activates what would otherwise be merely possible obligations, giving them a moral force; however, their ability to override all other obligations is not a result of the divine command, willed by God from above. The ability of the divine commands to override all other obligations is built from the ground up, a result of the myriad obliging wishes that unite in the divine wish.²²

In short, James denies an abstract moral order, saying instead that moral order is essentially personal. In doing so he does not attribute to God the privilege of a moral authority qualitatively different from that of any other person; the difference is quantitative. God is no moral legislator for the universe. God is more like an *executive* for moral legislation. The legislature consisting of all sentient beings below sends to his divine desk a huge, disorganized pile of laws. He proceeds to ratify the most comprehensive moral order than can possibly be made out of them—but he vetoes the handful that cannot be integrated.

Thus, God does not command and create obligation out of his own authority. Rather, God discovers that set of obligations which would, on its own merits, be sublime; through loving it, he wishes into existence the obligation that we work to make the world satisfying it a reality. Indeed, a better word for the divine commands might be "wishes" or "desires," for the word

“command” connotes authority, and on James’s view God simply does not make things right by virtue of his infinite authority.

This, by the way, allows us to return to Schrader’s concern with James’s appeal to religion. Schrader notes that religion has often been mixed with prejudice, saying that “People are notoriously prone to imputing their own blindness and deafness to God as well.”²³ Schrader fails to engage James’s own reason for appealing to God, which specifically precludes any attempt to harness God to the narrow agenda of any single ideal. James’s idea of God is the idea of the God who cares more about *all* our ideals than the most loving of human beings is able.

C. DCT May Not Obtain of Any Actual Obligations

Third, God, who wishes for a world that satisfies maximally consistent obligations, may not exist yet; therefore DCT may not obtain for any existing obligations, but merely for certain possible obligations. In order to explain this, let us consider two plausible interpretations of James’s idea of divinity. On one of these interpretations God does not yet exist, for which reason maximal obligations do not exist and DCT does not hold in the real world. I will not try to give a comprehensive summary of the possible interpretations of James’s view of God, nor to determine which is the correct interpretation. I only aim to show that it matters what sort of God we are talking about.

It is hard to tell what kind of God James believes in—or, rather, which divine realities are worthy of being called “God.” After outlining two such notions of the divine in James’s thought, I will comment on the implications of this ambiguity for DCT in James. For the character of God determines whether God is able to issue divine commands, thus grounding the highest obligations.

So what kind of God might James believe in? On the one hand, there is the idea of a finite God, a God who is the central character in what I like to call Almost Classical Theism (ACT). Despite staying close to classical theism in several respects, ACT is not bound to the specific content of any religious scriptures; it is at best uninterested in the simplicity of God; although God is all-knowing or near enough,²⁴ it concedes that God cannot be both all-knowing and all-powerful at the same time;²⁵ it insists that God interacts closely with the world to achieve his ends;²⁶ and, at this latter point, implicitly gives up the notion of God’s timelessness and impassibility. Still, as concerns the relationship of God and obligation, ACT is pretty traditional: God exists, is entirely good, and currently has the best perspective on the moral universe; he already knows what a unity of ideals looks like, and, in wishing that a world satisfying it come to be, has already created the

coherent set of moral obligations for which the moral philosopher longs. Accordingly, maximal obligation is presently binding on us; we just don't know what it is, and for the time being we have the duty of finding out. God's orders precede our moral activity in order of time and priority: God's requirements are issued before we have a chance to act on them; and our deeds are moral to the degree they measure up to God's standards.

On the other hand, James might endorse what I call Extreme Process Theology (EPT), the belief that God is still in the making. God simply *is* the eventual stability of ideals, or in Dewey's words God is "the union of all ideal ends."²⁷ On EPT, a stability of ideals has yet to be achieved, even in theory. Since we have yet to achieve the unity of ideals a complete God has yet to emerge. In fact, the moral philosopher has a hand in the construction of God.

To further distinguish ACT from EPT, consider James's most dramatic example of the necessity of belief. When I have to jump across a huge chasm to save my life, my belief that I can make the jump will help me to succeed; this belief is a factor in, and condition for, its own truth.²⁸ It interacts with its own object, effecting a new alignment between belief and world by changing the latter to fit the former. What if, as James suggests in "The Will to Believe," religious belief also interacts with its own object?²⁹ On ACT, since God already exists, he has only to shape a world of maximal ideal satisfaction—to realize the happy eschatological state. Belief in God interacts with its eschatological component; the belief that the eschaton is on its way, that God exists and will ultimately triumph, helps to assure that ultimate triumph.³⁰ But on EPT religious belief interacts with its object on a much grander scale; it helps to ensure God's existence and to shape his ultimate character, not merely guaranty his triumph over evil; for the process of achieving the best possible world shapes the ideals that are identified with God. It is not just that we don't yet *know* what the ideals (or God) will look like; our interaction with them helps to determine what they *will* ultimately look like.³¹

Although I think the idea of God at play in "MPML" is probably closer to ACT than to EPT, I will not argue this here. My point is simply that EPT is a plausible reading of James's theology in "MPML"; and, since it is plausible that James holds to EPT, it is possible that the divine commands which constitute maximal obligations do not exist yet.

IV. LIMITATIONS ON OUR KNOWLEDGE OF DIVINE COMMANDS

We must now turn to the epistemic limitations of the Jamesian DCT; following that we will explore the concomitant practical limitations. Cantrell acknowledges the epistemic and the practical limitations, observing that “God’s thoughts are hidden from us” and that a DCT “fails as a measure of conduct.”³² I explore these limitations for two reasons, one of which is simply to be thorough in uncovering the limitations of the Jamesian DCT. The other, more important reason is to let James’s outlook speak for itself. As we shall see when all is said and done, James’s underlying Pragmatism speaks strongly against the propriety of using the language of DCT to describe his view. After explaining the epistemic limitations of the Jamesian DCT in this section, in the next section I shall explain the practical limitations; at the end of the next section I shall explain why Cantrell’s acknowledgement of these limitations does not go far enough.

On the Jamesian DCT, we have no knowledge of the divine commands. Even if there is a God somewhere wishing certain highest obligations on us, we do not know what they are; “exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence.”³³ We simply don’t have access to God’s perspective. In time, we can at least approximate knowledge of it; the moral philosopher can hope to eventually approach an understanding of this set of ideals. Understanding what this set of ideals is will take some doing. Since ideals are rooted in subjective perspectives, the largest set of mutually consistent ideals exists in a world containing the largest set of mutually consistent personal demands. As things stand now, too many people have too many irreconcilable demands. Accordingly, the highest obligation which is known to us is not to obey the divine commands, but to discover them.³⁴

It will take a little time to figure out how to satisfy the most number of ideals. It will also take political action. The moral philosopher is also the political philosopher.³⁵ He begins with the ideals that exist in human society (those of Republicans and Democrats, of libertarians and socialists, of Kant, Aristotle, and Mill) and tries to reconcile them *in practice* as much as in theory. The philosopher and his community will have to work together. Since it is unclear how to reconcile some of the distinct ideals that *can* be realized simultaneously, political and philosophical practice will take a great deal of creativity. Also, some ideals will have to be sacrificed in order for the most ideals to be realized. Most importantly, in the process the moral philosopher and the rest of us will have to learn to tolerate and embrace the demands of others as

much as possible, to make the ideals of others our own.³⁶ In this respect our ideals will come to resemble the ideals of God, whose ideal is precisely that the greatest possible harmony of ideals comes to be.³⁷

This, by the way, solves a problem scholars have raised with James's ethics. Aikin and Talisse lament the supposed absence of an ideal of tolerance in James. They fear the consequences of validating contradictory obligations, especially the obligations forged from ideals that are based in the desire to dominate or destroy others.³⁸ Talisse and Aikin fail to see how God brings about the very tolerance they seek. On James's view, God's ideals are precisely those that best tolerate and reconcile the ideals of others.³⁹ The process of reconciling our competing ideals will, as James says,⁴⁰ necessarily involve eliminating some ideals. Every person's ideal is an obligation, but not every obligation is overriding. The ideals of the Nazis, for example, are technically obligations on James's scheme; but they conflict with the ideals of the rest of us, not to mention the ideals of their victims; accordingly, they would be among the very first ideals to go.⁴¹ We need not even wait for clarity from God on this point; that Nazi ideals must be eliminated to form a moral universe should be clear to any moral philosopher worth his salt.

While this may sound like a version of utilitarianism, it is at least not a typical one. James's strategy is to satisfy the greatest possible number of demands, but this is no ordinary utilitarianism: Demands ought to be satisfied only because they ground *ideals*. Classical utilitarianism itself is wedded to a certain ideal, the ideal that happiness or pleasure is the greatest good. Utilitarianism *proper* would sacrifice some desires so that others can be satisfied because that would bring the most pleasure and so maximize its own ideal. James's philosophy would sacrifice some desires on behalf of others in order to *maximize the satisfaction of ideals*. If James's philosophy is utilitarianism, then, I think it is a *utilitarianism of ideals*; it seeks the satisfaction of as many ideals as possible, not the satisfaction of the ideal sought by utilitarianism.⁴²

In sum, divine commands, while necessary and sufficient to ground maximal obligation, are unknown to us even if they do exist. So the Jamesian DCT, though it correctly describes these highest of obligations, fails to describe any obligations we human beings know about. It is a theory of the conditions for sublime, yet unknown, moral principles. In the next section I will explain why this epistemic limitation of the DCT leads to a serious practical limitation.

V. PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS OF A JAMESIAN DCT

We have already seen how DCT is a poor, though an accurate, description of some of the ethical realities James discusses. But what really matters to James is not simply the accuracy of a theory in describing some component of reality. James is a Pragmatist; what matters to him is the difference a moral theory makes in practice. The Jamesian DCT is only a part of James's overall moral theory, a part which is useful as an inspiration, but nevertheless fails to describe anything useful since the moral obligations to which it applies are unknown to us.

According to James's moral theory as a whole, we must mediate between competing ideals in order to achieve a world in which the most ideals can be satisfied. We must learn about divine commands so as to enact them. The process of learning them is no less than the common ethics of an entire society (if not the world); there is enough work to keep moral philosophers and politicians busy for several lifetimes devising and implementing common solutions to diverging ideals. This is all very practical; however, our present ignorance of divine commands ensures that they themselves are useless. In other words, while the Jamesian idea of moral obligation is useful, the portion of it which describes the highest obligations, and which I have been calling a DCT, fails to announce any of these obligations to us, and so these obligations remain useless.

Even the portion of James's moral theory which can be called a DCT is only useful as an inspiration. While DCT is technically true of some real or possible component of moral reality as James understands it, we cannot *act* on the overriding obligations wished by God. We can only work towards understanding them. Those divine commands which shimmer beyond the veil of our ignorance do not give us practical rules for moral practice, but inspire us to *discover* the best rules for moral practice. The obligations explained by the DCT are useless, but not the supremely useful dream of learning what they are. The Jamesian DCT inspires us to find what is good without *telling* us what is good. So the theory itself is useful; but that of which it is a theory, supreme moral obligation, is useless to us. The divine wishes do nothing to guide future experience, solve no concrete problems, and fail to direct the moral philosopher or the politician. The idea of the divine wishes has value in experience as an inspiration that we strive to realize the divine wishes.

This is why James says that "our postulation of him after all serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood."⁴³ It is not that God is *in fact* only an inspiration to our vigorous pursuit of a

moral universe; Cantrell is quite right that the living God, if there is one, matters to James, as the supporter of the highest obligations.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, our *idea* of God, held in ignorance of the divine fact that may (or may not) presently be out there, is only an inspiration. For James the truth lies somewhere between Cantrell's view and that espoused by Deborah Boyle: "What matters for James is not whether God actually exists, but whether we believe that God exists."⁴⁵ Boyle's is an apt description of God's immediate relevance to known obligation, as long as we remain ignorant of the divine wishes. However, as Cantrell says, the actual existence of God matters a great deal, albeit in the long term.

This amounts to a serious objection to the propriety of using DCT to describe James's views. He is pragmatic to the core. What is useless has no value. The unknown obligations described by the Jamesian DCT are useless to us. The DCT itself is useful, but less so than the overall moral theory of which it is only a part and which does succeed in giving moral rules to guide practice. Pragmatically, then, DCT as Cantrell defines it succeeds in being an accurate description of a portion of James's moral theory, but a inadequate description of that portion and of the moral theory as a whole.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY AND WILLIAM JAMES

The proponent of DCT may find James's theory an attenuated version of DCT, hardly worthy of the name. Although DCT and James's metaethics have much in common, the five differences I have articulated hold the two views rather far apart. I shall conclude, first, by suggesting a better definition of DCT which distinguishes the views. Then I shall show how some of James's ideas could support a more traditional DCT. For DCT and James's ideas, if not quite the same, are nonetheless related ideas with significant connections.

James's ideas call for a reexamination of what constitutes DCT. Cantrell suggests that a DCT has four parts: divine commands are necessary for moral obligations, they are sufficient, there are moral obligations which override all others, and these overriding obligations are objective such that we can be mistaken about them. As we have seen, this definition of DCT correctly describes one component of moral reality as James understands it. But as we have also seen, it describes only one small component; it also fails to describe the ultimate source of obligation even in that component, which may exist only in possibility and not in reality, which is unknown to us even if it does exist, and which fails to

give us any practical ethical guidance. The last of these problems is the deepest for the Jamesian, but the second is the deepest for the proponent of a traditional DCT. On a robust DCT God's wish should be the *source* of the highest moral obligation, not just a truth condition for it.

What shall we conclude, then, with respect to William James and the divine command theory? We could, as I have done so far in this article, call James's theory a DCT, albeit an unusual one with theoretical and practical limitations. However, I think it would be better to refine Cantrell's definition of DCT by adding a fifth part to his definition: that divine authority be *the only possible ground of obligations*, that the highest moral obligations have no source of moral authority save the God who commands them. Better yet, we can simply replace the first two parts of Cantrell's definition, for this fifth part entails the first two; for, if divine authority is the only possible source of moral obligation, then it is both necessary and sufficient for moral obligation. So, though Cantrell's definition of DCT describes a component of James's view of moral reality, I think a better definition of DCT will not describe James's view.

However, his theory is a sort of corollary to a more traditional DCT, and shares key elements with it. With this in mind, I shall now suggest a quasi-Jamesian strategy for promoting a more traditional DCT. We must make a distinction between a raw examination of experience and what James calls in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* "over-beliefs," those beliefs that are abstracted from experience.⁴⁶ James prefers his over-beliefs to extrapolate as little as possible from experience.⁴⁷ But a proponent of DCT may have different preferences. He is free to accept James's moral intuition that, all else being equal, the demand of any person "ought . . . , for its own sole sake, to be satisfied" and to agree with James that there is a desperate need for divine help in piecing together a moral universe. But he is also free to insert his own over-beliefs to the effect that God already exists, has already constructed the moral universe, and has subordinated the ideals of some creatures to his own, by his authority making them *non-moral* obligations. Although a theory of this sort goes beyond a mere analysis of James's thought, I see no reason why James's ideas could not be developed in this manner.

I have tried to keep my own views from getting in the way of articulating what I think James is saying and determining how DCT interacts with his thought. I close, however, by stating my opinion on an aspect of James that I think must surely be correct. However James thinks of God, and whatever understanding of God we may wish to bring to James, the impetus of "MPML" is to learn how to, in the phrase attributed to Johannes Kepler, "think God's

thoughts after him.” We must learn to predicate as morally obligatory what God predicates as morally obligatory, desire what God desires, and love what God loves. In short, we must conform our minds to the mind of God. When James recommends this, for what little my view is worth, I believe he is correct.

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NOTES

¹I wish to thank Michael Cantrell for his insightful and provocative essay on "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"; Stuart Rosenbaum for teaching me so much about William James and for encouraging me to respond to Cantrell's thesis; and my student worker at Berry College, Haley Athens, for reading through an earlier draft of this essay.

²Graham H. Bird says James sees inadequacies in several major ethical theories, including utilitarianism; Ruth Anna Putnam describes James as "a consequentialist," but "not a hedonist, nor any other kind of reductive utilitarian"; David E. Schrader points out that James himself dismisses his connection with utilitarianism as trivial; Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse say James rejects utilitarianism both for its hedonism and for its thesis that "all goods are commensurable"; and Robert J. O'Connell thinks James's ethics manifest "a deontological streak." On the other hand, Michael R. Slater identifies "MPML" as promoting "a

version of utilitarianism.” Richard Gale analyzes James’s view as a version of desire-satisfaction utilitarianism. Recently, Wesley Cooper objects to Gale, describing James’s view as “an *ideal-maximizing consensualism*.”

Graham H. Bird, “Moral Philosophy and the Development of Morality” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 261-262. Ruth Anna Putnam, “Some of Life’s Ideals” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 285. David E. Schrader, “Simonizing James: Taking Demand Seriously,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 34.4 (Fall 1998), 1014. Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” *William James Studies* 6 (2011). O’Connell, *William James on the Courage to Believe* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1997) and “‘The Will to Believe’ and James’ ‘Deontological Streak,’” *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 28.4 (Fall 1992), especially pages 816-22. Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 70. Gale, *The Divided Selves of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 2. Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), chapter 12, especially page 225.

³Three studies which do investigate the religious aspect of “MPML” are Todd Lekan, “Strenuous Moral Living,” *William James Studies* 2.1 (2007); Michael R. Slater, “Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,’” *William James Studies* 2.1 (2007); and Michael Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*, chapter 3. Slater notes that “Very few interpreters . . . have dealt with the *religious* aspect” of “MPML” (*William James on Ethics and Faith*), 70-71.

⁴Schrader, 1025-1026.

⁵Harvey Cormier, “Comment on Talisse and Aikin,” *William James Studies* 6 (2011); Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, “Replies to Our Critics,” *William James Studies* 6 (2011).

⁶Michael Cantrell, “William James’s Transcendental Theological Voluntarism: A Reading of ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,’” *William James Studies* 10 (2013).

⁷William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, vol. 6 of *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis; 19 volumes (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1975-1988), 145. Hereafter “MPML.”

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 147.

¹⁰Ibid., 149.

¹¹Ibid., 141. Ruth Anna Putnam’s language is slightly misleading when she says that “for James morality *presupposes* that we have” made “the ends of others our own.” The reality of moral standards

requires no more than that one sentient being want something from another; making others' ends our own is a requirement for something grander than mere morality, namely the establishment of a moral universe, a coherent system of morals. Putnam, "Some of Life's Ideals," 284.

¹² "MPML," 161.

¹³ Cantrell, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ "Strenuous Moral Living."

¹⁶ On this see Slater, "Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief," 42-4.

¹⁷ D. Micah Hester, "The Possibility for Tragic Obligations" in *Streams of William James* 1.3 (Winter 2000, 15).

¹⁸ "MPML," 149.

¹⁹ Cantrell, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "MPML," 149.

²² Also consider: "ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well" ("MPML," 150). The highest of obligations grow out of these myriad lesser obligations, deriving their overriding character from the fact that they are the best possible integration of them. I think James's later view as Gale describes it—"it is because God's demands and desires are good that we are obligated to comply with them"—is at least implicit in "MPML" (Gale, 44). Also Cooper: "Without roots in human motivation, a theistic moral code would have no moral weight" (235). Also Slater: God's values are not "intrinsically good or right"; God's "ideal moral universe would be the maximally inclusive one" (*William James on Ethics and Faith*, 90).

²³ Schrader, 1025.

²⁴ "MPML" describes God as "the infinite thinker" (161).

²⁵ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, vol. 4 of *The Works of William James* ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis; 19 volumes (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1975-1988), 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 42.

²⁸ William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 80. For a thorough examination of James's understanding of truth, see Hilary Putnam, "James' Theory of Truth" in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Putnam addresses this aspect of James's understanding of truth on pages 167-171.

²⁹ "The Will to Believe" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 31-32. On the development of James's idea of comprehending the universe under the analogy of social relationships, those very things said in "The Will to Believe" to be realities which our

beliefs can change, see David C. Lamberth, “Interpreting the Universe after a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and a Finite God in a Pluralistic Universe” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁰ This theme also appears in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” 84-89, and “Is Life Worth Living?,” 53-56, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

³¹ Cooper’s comments help to elucidate this aspect of Jamesian religion (6, 20-21, 147-148).

³² Cantrell, 8.

³³ “MPML,” 161.

³⁴ Of course, God desires that we find these overriding obligations, so to do so is to obey a divine command; but the command that we find the highest obligations is not *itself* the highest obligations.

³⁵ James: “His function is in fact indistinguishable from that of the best kind of statesman at the present day” (“MPML,” 159).

³⁶ Ruth Anna Putnam, “Some of Life’s Ideals.”

³⁷ Deborah Boyle explains how James’s God seeks an inclusiveness of ideals; see her “William James’ Ethical Symphony,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 34.4 (Fall 1998).

³⁸ “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” 7-9. Telling is their remark that “Jamesian pluralism entails that James’s ethics cannot support a muscular commitment to tolerance,” 33.

³⁹ Harvey Cormier misunderstands James on this point as well. He correctly points out that tolerance is built right into the process of constructing the largest possible set of consistent ideals, but implies that God has no part in it; to the contrary, James says that God is at the heart of this endeavor; “Comment on Talisse and Aikin,” 13-14.

⁴⁰ “MPML,” 156.

⁴¹ In fact, they have already gone, as social and political progress have ruled out a number of ideals that are too exclusive of other ideals. Cooper makes this clear in his discussion of sadism (227-231).

⁴² On the question of James’s utilitarianism, I favor the language Cooper uses to describe James’s ethics; Cantrell seems to side with Gale. See above, footnote 2. Cantrell, 8.

⁴³ “MPML,” 161.

⁴⁴ Slater misunderstands James: “if God exists, then any claims that God makes on us are binding only insofar as *we* respond to those claims” (“Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief,” 18; also see *William James on Ethics and Faith*, 77). In the passage to which Slater refers (“MPML,” 149), James says that our response to God’s demands is a necessary condition, not for making a way of life moral, but for making us walk in it. Gale is helpful in describing Section V of “MPML” as pertaining to the “existential . . . dimension of the ethical life,” describing the human motivation to live ethically—not the necessary and sufficient conditions for a way of living being ethical. Gale, 40-4.

⁴⁵ “William James’ Ethical Symphony,” 985.

⁴⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, vol. 15 of *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson

Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis; 19 volumes (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1975-1988), Lecture XVIII, 341.

⁴⁷ Cooper, 147.