

# Maitzen's Objection from God's Goodness

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**Abstract:** Stephen Maitzen argues that divine command metaethics must be mistaken because it is committed to the implausible assumption that the sentence 'God is (morally) good' is a tautology. In this article, I show that a charitable interpretation of R. M. Adams's version of divine command metaethics is not committed to accept this assumption. I conclude that Maitzen's objection merely manages to refute a strawman version of divine command metaethics.

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, it has been objected that divine command metaethics is unable to make sense of the fact that God, if He exists, is morally good in a non-trivial way. In this sense, already Leibniz objects that "[t]hose who believe that God established good and evil by an arbitrary decree [...] deprive God of the designation *good*: for what cause could one have to praise him for what he does, if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?" (Leibniz 1951, 236) Rarely has this objection been developed in a rigorous way. Stephen Maitzen's article 'A Semantic Attack on Divine-Command Metaethics' (2004) is a notable exception.<sup>1</sup> Maitzen argues that divine command metaethics must be mistaken because it is committed to the implausible assumption that the sentence 'God is (morally) good' is a tautology. In this article, I argue that a charitable interpretation of R. M. Adams's version of divine command metaethics is not vulnerable to his criticism.

First, I will explain Maitzen's objection from God's goodness against divine command metaethics. In particular, I will elaborate on Maitzen's three arguments for choosing a particular idiosyncratic definition of divine command metaethics as the target of his criticism. Second, I will point out why Maitzen's objection from God's goodness cannot be escaped by reformulating divine command metaethics in terms of deontological instead of axiological properties. Third, I will defend divine command metaethics by pointing out that Maitzen's three arguments in defence of his idiosyncratic definition of divine command metaethics are bound to

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<sup>1</sup> Maitzen points out convincingly that previous versions of the objection from God's goodness (in particular, J. L. Mackie's, James Rachels's, and John Chandler's version) "do[...] not bother to spell out [their] reasoning as thoroughly as one might have hoped" (Maitzen 2004, 18).

fail. As a result, it will turn out that a version of divine command metaethics that is indebted to the later Adams is not vulnerable to Maitzen’s version of the objection from God’s goodness.

## 2. Maitzen’s Objection from God’s Goodness

First, in order to understand Maitzen’s objection, we need to understand what divine command metaethics is. Roughly, divine command metaethics (or ‘DCM’) holds that God’s commands explain the moral status of certain entities (e.g., acts, agents, or states of affairs). Maitzen proposes to flesh out this minimal definition of DCM in the following way:

**DCM-Goodness-Meaning:** “[F]or any agent  $x$ , [the sentence] ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ has the same meaning as [the sentence] ‘ $x$  wills what God wills’” (Maitzen 2004, 22).

Crucially, this definition of DCM is formulated in terms of the *meaning* of certain sentences. This is an idiosyncratic way to define DCM. For this reason, Maitzen puts significant effort in arguing that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is a reasonable way to define DCM. I will turn to Maitzen’s three arguments for this claim in a minute – but, first, I would like to illuminate the general structure of his objection from God’s goodness.

Maitzen’s argument requires four premises. The first premise is put in terms of ‘traditional theism’ by which Maitzen means “the claim that there exists a Supreme Being, God, whose moral goodness, in combination with his other attributes, makes him uniquely worthy of being worshipped” (Maitzen 2004, 22). Accordingly, the first premise can be stated in the following way:

(1) According to traditional theism, the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ is religiously significant (premise).

Furthermore, Maitzen assumes that “no tautology contains enough information to make a difference, religiously speaking: no recognizably religious claim is true or false, probably or

improbable, on account of a tautology” (Maitzen 2004, 23).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Maitzen takes the following premise for granted:

(2) If a sentence  $p$  is a tautology, then  $p$  is not religiously significant (premise).

Furthermore, Maitzen’s objection requires two further premises that strike me as uncontroversial:

(3) If a sentence  $p$  is a tautology and the sentences  $p$  and  $q$  have the same meaning, then  $q$  is a tautology as well (premise).

(4) The sentence ‘God wills what God wills’ is a tautology (premise).

Now, let me point out how these four premises are supposed to give rise to a problem in conjunction with DCM-Goodness-Meaning. The following sentence is a substitution instance of DCM-Goodness-Meaning:

(5) The sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ has the same meaning as the sentence ‘God wills what God wills’ (from DCM-Goodness-Meaning).

Furthermore, Maitzen reasons in the following way:

(6) The sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ is a tautology (from (3), (4), and (5)).

(7) The sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ is not religiously significant (from (2) and (6)).

(8) Traditional theism is false (from (1) and (7)).

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<sup>2</sup> I believe that this premise suffers from two problems. First, even if it is difficult to imagine tautologies that have religious significance in virtue of their *semantic* properties, Maitzen forgets that they can have religious significance in virtue of their *pragmatic* properties. For instance, one can assert the tautology ‘God is God’ in a conversation with a pantheist to *conversationally implicate* that we should understand God in a traditional way (instead of equating God with the entire cosmos). In this context, this tautology would have religious significance. (For a more vivid but fictional example of a context in which the tautology ‘God is God’ has religious significance, consider the song of the same name by the music group Laibach.) Second, Maitzen’s argument for premise (2) seems to be based on the general assumption that the religious significance of a sentence depends on the amount of information that it contains. However, it is easy to refute this principle by counterexample. For instance, there are many mantras that have religious significance in several Buddhist, Hinduist, and Jainist traditions but that do not contain any information (e.g., the famous mantra ‘Om’). I suspect that Maitzen’s argument for premise (2) is guilty of what Belnap (1990) calls the ‘declarative fallacy’: he seems to forget that there are countless speech acts apart from declaratives; and many of these non-declarative speech acts do have religious significance. Nevertheless, this objection against premise (2) is no serious threat for Maitzen’s argument because the relevant instantiation of (2) remains tenable: the tautology ‘God wills what God wills’ indeed has no noteworthy religious significance.

At this point, we might stop. The conclusion (8) suffices to show that DCM is no viable metaethical position for any proponent of traditional theism. Presumably, this already is enough to undermine the appeal of DCM.

Nevertheless, Maitzen wants to point out that the problems for DCM-Goodness-Meaning run even deeper. Maitzen recognises that DCM-Goodness-Meaning often appears attractive to atheists because they cannot shake off “the intuition that God’s will alone is a metaphysically necessary and sufficient foundation for any moral truths there are” (Maitzen 2004, 26).<sup>3</sup> Maitzen wants to undermine the appeal of this argument for DCM-Goodness-Meaning by pointing out that DCM-Goodness-Meaning even gives rise to *moral nihilism*, i.e., the position that no moral truths exist whatsoever. For this part of the argument, Maitzen needs another premise. Maitzen assumes that if moral nihilism is false, then (at least) one moral truth must exist. If we make the further assumption that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is true, then, according to Maitzen, “[DCM-Goodness-Meaning] correctly explains that moral truth: it is true because, and only because, of facts about the will of [...] the Supreme Being” (Maitzen 2004, 24). Thus, Maitzen takes the following premise for granted:

(9) If moral nihilism is false and DCM-Goodness-Meaning is true, then traditional theism is true (premise).

Now, one can show with a little effort (e.g., by comparing the respective truth-tables) that the truth-conditions of (9) are identical to the truth-conditions of the following sentence:

(10) If traditional theism is false, then DCM-Goodness-Meaning is true only if moral nihilism is true (from (9)).

Finally, it can be shown that (8) and (10) jointly entail the following conclusion:

(11) DCM-Goodness-Meaning is true only if moral nihilism is true (from (8) and (10)).

Thus, if Maitzen’s argument is correct up to this point, then he has successfully shown that one can only endorse DCM if one is willing to concede that there are no moral truths to begin with. Presumably, this conclusion would refute the position “that God’s will alone is a metaphysically necessary and sufficient foundation for any moral truths there are” (Maitzen 2004, 26).

To summarise, Maitzen’s objection from God’s goodness has two results. First, Maitzen’s conclusion (8) shows that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is unacceptable for the proponents of traditional theism. Second, Maitzen’s conclusion (11) shows that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is unacceptable for anyone who believes that moral truths exist in the first place. Therefore, Maitzen claims to have shown that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is an extremely unattractive position.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Mackie (1983) and Harrison (2015) have argued along these lines.

## 2.1 Maitzen's Definition of Divine Command Metaethics

In this section, I will illuminate Maitzen's reasoning in favour of his idiosyncratic definition of DCM, which, as we have seen, is the very foundation of his objection from God's goodness. Let us recall his definition of DCM:

**DCM-Goodness-Meaning:** "[F]or any agent  $x$ , [the sentence] ' $x$  is (morally) good' has the same meaning as [the sentence] ' $x$  wills what God wills'" (Maitzen 2004, 22).<sup>4</sup>

Maitzen provides three arguments to back up his assumption that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is the most promising definition of DCM. I will address each argument in turn.

### 2.1.1 Maitzen's First Argument

Maitzen cites the earlier R. M. Adams to back up his idiosyncratic definition of DCM. There is no doubt that Adams is one of the most prominent proponents of DCM. In his earlier work, Adams explicitly claims that one may define DCM in terms of the *meaning* of sentences. For instance, in 'A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness,' Adams claims that "a simple, *unmodified* divine command theory of ethical wrongness [...] is the theory that ethical wrongness *consists* in being contrary to God's commands, or that the word 'wrong' in ethical contexts *means* 'contrary to God's commands'" (Adams 1987a, 97). Nevertheless, in the very same article, Adams argues that this definition of DCM is flawed and proposes a modified definition instead. But Maitzen points out that the earlier Adams's modified definition of DCM remains committed to a very similar claim: the only difference is that Adams's modified definition posits the aforementioned identity under the condition "that God has the character which I believe him to have, of loving his human creatures" (Adams 1987a, 100). Thus, according to Maitzen, the fact that a distinguished proponent of DCM defines DCM in terms of the *meaning* of sentences gives us a reason to think that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is a sufficiently charitable definition.

### 2.1.2 Maitzen's Second Argument

Maitzen recognises that we have to deal with an important complication that will lead us to his second argument for defining DCM as DCM-Goodness-Meaning. Later, Adams famously changed his mind and came to the conclusion that it was not a good idea to define DCM in terms of the meaning of sentences. In particular, Adams objects that

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to highlight two aspects of this definition. First, DCM-Goodness-Meaning is formulated in terms of God's *will* and not God's *commands*. Thus, the label 'divine *will* metaethics' would strictly speaking be more accurate than the label 'divine command metaethics'. Second, DCM-Goodness-Meaning is based on the assumption that the *will* of an agent determines his or her (moral) goodness. For example, Kant (2002) is a famous proponent of this assumption. Nevertheless, this assumption is not uncontroversial (Wood 2003).

the word ‘wrong’ is used in ethical contexts by many people who cannot mean by it what the theory says they must mean, since they do not believe that there exists a God. (Adams 1987a, 98)<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Adams is concerned that endorsing DCM-Goodness-Meaning commits one to the assumption that all atheists as well as theistic critics of DCM are *conceptually incompetent*. However, this is highly implausible if we keep in mind that, say, Hume, Leibniz, and Kant, definitely count as conceptually competent but, nevertheless, reject DCM. To deal with this problem, Adams suggests to replace DCM-Goodness-Meaning with a more sophisticated definition. In his later article *Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again*, Adams proposes to reformulate DCM-Goodness-Meaning in terms of the *nature* of the moral properties involved:

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. (Adams 1987b, 139)

So, according to the later Adams’s modified version of DCM, only those who have put some effort into investigating the nature or essence of morality are rationally required to recognise that they are related. However, in contrast to DCM-Goodness-Meaning, a mere ‘conceptual analysis’ cannot unearth any information about this relation. Adams compares this account to Saul Kripke’s (1972) and Hilary Putnam’s (1975) discussion of *a posteriori* metaphysical necessities: Kripke and Putnam argue that we take it to be metaphysically necessary that being water is identical to being H<sub>2</sub>O but we do not expect every competent user of the term ‘water’ to recognise that this is the case. Rather, only those who have put some effort into studying the *nature* or *essence* of water are rationally required to recognise that being water is the same as being H<sub>2</sub>O. Similarly, Adams suggests that only those who have put some effort into studying the *nature* or *essence* of morality and divine commands are rationally required to recognise that they are related.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we can formulate the later Adams’s modified definition of DCM as follows:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Technically, Adams (1987) defines DCM in terms of *wrongness* while Maitzen prefers *goodness*. However, this difference seems to be of minor importance for the purposes of this article.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect of Adams’s version of DCM is not unprecedented: already Luther (citing Romans 2:15) argues that the natural law “is written in the depth of the heart and cannot be erased” (Luther 1971, 110). Thus, not unlike Adams, Luther believes that every human has implicit knowledge of fundamental moral principles but only those who accept DCM can acquire a deeper understanding of them.

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of coherency, I ignored the fact that Adams (strictly speaking) offers an account of the *moral wrongness of acts* and not the *moral goodness of agents*. Maitzen ignores this difference as well.

**DCM-Goodness-Essence:**

- (a) For any agent  $x$ , for  $x$  to be (morally) good is for  $x$  to will what God wills.<sup>8</sup>
- (b) We cannot get to know sentence (a) *a priori* but only *a posteriori*.

Now, Maitzen recognises that his objection from God’s goodness fails to get off the ground if we take for granted Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence instead of DCM-Goodness-Meaning. The underlying reason is that DCM-Goodness-Essence does not make any claims about the *meaning* of any sentence. Thus, we cannot object that it assigns a tautological meaning to the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’. In more formal terms, we could say that the objection of God’s goodness no longer poses a threat because the new definition of DCM no longer entails (5) which said that ‘God is (morally) good’ has the same meaning as ‘God wills what God wills’. Therefore, Maitzen’s objection from God’s goodness is no harm to Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence.

However, Maitzen is not convinced by Adams’s suggestion to define DCM as DCM-Goodness-Essence. Maitzen argues that Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence is vulnerable to a different argument. For reasons that will become apparent in a minute, I will refer to this argument against DCM-Goodness-Essence as Maitzen’s ‘Anselmian Argument’.

Maitzen’s argument relies on the assumption that we can reformulate claims about essences in terms of metaphysical modality:

[T]alk of essences is typically analyzed in terms of possible worlds: water is essentially H<sub>2</sub>O because no possible world contains any sample of water that is not equally a sample of H<sub>2</sub>O. (Maitzen 2004, 21)

If this account of essence is correct, then we can reformulate DCM-Goodness-Essence in the following way:

**DCM-Goodness-Modality:**

- (a) For any agent  $x$ , for any possible world  $w$ ,  $x$  is (morally) good at  $w$  if and only if  $x$  wills at  $w$  what God wills at  $w$ .
- (b) We cannot get to know sentence (a) *a priori* but only *a posteriori*.

Furthermore, Maitzen points out that both theists and atheists tend to agree that God, if He exists, “exists of metaphysical necessity, i.e., in all possible worlds, and he possesses his intrinsic properties not accidentally but essentially” (Maitzen 2004, 20). Maitzen calls this claim ‘the Anselmian Assumption’. Now, traditional theists agree that omnipotence, omniscience, and moral goodness are all intrinsic properties of God. For this reason, it follows from the Anselmian Assumption that it is metaphysically necessary that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally good. Therefore, Maitzen argues that, according to the Anselmian Assumption, the

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<sup>8</sup> Correia and Skiles (2019) suggest this formulation to describe cases of full generic essence.

following sentences have the same very same truth-value across all possible worlds (namely, the truth-value ‘true’):

- (S1) ‘God exists.’
- (S2) ‘God is omniscient.’
- (S3) ‘God is omnipotent.’
- (S4) ‘God is morally good.’

Maitzen believes that this commitment is a problem for the following reason:

Since S4 is an ethical sentence, an attribution of a moral property to an object, it belongs to the domain of sentences DCM needs to explain. If DCM gives only the truth-conditions, and not also the meaning, of S4, then it tells us nothing about S4 that is not just as true of the other three, presumably non-ethical, sentences. (Maitzen 2004, 20)

This is a dense argument. Let me try to unpack it. This argument can be reformulated as a *reductio* argument with three premises. The first premise can be stated in the following way:

- (12) For any sentence  $p$ , for any theory  $T$ ,  $T$  explains the sentence  $p$  if and only if  $T$  provides the truth-conditions of the sentence  $p$  (premise).

The following sentence is a substitution instance of (12):

- (13) DCM explains the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ if and only if DCM provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ (from (12)).

The following sentence is a substitution instance of (12) as well:

- (14) For any theory  $T$ ,  $T$  explains the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ if and only if  $T$  provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ (from (12)).

Furthermore, Maitzen points out that, according to the Anselmian Assumption and Traditional Theism, say, (S3) and (S4) are both true in *all* possible worlds:

- (15) The sentence (S3) ‘God is omnipotent’ and the sentence (S4) ‘God is morally good’ possess the very same truth-conditions (from the Anselmian Assumption and Traditional Theism).

Furthermore, we saw that Maitzen takes for granted that DCM explains the sentence (S4) ‘God is (morally) good’ but *not* (S3) ‘God is omnipotent’:

- (16) DCM explains the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ (premise).
- (17) DCM does *not* explain the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ (premise).



Now, we have all the ingredients to show that DCM-Goodness-Modality gives rise to a contradiction:

(18) DCM provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ (from (13) and (16)).

(19) DCM provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ (from (15) and (18)).

(20) DCM explains the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ (from (14) and (19)).

(17) and (20) contradict each other. Thus, Maitzen concludes that DCM-Goodness-Modality must be false. Thus, if Maitzen is right to assume that DCM-Goodness-Essence is a disguised form of DCM-Goodness-Modality, then it becomes clear why he believes that Adams’s attempt to replace DCM-Goodness-Meaning by DCM-Goodness-Essence is misguided. This is the second reason why Maitzen believes that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is the best way to define DCM.

### 2.1.3 Maitzen’s Third Argument

Maitzen puts forward a third, rather short argument for his assumption that DCM should be defined as DCM-Goodness-Meaning. Maitzen’s argument is worth quoting in full:

Third, there is the intuition, which I at least find plausible, that giving an adequate *explanation* of why a sentence *S* is true (when *S* is true) or false (when *S* is false) is sufficient for giving the *literal* meaning of *S*. But DCM claims to give an adequate explanation – indeed, it claims to give the only adequate explanation – of the truth of ethical sentences when they are true and of their falsity when they are false: they have their truth-values ‘because and only because’ of facts about God’s will. So, if my claim about explanation and meaning is correct, DCM suffices to give the literal meaning of ethical sentences – in particular, those ethical sentences formed by substituting appropriately for *x* in the formula ‘*x* is morally good.’ (Maitzen 2004, 23)

This argument crucially depends on the meaning of the phrase ‘giving the meaning of a sentence’. Unfortunately, Maitzen refrains from giving a precise account of this important phrase. I take him to mean that a theory provides the meaning of a sentence if and only if endorsing the theory is a sufficient condition for understanding the meaning of that sentence.

Thus, Maitzen’s third argument can be put in a more clear shape as follows:

(21) If a theory *T* is the only adequate explanation of the truth-value of a sentence *p*, then *T* provides the meaning of *p* (premise).

(22) DCM-Goodness-Essence is the only adequate explanation of the truth-value of the sentence ‘*x* is (morally) good’ (premise).

(23) DCM-Goodness-Essence provides the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ (from (21) and (22)).

Furthermore, Maitzen argues that DCM-Goodness-Essence is the most important competitor to DCM-Goodness-Meaning. For this reason, he claims that DCM-Goodness-Essence refrains from making a commitment about the *meaning* of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’:

(24) DCM-Goodness-Essence does not provide the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ (premise).

However, (23) and (24) contradict each other. For this reason, we may conclude:

(25) DCM-Goodness-Essence is false (by *reductio* from (23) and (24)).

This is the third and last reason why Maitzen believes that Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence is of no avail and, instead, DCM-Goodness-Meaning is the most charitable way to define DCM.

### 3. Attempted Defence: Resorting to Deontological Terminology

In this section, I will briefly discuss a popular attempt to defend DCM against the objection from God’s goodness by reformulating it in deontological terms.

For example, Quinn (1979), Adams (1987), Alston (1990), Baggett and Walls (2011), and Evans (2013) argue that the proponents of DCM are well advised to reject DCM-Goodness-Meaning and, instead, endorse a version of DCM that is formulated in *deontological terms* (e.g. moral obligations, moral rightness, or moral wrongness).<sup>9</sup> For instance, we could implement this suggested modification in a simple way (that the aforementioned authors presumably would not agree with)<sup>10</sup> by replacing DCM-Goodness-Meaning with the following definition:

**DCM-Rightness-Meaning:** For any agent  $x$ , ‘ $x$  is (morally) right’ has the same meaning as ‘ $x$  wills what God wills’.

Technically, replacing DCM-Goodness-Meaning by DCM-Rightness-Meaning brings the objection from God’s goodness to fall since DCM-Rightness-Meaning no longer entails sentence (5) ‘The sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ has the same meaning as the sentence ‘God wills what God wills’.

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<sup>9</sup> For a critical discussion of this ‘restriction’ manoeuvre, see Murphy (2012).

<sup>10</sup> The aforementioned authors do not offer a deontological version of DCM that is formulated in terms of the *meaning* of sentences and, therefore, are not committed to DCM-Rightness-Meaning. Rather, as an anonymous reviewer points out, they offer a version of DCM that is formulated in terms of Kripke-style *a posteriori* metaphysical necessity.

However, Maitzen has convincingly pointed out that this reply is of no avail because we can easily reformulate his objection in terms of God's (moral) *rightness*. For this purpose, we merely need to replace 'goodness' with 'rightness' in premise (1):

(1)\* According to traditional theism, the sentence 'God is (morally) right' is religiously significant (premise).

Presumably, (1)\* is just as plausible as (1).<sup>11</sup> The remainder of the argument would run just like in Maitzen's initial version of the objection from God's goodness. Therefore, I agree with Maitzen that resorting to a deontological definition of DCM fails to evade the objection from God's goodness.

In any case, I would like to point out that this proposal already makes Maitzen's objection from God's goodness considerably less dramatic because it allows the proponents of DCM to assign a non-tautological meaning to all sentences that ascribe axiological properties to God (e.g., 'God is (morally) good'). This is some progress. However, we have seen that this solution is still not entirely satisfactory because, if Maitzen's argument is correct, even this refined definition leaves us without a way to ascribe a non-tautological meaning to sentences ascribing deontological properties to God.

#### **4. In Defence of Divine Command Metaethics**

In this section, I will defend DCM against Maitzen's objection from God's goodness. We saw that Maitzen himself recognises that Adams's DCM-Goodness-Essence is not vulnerable to his objection from God's goodness. However, he offers three arguments that allegedly show that Adams's preferred definition is untenable. I argue that all three arguments are bound to fail. As a result, it will turn out that Adams's DCM-Goodness-Essence survives Maitzen's objection from God's goodness. I will address each of Maitzen's three arguments in turn.

##### **4.1 Response to Maitzen's First Argument**

We saw that Maitzen's first argument claims that DCM-Goodness-Meaning is a charitable definition of DCM because even a distinguished proponent of DCM such as Adams took for granted such a definition in his earlier works.

In response, I would like to make two points: First, we can easily dismiss this argument as a mere appeal to authority. Of course, even the judgment of distinguished philosophy scholars is fallible. Second, if we wish to accept the judgments of experts as evidence, then the fact that Adams at a later stage joined the critics of DCM-Goodness-Meaning seems to be a good reason

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<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, one can construct a simple argument from perfect being theology for this assumption. On the other hand, Maitzen (2004, 28n) mentions some evidence from Scripture (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:4 and Hosea 14:9) to show that (at least) Christians and Jews are well advised to accept this assumption.

to believe that there actually is something fishy about DCM-Goodness-Meaning. For these reasons, I remain unconvinced by Maitzen's first argument.

## 4.2 Response to Maitzen's Second Argument

We saw that Maitzen's second argument proceeds in two steps. First, Maitzen argues that the later Adams's DCM-Goodness-Essence collapses into DCM-Goodness-Modality. Second, Maitzen introduces his Anselmian Argument to show that DCM-Goodness-Modality is untenable. In this section, I will argue that both steps of Maitzen's second argument do not work.

### 4.2.1 First Part: Non-Modal Definition of Essence

In this section, I argue that Maitzen mistakenly assumes that DCM-Goodness-Essence collapses into DCM-Goodness-Modality.

We saw that Maitzen's argument relies on a specific understanding of the metaphysics of essence:

[T]alk of essences is typically analyzed in terms of possible worlds: water is essentially H<sub>2</sub>O because no possible world contains any sample of water that is not equally a sample of H<sub>2</sub>O. (Maitzen 2004, 21)

Thus, we can put Maitzen's preferred account of the metaphysics of essence in the following way:

**Maitzen's Modal Account of Full Generic Essence:** For every  $x$ , for  $x$  to be  $F$  is for  $x$  to be  $G$  if and only if, in every possible world  $w$ ,  $x$  is  $F$  in  $w$  if and only if  $x$  is  $G$  in  $w$ .

However, it is easy to come up with counterexamples to this modal account of full generic essence. For instance, Kit Fine (1994, 5) has famously pointed out that modal characterisations of essence struggle to account for metaphysically necessities:

[C]onsider any necessary truth; it could be a particular mathematical truth, for example, or even the conjunction of all necessary truths. Then it is necessarily the case that this truth should hold if Socrates exists. But it is no part of Socrates' essence that there be infinitely many prime numbers or that the abstract world of numbers, sets, or what have you, be just as it is. (Fine 1994, 5)

Let me spell out how one might construct a counterexample to Maitzen's modal account of full generic essence that follows Fine's lead. Suppose  $F$  is the property of being such that Fermat's Last Theorem holds and  $G$  is the property of being such that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Thus, literally every entity possesses both properties in every possible world. Therefore, it is true that, for every  $x$ , in

every possible world  $w$ ,  $x$  is such that Fermat’s Last Theorem holds in  $w$  if and only if  $x$  is such that water is  $H_2O$  in  $w$ . Therefore, according to Maitzen’s modal account of full generic essence, for every  $x$ , for  $x$  to be such that Fermat’s Last Theorem holds is to be such that water is  $H_2O$ . However, this is intuitively false because Fermat’s Last Theorem has nothing to do with the identity of water and  $H_2O$ . For this reason, we have a reason to reject Maitzen’s modal account of full generic essence. Therefore, Maitzen did not manage to show that DCM-Goodness-Essence collapses into DCM-Goodness-Modality.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Second Part: Challenging Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument

In this section, I argue that Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument is untenable. Thus, even if Maitzen’s modal definition of essence turned out to be correct, his second argument for rejecting Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence would still fail. For the sake of the argument, I will ignore the result of the previous section by assuming that any argument against DCM-Goodness-Modality equally counts as an argument against DCM-Goodness-Essence.

We saw that Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument derives a contradiction from DCM-Goodness-Modality, (12), (16), (17), the Anselmian Assumption, and Traditional Theism. I agree with Maitzen that these premises give rise to a contradiction. However, I doubt that Maitzen draws the right lesson from it. I do not think that we should reject DCM-Goodness-Modality but, rather, the inference rule that licenses the inference from (15) and (18) to (19). For my argument, I need to make a further assumption about the phrase ‘ $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’. I will assume that this phrase has a built-in ‘aboutness condition’. What do I mean by that? I believe that the phrase ‘ $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’ has a built-in aboutness condition if and only if the following inference is permitted:

- (28)  $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$  (premise).  
 (29)  $T$  is about the sentence  $p$  (from (28)).

At this point, we do not need to get clear on the vexed meaning of the term ‘about’. I would merely like to highlight one aspect that is particularly relevant for my argument: the position of  $p$  in ‘ $T$  is about  $p$ ’ is a *hyperintensional context* (Hawke 2018, 697-8), viz. even if we substitute  $p$  for a necessarily co-extensive term, it is not guaranteed that this sentence preserves its truth-value. Thus, if we believe that the phrase ‘ $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’ has a built-in ‘aboutness condition’, then we cannot always substitute  $p$  in the sentence ‘ $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’ for a sentence that has the very same truth-value in all possible worlds. Let me give an example. Consider Fermat’s Last Theorem (‘There are no non-zero integers  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ ,  $n$  with  $n > 2$  such that  $a^n + b^n = c^n$ ’). Andrew Wiles managed to prove this theorem in 1994. Furthermore, it goes without saying that his proof is *about* Fermat’s Last Theorem. Now, Fermat’s Last Theorem has exactly the same truth-value in all possible worlds as the sentence

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<sup>12</sup> Maybe, a sophisticated modal account of essence can accommodate this Fine-inspired counterexample (e.g., Zalta 2006, Wildman 2013). To enter this debate would exceed the limits of this article. At any rate, even if this objection turns out to be untenable, I offer a second objection in the next subsection.

‘Gold has the atomic number 79’. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that Wiles’s proof is *about* the sentence ‘Gold has the atomic number 79’ because Wiles’s proof simply has nothing to do with the properties of gold. Thus, if we take for granted the assumption of a built-in aboutness condition, then the fact that a theory provides the truth-conditions of a sentence  $p$  does not guarantee that this theory also provides the truth-conditions of another sentence that has the same truth-value as  $p$  in all possible worlds.

Let me return to my criticism of Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument. I believe that the built-in aboutness condition of the phrase ‘ $T$  provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’ renders the inference from (15) and (18) to (19) invalid. Recall this step of the argument:

(15) The sentence (S3) ‘God is omnipotent’ and the sentence (S4) ‘God is morally good’ possess the very same truth-value in all possible worlds.

(18) DCM provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’.

(19) DCM provides the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ (from (15) and (18)).

At this point of the argument, Maitzen suggests to replace the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ with the sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ in the scope of the ‘DCM provides the truth-conditions of  $p$ ’ operator because both sentences have the very same truth-value in all possible worlds. This is how (19) gets on the table in the first place. However, because of the built-in aboutness condition, (18) entails the following sentence (18)\*:

(18)\* DCM is *about* the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ (from (18)).

In (18)\*, the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ occurs in a hyperintensional context. Therefore, we cannot simply replace this sentence in (18) by any sentence that has the same truth-value across possible worlds (e.g., ‘God is omnipotent’). At least, we should not wonder if the sentence that results from this invalid replacement procedure turns out to be *false*. For this reason, Maitzen cannot infer (19) from (15) and (18). Additionally, (19) seems to be intuitively false for the simple reason that DCM is not *about* God’s omnipotence. Thus, the contradiction between (17) and (20) should give us a reason to reject this invalid inference rule instead of DCM-Goodness-Modality. Hence, Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument is insufficient to make the case against DCM-Goodness-Modality.

### 4.3 Response to Maitzen’s Third Argument

In this section, I want to show that Maitzen’s third argument fails because premise (22) is problematic because the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ has more than one adequate explanation.

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<sup>13</sup> If van Fraassen’s pragmatic account of explanation is right, then (virtually) *every* sentence has more than one adequate explanation. van Fraassen argues that “[a]n explanation is an answer to a why-question” (van Fraassen 1980, 134) and, accordingly, that the question what counts as an adequate

Maitzen’s third argument relies on premise (22) ‘DCM-Goodness-Essence is the only adequate explanation of the truth-value of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’’. Earlier, we saw that Adams proposed DCM-Goodness-Essence to accommodate the intuition that one can count as fully conceptually competent without endorsing any version of DCM. For this reason, proponents of DCM-Goodness-Essence claim that having fully mastered moral discourse (including the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’) does not force one to endorse DCM-Goodness-Essence. Now, if one can fully understand the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ without endorsing DCM-Goodness-Essence, then one should be able to give an adequate explanation of the truth-value of this sentence without invoking DCM-Goodness-Essence. For instance, Adams claims that (at least) one other explanation is available: he claims that mere conceptual analysis provides us with a list of properties that are necessary and jointly sufficient for something to count as (morally) good and that have nothing to do with God’s will (Adams 1999, 19–26).<sup>14</sup> So, Adams seems to believe that one can explain the truth-value of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ in terms of the conjunction of these properties (even though this explanation would be less elegant than the explanation provided by DCM-Goodness-Essence). Thus, Adams believes that there is (at least)<sup>15</sup> one adequate explanation of the truth-value of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ that differs from the explanation provided by DCM-Goodness-Essence. For this reason, Maitzen’s premise (22) is untenable.

Maitzen relies on premise (22) to derive the intermediate conclusion (23) ‘DCM-Goodness-Essence provides the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’. In other words, according to (23), endorsing DCM-Goodness-Essence is a sufficient condition for understanding the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’. I believe that this intermediate conclusion is problematic for a very similar reason as premise (22). Again, remember that Adams’s central innovation was to drive a wedge between understanding the concept of (moral) goodness and endorsing DCM-Goodness-Essence. If this is correct, then we cannot assume that everyone who endorses DCM-Goodness-Essence automatically has a full understanding of the concept of (moral) goodness. Rather, someone can accept DCM-Goodness-Essence (i.e., accept that it is an *a posteriori* truth that for  $x$  to be (morally) good is for  $x$  to will what God wills) and still be confused about the concept of (moral) goodness at the same time. This person would be deprived from fully understanding the meaning of the

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explanation is highly dependent on contextual factors. Thus, if he is right, then it becomes difficult to imagine a sentence that has literally only one adequate explanation. (Perhaps, there are very special conversational contexts in which one can literally ask only one sensible why-question about a sentence. These sentences would literally have only one adequate explanation, according to van Fraassen. In any case, as I argue in the next paragraph, the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ is certainly not such an exceptional context.)

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Adams claims that mere conceptual analysis provides us with a list of properties that are necessary and jointly sufficient for something to count as (*morally*) *obligatory* (Adams 1999, 233–238). Technically, the latter discussion is more relevant in the present context because Adams rejects DCM with respect to (moral) goodness but endorses DCM with respect to (moral) obligatoriness.

<sup>15</sup> For example, we can explain the truth-value of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ in terms of the specific *contents* of God’s relevant commands or in terms of His *motivating reasons* for giving the relevant commands.

sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’ despite endorsing DCM-Goodness-Essence. Similarly, a person can accept that ‘water = H<sub>2</sub>O’ but still be confused about the meaning of the sentence ‘ $x$  is water’. For this reason, Maitzen’s intermediate conclusion (23) seems to be untenable for a very similar reason as premise (22). I conclude that Maitzen’s third argument in favour of his idiosyncratic definition DCM-Goodness-Meaning has collapsed as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of Maitzen’s objection from God’s goodness was to refute DCM. However, Maitzen recognised that his objection merely manages to refute DCM if we define it as DCM-Goodness-Meaning instead of DCM-Goodness-Essence. Thus, to make the case against DCM, Maitzen offers three arguments to establish that DCM should be defined as DCM-Goodness-Meaning. In this article, I argued that all three arguments are misguided. The first argument turned out to be a mere appeal to authority. Furthermore, the voice of the authority in question is even more ambiguous than Maitzen claims. The second argument turned out to suffer from two independent flaws: on the one hand, Maitzen’s claim that DCM-Goodness-Essence collapses into DCM-Goodness-Modality was based on a controversial understanding of full generic essence. On the other hand, Maitzen’s Anselmian Argument against DCM-Goodness-Modality was based on an untenable account of what it means to provide the truth-conditions of a sentence. Maitzen’s third argument for defining DCM as DCM-Goodness-Meaning turned out to be mistaken because it is based on the questionable assumption that DCM-Goodness-Essence is the only adequate explanation of the truth-value of the sentence ‘ $x$  is (morally) good’. Therefore, Maitzen did not succeed to show that we need to define DCM as DCM-Goodness-Meaning. Rather, Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence is a genuine alternative to DCM-Goodness-Meaning and Maitzen concedes that his objection does not harm this version of DCM. Therefore, I conclude that Maitzen’s novel version of the objection from God’s goodness fails to refute a charitable interpretation of Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Essence.

At this point, one might raise the question whether one can develop a more successful version of the objection from God’s goodness that avoids the pitfalls of Maitzen’s argument. I am afraid that a conclusive answer to this question would exceed the limits of this article. Nevertheless, to make progress on this question, let me elaborate on what I take to be the weak spot of Maitzen’s version of the objection from God’s goodness: Maitzen’s aim was to show that DCM is committed to claim that the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ is a *tautology* and, therefore, that it has no religious significance whatsoever. While this version of the objection from God’s goodness is admirably clear, it is at the same time very ambitious – too ambitious because, as I have argued, a charitable interpretation of Adams’s DCM-Goodness-Meaning must not take the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ to be a tautology. Perhaps, a more modest version of the objection from God’s goodness has better prospects. In particular, such a more modest version of the objection could concede that DCM does not need to take the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ to be a tautology but still object that it fails to assign the right ‘amount’ of religious significance to that sentence. For instance, one might argue along these lines that proponents of



DCM are committed to assume that the sentence ‘God is (morally) good’ merely means that God complies to certain standards of (moral) goodness that he determined himself, which seems problematic because, as Murphy puts it, “to live up to your own standards [...] is hardly the sort of thing that provokes in us the admiration that God’s goodness is supposed to provoke” (Murphy 2019). However, moulding this discomfort into a rigorous shape is a difficult task for at least three reasons. First, it is not clear what kind of ‘admiration’ for God is appropriate in the first place. Second, it is a non-trivial question if assuming that God determines the standards of (moral) goodness that apply to Himself would undermine His admirability in any way (Clark 1982). Maitzen himself complains that existing versions of the objection from God’s goodness rarely flesh out how this part of the argument is supposed to work (Maitzen 2004, 18). Third, even if we manage to overcome these two obstacles and formulate a rigorous version of the objection from God’s goodness that is less ambitious than Maitzen’s version, it remains an open question whether a successful defence on behalf of DCM is available. For instance, one might argue that even an improved version of the objection from God’s goodness turns out to be untenable once we accept that the predicate ‘(moral) goodness’ refers analogically and, therefore, that it has a different meaning when we apply it to God.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, friends of apophatic theology might try to defend DCM against such an improved objection by arguing that God “exceedeth all [...] Goodness” (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1920, 191). However, whether or not one can successfully defend DCM along these lines depends on larger theological and philosophical questions that go beyond the scope of this article.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, Adams (1987, 113–116) and Alston (1999) propose such a response.

<sup>17</sup> \*\*\*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS\*\*\*

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