DIVINE VOLUNTARISM AND COMPLEX ETHICAL SYSTEMS: AN INTRODUCTION*

VOLUNTARISMO DIVINO E SISTEMAS ÉTICOS COMPLEXOS: UMA INTRODUÇÃO

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the relationship between theology and ethics from the perspective of divine command theory, emphasizing the tensions and challenges it poses to complex ethical systems. Ethics is understood here as a dynamic system of value construction and negotiation, whose legitimacy depends on intersubjective processes of validation and recognition. The paper examines the epistemological and normative viability of incorporating moral precepts grounded in divine commands, particularly in light of the plurality of normative criteria and the inherent subjectivity of religious experience. We argue that, although the theological grounding of moral norms may be coherent within certain belief systems, its application in pluralistic social contexts requires integrative mechanisms that preserve the cohesion and stability of the ethical system as such. We therefore contend that the admissibility of divine commands as a source of moral authority must be mediated by criteria that safeguard the integrity of the normative system, allowing for the validity of individual experiences only within boundaries that maintain that integrity.
KEYWORDS: voluntarism; ethics; adaptability; teleology; subjectivity.

RESUMO
Este artigo explora a relação entre teologia e ética sob a perspectiva da teoria do comando divino, destacando as tensões e desafios que essa abordagem impõe a sistemas éticos complexos. A ética é entendida aqui como um sistema dinâmico de construção e negociação de valores, cuja legitimidade depende de processos intersubjetivos de validação e reconhecimento. O estudo analisa a viabilidade epistemológica e normativa de incorporar preceitos morais baseados em comandos divinos, especialmente diante da pluralidade de critérios normativos e da subjetividade própria da experiência religiosa. Defendemos que, embora o fundamento teológico das normas morais possa ser coerente dentro de certos sistemas de crença, sua aplicação em contextos sociais pluralistas exige mecanismos integrativos capazes de preservar a coesão e a estabilidade do sistema ético como um todo. Assim, argumentamos que a aceitação dos comandos divinos como fonte de autoridade moral deve ser mediada por critérios que protejam a integridade do sistema normativo, permitindo a validade das experiências individuais apenas dentro dos limites que garantam essa integridade.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: voluntarismo; ética; adaptabilidade; teleologia; subjetividade.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENON

Kierkegaard's *Fear and trembling* (1999) is arguably the most prominent example of grounding moral action in divine voluntarism.In this work, the claim to the validity of a subjective conviction reaches its peak in the idea that an absolutely dreadful act could be moral–and even praiseworthy – if it were commanded by God. His *Praise of Abraham* (1999), who "believed without ever doubting", illustrates that faith is a terrain obscure to the light of reason–or, to be more precise within Kierkegaard's atmosphere, a terrain so radiant that it blinds the light of our reason. "He said nothing to Sarah or to Eliezer: after all, who would have understood him"? This sentence captures the depth of what is at stake: when the command comes from God, how can it be communicated to those who did not receive it in the same way? In other words, when the believer holds full conviction that an action of theirs is validated–and more than that, commanded–by the very divinity, ethics seems to lose all ground as a set of norms that guide the actions and behaviors of a society.

Theologically, the foundations of classical theism underpin the theory of voluntarism: within it, God is described through a set of attributes (Mann, 2005 [Part I]; Oppy, 2014; Taliaferro *et al*., 2010 [Part IV]), of which the two most relevant for our purposes are personhood and simplicity. Through personhood, God is understood as a dialogical being–that is, not an abstract, distant, and incommunicable entity, but a being who establishes a relationship with humanity through his word (Edwards, 2021, p. 231-234, 242-257; Ratzinger, 1990, p. 443-447; Silvestre, 2021, p. 5-12). With the concept of simplicity, it is established that in God there is no separation between nature and attributes; that is, no predicate denotes something that is a "part" of God, distinct from God himself, but everything is referenced in strict identity. Thus, when we say that God is X, there is no difference between "being God" and "being X," and it is only due to a limitation of language that we logically treat him as a subject constituted by properties: God does not instantiate the property X, he is X (Stump; Kretzmann, 1985, p. 353, note 3). We can therefore affirm that in God there is no distinction between intellect and will, so that what God commands is his will, but it is also his wisdom, his love, and his power. Thus, it should not be assumed that a divine command is a mere act of liberality on God's part–something that may or may not be issued and that merely indicates the deity's will. A divine command is, in this sense, a supernatural intervention that establishes the best path and the best choice, insofar as God himself, in his completeness and simplicity, reveals himself to us.

In definition, then, we can say that the theory of theological voluntarism, also called the divine command theory, is a way of grounding human actions that holds that moral definition is based on what God determines to be good or bad; consequently, even actions that may seem objectionable *a priori*, if they have been recommended or commanded by God, are morally good, since they align with his will –which is, by definition, the moral standard for all actions. In summary, we can affirm that an adherent of divine command theory will adopt the first disjunction when faced with the question: Are things good because God wills them, or does God will them because they are good? (*Euthyphro* 10a–e). More generally, theological voluntarism is the theory that assigns to God's will the role of axiological regulation – that is, the grounding and definition of the moral value of human actions. Theologically, in the contemporary context, the challenge posed by divine command theory is among the most intricate, for a search for invalidators of this theory reveals that, to refute it, one requires a finite definitional framework regarding the ways God intervenes in the world. This task is unfeasible. Indeed, Kierkegaard already demonstrated that the absurd is not necessarily proof of divine non-intervention. On the contrary, our finite reason is definitionally insufficient to comprehend all forms of intervention, so that the appearance of injustice, irrationality, absurdity, and even of perversity may conceal, at a metaphysical level of religious experience, the effective presence of God.

It may indeed be argued that no one today adheres to this kind of moral grounding, and that any demonstration in this direction would be a sign of deep religious fundamentalism. However, we must bear in mind that the adoption of secularism by most modern states– undoubtedly a significant step forward in guaranteeing the fundamental rights of the individual–has allowed for a clearer distinction between social life and private life. Nevertheless, the secular character of the state and of the legal system does not imply the elimination of religiosity from society; on the contrary, the protection of a plurality of ideas and convictions fosters the creation and strengthening of an environment that is also rich in religious diversity (Piovesan, 2018, p. 65-69). In this sense, the defense of a secular state in no way implies a critique of any religion. Fundamentalist experiences (Libânio, 1997, p. 11-17; Panasiewicz, 2003, p. 50-52) constitute an extreme form of expressing one's core beliefs. Although such experiences may tend toward hate speech and fanaticism, it is important to emphasize that not every religious person is, by that fact alone, a fundamentalist. There is no necessary connection between adhering to religiously based moral precepts and religious fundamentalism; indeed, one can argue that there is not even a necessary link between

religious fundamentalism and fanaticism characterized by hate speech, prejudice, and discrimination (Marbaniang, 2010; Ratzinger, 1994, p. 167). However, this argument goes beyond the scope of our discussion: we are limited to principles that do not violate the legal framework and do not give rise to violent discourse, focusing solely on how ethics addresses the religious grounding of moral actions. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that religion – whether institutionalized or not – plays a significant role in the lives of a considerable portion of the population, especially in Brazil and across Latin America. The ways in which religious individuals, operating within existing ethical frameworks, epistemically ground their positions and behaviors in morally significant contexts can therefore be of interest when the issue is approached from a broader perspective.

Let us then consider a religious person – using Christianity as a paradigm – who is diligent in fulfilling their epistemic commitments and attentive to what is presented to them, and who accepts the existence of God as conceived by classical theism. Such a person undergoes a significant religious experience. From this experience arises an imperative for an action or behavior that carries meaningful ethical implications, both for the individual and for their immediate circle, as well as for their entire community. It is not necessary for the command to be extreme, as in the case of Abraham recounted by Kierkegaard; it suffices that it be a counterintuitive command. Counterintuitive commands in religious contexts are not uncommon (Gen 22:2; Ex 3:10; Rom 12:1-2; Luke 14:33; John 1:2; Matt. 10:37, among others); these are imperatives for actions that, "known per se by the law of nature and the dictate of natural reason, are seen as forbidden, […] but with respect to the absolute power of God, it is possible that such actions are not sinful" (Quinn, 1990, p. 357).

The central issue, therefore, concerns how an ethical system should address subjective claims of validity–that is, an axiological foundation based on personal and, in principle, non-communicable convictions–that seeks to attribute moral value to certain actions based on their metaphysical–or spiritual, religious–grounding (Ellis, 2024, p. 407-410). More specifically, we must evaluate how belief in a personal God–who intervenes in creation and cares for human life–can relate to a complex ethical system, and whether this relationship is sustainable when claims of divine intervention arise in ethically significant matters.

1 ETHICS AS A COMPLEX SYSTEM

Let us define ethics as a system of norms–that is, principles concerning what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided − which guide the actions and behaviors of a community,

prescribing the restraint of individual preferences in favor of a higher ideal, typically realized through a shared form of social life (Baechler, 2013)[1]. The definition of these norms, however, is subject to various interpretations, depending on the experiences, preferences, and aims of each group or society. As a result, there can be considerable divergence regarding what different peoples, in different historical periods, regard as guiding norms in pursuit of a higher good.

In addition to the diversity of moral norms observed throughout history and across cultures, the present age exhibits a distinct phenomenon that, when applied to ethics, tends to produce profound effects: the atomization of society. This refers to a growing process of individualization, in which the human sphere of concern becomes increasingly limited to oneself and one's immediate circle, while the entire process of identity formation is delegated to the individual alone. In the ethical domain, faced with the arduous task of seeking a common foundation capable of supporting a robust definition, or a standard by which individuals may orient themselves in the pursuit of a higher good, human beings tend to gravitate toward two diametrically opposed positions: on the one hand, a nihilistic relativism that strips everything of intrinsic value; and on the other, an arbitrary fundamentalism that elevates one's personal convictions as the sole valid ones.

A metaethical foundation for sets of moral rules–if it existed – would serve as a universal criterion for human conduct: deciding what is right and wrong, good and evil, would become a matter of consensus, insofar as it would be shared by all human beings, even if only intersubjectively. Divine command theory aspires to be such a foundation. Reducing it to a mere critique of fundamentalism is, as noted above, not only insufficient but in fact mistaken: the attempt to answer the question of good and evil, and the origin of our morality, has always sought various possibilities for a firm foundation upon which to be established; religiosity, in its many forms, was perhaps the principal candidate up until modernity – and it certainly remains one of the most significant to this day (Bloom, 2007, p. 147-151;Guthrie, 1980, p. 181-194; Kelemen, 2004, p. 295-301; Montero, 2014). Moreover, ethics–that is, the set of moral norms that governs life in society–must be broad enough not to exclude from its scope actions that are grounded in religiosity. After all, openness to and acceptance of diverse sources of moral motivation is a sign of a healthy and properly functioning system.

1 Our conception, therefore, is aligned with a deontological definition of ethics. While not disregarding the existence of other approaches, our focus lies in the analysis of duty-based ethics; thus, theories such as utilitarianism, contractualism, and pragmatism, for instance, will not be taken into account.

Let us consider some fundamental characteristics of ethical systems. By *system*, we refer to the interconnections and interdependencies among the constituent elements of a given set, such that they form a dynamic structure capable of processing an indefinite number of stimuli and providing coherent, organized, and plausible responses. By *ethical systems*, we mean sets whose constituent elements are moral norms. An ethical system may be composed of a single set of norms that interact among themselves, or of an indefinite number of distinct sets, thereby increasing its complexity and the possibilities for combination, conflict, and reorganization. Some desirable features of healthy ethical systems include: (i) non-linearity; (ii) the irreducibility of the whole to the sum of its parts; (iii) the capacity for self-organization; (iv) broad openness to a diversity of stimuli; and (v) the capacity for anticipation or teleology (Rescher, 2019; Standish, 2008; Turner; Baker, 2019).

Non-linearity means that the outcome of an action is not necessarily proportional to the original action, and that a given stimulus *x* may generate a range of responses that were not foreseeable at the outset. Irreducibility means that understanding the system as a whole cannot be achieved merely through the observation of its individual elements, and that the interconnection and interdependence of internal norms impose limits on the analytical capacity of observers. Self-organization, also referred to as the system's adaptability, arises directly from the interconnections among norms and refers to the system's ability to incorporate new elements without disrupting its existing patterns. The fourth characteristic is openness to a diversity of stimuli, which ensures that different systems can easily exchange information and incorporate new elements; however, it also makes it difficult to delineate their boundaries and limits, potentially causing them to appear diffuse and arbitrary. Additionally, there is the characteristic of anticipation or finality–which can be referred to as "teleology" when specifically applied to ethics–and it means that an ethical system has the capacity to adapt toward a purpose, thus not being purely mechanical or reactive (Prem, 1997, p. 9-13). All these characteristics are important because they reveal the interdependence and continuous adaptation, qualities that give the epistemological model a complexity akin to that of moral phenomena, and which aim to provide an accurate and unified description of their mechanisms and processes (Byrne, 1998; Popa, 2019).

The characteristics listed above are some of those that have recently been at the forefront of the so-called science of complexity. This field represents, above all, a multidisciplinary effort to develop an epistemological model applicable to a wide range of

objects and phenomena, constituting a kind of shared approach. This approach is applied to dynamic systems with the aim of understanding their multiple components and the key features of their operations (Chu; Strand; Fjelland, 2003, p. 22). There is no doubt that ethics constitutes a complex system–that is, an organization in which agents interact both with their environment and with one another, and whose actions generate observable emergent structures, at different scales, based on simple rules that allow for the system's own adaptation and evolution (Furtado; Sakowski, 2014, p. 7). In this context, we shall confine ourselves to the proposition that the characteristics of dynamic systems may be meaningfully applied to the study of ethical systems. This entails the adoption of an epistemological model which, by conceiving ethics as a complex system, enables us to understand the extent to which religiously motivated stimuli can be accommodated within–or excluded from–the intrinsic dynamism of this set of norms.

Let us then consider an action X, ethically significant and attributed to someone who claims to have acted under a divine command. Let us further assume that we are part of a community in which belief in the existence of God–understood in terms of classical theism–is normalized and widely accepted without major objections. Suppose also that the action in question has consequences not only for the person who performed it but also for their close social circle and possibly for the broader community. Finally, let us assume that we are individuals who are deeply committed to rationality and to the truth of our beliefs, and that we genuinely care about the practical and theoretical implications of that action. In this case, whether or not divine command theory is acceptable as an axiological foundation for the action becomes a matter of genuine interest and importance to both us and the community. If necessary, let us further assume that we hold a social position that gives us a decisive role in determining the moral acceptability of action X. The fact that an action is legally prohibited or permitted adds an additional element to our consideration, but this element is not decisive for our purposes: the alignment between morality and legality is not always clear-cut.

2 ETHICS APPLIED TO THEOLOGY – OR THEOLOGY APPLIED TO ETHICS

A system of moral norms that accepts claims such as those found in divine command theory may appear doomed to failure. What sustains an ethical system is the mutual commitment among individuals, and although we may affirm that each person enjoys a certain freedom to ground their beliefs and values, the emergence of an absurd command is enough to demonstrate that the coherence of the system is thereby put at risk. On the other

hand, the idea of forbidding religion as a source of moral value does not seem reasonable. Historical religions tend to orient themselves around moral archetypes, and when this is not the case, they often become devoid of meaning altogether (Klein, 2012, p. 146); reducing religion to a set of bureaucratic rites would disregard the entire dimension of validity accessible through transcendental reflection (Hösle, 2004, p. 78). A complex ethical system, one that embraces the multiple and varied sources of human motivation, cannot forgo recognizing this phenomenon as a legitimate feature of our moral behavior.

When we argue that the system should be capable of accepting, at least in principle, an action based on divine command theory, we aim to highlight the fourth characteristic of complex systems: openness to a diversity of stimuli. This feature is important because it allows for the inclusion of as many moral actions as possible, integrating different behaviors and attitudes while reducing the risk of an arbitrary moral homogeneity–usually defined by political and financial power. However, with regard to the other characteristics, especially (i) and (v), there are clear difficulties in integrating actions grounded in divine voluntarism.

The first characteristic, concerning the non-linearity of the system, implies causal disproportionality–that is, it is not possible to predict what the consequences of a given stimulus will be, even if similar stimuli have already been introduced into the system, and even if the stimulus in question is considered small or even irrelevant. The characteristic of non-linearity is intrinsic to dynamic systems and can be clearly observed in both natural and social phenomena–we might even say that unpredictability of outcomes is a defining trait of social phenomena. In relation to our action X, drawing inferences about its impact on the ethical system proves to be of limited relevance, since the inherent unpredictability of outcomes makes it impossible to determine what kinds of behaviors might emerge from the acceptance of divine command theory. This remains true regardless of the specific action in question, as different environments may produce vastly divergent results, even when prompted by the same initial stimulus. Another point to consider is that accepting an action grounded in divine command theory may lead to significant instability: insofar as effects cannot be foreseen, the system's internal capacity for adaptation (iii) becomes strained, and existing patterns are inevitably disrupted when a 'counterintuitive' stimulus is capable of generating a cascade of unforeseen–and unforeseeable–consequences. An unstable ethical system, in turn, becomes dysfunctional and begins to lose the adherence of its members.

Vittorio Hösle had already pointed out that religion possesses, as an essential feature, a sense of commitment to a power recognized as the ultimate criterion for the conduct of one's life (Hösle, 2004, p. 70-73; 2022, p. 160). Thus, when stimuli based on divine command theory are introduced into an ethical system, a conflict arises between normative frameworks. Even in societies where belief in a deity is widespread and deeply rooted, moral behavior requires a standard that is easily recognizable and widely shared; when this is lacking–either due to the idiosyncrasy of the stimulus or the unpredictability of its outcomes – it is natural that questions should arise regarding the guidelines of moral action. One might argue that moral actions, being a matter of private conscience, need not come into conflict with the regular norms of public life, such as legal or social norms. However, given that all these sets are part of the same ethical system – the subject's normative experience – the dispute over the principal criterion for the conduct of life inevitably arises. Thus, if there is any kind of ambiguity, internal conflicts will emerge that cannot be resolved through the system's adaptive capacity.

Let us return to action X. Upon being announced, it will likely exhibit characteristics that generate conflict with existing patterns. A distinctive feature of this type of experience–which underlies actions based on voluntarism–is the dialectical restriction that emerges immediately following contact with the transcendent. In the historical record of Christian experiences that have been reported (Bingemer, 2013, p. 178; Gilson, 2006, p. 190; Otto, 2011, p. 35-42; Velasco, 1999, p. 20-21), language is marked as an insufficient instrument for the description of the facts; William James (1991, p. 253), for instance, goes so far as to propose ineffability as an intrinsic characteristic of mystical experiences. Considering the communicative challenges–as in Kierkegaard's Abrahamic case–subjective claims to validity become the primary criterion of moral deliberation: there is no rational means by which those outside the God-commanded relationship can verify the validity of the command. Even if we do accept, therefore, the possibility that God may command certain actions to certain individuals, such grounding of the action remains unverifiable to those who stand outside the relation.

An application of theology to ethics must presuppose some form of common validity—otherwise, fundamentalism simply reemerges. The fifth characteristic of complex systems tells us that they must possess teleological capacity, that is, the ability to adapt while being oriented toward an end; this ensures that the models are not merely mechanical but have their responses adjusted according to their ultimate purpose. In ethics, this teleological model aims at the common good of society, that which the social group has established as its highest ideal and set

as a goal to be achieved in everyday life. In this sense, human actions must be oriented both toward the attainment of this common good and toward the pursuit of particular goods. When action X is introduced into the ethical system, there is no understandable common goal to be verified; rather, there is an action whose end is inaccessible to the entirety of society, because morality is no longer defined by the internal relations of the system: there is a true "*Deus ex machina*". Certainly, this does not necessarily annul the idea of teleology, but it weakens the common bond that ethics should have in order to encompass a significant number of individuals.

The problem of divine voluntarism applied to the foundation of theological ethics is, ultimately, insurmountable. Let us frame it as follows: insofar as subjective claims of validity for moral rules can still find space within a belief system, it seems that a dynamic of open and profound communication between different systems becomes unsustainable. An individual embedded in belief system A, who accepts that a moral rule may originate from direct communication with God, and when such a rule conflicts with another rule from belief system B, whose members do not accept the thesis of direct communication with God, will tend to regard their own system of moral rules as superior to the others, insofar as it is recommended by the very divinity. Even when considering individuals within belief system C, who also accept that moral rules may be validated by direct communication with God, and who encounter a rule conflicting with a rule from system A, they will tend to think that system A may not have been commanded by the true God, or is based on false prophets, or that the communication was only partial, or that the communication must be adapted to modern times and a more accurate interpretation. Thus, the subjective claim of validity remains a problem when dealing with concrete systems of moral norms.

The grounding of morality in the subjectivity of individuals will surely come into conflict with the purpose of an ethical system, which is the idea of the common good shared in social life. Now, if the coherence of sets of moral rules is jeopardized when such rules are founded on subjectivity–since subjectivity cannot ground morality (Hösle, 2022, p. 4-6) – the need for universal ethical criteria, even in religious contexts, becomes evident. Addressing what those criteria might be exceeds our scope, but some of the greatest recent theologians, who were also popes, have indicated some of them in various encyclicals and documents (*Nostra Aetate*, 5; *Evangelium Vitae*, 101; *Caritas in Veritate*, 4, 12, 29, 45, 73). Although there is evident difficulty when delving into theological questions concerning the maintenance of an objective

concept of divinity – which does not exclude, for example, its omnipotent Will – maintaining subjectivity as the sole criterion for defining moral validity is unsustainable in communal life.

Certainly, the kind of claim characteristic of divine voluntarism is not intrinsically wrong, and a complex ethical system must be capable of accommodating subjective assertions of validity that conflict with the general norm. The rejection of God as a source of moral rules will hardly be sustainable in a pluralistic society; therefore, defining certain boundaries becomes a necessary task. If we consider action X as opposed to the set of moral rules established and shared by society, and if its adoption or allowance would pose risks to the normative system itself, it must be dismissed–even though, in fact, there is no defeater for the assertion, that is, there is no theological way to prohibit that God is the source of moral rules. But the establishment of parameters is able to clarify why some claims must be rejected, so that even the subject targeted by the command must be prepared to have their action prohibited and understand the reasons for it: this concerns the balance of communal life, which is not always ready for the leaps that metaphysics demands. So, the believer is, ultimately, incomprehensible: for him, interiority possesses a radical primacy over exteriority (Hösle, 2022, p. 316).

3 THOMAS AQUINAS AND A DISCUSSION OF THE RATIONAL AND THE GOOD

Those who accept divine command theory appear to assert that the moral status of actions changes when they are commanded by God. Thus, there would be a suspension of the negative status of an action when it is divinely commanded, making it good. When Abraham receives the order to kill Isaac, the act of murder – which by definition is an evil – ceases to be evil because it is carried out in accordance with the will of the one who is the ultimate end of morality. However, this would imply that certain conceptual definitions are temporarily suspended for the sake of divine intervention, and that there is no such thing as the permanence of moral laws, or, to be more precise, that there is nothing eternal or universal in ethics. If what occurs is a modification of the very concept, in which murder ceases to be prohibited because it is no longer considered inherently evil, then what we witness is a true suspension of all conceptual qualification.

Aquinas does not follow this line of thought. Most likely, for strong conceptual reasons, Aquinas rejects the idea that the killing of Isaac would not be an evil if Abraham had carried it out simply because it was commanded by God. What Aquinas offers us, when reflecting on this matter, is the argument that such an act would not even qualify as murder, since murder is

necessarily evil, and God cannot command what is necessarily evil. Thus, rather than suspending the moral status of the action, God would simply ensure that the action no longer falls under that particular concept – which is, arguably, an even more radical alternative than the first.

> Similarly, when Abraham consented to kill his son, he did not consent to a homicide, because he was commanded to kill him by God, the Lord of life and death. For He is the one who has imposed the death penalty on all men, both the just and the unjust, on account of the sin of the first father. And the man who executes such a sentence by divine authority is not a murderer, just as God is not (*Summa* I-II, q. 100, a. 8, ad. 3, our translation).

This distinction, which Quinn (1990, p. 356-358) had already explored, might give us the impression that Thomas Aquinas adopts a deeper position of theological voluntarism – he would not be denying that the action is good because God commanded it; rather, he would be affirming that it would not even be a homicide since homicide is always evil, and God cannot command something evil. However, this idea can only be truly understood if we analyze it together with Question 6 of the *Summa theologica* (*STh* – Tomás, 1947), concerning the goodness of God.

When analyzing whether the notion of goodness applies to the notion of God, or whether God is good, Aquinas concludes that only God is good in an excellent manner — that is, where goodness and being converge perfectly (*STh* I, q. 6, a. 1). But the goodness of God is not an accident belonging to Him, but His very essence (I, q. 6, a. 3), so that all things are good insofar as they have God as their end, whereas He has no end but is the ultimate end of all things. And if the essence of God is goodness, certainly no instability can exist in the very concept of goodness, just as no instability exists in the will of God – as stated in q. 19, a. 7. It is thus established that everything God commands is good because He is the Good itself; therefore, morality is not founded on any remnant of arbitrariness that the idea of voluntarism might suggest, since in God His will is not arbitrary, but His very essence, which is also goodness – and which does not change.

One might object that our perception of God is impaired by the noetic effects of sin, and that the difficulty does not lie in God commanding something evil, but rather in our limited minds being unable to perceive the goodness of a command and rejecting it for failing to see that, ultimately, that appearance of evil concealed a greater good. In this case, due to our incapacity to make such a distinction – or because God surpasses our reason – we should embrace faith and its leaps into the unknown and distrust rationality, a decidedly limited tool. As Thomas Carson (2012, p. 462) states:

> Given the existence of actual divine purposes within a particular plan of creation (which has its source in a kindly omniscient being), we have reasons to fulfil those purposes. If there exists a kindly omniscient (etc.) creator of the universe who has a plan for the universe in which human beings play a role, then it makes sense for us to fulfil our purpose in that plan.

Now, just as God is good, He also created everything with a rational order, so that right and wrong can be known and recognized by human beings without the need for direct intervention by God every single time. Regarding ethics, the moral law is the most relevant part of natural law shared by human beings, and reason is imperative for some commands to be accepted and others rejected (*STh* I-II, q. 91, a. 2). Thus, it can be said that God may command actions to human beings and that His will determines the moral value of an action, but it is risky to claim that a bad action can be commanded by God – even if our reason is poor at identifying hidden goods – if that action is opposed to the dictates of natural reason. According to Aquinas, rationality, although it has its difficulties and provides us only with a general and confused sense of truth, remains our best tool for seeking God; it is through natural reason that we free ourselves from superstitions, establish the fairest possible criteria for life in society, and seek to honor our likeness to God. Abandoning this tool is to plunge into a subjectivity that has always led us to errors and superstitions (*STh* I, q. 2, a. 1; I-II, q. 91–94). As Hösle (2022, p. 9) states, it would be intellectual suicide to deny any intelligibility to God, for an unintelligible God could very well be evil: the basic properties of God that alone guarantee veneration for Him are His rationality and morality – in fact, He is the standard for all our claims to morality and reason.

Even with our sense of divinity impaired, and despite our inability to access God's will directly, we still access it indirectly through the use of natural reason. Natural law derives from the eternal law, which is the rational order of creation (*STh* I-II, q. 93, a. 4). Since God is good, He would not issue two contradictory commands, such as ordering the preservation of the lives of innocent children through natural reason and ordering the murder of innocent children through a direct command. There is something arbitrary in this, and in God there is no arbitrariness. Therefore, if we can know something of God through His works (*STh* I, q. 2, a. 2), we must reject any irrational form of religion, since that would be contrary to the very work of God.

> The man who discovers a higher concept of God also enters a higher level of moral human development. He is not mistaken in believing that he hears the voice of God; for the moral development of humanity is not merely subjective; in it something manifests that is greater than a psychological phenomenon, namely, the moral law. (Hösle, 2022, p. 330).

In this sense, a reconsideration of what we understand by divine voluntarism becomes necessary, since any command intended to express the will of God cannot be absolutely contradictory to natural reason, at the risk of being absolutely contradictory to the nature of God. Any appeal to the negative sense of theology (*via negativa*) must be treated with caution: Hegel has already shown us that subjective faith, without dialectical mediation, is abstract and illusory. But is this enough to claim that we have a parameter to reject action X as valid?

A CONCLUSION

We will probably never know whether Abraham was under a divine command. Certainly, we have a theologically grounded account, and miracles – fantastic, rare, and absurd occurrences – often signify the manifestation of a great power. However, superstitions also frequently display absurd signs and are only abandoned after much effort, when it becomes clear that they are not the work of the true God. Knowing whether an action is divinely commanded is one of those tasks where reason is unlikely to have the final word: the subjectivity of the God-commanded relationship is probably the only bearer of truth. But how can a complex ethical system deal with such claims of validity? Clearly, society would collapse if we were to take seriously the absolute relationship of the individual with the Absolute, since it cannot be distinguished from madness (Hösle, 2022, p. 321).

As Philip Quinn (1990, p. 350) states, the friends of divine command theories can derive modest comfort from the fact that no knockdown philosophical argument is presently known that conclusively refutes them all. If we accept the premise of theism, we must say that, theologically, the theory is plausible; philosophically, it is undefeated; and ethically, it is absurd. Although it is not possible to theologically refute the divine origin of certain moral actions, life in society demands verifiable criteria–even if only intersubjectively. The acceptance of a command based on the criterion of divine order increases systemic unpredictability, is likely to overburden the ethical system's capacity for self-organization, and ultimately dissolves its teleological orientation, insofar as the pursuit of an end requires shared recognition and commitment. Just as one cannot prohibit God as a source of moral commands, so one cannot accept, in common life, moral expressions that destabilize the very ethical system that is complex par excellence, but not arbitrary. This is far from an objective criterion, but it is what can be expected when individual experiences have – and must have–a significant weight in defining our ethics.

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