§1. Varieties of voluntarism: Divine/Regal, Reasons/Obligation

Divine Voluntarism About Moral Reasons

All there is to the fact that there is a moral reason to φ is the fact that God wishes (or commands) us to φ.

Regal Voluntarism About Moral Reasons

All there is to the fact that there is a moral reason to φ is the fact that the Queen wishes (or commands) us to φ.

Voluntarism About Moral Obligations

All there is to the fact that there is a moral obligation to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to φ.

Voluntarism About Reasons

All there is to the fact that there is a reason to φ is the fact that God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to φ.

§2. The authority of morality and ontological parsimony

Voluntarism gives us a satisfying answer to the question: Why should we be responsive to moral reasons/obligations?

If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to do, then we will be made to suffer. (A reason of self-interest)

If we don’t do what God (or the Queen) wishes (or commands) us to do, then we are being ungrateful. (A moral reason)

Voluntarism gives us a way of avoiding the postulation of sui generis facts about moral reasons/obligations.

Do we have to be theists to be Divine Voluntarists? No!
§3. Arguments for voluntarism: Descartes and Pufendorf

T1 ‘…it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so… the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence.’

(René Descartes, Sixth Set of Replies, §6)

P1 God is omnipotent.
P2 If Divine Voluntarism is false, then God is not omnipotent.
C Divine Voluntarism is true.

T2 ‘…since honesty (or moral necessity) and turpitude are affections of human deeds, arising from their agreeableness or disagreeableness to a rule, or a law; and since a law is the command of a superior, it does not appear how we can conceive any goodness or turpitude before all law, and without the imposition of a superior.’

(Samuel Pufendorf, Law of Nature and Nations, Book 1, Chapter 2, §6)

P1 Moral obligations are legal obligations.
P2 Voluntarism About Legal Obligations is true.
C Voluntarism About Moral Obligations is true.

Cf. the ‘jural view of ethics’ in Henry Sidwick’s Methods of Ethics (1874) and John Austin’s ‘command’ theory of law in his Province of Jurisprudence Determined (1832).

T3 ‘Naturally it is not possible to have a [law conception of ethics] unless you believe in God as a law-giver… But if a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation”, of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root… It is as if the notion “criminal” were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten.’

(Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p.6)

§4. Arguments against voluntarism: Clarke and Cudworth

T4 ‘…if there be no such thing as good and evil in the nature of things, antecedent to all laws; then neither can any one law be better than another… but all laws equally, will be either arbitrary and tyrannical, or frivolous and needless; because the contrary might with equal reason have been established…’

(Samuel Clarke, Discourse of Natural Religion, R 228).
If Divine Voluntarism is true, then God’s commands are arbitrary and tyrannical.

God’s commands are not arbitrary and tyrannical.

Divine Voluntarism is false.

‘Whence [i.e. from Divine Voluntarism] it follows unavoidably, that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just and righteous.’ (Ralph Cudworth, Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, R 119)

There is a possible world at which God wishes (or commands) us to torture babies for fun.

If Divine Voluntarism is true, then any possible world at which God wishes (or commands) us to torture babies for fun is a world at which there is moral reason to torture babies for fun.

There is no possible world at which there is moral reason to torture babies for fun.

Divine Voluntarism is false.

Bibliography

- Hooker, B. ‘Cudworth and Quinn’, Analysis 61:4 (pp.333-335).