The Decalogue as the Prohibition of Theft

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1 The Thesis

My thesis is a simple one: it is that all the Ten Commandments are, in one way or another, commandments against theft. The apparently wide-ranging set of ethical principles we find in the Decalogue can be shown to have an inner coherence when it is recognized that they are all dealing with a single ethical issue: the wrongful appropriation of the property of another person.

If this claim is correct, the character of the Decalogue is different from what it has always been taken to be: namely, a more or less random collection of ethical principles covering subjects as diverse as murder, adultery and sabbath observance. It can now be seen as a set of exemplifications of one underlying principle, the avoidance of theft. The one great sin, in its perspective, is the infringement of the property and rights of others; such infringement can take many forms.

I am not suggesting that the framers of the Decalogue had this single principle in mind as they brought together the various clauses that constitute the Decalogue. But the end-result of the composition of the Decalogue was a consistent collection of requirements and prohibitions addressing the single issue of theft.

2 The Commandments

2.1 The Tenth Commandment (Coveting)

It is agreed on all sides that the Tenth Commandment1 is something of an anomaly in the Decalogue, in that unlike all the other items this one appears to deal not with an observable action but with an inner disposition.

It has indeed been much disputed whether the Hebrew term חמה "covet" refers exclusively to disposition or whether it also includes a consequent

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1 I am following the numbering system used mainly by Protestants (and similar to that of Philo). There is a helpful table of the differences among seven numbering systems at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Commandments.
action. J. Herrmann began a trend in favour of the latter view, adding a number of texts such as Deut 7:25, Josh 7:21, and Prov 6:25 where it is followed by words for taking. These examples, however, are by no means probative for the meaning of חמוד, since it is natural for desire to lead to action, and thus for a term for desire to be followed by one for an action.

If חמוד does mean “acquire” in the Commandment, that would make it equivalent to stealing in the Eighth Commandment, and no one believes there could be two commandments about the same subject. Many consequently have followed A. Alt in regarding גנב “steal” in the Eighth Commandment as properly (or originally) referring to stealing a person, kidnapping. The verb never means that elsewhere, however, and the proposal, despite its multitude of supporters, is weak.

Since it is hard to sustain the view that חמוד does indeed refer to action, we are compelled to accept the traditional view that the last Commandment is indeed about desire, not about action, and to address the question whether such a commandment is truly appropriate within the Decalogue.

My proposal is that the Tenth Commandment forms the climax of the Decalogue, and is, properly speaking, not only the last but also the greatest of the Commandments, reaching beyond the encouragement or the prohibition of external acts to the realm of motivation. Do not commit what is forbidden, says the Decalogue; don’t even think about it!, says the tenth commandment. What coveting leads to is always theft, since the object of coveting is always


5 David Noel Freedman, The Nine Commandments: Uncovering a Hidden Pattern of Crime and Punishment in the Hebrew Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), speaks of the tenth commandment as a supplement to the others (hence his title The Nine Commandments): “The tenth commandment is a supplement to the previous commandments. It presents the motivations behind the crimes, especially for violations of commandments six through nine” (155). But he does not apply the concept of coveting to the earlier commandments, and he is not saying that the commandments depict various types of theft.