John E. Hare  

Reading John Hare’s new book makes it easy to heed the biblical dictum to think others better than oneself. The book is incredibly rich in scope and ambition, canvassing just about every major philosophical issue that arises in connection with divine commands. In the process Hare discusses a dizzying array of thinkers who have reflected on relevant issues, critiquing many of them with insights both trenchant and penetrating. The net effect is an impressive and comprehensive articulation and defense of divine command theory (henceforth ‘DCT’).

The first half of the book is largely concerned with laying out a version of DCT and defending it against alternative theories. The second half relates that theory to four new areas: DCT in Karl Barth, in Islam, and in Judaism, and then evolutionary psychology.

Hare begins the discussion by laying out three ways in which morality may well depend on religion, encapsulated in arguments from Providence, Grace, and Justification—all found, directly or indirectly, in Kant. Respectively, belief in God salvages the rational stability of morality by assuring the consistency of happiness and morality; a revolution of the will (by which the ranking of happiness over duty is reversed) requires divine assistance; and DCT as an answer to Korsgaard’s normative question of whether morality has proper authority. Hare thinks the argument from justification is weaker than the first two because it would take much work to show the DCT answer to the normative question is the only or best answer.

Woven into his analysis of the justification issue, Hare provides his own answer to the Cudworth-inspired “prior obligations” objection to DCT, namely, that it is viciously circular to say we should obey God’s commands on the basis of DCT. Hare concedes an exception to DCT at this point, but he doesn’t think it problematic. Following Scotus, he affirms that it is necessarily true not just that God is to be loved, but that God is to be obeyed. Thus the obligation to obey divine commands does not come from DCT, nor does it need to; but rather it is “known by its terms.”

Juxtaposed with this analysis is a distinctive contribution that distinguishes Hare’s DCT from that of Quinn and Adams. Hare rejects both Quinn’s causal account of DCT and Adams’ constitution model, opting instead for an “explicit performative” story in which the truth that God is to be obeyed plays the same role in DCT as the institution of promising does when a promise results in an
obligation. Hare sees divine commands resulting in obligations in a way analogous to a president signing a bill, except that DCt is predicated on the necessary truth that God is to be loved and thus obeyed.

After carefully demarcating five types of divine prescriptions—precepts, prohibitions, permissions, counsels, and directly effective commands—Hare concludes that a divine command that generates obligation is a prescription with which the person commanded is not permitted not to comply, and a prescription in which there is an internal reference, by the meaning of this kind of speech act, to the authority of the speaker, and to some kind of condemnation if the command is not carried out. His discussion in this context of legislative, executive, and judicial divine authority is illuminating, and he then spends time specifying implications of divine commands and three puzzles about four Barthian constraints (that we are individual centers of agency, in time, free, and language-users).

Hare then moves to a topic central to the book: eudaimonism, which by turns ties morality to happiness or the fulfillment of one's nature. Hare thinks it produces a pattern of motivation unacceptably self-regarding. He critiques four important defenses of eudaimonism, and ends up following Scotus in his “double-source” view of motivation. We have affections for both advantage and justice, but morality requires the latter to outrank the former. Hare's counterfactual in which advantage and justice come apart affords him the chance to insist that God is under no requirement to elect all human beings for salvation, though I found myself a bit unpersuaded by some of what he had to say there. Particularly when that discussion assigned primacy to the requirements of moral duty over those of love, it seemed beholden to an individualist rendering of the biblical doctrine of election, which, in light of other claims in the book, stands in a bit of tension.

He then extends his discussion of eudaimonism to ask whether morality can be deduced from natural facts. He follows Scotus again in denying such deductivism, though he affirms that morality fits our nature. Our nature does put some constraints on what can count as moral, but those constraints alone are not enough to generate moral obligations. Moreover, Hare argues that our nature is both too much and too little to allow us to deduce conclusions about moral goodness: Our nature is too mixed with noble and ignoble impulses, and enough resources for moral transformation can't be located within our nature.

A marvelous strength of the book is its treatment in detail of Christian theologian Karl Barth and two sets of both Islamic and Jewish thinkers, particularly concerning the role DCt played in their accounts. It was fascinating to see recur in all the great Abrahamic faiths the interplay between divine commands and human reason. The chapter on Islam compares and contrasts three