Divine Command Theory of Right and Wrong

As Sober defines the Divine Command Theory of Right and Wrong (“DCT”), it holds “there are moral facts, but these facts depend on the say-so of God.” This means two things:

1. There is a God. He commands that we do some things and not to do other things. We can know what these commands are, by consulting his revealed word to us. (Different versions of DCT take different views about where that revelation is to be found. Moslem defenders of DCT will say the Koran, Jewish defenders of DCT the Old Testament, Christian defenders of DCT the New Testament, etc.)

2. If an act is wrong, then what makes it wrong is that God has commanded us not to do it. If God exists, then it is wrong to do what he forbids, simply because he has forbidden it. If he had not forbidden it, then it would not be wrong.

the DCT: “murder is wrong, because God forbids it.”

not the DCT: “God forbids murder, because He sees that it’s wrong.”

An alternative (to the DCT) theory about right and wrong that has been especially popular in the Roman Catholic tradition is the natural law theory. St Thomas Aquinas defended this theory, not DCT. According to this theory:

Everything has a function/purpose and “the good” for a thing is whatever helps realize that function, while “the bad” is what hinders or thwarts the fulfillment of that function.

The theory assumes human beings as a whole have a function, as do their various parts (eyes, heart, sex organs, etc.); the functions of the parts complement the function of the whole. When human beings act in a way that is contrary to these functions, they are acting immorally. Since immoral acts are contrary to our function or nature, they may be said to be “unnatural.” Hence, to pick just two examples, Aquinas held that lying and engaging in nonprocreative sex acts are both wrong, because “unnatural” (i.e. contrary to the functions of us and our parts.) Lying is wrong because contrary to the function of speech, which is to communicate to others the ideas in our minds. Masturbation is wrong, because the function of the sex organs is procreation, and masturbation is a kind of sex act that cannot possibly lead to procreation.

-- A key difference between DCT and natural law theory is this. For natural law theory, we can figure out by means of unaided human reason that lying is wrong. Even people ignorant of divine revelation/God’s commands could figure out what the function of speech is and how lying is contrary to that function. For DCT, on the other hand, only people who are familiar with the word of God will know whether lying is ever morally permissible.
Both of these theories are theories about how to distinguish right from wrong. Both are normative theories/make value judgments/make claims about how people ought to behave. Don’t confuse either of them with the following psychological (thus, nonnormative) hypothesis:

- People who believe in God and the afterlife are more likely to do what’s right/resist temptations to do wrong than people who are not religious. The reason why they are more likely to be morally good is that they hope to be rewarded in heaven for their good behavior and they fear punishments in hell for their bad behavior. Since nonreligious people don’t have these motivations, they are more likely to give in to temptations to do wrong.

Let’s return to the divine command theory. Here are some objections to it:

1. How do we know that God exists? Even if we know that He exists, how can we know who’s right (Mormons, evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Moslems, etc.) about what his commands are?

2. If the only thing that makes genocide, slavery, or torturing babies for fun wrong is that God forbids them, then it follows that there would be nothing wrong with these things, if God didn’t forbid them. But how can that be? Aren’t they wrong, whether or not God forbids them?

The next three objections are not objections to DCT per se, but objections to the idea that DCT is compatible with traditional theism. 3-5 point to problems that people who want to believe both DCT and traditional theism face.

3. If murder is wrong because God forbids it, then before he forbids it there is nothing wrong with it. So God’s reason for forbidding it can’t be that it’s wrong. DCT implies that God cannot have any moral reasons for giving the commands he does. His commands are morally arbitrary.

4. According to DCT, for something to be good is just for God to approve of it. So according to DCT, God’s goodness just consists in his approving of himself and his commands. But if that were all that God’s goodness consisted in, it’s hard to see why it would be admirable.

5. DCT makes it harder for theists to distinguish true from false prophets, revelations, etc. The theist who is a moral realist and who hears a voice that commands him to kill his mother can say “I know that that voice is not God’s, since God is good, murdering one’s mother is evil, and thus, God couldn’t command it.” But the theist who accepts the DCT can’t say this. So how will he decide what to do, if he hears such a voice? Take a “leap of faith”?