

Article

Is It Morally Permissible for Some People to Rape and Murder? Responding to Erik Wielenberg's Argument That Divine Command Theory Fails to Explain How Psychopaths Have Moral Obligations

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Abstract: Atheist moral philosopher Erik Wielenberg recently argued that Divine Command Theory is implausible as an explanation of objective morality because it fails to explain how psychopaths have moral obligations. In this paper I explain that everyone agrees the consciences of psychopaths don't work as they should, but there's disagreement among experts as to whether: A. The consciences of psychopaths *don't* inform them of what's right and wrong and that they should do what's right or B. The consciences of psychopaths *do* inform them of these things but merely don't generate the appropriate moral emotions. I argue that, based on the psychological research, a strong case can be made for B and thus under DCT psychopaths do have moral obligations because their consciences inform them of what's right from wrong and that they should do what's right. I also argue that even if A is true, God can, and does, make psychopaths aware of what's right and wrong and that they should do what's right through other means such as rationality, society, parents, culture, direct verbal commands, etc. Therefore, even if A is true, then psychopaths still have moral obligations under DCT because they do know what's right from wrong and that they should do what's right. Lastly, I turn the tables on Wielenberg and point out that his theory is even worse than DCT when it comes to providing an explanation for the moral rights and obligations of psychopaths



Citation: Johnson, Adam Lloyd. 2023. Is It Morally Permissible for Some People to Rape and Murder? Responding to Erik Wielenberg's Argument That Divine Command Theory Fails to Explain How Psychopaths Have Moral Obligations. *Religions* 14: 507. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040507>

Academic Editor: David Baggett

Received: 16 February 2023

Revised: 23 March 2023

Accepted: 3 April 2023

Published: 6 April 2023



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Keywords: Divine Command Theory; Erik Wielenberg; David Baggett; psychopath; moral realism; Divine Love Theory; metaethics; obligations; duties; morality; ethics; Robert Adams; William Lane Craig

1. Introduction

Erik Wielenberg has recently argued that Divine Command Theory is implausible as an explanation of objective morality because it fails to explain how psychopaths have moral obligations (Wielenberg 2020). His reasoning is as follows: in an attempt to explain how and why everyone has certain moral obligations, some Divine Command Theorists have proposed that God has issued commands to people, and therefore they have moral obligations if they recognize moral requirements as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force. However, because psychopaths do not recognize these things, they would not have moral obligations under Divine Command Theory. If they do not have moral obligations, then everything they do is morally permissible and nothing they do is objectively wrong. Thus, according to Divine Command Theory, it is not objectively wrong for some people, i.e., psychopaths, to rape and murder. Since it is implausible for actions such as rape and murder to be morally permissible (not objectively wrong) for some people, Divine Command Theory is an implausible explanation for objective morality.¹

In this paper, I will defend Divine Command Theory by affirming and strengthening David Baggett's case that the evidence is not strong enough to conclude that the consciences of psychopaths do not recognize moral requirements as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force. In addition, I will argue that even if Baggett is wrong and the

consciences of psychopaths do not inform them of these things, then God can and does make such individuals aware of these things via other means besides their consciences. Thus, I will argue that since psychopaths do somehow recognize these things, at least to some degree, they do, in fact, have moral obligations according to Divine Command Theory. Lastly, I will point out that Wielenberg's own atheistic metaethical theory faces even worse problems in terms of providing an explanation for the moral obligations and rights of psychopaths.

2. Understanding Wielenberg's Objection

It is important to understand how Divine Command Theory would lose plausibility points if Wielenberg's psychopath objection is successful. Remember that those who believe there are objectively real moral truths (moral realists) propose metaethical theories, Divine Command Theory being one such theory, in which they attempt to explain how and why some actions are morally good while others are morally bad as well as how and why everyone has certain moral obligations; for example, to refrain from rape and murder. That people have such objective moral obligations is a key belief of moral realists. They often try to make their case that morality is objectively real by pointing out that if there were no objective moral obligations, then, for example, the atrocities committed by Hitler were not objectively wrong. Such moral realists argue it is implausible to conclude Hitler did nothing objectively wrong and therefore we have strong reason to believe people do have objective moral obligations.

Now suppose that a moral realist proposed a moral theory, call it the Purple Theory, which concludes that only half of the population have moral obligations to refrain from rape and murder but it is morally permissible for the other half to commit these actions. Such a theory would obviously fail in one of its primary goals; that is, to explain how and why everyone has certain objective moral obligations. Moral realists would dismiss this Purple Theory as implausible for the same type of reason they find it implausible to claim there are no objective moral obligations at all. For them, it is *just as implausible* to conclude half the population would do nothing objectively wrong if they raped and murdered as it is to conclude Hitler did nothing objectively wrong. A moral realist wants to explain why *everyone* has a moral obligation to refrain from such hideous deeds, not just some people. Thus, a metaethical theory like the Purple Theory would lose so many plausibility points that it would be deemed implausible by moral realists. However, how many plausibility points would a theory lose if it concluded that 25% of the population had no such objective moral obligations? What if it concluded 10% had no such moral obligations? What if it concluded 1% had no such moral obligations?

Ideally, a moral theory should explain how and why it is objectively wrong for *everyone* to rape and murder; thus, the more people that do not have these objective moral obligations in a theory, the more implausible that theory becomes. It would be similar to a situation where someone, after years of research confirming that all bees have stingers, proposed a theory to explain *why* this is the case.² If, however, her theory concludes that only 75% of bees have stingers and cannot explain why the other 25% of bees have stingers, then her theory as it stands has failed and should be considered implausible. Similarly, moral realists have a strong conviction that everyone has a moral obligation to refrain from rape and murder, but Wielenberg argues that Divine Command Theory should be considered implausible because it cannot explain why this obligation applies to a significant amount of people (i.e., psychopaths).

After quoting several experts on psychopathy, Wielenberg summarized his case as follows:

"We see, then, that despite the various disagreements about psychopathy, it seems quite plausible that psychopaths cannot grasp morality's authority and force. Suppose that is true [S]ince psychopaths cannot grasp morality's authority and force, God has not issued any commands to them, and so DCT [Divine Command Theory] implies that they have no moral obligations [O]n

DCT psychopaths do nothing wrong. DCT therefore implies that there walk among us human beings capable of freely and intentionally doing awful, evil things whom God has exempted . . . from the ordinary requirements of morality. If DCT is true, then for psychopaths, everything is permitted.” (Wielenberg 2020, p. 549)

If Wielenberg is correct, and if, according to psychologists, “about four percent of human beings are psychopaths” (Wielenberg 2008, p. 81), then under Divine Command Theory, it is not objectively wrong for over thirteen million people in America to rape and murder—an implausible conclusion indeed, at least for moral realists.

Most divine command theorists have not grasped the weight of Wielenberg’s psychopath objection because they mistakenly think it has to do with moral accountability, whereas it actually has to do with moral permissibility. For example, in response to Wielenberg’s objection, William Lane Craig wrote that “if psychopaths literally do not know the difference between right and wrong, then I’d say that on any plausible moral theory they are not culpable for their evil acts” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020). In a footnote, he further explained that “[i]n our justice system, guilt is typically a combination of an evil act (*actus reus*) and a blameworthy mental state (*mens rea*). A person who has done an evil act but is mentally deranged has no *mens rea* and so will be found ‘not guilty’ by reason of insanity.” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020, p. 63).

It is clear Craig thought this objection had to do with moral accountability because he argued that Divine Command Theory does not face difficulty with psychopaths since they simply would not be held accountable if they did not know right from wrong. It is reasonable to surmise that, if Divine Command Theory is true, God would not hold someone morally responsible if she does not know the difference between right and wrong. I have noted previously that Paul seems to imply this condition in Romans 2:14–16 but then explains that everyone does know the difference between right and wrong (Johnson 2023, p. 78). Regardless, that is not the issue here—the problem is *not* that under Divine Command Theory psychopaths cannot be held morally accountable. The problem is that, according to Wielenberg, under Divine Command Theory, psychopaths cannot do anything wrong in the first place.

It becomes more clear that Craig missed the thrust of Wielenberg’s objection when he wrote that “[i]n virtue of God’s general commands to mankind, murder is morally wrong, but someone who lacks a blameworthy mental state is not held morally responsible for committing that wrongful act. So when a mentally deranged person like James Holmes is found not guilty by reason of insanity for his hideous deeds, one does not deny that he has done a wrongful act . . . but that his mental state is blameworthy.” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020, p. 74). From this quote we can see that Craig thinks that under Divine Command Theory the psychopath can commit wrong actions but just is not held morally accountable for those actions. But Wielenberg’s argument is that Divine Command Theory actually *does deny* that a psychopath has done a wrongful act when he does such a hideous deed. Because he mistakenly thought the issue was moral accountability instead of moral permissibility, Craig did not explain how psychopaths could have moral obligations in the first place if they do not know right from wrong. In other words, if Divine Command Theory requires someone to know right from wrong in order to have moral obligations, and if psychopaths do not know right from wrong, then they have no moral obligations—nothing they do can be considered wrong and we would be incorrect if we told them there are things they should not do.

3. Responding to Wielenberg’s Objection

Wielenberg’s argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Under Divine Command Theory, someone does not have moral obligations if he does not recognize moral requirements as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.

2. Psychopaths do not recognize moral requirements as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.
3. Therefore, under Divine Command Theory, psychopaths do not have moral obligations.

He focuses mostly on defending premise two; for example, he wrote that “[p]sychological research shows that, whether or not psychopaths know the difference between right and wrong, they are incapable of grasping the *authority* of morality” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020, pp. 70–71). He even claimed that “the evidence from psychology that at least some psychopaths cannot grasp morality’s authority and force is overwhelming.” (Wielenberg 2020, p. 551). He summed up his argument when he explained that “[s]ince psychopaths are incapable of grasping the authority of moral demands, it seems that God has not given them moral obligations, which means that, on Craig’s view [Divine Command Theory], they have no obligations at all.” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020, p. 59).

Like many divine command theorists, I have argued elsewhere that in order for someone to have moral obligations, God must make that person aware of two things: 1. what is right and wrong; and 2. that he should do what is right, morally speaking (Johnson 2023, pp. 75–80). Wielenberg words it a bit differently in that he says someone must recognize moral requirements as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force—language he takes from Robert Adams (Adams 1999). However, when I say that God must make someone aware ‘that he should do what is right’, I am including in this awareness a recognition that moral requirements are extremely authoritative and have imperative force. Thus, throughout this paper, I will often use my description but the reader should keep in mind that it entails Wielenberg’s.

Wielenberg has argued that “[p]sychopaths are incapable of empathy, love, or guilt and cannot grasp the authority of moral demands” (Craig and Wielenberg 2020, p. 59). In order to defend his position, he quoted several experts who have spent many years researching psychopaths. For example, psychologist Robert Hare explained that psychopaths lack “the shackles of a nagging conscience” (Hare 1993). Marijana Vujosevic wrote that “[s]ince their dysfunctional conscience does not stimulate moral feelings, psychopaths do not become aware of the constraints required to understand that they have obligations. Their conscience does not make them responsive to the constraining power of morality” (Vujosevic 2014). Eric Matthews maintained that psychopaths “do not merely behave contrary to moral standards . . . but seem in some sense not even to understand the notion of a moral standard in any ‘serious’ sense, that is, as meaning anything more than a conventionally accepted rule” (Matthews 2014, p. 78).

An initial concern with Wielenberg’s argument here is that he seems to conflate mortal motivation with moral knowledge when he implies imperative force means ‘to be strongly motivated.’ But certainly, our obligations do not disappear just because our motivations are lacking. We all struggle with motivation to do the right thing from time to time, but this does not negate our obligation to do what is right. As a reminder, Wielenberg took this phrase ‘imperative force’ from Adams (Adams 1999, p. 268), but I suggest that the correct way to understand Adams here is that he intended this phrase to mean ‘knowing you should do something,’ not ‘being motivated to do something’.

Even more concerning is Wielenberg’s giant leap from the agreed-upon fact that psychopaths have an absent or significantly diminished capacity for moral emotions to the conclusion that they are incapable of grasping the authority and force of moral demands. Interestingly, this leap implies that the root problem with psychopaths is primarily emotive, not rational, which, as we have seen, is what the experts affirm. It also should be noted that considering his overall approach to morality is rationalistic, it is odd for Wielenberg to suggest an emotivist approach to moral knowledge. However, the major concern here is whether he is justified in making this leap from a deficiency in moral emotions to an incapability for moral knowledge.

Elsewhere, Wielenberg qualified himself a bit when he wrote “I do not mean to suggest that there is widespread agreement on the part of philosophers or even psychologists on

the exact nature of psychopathy. On the contrary, psychopathy is the subject of various psychological and philosophical disagreements. However, as far as I can tell, there is widespread agreement on the claim that is crucial for my argument here, which is that psychopaths are incapable of grasping morality's authority and force." (Wielenberg 2020, p. 548). While we can agree that the "mainstream view of psychopaths in contemporary psychology and philosophy has it that they have significant neurological deficits that leave them with an absent or significantly diminished capacity for love, compassion, and guilt," (Wielenberg 2020, p. 546) it certainly is not clear that the experts have concluded from this, as Wielenberg has, that they are, therefore, incapable of grasping the authority and force of moral demands. It would do well at this point to note that according Robert Hare, the leading expert on psychopathy,

"for psychopaths . . . the social experiences that normally build a conscience never take hold. Such people don't have an inner voice to guide them; they *know* the rules but follow only those they choose to follow, no matter what the repercussions for others. They have little resistance to temptation, and their transgressions elicit no guilt. Without the shackles of a nagging conscience, they feel free to satisfy their needs and wants and do whatever they think they can get away with. Any antisocial act, from petty theft to bloody murder, becomes possible. We don't know why the conscience of the psychopath—if it exists at all—is so weak. However, we can make some reasonable guesses: Psychopaths have little aptitude for experiencing the emotional responses—fear and anxiety—that are the mainsprings of conscience." (Hare 1993, pp. 75–76)

Hare here seems to affirm that psychopaths lack the proper emotions that often are associated with morality but still know what the moral rules are.

Wielenberg's 'incapability' proposal is suggesting something that goes way beyond any empirical evidence from those who have researched psychopaths. It is one thing to affirm someone does not know certain truths, but quite another to affirm they are incapable of knowing them. How could Wielenberg, or anyone else, know that psychopaths do not merely lack such knowledge but are absolutely incapable of it? Yes, there is agreement that the problem with psychopaths has to do with their internal consciences, but there is disagreement among experts as to whether:

A. The consciences of psychopaths *do not* inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right, OR

B. The consciences of psychopaths *do* inform them of these things but merely do not generate the appropriate moral emotions.

Wielenberg jumps too quickly from the agreed-upon fact that the consciences of psychopaths do not generate the appropriate moral emotions to the conclusion that their consciences do not inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right. Based on the evidence we currently have, a reasonable case can be made for B; that is, the only problem with psychopaths is that their consciences do not generate appropriate moral emotions.

For example, consider David Baggett's case in his response to Wielenberg's psychopath objection. Baggett noted several experts, some of whom Wielenberg also quoted, which take the position that the consciences of psychopaths do inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right but merely do not generate the appropriate moral emotions. Baggett explained that

"There is an intellectualist interpretation according to which the psychopath can know that such reasons [reasons to comply with the edicts of morality] are invariably strong ones, while also remaining largely or entirely indifferent to them. On this interpretation, it's possible for psychopaths to apprehend moral authority, much as it's possible for an agent to know of the 'prudentially authoritative' reasons that might demand that he, say, go on a diet, without his being in the least inclined to do so". (Baggett 2020, p. 136)

To support this position, Baggett noted that in a review of Hare's work (the well-known expert on psychopaths that Wielenberg often quotes), Christian Perring wrote: "Can or can't we say about the psychopath, 'he doesn't know any better'?" The answer seems to be both yes and no. Yes, in that the psychopath does not *emotionally* understand the rules of morality, even while he *does intellectually* understand them" (Perring 1999). In response to Perring's summary, Baggett encouraged his readers to "[n]otice once more that the vexed question of how best to understand what it means to grasp moral authority—whether affective/motivational or intellectualist—rears its head. It's not that Hare can be faulted for not settling this dispute, but Wielenberg moves too quickly when acting as though it were a settled matter . . ." (Baggett 2020, p. 140).

From this discussion, we can see that it is important to make a distinction between the cognitive understanding of right from wrong and that a person should do what is right versus the emotions that are often associated with these experiences. It may very well be the case that the consciences of psychopaths merely fail to generate these emotions but still do inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right. Baggett summarized this position as follows:

"A psychopath is a person who doesn't feel appropriately about his actions, but reason still leads to moral law. So psychopaths are not incapable of recognizing the moral law, they just lack the right emotional responses to it. Thus they are disadvantaged, but not in a way that precludes knowledge of the moral law Wielenberg, therefore, may be treating conscience in an overly narrow sense. Perhaps he thinks of conscience as morally appropriate feelings that guide us to right action, but why not include among the faculties of conscience the deliverances of reason?" (Baggett 2022)

If this position is correct and psychopaths merely lack the appropriate moral feelings, then they are not completely without a conscience but simply lack most, if not all, of the emotions that a healthy conscience normally generates.

Baggett has also made an additional point that raises doubts about Wielenberg's claim that the consciences of psychopaths do not at all inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right. Namely, he noted that psychopathy is measured in degrees, and very few, if any, are diagnosed at the highest level of psychopathy, which seems to imply that while the consciences of psychopaths may not inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right *as well as* normal consciences do, they still do so at least to some degree. In other words, their conscience still works in that it informs them of these moral truths, but it just does not work as well as it should, which is vastly different than Wielenberg's claim that they are incapable of knowing these things. Baggett elaborated on this point as follows:

"In at least the vast range of cases, psychopathy manifests along a continuum; it's less a binary matter than one of degree. Even among those who clinically qualify as psychopaths there's a range of scores on Hare's diagnostic, and very few who score as high psychopaths. What this suggests is that among many if not most diagnosable psychopaths there may well be some measure of capacity for guilt, conscience, and remorse. Rather than a complete absence of such faculties, they're compromised to one degree or other. This again reminds us of the misleading nature of treating limiting cases as paradigm cases. If a given psychopath has some measure of capacity for guilt or conscience, then such a person may, to at least some real degree, be able after all to apprehend a modicum of moral authority It's an open question how big the class is of the limiting case psychopaths; it may well be very small indeed, or perhaps ultimately even empty." (Baggett 2020, p. 142)

Baggett also pointed out that "[h]igh psychopaths are roughly those who score 34 or above on the PCL-R. Unfortunately, almost no studies of moral judgment in psychopaths have participants who score above 34 . . ." (Baggett 2020, p. 138). He noted that "[i]nterviewees

during a PCL-R evaluation can receive the highest score for lack of empathy and for lack of remorse even if they show some signs of limited empathy or remorse (Baggett 2020, p. 142).

Thus, it seems a good case can be made that psychopaths do know, even if it is in a greatly diminished capacity, what is right from wrong and that they should do what is right. Under Divine Command Theory, a moral conscience does not have to be perfectly correct all the time in order to instigate moral obligations; after all, everyone struggles to know what is right from wrong in certain situations. Similarly, even a faint conscience, as long as it informs a person to some extent of what is right and wrong and that he should do what is right, still instigates moral obligations.

So which position is correct, A or B? Since, as we have seen above, experts who study psychopaths seem to vacillate on this question, we should be hesitant to reject a metaethical theory based solely on this issue. There is just a lot we still do not understand about psychopathy and it is for this reason that Baggett believes Wielenberg is overstating his case here in claiming A is true. Baggett provided the following caution in this regard:

“The work of Robert Hare to which Wielenberg primarily points, groundbreaking as it is, tends not to be as bold as Wielenberg’s conclusions. . . . Among what Hare does effectively is broach the question of whether psychopaths are bad or mad. When it comes to the crunch, however, Hare actually remains fairly noncommittal. This may in fact be the right stance to take, in light of the genuinely difficult nature of the question involved, but Wielenberg doesn’t emulate Hare’s reticence at this point.” (Baggett 2020, pp. 138–39)

There is just a lot we do not know about the inner experiences of psychopaths.

One of the factors that makes it difficult for us to know what is going on inside the minds of psychopaths is that the only information we have, and could ever have, about the inner workings of psychopaths is what they themselves tell us. I trust you see the irony of this situation—psychopaths, by definition, are not a very trustworthy source of honest information! For this reason, among others, Baggett is concerned that Wielenberg’s

“appealing to the existence of psychopaths invites a number of difficult philosophical questions that the psychological evidence alone underdetermines. We don’t look to the psychological literature, as fascinating as it may be, to settle meta-ethical questions [T]here’s a distinct danger of borrowing too freely, presuming too much, and being strategically selective in adducing evidence The psychological evidence on numerous scores underdetermines answers to central philosophical questions. Many psychologists themselves attest to the challenging and vexed nature of the moral questions that psychopathy raises. Philosophical theorists simply drawing on the empirical findings they find most suitable for their purposes does not a solid interdisciplinary discussion make. . . . A non-exhaustive list of examples includes character, personality, emotion, cognition, rationality, empathy, and moral knowledge. Much still needs exploration, and there remains a great deal of disagreement about explanations of and the relevant concepts germane to psychopathy. . . . The best way forward, however, is not to treat the issue as more definitively settled than it is. Wielenberg’s ambitious and premature use of the category of psychopathy is arguably guilty of overreach.” (Baggett 2020, pp. 136–37)

Even if someone concludes that we do not know yet whether A or B is true, I argue that in either case, psychopaths do have moral obligations under Divine Command Theory. If B is true—if the consciences of psychopaths do inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right but merely do not generate the normal emotions that usually accompany these experiences, as Baggett has argued—then they have moral obligations. This result follows because, according to Divine Command Theory, all that is required for moral obligations is for someone to know what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right. Moral obligations are based on moral knowledge, not emotions and feelings.

However, if Baggett is wrong and A is true—namely, that the consciences of psychopaths actually do not inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right—then God can, and does, make them aware of these truths via other means; namely, through direct verbal commands from God, rationality, family, friends, culture, etc. It is important to keep in mind that, according to Divine Command Theory, God can make His moral requirements for us known in many ways. In fact, most divine command theorists use the term ‘command’ broadly in this context to include not only direct verbal instructions from God but also the many other ways God makes His moral requirements known to us, including the ways I enumerated above (Adams 1999, pp. 264–65). While some experts on psychopaths do describe their problem as a failure of their consciences to inform them of these things, in no way do they claim that psychopaths are incapable of knowing these things via other means. Wielenberg’s ‘incapability’ proposal goes way beyond the evidence from empirical research concerning psychopaths. Therefore, regardless of whether A or B is true, psychopaths do know what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right, and thus, according to Divine Command Theory, they do have moral obligations.

4. How Psychopaths Fare under Wielenberg’s Moral Theory

As we have seen above, Wielenberg has argued that Divine Command Theory is implausible because he claims it results in psychopaths having no moral obligations. However, let us turn the tables and see if his moral theory does a better or worse job in this regard. In other words, what does Wielenberg’s moral theory conclude, either explicitly or implicitly, about the moral obligations of psychopaths?

One of the noteworthy features of Wielenberg’s theory is his proposed making relationship in which natural, non-moral properties are responsible for instantiating moral properties. Wielenberg summarized this making relationship well when he responded to this question: what is the source of human moral rights and obligations?

“I propose the following answer: any being that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, tell the difference between right and wrong, choose between right and wrong, and set goals for itself has certain rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and certain obligations, including the duty to refrain from rape (in typical circumstances). Having such cognitive capacities *makes* one have such rights and duties.” (Wielenberg 2014, p. 56)

Thus, Wielenberg’s proposal is that certain natural properties robustly cause, or make, moral properties to become instantiated.” As I have explained elsewhere, Wielenberg’s critics have pointed out several concerns with his idea that moral properties are instantiated by our cognitive faculties (Johnson 2023, pp. 137–42). The primary concern is that different human beings have different levels of cognitive abilities. Wielenberg’s model would seem to indicate then that we should attribute fewer moral rights and duties to those who have lesser cognitive faculties, such as infants or those with mental handicaps. In other words, Wielenberg’s model seems to imply that if a particular human being does not have sufficient cognitive faculties, then they have fewer moral rights and duties, or none at all. This is a very precarious path that could be used to justify all sorts of horrendous practices such as eugenics, forced sterilizations, and involuntary euthanasia. Surely Wielenberg himself does not believe that infants and people suffering from dementia have fewer moral rights, but the fact that his model seems to minimize, if not eradicate, such rights is an indication that his model is dangerously wrong.

This concern can be extended to psychopaths as well. As I noted above, Wielenberg’s theory maintains that “any being that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, *tell the difference between right and wrong*, choose between right and wrong, and set goals for itself has certain rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, has certain obligations, including the duty to refrain from rape (in typical circumstances). Having such cognitive capacities *makes* one have such rights and duties.”³ Thus, it seems that Wielenberg’s attempted attack against Divine Command Theory boomerangs back

and strikes an even worse blow to his own theory. This follows because, according to Wielenberg's psychopath objection, psychopaths are incapable of knowing the difference between right and wrong and that they should do what is right and, according to Wielenberg's proposed making relationship, such persons do not have any moral obligations. But things are even worse than that because, according to Wielenberg's proposed making relationship, such individuals, such as psychopaths if Wielenberg is correct, do not even have any moral rights.

To summarize, according to Wielenberg's psychopath objection, Divine Command Theory is implausible because it concludes that psychopaths do not have any moral obligations. However, this objection of his, when applied back to his own moral theory, concludes not only that psychopaths do not have any moral obligations but that they do not even have any moral rights, which is an even more implausible conclusion.

5. Conclusions

I appreciate Wielenberg's work in moral theory because it causes all of us to think deeply about important issues. His psychopath objection claims that Divine Command Theory is implausible because it results in psychopaths—since they do not know right from wrong and that they should do what is right—having no moral obligations. While this objection is interesting and thought-provoking, it ultimately falls short in showing that Divine Command Theory is implausible.

I argued in this article that unless we develop strong evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable, based on the psychological evidence we currently have, to assume that psychopaths do know right from wrong generally, though not perfectly, and they do know they should do what is right, even if they do not have the normal emotions that a healthy conscience normally generates. However, even if I am wrong and the consciences of psychopaths do not inform them of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right, God can and does make them aware of these things through other means, and this, according to Divine Command Theory, is all that is required for someone to have moral obligations. Thus, in either case, psychopaths do have moral obligations under Divine Command Theory.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ I call my own moral theory a Divine Love Theory instead of a Divine Command Theory because God's triune nature plays the central role in my theory, not His commands. However, my Divine Love theory affirms what most Divine Command Theories do, namely, that God's commands generate our moral obligations. Therefore, this objection of Wielenberg's also applies towards my Divine Love Theory. (Johnson 2023). In this book I also defend the overall cogency of Divine Command Theory and contrast it with other theistic moral theories such as Natural Law.

² I have no idea if all bees have stingers, but assume they do for the sake of this illustration.

³ (Wielenberg 2014, p. 56). Emphasis added.

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