

In the Name of the King (of Heaven): Joan of Arc and the Ethics of Divine Command

by Benjamin Reed

Introduction

Joan of Arc was one of the most influential figures in the Hundred Years War. Her participation in that conflict may have been unremarkable, but for two things. She was a young woman, only sixteen years of age, and she claimed to have received her quest from heaven itself. She tasked the king of France in the name of God to supply her with an army and allow her to lead it to lift the siege of Orléans and fight her way to Reims, the city in which all kings of France are crowned. *Joan of Arc's campaign during the Hundred Years War, undertaken by divine command, was compatible with Just War principles. Divine Command claims, such as hers, should not be summarily dismissed, as they are verifiable, and can be compatible with Just War Theory.*

The Hundred Years War

The Hundred Years War between France and England was fought intermittently from 1337 to 1453. As with almost every war in human history, it was fought over land and power. English monarchs laid claim to the French throne, while English armies occupied lands throughout France. Compounding the chaos, was the fact that France was embroiled in a civil war between factions of the nobility (Burgundians and Armagnacs), and the king (Charles VI) had gone insane. In the midst of this turmoil, King Henry V (England) laid claim to the French throne and led the English to a historic victory at Agincourt. Allying with the English, the Burgundian faction seized Paris, and Charles VII's mother (Queen Isabelle) influenced his mentally ill father to formally ally with the Burgundians (already allied with the English) and to disinherit Charles VII and proclaim Henry V heir to the French throne.¹

Things were historically bad in France. The nobility were divided and disloyal, entirely uncertain where their safest allegiance lie. King Charles was young, inexperienced, afraid, and possibly illegitimate (Queen Isabelle was not entirely chaste). The French people were overtaxed, war-weary, and destitute. The army was equally bad off, having been rendered effectively leaderless as a result of capture, treachery, and incompetence. Perhaps worst of all, the deep moral decay that often accompanies war had overtaken the hearts of Soldiers and citizens alike.²

Joan of Arc

The context into which Joan of Arc was born was one of the darkest periods in French history. Into that darkness, she would shine the divine light of heaven, with its offering of physical and spiritual salvation. Joan was born in the village of Domrémy in 1412 to Jacques d'Arc and Isabelle Romée. She was diligent, compassionate, and devout; the kind of child that would rather go to confession than play with friends. She was also a hardy, country girl, blessed with determination and endurance.³ In 1425, marauders plundered and burned the church in Joan's village. That was the year she saw a great light and first heard the voice of St. Michael telling her that she had been chosen to restore France and give the king back his kingdom.⁴ Were it not for a famous prophecy, Joan may never have been granted a meeting with the king. The prophecy claimed that a maid from the borders of Lorraine would save France.⁵ Much of the French peasantry believed that she was the maiden of whom the prophecy spoke. King Charles, at least, saw in her the potential manifestation of the miracle that was required to save his kingdom.

Divine Command Theory

Joan of Arc's invocation of divine mandate aligns with the divine command theory (DCT) of philosophy. "DCT is the view that morality is somehow dependent upon God, and that moral obligation consists in obedience to God's commands. DCT includes the claim that morality is ultimately based on the commands or character of God, and that the morally right action is the one that God commands or requires."⁶

In *Five Dialogues*, Plato poses a question (the Euthyphro Dilemma) that is fundamental to the divine command theory. "Does God command a particular action because it's morally right, or is it morally right because God commands it?" If the latter is true, the DCT proponent is then morally obligated to do whatever God commands regardless of how reprehensible it may seem to them or if it clearly contravenes a previous command he has given. For many this makes the foundations of morality alarmingly arbitrary. If it seems morally reprehensible to me, should I do it anyway simply because God commanded it? The divine command theory says yes.

If God commands an action *because* it is morally right—the other aspect of the Euthyphro Dilemma—then something other than him is making the "moral-not moral" distinction and he is merely selecting actions to command from those that were predetermined to be moral. This challenges the notion of his sovereignty. We see that there is a reasonable objection to either side, ergo a dilemma. This leaves us with another, perhaps more fundamental question: why does God command the things he does? Is it because they fulfill some measure of his comprehensive purpose? Does he command anything that does not have a purpose? Is the pinpoint definition of "morally right," then, "that which is useful to God?"

The reasonable philosopher or ethicist may then rightly ask, "should a theory of ethics that could morally obligate us to commit adultery or kill a baby (i.e. intentionally inflict suffering on others) be given any credence?" A defender of the DCT may contend that even though God *could* command such "atrocities," he would not. It's simply not in his nature to do so. Events recorded in the Old Testament, and the following verse inform this contention.⁷ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."⁸ We also have this scriptural distinction between human and divine assessment. "What God has made clean, [you should] not call impure."⁹ The DCT argues that God's commands are not subject to man's judgment.

The Divine Command Test

Another strong challenge to the DCT is the "surety objection." How can others be assured that those who claim divine command are certain that the command came from God? The surety objection is important. Is there a method of substantiating divine command beyond simply trusting God and taking another at their word? An effective test of divine command will consist of at least the following four elements: specificity, authenticity, humility, and annunciation. Each of these elements are present in the story of Joan of Arc.

Specificity evaluates the scope of divine instruction or requirement. God gave Moses 10 Commandments. Noah was given two requirements: build an ark and fill it. Joan of Arc's divine command was also twofold: lift the siege of Orléans and effect the coronation of King Charles. If divine command claims are not limited and specific, they are more likely to be the will of man.

Authenticity is the heart of the divine command test. Joan of Arc experienced four different authentication events: she was assessed by a council of priests as to her piety and honesty¹⁰; she was examined to determine if she was a virgin (required by the prophecy)¹¹; she immediately perceived the King (who had been intentionally disguised) upon their first meeting; and, when they were alone, she rehearsed to the King the words of a prayer that he had offered in private in which he asked God to save his kingdom.¹² If someone has a legitimate divine mandate, God will provide them the means to signify it to others.¹³

Annunciation is another safeguard used by God to substantiate divine command. He discloses the future appearance of a significant individual so that they will be recognized in their divinely appointed capacity when the time comes. A prophecy of Marie d'Avignon foretold that France would be ruined by a woman and later restored by a virgin.¹⁴ The woman in this case was King Charles' mother, Queen Isabelle.

The final aspect of the divine command test is humility (or simplicity). God intentionally uses insignificant people to do great things in order to reveal himself as their true author. It was impossible for Joan of Arc to do what she did with the knowledge and experience she possessed. Thus, making her claim to divine command all the more credible. “By small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and...by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls.”¹⁵

Just War Theory

The life of Joan of Arc invites evaluation within the DCT philosophical framework and validates the four-pronged divine command test. Because the divine command she received required her to wage war, the *jus ad bellum* principles of Just War Theory can be used to further assess the moral validity of her campaign.¹⁶ The first principle of just cause says that in order for a war to be just it must be fought in response to serious wrongs (ex. in self-defense or in defense of another innocent nation/group). When Joan of Arc disclosed her divine mission to the king, much of France had been overrun by English invaders.¹⁷ Her campaign was undertaken, in self-defense, in order to prevent France’s complete subjugation by the English. Her people were in grave danger, politically, financially, morally, and spiritually. Because of the Maid of Orléans, the people of France, and their king, took heart for the first time in a long time.

The second principle of right intention requires that a war be waged for a just purpose, like the reinstatement of peace, as opposed to the annexation of foreign territory or to plunder treasure. The intentions behind Joan’s campaign were to ensure the king was crowned and to revive the soul of her country. God asked her to spark the spiritual rebirth of France. Her charge was to bring the King, and France, closer to the King of Heaven. God’s purpose in both was to ease the suffering of the French people.¹⁸

The third principle of legitimate authority holds that war must be declared by an entity duly invested with the authority to do so. Joan of Arc did not start the Hundred Years War, but she did start one of its campaigns. As a simple peasant girl she was seemingly the least proper authority to declare war. But, as the prophesied Maiden of Lorraine, invested with the Dauphin’s blessing, and having received a charge from God to save the people of France, she became, for a time, the most proper authority in all of France.¹⁹

The Dauphin’s coronation, secured by Joan, fully legitimized his authority to act as the supreme political authority in France. Joan generated the very authority needed to politically legitimize her campaign. The medieval understanding that monarchs ruled by divine mandate necessarily infuses God into any discussion of political legitimacy. The act of coronation bound church and state in the person of the monarch—fully legitimizing the king’s divinely derived power and authority. Coronation was more than executive regalia; it was a sacred ceremony, presided by the church, at which the monarch was consecrated to serve the people in the name of God.

The fourth principle of proportionality requires that the peace secured through war be an improvement over the conditions that existed before the war. Joan’s divinely dictated campaign objectives were limited: liberate Orléans, ensure the coronation, and defeat the English as needed.²⁰ Their limited scope minimized the likelihood of creating a worse peace in the aftermath. As a divinely inspired tactician, Joan frequently achieved victory with fewer than anticipated combat losses. The number of soldiers lost in her Loire Campaign were certainly worth the freedom, peace, spiritual and emotional revival, political legitimacy, and reversal of French fortunes in the war that were won as a result.

The fifth principle requires that war is entered into only as a last resort. Joan of Arc’s Loire Campaign in the Hundred Years War was a last resort of sorts in that it was carried out as an act of desperation. If the English captured Orléans, France would become an English holding, and King Charles would spend the rest of his life in exile.²¹ The divine messengers who spoke to Joan told her to hurry; that there wasn’t much time. She frequently pleaded with the king and scolded others for delaying time-sensitive actions. She promised her army that if they would work when God said it was time to work, he would work with them.²²

The final *jus ad bellum* principle requires that war is only undertaken if there is a reasonable chance of success.

If there is no reasonable chance of success, the more ethical action is surrender, thereby sparing soldiers' lives. Did the small, French army led by Joan have a reasonable chance of success? Not initially, no. Then again, nothing about Joan of Arc was reasonable. Little about the French tactical situation up to the siege of Orléans pointed to success. In response, they placed a teenaged girl who had never swung a sword at the head of their army. It was, very truly, a leap of faith of biblical proportions for all involved—except Joan. She knew.²³ As the Loire Campaign yielded successive victories under Joan's leadership, the reasonable chance of French success grew considerably.

A Reasonable Integration

Is the integration of the DCT and JWT a reasonable philosophical endeavor? The DCT makes morally obligatory a war which God has commanded regardless of our assessment of its ethical merits. Conversely, JWT only considers a war to be morally valid if it is able to withstand ethical scrutiny under *jus ad bellum* principles, even if divinely commanded. This dichotomy raises the fundamental question of whether man has any authority to judge the moral correctness of what God has decreed. It is true that men have and will deceive about the receipt of divine command relative to war.²⁴ In this instance, the divine command test will prove useful. It is also true that God is not beholden to the theories of men. Here it's beneficial to remember that it is in God's nature (a nature that we do not fully comprehend) to act justly. The determination of justness is the evaluative aim of the JWT.

Divine command theory may not be perfectly universalizable relative to warfare across the breadth of modern, pluralistic faith profession, but it can be (and has been) compatible with JWT. The story of Joan of Arc highlights at least one instance in which it was. Joan executed the Loire Campaign because of divine command, but she also led her army (required certain conduct) so as to reflect the divine impetus behind her part of the war.²⁵ The fact that her campaign adhered to Just War principles constitutes a historic validation of the DCT.

Conclusion

What is the rightful place of the voice of God in the wars of men? Is it merely to inspire the troops to embrace the cause of freedom? The story of Joan of Arc is one of the more profound examples in history of the interposition of the divine in the warfare of man. Joan of Arc's army began a campaign against the English at Orleans, in self-defense, to reclaim sovereign French territory. Her piety and prowess proved to the King and the people that she was the Maiden of Lorraine imbued with a divine mandate to save France. Her demonstration that she was acting out of Divine Command within the proper *jus ad bellum* framework ensured that her campaign in the Hundred Years War was morally just. By all rights, Joan should not have been able to do what she did, but the historical fact of her accomplishment remains. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment was incredible faith in the face of the overwhelming doubt of those around her.

In her time, Joan of Arc was "the wonder and glory of France" having won the greatest triumph ever achieved by any woman of France.²⁶ The entire nation of France owes an existential debt of gratitude that Joan of Arc and King Charles VII allowed God a place in the *jus ad bellum* framework. In matters of faith (reliance upon divine revelation) we are seldom given assurances. This is the nature of faith. It certainly helps us (humanity) feel better to know (without doubt) that God is behind an endeavor. But he does not need us to validate what he's done or those through whom he's done it. Our inability to justify something rationally, should not always invalidate it. With the world seeming to draw closer and closer to another large-scale conflict, and many young people increasingly embracing a life shaped by faith in God, perhaps the conditions will soon exist (or now exist) in which we will see another Joan of Arc shape the destiny of a nation. If such a young woman appears, will we hear and aid her, and perhaps save a nation thereby, or will we dismiss and delegitimize her and abandon that nation to its own devices?

Endnotes

1 Frances Gies, *Joan of Arc: The Legend and the Reality* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), 1.

- 2 Mary Gordon, *Joan of Arc: A Life* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2000), 8, 27.
- 3 Albert Paine, *The Girl in White Armor: The Story of Joan of Arc* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 15.
- 4 Gordon, 4. See also Paine, 14-15.
- 5 Paine, 17.
- 6 Michael W. Austin, "Divine Command Theory," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 5, 2026, <https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>. See also Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 132.
- 7 The following actions carried out (or commanded) by God would qualify as atrocities: the genocide of the Canaanite peoples (Deut. 7:2); the annihilation of all life on earth (Genesis 6:13); the Plague of the Death of the Firstborn (Ex. 11-12); and the annihilation of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3).
- 8 Isaiah 55:8-9.
- 9 Acts 10:15.
- 10 Gordon, 43-44.
- 11 Gies, 55.
- 12 Gies, 50-51.
- 13 Paine, 48. When asked to manifest a sign that would substantiate her claim to have been sent by God, Joan replied, "I did not come [here] to work signs! Take me to Orléans and I will show you signs why I am sent."
- 14 Victoria Sackville-West, *Saint Joan of Arc* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1936), 72. See also Gordon, 14.
- 15 Alma 37:6-7, *The Book of Mormon*.
- 16 Alexander Moseley, "Just War Theory," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 5, 2026, <https://iep.utm.edu/justwar/>.
- 17 Edward Lucie-Smith, *Joan of Arc* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 59. Joan's recorded first words to King Charles were, "Very noble Lord dauphin, I am come and sent by God to bring succor to you and your kingdom."
- 18 Paine, 109.
- 19 Paine, 51. By Charles' authority Joan of Arc was made *chef de guerre* (Chief of War).
- 20 Paine, 100.
- 21 Paine, 20.
- 22 Paine, 89.
- 23 Gordon, 83-84. Was Joan of Arc a miracle or merely a military savant? Given her age, experience, and circumstance, what she did was impossible.

24 Paine 86-87. On the authenticity of her claim to Divine Command, Joan said: “When someone does not wish to credit the thing I speak on the part of God, I pray to God, complaining that those to whom I speak are hard of belief. When I have finished praying, I hear a voice that says to me: ‘Daughter of God, I will aide thee. Go!’”

25 Paine, 56. See also Gordon, 46. Joan insisted that the soldiers under her command confess their sins and receive communion. She also required them to use clean language and forbade them camp followers.

26 Paine, 115.