

# History of Philosophy A: Lecture Three

## 1. Problems with DCT: Arbitrariness

The first problem was mentioned last lecture. In fact, it's not *one* problem but two problems often run together.

In its first formulation there's a concern that God now gets to make arbitrary moral assertions.

*Example:* Left sock before right sock.

*Example:* Theft is acceptable.

*Example:* Genocide was okay yesterday, but is wrong today.

And it also works the other way around. Not only would it be weird if the world *was* that way, but it's weird that the moral strictures we currently have *are* that way.

*Example:* Rape is only wrong because God says so.

*A more religious example:* Sacrilege is only wrong because God says so.

There are intuitions that there's a *reason* that these things are wrong. That, if there is a God, He *sees* that reason and so tells us not to do it. He Himself didn't *make up* the reason.

But there's another source of arbitrariness. Imagine God cobbled together an utterly *random* set of strictures. God might demand that killing innocents is only wrong one a Tuesday, unless you're wearing a red t-shirt in which case it's wrong every other day of the week. He might say we are obliged to marry all people named Nigel. He might order that we all do the funky chicken whenever someone says the word 'frugal', and that failure to do so is worse than any other sin. *It's just crackers!* You might have the intuition that necessarily a framework of strictures – to count as a moral framework – must have some sense to it. It must be well ordered, rational, motivated by similar aims etc.

## 2. Problems with DCT: Undermining God's Goodness

One motivation for DCT was that for it to be otherwise would undermine God's power. That if God had no control over the moral laws, He would be somehow 'limited' and not omnipotent. But there's a 'right back at you' problem lurking.

Some worry that if DCT were true it'd actually undermine God's omnibenevolence. God's goodness is meant to be an admirable quality – a really *great* thing. Heck, it's one of the reasons He's meant to be worshipped. But given DCT, so the argument goes, all 'God is omnibenevolent' amounts to is God doing what He wants to do. That's not *admirable*, that's *easy*. We can *all* do what we feel like.

So DCT removes from God an admirable quality. Or a slightly different way to look at it. The phrase 'God is good' is meant to be *informative*. But now it's *uninformative* as it just says that He does what He does.

*Compare:* Next semester we'll look at Descartes. He'll suggest there might be something *just like God* but evil. Given DCT that's *conceptually impossible* – a contradiction to even think about.

## 3. Problems with DCT: Problems With Conscience

This objection is more specific to Ockham's DCT. His notion of using your conscience to figure out what the moral law is, is kind of weird. If I look inside myself and my conscience seems to tell me that brutally killing and eating people is okay, then apparently that's *good justification* for doing it. So what if I'm Hannibal Lecter?

It looks like there are questions to be asked about Ockham's moral epistemology. We might have serious misgivings. Although this might be more a problem with Ockham's theory than DCT in general.

#### 4. Counterarguments

Let's recap what's gone on in the last two lectures. We've introduced arguments *for* DCT. We've introduced reasons *not* to believe DCT. Two points to note.

##### *Point One*

I've intentionally left aside in-depth criticisms of the arguments for and against. You are not here to learn arguments *verbatim*. That's pointless, and would also spoil the fun. The arguments we've given, both for and against, have been intentionally picked such that they have flaws I think you can locate. I've done this because this is the first year and you've got to learn how to argue – how to *give objections* – on your own. It's one of those essential study skills I talked about in Lecture One.

##### *Point Two*

The problems given here aren't *exactly* responses to the *motivations* for DCT. We introduced two motivations. We had three problems. Note how the *problems* don't explain why the *motivations* are flawed! And they can't both be right! The motivations can't be flawless *and* the problems be flawless! That'd entail a contradiction!

Keep that in mind, *particularly* when writing essays. An *evaluation* of a position isn't giving some 'for' reasons and some 'against' reasons. It's about picking *one* reason and sticking with that reason – showing whether *that* reason works or not.

#### 5. Aquinas on Natural Law

Aquinas's philosophy is called *Thomist* philosophy. He did not take the heretical line of Ockham on the Euthyphro Dilemma. Aquinas said that morality was more fundamental than God's commands – that God commanded P because P was obligatory. But this doesn't limit God's power. God *would never want* to do immoral things – He's all good! If He *would never want* to do immoral things, He isn't constrained by the fact He can't ordain moral law Himself.

Notice how *that* is a response to a previous problem. One argument for DCT is that otherwise God could not be omnipotent. Here's Aquinas arguing that, in fact, this view is misguided. So here Aquinas *is* offering a counterargument to a motivation for DCT.

Nor does Aquinas stop there. He provides his own ethical system. Aquinas was heavily influenced by Aristotle. Aristotle was very into *teleology*. Teleology is all to do with the *functions* of things. So, Aristotle said, everything has a function. Aquinas, like Aristotle, thinks that to lead a 'good life' we should fulfil these functions. And, like Ockham, he believes that people from non-Christian religions can also figure out their moral obligations. They can do so by attending to their *natural inclinations*.

There are three levels of inclinations.

*First level:* Those inclinations shared by all living things.

- Self preservation

*Second level:* Those inclinations shared by all animals.

- Reproduction, caring for the young

*Third level:* Those specifically human inclinations.

- Rationality

So we figure out what to do on the basis of these natural inclinations. Since we are inclined to reason, we shouldn't engage in practices that deprive us of reason.

*Example:* Getting blind drunk

This is known as *natural law*.