

# Philosophy 1100: Ethics

## Topic 3 - Religious Approaches to Ethics

1. Religion and Morality
2. Divine Command Theory (DCT)
3. DCT and Atheism
4. Why believe DCT?
5. Plato
6. *Euthyphro*
7. An Argument against DCT: The Euthyphro Problem

# Religion and Morality

IOC

- its rules can conflict with each other
- its rules are too absolute
- its rules don't prohibit enough

GR

???

Divine Command Theory (DCT)

# Beginning-of-Term Questionnaire

**QUESTION 1:** *What is your view about the relationship between God and morality?*

(a) I believe in God, and I believe that morality must be based in God; so if God didn't exist, nothing would really be right or wrong.

(b) I believe in God, but I don't believe that morality must be based in God; if God didn't exist, there would still be right and wrong ways to treat each other.

(c) I don't believe in God, but I believe that morality must be based in God; thus, I don't believe in morality (that is, I don't believe that anything we do is really ever right or wrong; it's just what we do).

(d) I don't believe in God, but I don't believe that morality must be based in God; I am an atheist (or at least an agnostic) who believes in morality.

# The Divine Command Theory

DCT: an act is morally right if and only if it is not prohibited by God.

**God** is the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe.

# by the way ...

Some basic definitions.

In our class ...

‘**morally right**’ simply means morally *permissible*.

Morally right actions are ones you are *allowed* to do; it’s *ok* to do them, morally speaking.

‘**morally wrong**’ means *not morally right*. You can’t do those things.

‘**morally obligatory**’ means *wrong to fail to do*.

Morally obligatory actions are ones you *must* do, or *should* do, or *ought* to do, morally speaking; morality *requires* that you do them.

# The Divine Command Theory

DCT: an act is morally right if and only if it is not prohibited by God.

**God** is the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe.

An issue that arises immediately:

*How do we know what God has prohibited?*

One natural answer:

from some sacred text, such as the Bible.

# Knowing God's Prohibitions

## Disturbing Bible passages

- Slavery:

“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property.”

(Leviticus 25: 44-45)

- Homosexuality:

“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” (Leviticus 20:13)

- Genocide:

see Deuteronomy 7:1-2; and Wes Morriston, “Did God Command Genocide?” *Philosophia Christi* (2009).

# Knowing God's Prohibitions

Disturbing Bible passages

Solution: not everything in the Bible is true.

*But then how do we know what God has commanded and forbidden us to do?*

Solution: By using our moral sense, together with reasoning.

(and this is how we do moral philosophy anyway!)



this one has a  
"right answer"

# clicker question

DCT says that an act is right if and only if it is not prohibited by God. **Can this claim be true if God does not exist?**

In other words, **is DCT + atheism at least a consistent position?**

- A.** Yes, this is at least a consistent position.
- B.** No, atheism on its own entails the falsity of DCT.

# DCT and Atheism

The correct answer is **A**: DCT is compatible with atheism

*So what follows from the combination of DCT + atheism?*

If there is no God, then there are no acts that are prohibited by God.

If there are no acts that are prohibited by God, then every act has this feature: it is not prohibited by God.

If every act is not prohibited by God *and* DCT is true, then ...

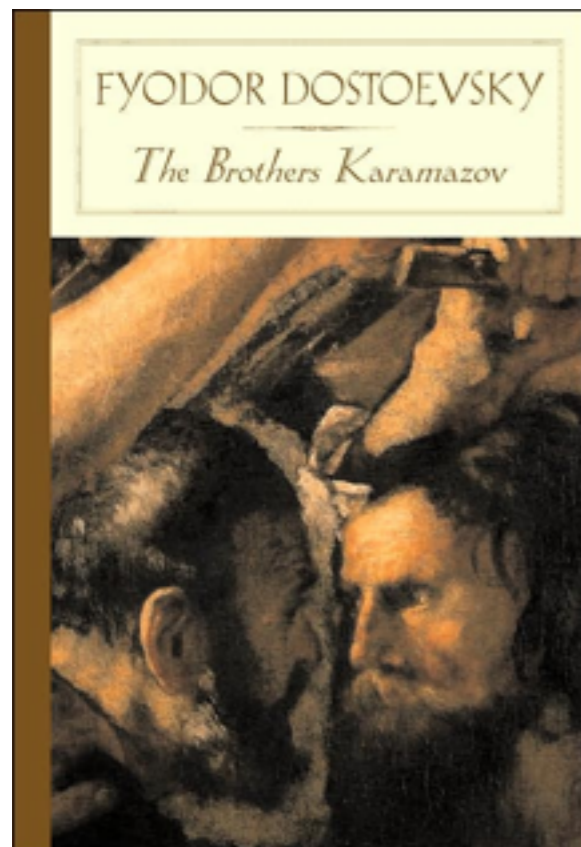
... all actions are right

(by which, as you know, we mean *permissible*)

# DCT and Atheism

As Dostoyevsky (is said to have) said:

“If there is no God, then all things are permitted.”



Apparently what the character actually said (on one translation) is this:

“If there’s no God and no life beyond the grave, doesn’t that mean that men will be allowed to do whatever they want?”

recall this  
earlier slide

## Beginning-of-Term Questionnaire

**QUESTION 1:** *What is your view about the relationship between God and morality?*

(a) I believe in God, and I believe that morality must be based in God; so if God didn't exist, nothing would really be right or wrong.

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# Why believe DCT?

*Any ideas? ...*

# Plato (428-347 BC)

- The best known ancient Greek philosopher
- Student of Socrates; teacher of Aristotle  
(remember: S - P - A )
- Wrote about 23 philosophical dialogues
- Famous doctrine: the Theory of the Forms
- Western philosophy “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” - A. N. Whitehead (1929)







# The Euthyphro Problem

for DCT

*Euthyphro*: “I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite, which they all hate, impious.”

This should remind us of DCT:

what God commands us to do is obligatory, and the opposite, which God prohibits, wrong.

# The Euthyphro Problem

*Socrates:* “The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”

Or, to put it in our terms:

Is an action wrong because God prohibits it or does God prohibit it because it is wrong?

# The Euthyphro Problem

Socrates' Question: *Is an action wrong because God prohibits it, or does God prohibit it because it is wrong?*

The proponent of DCT has two options:

Horn 1: she can say that wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

- or -

Horn 2: she can say that God prohibits wrong actions because they are wrong.

# Horn I

Horn I: wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

Horn I implies at least two problematic things:

(a) that if God had commanded that we do something horrible, it would have been right to do it.

(b) that God's prohibitions are arbitrary.

# The First Implication of Horn I

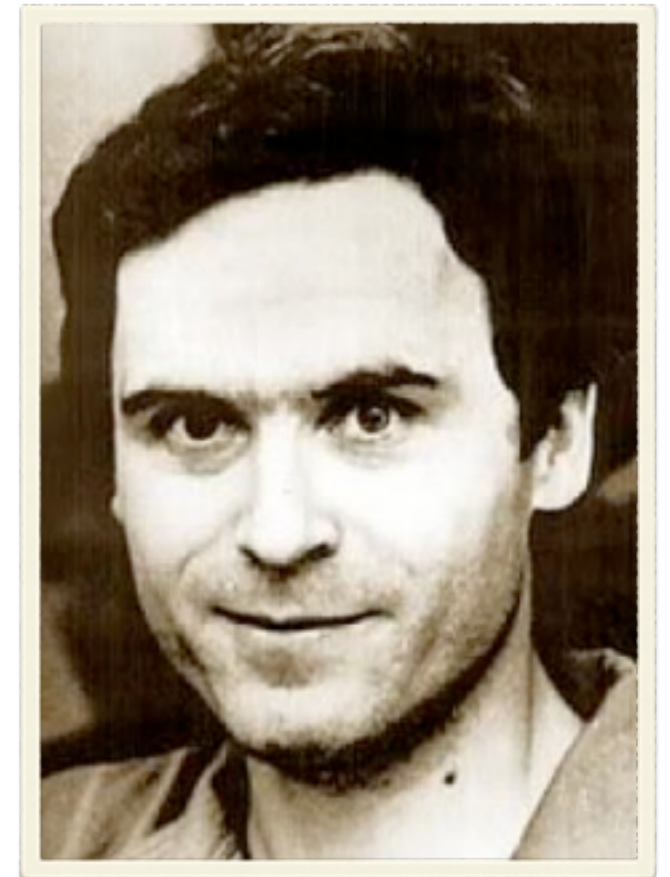
[(a) that if God had commanded that we do something horrible, it would have been right to do it]

*Why would this implication be a problem?*

One illustration: the case of Ted Bundy and Joni Lenz.

About this case, Horn I implies this:

that if God had decided not to prohibit rape and assault, then there would have been nothing wrong with what Ted Bundy did to Joni Lenz.



# clicker question

What is your opinion about the following conditional claim? “If God had decided not to prohibit rape and assault, then there would have been nothing wrong with what Ted Bundy did to Joni Lenz.”

- A. Very obviously false.
- B. Probably false.
- C. Not sure. Too hard to decide.
- D. Seems right to me.

# The First Implication of Horn I

[(a) that if God had commanded that we do something horrible, it would have been right to do it]

A popular reply to this objection:

*God would never have failed to prohibit rape and assault.*

The problem with this reply:

it's truth is not inconsistent with the point it is supposed to be attacking!

We might also ask someone making this reply:  
If Horn I is true, why think God would never have failed to prohibit rape and assault?

this is an  
earlier slide

# Horn I

Horn I: wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

Horn I implies two problematic things:

- (a) that if God had commanded that we do something horrible, it would have been right to do it.
- (b) that God's prohibitions are arbitrary.



# The Second Implication of Horn 1

[(b) that God's prohibitions are arbitrary]

*What does this mean?*

It means that God has no good reason for prohibiting what God prohibits.

*Why does it follow from Horn 1?*

What reason can God give? Not: "my reason is that the acts are wrong." What else can God say?

# The Second Implication of Horn I

[(b) that God's prohibitions are arbitrary]

*Why is arbitrariness a problem?*

If the commands and prohibitions are truly arbitrary, we would have no reason to follow them, or the “obligations” that they generate.

That means that they wouldn't be genuine obligations; we would be free to ignore them.

And this is not true of genuine moral obligations.

Consider an analogy: “the 20 prohibitions.”

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earlier slide

# The Euthyphro Problem

Socrates' question: *Is an action wrong because God prohibits it, or does God prohibit it because it is wrong?*

The proponent of DCT has two options:

~~Horn 1~~: she can say that wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

- or -

Horn 2: she can say that God prohibits wrong actions because they are wrong.

# Horn 2

Horn 2: God prohibits wrong actions because they are wrong.

Why Horn 2 avoids the problems of Horn 1:

*Does Horn 2 imply that if God failed to prohibit something horrible, it would be ok to do it?* NO.

*Does Horn 2 imply that God's prohibitions are arbitrary?* NO.

So then what's the problem with Horn 2? ...

# Horn 2

The problem with Horn 2 is that it abandons the Divine Command Theory of morality!

On Horn 2, right and wrong are no longer based in God, but in some standard independent of God.

Horn 2 is what Louise Antony, in her *New York Times* piece, calls a “Divine Independence Theory.”

“... the goodness of an action is a feature that is independent of, and antecedent to God’s willing it.”

Louise Antony  
philosopher at UMass Amherst



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earlier slide

# The Euthyphro Problem

Socrates' question: *Is an action wrong because God prohibits it, or does God prohibit it because it is wrong?*

The proponent of DCT has two options:

~~Horn 1~~: she can say that wrong actions are wrong because God prohibits them.

- or -

~~Horn 2~~: she can say that God prohibits wrong actions because they are wrong.

# An Overview of the Euthyphro Problem

EITHER

Horn 1: wrong acts are wrong because God prohibits them



(a) if God commanded something horrible, doing it would be right

&

(b) God's prohibitions are arbitrary

Horn 2: God prohibits wrong acts because they are wrong



morality is no longer ultimately based on God's commands  
(DCT has been abandoned)

# The Euthyphro Problem

(in the form of a valid argument)

P1. If DCT is true, then either Horn 1 or Horn 2 is true.

P2. Horn 1 is not true.

P3. If Horn 2 is true, then DCT is not true.

C. Therefore, DCT is not true.

*Make sure you would be able to give the rationale for each of three of the premises.*



this one has a  
“right answer”

# clicker question

**Which of these best captures Plato’s point?**

A. DCT is false because God doesn’t exist.

**B.** Even if you believe in God, you should not base morality in God’s commands (as DCT does).

C. Because we can’t know what God commands and prohibits, DCT is a useless theory.

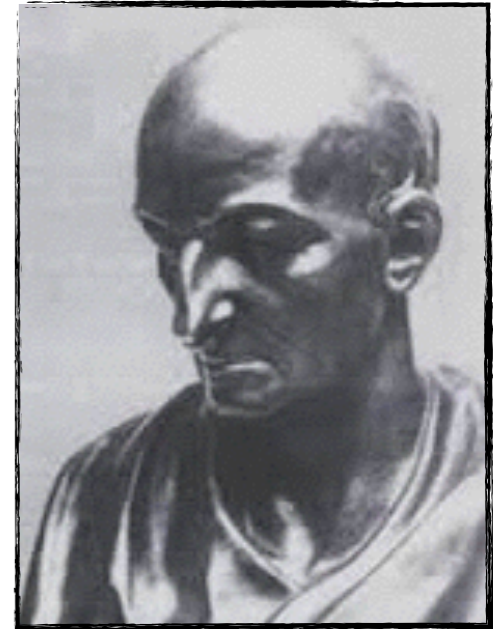
D. Horn 3 is the best option for DCT.

# Many famous *theists* reject the Divine Command Theory for just these reasons

for example, G.W. Leibniz:

“In saying... that things are not good according to any standard of goodness, but simply by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all his glory; for why praise him for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary? Where will be his justice and his wisdom if he has only a certain despotic power, if arbitrary will takes the place of reasonableness, and if in accord with the definition of tyrants, justice consists in that which is pleasing to the most powerful? Besides it seems that every act of willing supposes some reason for the willing and this reason, of course, must precede the act.”

Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686)



**G.W. Leibniz**  
philosopher,  
mathematician,  
physicist,  
geologist,  
jurist,  
historian —  
“the last  
‘universal genius’”