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978-1-107-00707-9 - Moral Dilemmas in Medieval Thought: From Gratian to Aquinas

M. V. Dougherty

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MORAL DILEMMAS IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

The history of moral dilemma theory often ignores the medieval period, overlooking the sophisticated theorizing by several thinkers who debated the existence of moral dilemmas from around 1150 to 1450. In this book, M. V. Dougherty offers a rich and fascinating overview of the debates which were pursued by medieval philosophers, theologians, and canon lawyers, illustrating his discussion with a diverse range of examples of the moral dilemmas which they considered. He shows that much of what seems particular to twentieth-century moral theory was well known long ago – especially the view of some medieval thinkers that some forms of wrongdoing are inescapable, and their emphasis on the principle ‘choose the lesser of two evils’. His book will be valuable not only to advanced students and specialists of medieval thought, but also to those interested in the history of ethics.

M. V. DOUGHERTY is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Ohio Dominican University. He is the editor of *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (Cambridge, 2008).

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A man swears to keep secrets in silence. Afterwards the one to whom he swore reveals both adultery and a plan to kill his adulteress's husband. It seems that the swearer is in a dilemma, because if he is silent he becomes an accomplice to homicide, and if he reveals the secret, he becomes guilty of perjury.

Gregory the Great, *Moralia*

It seems that someone can be in a dilemma between minor sins. For example, a man promises to drink more than he is able. If he drinks that much, he sins. If he breaks his promise, he also sins.

Glossa ordinaria on Gratian's *Decretum*

Sometimes it happens that a fly, or a spider, or some other poisonous creature falls into the chalice after the priest has said the words of consecration at Mass. If the priest drinks from the chalice, he appears to sin by killing himself or by tempting God. If he does not drink, he sins by acting against the statute of the church. Consequently, the priest seems to be in a dilemma and unable to avoid sinning.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*

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Preface

It is a pleasant task to thank those who have assisted me along the way. At Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl first expressed interest in the project and Hilary Gaskin carefully guided the manuscript through the review process. Joanna Garbutt helpfully answered many queries, and Jodie Barnes and Anna Zaranko expertly oversaw the production and copyediting phases of this book. The two anonymous reviewers for the Press gave valuable comments.

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