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.

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MORAL DILEMMAS IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

From Gratian to Aquinas

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For Michelle
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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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.

My home institution provided material support in the form of a 2007 summer research grant and a 2010 fall sabbatical. Colleagues Lawrence Masek, Matthew Ponesse, and Perry Cahall read chapter drafts and offered insightful criticisms in addition to welcome company. On various occasions I have presented versions of chapters, and I am grateful to audience members for their questions and comments. In this regard I owe thanks to William Starr, Gregory LaNave, Carl Still, Brian Shanley, OP, John Knasas, Ed Houser, Mary Catherine Sommers, Christopher Martin, John Hittinger, Michael Waddell, John Finnis, James Jacobs, Nicholas Rescher, Michael Ross, Joseph Murphy, SJ, Jeffery Nicholas, W. Matthews Grant, John Simmons, Timothy Yoder, and Michael Henry.

The librarians at Ohio Dominican University’s Spangler Library have been quite helpful, especially Jim Layden, Cathy Kellum, Evelyn Burns, and Joshua Alvarez. I am also grateful to Peter Veracka and Michelle Brown at the Wehrle Library of the Pontifical College Josephinum.

Preface


Kurt Pritzl, OP; Richard Taylor, and John Jones have provided helpful guidance to me over the years, and I am pleased to mention my gratitude to them. My parents, Mike and Gilda, have been a continuous source of support in all of my studies. My two young sons, Thomas and Benedict, have managed to extract their father from the Middle Ages on many occasions, and they are a source of great joy. This book is dedicated to my wife, Michelle Ruggaber Dougherty, whose careful comments have improved its content, and whose love has improved its author.