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Moral Dilemmas in Medieval Thought: From Gratian to Aquinas.

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Those versed in medieval philosophy are familiar with a recurring pattern: a clutch of contemporary philosophers of one tradition or another ‘discovers’ an interesting topic. They boldly venture out into this virgin territory. After a few false starts and fumbling first steps, they eventually arrive at what looks like a defensible set of views on the new topic. Mutual backslapping ensues, hymns fêting the originality and intellectual power of the contributors are sung, conferences are held, etc., etc. Then someone points out that this allegedly new topic was standard fare in the Middle Ages, that the ‘new’ views were well-known in the 13th and 14th centuries, and that the scholastic discussions of the topic reached a degree of sophistication and refinement surpassing anything we have yet to achieve. This unwelcome voice is promptly ignored, and the cycle repeats itself. Although Dougherty is far too polite to express his main point in these sorts of terms, his fascinating study of medieval treatments of moral dilemmas provides yet another instance of this old story. One can only hope that contemporaries working on moral dilemma theory will take note.

The standard histories of moral dilemma theory usually take Plato’s short discussion of a moral dilemma in Book I of the *Republic* as their point of departure. They then rush ahead to Kant’s *The Metaphysics of Morals* and his famous denial of the possibility of a strict conflict of duties. The last historical figure honoured in the standard histories is John Stuart Mill. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill argues that all moral dilemmas can be solved by appeal to the principle of utility. But all these figures are seen as merely preparing the way for the high point of moral dilemma theory reached in the second half of the 20th century. Little or no mention is made of scholastic discussions of moral dilemmas in the standard history, it being commonly assumed that the schoolmen all accepted the maxim that ‘ought implies can’. The principal burden of Dougherty’s study is to challenge this standard history. *Moral Dilemmas in Medieval Thought* is primarily historical and exegetical, but Dougherty does enter into current debates on certain points, and the work as a whole is designed to be of interest to contemporary moral dilemma theorists as well as historians.

In the Introduction, Dougherty sets out some necessary preliminaries. He begins by defining terms: ‘A moral dilemma is any situation in which an agent cannot fulfil all genuine impending moral obligations’ (3). Moral dilemmas come in two main forms. First, an agent might be required to perform actions a, b, and c; but if the world is so constituted that the performance of a precludes the performance of b or c, then the agent is unable to fulfil all her genuine moral obligations. Alternatively, an agent may find that she has compelling reasons both to perform and to refrain from performing one and the same action. Again, in such a situation the agent cannot fulfil all her moral obligations.

With this definition in place one can then pose the first question of moral dilemma theory, namely: are moral dilemmas possible? The question is complicated somewhat by an

important distinction noted by the scholastics. Those caught in a dilemma were characterised as being ‘perplexed’ (*perplexus*). But one can be perplexed in two distinct ways. The primary sense of perplexed is the condition of being physically entrapped or ensnared. In a second, metaphorical, sense, being perplexed is to be confused. The distinction is important, because an agent might take herself to be in a moral dilemma (and thus be confused about what she ought to do in the circumstances) while not really being in any dilemma at all (because there actually is a way out of the predicament that the agent has overlooked or because the agent has misunderstood her moral obligations). All parties agreed that agents are frequently perplexed in the sense of being confused. But the debate was heated as to whether agents could be perplexed in the sense of being genuinely trapped by their circumstances so that avoidance of wrongdoing is impossible.

With these preliminary points in place, Dougherty proceeds to chapter-length presentations of representative lines of thought developed in the Middle Ages. Chapter One is devoted to a seminal text from Gratian’s *Decretum*. According to Gratian, moral dilemmas are genuine features of moral reality, and the appropriate response for the agent is to choose the lesser of the two evils. This text was enormously influential, but subject to repeated criticism. In Chapter Two, Dougherty presents two such critical theories. William of Auxerre and Alexander of Hales both maintain that most moral dilemmas are only apparent, for there is almost always an acceptable way of escaping wrongdoing that has merely been overlooked. As for the very few genuine dilemmas that must be deemed real, both follow Gratian and uphold the principle of the lesser evil. Chapter Three is devoted to an account of Raymond Lull’s curious claims that moral dilemmas are genuine and frequent occurrences, but that the entrapped agent’s only hope is to pray for supernatural intervention. Chapters Four through Six are devoted to the reconstruction and extended exposition of Aquinas’ treatment of moral dilemmas. The gist of Dougherty’s Aquinas is that moral dilemmas are almost invariably merely apparent (often due to malformed consciences), and the few genuine cases that do arise are the result of prior faults of the agent. The innocent, then, never face genuine moral dilemmas.

Dougherty’s exposition and choice of figures is excellent. The reconstruction of Aquinas is also highly plausible and valuable. Dougherty’s use of Johannes Capreolus, a commentator on Aquinas, to reach the conclusion that irresolvable past-fault moral dilemmas are inconsistent with Thomist principles is worth serious attention. But perhaps the chief value of the study for contemporary theorists is to be found in the very richness of the medieval treatments of moral dilemmas, a richness which Dougherty manages to convey with admirable skill.

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