

# Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

## 4. The Divine Command Theory

**Sunday, June 5, 2005**

**9 to 9:50 am, in the Parlor.**

*Everyone is welcome!*

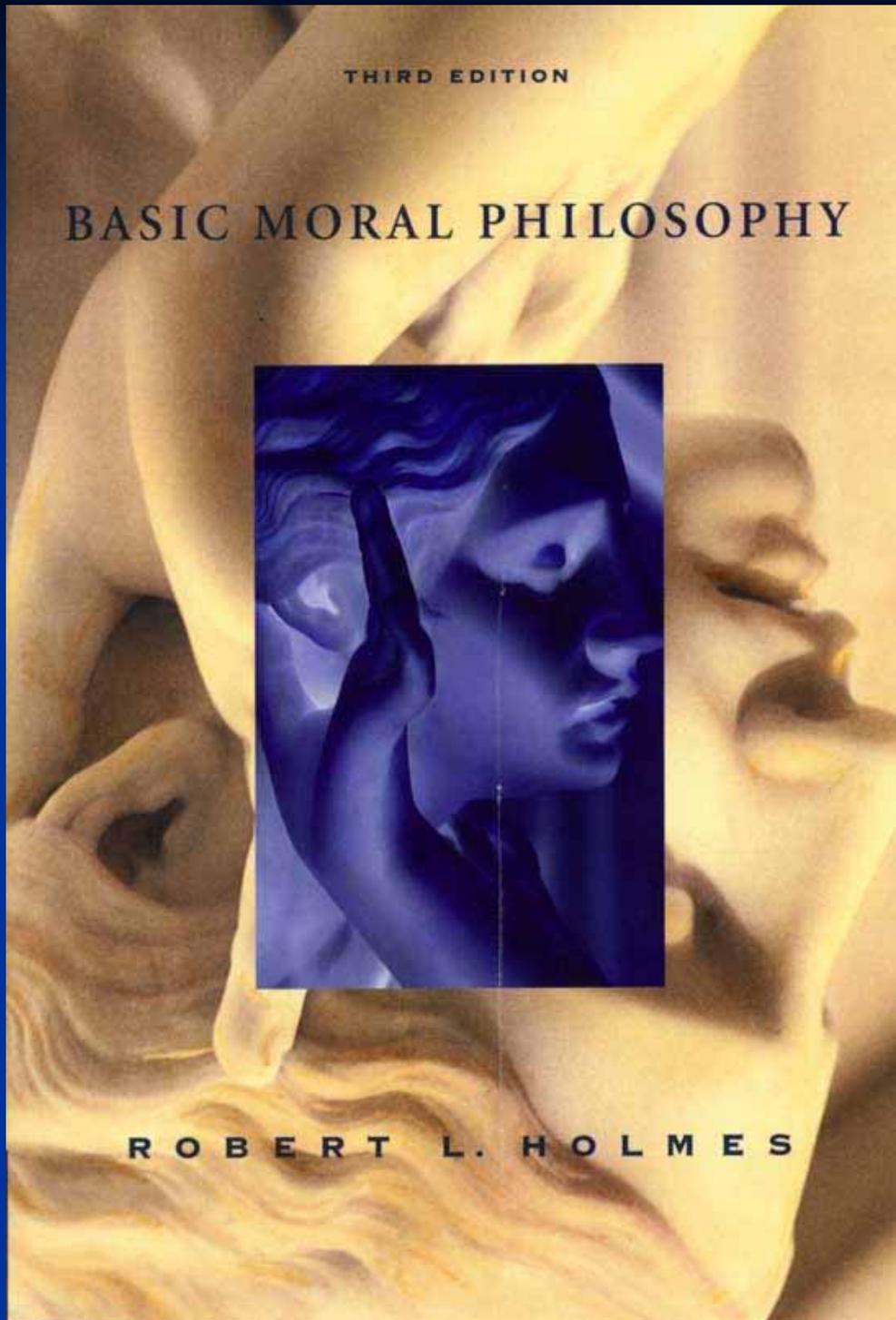
*St. John in the Wilderness*

**Praise to you, God, for all your work  
among us.**

**Yours is the vigor in creation,  
yours is the impulse in our new  
discoveries.**

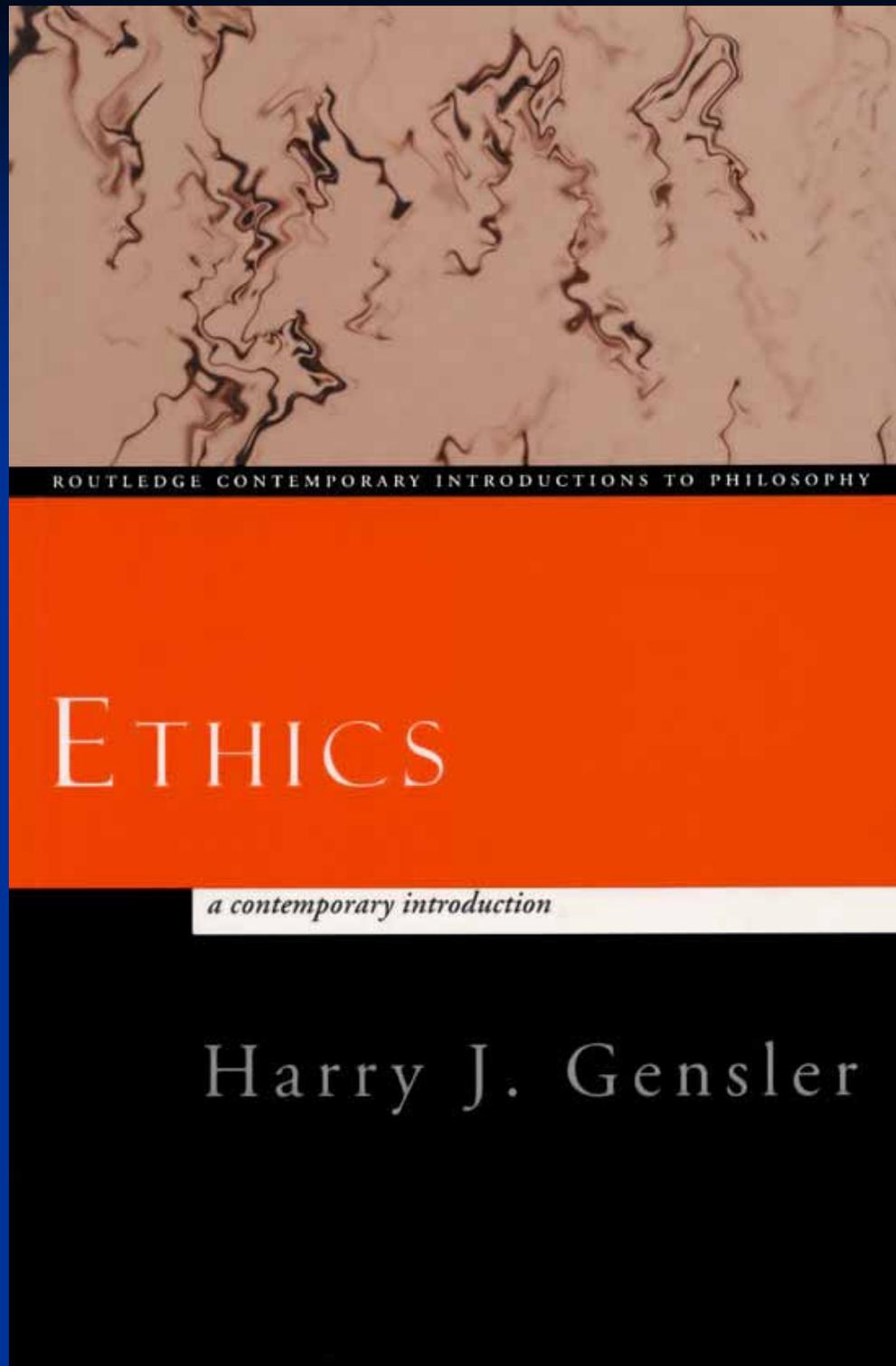
**Make us adventurous, yet reverent  
and hopeful  
in all we do.**

*- A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612*



- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2 (Chapter 6: “The Divine Command Theory”)
- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.





- **Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction**, by Harry J. Gensler, Routledge, 1998. ISBN: 0-415-15625-4. (Chapter 3 “Supernaturalism”)
- Dr. Gensler is professor of philosophy at John Carroll University in Cleveland.

# THE MORAL QUEST

FOUNDATIONS  
OF CHRISTIAN  
ETHICS

STANLEY  
J. GRENZ

- **The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics,** Stanley J. Grenz. InterVarsity Press, 2000. ISBN: 0-830-81568-6.
- Dr. Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey / Regent College in Vancouver, B.C.

# Introduction

# Introduction

## Ethics of Doing vs. Being

- There are two ways of approaching the question of what it means to be **moral** or **ethical** (= right / good rather than wrong / evil):
  - 1. **Ethics of Doing = Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct.** Asks the question: *What should I do?*
  - 2. **Ethics of Being = Virtue-based Ethics = Aretaic Ethics.** Asks the question: *What should I become?*

# Introduction

## Ethics of Doing

- There are two major divisions in **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct**):
  - 1. **Relativism**: *all* moral principles are **relative**, and will vary from culture to culture (= Conventional Ethical Relativism or Conventionalism) or even from person to person (= Subjective Ethical Relativism or Subjectivism)
  - 2. **Objectivism, Absolutism**: there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place, or time that they live.
    - **Absolutism**: the **universal moral principles** do not conflict with each other. It should (at least theoretically) be possible to find one correct answer to every moral problem.
    - **Objectivism**: some of the **universal moral principles** may override others in some situations.

# Introduction

## Ethics of Doing

- All Christian ethical theories of doing agree there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place or time that they live.
- A Christian system of ethics may be:
  - An **Absolutist** system.
  - An **Objectivist** system.

# Introduction

## Ethics of Doing

- *What makes an act right or good?*
- There are two general answers to this question that create two approaches to the **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct**):
  - 1. **Teleological Ethics = Consequentialist Ethics.** The morality of an act is based on the *outcome* or *consequence* of the act.
  - 2. **Deontological Ethics = Nonconsequentialist Ethics.** The morality of an act is based in the *act itself*.
- Most Christian ethics of doing are *primarily* deontological or nonconsequentialist.

# Introduction

## Deontological Ethics

- There are three major systems of **Deontological Ethics** = **Nonconsequentialist Ethics** (= the morality or “rightness / goodness” of an act is inherent in the *act itself*):
  - 1. **Divine Command Theories.** “Rightness” or “goodness” is what God permits or commands.
  - 2. **Intuitionist Theories.** “Rightness” or “goodness” are principles built into the fabric of reality and cannot be further analyzed; they can be “intuited” and are “self-evident” to the mature mind.
  - 3. **Reason-based Theories.** “Rightness” or “goodness” can be discovered through our reason.

# Introduction

## Divine Command Theory

- Today we will be discussing the **Divine Command Theory** in Christian Ethics. It is also referred to as:
  - **Supernaturalism**
  - **Theological Voluntarism**
- We will presume that we can accurately hear, discern and interpret what God permits or commands (God's will).

# **God's Will and Moral Rightness**

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## Socrates' Question

- In Plato's (428 BC to 348 BC) early dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks Euthyphro the question:

**Does God love goodness because it is  
good?**

**Or is it good because God loves it?**

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## Socrates' Question

- Euthyphro answers the later. Something is good *because* God loves it. That is:
  - “X” is good *because* God loves / desires / wills “X.”and *not*:
  - God loves / desires / wills “X” *because* “X” is good

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## The Divine Command Theory

- Euthyphro's answer ("Euthyphro's thesis"), "X" is good *because* God loves / desires / wills "X," is the **Divine Command Theory**
- In the **Divine Command Theory**:
  - Whatever God *permits* is (by definition) good.
  - Whatever God *prohibits* is (by definition) wrong.

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## The Divine Command Theory

- That is, the **Divine Command Theory** says
  - Moral rightness simply means “*willed by God*” (whatever God wants = good!)
  - Moral wrongness simply means “*against the will of God*” (whatever is not what God wants = bad!)
- Morality is based *strictly* on God's will. Without God, there can be no morality or ethics.

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## The Autonomy Thesis

- The opposing answer (which Socrates argues for) is sometimes called the “**autonomy thesis**:”
  - “God loves / desires / wills “X” *because* “X” is good.”
- The **autonomy thesis** implies:
  - Rightness and wrongness are not based simply on God's will, but:
  - Rightness and wrongness (morality) has an existence or meaning that is *independent* of God.
    - God's “omnipotence” does *not* include the power to define what is right or wrong, good or bad.

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## Divine Command Theory vs. the Autonomy Thesis

- At first glance it may seem that the **Divine Command Theory** (Euthyphro's thesis):
  - "X" is good *because* God loves / desires / wills "X."is the way to go in any Christian Ethics, for the **autonomy thesis**:
  - God loves / desires / wills "X" *because* "X" is good (implying that the **moral law**, the definition of what is good or bad, exists independent of God)seems to:
  - Limit God's power (for even God is subject to this independent moral law), and
  - Limits God's perfection

# God's Will and Moral Rightness

## Divine Command Theory vs. the Autonomy Thesis

- However, the **Divine Command Theory** also has some problems that has caused many Christian Theologians (such as Thomas Aquinas, 1224–1274, to reject it). . .

# Problems with the Divine Command Theory

# Problems

## God and Goodness

- If we accept the **Divine Command Theory** that “goodness” is what God wills / desires / loves, then:
  - It becomes meaningless babble to say “God is good.”
    - “God is good” = “God wills / desires / loves what God wills / desires / loves”
  - It becomes meaningless babble to say “God commands us to do good:”
    - “God commands us to do good” = “God commands us to do what God commands us to do.”

# Problems

## God and Goodness

- To speak of God as having the *property* or *quality* of:

- Goodness
- Rightness

is meaningless, for we have now *defined* “goodness” and “rightness” in terms of God.

- God in a logical sense now lies beyond or outside of “goodness” or “rightness.”

# Problems

## God's Ability to Redefine Good and Evil

- Another problem with the **Divine Command Theory** is that it implies God can at any time redefine what is good and evil (because good is simply whatever God wills / desires / loves at any given time).
- **Duns Scotus** (1266-1308) and especially **William of Ockham** (1280-1349) inaugurated a Christian movement embracing the Divine Command Theory, emphasizing “God’s inscrutable will.”
  - This was in reaction to their perception that the preceding medieval scholastics and Thomas Aquinas had put human reason upon a pedestal.

# Problems

## God's Ability to Redefine Good and Evil

- The hatred of God, theft, adultery, actions similar to these ... may have an evil quality annexed, in so far as they are done by a divine command to perform the opposite act. But ... God can perform them without any evil condition annexed; and they can even be performed meritoriously by an earthly pilgrim if they should come under divine precepts, just as now the opposite of these in fact fall under the divine command.

- William of Ockham

# Problems

## God's Ability to Redefine Good and Evil

- William of Ockham in other words is saying that if God, whose will is inscrutable, were suddenly to command us to:
  - Kill
  - Steal
  - Commit adultery
  - Torture babies
- these would then become good, meritorious acts!

# Problems

## God's Ability to Redefine Good and Evil

- The Protestant reformers followed in the tradition of Scotus and Ockham.
- Dr. Grenz in *The Moral Quest* (p. 155): “In somewhat different ways both Luther and Calvin spoke about a hidden, unknowable God whose decrees are fixed in the shrouded mystery of eternity and whose ways are higher than human reason can fathom. The sovereign God commands according to God’s own good pleasure and will. This God does not need to justify the divine commands at the bar of human reason. In fact, sometimes God refuses to supply any rationale whatsoever for the directives that come our way. Indeed, such commands require no rationale or justification beyond the fact that they are God’s own injunctions.”

# Problems

## God's Ability to Redefine Good and Evil

- Critics of the **Divine Command Theory** also point out that if God can redefine what is good or evil, then it is no longer meaningful to describe the difference between God and the devil in terms of good and evil.
  - They are both supernatural or “divine” beings; God is simply the most powerful.
    - God is just the “bigger bully on the block”

# Problems

## Summary

- Because the **Divine Command Theory**:
  - Makes it meaningless to say “God is good” (= it becomes the contentless babble that “God wills / desires / loves what God wills / desires / loves”)
  - Threatens to turn God into “the biggest bully on the block,”
- Most Christian theologians have rejected it as an inadequate explanation of morality.

# The Autonomy Thesis

# The Autonomy Thesis

## Socrates' Question

- This brings us back to Socrates' answer that "God love goodness *because* it is good."
- That is:
  - God loves / desires / wills "X" *because* "X" is good (= **Autonomy Thesis**)  
and *not*:
    - "X" is good *because* God loves / desires / wills "X." (= **Divine Command Theory**; Euthyphro's Thesis)

# The Autonomy Thesis

## Implications

- There is a **moral law** that has an existence, reality, or meaning independent of God.
- Just as God's power does not allow God to override the **laws of logic**, so too God's power does not allow God to override the **moral law**.
  - God does not have the power to make murder, stealing, adultery, rape, torture into "good" acts any than more than God can make a contradiction true, a round square, or  $3 + 3 = 7$ .

# The Autonomy Thesis

## Divine Commands Still Useful

- Supporters of the **Autonomy Thesis** still admit God's knowledge is far superior to ours (God has an “epistemological” advantage):
  - God knows what is right far better than we do.
  - So it is still useful (even a loving act) for God to tell us what is good / right, and bad / wrong, for God's knowledge is far superior to ours, and our own minds often clouded.
    - We would be fools not to listen and obey.
  - But there it is also possible for human reason and intuition to directly discover the independent moral law.
    - Through reason and intuition, an atheist can discern the moral law and live a moral and ethical life.

# The Autonomy Thesis

## A Proposal

- A proposal (after Thomas Aquinas; taken from Gensler, p. 43):
  - God is a supremely good being.
    - Good not because God fulfills God's desires, but good because God's life accords with inherent truths about goodness (= with the moral law).
  - God created us and the universe in a way such that:
    - Our reason is capable of discovering what is good and what is bad through our study of creation, and in particular, human nature (= **Natural Law Ethics**; next week's topic)
    - Our wills are capable of freely choosing to do the good that we discover.
  - God intends our moral struggles on earth to purify us and lead us to eternal happiness with God.

# **Objective Moral Law and God's Nature**

# Moral Law and God's Nature

## Socrates' Question

- In Plato's (428 BC to 348 BC) early dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks Euthyphro the question:

**Does God love goodness because it is  
good?**

**Or is it good because God loves it?**

# Moral Law and God's Nature

## Socrates' Question

- Some theologians have tried to argue that Socrates' question is a *false dilemma*. They say we do *not* have to choose between:
  - God loves / desires / wills “X” *because* “X” is good (= **Autonomy Thesis**)
  - versus:
  - “X” is good *because* God loves / desires / wills “X.” (= **Divine Command Theory**; Euthyphro's Thesis)

# Moral Law and God's Nature

## The Moral Law as Part of God's Nature

- They say we can make both statements true by saying that the objective moral law is an **immutable, eternal part of God's nature.**
- God would never will / desire / love such acts as murder, rape, or torture because that would be against God's immutable, eternal nature.

# Moral Law and God's Nature

## The Moral Law as Part of God's Nature

- For this to work, we still have to give some *objective meaning* to the moral law (“goodness”) to identify it as built into God's nature.
- It would also still seem to “limit” God's power because of the distinction between:
  - God is *incapable by nature of choosing* to do or command anything other than good, rather than:
  - God *chooses* to do good and to command good because God wills / desires / loves goodness.