Eyes in the Sky
DILEMMA #5
Do we only act from self-interest?
In his influential *Inventing Right and Wrong*, John Mackie (1990) discusses how pervasive Social Contract Theory has been, spanning back millenia...
“This [SCT] is a useful approach, which has been stressed by a number of thinkers.

There is a colourful version of it in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, where the sophist Protagoras incorporates it in an admittedly mythical account of the creation and early history of the human race.”
“At their creation men were, as compared with other animals, rather meagerly equipped.

They had less in the way of claws and strength and speed and fur or scales, and so on, to enable them to find food and to protect them from enemies and the elements....”
“Finally Zeus took pity on them and sent Hermes to give men *aidōs* (which we can perhaps translate as ‘a moral sense’) and *dikē* (law and justice) to be the ordering principles of cities and the bonds of friendship” (Mackie 1990: 108).
“Some conventional cultural practices are the product of explicit agreement. But this is not how things got started; a social contract theory of the origins of social conventions would presuppose many of the things it needed to explain, such as advanced communication skills in which to make the agreement” (Tomasello 2014: 86).
New evidence is leading deep history scholars to the conclusion that the earliest states could not hold their population and they used coercion to reinvigorate their pool of subjects (see Scott 2017).
“If the formation of the earliest states were shown to be largely a coercive enterprise, the vision of the state, one dear to the heart of such social contract theorists as Hobbes and Locke, as a magnet of civil peace, social order, and freedom from fear, drawing people in by its charisma, would have to be re-examined.

The early state, in fact, as we shall see, often failed to hold its population. It was exceptionally fragile epidemiologically, ecologically, and politically, and prone to collapse or fragmentation.

If, however, the State often broke up, it was not for lack of exercising whatever coercive powers it could muster. Evidence for the extensive use of unfree labor, war captives, indentured servitude, temple slavery, slave markets, forced resettlement in labor colonies, convict labor, and communal slavery (for example, Sparta’s helots) is overwhelming” (Scott 2017: 25-9).
What we want from an ethical theory:

- Fit in with our moral intuitions
- Reflect how we actually form our moral judgments
- Resolve our moral debates
- Solve the puzzle of human collective action
Divine Command Theory: Important Concepts
In his intellectual biography of William of Ockham, Keele (2010) begins with the historical and ideological context into which Ockham was born.
Per Keele (2010: 27), Divine Command Theory typically entails the following theses:

- God is the source of moral law.
- What God forbids is morally wrong.
- What God allows is morally permissible.
- The very meaning of “moral” is given by God’s commands.
The Divine Command Theorist argues that morality has no cause but God.

Morality simply is what God has stipulated it to be.
Note:

Divine Command Theory can, of course, be modified for a polytheistic worldview.
To really understand Divine Command Theory (DCT), it is helpful to look at an ancient debate between Socrates and Euthyphro...
The Euthyphro Dilemma
“But this thought came to me as you were speaking, and I am examining it, saying to myself: ‘If Euthyphro shows me conclusively that all the gods consider such a death unjust, to what greater extent have I learned the nature of piety and impiety?’” (9c-d; emphasis is mine).
Socrates: Tell me then, my good sir, to the achievement of what aim does service to the gods tend? You obviously know since you say that you, of all men, have the best knowledge of the divine.

Euthyphro: And I am telling the truth, Socrates.

Socrates: Tell me then, by Zeus, what is that excellent aim that the gods achieve, using us as their servants?

Euthyphro: Many fine things, Socrates.

(See 13e.)
In the end, and in monotheistic terms, Socrates asks...

Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?
Either...

A. Morality exists independent of God and He commands us to obey the moral law...

Or...

B. God simply invented morality.
Reasons to Opt for A(?)

1. To believe B means to believe that some actions are wrong just because God said so. But it seems obvious some things are wrong no matter what.
2. Moreover, God could choose to make some things morally permissible on a whim. This doesn’t seem right.
Either...

A. Morality exists independent of God and He commands us to obey the moral law...

Or...

B. God simply invented morality.
William of Ockham
“[For Ockham], God, by his absolute power, was so free that nothing was beyond the limits of possibility: he could make black white and true false, if he so chose: mercy, goodness, and justice could mean whatever he willed them to mean.

Thus not only did God’s absolute power destroy all [objective] value and certainty in this world, but his own nature disintegrated [in terms of the capacity for rational reflection]; the traditional attributes of goodness, mercy and wisdom, all melted down before the blaze of his omnipotence. He became synonymous with uncertainty, no longer the measure of all things” (Leff 1956: 34; interpolations are mine; emphasis added).
Food for thought...
Question: What if God doesn’t exist?
Despite the presumed non-existence of God, some researchers argue that humans, with their ability to construct social realities through cultural evolution, eventually stumbled on the idea of big, powerful, supernatural deities that were morally concerned. “Big Gods” were a necessary element in what enabled society to scale up to the present level of complexity.

(For criticism of this view, click here.)
Displaying eye images has been associated with:

- Increased generosity in a “dictator game” where people decide how much money they will share with another person (Haley and Fessler 2005);
- Increased donations to a shared pot in a “public goods game” (Burnham and Hare 2007);
- Decreased littering in a self-service cafeteria, where patrons bus their own tables (Ernest-Jones et al. 2011); and
- Contributions to an honesty box used to collect money for drinks in a university coffee room (Bateson et al. 2006).
Ambient darkness and wearing dark glasses increase dishonest and selfish tendencies (Zhong et al. 2010).
Humans have a region in the brain (the fusiform face area, or FFA) that appears to be optimally tuned to the broad category of faces (Tong et al. 2000).

Moreover, humans are unable to suppress their tendency to fixate on a face’s eyes (Laidlaw et al. 2012).
Religious priming decreases the likelihood of one cheating (Mazar et al. 2008), even if the primes are subliminal (Randolph-Seng and Nielsen 2007).

It also increases generosity and cooperation (Shariff and Norenzayan 2007, Ahmed and Salas 2009), as well as increases the likelihood of costly punishment to noncooperators (McKay et al. 2011).
It’s even the case that “those who attend religious services [Sundays] shift their consumption of adult entertainment to other days of the week, despite on average consuming the same amount of adult entertainment as others” (Edelman 2009: 217-8).
“The anthropological record tells us that in moving from the smallest scale human societies to largest and most complex human societies, the following patterns emerge:

- Big Gods go from relatively rare to increasingly common.
- Morality and religion move from largely disconnected to increasingly intertwined.
- Rituals and other credible displays of faith become increasingly organized, uniform, and regular.
- Supernatural punishment becomes increasingly focused on violations of group norms (prohibitions on cheating, selfishness, but also on adultery, food taboos), and the potency of supernatural punishment increases (for example, salvation, eternal damnation, eons of karma, hell) (Norenzayan 2013: 124).
Harari argues that “religion has been the third great unifier of humankind, alongside money and empires. Since all social orders and hierarchies are imagined, they’re all fragile, and the larger the society, the more fragile it is. The crucial historical role of religion has been to give superhuman legitimacy to these fragile structures” (Harari 2015, chapter 12, see p. 210 for quote).
Problems with DCT
The Contradiction Argument

We are assuming that religions have a coherent, non-contradictory moral code. But, for example, the moral precepts in the Bible form an inconsistent set; i.e., they contradict each other.

Hence, it is unclear just what God’s Law is.

Can inconsistent moral systems really solve the puzzle of collective action?
The Moral Argument

Some of the moral precepts in the sacred scriptures of some religions, for example the Bible, are morally abhorrent;

e.g., genocide (click [here](#)), the prevalence of capital punishment (see Deuteronomy), misogyny, strange marriage customs, abortion for unfaithful wifes(?).
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