Supplemental notes for Phil 104:

I) Divine Command Theory

Roots moral standards in the will of God (the gods): actions are good because God (the gods) so will(s) them. This is known as a voluntaristic theory of the good (the moral good is the solely determined by fiat (the will of some rule giver).

DCT assumes that moral norms require a rule giver. A typical argument for DCT is that if there is no God, then everything is permitted (a view held by a Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*). Why? If the only sources of moral norms are human wills, then we are reduced to moral subjectivism since one person’s will cannot provide the norms for anyone else).

In the Plato’s *Euthyphro* the dilemma for this view is put this way: (1) either God (the gods) commands actions because they are good or (2) they are good because God (the gods) command them. If (1) then the actions are morally good independently of divine will and thus DCT is false; if (2) then in principle divine will could command actions that appear to be morally atrocious -- killing innocent children to test a parent’s faith. In this case, DCT does not seem to be a good moral theory.

If there are many gods, then problems arises with the gods giving conflicting advice. Unless it is assumed that God (the gods) are inherently good, then there is no guarantee that divine commands will be morally good. Even if God (the gods) are inherently good, that goodness is prior to the will.

DCT is incompatible with both cultural relativism and subjectivism. But it is not a rationally based normative ethics.

Further problems: how do we determine whether God (the gods) exists and if so, who is the true God or gods. Secondly, if the moral good is entirely a matter of divine fiat then it would seem we could only know what to do through some sort of revelation. The problem then becomes that of determining the veracity of any particular claim to revelation: many religious people, Jews, Christians and Muslims, may accept the veracity of God’s revelation to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; few if any of those people are likely to accept the claims of someone in the 21st C that he killed his children because God directed him to do so.

II) Ethical Egoism (a brief supplement to what is on the Ethical Theory Review Sheet)

Universal Ethical Egoism requires that each person act in his or her own self-interest regardless of the interests of others (unless it so benefits him/her). This does not prevent people cooperating with each other even when there are different self-interests.

Jones and Smith have differing self-interests:

A) what is in Jones’s s-i is not in Smith’s s-i.

Jones needs digitalis for a heart condition; but digitalis will kill Smith if Smith doesn’t have a heart condition. There need be no conflict here since Jones’s pursuing the digitalis need not harm or interfere with Smith’s pursuit of her s-i.

B) Conflict arises between UEE’s when, e.g., in pursuing Jones’s s-i, Jones will act in a way to harm Smith’s s-i. In this case, since each person is morally obligated to pursue his/her own s-i without regard to others except insofar as other people benefits one’s own s-i, this sort of
situation leads to conflict. The ethical egoist can cooperate with people by basically negotiating
to constrain pursuing certain things in his/her s-i that conflict with others’ s-i, if they will do the
same for themselves. In this way, cooperation among egoists can minimize conflict, allow people
to live in some sort of peace, which is generally in people’s s-i. That is, one trades certain things
in one’s self-interest for other things.

Cooperation among people is permissible for UEEs but only provided that the consequences of
the cooperation are beneficial to the individual.

However, if cooperation is not possible, then a serious problem arises in regard to UEE. Suppose
that both Jones and Smith need digitalis in the sense that each will die without it. Suppose also
that there is only enough digitalis for one person. Jones, a UEE, and Smith plan to go after the
digitalis. However, Smith asks Jones for moral advice. Since Jones holds UEE as a theory, Jones
should tell Smith that she should do what is in her own self-interest regardless of his s-i. But
doing so will directly lead Smith to a course of action that will harm Jones. That is, Jones will
violate UEE and do something immoral. However, if he either lies to Smith about what she
should do or says he doesn’t know what moral principles she should follow, then he has
abandoned UEE as a moral theory and, thus, undermined his own moral justification for
obtaining the digitalis without regard to Smith’s interests. These sorts of situations raise serious,
and many believe, fatal problems with UEE as a moral theory -- that is, a view which should
hold for all people.

III) Utilitarianism (supplemental notes)

1) Objection: Utilitarian’s can’t necessarily give reliable moral advice prior to an action. Since
only the consequences of an action make it good or bad, one can’t really know whether an action
is good or bad until one knows the ACTUAL consequences of the action. If actions will likely
have long term consequences, then knowing whether one acted correctly can be delayed well
into the future. The utilitarian can simply say that the desires for moral guarantees prior to action
is not possible given that consequences are morally relevant. In addition, the Utilitarian can look
to the past to see the consequences of various practices: truth telling, lying, taking human life etc.
When we do so, we can make a good determination about the good and bad consequences of
actions and use that as the basis for deciding what to do in the present. This procedure is part of
rule-utilitarianism -- making moral judgments for a practice rather than just an individual action.
But these rules are always just guidelines since if in a particular situation the action brings about
good and bad consequences that differ from the same action in the past, then one would have to
make, or one should have made, an exception to the rule. Recourse to past actions won’t work in
cases where actions are being contemplated for which there is no past precedent. This sort of
situation can easily arise in our age because of technological and other changes.

2) Objection: Utilitarian’s may have to morally support the wrongful punishment of an innocent
person if it benefits the majority. Case: A white woman has been viciously murdered by a black
man in a town that has a great deal of racial hostility and tension. There is a serious danger of
riots and of white vigilante groups killing black people. The police apprehend a black man who
was near the scene of the crime, has a past history of violence but whom the police know to be
innocent of the crime. They have no idea of the identity of the real murderer. However, to prevent riots and violence for the town, they frame the black man. He is convicted and sent to prison. Since such an action promoted the advantage of the vast majority of the citizens in the town, the objection is that the utilitarian must give moral approval to the actions of the police. A common Utilitarian reply is that if such practices were widespread, they would become known and would undermine the rule of law, thus leading to far worse consequences for people in general than the riots that were prevented. The objection continues: even if this is correct and even if one could show, apart from this consideration, that the false conviction would have lead to more negative than good consequences, it doesn’t seem that the consequences of an action are morally relevant here. It is simply unjust to punish an innocent person for a crime he/she did not commit. Justice commonly requires treating people according to what they deserve. It’s wrong to punish innocent people because they don’t deserve to be punished, not because not punishing them promotes general welfare. Similarly, one would object to the severe punishment of an individual for a minor infraction in order to deter others (a possible utilitarian justification for deterrence theories of punishment) since the punishment is utterly disproportionate to the offence and, hence, unjust and underserved. The thrust of the objection is that notions of justice and desert (what people deserve) are not founded on moral utility.