On the proper metaethical distinction between the divine command and natural law theories of ethics

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What is the proper metaethical distinction between the divine command (DCT) and natural law (NLT) theories of ethics? To pose the question in this way is to suggest that there are proper and improper ways to distinguish the two and that metaethics provides a helpful perspective aimed at the former. My purpose is to draw out a clear formulation of the distinction by means of analyzing the metaethical proposals of Professors Calvin Van Reken and C. Stephen Evans.[1] Since Van Reken's essay is directed at the principles of metaethics in general rather than at the foundations of DCT in particular, as is Evans's, I will focus narrowly on the conceptual tools that Van Reken uses to address the question of grounding the moral order, the answer of which is a prerequisite for drawing a clear DCT-NLT distinction. I begin by explaining two ways that philosophers use Plato's classic dilemma in *Euthyphro* and why Evans opts for the one and Van Reken the other. Then I introduce some of the conceptual tools that Van Reken employs, and I use these tools to produce a simple formulation of the DCT-NLT distinction. Next, I amend this simple formulation a few times in order to find a version of it that can facilitate Evans's proposal for an eclectic DCT (i.e., one that incorporates NLT and virtue ethics). Finally, I draw two conclusions about whether my attempt to analyze Van Reken's and Evans's metaethical proposals in this way is fruitful.

But first a brief preliminary: what do I mean by "metaethical distinction"? Metaethics is the branch of moral philosophy concerned with second-order questions about the foundations of morality itself and the nature and function of moral language. Its range of inquiry includes moral ontology (e.g., Whether an objective, universal moral order exists. What is the ground of the moral order?), moral epistemology (e.g., How

1. Van Reken, *Principia Meta-Ethica* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2015); Evans, *God & Moral Obligation* (Oxford: University Press, 2013).

are moral truths known?), and moral language (e.g., Whether moral propositions are objective truth claims or expressions of subjective states). Though its questions address ancient and perennial issues in moral philosophy, in the last century metaethics has come into its own as a distinct science by way of G. E. Moore's seminal *Principia Ethica* (1903). As a correlate development ethics (or "normative ethics") has come to be distinguished from metaethics by limiting its range of inquiry to first-order questions about particular moral propositions such as assertions that particular act types are permissible or impermissible.[2] By "metaethical distinction" then I mean a distinction that is drawn using the perspective of metaethics; specifically the perspective of Van Reken's *Principia*, which operates explicitly in the spirit of Moore.[3]

I.

To ask what distinguishes DCT and NLT is to venture into the waters of "one of the most debated topics in realist metaethics—the *grounding* of the moral order."[4] The

2. For this definition of metaethics, see Van Reken, x; Evans, 4–5; Thomas L. Carson, "Metaethics," ed. Donald M. Borchert, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 155; Geoff Sayre-McCord, "Metaethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/metaethics/. See also the five characteristics of metaethics summarized by L. W. Sumner, "Normative Ethics and Metaethics," *Ethics* 77, no. 2 (1967): 101. Sumner addresses the thorny problems raised by the bifurcation of moral philosophy into (neutral) metaethics and (normative) ethics, especially the alleged neutrality of metaethics, and whether in the end all metaethics reduces to normative ethics. For my purpose I simply grant the soundness of the distinction without taking a stance on the moral neutrality of metaethics, and I take Van Reken's *Principia* at face value for what it purports to be—a work of metaethics—notwithstanding the normative, pro-realist argument throughout. E.g., regarding moral realism vs. anti-realism, "I do not think it should be surprising that Plato, Aristotle, and virtually the whole of Western philosophy until the twentieth century got it right" (11).

3. In the preface to *Principia*, Van Reken acknowledges Moore's influence on his own thought, and he engages Moore's arguments and ideas throughout the essay.

4. Van Reken, 124; cf. the similar remark regarding moral epistemology at 105. Related to this Van Reken states that, "Typically the issue of the grounding of the moral order is taken up by moral realists, not moral antirealists" since antirealists "do not think there is a moral order" (124–25). What he means is that antirealists do not think there is *an objective, extra-mental moral order* and hence that the question of grounding in the objective, realist sense is meaningless to the antirealist. He does not mean that antirealists do not consider the question of grounding altogether; for antirealist theories do indeed include proposals for grounding morality, albeit via *subjective, intra-mental* grounds.

debates are not so much regarding *what* moral properties are assigned to certain act types within the respective theory's moral propositions; for DCT and NLT are in agreement on a wide range of particular moral judgments such as *murder is impermissible*.[5] Rather, the debates surround the grounding of such judgments: answering *why* the a particular act type has the moral property that it has. For how one goes about grounding a moral judgment reveals the most fundamental difference between moral theories: the theory's view of which non-moral state of affairs grounds the moral states of affairs (i.e., the identity of the non-moral property [NM] asserted in the moral principle: Mx ↔ (MMx ↔ NMx)).[6]

Philosophers commonly use a classic dilemma from Plato's *Euthyphro* as a starting point for discussing the grounding of the moral order.[7] In the dialog Socrates uses Euthyphro's standing as a magistrate and his temerity in prosecuting his own father for murder as a foil for critiquing his definitions of piety and impiety, the morally right and morally wrong.[8] Since the Greeks related morality to the will of the gods, and since Socrates himself is facing the charge of impiety, he asks Euthyphro to teach him the essence of piety, "that form itself that makes all pious actions pious," in order to use that knowledge for his own defense at trial.[9] At first Euthyphro defines the pious as that

5. Cf. Evans, 178.

6. Van Reken, 124, 126n4, 69–76; the logical structure of moral principles is explained at 66–67. This logical equivalency formulation will be amended to account for metacausality below. Van Reken distinguishes between *moral system principles* and *moral explanatory principles*, the latter of which includes the note of metacausality (127; cf. 68–77). I use "moral principle" throughout in the latter sense.

7. Plato uses the dilemma as part of a larger argument in 10a–11b. For an exposition of these sections in light of the whole dialog, see P. T. Geach, "Plato's 'Euthyphro': An Analysis and Commentary," *The Monist* 50, no. 3 (1966): 369–82 (esp. 376ff.).

8. "So tell me now [Euthyphro], by Zeus, what you just now maintained you clearly knew: what kind of thing do you say that godliness and ungodliness are, both as regards murder and other things; or is the pious not the same and alike in every action, and the impious the opposite of all that is pious and like itself, and everything that is to be impious presents us with one form or appearance in so far as it is impious" (5c–d)?

9. 6d; cf. the "nature" language at 11b and 16.

which the gods love (6e), but Socrates finds this definition wanting and thus asks the same question in a different way to focus on the problem of relating the divine will and the moral order: "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods" (10a)?[10] Enter the dilemma.

Philosophers commonly use the dilemma as a conversation starter in one of two ways. If one focuses on the material content of the dilemma itself, then the reader's focus falls on the implications of each horn of the either-or. "Only two answers seem possible," explains Michael Levin, writing on the dilemma from this first perspective.

> Either what God wills is right because he wills it, or God wills what he wills because it is right. The rightness of what God wills is a consequence of his willing it, or his willing it is a consequence of its rightness.[11]

The entailments of this either-or are the horns of the dilemma: the one risks divine capriciousness and moral arbitrariness, the other divine aseity and independence.

This first path leads naturally toward pondering the soundness of a DCT. A DCT advocate that wishes to clear himself of the seemingly unpleasant entailments lurking in its foundations must address this material aspect of the dilemma, and Evans raises "the Euthyphro problem" precisely for this purpose.[12]

Evans's resolution involves two steps.[13] First, he defers to the "powerful rebuttal" of the Euthyphro problem that "is now common in the literature."[14] Yet I'll set this aside since he makes no attempt to explain how this material relates to his own resolution.

10. All English translations are from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

11. Michael Levin, "Understanding the Euthyphro Problem," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 25, no. 2 (1989): 83.

12. Evans treats the "Euthyphro problem" at 89–91 and a correlate, the "horrible acts objection," at 92–94. In these sections he uses a distinction between different forms of DCT with respect to different views of the contingency of the divine will, which he introduces at 32–37; namely, the "modal status thesis" and the "discretion thesis."

13. Evans, 89–91.

14. See the literature cited at 90n4.

Second, he distinguishes between two types of DCT: those that have a universal voluntaristic component by which he means DCT theories according to which *all* moral properties are grounded in the divine will (i.e., that which God commands *is* the good per se); and those that ground only *some* moral properties in the divine will (i.e., that which God commands *is not* the good per se but is limited to *that which obliges human obedience*). According to Evans, only the former type is liable to the Euthyphro objection. He then asserts that the DCT that he defends belongs to the latter type since (a) it grounds only *moral obligations* in the divine will rather than all moral properties of every kind (i.e., the good per se) and (b) it explicitly presupposes both that a theory of the good is prior to and the foundation of a DCT[15] and that a cornerstone of this presupposed theory is that God himself is *necessarily* good:

> It is built into the theory [that I am defending] that only the commands of a God who is necessarily good and loving could generate moral obligations; the commands of a supernatural evil being could not generate such obligations.[16]

Hence according to Evans his particular form of non-universally-voluntaristic DCT evades both horns of the Euthyphro dilemma. On the one hand the allegation of divine arbitrariness is answered by the fact that Evans's DCT presupposes a theory of the good and hence the divine commands in his theory always (a) proceed from the necessarily good God and (b) aim at the good. On the other hand, the allegation that divine aseity is undermined by a purported independence of the moral order is answered by the same reason, though Evans's explanation is less than clear on this point. He seems to imply that there is no conflict between affirming both divine aseity and the objective goodness

15. This point is a recurring theme in Evans's essay. To give one example: "To put things as simply as possible, the DCT I defend, rather than being a rival to a natural law theory, actually presupposes some theory of the good, and a natural law theory admirably satisfies this need" (54).

16. Evans, 92.

of the moral order insofar as (a) the objective goodness that exists in the moral order proceeds from the same divine being that gives divine commands and (b) the divine commands themselves are means of furthering the goodness that is established by the divine being. Whether or not Evans's resolution of the second horn is successful—his explanation is unclear to me—his main point is that his version of DCT presupposes a theory of the good, and by virtue of that fact his DCT does not fall prey to the Euthyphro dilemma, which presupposes the opposite.

There is a second way that philosophers use the dilemma as a conversation starter, one which emphasizes the metaethical notes that sound in Socrates's critique of Euthyphro's unsatisfactory answer:

> I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet told me what the pious is. (11a–b)

Read in this light the focus of the dilemma narrative falls not so much on resolving the dilemma but on pondering the foundational question regarding morality that Plato is asking by means of the dilemma. "[Socrates] is interested in *why* any act is morally right," writes Van Reken, following this second path. "Socrates wants to know what brings about or metacauses the moral order—or what grounds the moral order."[17] This *why* (i.e., Why is the pious pious? Why is the morally right morally right?) is precisely what Euthyphro fails to deliver. Socrates presses Euthyphro for a clarification, but famously Euthyphro begs off and exits stage left. "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now. . ." (15e). Plato thus leaves it to the reader to ponder the metaethical

17. Van Reken, 126. Or in Socrates's words, he seeks "that form itself that makes all pious actions pious" (6d; cf. the passage at 5c–d quoted above). At 7b–e Socrates makes a similar point regarding murder (i.e., everyone agrees its is wrong, but *why* is it wrong?); see Geach, 375.

question that lurks stage left: why does Euthyphro's answer fail to explain the essence of piety, and, more broadly, the ground of the moral order?

Is it possible to define a moral principle using Euthyphro's answer such as follows: let MM be *morally permissible* and let NM be *is loved by all the gods*; then let the formula be Mx ↔ (MMx ↔ NMx)?[18] According to Van Reken, the problem with this formulation of Euthyphro's moral principle is neither its validity nor soundness but its lack of explanatory power. This lack arises from the need to express a relation in the moral principle formula that logical equivalence is not capable of expressing: that the non-moral property is logically prior to and serves as the basis of the non-moral property; for logically speaking if MM and NM are equivalent, there is no priority of the one coming before or bringing about the other and not vice versa. But that NM is logically prior to and is that which brings about MM is precisely the note that is needed in order to express the *why* of a moral theory. Hence to fill up this lack Van Reken introduces the notion of *metacausality*. "For any state of affairs, P and Q," he explains, "P metacauses Q if and only if (1) P brings it about that Q (and not vice versa); and (2) the propositions corresponding to P and Q, viz., (x)Px and (x)Qx, are logical equivalents."[19] Without the notion of metacausality—or using only logical equivalence—a moral theory's principle would be limited to showing *which* act types are morally permissible or impermissible; it could assert *that* the act type in question has this or that moral property, but it would not be able to explain *why*. For the *why* comes from the asymetrical relation between the non-moral property and the moral property. Therefore to introduce the *why* into the

18. I.e., for any act x and only for act x, x is morally permissible if and only if x is loved by all the gods. In Van Reken's terms this formula succeeds as a moral system principle but fails as a moral explanatory principle.

19. Van Reken, 127n5; cf. the fulsome explication of metacausality in ch. 4.

moral principle formulation—to give it the possibility of wielding explanatory power with respect to grounding—the formula needs to be amended to include the notion of metacausality: Mx ↔ (NMx metacauses that MMx).[20]

II.

As important as the concept of metacausality is as a tool for explaining the *why* of a moral principle, simply amending the moral principle formula to include it does not yet provide an adequate account of a moral theory's grounding. Two refinements are necessary to achieve adequate clarity: a moral theory must (a) delineate which cause in the metacausal chain is the *immediate* metacause of the moral state of affairs in its moral principle and (b) determine whether there is more than one metacause (or metacausal chain) that grounds the moral state of affairs in its moral principle.

Regarding (a), a delineation is necessary given the distinction between remote and proximate causes within the chain of causes that together comprise the full ground of the moral order. While it might be the case that the cause for a particular state of affairs includes a long and complex chain of causes with the many links comprised of diverse sorts of causes (e.g., formal, material, efficient, teleological, exemplary) operating on different levels of causation (e.g., primary and secondary causes), when one asks for the *why* of some state of affairs, one does not normally intend to ask for the entire chain of all possible causes; rather, one normally intends to ask for the cause with the most helpful explanatory power. Ordinarily, the most proximate secondary cause to the effect is the one with the most helpful explanatory power. For instance, if I ask, "Why is it hot in here?" the more helpful response is that someone left the thermostat turned up

20. Van Reken, 76.

too high rather than a lecture on how the four laws of thermodynamics are operating on the various material bodies in the room and how my physical senses are affected by the increasing energy and ambient temperature in the room. The same is true with respect to the moral order. When one asks about a particular theory's view of why a certain act type is morally permissible or morally impermissible, ordinarily one is asking for the most proximate secondary metacause: that non-moral property that brings it about most directly that act types receive the moral properties that they do.[21] This delineation is important for distinguishing NLT and DCT clearly, which point I will revisit below.

Regarding (b), the fact that a moral theory asserts a moral principle with a particular non-moral property that metacauses that certain act types have the moral properties that they have does not entail that that theory claims necessarily that there is one and only one ground for the entire moral order. There is a difference between asserting *a* ground and *the only* ground. Furthermore, "[i]t is possible," writes Van Reken,

> that different precepts in the moral order are grounded in different non-moral states of affairs, and the whole moral order is only grounded by a compound metacause including all these different states of affairs. (139)

This possibility of a "compound metacause" is expressed in the moral principle formula by means of a compound proposition (i.e., propositions joined by conjunctions or disjunctions) in the assertion of the non-moral property. For example: Mx ↔ (NM1x or NM2x metacauses that MMx). Amending the formula to include compound states of affairs opens a wide array of possibilities regarding grounding such as that the ground of the moral order can be comprised of both naturalistic and non-naturalist metacauses and that specific non-moral properties can ground specific moral states of affairs

21. Van Reken, 128–29.

without denying the validity of the other non-moral properties in the compound proposition.[22] This metacausal refinement is important for distinguishing NLT and DCT in that it provides a mechanism by which eclectic theories such as Evans's can give valid and clear expression to the fundamental principles that drive the theory. I'll revisit this idea below as well.

III.

Having used Plato's *Euthyphro* to introduce the problem of grounding the moral order, and having put a few metaethical tools from Van Reken's *Principia* on the table, I will now put these tools to use, first, by formulating a simple NLT-DCT distinction and, second, by amending the formulation in three ways in order to find a version of it that can accommodate Evans's eclectic DCT.

According to Van Reken, NLT proceeds from an ontological commitment concerning human nature: that all humans share a common nature (i.e., a common design and purpose). It follows from this that (a) moral obligations are grounded in this nature rather than in socially constructed norms and (b) moral obligations are known via knowing this nature. "Simply put," writes Van Reken,

> a natural ordinances view of the immediate ground of the moral order is that there are ways for human being[s] to act that are fitting for beings with the design and purpose that human beings have. (131)

Different versions of NLT can be distinguished according to how they construe this design and purpose. Nevertheless, all versions of NLT are united in identifying the immediate ground of the moral order in terms of fittingness with human nature.[23] To

22. Van Reken, 138–41.
23. Van Reken, 132.

put the matter in terms of the moral principle formulation introduced above, according to NLT the non-moral property that grounds the moral state of affairs is that *x is in accord with humanity's design and purpose*.

DCT by contrast proceeds from the conviction that the immediate ground of the moral order is God's command(s) regarding human conduct. According to DCT the non-moral property that grounds the moral state of affairs is that *x is in accord with the divine command*. But there is a slight inadequacy with using "divine command" here without further qualification. For in order to address the issues raised by Euthyphro's dilemma (i.e., divine moral arbitrariness and divine aseity), a DCT often includes qualifications regarding the relation between the divine command and the divine essence and attributes.[24] For example, as I noted above, Evans's version of a DCT explicitly presupposes a theory of the good in which God is the supreme good necessarily and that God gives commands in accord with his essential goodness.[25] Therefore to account for this common qualification DCT's non-moral property can be amended; the following reflects Evans's proposal: *x is in accord with the divine command, which proceeds from God as the Supreme Good, and which and is aimed at furthering God's good purposes*.

In these two formulations the primary note that distinguishes NLT from DCT is the difference over which non-moral property serves as the immediate ground of the moral state of affairs: human nature or the divine command. The moral principle formula and the distinction are simple and clear. However, after asserting this distinction, if one asks how the two theories relate to each other, one finds that it is necessary to add layers of

24. Van Reken, 136.
25. Again, this theme is programmatic in Evans's essay; see 26, 32, 35, 54, et al.

complexity to this seemingly simple distinction. To illustrate a first degree of complexity, for example, if one asks whether divine commands can play a role in a NLT, the distinction between the most proximate secondary metacause (i.e., the immediate ground) and less proximate secondary metacauses allows one to answer "yes." NLT does not deny that divine commands concerning human conduct exist or even that divine commands can serve a prominent role in ethics. Rather, NLT denies only that the commands are the immediate ground of moral states of affairs (i.e., that they are logically prior to and constituent of the moral order). It affirms instead that divine commands are logically subsequent to the moral order (i.e., that they are less proximate metacauses of the moral order than human nature) and that they serve primarily an epistemological end (i.e., to make the content of this order known to humans) rather than an ontological end (i.e., to constitute the moral order). In this sense NLT can not only accommodate divine commands as less proximate metacauses on the same chain of metacauses in which human nature is found but also give these commands a place of prominence within its theory by making DCT-like concessions such as that "we know the moral order only through God's revealing it" or that "deductions from human nature are not sufficient for moral knowledge" without relinquishing NLT's conviction that a common human nature is the immediate ground of the moral order.[26]

26. See Van Reken's answer to the "third objection" to NLT at 133–36 (esp. 135); the point about the concessions and the quotes are at 137–38.

I think it is fair to suggest that Aquinas's Treatise on Law (*Summa Theologiae* 1–2.90–114) is a historical case in point—if not the historical paragon—of a theistic NLT that incorporates divine commands. Herein Aquinas treats both natural law and supernatural law (i.e., the moral precepts of the Old Law and the New Law) as participations of the eternal divine law. At the same time Thomas maintains the logical priority of the natural law to the supernatural law, which he explains in the theological formulation that just as grace presupposes nature, so also supernatural law presupposes natural law (*ST* 1–2.99.2 ad 1). Evans, 74–75, makes a similar point regarding Aquinas's NLT and virtue ethics.

If a NLT can appropriate divine commands as a part of the ground, then is the analogous true for DCT? Can a DCT appropriate human nature as a less than immediate ground of the moral order? Van Reken suggests that the answer is "no." His rationale is that there is an important epistemological difference between NLT and DCT that is entailed in their differing ontological commitments:

> The divine command theorist who is committed to God's sovereignty is committed to the epistemological view that nothing outside of God's nature sets any limits on what he commands, and so the moral order is not linked to the kind of creatures human beings are or the kind of world in which we live.[27]

Rather, to complete Van Reken's tacit thought, since according to DCT the moral order is unlinked from or independent of the created order, nothing in the created order can serve as an epistemological path for knowledge of the moral order; such knowledge must come via special revelation. Evans, however, answers "yes." He argues that, even on the supposition that NLT is logically prior to DCT and that the morally right is grounded in the natures of things, DCT is nevertheless necessary insofar as it adds a metaethical note concerning the unique nature of moral obligation that is lacking in NLT alone: "the preceptorial force of the morally right."[28] Furthermore, in treating the question of how God promulgates his commands, Evans makes a case that divine commands are promulgated not only by special revelation but also by various forms of general revelation. He lists several possible forms of such revelation including natural law, religious teachers, parents and school teachers, natural inclinations, and social mores, but he gives special attention to the faculty of the conscience as a natural means

27. Van Reken, 137. I take the final phrase as synonymous with Van Reken's assertion on the same page that according to DCT it follows that "human beings cannot learn the contents of the moral order by considering natural reasons why some act may be permitted or not."

28. See "Does a natural law ethic need divine commands for moral obligations?," in Evans, 68–74; quote at 69.

by which God communicates his commands to humans.[29]

Whether Van Reken's "no" and Evans's "yes" are contradictory turns on whether the denial and affirmation refer to the same proposition, and this is ambiguous at least in the case of Van Reken's denial since he seems to imply but does not clearly assert either that it is impossible for a DCT adherent to claim knowledge of the divine command or divine nature via general revelation. Additionally, Evans's affirmation refers to an eclectic version of DCT, one that presupposes NLT and includes virtue ethics as well. It could be that Van Reken's denial refers to non-eclectic versions of DCT and that using Evans's eclectic DCT proposal as a counterexample is an apples-to-oranges comparison. Whether or not Van Reken's and Evans's views contradict each other on this point, by considering the possibility of distinguishing remote and proximate metacauses on a single metacausal chain, the simple DCT-NLT distinction does attain a new degree of complexity even if the new degree applies solely to the NLT side of the distinction.

The simple DCT-NLT distinction attains a second degree of complexity when one introduces the possibility of multiple chains of metacauses for the moral order and the related distinction between simple and compound propositions in moral principles. This degree facilitates the formulation of eclectic moral principles such as the following. Let NM1 be *x is in accord with the divine command;* let NM2 be *x is in accord with humanity's design and purpose*; then let the moral principle formula be: Mx ↔ (NM1x or NM2x metacauses that MMx). This type of eclectic moral principle provides a way out of the possible contradiction in Van Reken's and Evans's views over whether a DCT can appropriate human nature as a ground of the moral order; on this theory human nature

29. See "How are God's commands promulgated?" in Evans, 37–45.

could even be considered an immediate ground. However, such a theory will only appeal to one who is willing to embrace the fact that all of the non-moral properties asserted by in the compound proposition are logical equivalents. This type of eclectic moral principle will not work for Evans's eclectic DCT, which asserts a logical priority among the multiple metacausal chains.

A third degree of complexity is therefore required, one that can accommodate asymmetrical relations between members of the compound ground.[30] Evans's eclectic DCT gives logical priority to NLT, which provides a theory of the good to DCT, which in turn provides human duties to virtue ethics, which in turn brings these duties to perfection in humanity insofar as virtue is the end of duty.[31] As a thought experiment for how this asymmetrical causal chain might be represented in a moral principle formula, let NM1 be *x is in accord with God's (i.e., the Supreme Good's) good design and purpose for humanity*; let NM2 be *x is in accord with the divine command*; and let NM3 be *x promotes human virtue*. Then let the moral principle be formulated as follows:

> Mx ↔ ((NM1x metacauses that MMx) metacauses that (NM2x metacauses that MMx) metacauses that (NM3x metacauses that MMx))

In contradistinction to the second degree's eclectic DCT, which effectively makes the different roles and logical sequence between the theories moot via logical equivalence, this formula preserves the role and sequence Evans thinks each theory has.

IV.

Having applied Van Reken's conceptual tools to three classes of examples with

30. Unlike the first two degrees in which I utilize conceptual tools that I draw explicitly from Van Reken's treatment of grounding, here in the third I attempt to apply these tools in a way that is consistent with this treatment even though Van Reken himself does not address this class of eclectic moral principles.

31. Evans ch. 3 (esp. 67–68); cf. 26, 28.

deepening levels of complexity, I am ready now to draw two conclusions about the proper metaethical distinction between DCT and NLT.

First, the simplest answer and the one that likely has the most explanatory power is that the DCT-NLT distinction turns on whether the divine command or human nature is asserted as the non-moral property that metacauses the moral property in the moral principle formulation. From the perspective of metaethics, this ontological metacausal relation is the deepest ground upon which the distinction can be drawn.

Second, the simplicity and explanatory power gained in the simple answer faces a significant challenge when, after distinguishing the two, one inquires how they relate together: it seems that causes need to be multiplied and that further distinctions between causes need to be drawn in order to account for eclectic classes of moral theories; yet it also seems that the more that one multiplies causes and distinctions, the less explanatory power the theory is able to provide due to its growing complexity. It is one thing to propose an eclectic theory with two non-moral properties. It is another to propose one with two hundred or two thousand. Even with only a few, however, there is a significant growth in complexity between the simple formulation and that of the second and third degrees. Such a challenge is likely unavoidable given the inherent complexity of the moral order itself and its resistance to being subsumed under a single, simple moral principle. Both Van Reken and Evans sound this theme in their proposals.

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