Study Guide for Ethics Test #1

I Kai Nielson *Ethics Without God*

What is Secular Ethics?
What are its pros and cons?
What is Nielson’s argument for how we can have value and meaning in our life without God?
How can Human existence and our endeavors have even more meaning without God as the basis?
Why is evil and injustice more of a problem for Religious ethics rather than secular ethics?
What does Nielson mean when he states “the validity of a belief is independent of its origin.” Does this hold any bearing on Divine Command Theory?

II Ethical Subjectivism, Relativism and Objectivism

A.J Ayer

What is emotivism?
How is ethics merely an inner subjective feeling?
What are the two main problems with emotivism?

David Hume

What is the “Is Ought Problem”?
How does Hume describe how ethics is Subjective?

Ruth Benedict

What ethical position is she arguing for?
What is the crux of her argument?
What were some of her main example to prove her point?
What are the two main problems with Ethical Relativism/conventionalism?

Mary Midgley

Why is fully understanding another cultures’ practices not necessary for making moral judgments?
How do Relativists contradict themselves?
III Divine Command Theory

**Divine Command Theory**- Morally Right Actions are ones that God commands. An action is morally right if and only if God commands it and is wrong if and only if God forbids it.

**Clear and Universal Guidelines**

The guidelines set forth in the religious texts are unambiguous. Example: “Thou shalt not steal.” It is also universal, which means it applies to everyone everywhere. Human opinion on stealing bears no relevance on the morality of stealing. This is definitely strength of the theory because it eliminates a great deal of conflict.

**Divine Command Theory and its basic themes**

**Theme one**- Human freedom; God does not force us to obey the commandments.

**Theme two**- Rewards and punishments; those who obey are rewarded and those who disobey are punished. This seems fair to most.

**Theme Three**- Impartiality; DCT assumes that all people are moral equals. Race, gender and class have no bearing on who qualifies as a moral equal (unless God commands otherwise). A person’s emotions or attitudes toward ethics are not considered either. The same goes for a society’s beliefs and attitudes towards ethics. As an example, Jesus was morally justified because he was following God’s laws, even though he may have gone against the societies’ rules.

**Problems**

1. **Practical Problem**

The Problem - Whose interpretation of God?

There are many disputes over what is the correct source of Divine Commandments. These disputes have been going on for thousands of years and there seems to be no end in sight. Also, the correct interpretation of the texts can be very troublesome. What does “though shalt not Kill” really mean?

2. **Plato's Dilemma**
“Is what is good good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good?”

Arbitrariness- In the first option, God could have commanded anything and it would have been good (e.g., God could have commanded us to torture innocent children, in which case it would have been good to torture innocent children.) This does not seem to adhere to most people’s explanation of right and wrong.

If you decide on the latter of the two choices, you are no longer in the realm of DCT. An independent test is being used to calculate what is good and what is bad, not necessarily God’s commandments.

3. Circular Reasoning
According to Middle Eastern Religions, and many others, God has the characteristic of being perfectly good. Since “Good means commanded by God” in DCT, then what this really means is “God is perfectly commanded by God”. The consequence of this is that Divine Command Theory is circular at best and nonsense at worst. When broken down even more, DCT states that “God Commands God”.

IV Terms to Know
Absolutism, Objectivism, Relativism/Conventionalism, Subjectivism, Divine Command Theory, Secular, Obligatory, Permissible, Supererogatory, and of course Ethics/Moral Philosophy