



Religion and Morality



Overview

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Review

What is the relation (if any) between religious thinking and moral thinking?

- Does moral thinking imply that God exists?
- How does God relate to morality?
- (Are religious people better? – different question.)

Does morality imply that God exists?

It will depend on your moral theory!

- e.g., emotive theory: moral judgments are expressions of feelings, not strictly speaking true or false. Consequently, they have no religious significance.
- what about moral objectivism? (= moral claims *are* true or false.)

Kant's argument:

- people ought to strive for moral perfection (willing the highest good = willing a correlation between moral rectitude and happiness);
- they cannot succeed in this without divine assistance;
- God must exist to help people achieve that for which they should strive ('ought' implies 'can')



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Cf. John Henry Newman

Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, ed. Harold, 83.

If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claim upon us we fear.

- Illyd Trethowan: we are aware of God in our moral experience; we have value because we receive it.
- **Elizabeth Anscombe**: there is no sense in the moral law without the religious tradition

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Moral Realism without God?

Can we be moral realists *without* God?

Cf. Aristotle!

- we need morality to flourish
- how to be moral and how to flourish depend on human nature
- it is objective and real, but does not involve theological considerations

Perhaps also, cf. JS Mill (and Kai Nielsen)

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The Euthyphro Dilemma

Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a1–2

“Think about this: Is the pious [or holy] loved by the gods because it is pious, or it is pious because it is loved?”

Euthyphro dilemma

Is X morally good because God wills it, or does God will X because it is morally good?

- 1 theological voluntarism (divine command theory): God’s will establishes moral standards.
- 2 “realism”: moral truth in no way derives from God’s will; it is independent and God must obey it. (Does this mean not everything is created by God?)

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General motivations:

- how can we understand normative properties ('ought' etc.)? It looks like, we can't understand them in terms of non-normative ones.
- point of view of morals = the point of view of the universe – but the universe does not have a point of view!
- DCT can ground moral objectivism and provide an argument for God's existence.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Payne, 84.

Here, there can be no question of ethics in the sense of morality. . . Ordinarily speaking, a temptation is something which tries to stop a man from doing his duty, but in this case it is ethics itself which tries to prevent him from doing God's will. But what then is duty? Duty is quite simply the expression of the will of God.

- suspension of the ethical due to religion

For a contemporary defense of DCT today, see, e.g., Robert Merrihew Adams

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Objections against DCT

- what if God commands cruelty for its own sake?
- it seems that we value some things (e.g., kindness et al.) independently of God.
- how can we say then that God is good?
- does this mean that there can be no meaningful discourse about ethical right and wrong between the believer and the non-believer?
- doesn't it lead to morality being arbitrary?

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Other views on the Euthyphro – Aquinas

- God is the supreme good – in the Aristotelian sense, as being desirable (God is the ultimate source of existence).

Aquinas, *ST* I.6.1

The perfection and form of an effect is a certain likeness of the efficient cause ... since God is the first efficient cause of everything ... the aspect of good and desirable manifestly belong to him.

- moral goodness depends on the things' nature
- God created the things and their natures
- so moral goodness depends on God's will, but it is not arbitrary

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Boethius (d. 524)
Anselm (d. 1109)
Maimonides (1138–1204)
Aquinas (1225–1274)
Marguerite of Porete
(1250–1310)
Pascal (1623–1662)
Kant (1724–1804)
Clifford (1845–1879)
James (1842–1910)

- how to talk about God?
- what are our epistemic obligations with respect to belief in God?
- can belief in God be justified? by arguments, or practically? or perhaps by experience?
- can God's existence be excluded by various observed things in the universe?
- human freedom (problem of foreknowledge), or evil?
- God and morality

Takeaway(?): we *can*, meaningful and rational discourse about religious belief.

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