

Gauthier on Morality's Foundational Crisis

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Philosophy 100A

Gauthier opens “Why Contractarianism” by proclaiming that morality faces a foundational crisis. What does he mean by this claim? Why does he believe it is so?

1 Purpose and Morality

Recall that Aristotle believes the good of a thing is found in its function, and that something is virtuous just in case it performs its function well. This is true as much for human beings as for anything else. The good of a human being is to do what is characteristic of human beings, and the good human being is the one that has qualities that make him or her virtuous.

In general, western society has by and large rejected the idea that nature consists in kinds of thing that have built-in functions that can be performed well or poorly. How then, can we hold on to the idea of morality? The reason we *once* had for being moral is one we no longer have. That is, we no longer think there is any purpose intrinsic to a human being.

2 Deliberative Justification

Gauthier uses the term ‘deliberative justification’ in a sense similar to the Hobbesian conception of rational justification. Deliberative justification tells us what we ought to do given our concerns - specifically, our beliefs and desires. The existence of such a capacity may lead one to wonder what role morality could play in our lives that deliberative justification does not.

Two questions to ask at this point:

1. Is the existence of deliberative justification logically consistent with moral justification?
2. How does this form of justification cause for us concern that morality may be irrelevant, useless, or nonexistent?

3 The Analogy with Religion

In order to elucidate the nature of this foundational crisis, Gauthier draws a controversial analogy:

Religion demands the worship of a divine being who purposively orders the universe. But it has confronted an alternative mode of explanation. Although the emergence of a cosmological theory based on efficient, rather than teleological, causation provided warning of what was to come, the supplanting of teleology in biology by the success of evolutionary theory in providing a mode of explanation that account in efficient-causal terms for the *appearing* of a purposive order among living beings, may seem to toll the death knell for religion as an intellectually respectable enterprise.

Let's unpack the analogy by asking a few more questions:

1. What does the existence of a God who created nature explain?
2. Why does science, and in particular evolutionary biology, seem to undermine this explanation?
3. How is this foundational crisis for religion similar in form to the moral case that Gauthier is primarily concerned with?

4 Confronting the Crisis

According to Gauthier we have three options in answering morality's foundational crisis:

1. Propose an explanatory role for moral facts and properties that no other set of facts and properties is suited for.
2. To show that not all choices or actions can be justified on deliberative grounds - that is, in terms of an agent's beliefs and desires.
3. To show that morality has a place within the framework of deliberative justification.

Gauthier rejects the first two options and embraces the third. What *prima facie* problem does he see with this option, though? (Hint: think of the word 'constraint'.)