

Ethics and Religion

Which comes first?



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Common assumptions



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Moral rules are taught by adults to children, often in religious contexts.

Common assumptions



Without this kind of moral training children end up not having a solid sense of right and wrong.

Common assumptions



Religion *in fact* has historically provided a normative framework for social life -- religion is the source of social and ethical rules.

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Divine Command Theory

Appeals to *divine authority* as the basis of ethical rules.

"God creates the rules and we all have to follow those rules or else."

How to base ethics on religion

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Natural Law Theory

Appeals to a religiously based conception of *human nature* as the basis of ethics.

"God created us with a built-in purpose and the ability to see for ourselves what that purpose requires us to do."

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for example:

"Murder is wrong," really means "God commands us not to murder each other."

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- We would have to settle religious questions before we could settle moral ones -- what *exactly* does God command?
- Non-religious people can't really have morality -- for them nothing would be ultimately forbidden.

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A theological argument

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- We'll see a reason to doubt the truth of the first in a moment...

Is DCT true?

The argument from moral facts

If God didn't exist, there would be nothing that is just plain wrong .

But some things are in fact just plain wrong.

Thus Divine Command Theory is true -- God exists and is the basis of morality.

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- But doesn't it beg the question by assuming that the existence of God is *required* for morality?

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Or is it the fact that it is right that leads God to command us to do it?

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Let's consider these one at a time, to see why neither works.

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- But then God *could have said otherwise* and that makes these rules arbitrary.
- Instead there must be a *reason* why God made the laws He, She or It made...

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- What then might be the source of moral rules? That question remains unanswered.

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for example:

Murder is wrong because it violates one of the fundamental tendencies of all living things which is to preserve life itself.

Aristotle on natural law



384-322 BCE

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Explaining anything in nature requires specifying its "four causes."



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1. **Material cause:** what is it made of?
2. **Formal cause:** What kind of thing is it?
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Aristotle provided the foundation for the ancient and medieval view of the natural world as a *hierarchical order* where everything has its proper place, causes and functions.

Aristotle on natural law

How does this apply to human beings?



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How does this apply to human beings?

1. We are made of flesh and blood.
2. We are rational and political animals.
3. Our parents are the cause of our being as we are.
4. Our function is to realize our natures, to attain true happiness through virtuous behavior.

Aristotle on the good life



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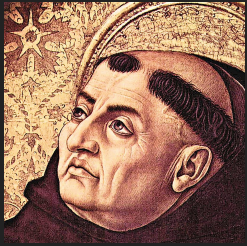
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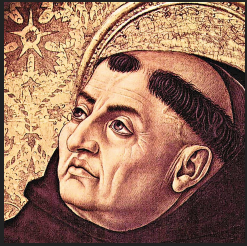
- reason and understand
- relate to others as friends, colleagues and family members
- participate in public life
- exercise good judgment in practical affairs

Aquinas on natural law



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Thus he argues that there are four "cardinal virtues."

1. Prudence
2. Temperance
3. Courage
4. Justice

Aquinas on natural law



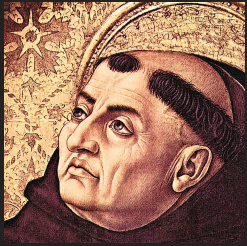
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All of this is based on the idea that the universe was created by God for a purpose, with us at the center of things.

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- The human capacity for free choice is not emphasized and so freely choosing *not* to cultivate virtue would be morally wrong and not a matter to be left up to the individual.

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The argument from human nature

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What does it mean to go against nature? Four different things...

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- So in this sense it is **FALSE** that what is unnatural is wrong.

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Stay tuned ...

Find out more

Religion and Morality: a comprehensive account of the long and complex interactions between these two important aspects of human culture at the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Crash course video: Divine Command Theory: Hank Green's account is short succinct and to the point.

Crash Course video: Natural Law Theory: another great video.

Can We Have Ethics Without Religion?, Jeffrey Morgan. Another helpful overview of the complex issues here from the *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics* textbook.



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