Ethics and Religion

which comes first?

George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

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Common assumptions

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.

How to base ethics on religion

From these assumptions it seems to follow that morality can and should be based on religious teachings.

The two chief ways of attempting to do this are:

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

From these assumptions it seems to follow that morality *can and should be* based on religious teachings.

The two chief ways of attempting to do this are:

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."

Divine Command Theory

- DCT is a theory of the meaning of moral language.

- Morality takes the form of overriding and absolute commands: "Thou shalt not, do this that or the other thing."

- Such commands are binding on us only to the extent that there is a sufficiently powerful moral authority behind them, otherwise they would be optional.

  for example:

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

If DCT is true...

- Morality would have an objective basis and we would have a strong reason to follow the rules.

- We could avoid the trap of relativism.

  But...

- 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.

Is DCT true?

A theological argument

> If God created everything, this certainly must include the rules of morality.
>
> God created everything.
> _____
> Thus God must have created the rules of morality.

- A valid argument, but are the premises are really true?

- 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.

- This argument is sometimes used to prove that there must be a God.

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

The Dilemma of DCT

Even if these arguments worked DCT would face a dilemma in trying to account for *why* we should listen to God's commands.

> Is it because God commands us to do something that makes it the right thing to do?
>
> Or is it the fact that it is right that leads God to command us to do it?

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

The Dilemma of DCT

> Are murder, stealing, lying, etc. wrong **because** God says so?

- 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...

The Dilemma of DCT

Does God command us not to murder, steal, lie, etc. **because** those things are wrong?

- But then moral rules would be *independent of God* and that makes God's commands irrelevant.

- If the rules themselves have *reasons* God is no longer a foundation of morality, but at best a messenger.

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

Natural Law Theory

- Religion not only offers an account of the origins of human laws, but of the natural order of things in general.

- Perhaps *this* could provide a basis for ethics and explain *why* God might command or forbid particular behavior.

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

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

1. **Material cause:** what is it made of?
2. **Formal cause:** What kind of thing is it?
3. **Efficient cause:** What led to its current state?
4. **Final cause:** What is its purpose?

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.
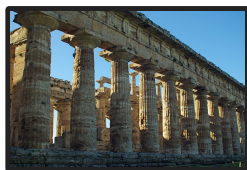
Aristotle on Natural Law

384–322 BCE

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

True happiness arises from fulfilling our natures and this is the purpose of our lives. This requires cultivating our natural abilities to:

- 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

1225–1274 CE

Aquinas took Aristotle's account of the order of nature and "Christianized" it, placing God at the top of the "Great Chain of Being."

And four basic moral values, the maintenance of which is required to enable us to realize these virtues.

1. Life
2. Procreation
3. Knowledge
4. Sociability

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.

If NLT is true...

- Morality would be an integral part of the order of things.

- We could discover the fundamental principles of ethics and how to implement them by relying on our innate capacity to reason.

- We could assess societies based on whether or not they help their members to fulfill themselves as well-rounded, and virtuous people.

    But...

- This view emphasizes hierarchy of values in nature, which we may doubt really exists.

- 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.

Is NLT true?

The argument from human nature

> Human beings have a definite nature, a set of built-in capacities.
>
> In general it is better to follow nature than go against it.
> _____
> So we should act in such a way as to fulfill our nature as human beings and avoid violating what it is in our nature to do.

This is a valid argument, but are the premises true?

The first brings up a long and involved debate about what is innate in human beings and what is learned or a product of our environments. It is far from clear...

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

Is it wrong to go against nature?

> What follows the Laws of Nature is better than what doesn't.

- One first definition of what is natural is the modern scientific definition: whatever is a part of Nature, the laws of which are described by science.

- But *nothing* that exists violates these laws since they merely describe observed regularities.

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

Is it wrong to go against nature?

> What is statistically uncommon is not natural and this is worse than what isn't.

- A second definition of the natural and the unnatural has to do with what follows statistical norms and what doesn't.

- Although it is true that some uncommon things are bad, such as terrorist attacks, others are neutral or good, such as talent and important discoveries.

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

Is it wrong to go against nature?

> What is artificial is unnatural and what is not artificial is both natural and inherently better.

- A third definition of the natural and the unnatural distinguishes between what is a product of Mother Nature and what is synthetic or created by us.

- Although many people assume that "natural" foods and ingredients are automatically better for us that artificial ones, there are plenty of perfectly natural diseases out there too, plus some artificial things like clothes are great.

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

Is it wrong to go against nature?

> What violates natural functions is unnatural and wrong.

- This last definition the natural and the unnatural is what Natural Law Theory rests on.

- The question here is who gets to decide what the natural functions of our bodies and our behaviors really are?

- Since this is a morally loaded idea, it must in some way depend on our choices -- we can no longer take it for granted that there is a natural order of things in the universe that dictates right and wrong as Aquinas and Aristotle once did.

- So once again it is **FALSE** that what is unnatural is automatically wrong.

Which comes first ethics or religion?

- Historically speaking cultures often express ethical concepts in religious terms and so religion *seems* to come first.

- But *logically* speaking ethics is independent of religion as we have seen.

- Ethical rules don't depend on authority.

- They are independent of "human nature," whatever that actually means.

- So *what* are ethical principles based on?

  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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