

Morality and Religion

Attempts to Ground Morality in Religion

- There is a widely held view that there is an **intimate connection** between **morality and religion**.
 - This implies that if there is no god, then there is no morality.
- Even if there is a connection between **morality and religion**, attempts to **understand** this connection so far have **failed**.
- Two **popular** attempts to **understand the connection** between **morality and religion** are **Divine Command Theory**, and **Natural Law Theory**.

Divine Command Theory (DCT)

- The **roots** of **DCT** have their origin in the writings of **Plato** in a dialogue called **The Euthyphro**.
- The basic ideas of **DCT** can be summarized as follows:
 1. An act is **obligatory** if God commands it (tells you to do it).
 2. An act is **permissible** if God permits it.
 3. An act is **forbidden** if God forbids it (tells you to not do it).
- This raises the question: "How do you know what God commands?"
 - Some people believe that it is found in **religious scripture**.
- An **ontological problem** (a problem in the study of existence) that relates to **DCT** is: how do we know that God exists?
 - There is an ontological proof that goes as follows: God's essence is perfection. It is more perfect to exist than to not exist. Thus, God exists.
 - However, not everyone accepts theological proofs of God's existence.
- Some defenders of **DCT** believe that it is **not necessary to believe in God** to adhere to **DCT**. They would instead argue that **only if God exists**, morality is possible. So they are giving an account of what morality would be if there were a God.
- An **epistemological problem** (a problem about how we know something) with **DCT** is: even if God exists, how do we **know** what **God's commands are**?
 - Some would argue that we know through **scripture, prayer, meditation, and religious experiences**.
 - Adams claims that all **wrong actions** have one thing in common; they are **contrary** to the **commands** of a **loving God**.

The Major Problem with DCT

- The **major problem** with **DCT** was put forward by **Plato** in **Euthyphro**. The **problem** is known as the **Euthyphro dilemma**.
- The **Euthyphro dilemma is as follows**: Does god command an action because it is right, or is the action right because God commands it?
 - Suppose an action X is right, simply because God commands it. Doesn't that make morality arbitrary? It can be whatever God wants? He can change the commands at any time. God could command us to do something that we think is immoral.

- Suppose an action X is right, then God will command it. But this means, that religion is based on morality instead of morality being based on religion. God is essentially acting as a messenger for something above him.
- This dilemma leads us to **abandon DCT**. Though there have been attempts to resuscitate it.
 - One theory that attempted to save DCT is **A New Device Command Theory** by **Robert Adams**. To get around the **Euthyphro dilemma** it modifies **DCT** as follows: An act is morally right if it is commanded by a **loving God**; a loving god would never command us to do something that is morally wrong by our moral intuitions.

Natural Law Theory (NLT)

- Since not every accepts solutions proposed to the **Euthyphro dilemma**, **St. Thomas Aquinas** proposed an alternative way of grounding morality in religion. This was is **Natural Law Theory**.
- **Natural Law Theory** can be summarized in terms of three theses:
 - Every event and every action has a **purpose**.
 - There are **laws of nature** that represent the **purposes** of actions and events.
 - God provides us with the **ability to reason** in order to comprehend the **laws of nature**.
- In **NLT**, moral laws are **laws of nature**, not **commands of God**. God enters into morality only at the level of **providing us with the ability to reason**.
 - This allows NLT to avoid the problems that exist with DCT.
- Essentially, **NLT** is a theory that it is **immoral to use things in a way that does not fit their purpose**.
 - An example would be: arms were created to life things, using them for any other purpose (such as to hit someone) is morally wrong.

Problems with NLT

- One problem with **NLT** is that it is not clear that **every event has a purpose**.
 - For example, we do not have eyes for the purpose of seeing, rather we have eyes as an evolutionary adaptation.
- Another problem with **NLT** is that it commits the **naturalistic fallacy** (infering "should" from "is"). We are deducing moral oughts from "the purpose an event is".
- Arguably the most serious object is that an **atheist** could still **act morally** since having the ability to reason **does not depend on believing in God**.
 - Implying God is irrelevant, since one could be moral without believing in God.

Moral Codes

- Another approach to ground morality in religion, discussed by **James Rachels**, is that **religious scriptures can be regarded as moral codes**.
- To determine if an act is morally right or morally wrong, you consult the scripture.
- The problem with this approach is that **scripture is open to interpretation**. You could interpret it **literally, metaphorically, historically, etc.** People can also take scripture passages out of context, or ignore the meaning of the terms at that time in history.

Non-Religious Natural Law Theories

John Finnis' Natural Law

- According to **John Finnis**, natural law theory is used by philosophers to make sense of the following claims that seem to be beyond or prior to positivistic law:
 1. That was a crime against humanity.
 2. That action was morally unreasonable, inhuman, cruel, etc.
 3. That person should be immune for legal liability.
- As **Finnis** notes, it's almost as if there is an **implicit appeal** to a "**higher law**" - a law of nature.
- **Natural law** tries to make sense of these **claims** by providing a **general account** of **good and evil** in human life.
- Finnis claims that a general theory of good and evil will contain the following kinds of propositions:
 1. **Normative claims** about what is right and wrong,
 2. **Non-Normative claims** justifications of the normative claims.
- Finnis wants to make it clear that **natural laws** are **not mysterious entities that can be read off from nature**, and that **natural law theories** do not claim that their laws of nature are **physical laws** (morality \neq science).
 - It is important to recognize that natural law theories are distinct from logic, technology, and science.
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John Finnis' Natural Law Definition

- Finnis claims that the term **law** does **not mean an imperative / command** by a superior will such as **God**.
- The term **law** refers to **standards of action** which are **normative**, such that **not following** these **standards** is **unreasonable**.
- Finnis defines the term **natural law** as one of the following:
 1. **Natural law** is not positive — that is, it is prior to any positioning of any individual, group, or legal system.
 2. **Natural laws** are standards that **transcend positive law** — that can be used to critically assess positive law.
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