

Religion and Morality:
Is Religion Necessary to Morality?

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Abstract

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relating man's acknowledgement of the divine. Morality studies the principles of right and wrong in human conduct. It is normally taken for granted that religion and morality are connected, because religion developed sociologically to give civilization a basis for ethical conduct. Religion itself is based in the idea of the divine, usually called God. God has many attributes, including infinity, eternity, omnipotence, and omniscience, and God's existence is traditionally proven in relation to these attributes. Worship is the way in which man relates to God, but inherent in the act of worship is the surrender of the individual's moral autonomy. The Divine Command Theory enforces the rules of God, regardless of whether those rules are good because God commanded them, or God commands them because they are good. The Theory of Natural Law subjects morality to rationality and claims that the nature of rationality is divine; however, this theory is demolished by the logical argument against the existence of God. Without the existence of God, religion cannot be a basis for morality. Religion is not necessary to morality.

Is Religion Necessary to Morality?

Religion and morality. We generally take for granted a connection between the two. But, why must this be? There is no logical proof demanding that religion is necessary to morality; indeed, it is very illogical that such a case be so. Morality is the standpoint from which conduct is determined to be right or wrong. Religion makes the divine that standpoint from which actions are judged, while ethics justifies through rational thought.

Religious philosophers advance the argument that morality, or ethics, is rooted in religion. Secular philosophers, however, usually defend the position that morality must be independent of everything, save logic and rationality. Religion claims as its basis divinity, while logic and rationality are capable of destroying this basis. The arguments and evidence will be presented, after a few definitions of key terms.

What is religion?

Religion may be defined as:

1. Man's expression of his acknowledgement of the divine;
2. A system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community;
3. Adherence to such a system; or
4. Something that has a powerful hold on a person's way of thinking, interests, etc.

Religion is the "sacred engagement with that which is believed to be a spiritual reality. Religion is a worldwide phenomenon that has played a part in all human culture and so is a much broader, more complex category than the set of beliefs or practices

found in any single religious tradition (Religion, 2000).” It is in this vast understanding of religion that one must begin to examine its relationship to morality.

What is morality?

Morality may be defined as the principles of right and wrong in human conduct. It encompasses the term ethics, or the philosophy that studies morality. Different people ascribe different authorities to morality. To philosophers, the authority for morality is the rule of reason, or rational thought, of which logic is the foundation. Religionists claim that the authority for morality is the will of the divine. This, then, becomes the major contention between religion and ethics.

How are religion and morality connected?

The majority of philosophers, in general, view religion as an institution of society, rather than a system of ultimate truth. All religions appear to be natural outgrowths of social stratification, and they accomplish several functions, each related to the four definitions of religion given above:

1. Explaining the unknown and relating the human experience to it;
2. Providing a basis for ethical conduct;
3. Maintaining the social structure of ruler and ruled; and
4. Allowing for intellectual growth.

The institution of religion developed as a means of controlling civilization, giving meaning to life for the common man. The concern, here, is with the second point expressed above.

According to Rudd (1993), the great nineteenth-century religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard identified three main points for grounding morality in religion: “(i) the

inability of a social morality to do justice to the uniqueness of each individual; (ii) the erosion, in the modern world, of the social basis for a morality of conformity to customary roles; and (iii) the pluralism of a secular ethics, its lack of a single goal in striving towards which the moral life finds its unity (p. 117).”

Staunch supporters of organized religion claim that ethical conduct cannot exist without a firm belief in the divine, or that which transcends the human experience. This, however presents several problems:

1. The existence of the divine is unverifiable;
2. Individual autonomy is removed in deference to the divine; and
3. Morality becomes relative to the religion one practices.

Religions, especially the three Western faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend to classify the divine as God.

Who is God?

God is the focal point of the religious experience, regardless of whether the religion is monotheistic or polytheistic, Western or Eastern. God is the divine being to whom worship is addresses. The universal attributes of infinity, eternity, omnipotence, and omniscience, as well as the human attributes of will, love, goodness, and forgiveness, are usually applied to God.

Among the traditional ‘proofs’ for the existence of God, Rudd (1993) explains the ontological and the teleological. According to the ontological proof, God exists simply because the concept of God exists. The teleological proof states that the order of the natural world verifies the existence of God (p. 61).

Aquinas rejected the ontological proof of the existence of God, and composed five other arguments, closely related to the teleological proof. The 'five ways' are as follows: (1) change implies an original agent of change; (2) the sequences of causes and effects found in the world imply an uncaused original cause; (3) the existence of what is transient implies the necessary existence of a being which is intransient and which is derived from nothing apart from itself; (4) ethical comparisons imply a perfect standard of comparison; and (5) the very order of nature implies a source of the most supreme wisdom (Quinque Viae, 1997).

Harrison (1997) states that Immanuel Kant believed that the idea of God was necessary to morality, and he classified it, along with the idea of the immortal soul, as a postulate of practical reason. However, Kant also refuted many of the traditional proofs of God's existence, putting his own moral basis on shaky ground. While claiming God as necessary to morality, he virtually denied the existence of God.

The Act of Worship

If religion is characterized by one's relation to God, then morality grounded in religion must also be characterized by the relation to the divine, one of the functions of religion. Normally, a person relates to God through the act of worship. The actions that constitute worship are quite ritualistic in character, but the ceremonial form of a ritual is not as important as that which is accomplished by the ritual. According to Rachels (1997), the ceremony itself is analogous to the use of language. Words, according to convention, convey meaning, just as the ceremony accomplishes a point. In worship, one is accepting his role in relation to God, as God's subordinate, or 'child' (p. 115).

Presumed in the act of worship are the inferior status of man and the superior status of God. There can be no such thing as mutual worship; it is illogical. The worshipper assumes his own inferiority and relative worthlessness. Rachels (1997) states that pride, or one's own worth, is incompatible with worship (p. 115).

Rachels (1997) continues by saying that to worship God is to discard one's own moral autonomy. When a person worships God that person gives up his or her role as a moral agent for that person accepts God's role as supreme moral agent (p. 118).

The Divine Command Theory

If God is the supreme moral agent, then we must follow the divine dictates. People, however, have free will, and may or may not choose to obey those commandments. God has given us a moral code to live by, and He judges us against that code. If one is to live a morally correct life, then he must follow God's rules. According to Rachels (1986), this is the essence of the Divine Command Theory, where “ ‘morally right’ means ‘commanded by God’, and ‘morally wrong’ means ‘forbidden by God’ (p. 41).”

Rachels (1986) continues, outlining the benefits and drawbacks of this theory. Morality becomes very simply objective: either God commands an act or God forbids an act. Humanity need not worry about morality of an act, for God will deal with those who disobey (p. 41).

Again according to Rachels (1986), if God commands what is right, then those actions are right because God commands them, or God commands those actions because they are right. If the former of the two is accepted, then God's commands are arbitrary, and the goodness of God is non-existent. If the latter of the two is accepted, then there

must be a standard of morality independent of God. Most supporters of religion are unable to accept either of the two options because of what they entail (p. 44).

The Theory of Natural Law

Because of the failure of the Divine Command Theory, most religious philosophers, including Aquinas, turn instead to the Theory of Natural Law. This theory states that reason dictates the best course of action. Believers and nonbelievers are both capable of making moral judgments.

According to Rachels (1986), the theory states that God, who is perfectly rational, created the world as a rational order and humans as rational agents. Rationality is the 'Natural Law', and it is the essence of mankind, the 'divine spark', whether one is a believer or a nonbeliever (p. 45).

In essence, Rachels (1986) claims, the theory divorces morality from religion. Morality is separate from religion, just as science is separate, or autonomous, from religion. In the same vain, religious believers have no special insight into ethical matters, as they have no special insight into scientific matters. It is over the nature of reason that believers and nonbelievers part company. The believer regards his own reasoning, sometimes called conscience, as revealing the will of God (p. 47). However, the nonbeliever, or skeptic, can make no such claim, for the existence of God cannot be convincingly proved.

The Power of Reason and Logic

There is a conflict between the very idea of God, and the role of autonomous moral agent. God is the only being worthy of worship, because God is the only omnipotent being and the only perfectly good being. God cannot exist, because there could not

be any being to whom we should surrender our self-worth. Immanuel Kant stated that “Kneeling down or groveling on the ground, even to express your reverence for heavenly things, is contrary to human dignity (quoted in Rachels, 1997, p. 109).”

According to Rachels (1997), the logical argument against the existence of God can be constructed as follows:

1. “If any being is God, he must be a fitting object of worship.
2. “No being could possibly be a fitting object of worship, since worship requires the abandonment of one’s role as an autonomous moral agent.
3. “Therefore, there cannot be any being who is God (p. 119).”

Conclusion

It is safe to say that morality is probably not dependent upon religion; in other words, religion is not necessary to morality. In general religion creates a tenuous base upon which to claim moral authority. The Divine Command Theory suggests that whatever God commands is morally correct, even if rationality dictates otherwise. Through the Theory of Natural Law, religious philosophers have reconciled rational thought to religion, stating that only rationality can be the basis for ethical action. However, the theory also claims that the nature of rationality is divine.

Reason and logic dictate that if God did exist, then he would be worthy of worship. Worship causes an individual to surrender his role as autonomous moral agent, an illogical and irrational position. Therefore, God cannot exist, despite that the traditional 'proofs' of God's existence may be defended. This is because those 'proofs' rely on the attributes ascribed to God, and it appears as if those attributes are actually attributes of the universe itself. The only thing the 'proofs' defend is the existence of the universe itself.

The Theory of Natural Law has contributed one positive aspect to the study of ethics, and that is that morality is subject only to rational thought. Only through contemplation and examination can actions be judged as moral or immoral. Application to a set of religious tenets, which is relative depending on the religion, is not logical. Religion cannot be necessary to morality.

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