



WHERE DOES MORALITY COME FROM?

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Where does morality come from? Does it derive from religion? In essence, there are two views in terms of Christian morality, namely, the Divine Command, and Natural Law.

When we reduce the basic tenets of morality hinged upon Divine Command, we derive the following hypotheses: That which is morally right is commanded by God; and that which is morally wrong is forbidden by God. In effect, moral conduct is right because God commands it.

Immediately, we perceive problems with morality based upon Divine Command. Firstly, agnostics and atheists would have no knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

This in turn brings in Plato's objection whether moral conduct is right when commanded by the gods, or do the gods command such conduct because it is intrinsically right. But what if God commanded us to murder constantly. Would this not render meaningless the very notion of God's goodness?

Further, when we say that God commands moral conduct because it is, by its very nature, right – then we are implying that there is a standard of good and evil which is independent of God, or outside his command.

Therefore, if God commands us to do what is right we must face two implications of our actions:

1. Our ensuing moral actions are right because God commands them, or
2. God commands such actions because they are by their very nature right.

If we accept the first of these implications, then we must acknowledge that God's commands are arbitrary, from a moral point of view, which in turn renders the idea of God's goodness meaningless.

And if we accept the second implication, we inherently acknowledge that there is a standard of good and evil, right and wrong, which is entirely independent of God.

As a result of these two implications, we must either accept God's commands as arbitrary, and abandon the doctrine of the goodness of God, or we must acknowledge that there is an independent standard of right and wrong, and thus we must forsake the notion of God as the arbiter of right and wrong, good and evil.

Of course, from a religious point of view, it would be impossible to perceive God's command as arbitrary, and it would be equally impossible to forsake the idea of God's intrinsic goodness. Consequently, an independent standard of good and evil, right and wrong must be acknowledged – which ultimately suggests that the theory of Divine Command is flawed.

The second view of Christian morality depends on the theory of Natural Law which, when summarized, suggests three assumptions. First, that everything in nature has a definite purpose.

Thus when we ask the question: "What is it for?" We can derive an immediate answer (for example, the sun shines to generate life). Second, that everything in nature has a purpose because that is the way God intended it to be; it is from this assumption that religion derives its reason for being. Third, that the laws of nature define how things ought to be.

Thus, what is right is that which is natural. That which is unnatural is wrong. For example, the philanthropic urge stems from mankind's natural concern for the well being of others.

However, this third and final assumption also suggests that all that is unnatural is wrong and is the pursuit of the twisted. Such an argument can certainly be used to criticize homosexuality and masturbation, since it does not lead to the natural outcome of sex, namely, children.

However, as David Hume suggests, there is a marked difference between what is and what ought to be, and therefore, Natural Law theory confuses facts with values. In effect, nature does not seek to answer the question "Why?"

Thus, rain just falls and the sun just shines. In other words, the laws of nature are blind – their reason for being is not to serve the "higher" purpose of mankind's needs. We cannot impose an anthropocentric view upon nature.

Further, Natural Law implies that moral judgment is dictated by reason. Therefore, both believers and non-believers have access to truth. Consequently, morality is independent of religion.

Certainly, it is difficult to agree with the theory of Natural Law, simply because it confuses two independent (and perhaps mutually exclusive) issues: namely, facts or mundane reality and morality.

We cannot imbue nature with our moral vision or values. Nature exists because it does. Nature does not exist to reify our moral values. Thus, in condemning that which is deemed "unnatural" Natural Law imposes a moral code that cannot exist independently in nature.

Nature, in and of itself, does not exist according to moral laws. If that were so, then predators would not kill and eat newborn fawns, nor ravens pluck chicks from nests.

Therefore we need to acknowledge that nature, morality/ethics, and religion are simply different areas that cannot impinge upon each other.

Morality and religion are not inherent in nature. In short, nature is neither moral nor religious.

Thus, we cannot impose laws on nature, and thereby use these imposed laws as moral codes to judge others as either deficient or satisfactory.

The photo shows, "Found," by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, unfinished painting, ca. 1869.

