

4. CHAPTER 4: DOES MORALITY DEPEND ON RELIGION?

4.1. The Presumed Connection Between Morality and Religion

Who are generally considered to be the moral leaders in our time?

The general consensus points to religious leaders.

In popular thinking, morality and religion are inseparable: people commonly believe that morality can be understood only in the context of religion.

4.2. The Divine Command Theory

If we are to live as we should live, we must follow gods laws. This, it is said, is the essence to morality.

It immediately solves the old problem about the objectivity of ethics. According to this theory, ethics is not merely a matter of personal feelings or social custom. Whether something is right or wrong is a perfectly objective matter: it is right if God commands it, wrong if God forbids it.

Difficulties of this theory. (Socrates)

Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right? It is one of the most famous questions in the history of philosophy.

1. Suppose God commands us to do what is right. Then either (a) the right actions are right because God commands them or (b) God commands them because they are right.
2. If we take option (a), then God's commands are, from a moral point of view, arbitrary; moreover, the doctrine of the goodness of God is rendered meaningless.
3. If we take option (b), then we have admitted there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will.
4. Therefore, we must either regard God's commands as arbitrary, and give up the doctrine of the goodness of God, or admit that there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of his will, and give up the theological definitions of right and wrong.
5. From a religious point of view, it is undesirable to regard God's commands as arbitrary or to give up the doctrine of the goodness of God.
6. Therefore even from a religious point of view, a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will must be accepted.

4.3. The Theory of Natural Law

In the history of Christian thought, the dominant theory of ethics is not the divine command theory. That honor goes to the **Theory of Natural Law**.

1. In the theory of natural law, the world is a rational order with values and purposes built into its very nature.

Values and purposes were, therefore, conceived to be a fundamental part of the nature of things, because the world was believed to have been created according to a divine plan.

2. A corollary of this way of thinking is that "the laws on nature" not only describe how things *are*, they specify how things *ought to be* as well. Things are as they ought to be when they are serving the natural purposes. When they do not, or cannot, serve those purposes, things have gone wrong.

Some ways of behaving are said to be "natural" and some are "unnatural"; and "unnatural" acts are said to be morally wrong.

If everything has a natural purpose, what is the purpose of sex?

Outside the Catholic Church, the theory of natural law has few advocates today. It is generally rejected for two reasons. First, it seems to involve the confusion of "is" and "ought to". David Hume pointed out that *what is the case* and *what ought to be the case* are logically different notions and no conclusion about one follows from the other.

The rain falls only because of the impersonal operation of physical laws. It does not fall in order to make anything happen; what happens just happens, fortuitously, in consequence of the laws of cause and effect. If the rain benefits the plants, is only because they have evolved by the laws of natural selection in a rainy climate.

To the extent that one accepts the worldview of modern science, then, one will be skeptical of the Theory of Natural Law.

3. According to the natural law theory, moral judgments are "dictates of reason." The "natural laws" that specify what we should do are laws of reason, which we are able to grasp because God, the author of the natural order, has made us rational beings with the power to understand that order.

This means that the religious believer has no special access to moral truths. The believer and the non-believer are in exactly the same position. God has made all people rational not just believer's; and so, for believer and non-believer alike, behaving morally is a matter of listening to reason and following its directives.

The religious interpretation of conscience as the voice of God is an after the fact addition of vital interest to believers, but something they can be ignored by non-believers. In this way, even though they may disagree about religion, believers and non-believers will still inhabit the same moral universe.

4.4. Christianity and the Problem of Abortion

There are still the moral teachings of one's religion about particular issues. The teachings of Scripture and the church are regarded by believers as authoritative, determining the moral positions they must take.

In the first place, it is often difficult to find specific moral guidance in the Scriptures.

Our problems are not the same as the problems faced by the Jews and the early Christians many centuries ago; thus is not surprising that the Scriptures might be silent about moral issues that to us seem quite urgent.

The various arguments in this chapter point to a common conclusion. Right and wrong are not to be defined in terms of God's will; morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and in any case, religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to the specific moral problems that confront us. Morality and religion are, in a word, different. Because this conclusion is so contrary to conventional wisdom, it may strike some readers as anti-religious. Therefore, it should be emphasized that this conclusion has not been reached by questioning the validity of religion. The arguments we have considered do not assume that Christianity (or any other theological system) is false; they merely show that even if such a system is true, morality remains an independent matter.