

Religion and Morality

A. Introduction

1. Many people see a very close connection.
2. Many ethical terms have religious connotations or origins.
3. Religious institutions often endorse certain ethical positions or doctrines.
4. Philosophers and others disagree about what the connection is, and whether there even is one.
5. We'll only be able to focus on a small number of issues and possible views.

Religion and Morality

A. Introduction

6. Relates to other philosophical questions:
Is there a true religion? (If so, which one?)
Does God exist?
Is there an afterlife?
Obviously we could spend all semester discussing these.
7. Let's start out by *assuming* God exists and that God is morally good.
Then ask: what is the relationship between God and morality?
Still worthwhile to explore even if there is no God.

B. Divine Command Theory

1. God is supposed to be **superbly** good.
"Good" is one of the chief words of ethics.
This suggests a connection.
2. Suppose the connection is *very close*:
Divine Command Theory: a normative ethical theory with two parts:
(DCT1) Something is morally good if and only if God approves of it. (Axiological part.)
(DCT2) An act-token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if X is what God commands or desires P to do at time T.
(Part dealing with the normative ethics of behavior.)

B. Divine Command Theory

3. Example: I just whacked myself in my head with a book. Was that the right thing to do?

If God wished me to do that at this time, then it was.

If God didn't want me to do that at that time, then it wasn't.

4. Something like this suggested by:
Old Testament (Judaism, Christianity)
New Testament (Christianity)
Koran (Islam)
Elsewhere

C. Two Meta-ethical Perspectives on Divine Command Theory

1. People who agree with DCT can disagree about *what makes it true*.

Here are two possible perspectives:

2. **The Strong Form:** God's approving of it is what *constitutes* or *makes* a thing good or an action right.

Morality is nothing more nor less than God's pronouncements, commands and attitudes.

In short, if an action is right, it is right *because* God commands it.

C. Two Meta-ethical Perspectives on Divine Command Theory

3. **The Weak Form:** Things are good or actions are right on independent grounds from God's commandments.

It is not God's commandments that *make* actions right or things good.

Instead, it is *because* they are right or good that God commands or approves of them.

C. Two Meta-ethical Perspectives on Divine Command Theory

4. An analogy: (“Cordate” means “creature with a heart”)

An organism is a cordate if and only if it has a heart.

An organism is a cordate if and only if it has a kidney.

Both of these sentences are *true*.

However, they are true for different sorts of reasons.

The question for someone who accepts Divine Command Theory is whether (DCT1) and (DCT2) are more like the first example or more like the second.

D. The Euthyphro Problem



PLATO (427-347 BCE)

1. This issue is a very old one in philosophy.

In the Western tradition, it dates at least as far back as Plato’s *Euthyphro*, from the 4th century BCE.

In it, the characters of Socrates and Euthyphro discuss the nature of “piety” or “the pious”.

D. The Euthyphro Problem

2. Socrates asks:
“Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”

Euthyphro believes that the gods love things *because* they are pious.

Socrates concludes that then piety must be something *different* from being loved by the gods.

3. The difference between the strong and weak forms of DCT are two different answers to a similar question.

D. The Euthyphro Problem

4. The problem for Strong Divine Command Theory

a) God's commands and attitudes are themselves completely *arbitrary*.

* *Whatever* God commands or approves of is right.

* It doesn't matter what other features the action has.

b) If God commands me to donate \$1000 to the Amherst Survival Center on Easter Sunday, then that is morally right.

However, if God commands me to rape, torture and mutilate my four year old cousin on Easter Sunday, then *that* is morally right.

D. The Euthyphro Problem

c) Another problem: what do we mean by "God is good"?

Does it just mean "God approves of God"?

Doesn't it mean something more than this?

d) Analogy: call something "schmood" if and only if Martha Stewart approves of it.

Obviously, Martha Stewart herself is schmood.

If "good" is like "schmood", why should I care about "good" things more than "schmood" things?

D. The Euthyphro Problem

5. The Problem for Weak Divine Command Theory

a) Something else besides God *makes* things good or bad or actions right or wrong

b) Doesn't actually show Weak DCT to be *false*.

c) However, it seems that ethical theory, or moral philosophy, should concern itself with the *something else* that is more fundamental in morality

d) God's commandments or scriptures at most a handy guide to help us figure things out that we could figure out other ways.

E. How Helpful is Divine Command Theory?

1. Another problem: DCT2 doesn't actually tell us what to do in any concrete situations.

We would need to know what God actually commands or desires us to do.

2. Can we communicate with God?

Many people think it is possible, directly or indirectly.

But no one thinks it is always easy and straightforward.

E. How Helpful is Divine Command Theory?

3. Do we need to consult scripture?

The Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, etc.
Which one is right?

4. Too many scriptures to discuss individually.

Often take the form of stories or parables, not general criteria for rightness or wrongness.

There are some exceptions.

I'm going to focus on two strands from Judeo-Christian tradition.

F. The Ten Commandments

1. From the book of *Exodus* chap. 20:

(1) "You shall have no other gods before me."

(2) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

(3) "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

F. The Ten Commandments

(4) "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

(5) "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

F. The Ten Commandments

(6) "You shall not murder."

(7) "You shall not commit adultery."

(8) "You shall not steal."

(9) "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

(10) "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

F. The Ten Commandments

2. This suggests the following criterion for acting morally:

(10C) An act-token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if in performing X at time T, P does not violate any of the 10 commandments.

3. Does this criterion have any counterexamples?

Are there acts that violate the 10 commands but are still morally right?

Are there acts that don't violate the 10 commands but are still morally wrong?

F. The Ten Commandments

4. Cases of wrong acts that do not violate the 10 commandments:

a) Don the lucky Drunk Driver. (Leads to an argument:)

P1. If 10C is true, then Don's act of driving with a blood alcohol level of 0.40 was morally right.

P2. Don's act of driving with a blood alcohol level of 0.40 was not morally right.

C. Therefore, 10C is not true.

b) Other examples: child pornography, internet spamming, public urination, vandalism

F. The Ten Commandments

5. Acts do violate the 10 commandments that are not morally wrong:

a) working on the Sabbath to have the money to feed your family

b) stealing from the rich to give to the poor

6. Can the 10 commandments be revised or changed to overcome these problems?

Perhaps best to replace them with more general principles that preserve what seems right about them.

G. The Golden Rule

1. From many sources, including the Christian Bible:

"In everything, do unto others what you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12)

2. Only tells us how to *treat others*.

Doesn't address other actions.

But maybe other actions don't matter.

How about:

(GR) An act-token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if, in performing X, P does not treat anyone else in a way that P would not want that person to treat P.

G. The Golden Rule

3. Acts that do not violate the Golden Rule but seem wrong:

a) Consider Pete the Pervert, who loves groping strangers and being groped by strangers.

P1. If GR is true, then Pete's act of groping Grandma Betty at the Holyoke Mall was morally right.

P2. Pete's act of groping Grandma Betty at the Holyoke Mall was not morally right.

C. Therefore, GR is not true.

b) Other examples involving people imposing their own likes and preferences on other people.

G. The Golden Rule

4. Acts that violate the Golden rule but seem right:

a) A doctor who is herself allergic to penicillin but uses penicillin to treat her patients.

b) A hair stylist who gives a customer a haircut that the customer asks for but the hair stylist himself would not want.

5. Almost undeniable that there is *something* right about the Golden Rule.

Perhaps it could be reformulated to get around these problems.

I invite you to think about that for yourself.

H. What if God Doesn't Exist?

1. We have been assuming that God exists. But what if there is no God?

2. Worthwhile to ask even if you are sure God exists.

Sheds light on connection between God and morality to consider what would be different if there were no God.

3. Can morality exist without God?

I'll consider two arguments that answer *no* to this question.

Read the papers by Mavrodes and Nielsen in your book for a more detailed examination of this issue.

H. What if God Doesn't Exist?

4. The purpose of human existence argument:

P1. If God does not exist, then there is no God-given purpose to a person's existence,

P2. If there is no God-given purpose to a person's existence, then there is no one right way for a person to live his/her life.

P3. If there is no one right way for a person to live his/her life, then there can be no morality.

C. Therefore, if God does not exist, there can be no morality.

a) The argument is valid. Are the premises true?

H. What if God Doesn't Exist?

b) P1 is hard to deny, but both P2 and P3 have been challenged by ethical philosophers.

c) Perhaps something other than God's will forms the basis of morality.

Even weak divine command theory thinks this.

Casts suspicion on P2.

d) Perhaps even without a *single* right way for us to live, there is still a difference between better and worse.

Casts suspicion on P3.

H. What if God Doesn't Exist?

5. The supernatural reward/punishment argument:

P1. If God does not exist, then there is no heaven or hell (or reincarnation, or karma, etc.)

P2. If there is no heaven or hell (or reincarnation, or karma, etc), then there is no motivation for people to act rightly instead of wrongly.

P3. If there is no motivation for people to act rightly instead of wrongly, then there can be no morality.

C. Therefore, if God does not exist, there can be no morality.

a) Again, the argument is valid. Are the premises true?

b) *All* of these premises have been called into question.

H. What if God Doesn't Exist?

c) Perhaps there is karma, or "what goes around comes around", even if there is no God.

(This calls P1 into question.)

d) Perhaps acting rightly is "its own reward", and we don't need any other motivation.

(This calls P2 into question.)

e) Perhaps there is still a difference between right and wrong whether or not any one has any motivation to act rightly.

(This calls P3 into question.)

6. These are all very difficult issues we can't discuss fully given time constraints.
