

God and Morality

Argument for the Existence of God

- Some theists argue for the existence of God, from the (supposed) existence of moral truths.
E.g.

1. If there is no God, everything is permitted
(Dostoevsky)

2. Some things are morally impermissible

∴ God exists

Is this what Dostoevsky meant?

1. All moral statements are *evaluations* of actions and other states of the world
2. An evaluation requires an evaluator
3. In the absence of God, the only available evaluators are humans, who lack authority

∴ In the absence of God, moral statements are based on (mere) human preferences, and lack authority.

The 'divine policeman' argument

1. If people think they can do evil and get away with it, they are more likely to do evil.
2. Religion tells people that God sees everything, and will eventually punish all who do wrong.

∴ Religion is needed to make people good

(Argues for the *usefulness* of religion, rather than its *truth*.)

The 'ultimate justice' argument

1. We often see good people suffering and dying, while the wicked prosper.
2. In the absence of a divine judge, who evens the score, such injustices are permanent.
3. For morality to be reasonable and make sense, virtue and well-being must ultimately be in harmony.

A righteous divine judge must exist (to punish the wicked, and reward the virtuous, in the afterlife).

1. If there is no God, everything is permitted (Dostoevsky)
2. Some things are morally impermissible

∴ God exists

- The crucial premise is the first, which claims that moral truths cannot exist in a world without God.
- Naturalists respond in various ways:
 - There are no moral truths (rare view)
 - God is not needed for moral facts (standard view)
 - Religion-based moral systems are nasty anyway

The main questions

- What kind of “theocentric” ethics is possible?
- What kind of naturalised ethics is possible?

FACTS, VALUES AND MODERN MYTHS ABOUT ETHICS

Can Scientific Naturalism Fully Explain Ethics?

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Woodward IRC Room 5

Normativity

- Morality is normative or evaluative, i.e. concerned with good and bad, right and wrong. Ought, not just is. Normative claims don't just describe, they make demands on us.
- Other normative notions:
 - Knowledge, justification, warrant
 - Logical consequence, validity, probability
 - Health, disease, disorder
 - Truth

Normativity

- There are moral anti-realists (e.g. Mackie), who claim that there are no moral facts, so that moral claims are meaningless. (Similar to the status of theological claims for an atheist.)
- It's not so easy to be an anti-realist about normative facts in general.
- Is God needed for normativity in general?

N.B. Good vs. Right

- Philosophers don't use 'good' and 'right' interchangeably.
- **Good** refers to *states of affairs* that are desirable (such as happiness, and character virtues)
- **Right** refers to *actions* that in accordance with some rule (such as telling the truth). We are morally obliged to do what is right.
- N.B. Often an action will be prudent, a "good idea" (since it produces some benefit) without being morally obligatory.

God's nature and Human nature

- God's nature is considered essential, or necessary, just as he has necessary existence. (His nature is held to be just, loving, faithful, truthful, generous, etc.)
- Human nature is largely a result of God's *will* or *design*. After all, snakes, dolphins, lobsters have very different natures from us. But humans are special, "made in the image of God", i.e. modelled to some extent on God's nature. (E.g. humans are also designed to be loving.)

God's will/commands

- While God's nature is considered essential by theists, his will and commands are not. God has considerable freedom, though is constrained by his own nature (e.g. not to break promises).
- “Voluntarism”, the idea that God chose the physical laws, helped scientists to realise that the laws of physics must be discovered by experience, not reason alone.

Divine Command Theory

- Moral truth arises from God's commands (or more generally his will).
- E.g. generosity is right, even obligatory, *because* God commands us to be generous.
- The DCT faces the Euthyphro problem.

Euthyphro Problem

- Is generosity right because God commands it, or does God command it because it's right?
- If the latter, then we've abandoned the DCT.
- But if generosity isn't already right (prior to God's command) then why command it?
 - If God *creates* rightness by issuing commands, then he could command rape and murder, and these would be right!

Alasdair MacIntyre

- “The essential characteristics then which distinguish the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures from any of the Nobodaddies ... are that He [God] is just and that He cannot possibly not be. ...”
- [“Nobodaddy” is William Blake’s term for the imaginary God who is really a deified superego.]
- God is different from Jupiter in this respect

Bill Craig, Bill Alston

- ‘God’s moral nature is what Plato called the “Good.” He is the locus and source of moral value. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth.’ (Craig)
- ‘... we can think of God Himself, the individual being, as the supreme standard of goodness. . . . Goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some general principles are true but just because they are features of God.’ (Alston)

The Bills

‘So far from being arbitrary, God's commands are an expression of his perfect goodness. Since He is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best.’ (Alston)

‘... God’s moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands which constitute our moral duties or obligations. Far from being arbitrary, these commands flow necessarily from His moral nature.’ (Craig)

- God's nature -> God's commands -> moral obligations
- God's nature -> Good
- God's commands -> Right
- Alston compares God's moral character, in defining goodness, to the metre stick in Paris that defines one metre – a concrete exemplar.

Features of theocentric morality

- Naturally fits with virtue ethics, though can be used to ground deontology or utilitarian ethics.
- Sees much of normativity in terms of *authority*. Like warrants, permits, etc.
 - Morality is demanding. It requires us to do things we don't want to do.
 - The demands of morality cannot be ignored. They aren't optional. We all live under morality's rule.

Advantages of theocentric morality

- It's easy to say what moral truths are *about*. they're very concrete, necessary, significant.
- Morality is impartial, transcends human differences.
- Flourishing is objective, as defined by God's design
- Harmony between virtue and self interest
- Also accounts for other kinds of normativity?
- Knowledge of what's right comes from natural moral and rational faculties, designed by God, as well as from revelation.

Problems with theocentric morality

- Why not just take the (supposed) attributes of God, and make *them* the definition of good?
- Isn't "God is good" a trivial tautology on this view? (We might as well say 'God is like God'.)
- Why accept God's authority? *Who says* we should? (Other than God, of course!)

Naturalised ethics

- God's role can be played by:
 - Evolutionary history, as a “designer” of humans
 - Social attitudes (approval, acceptance, outrage)
 - Moral emotions (guilt, shame, indignation)
 - Reason
 - Mathematical game theory, showing that certain kinds of behaviour are optimal in the long run
 - An abstract set of properties or maxims (love, honesty, respect for persons, etc.)

E.g. Dawkins

- Altruism in the animal kingdom (including humans) can be explained by:
 - Genetic kinship
 - Hope of reciprocation
 - Building a good reputation
 - Advertisement of superiority
- Some moral urges have such a Darwinian origin.
- Do our moral urges have *authority*, on this view?

- Does evolutionary biology have a conception of human nature, or flourishing, that is similar to the theistic conception?

Kai Nielsen, “Ethics Without Religion”, 1964

- Nielsen considers the theists’ argument that:

“...if we look at morality with the cold eye of the anthropologist we will—assuming we are clear-headed—find morality to be nothing more than the often conflicting *mores* of the various tribes spread around the globe. If we eschew the kind of insight that religion can give us, we will have no Archimedean point in accordance with which we can decide how it is that we ought to live and die.”

Neilson's theist

- Aren't the social mores of a given tribe arbitrary, and lacking in authority?
- How can they be justified?
- Why obey them when they conflict with our personal preferences?

Neilson's theist continues ...

- For a secular moralist, there is no purpose for human life.

... when we become aware that there is no overarching purpose that men were destined to fulfill, the myriad purposes, the aims and goals humans create for themselves, will be seen not to be enough.

Nielsen's response

- “I do not see why purposes of purely human devising are not ultimately worth striving for. There is much that we humans prize and would continue to prize even in a Godless world. Many things would remain to give our lives meaning and point even after “the death of God.”
- Does this seem more like a psychological thesis than a philosophical one?
- C.f.: Could theology continue, after theologians all became atheists?

Happiness, flourishing

- Nielsen's understanding of morality is centred on the notion of "happiness", i.e. flourishing, or well-being.
- N.B. flourishing, *eudaimonia*, is not the same thing as pleasure.

"A man could be said to have lived a happy life if he had found lasting sources of satisfaction in his life and if he had been able to find certain goals worthwhile and to achieve at least some of them. He could indeed have suffered some pain and anxiety, but his life must, for the most part, have been free from pain, estrangement, and despair, and must, on balance, have been a life which he has liked and found worthwhile."

- Nielsen admits that we cannot adequately define “happiness”. He replies that most terms (e.g. “chair, “wind”, “pain”) cannot be defined rigorously, yet we know what they mean.

We all have some idea of what would make us happy and of what would make us unhappy; many people, at least, can remain happy even after “the death of God.”

- Does Nielsen confuse *God’s not existing* with *people not believing in God*? What is “the death of God” here?

Subjective vs. Objective

- The main conclusion of Hauser and Singer's study was that there is no statistically significant difference between atheists and religious believers in making these [moral] judgements. This seems compatible with the view, which I and many others hold, that we do not need God in order to be good—or evil.
- Dawkins, p. 258

- N.B. For a theist, *eudaimonia* is living in accordance with God's design. (or something along those lines)
- Thus, according to a theist, no one could live a *happy* life in a Godless world, just as one cannot go *up* in deep space.

Goods achievable in a Godless world)

“Human love and companionship are also central to a significant or happy life. We prize them, and a life which is without them is most surely an impoverished life, a life that no man, if he would take the matter to heart, would desire. But I would most emphatically assert that human love and companionship are quite possible in a Godless world, and the fact that life will some day inexorably come to an end and cut off love and companionship altogether enhances rather than diminishes their present value.”

Why can't this give our lives meaning?

... there is the need to do what we can to diminish the awful sum of human misery in the world. ...

Throughout the world there is an immense amount of human suffering, suffering that can, through a variety of human efforts, be partially alleviated. Why can we not find a meaningful life in devoting ourselves, as did Doctor Rieux in Albert Camus's *The Plague*, to relieving somewhat the sum total of human suffering?

- How might a theist respond?
- That love, companionship, and relieving human suffering could perhaps exist in an imaginary Godless world, but there would be nothing to make them *good*. What would their goodness consist in?

Why be so nice though?

My religious critic, following out the dialectic of the problem, should query: why should you respect someone, why should you treat all people equally, if doing this is not in your interest or not in the interests of your group? No purely secular justification can be given for so behaving.

What justification can be given?

Secular morality is *arbitrary and parasitic*?

... the secularist, as well as the “knight of faith,” acknowledges that the principle of respect for persons is a precious one—a principle that he is unequivocally committed to, but the religious man alone can *justify* adherence to this principle. The secularist is surreptitiously drawing on Christian inspiration when he insists that all men should be considered equal and that people’s rights must be respected.

- Nielsen responds to this “arbitrary and parasitic” charge with a *tu quoque*. The religious and secular moralists are in basically the same position here. *Both* systems begin with arbitrary first principles.

Even if the secularist must simply subscribe to the Kantian principle, “Treat every man as an end and never as a means only,” as he must subscribe to the claim, “Happiness is good,” it does not follow that he is on worse ground than the religious moralist, for the religious moralist too, as we have seen, must simply subscribe to his ultimate moral principle, “Always do what God wills.”

- Is this *tu quoque* reasonable?
- Is theocentric morality, as well as secular morality, based on accepting moral axioms with no justification?

- This is only Nielsen's first response to the "arbitrary and parasitic" charge. He continues:

There is a purely secular rationale for treating people fairly, for regarding them as persons...

We have no evidence that men ever lived in a pre-social state of nature. Man, as we know him, is an animal with a culture; he is part of a community, and the very *concept* of community implies binding principles and regulations—duties, obligations and rights.

- Nielsen draws on ideas from Hobbes and Rawls, noting that individuals do best (satisfy their own preferences to the fullest degree) when part of a fair and just community, in which everyone's rights are respected. Even rational egoists, *if everyone is equal in ability*, will choose membership in such a community, with all the obligations it entails.

The Happy Tyrant

- But what if humans are not equal in ability and strength?
- Kai Nielsen considers a happy tyrant, i.e. an egoist who is powerful enough to escape retribution for his acts of injustice.
- What can we say to such a tyrant?

- We can say that his position, no matter how strong, might change and he might be in a position where he would need his rights protected, but this is surely not a strong enough reason for respecting those rights.
- Then Nielsen falls back on his earlier *tu quoque*.

In considering such questions we reach a point in reasoning at which we must simply *decide* what sort of person we shall strive to become. But, as I have said, the religious moralist reaches the same point. He too must make a decision of principle, but the principle he adopts is a fundamentally incoherent one.

Stanley Fish

“Norms and Deviations: Who’s to Say?” (*New York Times*, June 1, 2008. Stanley Fish is a professor of humanities and law at Florida International University, in Miami.)

- Fish is assuming a secular perspective, so that there is no fixed human nature, determined by God’s design.
- Historically, women, black people and gays were seen as inferior, deviant, etc. but now have gained equality, human rights, etc. (Sort of.)

Who is to say that your community is better than ours?

“The logic of that question is the logic that has driven all the anti-discrimination movements of the last 120 years. A minority ... is regarded by the mainstream as defective, impaired, criminal (Italians and Irish in the 19th century), inferior (Asians and blacks), immoral (gays, polygamists and gypsies), lacking in mental or physical resources (women until only recently) and either less or more than human (X-men and Jews).”

- “Within the minority community the conviction grows that its stigmatization is the result not of “natural” deficiencies, but of a politically established norm that serves the interests of the powers that be. Exposing that norm as a mere artifact of history with no special claim to authority means first that it is no longer obligatory to honor it ...”
- Today, some other groups presently judged defective or deviant in some way (e.g. people with ASD, deaf people, pornographers, polygamists, pedophiles, etc.)

- “I am neither making nor approving these arguments. I am merely noting that they can and have been made, that they will continue to be made, that *there is no theoretical way to stop them from being made*, and that their structure is always the same whether the condition that asks for dignity and the removal of stigma is autism, deafness, blackness, gayness, polygamy, drug use, pedophilia or murder.”

(My emphasis – RJ)

- Of course this argument does not apply to theocentric norms, which are determined by God's design plan for humans.
- What can a secular moralist say in response to Fish?
- Will any of Neilson's ideas work here?
- What about other naturalistic bases for morality, such as evolutionary biology?