

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 2

I. Voluntarism and Natural Law

Socrates and Euthyphro agree that:

Holy = What is pleasing to all the gods, or what they all love.

Unholy = What is displeasing to all the gods, or what they all hate.

Given this definition, Socrates asks whether the holy becomes holy from the love of the gods, or vice versa.

This question is one of the most famous in all of philosophy.

Consider a specific instance of this question:

Is murder unholy because the gods hate murder, or do the gods hate murder because it is unholy?

Which is the cause and which is the effect?

Note that the same question remains if we consider only one God:

Is murder unholy because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is unholy?

Also, the same structural problem arises for morality as for holiness:

Is murder wrong because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is wrong?

We will consider this last version of Socrates' question to Euthyphro.

The first option is called 'voluntarism', or Divine Command Theory (DCT).

Arthur's rejects this, in his article.

On voluntarism, ethics is a part of religion, and we should look to God for morality.

But this means that God could change his mind, and make murder morally acceptable.

That's uncomfortable.

Doesn't there have to be a reason to choose certain acts as good and others as bad?

So, maybe it's the other way around.

The second option is called 'natural law'.

(Arthur takes this position, but not by name.)

This means that there's a limit on God's power; she can not make murder morally right.

So she is not omnipotent.

This also means that there is ethical work to be done outside of religion.

God can still be the divine discoverer of morality, even though she is not the source.

The problem then becomes one of access.

How do we know which of God's supposed pronouncements are really the divine word?

II. More problems with linking morality and religion

We may be tempted to confuse morality with self-interest.

If one does the right thing for desire of eternal reward or fear of eternal punishment, one have only acts in self-interest.

This seems not to be what we mean by morality.

Morality seems opposed to self-interest.

At least, it is difficult to determine if some one acts morally, when self-interest is involved.

A further problem with looking to God for morality:

We're doing philosophy.

We want to ask questions about why things are right and wrong.

'God says to do p' sounds a lot like, 'do p and shut up'.

III. Arthur's arguments against linking morality and religion

Arthur presents four arguments in attempting to separate morality from religion, rejecting the necessity of religion as a foundation for ethics.

1) Many people act morally without religious motivation, p 17.

But we might internalize the real motivation (i.e. religion).

An analogy: we do not fear a traffic accident when we drive.

We have learned to follow certain rules.

But the basic motivation is fear of an accident.

On the other hand, there are ethical atheists.

It is difficult to say that they have internalized religion.

Maybe they are acting out of bad faith, but Arthur's argument does seem plausible.

2) There are many religions, and we do not know which one is right.

They may conflict.

But we do not need to know the answer to be moral.

There are problems of revelation and interpretation.

Is the Bible God's word, or an historical account of God's actions?

Our answers to these questions project a prior understanding of morality, pp 17-18.

3) Moral arbitrariness of God.

(Already discussed, above; this only applies to Divine Command Theory.)

DCT entails the possibility of murder, torture being morally acceptable, if God changes her mind.

If you think that God can not change her mind, you have abandoned this position.

4) Linguistic argument: 'is morally required' does not mean 'is commanded by God'.

Societies without one concept can have the other.

IV. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

Consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

A) no morality;

B) exactly one morality; or

C) more than one morality.

You must decide which one of these options is right.

Each has a name:

Position A) is called moral nihilism

There is no morality, but just an illusion, an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.

Consider how morality is learned, through reward and punishment.

Nietzsche and the will of the strong.

Position C) is called ethical relativism.

There are two types:

1) Cultural relativism: Morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other grouping.

2) Subjectivism: Morality depends on the individual.

Again, consider how we learn moral facts.

On either position, there is no right/wrong outside society, or subculture, or family.

King Darius (Persians) brought the Callatians and the Greeks to court to prove relativism.

Callatians were cannibals, ate their dead.

Greeks cremated their dead.

Each thought the others' practice not just repugnant but immoral.

Position B) is called moral absolutism, there is just one set of rights and wrongs.

This is a claim about what exists, not what we know.

We may be ignorant of the right morality.

So, we can be absolutists, without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.

We'll see a variety of examples of absolutism, throughout the course.