

Morality and Religion - Jeremy Pierce, 29 May 2003
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The *Euthyphro* problem:

Many people are attracted to the idea that morality is based on religion in some way (particularly in God). In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates raises a problem for this sort of view. When applied to contemporary monotheism, the problem is as follows. The religious view of morality might say that things are morally right and wrong simply because they conform to God's will. If God says something is right, that means it's right. If God says something is good, that means it's good. If God says it's wrong, it's wrong. If God says it's bad, it's bad. What it means for something to be right, wrong, good, or bad is for God to declare them such. Morality is entirely based on what God says.

What does it mean to define goodness in this way? If all it means to say something is good is to say God chose to approve of it, then it doesn't seem as if the things that are good had to be good. God could just as easily have chosen different things to be good – e.g. murder and stealing. If God had chosen them to be good, they would have been good.

The main complaint against this view when put this way is that God's choice is arbitrary. There doesn't seem to be a reason why God would have chosen caring for people to be a good thing and stealing to be a bad thing. If it's merely God's choice that makes it right or wrong, then God must not have a basis for that choice. What's worse is that talking about God's goodness now seems to be saying very little. It's supposed to be saying something about God to say that God is good. But according to this view, whatever God chooses is good. So it just says that God is God. It doesn't add anything to your picture of God to say that God is good, and it's certainly not something to worship God about.

So, many philosophers move to a different conception of the connection between God and morality. It's not that God chooses what's right and wrong with no basis. God has a basis - the independent truths about morality. What's right and wrong is already true, not because of God's choice. God's choice is because of what's already right and wrong.

This seems to avoid the problems with the first option. God's decision is based on some truth already there, so it's not arbitrary. Also, it really does mean something to say that God is good, since it's saying God's character fits with an independent standard of goodness (whatever that might be). However, there are new problems with this view. We no longer have an account of the basis of morality. God was supposed to be that. Now we're back to square one. Lots of moral theories give an account of the basis of morality, but the main point here was to do it in terms of God, and this second option gives in on that. Also, there seems to be an external limitation on God that wasn't there in the first view. If an independent standard of morality applies to God, isn't that a limit on God? God is no longer the absolute standard of morality many people would have thought, and there are facts unrelated to God's character that determine how God ought to act. This seems equally unsatisfying to many believers.

As James Rachels¹ presents just these two options. He presents Thomas Aquinas as taking the second view. Rachels himself is an atheist, but he thinks you should believe B if you believe in God. However, he ignores Aquinas' own view, the classic response to the *Euthyphro* dilemma. The two options are supposed to be as follows:

¹ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th edition (2003) New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, ch.4.

- A. God simply decides what is good and bad, without any basis but mere whim.
- B. Morality has nothing to do with God, and God just goes along with it.

It shouldn't take much thought to see that there's a third option:

- C. God doesn't just choose what's good and bad, but it's based on God's nature.

Aquinas says God isn't simply picking something with no basis, but that doesn't mean it's not based in God in some other way. Aquinas says the basis is God's perfect nature (not meaning moral perfection but some richer notion of absolute perfection, from which moral perfection flows in some way mere mortals shouldn't expect to understand). So the charge of God's arbitrary choice doesn't apply. God doesn't pick for no reason at all but because it's God's nature to choose that way. However, God's nature is perfect in every way, and morality is somehow based on that. so it's not an external limitation on God. Aquinas hasn't answered all the questions (particularly how it is that this notion of perfection explains morality), but at least he's dodged the worries presented from the two choices above. It may not be a complete view, but it seems consistent.

Natural Law Theory:

Rachels goes on to discuss Aquinas' natural law theory. He portrays this view as a way to flesh out option B above, although a view like this fits with any of the three views from the previous section. The two main components of natural law theory are:

1. There are purposes in nature (in the Christian version offered by Aquinas, these purposes are given to things by God, although Aristotle tried to have a version without God playing the same sort of role). A common example of such a purpose would be the traditional Catholic view that the purpose of sex is merely for reproduction. Pleasure is not one of its purposes.
2. These purposes in part determine which things are right and wrong. In particular, acting according to the purposes of the creator for creation fits with those purposes and thus fits with God's plan. This is the right sort of action. Acting against God's purposes by acting against the purposes of things in nature is the wrong sort of action.

Rachels discusses three objections to this sort of view:

1. This view is too anthropocentric. It places humans as the center of the universe.
2. Seeing purposes in nature is out of step with contemporary science.
3. It's a mistake to think an "is" can imply an "ought".

Let's take each of these objections separately.

1. Is the theory of natural law anthropocentric? Here's a version that is: There are purposes in nature. For instance, rain falls so that we can have crops growing, so that we can eat them. Plants exist just for us to use them, and animals do also. In fact, the whole purpose of the entire universe is for humans to enjoy it and use it to fulfill our own desires. (To be truly anthropocentric, it wouldn't just be that God made universe for us but that God's own existence is merely for our benefit.)

But this isn't the view that Aquinas or most natural law theorists today would

hold, though perhaps Aristotle was guilty of this sort of view. The traditional Christian natural law theory is far more theocentric than anthropocentric. That is, God is the center of all things. Everything exists because God created it, and all of creation, insofar as it serves its natural purposes, is to do what God intended it to do. There's usually a notion of humans being created in God's image and therefore getting a large part of the benefit out of this, and perhaps there's a notion of humans as being responsible to manage wisely what God has allowed us to take part in. However, that does not place humans at the center or see us as all-important. Just because God made things to serve certain purposes doesn't mean those purposes all involve us, even if humans are a crucial part of God's purposes (which is the case at least in Christian versions of natural law theory).

2. Is it contrary to science to see purposes in nature? Aristotle's natural law theory certainly was. He thought rain fell *because* it would help out humans – because it ultimately serves this purpose. Our advances in science tell us the real reasons why rain really falls – simply natural processes of cause and effect.

However, does that mean there isn't a creator who set things up with those processes of cause and effect so that there would be an environment where rain can fall and nourish plants that we could eat? Natural law theory discusses *why*, whereas contemporary science focuses *how*. We've got more "how" answers than Aristotle did. It doesn't immediately follow that the "why" questions should just disappear. If there really is a God who is somehow in control over the progress of the universe, then there may be an ultimate purpose for certain things, even if each step along the way can be fully explained in terms of how it happened. So modern science doesn't eliminate natural law theory.

3. David Hume presented a problem that would apply to this theory (if it applies at all). There are facts, and there are values. There are facts about the world, the things that are true or false. Then there are the values we bring to the world, the things we consider good or bad. The goodness or badness isn't in the world. It's not something you find when you do your scientific research. It's something you bring to it. It's really just your feeling or attitude about the things in the world. But natural law theory involves purposes in the world that make things right or wrong. If it turns out that the Catholic view is right about sex, then sex is merely for procreation (though only quick read of the Song of Solomon should demonstrate quite clearly that the biblical picture of sex isn't just about reproduction). Hume wants to say that this is just the Catholic attitude toward sex. It doesn't have that implication in itself. So there are the facts about sex and then the values people bring to the table. The facts can't imply anything about what really is right and wrong. That's our feeling or perception on top of what's really there. An "is" doesn't imply anything about an "ought".

The main problem with this objection is that Rachels can't really believe it. In an earlier chapter², he argues that there really are objective facts about right and wrong. Morality isn't as the emotivist thinks. We're not just expressing our feelings when we say something is good or bad. The fact that we can give reasons for our views (and that these reasons are supposed to be able to convince someone that we're right) shows that we don't think we're just expressing our attitude but arguing for something true independent of how we feel. Hume's view is very close to emotivism, and Rachels handily disposes of such a view about ethics. So why does he give the same objection against natural law

² See especially pp.39-44 in the chapter on subjectivism.

theory? It's true that natural law theory provides a basis for moral truths in facts about nature. That does involve an "is" leading to an "ought". However, every objectivist moral theory does this. Ethical egoism bases the "ought" claims on the truths about what's in your best interest. Utilitarianism bases them on truths about what will lead to the most happiness (or the best consequences in general). So Rachels is just inconsistent on this. It may be an objection a subjectivist could use against natural law theory (and against ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and all the other objectivist views). But Rachels, an objectivist, cannot consistently use it here.

Some quick thoughts on reason, truth, and revelation:

Rachels spends a fair amount of time saying that he's shown that moral truths must be able to be known by reason. He says that natural law theory leads to this way of thinking, since the truths about morality are all present within the natural order, and all we have to do is look into the world and see the purposes to see what right and wrong are. Then there should be no reason for God to have to tell us. Interestingly, this optimistic view of human reason is out of step with the traditional Christian doctrine of the fall, which says that human beings rebelled against God's good purposes and are out of step with those purposes now by our very nature. We no longer share in the perfect moral order and perfect community created by God, and as a result we can't always see God's purposes, since we ourselves are out of touch with those purposes. If this is right, then there is a need for God to reveal to us which things fit with God's purposes, and reason isn't enough, though it certainly might play a significant role. Aquinas never denied this.

Rachels also shows how some people use biblical texts to show opposite points, thereby undermining the authority of such texts. But isn't this just a problem in figuring out what the text is really saying? He gives no principled argument against seeing a religious text as authoritative. He just points out some difficulties in figuring out how to interpret such a text.