

Being Good without God

Some inconvenient facts:

- a) The major ethical theories taken seriously by philosophers do not depend on God for anything.
 - Utilitarianism* = value based in natural states of feeling (pleasure and pain); right conduct: maximize pleasure
 - Kantian ethics* = value based in capacity for autonomy (= self-governance); right conduct: respect for persons
 - Virtue ethics* = value based in states of excellence, flourishing that helps humans live successfully; right conduct: virtuous behaviour
- b) Most *religious* philosophers agree that ethics does not depend on religion; only a dogmatic minority doesn't agree.

Ways ethics might be connected to religion:

- a) *Motivation*: religion provides reasons to be good (wishing to do God's will, offer of heavenly reward)
 - i) Motivation by reward/punishment is motivation by self-interest – cannot motivate us to be moral when it is not in our interest.
 - ii) Motivation to do God's will is obedience – obedience is not a satisfactory model of moral choice, since no one can escape the duty to evaluate the commandments they obey (check out the Nuremberg trials).
 - iii) Both self-interest and obedience are the wrong kind of motivations for morality – the reason not to abuse children is not protection of self-interest or obedience to the rules, but because it causes needless suffering.
- b) *Knowledge*: religion provides knowledge of moral truth (humans cannot know moral truth by natural reason, or cannot be objective)
 - i) If humans have no inherent power to determine moral truth, they could not understand moral truth provided by religion: recognizing moral truths on one's own and moral truth that one is told uses the same capacity – practical reason.
 - ii) Objectivity means what is "publicly scrutinizable, supported by sufficient grounds which can be assessed for their legitimacy" – unless we are able to assess his reasons for the commandments he gives, God's 'say-so' doesn't provide objectivity.
 - iii) If humans have practical reason and can understand God's commands, moral truth is not objective because of religion, but because of human reason.
 - iv) Even if God's say-so was relevant, it would make moral truth more difficult to determine – we would have to examine whether there is any God to consult, try to find out which God is the right one, try to find out which revelation *really* reflects his/her commands, try to find out what the correct interpretation of that revelation is, wonder why believers obey only a tiny fraction of God's absolutely objective commandments, ...?
 - v) Most humans agree that pointless suffering is bad – why couldn't this be an objective basis for morality?
- c) *Existence*: religion provides the existence of moral truth (God creates moral rules, institutes a divine order)
 - i) *Divine Command theory*: right = commanded by God; wrong = against God's command
 1. Moral truth is arbitrary – if God commands murder, murder is right
 2. Can't say "but God is good – would not command to do wrong" – remember 'wrong' already means "against God's command", so saying "God would not command wrong" only means "God would not command wrong against God's command" which is probably true by definition, but doesn't help much.
 3. Also see, a), ii) and iii) above
 - ii) *Natural Law theory*: God has instituted a divine order in the cosmos; right = things working naturally (as God arranged), wrong = things working unnaturally.
 1. Is-ought fallacy: cannot determine 'how things ought to be' from 'how things are'
 2. Natural/unnatural ≠ good/bad; snake venom = natural and bad / synthetic painkillers = unnatural and good