

Chapter 2

Religion

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Abstract An introduction to the similarities and differences between religion and ethics.

Keywords Ethics • Religion • Divine command theory • Natural law • Tradition

Case: Rich the Atheist

Students in Emily's "Ag Ethics" course are still discussing cheating during a class several days later. Emily hesitates to get drawn in, but eventually cannot stop herself from raising her hand to say that one of the reasons that she decided not to cheat is that she is a Christian. Honesty, honor, love, and respect are central virtues of the Christian faith, she explains, and cheating seems distinctly un-Christian to her.

Rich, who sits in the front row and has already distinguished himself as an active participant in discussions, loses no time.

"Dr. Wright, I mean no disrespect to those with religious beliefs, but we aren't going to get involved in this class with questions about what the Bible says, and what God wants, or what the Pope thinks, are we?"

"Well," the professor replies, "You raise some good questions. But why do you ask?"

"Because I don't think religious discussions ever get anywhere when it comes to talking about morality. First, not everyone in the discussion believes in God, so why should atheists be forced to adhere to standards that they don't agree with? Second, even those people who do believe in God don't agree about morality. Liberal Protestants say abortion is okay under virtually any circumstances; traditional

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Catholics say it isn't permissible under any conditions; and you have the full spectrum of views in between. Third, how can anyone know what God commands people to do? The Bible is full of contradictions, isn't it?"

Emily squirms a bit in her seat.

"Wait a minute," she replies. "There are methods in my religious community for determining better and worse interpretations of Scripture; there isn't that much disagreement among Christians on abortion – well, at least not in *my* church; and everyone, sometime, has to adhere to standards he or she doesn't agree with. So I don't see why religious arguments should automatically be excluded from the conversation. Religious traditions are important in teaching values, and they can help us to form our children and our communities in the right way."

Dr. Wright responds by saying that the class will not be able to spend a great deal of time on the subject of religion, but it must consider one ethical theory that depends heavily on religious belief. That theory is the Divine Command Theory, in which moral standards are thought to be necessarily related to God's will.

"But isn't the Divine Command Theory simply false?" Rich persists.

"Let's withhold judgment on the matter until we have at least had time to get the theory out on the table," says Dr. Wright. He looks around the class. "Any other questions?"

The classroom is very quiet. No hands are raised, and everyone seems to be avoiding eye contact with everyone else. As the bell rings, Emily rises from her seat feeling alone. Outside the building another student, Dawn, approaches her.

"Hey, I just wanted you to know that I'm a Christian, too," says Dawn. "And I support you 100 percent. But we have a problem; we don't know how to talk about our religious convictions in this class. It doesn't seem that the instructor, or this campus, is very open to honest discussion of beliefs in anything supernatural."

"Oh, thanks so much for telling me," says Emily.

"If it's any comfort, I would guess that the majority of the students in the class feel the same way that you and I do. We're all kinda religious, but we're also kinda intimidated by the secular atmosphere of the university. We want to learn how to talk about our religious beliefs—we want to learn what we believe!—but it's pretty clear that our instructors are not very friendly to belief."

Case: Questions

1. Do you consider yourself religious?
2. If you answered the first question *yes*:
 - (a) Do you feel comfortable discussing your religious beliefs with others in general? Why or why not?
 - (b) Do you feel comfortable discussion your religious beliefs in university class-rooms? Why or why not?
3. If you answered the first question *no*:

- (a) Do you feel comfortable discussing the religious beliefs of others in general? Why or why not?
 - (b) Do you feel comfortable discussing the religious beliefs of others in university classrooms? Why or why not?
4. Do you agree with Rich that discussion of religion should be limited in university classes devoted to ethics? Why or why not?
 5. If you know what the Divine Command Theory is, please explain it.

Discussion of Issues

Rich's comments direct attention to the source of ethical values. In the previous chapter we observed that ethics is not derived from custom or law. From whence does it come? Perhaps the right answer is Emily's answer: God's will. Because religion is so powerful and its relationship to ethics so complex, the relation between the two subjects deserves thorough investigation.¹

Are Morality and Religion the Same Thing?

Some hold that moral systems may be reduced to the values of a society's religion. This is an important point because those of us in the United States live in a very religious culture. Harris polls show that more than 75% of all U.S. college students believe in God.² In 2008 according to the Harris Interactive Poll 70% of Americans said that they believed that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that Heaven exists (Harris 2008). The United States has some 900,000 religious fellowship groups; on average, that amounts to 20,000 religious groups in each of the 50 states (Wuthnow 1994, p. 11).

Where we find religion we typically find instruction in morality. Although the aberrant, hateful religious organizations are the ones that make headlines, the truth about religion is more mundane and hopeful. It is a rare religious community that does not teach honesty, integrity, love, reciprocity, caring for others, and civility. According to Nancy Rosenblum, the influence of religion permeates our entire culture, creating the general "expectation that our pain and indignation at day-to-day unfairness and abuse will not be met with indifference, and thus [religious belief] may cultivate the iota of trust necessary for democratic citizens to speak out about ordinary injustice".³

¹I presented versions of this chapter between 1994 and 1998 at Bioethics Institutes at the University of Illinois, Michigan State University, Purdue University, Iowa State University, North Carolina State University, and Oregon State University. Many thanks to the participants of those institutes whose questions and criticisms helped me to refine the presentation.

²Note that the number of U.S. college students who said that they believed in God in March 1965 was more than 97% (Nielsen Survey Collection 1994).

³Rosenblum (1998) refers to Wuthnow (1994).

Historically, the ethical values of cultures have resided within religious traditions.⁴ The faith traditions have been the primary incubators and champions of virtue and character, whether you think of Jews, Muslims, the Nuer in Africa, the ancient Greeks and Romans, or the Lakota Sioux. In these traditions, rules about permissible and impermissible behaviors are closely aligned with religious beliefs. Morality is intimately tied up with religious beliefs about the power of deceased kin, the whims of capricious gods and goddesses, the will of a single omnipotent deity, or the power of the karma of one's past volitions.

Because religion both teaches moral rules and provides motivation for adhering to them, it cannot help but be a close neighbor to ethics. So close a neighbor that we sometimes fail to distinguish between them. As James Rachels points out, when New York Governor Mario Cuomo appointed a special panel to advise him on medical ethics, he did not select professors of ethical theory or trained applied ethicists (Rachels 1993, p. 45). He chose Christian clergy and a Jewish rabbi. We commonly think of spiritual people as moral experts, and we commonly resort to our religious traditions when trying to decide about contentious moral issues.

Religion is not only a close neighbor but also a powerful one. The price of sin and moral transgression is not only the sanction of God but also the disapproval of one's religious community. The power of religion and its proximity to ethics is especially critical today, when most Americans are concerned that the nation is going down the tubes morally. In a 1996 poll, more than 85% of Americans believed that "something is fundamentally wrong with America's moral condition," citing as proof the prevalence of "teen-age pregnancy, unwed childbearing, extramarital affairs, easy sex as a normal part of life" (Institute for American Values 1998). (It is worth noting that Americans, ironically, do not seem to think that racism, sexism, speciesism, environmental degradation, and the growing income gap between rich and poor are further evidence of this moral decay. Indeed, one might interpret the following fact as underscoring the possibility that the typical American's worries about "moral decay" are *not* connected to issues of race, equality, and distributive justice: Twice as many Americans believe that "'lack of morality' is a greater problem in the United States than 'lack of economic opportunity'" [Eberly 1996]).

⁴ Apart from the modern Western period in which the morality called secular humanism has developed in explicit opposition to religion, the only historical exception to the rule that morality develops within religion is probably Confucianism in China. According to many interpreters, Confucius (d. 479 BCE) did not believe in supernatural phenomena and denied the reality of one's dead ancestors, yet Confucius developed a very clear moral system based on the principle of *ren*, or benevolence. *Ren* is "the attitude and habit of reciprocity in moral thinking." Confucius once summarized *ren* as "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself." In the ethic of self-discipline and justice that characterized the Chou political court, we have an example, if my interpretation is correct, of a morality that did not rely on the sanction of transcendental beliefs or religious authorities. In our culture, secular humanism is a twentieth-century manifestation of a similar phenomenon.

Americans appear to be very interested in spirituality, and concerned with the moral state of their country. Curiously, however, we seem not to be particularly skilled at analyzing our problems in religious language. Consider the behavior of various U.S. leaders. Almost every recent president – George W. Bush, Clinton, Bush Sr., Reagan, Carter – all claimed to be devout Christians and most of them went regularly to church. Each one consulted with the evangelist Billy Graham. But, in public, the most sophisticated theological pronouncements they seem capable of making is the puzzling phrase they repeat over and over: “God bless America.” A masterful expression, but one not particularly well suited to subtle theological analysis of complex public policy.

Because morality and religion are proximate, powerful neighbors, those of us who are religious as well as those of us who are not need to think carefully about their relation. I begin with a definition of religion.

Defining Religion

It helps to have some paradigmatic cases before us when we try to define a term. Representative religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Sikhism, the Ojibwa and Sioux of North America, and the Yoruba and Ibo of Nigeria. Religions are complex and consist of many different components. They contain narratives, such as the Yoruba creation story, the synoptic narratives of Jesus’s suffering, death, and resurrection in the New Testament, and the autobiographies of individual believers. They feature rituals, such as the Christian Eucharist, baptism, and last rites, the Jewish bar mitzvah, and the Lakota Sun Dance. They include institutions, such as the universal Roman Catholic Church, the local Foursquare Gospel prayer meeting, a neighborhood ladies missionary circle, and Jewish synagogues. And there are beliefs, I argue, about the supernatural, immaterial places, states, or beings whose effects, powers, or actions are not explicable in terms of material causes and effects. The supernatural is anything to which people refer when they use other-worldly terms such as God, Krishna, Yahweh, Allah, Creator, karma, ancestral spirits, the All, the One, the Divine, miracles, heaven, hell, nirvana, damnation, salvation.⁵ I summarize this discussion by offering a definition.

Religion is that complex dimension of human activity involving beliefs about the supernatural, beliefs that are expressed in propositions and narratives and enacted in rituals and institutions. These beliefs authorize the group’s moral code and answer the question, What is the best way of life overall?

⁵By “transcendent,” I mean supernatural, not simply a mental realm that exists outside the body. One may be an atheistic mind-body dualist, such as Descartes would have been had he not been a theist, and not believe in the transcendent in the sense I am using it here. Atheists may believe that human identity consists of something more than the material transactions happening in our brains, but that does not make them believers in “transcendence,” at least as I am using the term here.

Note that this is a substantive rather than a functional definition of religion. It is a substantive definition because it insists that a religion must contain beliefs about the supernatural. Social theorists such as Emil Durkheim and Clifford Geertz proceed differently, using a functional definition. They note that social order is required in order for any people to live together, and they call whatever glue that ultimately binds a group together that group's religion. Functional definitions therefore don't require a religion to include supernatural beliefs. A religion is anything that *functions* in a certain way to bind a culture together. For a functionalist, Confucianism in China counts as a religion, even though Confucius himself did not believe in supernatural phenomena and explicitly denied the reality of ancestral spirits. For a functionalist, certain atheistic forms of Buddhism in China and India count as religions, as do communism and secular humanism in the West.

But we may ask: *Should* these traditions, which deny the existence of the supernatural, count as religions? Are they not instead cultural traditions? Perhaps we should reserve the term *religion* for those forms of Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism that contain not only a cultural binding force but also a belief in the extrawordly. I have argued elsewhere that functional definitions of religion are not particularly helpful because they exclude nothing (Comstock 1995).

A substantive definition of religion, by contrast, provides a good tool to think through the relationship of religion and ethics. Every religion has certain moral rules, such as "Treat others in the way you would like to be treated," and "Do no harm to any living creature." These rules are sometimes implicit and unarticulated, but they are sometimes explicit, worked out in treatises such as the Catholic Church's encyclical "Culture of Death," the Pope's attack on the permissibility of abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia in modern Western culture.

Clearly, moral rules and ideals are found in religious traditions. But if we assume that not every tradition or person is necessarily religious, then moral rules and ideals can exist apart from religion as well. Many people do not qualify as adherents of religion, and yet they have moral principles and lead lives of moral integrity. I think of atheist colleagues I admire who teach philosophy or religious studies, of the members of the society of secular humanists, of the liberal Jews and Protestants who do not believe in a transcendent being and yet live lives of courage, decency, tolerance, and love. It appears impossible to insist that true morality, thought of as good behavior, is the exclusive property of religious people.

Assuming that religion refers to human activities involving beliefs about the supernatural and that people can be virtuous even if they do not believe in the supernatural, then morality can be independent of religion. To help us keep this fact in mind, I will use the phrase *rational morality* for the next few pages to refer to any institution of morality that exists separately from religion. I use the phrase *rational applied ethics* to refer to all non-theologically based attempts to develop general public policies, that is, public policies meant to apply to everyone, whatever their religious tradition. When we do ethics with the intent of influencing public policy, one of our most important jobs is to study arguments: premises, conclusions, and the validity of moving from premises *a*, *b*, and *c* to conclusion *d*. You will learn how to evaluate moral arguments in the next chapter.

As noted in Chapter 1, applied ethics has two tasks. One is to try to answer difficult moral dilemmas. The other is to remind ourselves of the astonishing number of particular moral judgments we hold in common. Religions typically help to teach these common values by offering their members moral instruction. Now, some religions teach values not found in rational applied ethics. For example, Jain morality teaches that one should not kill insects, while Christian morality teaches that one should love one's enemy. It is difficult to find justification for these judgments on rational grounds. But these values are the exception rather than the rule. More commonly, the world's religions teach their youngsters what I have called the moral truisms, the lists of rights and wrongs we have previously generated in our thought experiments: Do good, avoid evil, seek justice, honor your mother and father, help the needy.

Religion, in sum, is one vehicle through which children learn right and wrong. To put it another, perhaps more controversial, way: Religion teaches rational morality. But, of course, religion is not necessary in order to teach moral truisms or to explore ethics. Consider one anecdotal piece of evidence for this claim. Religion plays at best a marginal role in ethics courses offered at U.S. state universities, and virtually no role at all in ethics discussions in Europe. Typically, philosophy instructors spend at most 1 or 2 days on the Divine Command Theory (discussed later), and that is the extent of the treatment of religious approaches to ethics. Moreover, philosophy instructors typically conclude discussion of the Divine Command Theory with the claim that the theory is false. Indeed, it is not unusual for ethics professors to issue explicit disclaimers that appeals to religion will not be allowed to settle matters in the class. As a result, religion appears very little, either in classroom discussions or in the papers submitted by students. In my experience, nuanced and careful talk about religion is about as prevalent in university ethics courses as it is in public political discussion in France and Sweden, where it is virtually nonexistent. So, ethics is being taught without religion.

A religious person might think this an objectionable state of affairs. But is it? Consider three points.

First, it may be that at least some basic moral values can be justified rationally, without drawing on religious premises. This discussion explores this point in more detail soon with the Divine Command Theory.

Second, religious people have several basic values, often including religious freedom: the right of each individual to behave and believe religiously in the way dictated by his or her conscience. The beliefs and rituals of one religion should not be imposed on those who do not share those beliefs, and no one should be forced to worship one way or another. In a democratic setting that contains a plurality of religions, all people, and especially the very devout, have good reasons not to impose their beliefs on others.⁶

⁶Unfortunately, philosophy instructors often presume that helping students learn to reason for themselves requires that one talk dismissively about religion. The best kind of reasoning includes reasoning about matters near and dear. Perhaps professors need to worry less about stopping religious students' illegitimate appeals to authority and worry more about enabling religious students' attempts to draw legitimately on religious traditions as moral sources.

Third, we can reason *impartially* about our values, developing policies that apply not only to the members of our own religious community but also across the board. University classrooms often include students who do not accept the beliefs of any religious community. Which moral principles will they consent to? To answer this question is to begin to reason impartially.⁷

One feature of morality distinguishes it from economic calculations of costs and benefits, from prudential calculations of what will best serve one's own interests, and even from religious considerations about revealed truths. Morality has the quality of *overriding* these other considerations. The overridingness of morality is the feature of ethics that insists that the right thing to do is not determined by the polls, our preferences, economic utility, or the results of democratic votes. The right thing to do is determined by the actions we have the best reasons to perform. Whatever is the ethical thing to do is the thing we *ought* to do; the right thing trumps all other choices.

Even religious choices? We should do the right thing rather than what God tells us to do? This is a sensitive and controversial issue because God apparently sometimes has told individuals (Abraham) to do the wrong thing (kill his innocent son Isaac). But such instances are extraordinarily rare. In the ordinary case, and in the public secular arena, we place higher value on the dictates of morality than we place on the freedom of religious thought. Consider one example. Rational morality tells us that difficult cases in which young children with treatable leukemia whose parents refuse medical treatment for them on religious grounds should be settled in favor of saving the child's life rather than sacrificing the child to respect the parents' religious beliefs. When it comes to life and death issues, courts in Western culture insist on doing the right thing. When in such cases the dictates of rational applied ethics override fundamental spiritual convictions, we see – for better or worse – that religion is marginalized in secular courts.

The marginal character of religion is underscored when people review the particular moral codes specific to their professions. A *professional ethical code* is a summary of the rules regarding what is considered to be right and wrong in a profession, such as the National Cattlemen's Association's code of ethics and the Veterinarian's Oath. Such codes typically articulate noncontroversial and widely held beliefs about the responsibilities that attach to one's role. Veterinary scientific and cattle associations all disavow dishonesty, fraud, and disrespect for the law. All commend the use of professional skills for the benefit of society. Religious leaders make up a profession, and there are ethical standards that apply to them. In the Evangelical Covenant denomination, for example, male pastors are strongly discouraged from meeting alone in counseling sessions with women parishioners.

How is religion related to professional ethical codes? To my knowledge, and apart from the codes of the clergy, no twentieth-century professional ethical code

⁷University instructors may need to be reminded of the possibility that some rationally justifiable ethical principle or other may best be disseminated, as a practical matter, through the resources of some religious community or other. To imply that students should cut themselves off from their theological resources is unnecessarily to constrain not only moral development but ethical reasoning.

makes reference to a supernatural power. The Hippocratic Oath (c.370 BCE) invokes Apollo and Panacea and “all the gods and goddesses” as witnesses, but the American Medical Association’s code has discreetly dropped such references. The Boy Scout’s oath refers to God, but Boy Scouts are not professionals. Religion, then, is nearly nonexistent when it comes to the official ethical statements of today’s professional associations. Of course, religious beliefs and traditions may be the basis of moral thinking for many individuals within the professions, even though these beliefs and traditions do not appear in their official codes.

I have noted that morality seemingly can be taught without religion. But is this correct? Does morality not need religion in order to be justified? To answer this question we must do some work in *ethical theory*, the philosophical study of what makes things good or bad and actions right or wrong. Theorists inquire into questions such as: What is the standard for judging things to be moral? Is it God’s will? Individual rights? Pursuit of the greatest good? What is the relationship between moral and nonmoral explanations? Can moral language be reduced to naturalistic language? How should ethical theories be constructed and justified? On certain rational or religious foundations? Or by a process of comparative reasoning that considers our intuitions, scientific knowledge, and moral principles?

How is religion related to ethical theory? Two possible answers exist: necessarily and not necessarily.

Necessarily

The idea here is that moral laws logically must derive from divine commands. This idea is found in the Divine Command Theory, which holds that *an action is right if and only if God commands it*. A classic exposition of this theory is given by C. F. H. Henry, who writes that biblical ethics discredits rational morality. Biblical ethics is superior because it

gives theonomous ethics its classic form—the identification of the moral law with the Divine will. In Hebrew–Christian revelation, distinctions in ethics reduce to what is good or what is pleasing, and to what is wicked or displeasing to the Creator God alone.... The good is what the Creator-Lord does and commands. He is the creator of the moral law, and defines its very nature. (Henry 1957)

The virtue of this theory is that it renders morality objective, absolutist, and enforceable. Ethics is not a matter of etiquette, feelings, evolutionary adaptation, or do-what-you-will. Things are not right or wrong based on what you happen to think about them; they are *objectively* right or wrong, and there are moral facts about whether it is right to rape and steal. A standard exists by which we can tell what is good and bad. The Ten Commandments, for example, is one statement of the standard. Notice, too, that this theory carries with it a police force and judge as well as sanctions for disobedience. We ought to be moral on pain of punishment on Judgment Day. The theory also has the theological virtue of respecting God’s omnipotence and sovereignty. God is the creator of rational morality, and

God's actions are not constrained by a law higher than God. The slogan here might be that no ethical theory exists without religion.

Two of the most prominent German theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, both argued for this theory. It has at least three interpretations:

1. "Morally right" means "commanded by God."
2. No moral reasons exist for acting one way or the other that may be known independently of God's will.
3. Morality logically must originate with God.

Each of these interpretations has problems.

I begin with the first interpretation. Whenever anyone says "*x* is morally right," what the person really means is that "*x* is commanded by God." But it does not seem correct to say that this is what people mean who do not believe in God. If proposed as an explanation of what people everywhere mean when they use moral terms, then the Divine Command theory seems obviously false. Now, someone could argue that we should just stipulate that this is what morally right means, and that whenever we use the term this is what we mean. But this strategy would beg the question, rendering our inquiry pointless. Why try to find out *whether* rational morality requires religion if we are simply going to assert from the very start that it does? This move certainly will not settle the question of whether morality requires religious justification. So the first interpretation is defective.

Now consider the second interpretation of the Divine Command Theory. If no moral reasons exist for acting one way or the other that may be known independently of God's will, then the claim, "God is good," becomes meaningless. On the Divine Command Theory, to say that "God is good" is redundant; it is to say the equivalent of "God is God." The reason is that the statement "God only does what is good" comes to mean "God does whatever God wants to do," and the statement "God commands us to do what is good" is reduced to the tautology "God commands us to do what God commands us to do." But when we say, "God is good," we do not generally think that we are uttering an empty tautology; we think instead that we are ascribing a property to God. Furthermore, it seems that even in the absence of divine revelation, people can and do know that it is wrong to poke pins in cats' eyes and right to assist the needy. (The Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas argued as much.) Therefore, the second interpretation seems unsatisfactory.

Finally, regarding the third interpretation of the Divine Command Theory, if morality originates with God, then what is right is reducible to what God says is right. But if whatever God says is right, then moral norms become arbitrary and unreliable. This is the problem we know from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (d. 347) who, in a dialog called *The Euthyphro*, asked whether something is good because God wills it or whether God wills something because it is good (Rachels 1993, p. 48). God commands us, for example, not to starve our children to death not because God is capricious and happens to decide at the moment that murdering children is distasteful. Rather, murdering children is wrong, and God, being omniscient, knows that it is wrong. Being omnibenevolent as well, God is good and

commands us not to do what is wrong. *God is a good God*. That's an informative sentence, not a tautology. Indeed, we can imagine good gods and bad gods; bad gods are those who command us to do evil. We would not be able to imagine evil gods were it the case that whatever the gods command is necessarily what ought to be done.⁸

To see the concern that philosophers have come to call "the Euthyphro problem," we must use our theological imaginations and be willing to entertain different possibilities in our idea of God. The traditional God of Western religions, of course, is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. But it is not a logical fact that God must have these characteristics, and other cultures have had, and continue to have, very different pictures of the deity. For example, the ancient Greeks believed that before the Olympian gods came to power, the Titans ruled the heavens. What if God were not the loving God of Western religions but rather Cronus, the giant Titan god who castrated his father, married his sister, Rhea, and killed and ate his children. If the universe is ruled by Cronus and if the Divine Command Theory is true, then castrating your father, having sex with your sister, and killing babies are good things. Why? Because whatever God wills is good, and Cronus – who, we are imagining, is God – wills these things. Consequently, having sex with our sisters is not only permissible but also something we ought to do. But that seems wildly counterintuitive and offensive.

Obviously, what is right or good is not necessarily the same as what any particular religion teaches. A religion that taught obedience to Cronus would teach prejudice, rape, discrimination, and murder. This fact would not make prejudice and rape right.

There is another problem with the third interpretation of the Divine Command Theory. If God can make morally good what seems morally heinous, then the right theory of ethics seems to be that might makes right: whoever is at the moment the most powerful gets to declare what is right. In other words, if morality originates with God and there is no independent standard by which we can judge God to be a good or a bad God, then our moral standards are completely at the mercy of divine whims and we may think that abhorrent actions are good actions.

Consider three defenses of the Divine Command Theory.

First, some writers, such as G. E. M. Anscombe and Fyodor Dostoevsky, believe that people will not behave morally unless they believe that bad behavior will be sanctioned – punished – by a divine lawgiver. With regard to civil laws, people must believe that an authority will punish them if they break the law or else they will not obey it. Without sanctions, laws lack teeth. Indeed, without sanctions, laws may not even count as laws; they may function only as suggestions or requests.

⁸Taliaferro (1997) articulates an ethical theory in which normative judgments are hooked into the concept of an ideal observer. Morality, in his view, may depend metaphysically on such an ideal observer and, because such an observer bears many similarities to standard Western conceptions of God, Taliaferro's proposal might be construed as a defense of a (modified) Divine Command Theory.

So it is with moral laws. If no divine authority enforces it, agents will not experience the law as binding. Just as civil laws demand police forces and judges, so moral laws demand a divine police force and lawgiver. Kant held that in order for morality to inspire adequate motivation for compliance, a God must exist who enforces the law and who rewards and punishes us in the afterlife. Anscombe, a twentieth-century British philosopher, basically argued that rational ethics makes no sense. And in the *Brothers Karamazov*, the Russian novelist Dostoevsky had his character Ivan Karamazov assert that “If God doesn’t exist, everything is permissible.” If morality has reason alone as a basis, then morality fails to account for the overridingness of moral values, is uninspiring, and fails to tell us why we should be moral.

All the writers just mentioned were theists who sought to underwrite rational morality by giving it a religious foundation. Another philosopher, who held that God is dead, agreed with part of what these theists believed. That philosopher, Nietzsche, thought, however, that rational morality, like God, ought to be dismissed, and he sought to undermine morality, which he viewed as prophylactic principles invited by the huge numbers of society’s weakest members to protect themselves from willful and strong individuals. Ironically, atheistic nihilists such as Nietzsche share this belief with Divine Command theorists: that religion is essentially related to ethics. If religion disappears, so does morality.

Problems are identifiable here. Are there really no sanctions other than the deity for our actions? The following, if they exist, might all exercise a powerful influence dissuading us from bad behavior: conscience, moral facts, cultural taboos, the evolutionary advantageousness of altruistic behavior. In ethical theory, God is not the only possible psychological enforcement mechanism for morality. So it seems that this first line of defense of the Divine Command Theory fails.

A second line of defense argues that rational ethical theory ignores the twin facts of sin and forgiveness. Selfishly egoistic actions and attitudes offend God, but a nontheologically-based ethical theory has nothing to say about those people on whom God has mercy, even though they commit moral transgressions.

Here is a response: In order to believe in sin and divine forgiveness, one must believe in God because sin is not just any moral transgression; it is, rather, a moral transgression against a supernatural power. However, can we believe in *sin* or *divine forgiveness* unless we first believe in the existence of God? It would not seem possible. And yet the point of our inquiry here was to figure out whether ethics needs God in the first place. So to object that rational morality ignores sin is to beg the question of whether there is a God.

A third line of defense proposed by Robert Merrihew Adams responds to the charge that the Divine Command Theory makes morality arbitrary. Adams argues that the nonarbitrariness of divine commands is ensured by God’s character. God’s character is not that of a mercurial, evil-minded arbitrary being; God is a constant loving Parent who wants the best for us.

My response is that Adams’s argument seems only to push the problem back a level. What does it mean to do something that is “loving?” On Adams’s Divine Command Theory, it must mean “to do whatever God commands,” because no

independent standard exists of what is loving or hateful. Therefore, to say that “God commands what is loving” is to say that “God commands what God commands.” Are we not stuck in the same quandary noted previously in response to interpretation (3)? On Adams’s account, the problem seemingly has only been transferred from the term “good” to the term “loving.”

We might conclude, therefore, that religion is not essentially or necessarily related to ethics. Fortunately, there is another way to construe the relationship.

Not Necessarily

Having considered the ways in which religion might be necessarily related to ethical theory, I turn to the other alternative: not necessarily. The idea here is the following. If divine commands exist, they are always issued in accord with moral laws so that when God commands something, God commands it because it is good. Humans, therefore, can discover what God wills in the moral realm by consulting our conscience, reason, intuitions, and sense of justice. The theory of natural law holds that moral principles are rational and that our faculty of reason is the divine image within us. Morality is given by God but it is discoverable within the bounds of reason alone. Even on this Thomistic view (that is, a view inspired by the medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas), however, agents can discover what is morally right or wrong without special revelation so that Natural Law Theory does not require a divine command giver.

Now, some will object that if moral standards exist that are independent of God’s being, then monotheism is compromised because something exists that God did not create. Even worse: If moral standards exist independently of God’s will, then God is not the author of morality; something exists that God did not create and God is not free to make God’s own laws. Rather, God must obey the laws of morality.

The answer to this worry is that even God seems to be bound by certain laws, such as the laws of logic and morality. God cannot make a married bachelor or a color that is simultaneously red and green. There appear to be some things that God cannot do: God cannot make it the case that God does not exist. God cannot both love us and hate us simultaneously, or call an action that is clearly evil a good action.

To conclude, then, it seems that what is right or good is not necessarily identical to what a particular religion teaches. There is the Cronus problem, that some religions teach prejudice and discrimination, and there is the Euthyphro problem, that God commands something because it is right. To put it another way, morality is independent of God’s will. Therefore, we should not conflate the spheres of piety and morality.

Good reasons exist to separate public policy decisions and the revelations of particular faiths, and not only because religious people disagree among themselves about what is right. Countries that try to separate church matters from matters of state attempt to make regulations and laws not on the basis of sacred truths revealed to a few but rather on the basis of broader principles upon which people from

diverse religious backgrounds – and no religious background – can agree. Reaching a consensus about moral issues is possible without invoking religious authorities. Consider one example: In the United States, many people once believed that allowing women to vote was morally wrong. Some traditions thought it imperative on biblical and theological grounds to keep women out of the public sphere, whereas other traditions supported the suffrage movement on grounds that were equally theological and biblical. However, after the culture removed the issue from the sphere of religion and looked at the facts about women, it could not justify its view that women should not vote. The general population came to a consensus that the policy should be changed because *justice* demanded it. There was no need to settle the vexing theological questions; the question was settled, and in the right way, on nonreligious grounds. Strictly put, then, morality is not the same thing as religion.

Before ending this discussion, please notice three implications that do not follow from my argument:

- It does not follow that God does not exist. Nothing I have said should raise any doubts in your mind about the existence of God. Other things may be able to raise these doubts, but I have not said them here.
- It does not follow that the moral teachings of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or any other religion are incorrect or faulty. To the contrary, I think it is clear that our religious traditions have through time been the repositories and incubators of some of our highest ideals.
- It does not follow that people do not need religion nor that secular philosophy can tell you all you need to know about how to lead your life. Morality is only part of human life. It does not do everything. It does not, for example, reward us if we try to worship it (Wolf 1982, Adams 1984). Nor does it seem to touch upon all aspects of our life. Many dimensions of life do not necessarily have anything to do with morality: the beauty of a cello concerto, the drama of an NCAA basketball game, the complex history of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the meditative quality of a Cormac McCarthy novel, the silence of prayer, the difficulty of spiritual repentance, the sculpture of an unplowed tall-grass prairie.

We are multifaceted beings. If an omnipotent and benevolent God created us, then it may well be our primary end in life to worship and enjoy that being. In that case, religious activity is a vehicle by which the various dimensions of our lives are given coherence, our discordant activities harmonized. If our chief purpose is to glorify God, then religion is unlike morality in important ways. Religion's primary role is not to answer questions about what is morally right and wrong but to answer questions about how in general we ought to live. Which activities should be subordinated to others? What is the relative importance of parenting, prayer, esthetic experience, professional obligation, and worship?

Returning to the ideas raised in the case study at the start of this chapter, Rich may justifiably believe that religion *is not* a necessary part of ethical theory. Emily may justifiably believe that religion *may be* necessary for full human flourishing. In other words, anyone may without contradicting themselves believe both of the following propositions:

We can know what is morally right or wrong independently of religion.
 We cannot live a complete human life independently of religion's beatific vision.

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