

Religion and Morality

Examine and comment on these two claims:

c) “Morality should be separate from religion” (10 marks)

Whether morality is dependant on religion has been a contentious issue since the time of Plato and his Euthyphro Dilemma. The dilemma is that *is something good because God commands it to be good*; or *is it good because God agrees that it is good*? Theists argue that the links between religion and morality are indubitable as our western society is based on the Decalogue, whilst every other culture bases its laws and morality on its own religions.

If we return to Plato; if we take the view that something becomes good because God states that it is good; which arbitrarily makes it right then we are left with the problem that God can make *anything* good. This argument, which is known as Divine Command Theory, allows us to postulate a supreme divine being that is entirely good by very definition – however it does raise some questions about the *nature* of goodness. As Leibniz says “*why praise Him for what He has done if He would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary?*” by which he means that by this definition of God, where God decides what is good and evil; God *cannot* do anything but good since he controls what is good. Following this though we are lead to conclude that we cannot really congratulate God’s wisdom since God decides the rules for Himself.

This leads us to the alternative theory proposed by Plato; and that is the idea that God himself does not decide right from wrong, rather he simply mediates between morality and humanity, commending what is good and punishing what is bad. In this case God’s wisdom is kept in-tact because God is wise in deciding right from wrong according to this global morality. Many religious follows would support this argument and agree that in this way God can be moral, wise, loving however his teachings need to be interpreted correctly – if he suddenly made murder permissible then obviously it would still be immoral – because God can’t make murder moral. The new problem is that if God doesn’t control morality then who does? This is not something possible with an omnipotent God since God Himself does not have power over morality.

If we take the view that morality comes by divine command from God, then God is most certainly a necessity for morality, however if we assume that God merely obeys and respects morality then not only do we have a God which is not omnipotent but we have a God whose role within morality is redundant. When morality is not dependant on God we can make our own way to morality without going though God – and this

would most certainly be the view of many atheists who despite not believing in God claim to be moral independent of religion.

Our key conflict here is that is morality the product of divine revelation, either through the scripture as “word of God”, or through the Holy Spirit in the conscience - or is morality something we can reason our way to. The theory of natural moral law would suggest we are able reason our way to morality by observing the laws of nature around us.

In natural moral law we accept that the universe is bound by the natural laws around us, which have purpose and harmonize with the other laws. The purpose of something reflects its relative value, since what is valuable (or good) is what fulfils its purpose. Our human reason can allow us to observe these natural laws, and from them deduce that what is good in terms of morality is what fulfils its natural purpose – what it was intended to do. From this angle we find, for example, homosexuality to be morally unacceptable since sex’s *purpose* is procreation.

Another key problem with accepting a strong link between religion and morality is that we live in such a diverse world where religions hold different views about different issues. Even within the Christian faith there are differing opinions about things like homosexuality and female clergy. What religion makes moral in some cultures is forbidden by others and this subjective view of morality means either one religion is “right” while the others are all delusional and “wrong” or that a divine being such as God is allowing us to interpret morality for ourselves. Some Christians for example rather than taking the scripture as absolute adopt a “What Would Jesus Do” approach.

In conclusion it would be easy to accept God as a creator of all morals, however this brings the all knowing, all loving and all powerful status of God into question. Natural moral law is an example of how we can clearly make decisions *without* God. It would be silly to admit that religion plays no part in morality; religious morals have formed the basis of our society for many years – however that is not to say we can’t get to morality without God.

d) “Morality is enhanced by its links to religion” (10 marks)

It can be argued that for something to be meaningful it has to have a purpose; and an idea of how that purpose can be achieved. For example a sports game is meaningless without an idea of how to win, and what the rules are along the way. This authoritarian view means that for something to be meaningful it must have purpose and rules which override human wants and desires. Applying this to “life” we can say that without laws and purpose our life is meaningless, and as rules have to be authoritarian (i.e. determined by an external) we are left requiring God to make life meaningful. Without such rules we have an antinomian society with no laws, and no morality.

Of course this is based firstly on the idea that we can actually apply this metaphor to “life”, and secondly it requires life to be meaningful. Some would say that if life is meaningless then anything is permitted as there is no *reason* to behave – however others reject his idea, it is subjective.

As we have already seen divine command theory allows God to be responsible for setting these divine rules, and we are drawn back to the Euthyphro dilemma where either we accept that God makes morality, which is Divine Command theory, or that God merely confirms morality which is in fact universal. If we accept the former then God is in the position where he can make whatever he likes moral – which just isn’t in keeping with our understanding of the world, we cannot accept that God can make whatever he likes moral. Or we can accept the latter whereby God is no longer the ultimate Supreme Being as he does not control morality. If we do accept that God is subservient to morality that enables us to argue to morality without God; however it does not mean that morality cannot be enhanced by God.

If morality is some separate entity in its own right; and “good” really does exist – perhaps in Plato’s world of the forms – then God is still enhancing morality because he is giving morality to the people. For Christians a key part of their faith is the belief that the Holy Spirit is there to guide them, possibly through the conscience; in which case God can guide people to making the right decisions even if he does not control what is right and wrong himself.

Of course there are problems with linking God and morality; perhaps the foremost being how this morality is communicated to us. As already mentioned there is the idea of the Holy Spirit, however quite what that *is* is another matter. We do have the scripture to base decisions on, but this can be problematic because of changes in society over thousands of years. If it is said that there is a God then why is there diversity in morality. One would assume if there was a God, who responsible for morality or not, communicated morality to us then we would all have a set of common

“global” morals, not the cultural morality or pluralism where “*he is good because what he does is customary*” (Nietzsche).

The links between religion and morality are almost undeniable; religion has played a key part in defining our morality for millennia. It is on the laws set down in the Decalogue, supposedly by divine intervention, which our current western morality is derived and for this reason we cannot doubt that religion has enhanced our morality in many ways. Without morality – without rules – we have no *reason* to behave as we do. God and religion offer that but they are not the *only* way to get to morality. Natural moral law can offer morality without religion, and this would lead me to conclude that while religion has most certainly enhanced morality, morality is not dependant on religion.