# Why Morality Can Survive Without Religion

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## 1. Introduction

I have often observed that any class discussion of the ethical issues with my students inevitably leads to mentioning of a religion. Indeed, depending on the geographical region, the close connection between religion and morality has become part of the 'commonsense view' – one of those deeply entrenched 'self-evident' beliefs that philosophers take so much pleasure in undermining. But, as is often the case in these situations, once the work of critical deconstruction of the commonsense is done, the original position resurfaces with increased vitality, now securely armed against the standard objections by developing itself into a more sophisticated philosophical view. At which point, the critic brings up a whole new list of substantial objections, and the cycle of arguing continues. All this has at least the benefit of always keeping the old topics fresh, and duly at the pages of the philosophical journals.

In this paper I have two main objectives. First, I would like to clarify that commonsensical position, which argues that morality has a close tie with religion. The connection between the two can be conceived in at least three different ways, which are not usually distinguished by the defenders of such a connection. Both theoretical and empirical reasons will be presented for arguing that in all three cases a system of morality would remain both meaningful and efficacious in the absence of any religious backing. My second objective is look briefly at a more subtle position of George Mavrodes, who offers a decidedly different way of looking at the alleged religious dependence of the categorical moral rules.

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A person stating that morality depends on religion can be plausibly interpreted as arguing either for any one of the following three claims, or accepting any combination of these three. First, he might be interpreted as claiming that religion is the main source of moral knowledge. Without religious tradition or religious books, one might argue, we would remain ignorant as to what constitutes the proper set of moral rules and moral values. Let us refer to this interpretation as <u>epistemological dependence</u> of morality on religion. Secondly, one might bring up a religion in the context of the discussion of efficaciousness of moral rules. Admittedly, knowing what the moral rules are, and having a sufficient incentive for following them, indicates two different levels of moral maturity. It is common, then, to encounter an argument, suggesting that without the background religious beliefs in rewards and punishments, one would have no sufficient motivation for obeying the rules, especially in cases, when one might benefit from breaking a rule, and is able to do so with impunity. Let us refer to this view as a view of the alleged <u>psychological dependence</u> of moral action on religious beliefs. Finally, a more sophisticated (and more radical) version of a religious dependence theory would suggest that the core moral notions of rightness and wrongness should be defined in terms of divine properties, such as God's approval or disapproval of certain actions or types of actions. Let us call this last interpretation a claim to <u>semantic or ontological dependence</u> of moral concepts on divine properties. As I suggested earlier, a defender of the religious dependence theory might consistently embrace it either in the form of epistemological, psychological or ontological variety, or else, claim to adhere to two or three versions at the same time.

## 2. Epistemological Dependence

Does our knowledge of moral rules come from religion? The question is ambiguous in an important sense, and we should note this ambiguity. It may either be taken as an empirical question about the actual source of moral knowledge for a particular individual or group of people, or else, as identifying religion as the only possible, or the only reliable, source of this kind of knowledge. I suppose there is no need to deny that for many individuals, although by no means for all, the initial familiarity with moral prohibitions and moral values comes in the context of a particular religious tradition. In this sense, a religion may be cited as a source of moral knowledge in the same sense, as one's parents can be credited as the source of initial moral education. But nothing particularly interesting follows from this ordinary fact. My initial source of knowledge about the shape of the earth was my first-grade teacher; it hardly follows

that there is any philosophically significant connection between this scientific fact and the teacher in question.

The more challenging interpretation suggests that religion must be viewed as the only *reliable* source of moral rules and values, regardless of the fact whether competent participants of the social life as the matter of fact gain such knowledge directly from a religious source or not. To press our analogy a little further, one might suggest, that whether one found out about the shape of the earth from one's parents, one's friends or one's teacher, it is ultimately the *natural science* that provides us with genuine knowledge of this type. By the same token, while the actual line of communication of moral knowledge might have a number of intermediate links, they can all be traced to a religious root.

I believe that any reasonably successful response here must proceed in two steps. First, by spelling out the meta-ethical theory which would clearly demarcate the specifically moral domain from a number of other non-moral normative systems. Secondly, by pointing to an alternative and fully autonomous procedure of deriving the prescriptive rules and value judgments from within the moral domain without invoking the gods. The first step mentioned above is especially pertinent. When a student claims that we would never know that eating pork and drinking wine is wrong if it were not explicitly said so in the Holy Quran, one should be able to spell out the main functions and limits of the moral sphere, arguing that the prohibitions in question have nothing to do with *moral* prohibitions *per se*, but are better viewed as ritual or dietary restrictions of some non-moral normative system.[1]

Once the moral domain is demarcated as containing, for instance, only rules and regulations that serve to offset the natural disadvantages of the weaker party, or contributing to the overall happiness of the greatest number of people (among many other alternatives), we might proceed to the question of derivation of substantive moral rules. The procedure here is relatively straightforward – having the main function of morality identified, any candidate for the membership on the final list of all moral principles (e.g., a meta-rule "It is wrong to do X") should be examined as to whether the suggested rule, if adopted, would indeed contribute to the overall goal of a system of morality (e.g., increase the overall happiness). The process would be no different from discovering the most efficient traffic rules, once we stipulate the main goal of the traffic regulation as the increased safety of all drivers and pedestrians. Given the Kantian definition of morality, the testing procedure for maxims, to be sure, would be very

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[1] For two plausible accounts of what constitutes the moral domain proper see (Frankena 1963) and (Wilson 2004).

different from the testing procedure for utilitarian rules, but in all cases the general direction of these tests is well-known, various practical difficulties of application notwithstanding.

A more direct procedure of derivation of moral rules and values has been long suggested by the old school of moral intuitionism, and forcefully defended in recent philosophy by W. D. Ross and Robert Audi (Ross 1930) (Audi 1997). On their view, any reasonably mature individual would consent to the list of *prima facie* moral duties, such as duties of non-injury, fidelity, beneficence, gratitude, and the like. These basic moral obligations, although occasionally overridable on Audi's view, have the property of being *self-evident* or foundational, i.e., they should not be derived from any further underlying normative principle or a non-moral fact. The alleged self-evidence of certain moral obligations does not imply that everyone, as the matter of fact, recognizes these duties as valid. But the intuitivists often suggest that the acceptance of those obligations is yet inevitable in an idealized epistemic condition, i.e., the one characterized by full reflective equilibrium, a person's developed intellectual capacities, his being fully informed about various non-moral facts, and the like.

Whether one prefers the empirical method of derivation of moral rules from the overall conception of the main function of a moral system, or opts for the claim of the foundational status of certain moral beliefs, which can be discovered by informed intuition, the main point is, that there are several other viable alternatives to a morality derived from the religious sources. And given the well-known problem of identifying which religious source exactly should be taken as authoritative in cases of conflict, we will do much better by relying on a purely secular method of moral derivation.

3. **Psychological Dependence**

A character in Dostoyevsky's novel "Brothers Karamazov" has famously exclaimed at one point: "If God is dead, then everything is permissible." Whatever else this phrase implies, at the very least it suggests that a Christian idea of God, with all the accompanying beliefs in divine rewards and retributions, is the ultimate barrier in the face of the ever-present threat of social chaos and amoralism, and the removal of this religious barrier would immediately trigger a slippery-slope reaction with disastrous results. One of the earliest references to the notion that the fear of God is prerequisite for upright behavior is found in the Bible, in the book of Exodus. When God appears on mount Sinai before the Israelites in an intimidating form, with thunder, lightning, sound of trumpets and smoke accompanying his presence,

Moses candidly explains the need for such a show: God has appeared in this way "so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Exodus 20:20).

Invoking God and afterlife as an incentive for moral life is not a strategy limited to Jewish, Christian or Muslim civilizations, but seems to be present in all cultures since the earliest age. A 17th century Chinese novelist Li Yu in his famous novel "The Carnal Prayer Mat", records a conversation between a Buddhist priest and a young skeptical intellectual, who expressed doubts in the truth and usefulness of religion. At one point, the Buddhist priest, failing to convince the young man in the truth of the *Dharma*, appeals to a purely pragmatic justification of religion:

> You, intellectuals, can avoid [religious beliefs] in every sphere of life save that of personal morality. Disregard for the moment the irrefutable evidence for the existence of Heaven and Hell. Even if Heaven did not exist, we should still need the concept of Heaven as inducement to virtue. Similarly, even if Hell did not exist, we should still need the concept of Hell as a deterrent to vice (Yu 1996, 50).

Two points are in order regarding the alleged importance of religious motivation for moral behavior. I will start with an empirical observation first. Indeed, as we all know, people do often appeal to notions of divine wrath, bad karma, afterlife, heaven and hell, as a way of supplying the missing incentive for moral action. But what is the actual effectiveness of these appeals and how could it possibly be established? The question should not be conflated with the question about the effectiveness of the worldly threats of punishment for breaking a socially approved way of behavior. The presence of the police speeding cameras on the highway without doubt reduces the number of traffic violations. The efficiency of a police camera as a deterrent, though, is explained by the fact that the punishment ensues soon after the violation, and that the inevitability of punishment can be easily confirmed by a simple experiment. But a threat of afterlife retribution is based on a much more hypothetical scenario, with no direct way of confirming or refuting it. In fact, studies suggest that a high level of religiosity in a given society is not correlated with the decrease in violent crimes. Indeed, according to recent statistical reports the murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in more religious societies (Jensen 2006) (Paul 2005). In a 2000 census, not even 15 percent of Japanese reported a formal religious membership or regular religious practice (van Voorst 2013, 196). And yet Japan continues to be one of the most law-abiding society in the world. In the United States the criminal statistics shows similar results – rates of

most violent crimes tend to be lower in less religious, northern states (United States Census Bureau 2006).

This brings me a second point regarding the necessity of religious incentive. It appears to me that anyone, invoking the threat of divine punishment or the promise of heavenly rewards as a motive for being moral treats the potential transgressors as immature children, who are unable to understand the real reasons behind the moral regulations. The justification of a normative regulation of the type: 'You should not do X because otherwise I will hurt you' is not a moral justification, as it fails to provide a morally relevant reason for the prohibition in question. Those crude threats which might have been appropriate and justified at the earlier stages of moral development of a child, seem quite out of place among mature reasoning adults. If a person finds no other good reason for refraining, for instance, from stealing, except the fear of God's wrath in the afterlife, we may agree that such a person is, perhaps, not the worst member of a society. But at the same time, it seems obvious that he has not yet progressed beyond the very primitive level of moral understanding.

### 3. Ontological Dependence

It remains now to examine briefly the claim that moral concepts, rules and values are tied to the psychological attributes of a divine being in the most intimate way possible. On this radical interpretation, the very notions of moral rightness and wrongness should be analyzed as referring to the attitudes of approval or disapproval by a relevant deity or deities. Most of us were first introduced to this view through the question posed by old Socrates to a young and ambitious man, named Euthyphro: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it, because it is holy?"[2] The famous dilemma essentially presents us with two options: either all moral values, as well as the notion of moral goodness itself, have foundation in something other than God's approval, or else, the fact of God's approval of certain action, or a type of action, is what originally and uniquely bestows moral value to it. Choosing the former option commits one to a version of ethical autonomy, in effect, securing an independent ground for morality, while the latter option is often referred to as the Divine Command theory.

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[2] Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a2

Historically, the Divine Command theory is the most ambitious attempt of tying religion and morality together. While several distinct versions of this theory exist,[3] the most general view suggests the following taxonomy:

- An action is morally obligatory if God wants one to perform that action.

- An action is morally wrong (prohibited) if God wants one not to perform that action.

- An action is morally neutral (permissible) if God has no specific attitude with regard to that action.

On this view, God's will becomes the <u>only</u> 'right-making' property of actions. No other characteristics of actions (or their consequences) matter in evaluating that action from the moral point of view. The divine approval or disapproval is what ontologically constitutes the essence of moral rightness or wrongness, which, in turn, implies a semantic claim to the effect that a statement "X is wrong" <u>means</u> (at some deeper level) "X is disapproved by God."

I will not attempt here discussing all the traditional objections and problems associated with the Divine Command theory, most of which deal with the questions of moral authority of God's commands, the hypothetical scenarios of the morally abhorrent commands, and the epistemic difficulties of discovering what kind of action-guiding rules are really approved or disapproved by God.[4]

But one particular difficulty deserves a special mentioning. We have seen that one of the implications of the Divine Command theory is a modified semantic analysis of the ordinary moral judgments. The evaluative statements of the type "torturing innocent children is wrong", or, "offering a volunteer help in an orphanage for small children is morally praiseworthy" receive radical re-interpretation in the context of the Theory, and thus come to mean something other, than what most competent participants in the moral discourse thought these statements meant. We are now to believe, that at a deeper level of analysis, a moral condemnation of torture is <u>semantically equivalent</u> to a descriptive statement about God's preferences or revulsions. But since this is clearly *not* how most ordinary people would analyze the moral judgment in question, a further consequence of the theory is the attribution of a <u>massive mistake</u> when it comes to proper understanding of moral normative statements. If the Divine

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[3] For a contemporary, well-developed version of the Divine Command theory see (Quinn 1978).
[4] For a recent detailed discussion of these traditional objections to the Divine Command theory see (Baggett and Walls 2011).

Command theory offers the only correct analysis of moral terms, the great majority of population has been pitifully mistaken about the true meaning of moral judgments.

However unlikely the prospect of a massive mistake in the field of morality is, we may grant this for a second, and admit that we had our definition of moral rightness all wrong. But then two major (but related) difficulties need to be addressed. First, we might ask for a justifying reason for accepting an alternative definition of moral rightness, along the Divine Command theory lines. Here the proponent of the Theory has essentially two options – either referring to some *authority* as a reason for believing in the DCT (e.g., "because William of Occam said so"[5]), or else, trying to discover the hidden layers underlying the ordinary meanings of the moral terms.

Opting for the first option simply pushes the problem back, as we can now demand for a reason for accepting the authority cited (e.g., "why should we believe William of Occam?"). Choosing the second option commits one to a philosophically dubious theory of meaning, which would assert that the statement "whatever God commands is right" is <u>analytic</u>, despite the obvious fact that it seems synthetic on most accounts. The procedure that G. E. Moore has once suggested for testing any proposed definitions of moral goodness is quite appropriate in this case too. Even if we can overcome the epistemic difficulties and establish, that God indeed commands a certain type of behavior, the question: "But is it right?" is still, using Moore's famous term, an <u>open question</u>, and cannot be settled simply by pointing to the alleged fact of God's preference. If that is the case, then the two statements "X is right" and "X is commanded by God" cannot be semantically identical.

### 4. Mavrodes and the Queerness of Morality

George Mavrodes in his well-known article "Religion and the Queerness of Morality" (2008) has famously suggested yet another reason why morality might require religious backing after all. His argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Let us assume that a purely secular, materialist picture of the world is the correct one (the "Russellian world", in his terms[6])
2. Categorical moral obligations exist even in a secular world.

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[5] William of Occam (c. 1288 – c. 1348) – one of the most famous proponents of the Divine Command theory during the Middle Ages.
[6] Named after Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a British philosopher and writer who was an outspoken defender of a materialistic picture of the world.

3.  Sometimes fulfilling one's moral obligation brings no net-benefit to the agent, or might even result in serious net-losses for the person who decides to fulfill such an obligation.

4.  The very existence of an overriding categorical moral obligation which brings no benefit to the agent is "queer".

5.  The secular world which contains such queer moral obligations would be an absurd or crazy world.

6.  It is unlikely that we are living in an absurd or crazy world.

7.  Hence, a secular, materialist account of the world, as well as naturalistic accounts of morality, must be false.

Mavrodes mentions categorical moral obligations and how the existence of certain moral duties seems to be incompatible with the "Russellian world", and further tries to establish a much more ambitious claim, namely, the claim that materialism as such is false. I will not be considering the latter claim here, but will focus instead on Mavrodes' suggestion that fulfilling a moral obligation, which brings net-losses to the agent (even in the long run), is <u>irrational</u> in the absence of a prospect for a future reward (e.g., in the afterlife).

What is really at issue here, and Mavrodes clearly acknowledges this, is the Kantian concern for <u>ultimate justice</u>. To put it crudely, our world is such that the good people often don't get rewarded or recognized during their lifetimes, and the bad people often get away with their crimes. This seems to contradict one of the requirements of practical reason, namely, the requirement for justice. On the assumption that our universe is rational at its deepest ground, the apparent earthly injustices would then have to be redressed in the <u>other</u> world, and thus satisfy the demands of rationality.

It is important to note that Mavrodes is not advocating a Divine Command theory in any of its forms, nor is he suggesting that religion should serve as the only source of moral knowledge or provide the necessary motivation for moral action. His view is rather that the undisputed existence of objective moral obligations "bears witness" to the fact that Reality itself is not exhausted by its material components. In other words, whereas all previous attempts, discussed above, tried to establish something about the moral realm by bringing God or religion into the premises of the argument, Mavrodes reverses this logical relation – he is using the fact of morality to argue for a religious hypothesis as a conclusion. In its outline, his argument takes the form of an argument to the best explanation – a non-materialist, transcendental

metaphysics is offered as the most plausible solution to the apparent 'queerness' of certain facts about the moral realm.

Both Kant and Mavrodes cannot tolerate the 'absurd' universe, where happiness is not correlated with virtue, or where a person, who decides to be honest and to pay his loans, ends up in a worse position in comparison with the one who decides to cheat. For Kant, the correspondence of individual happiness to one's virtues behavior in this life is one of the necessary postulates of practical reason, and is deeply rooted in his metaphysical and epistemological investigations. Mavrodes, on the other hand, mainly appeals to the common sense of his readers, or, more specifically, to those readers who share his intuitions about the underlying rationality of the world order. If the purely 'Russellian world' indeed contains categorical moral obligations, then "such a fact would be absurd – we would be living in a crazy world" (Mavrodes, 581). Mavrodes' natural allies in this context are those who share "a sense of that absurdity, that queerness" (581), but who, unlike, say, Camus, Sartre or other existentialists, find this state of affairs unacceptable.

And yet one might wonder whether the alleged 'queerness' of moral obligations and the alleged 'absurdity' of the world, which contains such obligations, can be used to further the theist's agenda in any way. Traditionally, it has been held that the created order exhibits the features of rationality precisely <u>because</u> it is the fruit of the efforts of a rational Creator. The underlying rationality of the universe was typically seen as a <u>consequence</u> of its being created by rational God. The historical context of the Mavrodes' article though, obviously does not allow him to start with the God-hypothesis as a premise, but rather requires that the existence of God is established as a result of some further argument. But how could this argument look like? Presumably, a discovery that the world we live in is perfectly rational at all its strata, including the moral and the social ones, could serve as an inductive evidence for the existence of a rational Creator. But, apparently, Mavrodes makes the opposite discovery – our world is 'absurd, crazy and queer', at least when the existing moral sphere is concerned. What conclusion, then, can we logically draw from this fact?

The conclusion that Mavrodes draws amounts a denial of the apparent absurdity of the world. The world clearly <u>looks</u> as if it is absurd, but it <u>cannot</u> be so. Hence, we must look for an auxiliary hypothesis which would eliminate the apparent absurdness of the observed phenomena. A theistic hypothesis is then offered by Mavrodes as an effective remedy. Yet it appears that one might be justified in denying the very possibility of an absurd universe, only

on the condition that one already knows that the universe is a product of a rational design. In other words, the universe cannot be absurd, only if we know that a rational God exists and that He created the universe. But then the argument becomes clearly circular – the existence of the queer-looking moral obligations is offered as evidence for the truth of religion, and the truth of certain religious claims is implicitly assumed as a reason why we should not accept the absurdity of the world as a brute fact. In this form, the argument clearly does not seem to prove much.

### 5.  Concluding Remarks

We have explored and critically evaluated the several senses in which morality might be said to be dependent on religion. If what I have been saying is correct, there seems to be neither need nor space for supporting the moral domain by any type of religious hypothesis. The apparent fundamental autonomy of the moral domain, though, does not yet render religion wholly superfluous for the purposes of moral education and moral behavior. It is quite conceivable that certain moral ideals and virtues, couched in religious terms and presented in the context of a religious story, should make a much greater impression when first espoused. Likewise, a religious justification of moral norms might be acceptable at certain stages, as the first approximation on the way to a more mature grounding of morality in the notions of human autonomy, rationality, or else, along the utilitarian lines. One might even grant that the fear of divine retribution has, on occasion, stopped a person from committing a particular atrocity, or, alternatively, the promise of a heavenly reward, has motivated one to perform an act of genuine heroism. And yet all this should not undermine the fact of the essential self-sufficiency of morality vis-à-vis religion and its vital capacity to stand on its own feet.

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