

**Part III**  
**Morality and Religion**



# Chapter 8

## From the Divine Command Theories to the Natural Laws Theories

### 8.1 Homework

**Readings** – EMP 4, RTD 5 (Aquinas)

- Study Questions**
1. What is considered right by the Divine Command theory?
  2. Socrates' question is: Is it because the gods command it that something is right, or is it because it is right that the gods command it? Explain the implications of both possibilities on another example. Say your parents told you to respect other people. According to you, is it because your parents told you to do so that it is right to respect other people, or is it because it is right to respect other people that your parents told you to do so?
  3. Explain how Socrates' question is relevant to the issue of how morality and religion relate to each other.
  4. Explain the main tenets of the natural law theory. In this view, is morality restricted to religious people?

### 8.2 Introduction

**A very common belief** – It is a very common belief among religious people: a person without a religion cannot be a moral person, which is equivalent to say that *to be religious is necessary to be a moral person, and that religion is the only possible base for moral action.*

**The importance of the problem** – This is an important matter in a country in which about 90 % of the population is religious. We should expect that many American people believe that religion is the sole possible base of morality and moral actions.

**The origin of the belief** – Not hard to see when one compares the religious worldview with the atheist worldview:

- The religious worldview:
  - a. World created by God with a plan
  - b. Humans are part of the plan
  - c. Humans' existence and life make sense within God's plan
  - d. Humans can participate to the realization of the plan
  - e. Morality is part of the plan to realize
  - f. Reward / Punishment according to our actions
- The atheist worldview – From Russell, *A freeman's wordship*:

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

It seems pretty clear how religious people can “make sense” of their morality in a easier way than the atheist. That said, this idea requires to be studied more thoroughly... as usual !

## 8.3 Divine Command Theory

**The thesis** – The main thesis of the Divine Command Theory is that:

*DCT thesis: “What is right is whatever God commands”*

IMPORTANT NOTE: It should be clear that these view of morality applies mainly to the three monotheist religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Neither buddhism, nor, as far as I know, any of the native american religions, or animist african religions, etc. include the claim above.

**Advantages of the DCT** – At first sight, two advantages:

1. An answer to the question of whether there exists any absolute moral values. The DCT gives a simple, positive, answer: yes, there exists absolute moral values: God's values
2. A straightforward motivation for acting morally: reward / punishment

**Two interpretations** – There are two possible interpretations for the main thesis above:

- Thesis: "What is right is whatever God commands"
- Socrates' question (in the *Euthyphro*, which is a dialogue written by Plato, in which Socrates is a character): Is it because the gods command it that it is right, or is it because it is right that the gods command it?

**First interpretation of the Divine Command Theory:** Right because God commands it

**Second interpretation of the Divine Command Theory:** Commanded by God because it is right

- Compare with parents: two options:

1. whatever your parents tell you to do is right because they tell you to do so
2. your parents tell you to do so and so because it is right

- Another comparison:

1. the answers that the best students write are the right answer because they are the best students' answers
2. the best students write down the answer they write down because these answers are the right answers

And reasons to copy these answers....

*- In one case, authority and nothing else is why you abide by whatever the authority says. In the other case, you use the authority as a guide because you believe he or she has a special access to what is right. That said, you believe that what makes their judgments true is the actual truth of the matter, which is independent of their authority.*

- In the case the gods / your parents / or your excellent student friend would tell you something that seems crazy:

1. By interpretation 1., you follow the authority anyway
2. By interpretation 2., you are suspicious and inquire further the subject

Now that these two interpretations are clear, let us assess them one after the other.

**The first interpretation makes morality religious but is untenable** – The first interpretation (usually accepted only by fundamentalists in every religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) – Many problems arise under scrutiny.

REMINDER – FIRST INTERPRETATION:  $X$  and  $Y$  are right because God commands  $X$  and  $Y$ .

- Problem 1: Moral values are arbitrary – God could have commanded that child molesting is right ?

CAREFUL HERE: if you feel like objecting: “Of course not, God is good and molesting child is wrong”, then you accept the second interpretation of the DCT-thesis, that is, the idea that there are objective right and wrong independent of God’s will, and that God (because benevolent) follows these objective right and wrong. *In the first interpretation, values do not exist independently of God’s will: whatever God says is right, is right, for no further reasons than divine command.*

- Problem 2: Moral values are mysterious – no understanding of morality: just blind faith, no use of your reason

- Problem 3: Access: How do you know what God commands? The problem of the contradictions within the holy texts

- Problem 4: Authority seems to be the wrong reason to abide by what is right: compare with parents again

- Problem 5: if we were to prove for sure that God does not exist, do you truly believe that our moral life would disappear? What about all the civilization in which there is no God like in the God of the three monotheist religions: do you think they don’t have any moral life?

- Problem 6: The risk of arrogance: no doubt about values, especially when the accessibility is so poor.

- Problem 7: The risk of subjugating the masses – appeal to mere authority has proven to be a recipe for disaster in the history of the humanity.

In a way, the image of God’s command that stems from the fundamentalist view can be called impious by some non-fundamentalists believer: it makes God’s will arbitrary.

It appears that the first interpretation is \*not\* what most people understand by “founding morality and moral behavior on religion”.

**The second interpretation is tenable but makes morality independent of religion**

– The second interpretation is much more viable, and is usually held by non-fundamentalists.

REMINDER – SECOND INTERPRETATION: God commands  $X$  and  $Y$ , because  $X$  and  $Y$  are right.

- All the problems above are dissolved

- But then *moral values are not dependent on religion anymore!*

On this interpretation, absolute moral values are independent on God's will: the particular commands of a religion may be one way to access these absolute moral values, it may be a guide to find out about what is right and wrong, but God is not the one to ultimately decide on what is right and wrong. Rather, God's commands stem from the knowledge of right and wrong, which exist prior to God's command. Hence, there may be other ways to understand what is right or wrong, without referring to God's command.

It remains to see how... According to the Natural Law Theory, we can access these absolute moral values through *reason*. Before we turn to this idea, let us rehearse:

**Conclusion** **The main question** is whether religion is necessary to morality and moral action

**The main thesis** of the Divine Command Theory (DCT) is that what is right is what God commands.

**DCT seems to link morality and religion** – At first sight, such thesis seems to provide some support to the idea that morality and moral behavior can only be based on religion, and that only religious people can be moral people.

**Two different interpretations** are possible of the main thesis of DCT

1. To do  $X$  and  $Y$  is right / wrong because God commands / forbids to do so.
2. God commands / forbids to do  $X$  and  $Y$  because it is right / wrong to do so.

**Under scrutiny, morality and religion are disentangled** – We have shown that, under scrutiny, it is impossible to accept the idea that religion is necessary to morality and moral life:

**The first interpretation:** – “To do  $X$  and  $Y$  is right / wrong because God commands / forbids to do so”

1. support the idea that religion is necessary to morality and moral action
2. but is untenable for various reasons

**The second interpretation:** “ God commands / forbids to do  $X$  and  $Y$  because it is right / wrong to do so”

1. is perfectly tenable
2. but does not support the idea that religion is necessary to morality and moral action

At the end, then, morality and religion appear to be independent at the most fundamental level. Religion may serve as a guide for morality and moral action, but cannot be said to be the necessary foundation of our moral life.

## 8.4 Natural Law Theory

The Natural Law Theory can be seen as a Christian re-interpretation of the Greek philosophers' way of thinking about ethics. Aquinas is considered as the most important supporter

of this theory of ethics.

**The Greeks' notion of cosmos, and their related view of ethics** – Many greek philosophers and greek schools of philosophy had developed the idea that:

1. Our world is in *rational order*: the world is a *kosmos* (this is the origin of our word *cosmology*)
2. In order to be a good man, we have (a) to *understand* our particular role within the rational order of the world, and (b) play our role the best we can.
3. The way we can understand our role is through *reason* – reason is the good tool to understand the order of the world, which is *rational*.

Example: How your physics influences your ethical views: Stoics and Fate vs. Epicurus and Pleasure

IMPORTANT NOTE: The assumption here is that the way the world *is* is a good guide to know the way we *ought* to be. This is an important assumption, which, we'll see, is far from trivial. But before we discuss this, let us see how the Christian Natural Law Theory stems from the Greek tradition described above.

**The Natural Law Theory** – The Christian tradition has put the Christian God into the picture described above:

1. Our world is in *rational order*: – Christians: this rational order is coming from God – God's plan or Natural Law
2. In order to be a good man, we have (a) to *understand* our particular role within the rational order of the world, and (b) play our role the best we can – Christians: that is, we have to understand and play our role in God's Natural Law the best we can
3. The way we can understand our role is through *reason* – reason is the good tool to understand the order of the world, which is *rational* – Christian: reason is the tool that God gave us to understand and play our role in the world.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Note the difference between the Divine Command Theory:

- In the Divine Command Theory (whatever interpretation you accept), your best way to know what is right and wrong is to consult God's command.

- In the Natural Law Theory, your best way to know what is right and wrong is to use your reason to understand the fundamental notions of right and wrong. The scriptures are important, but not an end in themselves: they are a tool for a more profound understanding and more knowledgeable realization of God's rational plan thanks to the use of reason.

**Thomas Aquinas** – Aquinas (13th century) is considered the greatest Christian theologian and philosopher. He founded the Thomistic school. In the text, we get more details about the Natural Law Theory, theory of which Aquinas is the principal proponent:

The following summarizes the main points that Aquinas defends in the text:



**Human beings and the Natural Law** – There are two ways to relate to God’s law:

1. to be submitted to it (like stones, trees and animals are)
2. to follow it (like humans can do)

→ *Human beings have a special status within the rational order of the world: they share the capacity of reason with God – Reason is the “imprint of divine light” on humans.*

**The method** we should use is similar to the method used in mathematics:

1. We start from general and common principles
2. We figure out the particular matters by reasoning

The model here is Euclidean Geometry: State the axioms and then deduce the particular properties.

→ *Just as in mathematics, we use our intuition and reason to grasp the truth, so is the case with morality.*

**What should we expect from the Natural Law** – Both in Question 9, third article, and Question 94, third and fourth article, Aquinas makes an important point:

1. The Natural Law tells us what the most general principles of morality are
2. These concern only the kind of intention we should have in making our moral decision
3. THAT SAID: the Natural Law does not tell us what particular actions have to be accomplished in particular circumstances.

Example: “goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner” ?

→ *Humans have to decide on particular practical matters. The Natural Law commands general guiding principles, not specific acts.*

More precisely, in Question 94, fourth article, Aquinas makes the following three-fold distinction:

	Same for all?	Known to all?
General Principles	YES	YES
Principles of Speculative Reason	YES	NO
Principles of Practical Reason	NO	NO

**Consequence: believers and non-believers all alike** – Under the Natural Law Theory, every human being is gifted with reason. So, every human being, believer or not, is able to understand the fundamental notion of right and wrong. Only believer picture themselves as part of God’s plan, while non-believers do not.

→ *Under the Natural Law Theory, religion is not necessary to morality and moral action.*

## 8.5 How Religious Beliefs are Relevant to Applied Ethics – or not.

Many will feel frustrated by the level of abstraction of the discussion above. The deeply seeded belief remains that religion commands specific attitudes towards specific ethical issues. Abortion is one of the most important. So, we should answer two questions:

1. Are there distinctive stances on ethical issues that religion commands?
2. Are these stances different from the ones we could take through rational thinking?

**Distinctive Stances?** – The answer to the first question is simply negative:

1. Various religions have different stances, and some religions (like Buddhism) do not command anything particular
2. Within one religion (say the Catholic Church), particular stances are *the product of the history*. Theologians make decisions, revoke these decisions, etc., and the “stances” commanded by the Church change accordingly
3. The Scriptures have to be interpreted – The idea that the Bible has to read literally is the fact of a very recent movement in the United States, which remains a minority within Christian theologians.
  - The Scriptures are the result of history
  - The Scriptures are ambiguous
  - The Scriptures contain contradictions
  - The Scriptures contain commands that are dated : death for adultery or for cursing against your parents, forbid new mom to enter the Church, etc. (see EMP p. 50)
  - The Scriptures do not say anything about various modern issues (example of the camel and the car)→ *The History of the Church features a continuous attempt to understand and interpret the Bible.*

**Distinctive ways to decide?** – The question arises: how do theologian make decision, if not through reasoning, like everybody else?

Example of abortion:

- From Aristotle: a soul = a shape of a human
  - Since 1312: Fetuses don't have the shape of a human before several weeks → abortion is fine in early pregnancy
  - False theory 17th century: homonculus – shape of human very early – decision of the Church against abortion
- 
- Theologians make decisions on the base of theories and reasonings, just like anybody else.*
- Some of these theories may prove to be false, and hence the decisions should

change. In the case of abortion, it is remarkable that the Church maintains a stance based on a theory which has long been disproved.

→ *You can apply here Socrates' question: either you accept what the Church commands only because the Church commands it (which we have said is untenable), or you believe that you accept what the Church commands because it is right, when it is.*

### **The problem of Bad Faith** – Fundamentalists and the Bible

Fundamentalists (in all three monotheist religions) say they find what distinctive stances to take concerning particular issues in the direct, literal reading of the holy scriptures.

Under scrutiny, they make their decision first, and then use and often abuse the text in order to support their views.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

**What this chapter was \*not about\*** – The above is not about:

- Saying that the Church is wrong
- Saying that religious beliefs cannot serve as a guide to morality

**What this chapter was about** was to explain how religion and morality are fundamentally independent:

- one can be moral and not religious (and vice-versa)
- religious people and non-religious people, theologians, Christian philosophers and Atheist philosophers all use reason to figure out what is right to do.

