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Philosophical interpretation of the relation between Morality and Religion

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Abstract

The research paper attempts to give a brief account of morality and religion. It also tries to find out the mutual relationship between morality and religion. The main objective of the article is to give a philosophical interpretation of the relation of morality to religion. Morality or ethics deals with human conduct. Morality is a thoroughly totalitarian ideal. The concept of morality is characterised by greater universality. Moral principles are meant for everybody. Teaching of morality is completely universal and open. On the other hand, religion consists of beliefs, dogmas, traditions, practices and rituals. True religion educates man and trains him in hope and patience, in truthfulness and honesty, in love for the right and good. Kant said morality is prior to religion. Martineau holds that morality leads to religion. Descartes and Locke said that religion is prior to morality. Philosophers have strongly divided over whether religion is a positive or a negative influence in the moral life. Some philosophers, such as, Marx, Neitzsche etc. argue that religion is a threat to the moral life. But the service of religion to ethics is accepted by many thinkers. Philosophers, like Kant, Bergson, Mahatma Gandhi etc. say that religion has close association with morality. Morality and religion have been closely connected in the history of the race. Religion and morality are closely related but they are not identical. Neither morality precedes religion nor does religion precede morality. They are intertwined and interdependent on each other.

Introduction: Moral philosophy is philosophical inquiry about norms or values, about ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, what should and what should not be done. Some people use the term ‘moral philosophy’ as synonymous with ‘ethics’. In the history of the subject the term has been used more widely, to cover also the discussion of normative ideas in organized social as well as in private relationships; in particular it has included political and legal philosophy (Raphael 09). According to James Rachels, “Moral philosophy is the attempt to achieve a systematic understanding of the nature of morality and what it requires of us-in Socrates’s words, of “how we ought to live,” and why” (Rachels 01).

Morality or ethics deals with conduct, in so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad. According to Dewey, the term 'ethics' and 'ethical', are derived from Greek word '*ethos*' which originally meant custom, usages, especially those belonging to some group as distinguished from another, and later came to mean disposition, character. They are thus like the Latin word 'moral', from mores (Muslehuddin 01).

Morality is a thoroughly totalitarian ideal. It constitutes a unitary, homogeneous point of view from which all conflicts of duties of all agents, regardless of their specific circumstances, are supposed to have a solution. Thus, morality is not only universal in that it applies to all persons. It is also pervasive in that every moment of a person's life is sanctioned by morality: either morality provides a solution to the conflicts that beset the agent, or morality provides room and boundaries for the agent's free choice (Castaneda 186).

The concept of morality is characterised by greater universality. It must be thought of as a standpoint from which principles are considered as being acted on by everyone. Moral principles are not merely principles on which a person must always act without making exceptions, but they are principles meant for everybody. It follows from this that the teaching of morality must be completely universal and open (Baier 195).

In actual practice, religion consists of beliefs, dogmas, traditions, practices and rituals. A believer born in a religious tradition inherits all this. He takes everything for granted and believes in everything he has inherited as an essential and integral part of religion. For him, rituals are as important and integral as the values. However, while rituals are performed regularly, values are either violated, neglected or practised more symbolically (Engineer 177).

True religion educates man and trains him in hope and patience, in truthfulness and honesty, in love for the right and good, in courage and endurance, all of which are required for the mastery of the great art of living. Moreover, true religion insures man against fears and spiritual losses, and assures him of God's aid and unbreakable alliance. It provides man with peace and security and makes his life meaningful.

While explaining the relation of ethics to philosophy of religion, always a question is raised in this connection-how morality is related to religion? Is morality prior to religion or vice-versa? Or Are they supplementary to each other?

According to Kant, morality is prior to religion. It is our strong conviction that virtue will triumph at last (Jalil 10). That virtue will lead us to happiness and vice to pain. But our actual experience show that the happiness is not connected with virtue nor it arises from it as its natural consequence. Virtue does not of itself produce happiness nor vice of pain. Thus people find that a belief is thrust on mind that there must be a Supreme Personal Being who will combine virtue with happiness and vice with pain, and will reward the virtuous and punish the vicious. Thus, morality, to mean its basic entity requires religion. Martineau holds that morality leads to religion.

According to Descartes and Locke, religion is prior to morality. Commands of God are moral laws. Whatever He commands is right and whatever He forbids is wrong. Morality is an outcome of God's will. But this view is also not tolerable because it makes ethics not only dependent on theology but also a by-product of it (Jalil 11).

Actually, morality and religion are supplementary and interdependent on each other. Religion is the ideal basis of morality and morality is the true external expression of religion. Morality manifests the relation of the individual to society, and religion manifests the relation of the individual to God. Both are essential for human existence (Jalil 12).

The Role of Religion in the Moral Life: Philosophers through the centuries have been strongly divided over whether religion is a positive or a negative influence in the moral life. Let's begin with those who argue that religion is a threat to the moral life.

Since the 1840s, the west has witnessed a number of critiques of religion. The claim has been made that religion undermines human dignity and robs people of the autonomy necessary for making moral decisions. In this regard the arguments of Marx and Nietzsche are discussed-

More than a century ago, Marx claimed that religion is the "*opiate of the people*". Like opium, religion- in Marx's eyes- dulls the senses, lulls people into a false sense of security, and undermines their motivation to bring about effective social change to remedy conditions of injustice. When virtues such as humility and meekness are extolled, when people are told that injustices will be righted in the afterlife, and when suffering in this world is praised as preparation for salvation, few people will be motivated to challenge the existing social, political, and economic order.

Nietzsche, the other major nineteenth century voice against religion, also criticised Christianity for its effects on people. According to Nietzsche, Christianity is founded on resentment, the desire of the weak to gain control over the strong without themselves developing strengths. It is an example of what Nietzsche called the "*herd morality*" or "*slave morality*". The Christian virtue of humility provides a perfect example of this in his eyes. According to Nietzsche, humility is a sign of weakness, of lack of power. Christianity takes this weakness, pretends it is strength, and then criticizes those with genuine strength- in this case, those with pride- as bad. Thus, Christianity inverts the moral world, making the weak strong and the strong weak (Hinman 5th Ed. 83).

When Nietzsche proclaimed that "*God is dead*", he was also making a statement about morality. In the traditional Christian worldview, moral values had an ultimate guarantee in God. This had at least two important implications for ethics. *First*, because God is good, goodness is not just a human creation. It has objectivity independent of human choice. *Second*, God's goodness guarantees that justice will ultimately prevail; the wicked will be punished and the good will be rewarded. When Nietzsche said that God is dead, he meant that morality has lost any transcendent foundation for its values and any guarantee that the scales of justice will be righted in a later life. In Nietzsche's view, morality must cease to be

otherworldly. It must become purely a morality of this world- a morality of strength and self-affirmation that does not depend on a God or an after world (Hinman 5th ed. 84).

Does Morality Need Religion?

One of the most vexing difficulties for moral philosophers is that morality demands on some occasions that people set personal advantage aside and act for the sake of some larger good. Morality may require, for example, that people behave honestly, even when those around us accept bribes and never get caught. Why should people have morally when people lose by doing so? Divine Command theorists have an answer to this question that is not available to others. They claim that ultimately God will balance the scales. The just will be rewarded, and the (Hinman 5th ed. 85) unjust punished. If this is true, it certainly provides followers of divine command theories with a motivation to be moral that is not present for others. All of this presumes, of course, that God is just.

In considering the relation between religion and ethics, it is seen that there are really two distinct issues, one relating to the content of morality and the other pertaining to its motivation. The discussion has focused primarily on whether the content of morality derives from divine commandments or from reason. Yet even philosophers like Kant, who concluded that reason is the source of morality, were troubled by whether reason alone could provide a sufficient motivation to be moral. Kant himself vacillated on this issue. On the one hand, Kant argued that reason does provide a sufficient motivation in the feeling of respect for the law that it creates. On the other hand, he felt that from a practical point of view, it is necessary to postulate the existence of God and the immortality of the soul to make sense of morality.

Critics of religion such as Marx and Nietzsche saw religion as a profound source of social conformity, as a means of maintaining the status quo and keeping people confined to their existing social and economic positions. Yet there is another face of religion that was perhaps less visible in the nineteenth century, which suggests that religion may be a profoundly liberating force in individual's lives and an important force for social change (Titus 3rd ed. 537).

Religion has close association with morality as pictured by Kant, Bergson, Mahatma Gandhi, etc. Religion is responsible for subordinating barbaric anarchy to reverence and obedience. It is shaping economic, social and political institutions through virtue, social service founding of charitable institutions like hospitals, social services, temples, ashrams, etc. which are associated with the teaching of art, literature and culture. The scriptures suggest solutions to human problems and promote peace and international understanding (Singh 421).

Benoy Gopal Ray also held morality and religion as complimentary to each other. According to him, one fulfils the other. Gandhi also emphasizes almost the same idea when treated religion and morality on the same level. He advocated that religion and morality would pervade the whole of human life. He did not perceive religion as something more

than morality. In the words of Gandhi, “As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality” (Dutta 113).

Morality and religion have been closely connected in the history of the race. Both have emphasized human personality in its relationships and have been concerned with conduct. Morality has been especially concerned with the field of human values, or with the right, the good, and the desirable in respect of conduct. It has emphasized the right of every person to the fullest development through the sharing of values in a community person.

Religion, on the other hand, has been concerned not only with the ordinary values of human life but with the superhuman values. Religion is the conviction that “what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature.” It attempts to relate man to that which is highest in spirit and in this way to gain support from the cosmic environment. It represents belief in the reality of spiritual values.

While there appears to be a logical as well as practical connection between morality and religion, the two have been separated occasionally in the thoughts and conduct of men. There are men who (Titus 3rd ed. 503) are moral, in the popular sense of the term, yet who scoff at religion. On the other hand, there are some persons who are religious in the sense that they are intellectually and emotionally devoted to certain religious organizations but who is not moral- that is, they offend the modern moral consciousness. Apparently the moral and religious capacities of men are not equally sensitive in all persons or even in the same men. In the long run, however, if the two are separated there is damage both to morals and to religion. Morality without religion lacks drive and is cold, while religion divorced from ethical considerations tends to become immoral and to lose much of its significance (Titus 3rd ed. 504).

Conclusion: In conclusion it can be asserted that religion and morality are closely related, but cannot be regarded to be identical. Nietzsche, for example, never subscribed to any religion. He projected his ideas as opposed to Christianity. But he had his own version of morality. Sartre rejected the idea of God but had firmly subscribed to the thesis that through our free choice we can create our own moral values. All these show that religion cannot simply be equated with morality. Religion has many dimensions. Some of them are-the ritual dimension, the mythological dimension, the doctrinal dimension, the moral dimension, the social dimension and the experiential dimension. So, the moral dimension is not the whole of religion. But it is undeniable that all the major religions of the world have a strong moral dimension.

Regarding the relationship between religion and morality one may ask: is religion the source of morality? Historical evidences go to show that religion can be said to come first and morality later. But once the moral sense is developed in the mind of people, morality and religion would go together. Neither morality precedes religion nor does religion precede morality. They are intertwined and interdependent on each other.

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