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Prompt #4

### Is Religion a Necessary Foundation for Morality?

Being raised in a Christian home, I had always been taught that all my morals were rooted in my religion and that I should do everything God commanded and not do anything that was forbidden by him. Being away from my church and my Christian parents for this last school year didn't necessarily weaken my faith, but it allowed me to grow and adapt to my newfound independence. Along with that, my faith changed quite a bit. Now, instead of going along with what my family and church community have told me about God, I have made my faith my own. I have been able to experience more things that contribute to how I view the world and how I view religion, and I now have my own thoughts independent of my family's influence. In this paper, I will share those thoughts. I will introduce the Divine Command Theory and its criticisms, share my thoughts on Mavrodes' critique of secular ethics, and I will conclude with my opinion that morality does not depend on religion because anything can be considered right or wrong without a God having to tell us so.

A basic definition of the Divine Command Theory is that it is up to God to declare something morally right or wrong. According to Rachels, "Actions that God commands are morally required; actions that God forbids are morally wrong; and all other actions are permissible or merely morally neutral" (51). It seems very straightforward. Don't do what God says is wrong, and you should always do what God says is right. The idea seems simple, but this theory is extremely flawed. The first reason is that this theory would mean nothing to an atheist. Why would you base your morals off the commands of a God who you claim does not exist? The

concept of morality applies to everyone, not just those who believe in a God telling them what to do and what not to do. The second criticism of the Divine Command Theory is that it implies that “nothing is good or bad, except when God’s thinking makes it so” (Rachels p.52). This statement brings us to the conclusion that things like murder would not be bad if God wasn’t around to say that it was. However, we know that killing someone is still an extremely brutal act that should never be considered morally right. We don’t necessarily need a God to tell us that. To further prove this point, it is true that people may disagree on their religious beliefs, but I think it is fair to assume that we all agree that killing is morally wrong. It takes more than God deeming something good or bad for it to be that way, which brings up the next criticism; “does God make things morally right or wrong, or does he simply recognize that they are?” According to the Divine Command Theory, the first statement is true. The theory states that without God, morality simply would not exist. To say that morality depends on religion would be like saying that if religion did not exist, neither would morality. This is simply not true. One final problem with the Divine Command Theory is that people will try to find a way to justify their actions based on the Bible, making it look like they are doing the moral things that God commanded them to do. The way they do this is by actions such as taking scripture out of context to justify an action. The reason why they do this is very clearly illustrated in the Rachels text; “We face different problems than our ancestors faced 2,000 years ago; thus, the Scriptures may be silent on matters that seem pressing to us” (58). Rachels goes on to say that some of these “pressing matters” are things like worker’s rights, extinction, and funding medical research. There’s nothing in the Bible about anything like that, so it’s easy to see why we would search for scriptures that *could* apply to the situation, but they have a different meaning altogether. That being said, it is easy to see that even if God is the one who guides and determines our moral actions, we are justifying

them the wrong way. This is why the Divine Command Theory makes it difficult to accept the statement that morality depends on religion, because we are twisting it to make it that way.

Rachels states that we may say that our moral views come from our religion, but that's only because we interpret the Bible in a way that supports a conclusion that we've already reached (59). Overall, the Divine Command Theory has the potential to give meaning to morality, but it comes at the expense of being an extremely flawed theory that is hard to accept.

Professor and philosopher George Mavrodes wanted to examine the opinion that morality is so dependent on religion that if religion failed, so would morality (579). Mavrodes wrote an essay that explored this idea. However, upon reading Mavrodes' essay, I was immediately skeptical when I read the words "...it seems unusually difficult to formulate clearly the features of this suggestion that make it attractive" (579). My interpretation of this quote is that Mavrodes wanted his readers to know ahead of time that he was going to have a hard time making the argument that morality depends on religion. After the disclaimer, Mavrodes highlighted some points that he said he was "not going to cover" in his essay. All of these points happened to be some of the strongest arguments for the statement that morality and religion are separate and independent concepts. This helped me determine that since Mavrodes chose not to pay attention to the strongest arguments against his position, he had a hard time taking that position himself. I have a feeling that he did not believe that morality is dependent on religion, Rather, he wanted to explore the claim and test to see if it was actually worth arguing. One example of something that Mavrodes chose not to cover was the fact that there are people who reject religion altogether, but still live moral lives. This alone can be enough to prove that religion and morality are not dependent upon each other. Mavrodes' essay was not enough to convince me that morality is dependent on religion, especially since he told his readers at the beginning that he had a hard

time finding a way to make the statement attractive. In my opinion, Mavrodes' criticism of secular ethics was not much of a criticism at all, and that is one of the reasons why I chose to argue for the statement that morality and religion are two separate and independent concepts.

In my opinion, morality certainly does not depend on religion. That being said, we do not need religion to live moral lives, and being religious does not make us any more moral. The way in which we live and the choices that we make day by day are not influenced by the presence or absence of a God. If we adhered to the principles of the Divine Command Theory, we would all need to be religious in order to be moral, because morality is something that God created and God decides what is moral and what is not. However, my life experience has shown me that this is false. I have been going to church my whole life, and one thing I've learned is that we don't refrain from doing bad things because God commands us to. Rather, we know in our minds and our hearts that what we are doing is wrong, and that is sufficient reasoning to not do those things. Some may argue that God made those minds and hearts that are choosing to live morally, and that it is his plan that we make the decisions that we do. From a Christian viewpoint, this is true. God did create us. There is an entire book of the Bible devoted to creation. However, God created us as "free agents; so, we may choose what to do" (Rachels p.51). By this standard, we are choosing to do what is moral, and that has nothing to do with religion. I have seen people living some of the most moral lives and contributing to society in the most genuine and impactful ways. Some of these people are Christian, but there are a few people I know who do not associate themselves with any sort of religion. The fact of the matter is, they don't need a God to tell them what is moral and what is not. Therefore, morality does not depend on religion.

Although my argument has been that morality and religion are independent, that doesn't necessarily mean that they are always separate. There is some degree of overlap when it comes

to these two concepts. An example of this is when religious beliefs influence moral issues and decisions. However, the morals involved are independent of religion because the issue would be resolved one way or another, regardless of whether or not religion was the influencing factor. Rachels states that this argument for the independence of morality and religion does not question the validity of religion, rather it shows that regardless of whether or not the religion in question is true, morality is a whole different issue. That is why I believe that morality can exist independent of religion. In this paper, I shared my opinion that the Divine Command Theory is flawed based on evidence from the Rachels text. I assessed Mavrodes' critique of secular ethics, and concluded that a sound argument cannot be made for the statement that morality and religion are dependent of one another. With the supporting evidence, I gave my opinion that morality does not depend on religion because anything can be considered right or wrong without a God having to tell us so.

## References

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