

God's Commandments and Ethics

1.2. Analyze the arguments for and against theological voluntarism.

One of the most common views of ethical principles is that they are tied to the commands of a divine being. This view is referred to as theological voluntarism or the Divine Command theory of ethics. Theological voluntarism holds that a law or principle is right if and only if it is willed (commanded) by God. Something is good because God wills it to be so, not because God recognizes it to be good. For example, God does not condemn murder because it is wrong. Murder is wrong because God says it is wrong. Many people turn to religion for ethical guidance. There are some who insist that their personal religious beliefs provide the only acceptable ethical standards. There are contradictions in religious texts about many questions of right and wrong.

Ethical Principles as Divine Commandments

Theological voluntarism raises serious questions about the relationship between ethics and religion. If ethics is based on God's commands, there are two questions we might ask about the nature of these command: (1) Is something moral/ethical/right because God commands it, or (2) does God command something because it is moral? These questions expose a tension between the religious views of ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle, and the religion of the ancient Hebrews. Aristotle's God is perfect, completely self-sufficient, and unchanging. The God of Abraham changes His mind often, and He rewards and punishes people.

Problems with Theological Voluntarism

Theological voluntarists believe that God is the sole arbiter of ethics that the ethical principles or commandments laid down by God are absolute, universal, and eternal. They are not subject to critical examination or questioning. Critically examining ethical principles requires involving standards of ethical judgment *independent* of God's commands. Many religious people have a great respect for reason and use it to understand their religion. For theological voluntarists, reason is more likely to be an enemy rather than an ally. Some argue whether such total unthinking devotion would qualify as ethical behavior at all. Rachels argues that only those who exercise free will are capable of acting ethically.

God's Law and Punishment

The intersection of religion and ethics raises another fundamental distinction in ethics, namely, the difference between moral motivation and moral justification. It is possible that the person of faith endorses theological voluntarism because of the possibility of divine punishment. While this may provide one with a motive for obeying God's commands, it does not justify the commands themselves. One may be motivated to act in accordance with certain rules, without reflecting on whether the rules are ones that ought to be followed.

Religion and Ethics

1.3. Outline the influence of religion on ethical inquiry.

If we reject theological voluntarism, it does not imply the rejection of religious considerations in terms of our inquiry into ethics. Martin Luther King's civil rights campaign drew heavily on religious symbolism. Religious parables and traditions have often stimulated reform movements and have encouraged us to look more closely at our lives, habits, and assumptions. So, if ethics is not based on God's will or God's punishments, what is the basis of ethics?

Discussion

1. Several films have explored explicitly or implicitly the problems with accepting theological volunteerism or divine command theory. In *The Name of the Rose* the inquisitor Bernardo Gui justifies the torture and killing of supposed heretics on theological grounds. How can we know which commands are genuinely from God? Show part or all of the film and examine the implications and problems with theological volunteerism. Consider a present-day ethical question, such as: Is drug addiction a brain disease or a moral failing? Discuss how questions of ethics might determine how people are treated for addiction.

Activities

1. The U.S. Supreme Court legalized same sex marriage nationwide in 2015. Should the government be able to decide who marries whom? People on all sides of this question often use religious or moral arguments to support their views. Have students research same sex marriage in the United States. Have each student take a position on the question. Facilitate a roundtable discussion where students use their research to support their opinions.

2. Although many churches are Christian, not all Christian churches share the same outlook on individual moral issues. Ask the students to create a chart comparing the moral positions of several different denominations on a topic such as abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality, or marriage.

True/False Questions

1. Metaethics is the study of moral rules, norms and principles that guide or govern human action. _____

Answer: False

2. Plato believed moral principles are eternal truths that are only known through reason. _____

Answer: True

3. The word *transcend* means to go beyond the limits of something. _____

Answer: True

4. Theological voluntarism is also referred to as Divine Command theory. _____

Answer: True

5. Western religious tradition has struggled to combine the views of ancient Roman philosophy with the religion of the first Christians. _____

Answer: False

6. Aristotle's God changes His mind frequently. _____

Answer: False

Multiple Choice Questions

1. This philosopher believed that God implants moral principles in our mind as innate ideas.

- A. Aristotle
- B. Descartes
- C. Hobbes
- D. Socrates

Answer: B. Descartes

2. The belief that what is moral or immoral is commanded by God is known as

- A. moral relativism.
- B. moral absolutism.
- C. theological voluntarism.
- D. theological noncognitivism.

Answer: C. theological voluntarism.

3. This religious leader referred to reason as "the Devil's greatest whore."

- A. Moses
- B. Socrates
- C. Pythagoras
- D. Martin Luther

Answer: D. Martin Luther

4. One implication of accepting the premise that what is moral is moral in virtue of God's commanding it is that

- A. there must be a moral standard independent of God.
- B. there must be one God.
- C. what is moral is arbitrary.
- D. God is not a necessary for there to be morality.

Answer: C. what is moral is arbitrary.

Short Answer Questions

1. Are ethical principles fixed or changing? Explain your response.

Answer: Student responses should be supported by evidence or reasoning.

2. In the text, the author asks the reader to consider *how* to think carefully, critically, and effectively. What does this proposition mean to you?

Answer: Student responses should be supported by evidence or reasoning.

3. What is the difference between moral motivation and moral justification?

Answer: A motive might be a reward or punishment for doing or not doing something. Justification is an acceptable reason for doing something.

4. What two questions can we ask of someone who holds that “moral” equals “what God commands?”

Answer: Is a law right because God commands it? Does God command a law because it is right?

Essay Questions

1. Explain the difference between natural morality and transcendent morality.

Answer: Student responses should be supported by evidence or reasoning.

2. What two questions are raised by theological voluntarism (Divine Command theory)? What are the implications of holding one or the other true?

Answer: Student responses should be supported by evidence or reasoning.

3. Do you agree with Rachels notion that only those who exercise free will are capable of acting ethically? If you subject your will to the external commands of others, are you acting slavishly? Explain your response.

Answer: Student responses should be supported by evidence or reasoning.

Chapter 2: Thinking Critically About Ethics

Summary

Ethics requires that we be clear on the questions we seek answers to. You may decide that there are no moral objective facts in ethics. You may also decide that there are objective moral facts. Understanding ethical questions requires being able to identify which premises are relevant to the conclusion. Changing one's beliefs in light of better arguments or new information is a sign of clear and honest thinking. Bad forms of reasoning include: Red Herring/Irrelevant reason, Ad Hominem, Principle of Charity, Strawman Fallacy, and Inconsistency.

What's the Question?

2.1. Determine the exact conclusion and distinguish relevant from irrelevant arguments.

When considering ethics, it is important to be clear on exactly what question is being considered. When examining an argument, think about *precisely* what the argument is supposed to be proving. Make sure you clearly understand what the *conclusion* of the argument is. The relevance of an argument is not determined by whether a claim is true or false but whether it *matters* if the claim is true or false. For example, a false claim by a witness in a trial may be relevant because a defendant may go to prison because of the false statement. When a person uses an irrelevant point in support of a conclusion, we say the person has committed a *fallacy*, or argument error, of *irrelevant reason*. This is also known as the *red herring fallacy*.

Ad Hominem Fallacy

2.2. Recognize ad hominem arguments and distinguish legitimate uses of ad hominem from ad hominem fallacies.

An *ad hominem* fallacy is an attack on the *source of the argument*. If someone presents an argument, we must evaluate the merits of the argument itself, not the merits of the person making the argument. If you attack the source of the argument in order to discredit the argument, you have committed an *ad hominem fallacy*. It is important to keep this point in mind because many arguments can become intensely personal. Not all *ad hominem* attacks are fallacious. For example, in the O.J. Simpson trial, the defense made an ad hominem attack on Mark Fuhrman. In order to evaluate Fuhrman's testimony, the jury needed to know if he was a credible witness.

The Principle of Charity and the Strawman Fallacy

2.3. Focus on the strongest version of arguments and avoid the strawman fallacy.

The *principle of charity* supports the idea that you should interpret opposing views and arguments as generously, fairly, and honestly as possible. Resist the temptation to score cheap points and win false victories by misrepresenting opposing views. When someone distorts or misrepresents a position in order to make it easier to attack, it is called the *strawman fallacy*. Always represent opposing views in their strongest and most plausible form.

Appeal to Authority

2.4. Recognize the limits of appeal to authority in ethics.

In order for an *appeal to authority* to be legitimate, it must meet certain conditions. First, the authority to whom you appeal must be an expert *in the appropriate area*. Second, the subject on which we appeal to authority must be the one in which there is *general agreement* among authorities on that subject. We cannot legitimately appeal to authority to settle ethics issues because there is no general agreement among such authorities.

Consistency

2.5. Appreciate the importance of argument consistency.

A key question in examining ethical views is whether they are internally consistent and whether they are consistent with our other beliefs. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Emerson believed that it is okay for people to change their minds. He believed in keeping an open mind, but it shouldn’t be so open that it allows internal contradictions.

Analogies

2.6. Understand the different forms of analogy and how deductive arguments by analogy work.

An analogy is a comparison of two things, usually for explanation or clarification. Using analogy can be an effective way to convince someone to change his or her point of view. It can also be an effective way to evaluate the legitimacy of one’s own views. Figurative analogies don’t prove anything. They are illustrations. They are not effective as arguments or proofs. *Deductive arguments by analogy* do offer arguments, and they can be powerful and persuasive. There are two ways to dispute deductive arguments by analogy. First, you can reject the basic starting point of the analogy. Second, you can accept the starting point of the analogy but then argue that the analogy itself is flawed. For the second option, you must explain why the two cases are not analogous.

Discussion

1. There are many films that explore questions of ethics. In the 1981 film *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, a sculptor who is paralyzed from the neck down sues the hospital he is in for the right to be allowed to die. Show part or all of the film and examine the different kinds of arguments the parties make about their positions on the question. Compare the issues examined in the film to an ethical question you have had to consider in your own life.

Activities

1. Logical fallacies are often found in the editorial pages, and letters to the editor pages of the local and national newspapers (not to mention blog posts and comments). Have the students find an article from a newspaper, magazine, blog, etc. that commits one of the logical fallacies discussed in the text.
2. President Donald Trump frequently uses red herrings in order to distract the media and the public from investigations conducted on his administration. Have students search online for examples of red herrings Trump has used during his presidency. Invite groups of students to share what they found with the class.