The Interplay Between Ethics and Religion in the Contemporary World

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Abstract: The relationship between ethics and religion creates a multifaceted and evolving environment that influences both personal and societal moral frameworks in today's world. This paper argues that religion plays a dominant role in shaping ethics. The examination explores whether ethics can exist independently of religion or if religion can be practiced without ethical principles. This analysis demonstrates the beneficial outcomes that can result from a deeper comprehension of the connection between ethics and religion. Ultimately, this paper contends that in today's world, religion serves as the foundation of ethics in all societies.

Keywords: Ethics, Religion, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will inquire about the intricate relationship between ethics and religion. We will dig into the philosophical and practical implications of these two concepts, assessing whether an ethical anatomy can be sustained independently of religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, we will investigate the notion of religion existing without a moral compass, questioning the role that ethical guidelines play in shaping religious doctrines in the modern era. Through this examination, we aim to uncover how contemporary society steers the complexities of moral values and spiritual beliefs, and whether these elements can coexist harmoniously or are fundamentally interlaced.

The Interplay Between Ethics and Religion

The relationship between ethics and religion is a complex and longstanding one, tracing back to ancient civilizations. It is often challenging to ascertain which of the two concepts came first, leading to extensive philosophical discussions throughout history. For example, in ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato, through the character of Socrates, posed a significant question in his dialogue "Euthyphro": does morality arise from the commands of the divine, or does it exist independently before any divine edicts?[1] This inquiry puts across the crucial intersection of moral philosophy and theological ethics, raising questions about the nature of goodness and its grounding.

Both religion and ethics fundamentally deal with the appropriate behavior of human beings, but they tackle this issue from distinct perspectives. Religion is mainly centered on the veneration of supernatural entities, including rituals, beliefs, and practices that help followers connect with the divine. Nonetheless, a crucial aspect of religion is its influence on shaping the moral framework that guides followers in their interactions with others in society. Religious teachings frequently offer principles for ethical conduct, affecting how individuals engage with friends, family, and the larger community. These moral imperatives can be seen in various religious texts and teachings that urge followers to practice compassion, honesty, justice, and kindness.[2] As such, religion can act as a powerful source of ethical instruction, promoting values that foster social cohesion and interpersonal harmony.

The relationship between ethics and religion remains significant today as persons confront moral dilemmas and look for direction from their faith traditions. Each aspect influences the other, with ethical values frequently rooted in religious teachings and, in turn, religious convictions being understood through ethical reasoning. This

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[1] Plato, *Euthyphro, Complete Works of Plato* Trans Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871), 201.
[2] Louis Pajman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 3rd Ed. (London: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1955), 206.

interconnection not only affects individual behavior but also impacts societal standards and legislation, making the exploration of ethics and religion a crucial area of study for comprehending human actions and social interactions.[3]

The Significant Interplay Between Ethics and Religion

Most of our moral judgments are intricately tied to religious beliefs. The ethical guidelines set by ancient civilizations have significantly shaped the moral values we embrace today, frequently originating from religious teachings. For instance, there is a common agreement that actions like murder and adultery are fundamentally immoral, irrespective of the context, a perspective echoed in the teachings of prominent global religions.[4] These values are ingrained in ancient moral principles and have greatly influenced our social instincts. A crucial link between religion and morality can be summarized by the "Golden Rule," which advises treating others how you would like to be treated. Essentially, it highlights the importance of treating others in the same way we wish to be treated. This concept is reflected in almost all of the world's major faiths, appearing in different variations within their holy texts.[5]

The Golden Rule serves as a foundational ethical guideline across religious traditions, suggesting that adherence to this rule leads to happiness. In addition to the Golden Rule, many other teachings and practices delineate what is considered right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious from a religious perspective.

The Golden Rule as Expressed in Various Religions

Judaism conveys the idea that one should not do to others what is hateful to oneself; this captures the essence of the law, with everything else serving as commentary derived from the directive to love your neighbor as yourself. In Christianity, this principle appears in the teaching that whatever you wish others would do to you, you should do to them. Likewise, Islam expresses the Golden Rule by stating, "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." Confucianism advises that do not do to others what you would not want done to you," indicating that this principle can help avoid resentment within both families and communities.[6] Buddhism expresses the golden rule in this manner that hurt not others in ways that you would find hurtful. The Dhammapada elaborates on this, advising that one should not slay or cause harm to others, emphasizing that as I am, so are other beings.[7] Hinduism distils this idea into the essence of duty and declares that do nothing unto others what you would not have them do unto you.

It further teaches to "wound not others, do no injury by thought or deed, and utter no word to pain your fellow creatures."[8] Taoism encourages individuals to regard their neighbor's gain as their own and their neighbor's loss as a personal loss. In contrast, Zoroastrianism asserts that true goodness lies in refraining from doing anything harmful to another.[9]

The Existence of Ethics and Religion Without the Other

Having established the connections between ethics and religion, a thought-provoking question arises: is ethics possible without religion? In other words, can individuals adhere to ethical principles without subscribing to a religious anatomy? Conversely, one could ask whether it is possible to be religious without also being ethical. As previously mentioned, ethics and religion have coexisted since ancient times, and the debate over which one preceded the other remains contentious.

Similarly, the existence of ethics without religion sparks considerable discussion. Some argue that ethics cannot exist independently of religion, a view held by figures such as St. Augustine, Soren Kierkegaard, and many others. Indeed, Plato's earlier dialogues engage in this debate, exploring arguments from both perspectives. In Plato's dialogue,

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[3] James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 7th Ed. Stuart Rachels (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 51.

[4] Plato, *Euthyphro,* 203.

[5] Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy,* 58.

[6] Peter Singer, *Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1993), 29.

[7] Singer, *Companion to Ethics*, 58.

[8] Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy,* 52.

[9] Andreas Buss, *The Economic Ethics of World Religions and their Laws* (Germany: British Library, 2015), 57.

Socrates aims to argue for the futility of religious underpinnings in ethics, thereby suggesting the possibility of an ethical system independent of religion.

In contrast, Euthyphro's interlocutor asserts that ethics is fundamentally grounded in religious tenets, arguing that a moral system devoid of religious influence would be unfeasible.[10] Many individuals align with Euthyphro's perspective and contend that ethics and religion are intertwined. For many people, rather than relying on rational arguments, the rightness or wrongness of actions is viewed in light of whether they align with God's commands. However, some moral philosophers question the rational foundation of arguments based solely on divine command. These philosophers, reflecting Socrates' viewpoint, suggest that actions can be evaluated as right or wrong through rational deliberation. They contend that if God commands only what is ethical, then divine commands become unnecessary. Essentially, the comprehension of right and wrong can be attained through rational thought, independent of any divine directives.

However, R. Traer asserts that the discourse surrounding divine command theory is pertinent to ethics for several reasons. Firstly, there is no universal consensus among people regarding what actions are considered right or wrong. Consequently, it remains ambiguous how we can establish moral standards solely through rational reasoning.[11] Secondly, given that many individuals turn to religion as their ethical compass, the moral teachings of religious traditions, which aim to inspire the public to adopt a higher moral standard, should not be dismissed. Even though many people may insist that rational arguments should justify ethical principles and decisions, Traer argues that the contemplation of religious arguments must not be left out from the study of ethics.[12]

Even if individuals personally do not choose to accept religious arguments as valid within ethical discussions, it is a resolution that entails vigilant consideration. If ethics deals with morality, then, the view that its source is in religion is primitive, and has much influence till now, though, many have disputed that. In an attempt to defend the view that morality emanated from religion, J. S. Mackenzie argues that modern thoughts tend to upturn the "relation not to proceed from the idea of God to the idea of morality, but rather from the idea of morality to the idea of God."[13] Mackenzie further contended that if we seek to justify the possibility of ethics existing independently of religion, we must identify the source of our moral actions within the conscience.

He posits that the conscience is a creation of God, thereby leading us back to the very position we aimed to evade. In this view, the conscience requires discipline and education, akin to Aristotle's belief that character traits must be cultivated to ensure reasonableness.[14] If this is the case, then reason, rather than conscience, would serve as the foundation of morality, allowing ethics to exist without reliance on religion. The notion of reason as the basis for morality is a theory put forth by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who asserted that every action should undergo thorough reasoning. Accordingly, reason is grounded in the 'categorical imperatives': "Act in accordance with a maxim that can simultaneously make itself a universal law," and "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always as an end, and never merely as a means."

Mackenzie argues that Kant's attempt is not entirely successful. He raises the question of whether reason, as the source of moral obligation, is somewhat dry and if it can truly provide any substantial content for moral life.[15] However, the exploration of the possibility of ethics without religion is not focused on finding the foundation upon which ethics is built. Rather, the search for ethical principles and decision-making should be justified through rational argument. This pursuit has led those who believe ethics cannot exist without religion to assert that such a foundation is what connects all classical ethical theories. There might be differences in other aspects. The position of philosophy is not to look for foundation, but to search if a person can be moral, even if such a person does not subscribe to any religion or believes in the existence of God.

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[10] Pajman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong,* 193.

[11] R. Traer, *Doing Environmental Ethics.* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2009),

[12] Traer, *Doing Environmental Ethics,*

[13] S. Mackenzie, "The Source of Moral Obligation." *International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 10, No. 4.* (1900). *pp. 474*

[14] Mackenzie, *The Source of Moral Obligation,* 480.

[15] Mackenzie, *The Source of Moral Obligation,* 469.

If we are to look for foundation, it will be extremely difficult to bypass religion as the foundation of ethics. The reason is that society and religion are hardly separated. In every human society, there has been a myth of creation in which supernatural plays prominent roles. Ever since then, man has subscribed to one religion or the other for the proper ordering of the society.[16] Doing away with foundation, then to address the issue at hand, it is safe to say that many people in the society do not profess any religious belief and are morally upright, and live exemplary lives.[17] If this is the case, it follows that ethics can exist independently of religion. Having established the presence of ethics without reliance on religious frameworks, the next question arises: can religion exist without ethics? In other words, is it possible for someone to be religious without also being ethical?

If we accept the argument that religion serves as the foundation for ethics, it would be reasonable to propose that ethics is a pathway to religious perfection. This is because God provides commandments, rules, and codes of conduct that guide adherents of religious beliefs toward achieving a higher moral standard.[18] Consequently, we can conclude that religion cannot exist without ethics. In this context, ethics acts as a watchdog for religion, scrutinizing the actions of worshippers to ensure they align with their religious beliefs, while also evaluating whether those beliefs are consistent with the nature of God that religion professes.

The Significance of Ethics in Religion

Though religious tenets are built on ethics, morality is not the major concern of religion. The major concern of religion, as noted earlier, is worship: adorations through rites and devotions. Ethics, on its own part, is concerned with morality. Religion dabbles into morality indirectly as an indispensable condition for true worshipping. Based on the foregoing, ethics or morality is the judge of religion; it judges both religion and its adherents.[19] It judges religion by revealing the inherent immoral actions religion preaches or encourages; that would make humanity to know that such religion is a false one. It judges adherents of a religion, by showing light on the numerous immoralities that many people who belong to the religion engage in. For an illustration, if a religion that grounds its rules or commandments on the divine should do what is obviously in contrast with the nature of God that it professes, then such a religion must be rejected.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have examined the relationship that exists between ethics and religion. It is observed that the relationship is so robust and dated back to time immemorial, such that, it is very difficult to separate them from each other. We realised that while it is a matter of debate which of the two proceeded, their connectivity is unarguable. Apart from the fact that religion dabbles into ethical domains by teachings and practices of what is right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious, the major link of ethics and religion is the 'golden rule'. Virtually all the major world religions profess a version of the golden rule. Therefore, by way of conclusion, whichever religious belief you share, it is important for you as a member of society to always scrutinise yourself, and all your actions with the golden rule. This is so even if such actions emanate from religious creed before you carry them out.

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[16] Mackenzie, *The Source of Moral Obligation*, 470.
[17] J. Omoregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational and Research Publishers Ltd. 1993). 7
[18] Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy,* 54.
[19] Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy,* 52.

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