

Does Significance of Ethical Concepts Require Religion?

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ABSTRACT

Since when Plato introduced challenge between gods and stability of values and ethical norms in Eutyphro dilemmas, different statements have been made on logical relationship between religion and ethics and it has some aspects like conceptual relation, proof relation, motivational relation, sociological and so on. The present paper tries to investigate ethics significance dependence on religion. According to this paper, all or some ethical concepts can be defined only by referring to religious concepts. However, it does not seem that this kind of dependence can overcome some criticisms and problems like arbitrariness of God's actions, redundancy and insignificance and attribution of ethical goodness to God and presence of common ethical beliefs among humans.

KEYWORDS: religion, ethics, ethical concepts, religious concepts

1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to non-cognitivist theories in the field of meta-ethics which is in two forms recommendation orientation and emotion orientation within the past decade, we have a wide range of cognitivist theories. Non-cognitivist theories do not consider ethical concepts as indicative of any external reality and therefore deny cognitive nature of these concepts. However, cognitivist theories do not consider ethical concepts as limited to statements based on emotions, feelings and tendencies but consider cognitive and news natures for them. Cognitivists have explained ethical concepts from two different aspects. From the first perspective, ethical concepts can be defined by other concepts while the second viewpoint i.e. intuitionism believes that ethical concepts cannot be defined by means of other concepts. Of course, some people believe in definitionism in explanation of ethical concepts. They believe that these concepts can be defined via concepts other than ethical concepts. They believe in "ethical naturalism". In other words, they believe that other ethical concepts cannot be used for definition of an ethical concept but that concept can be defined by means of natural concepts which can be sensed and explained via psychological, sociological, biological and other concepts. For instance, when the sentence "a is good" turns into "a is in a way that all people are satisfied with", or when the sentence "b is bad" turns into the sentence "b stops society from progress", we use psychological and sociological concepts for defining ethical concepts. However, definitionists who believe in "non-ethical naturalism" state that an ethical concept should be defined by means of other ethical concepts. They also believe that there is no relationship between natural realities and value descriptions. They believe that "good" is something which must be dealt with. In contrast to definitionists who include naturalists and non-naturalists, intuitionists like Moore and Ross consider some ethical concepts as extensive and indefinable. Moore deals with this subject in a reasoning called "open question argument". He states that defining "goodness" makes us slip into "naturalistic fallacy" and will be pointless because we can ask about any feature "x" which is used for definition of ethical concept "y": "is everything which has the feature x y?" this is while such a question is not acceptable and is useless. The content which must not be ignored is that many philosophers of ethics have different theories for explanation of all ethical concepts. For instance, Moore believed in intuitionism only for the case of ethical concepts "good" and "bad".

2. Conceptual dependence of ethics on religion

The most extremist statement of significance dependence of ethics on religion is the need of ethical concepts to defining them with respect to religion and of course few philosophers and commentators have believed in it. According to this idea, when humans use ethical concepts like good, bad, right, wrong and so on, they actually state comments on features of God. Therefore, as a result of every voluntary action taken by human (like action x), we can say:

"x is ethically right" means "God has ordered to do x".

In a paper titled: "adjusted theory of divine order regarding ethical wrong", Adams investigates the above statement as:

1. the word "wrong" in ethics means "what is against divine order" (Adams, 1981, p. 83).

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In the aforementioned definition, right means "what God has ordered" and wrong means "what God has forbidden". However, the definition which is based on divine order and ban can be substituted by other concepts like morale, badness, worship, criticism, reward and punishment. Therefore, the ethical argument "oppression is wrong" can be turned into one of the following arguments:

- God has not wanted oppression.
- God does not oppress.
- Oppression is criticized by God.
- Oppression stimulates God's wrath.
- Oppression brings God's penalty.

The aforementioned definitions rely highly on religious preconditions like existence of God, issuance of order and prohibition by him, telling them to human, assignments, God's penalty and reward and so on. When an individual does not have the following assumptions and beliefs, he or she cannot present a definition for ethical realities. Of course, the above concepts disagree with each other and also it must be added that there is no correlation between what God has ordered and what belongs to his will. For instance, God ordered Ibrahim to kill his child but this action did not belong to God's will. In other words, what is intended by a divine order is the way of application of authority by human and testing human and God does not want the action to be done and doing or not doing an action by God is not the same as his penalty or reward. For instance, arrogance is an action which is taken by God but if human practices arrogance, he or she will be punished by God and God bans human from arrogance. Therefore, the above statement has different ways due to paying attention to three important subjects.

One. The fact that which voluntary action of God has been used in definition of ethical concepts, divine affair and prohibition, his will or badness or ... for instance, Adams emphasized highly on determining role of "God's order" in definition of ethical concepts (Adams, 1999, p 258). However, some commentators like Murphy state that ethical concepts can be explained only by referring them to "God's inclination" (Murphy, 1998, pp: 3-27). Consequently, attribution of actions like order and prohibition to God and presentation of a humanlike image of God and the fact that issuance of an action by human takes place in some cases against real desire of God and as it was said, other targets like examination may be aimed are reasons for emphasis on divine will in explanation of ethical concepts.

However, some commentators state reasons for justification of preference of God's order to God's inclination. One of the reasons refers to ability not to contradict of ethical requirements in case of adoption of concepts like God's wanting. Considering the image of God's absolute power, nothing in the world takes place out of the limit of God's power and will. Therefore, one of the problems of God's will theory in explanation of ethical concepts is that wrong actions which have been banned by God will not contrast God's will (Adams, 1999, p. 259). This is because everything lies in God's power limit.

The answer which is given to this reason tries to differentiate between God's antecedent will and consequent will and states that antecedent will of God matches ideal ethical conditions but the later will involves all possible states and conditions. Considering this discussion, although antecedent will of God does not want humans to do what is morally wrong but consequent will of God is what takes place in different conditions and some humans do wrong actions according to this theory.

It must be noted that the aforementioned differentiation between antecedent and consequent wills is not very useful because antecedent will of God should not be considered as a base for ethical requirements. This is because in some cases, we have to do an action which is less bad than its similar wrong action. It is definite that a good God does not allow for doing a bad action in his antecedent will.

Therefore, the reasoning presented by Adams on preference of divine orders to God's internal inclinations and intentions does not seem to be convincing, as it has been criticized by some of his contemporary commentators (Murphy, 1998, pp: 3-27). However, Adams also states some other items in defense position:

In the case of interference between God's order and will, a believer's viewpoint involves obeying God and following his orders and this obedience does not mean necessity and obligation to unstated divine needs but it is parallel to obeying divine orders.

2. compulsory and approved ethical requirements can be differentiated by emphasizing on divine order in explanation of ethical concepts. According to this assumption, actions which are accepted by God or God's will wants them may not belong to divine order and therefore, these actions will be approved. Therefore, God's will should be differentiated from duties and responsibilities which are given to humans. It is not necessary when God's will wants an action then that action is required because in this case, there will be no difference between will and necessity and the fact that God has two kinds of wills will lose its meaning. these two wills are the will which leads to imposition of obligations and necessities and fulfillment of actions-which is referred to as existential will and the other will is one in which the state of doing an action is purely good for God-and is referred to as legislative will.

3. Considering God's will theory instead of divine affair theory, although it does not have many of restrictions of God's order theory but instead it depicts a good image of relationship between God and human

because it dictates that God's internal desires and wills impose necessities and orders for human without being stated explicitly as arguments which deal with order and prohibition. Moreover, it must be accepted that imposition of necessities and therefore human's obligation to do them is an example of impossible obligation in spite of clear explanation of these necessities.

Two. Another reason which causes ethics philosophers' disagreements in the field of dependence of ethics on religion is that how we can specify God's voluntary actions domain. For instance, concerning concepts of God's order and will, whether we should use only orders and wills which have been clarified in religious texts to understand ethical points or there are other ways for achieving God's orders and wills in addition to what is stated in religious texts.

Commentators like Austin (1998, p. 104) and Meynell (1972, pp. 228-231) believe that in addition to orders and wills which have been stated by God in religious texts, there are other wills and orders which are intended by God but God has not declared them and there are other ways for acquiring God's orders and wills regarding humans' ethical actions:

God's discipline in doing actions like inspiration which took place for example for Ibrahim the Prophet. Further more, it can be said that God has some wills regarding humans' ethical behavior which will not be declared whether via revelation or via any other means.

However, if we accept the fact that individuals acquire divine orders and wills via discipline of their surrounding world, this will not result in regulation of ethical concepts.

Three. The fact that which category of ethical things can be explained by divine order and will. Commentators like Adams (Adams, 1999, p. 252 and Adams, 1981, p. 95), Taylor (Taylor, 1985, pp: 83-84), Quinn (1990, p. 118) and Forrest (1989, p. 5) believe that only some of the ethical concepts which are compulsory can be described by God's order and will. This is while some ethics philosophers (Quinn, 1978, chap. 2) believe that all ethical concepts can be defined by linking them to God's action.

Most Muslim philosophers and commentators have emphasized on two concepts: ethical good or bad. From their viewpoint, there is no difference between value and necessary concepts of ethics. For instance, in Mu'tazilite thoughts, necessity and obligation is the same as deserving criticism in case of disruption or leaving an action and they consider bad as doer's deserving criticism in case of doing that action (Mu'tazili, 2009, p 41). Therefore, if we consider deserving as equal to being good, dependence of definition of necessity on good and bad is clear. In Shiite theology, an obligatory action is defined as "an action the leaver of which can be criticized well" (Helli, 1414 h gh, p. 85). In this definition, obligation and necessity has turned into ethical concept of "being good" for an action.

However, in spite of concentration of Muslim commentators on concepts like good and bad in ethics-without even considering differences in ideas around the nature of ethical concepts-they have had differences in defining these two concepts. An evidence for this claim is acceptance of dependence of ethics on religion in definition of Ash'arites. Other Muslim sects do not agree with this idea. In order to clarify this subject, it must be added that concepts like "goodness" and "badness" are two useful concepts in ethics, linguistics and Islamic principles. In these sciences, different meanings have been presented for these two words. These include: compatibility and incompatibility with nature, consistency and inconsistency with goals, perfection and defectiveness and deserving and criticism from commentators' viewpoints (Sanad, 1418 h gh, p 164). All these meanings are in fact requirements for goodness and badness. Therefore, the meaning for goodness and badness which has received disagreements and differences deserves for praise or criticism. Ash'arites believe that intellect understands things goodness as compatibility with goal and intention, perfection or consistency with nature. However, understanding goodness and badness meaning praise and criticism is done only via religion from their opinion. Therefore, whatever God orders is good and deserves praise and whatever God bans is bad and unacceptable (Taftazani, 1409, h Gh, vol. 4, p 282). Shiite commentators also consider goodness and badness in this discussion as having the very same meaning (Tousi, 1980, p 452). Because "perfection and defection" or "compatibility and incompatibility with nature" are used in areas other than ethics, many Islamic commentators consider concepts like good, bad, must, must not and ... as extensive and indefinable because many of them consider these concepts as philosophical secondary intelligible, in spite of the fact that they have accepted concepts like deserving praise or criticism. This is because real definition is specific to natures and is conducted via them. Therefore, description of goodness as example, unique description and unchangeable description and good things may have it. Therefore, not only definition and analysis of goodness is impossible, but also its conversion into other descriptions is not possible because each of the second level of intelligibles are inferred by viewing the subject from a special viewpoint and their abundance is resulted from abundance of aspects and terms. Moreover, according to this consideration and because concepts like goodness and badness are extensive, their understanding will be also contributed by intellectual intuition. However, Ash'arites have presented some definitions regarding some ethical concepts like good or bad in which one of divine actions have been used. As an evidence for this claim, arguments like what is ordered or banned by God (Taftazani, 1409, h gh, vol. 4, p 293), the fact that the doer is criticized or praised by God (ibid, and also Joveini, 1369 h gh, p 258), the fact that the action is praised in the present world and is rewarded in the next world or the fact that it is

criticized and deserves future punishment (Jorjani, 1325, h gh, vol 8, p 183) are important definitions which have been emphasized in different works of Ash'arites. Therefore, when we say that "meaning of goodness and badness is nothing but belonging of divine order and prohibition to an action" (Joveini, 1369 h gh, p 261), we have actually considered definition of ethical concepts like good and bad as dependent on divine order and prohibition so that if it was not possible to access to these orders and prohibitions, ethical concepts and features would lack any meaning.

3. problems of ethics conceptual dependence on religion

Ethical concepts need for religion has always had a lot of problems such that philosophers like Adams tried to provide a more acceptable of this viewpoint by adjusting this dependence and restriction of this domain to ethical concepts of Jewish and Christian believers from one hand and attribution of features like kindness from the other hand to God. Of course, his attempts do not seem so successful. For short, primary review of ethics dependence on religion has been confronted with important criticisms and some of them are investigated in the next section.

3.1. the most important problem of ethics dependence on religion was presented by Moore in a reasoning called "open question reasoning" (Moore, 1962, p. 16). This reasoning can be shortened as: presentation of any kind of definition for "goodness" concept like "good is a" involves the argument "whether a is good?" be a non-open and meaningless question. The reason for this claim is that definitions are identical and the question does not infer any meaning from relation between subject and predicate. However, this question can be propounded in an open way and as follows: "whether 'a' or what has the attributes of 'a' is good?". Significance of this question indicates that goodness cannot be defined by any physical or metaphysical features like pleasure, happiness, divine order, prosperity and so on and such definitions are actually "naturalistic fallacy" which establish conceptual link between goodness and other natural and non-natural features.

In appearance, Moore's argument is not that efficient. If we define "a" as "b", the question: "whether b is a?" is a significant question for those who do not know this definition and are not aware of semantic and literal link between a and b. therefore, some have emphasized that even if "a is wrong" means "a is what differs from God's order.", again we can ask "whether an action which has been ordered by God is wrong?". This is because for any definition "x is y", the question "whether y is x?" will be rational (Rooney, 1996, p. 18). Consider these questions: "whether milk is an edible?", "whether breath is non-material?". Each of the following questions have clear meanings while they lack meaning based on Moore's open question reasoning theory. For instance, if we assume an individual who is not aware of Persian language and does not have any clear understanding of words like milk and breath or has misunderstood them or has forgotten their meanings, the aforementioned questions will be clarifying for him.

Therefore, the question "whether God's order is right?" is a significant question for a naïve person in ignorance, oblivion, wrong understanding and ... conditions and of course such a question cannot be a rational question for an aware person. Therefore, reasoning via Moore's open question- which tries to reject all analyses of definition of "good" and is based upon a kind of understanding of philosophical or scientific definition of this concept-does not seem justifiable (Harman, 1977, pp: 19-20).

Therefore, even if Moore emphasized on real definition of "goodness" instead of literal definition of this concept, the domain of this definition is based upon definition of definition and descriptive definition. Even if it is impossible to present a definition of the aforementioned concept due to extension and inability to define goodness such that the "goodness" concept cannot be defined by intellect, Moore does not still present a reason for extension of goodness concept. Of course, if he had presented such a reason, it would have been possible to present a descriptive definition.

3.2. According to Wittgenstein (1951, sec. 151), significance of words depends on general use of them. Now if the assumption that definition of ethical concepts is similar to one of the voluntary actions of God is purely a Socio – linguistic report about use of a concept, we can evaluate its accuracy by referring to language experts and their common understanding of these words. However, language users and even many believers do not consider such a meaning.

Now it is possible that one who believes in dependence of ethical concepts on religion argues that his or her definition is not reportive by no means and determination of its certainty is cleared by referring to its users' understanding but he tries to present a reformative definition which specifies the clear way of using these words and emphasizes that in what meanings should these words be used. However, it must be noted that although accuracy and inaccuracy of these definitions do not rely on way of their general use, presentation of such definitions must be rational and we cannot accept that the proper definition of "right" is what has been ordered by God before presenting a good reason.

3.3. The next problem of dependence of ethical concepts on religion is one of the problems introduced by one of the explainers of Kant. Its summary is as follows:

"If concepts like right and good are defined based on God's orders, God cannot order an action because it is right or good because this means that God has ordered it because he has ordered it and there is no reason for

God's orders which are purely arbitrary. Consequently, it is rational that God wants all our duties involve deception, torture and humans massacre and the fact that doing that way will be our duty." (Eving, 1965, pp. 99-100). Therefore, a person who believes in dependence of ethical concepts on religion considers that "action a is right" means "action a is what God has ordered". Now if we ask "why God has ordered that action?" he cannot say "because action a is right then God has ordered it". This is because such an individual considers argument "action a is right" the same as "action a is what God has ordered". Therefore, summary of the above response will be as follows: "because action a is what God has ordered, then God has ordered it". The above discussions reveal that the only reason for divine orders and bans is purely the orders and bans of God and if God's will goes to conduct of actions like murder and betrayal, these actions will be "right" by God's order. Therefore, there will be no criterion for differentiation between what has been accepted by God's will and what has been ordered by God and everything will be possible for God (Williams, 1972, p. 89). It seems that presentation of such an image of God's ethical features is not acceptable even for believers because they cannot be obliged to consider murder of an innocent person as a right action because it was foreseen by God's order.

3.4. Another problem of this kind of dependence of ethics on religion is presence of ethical concepts and beliefs which are common among humans while these individuals do not have the same beliefs about God's orders and bans and they may even deny presence of God's orders. According to this problem (Hare, 2007, pp: 266, 271-272), in spite of the fact that humans may have different religious beliefs but they use ethical concepts like each other and even it can be said that their attitudes towards ethics is like an image which pagans have of ethical concepts. Therefore, if we believe that ethical concepts depend on God's will or order, we should have seen formation of different ethical concepts and systems among followers of different religions so that God's disbelievers also lacked common understanding of believers about these concepts but it is clear that there are ethical conversations about followers of different religions and even pagans. The aforementioned statement reminds us of famous argument of Immamiyya theologians on explanation of innate goodness or badness and having ethical concepts and arguments. According to their argument (Bahrani, 1398 h gh, pp: 104-105 and also, Helli, 1414 h gh, p 86), even pagan people like pagans have the same ideas as believers (Muslims) in goodness or badness of some actions like goodness of honesty and justice and badness of falsehood and oppression while this unanimity is not resulted from religion because pagans do not believe in any particular religion but they have the same ideas as believers in ethics. The result of the aforementioned discussion is that goodness and badness of ethical arguments is something intellectual.

The result of Immamiyya theologians reasoning is that if God's order ad will affected ethical concepts like honesty, falsehood, right, wrong and ..., a pagan would not be able to understand sentences like "honesty is good" or "falsehood is bad". The reason for the aforementioned claim is that such an action is a kind of belief in existence of God and his actions while a pagan denies such beliefs. Pagans use ethical concepts in the same way as believers. Of course, some believe that there are some differences between believers' and disbelievers' use and understanding of ethical concepts. Some (Adams, 1979, p. 113) believes that pagans and believers have some common and some different aspects of understanding of ethical concepts but this idea does not seem to be right because there have been always common understanding of right and wrong among pagans and believers. If there was no common understanding of the ethical concepts, kind conversation of pagans and believers was impossible. From Adams' viewpoint, in spite of the fact that pagans and believers have similar understandings of ethical concepts, they do not use the concepts in the same way. The following statement verifies this claim:

" it must be assumed that the meanings of ethical concepts are similar and different in some way. "different from God's will or order" should be as a part of meaning an individual uses "wrong" concept for it. In the same way, common aspects of pagans' use of the concept "wrong" must be a part of the meaning considered by both pagans and believers for the word "wrong" (Adams, 1979, p. 113).

Therefore, considering the common understanding of pagans and believers of ethical concepts, it should be noted that both sides of this discussion have different meanings for these concepts and this difference is resulted from understanding which is resulted from diversity of understanding of the concepts.

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