How Could Ethics Depend on Religion?

JONATHAN BERG [in SINGER (ed) A Companion to Ethics]

Circumstantial evidence - ethical norms form a part of religious teaching, which correspond closely to norms of secular theories. But does that mean that ethics depends on religion - and if so, how?

**God and the moral good (an ontological link?)**

If God created everything in the universe he must have created “good” (theonomy) - but then everything would depend on religion - physics maths psychology etc. This idea overlooks the whole point which is what is the special relationship (if any) between morality and religion.

**The Divine Command Theory**

The strong version of the Divine Command Theory asserts that God’s will is good (by definition: called the “linguistic theory”) - problem is that the statement “God is good” is true in the same way that “a circle is round”. Also many people have beliefs about what is morally good without the corresponding belief about what God has willed. A weak form might be more preferable - claiming that “the good” and “God’s will” do not mean the same thing, but they amount to the same thing. There are still problems - God willing, for example, Sabbath observances, or certain rituals do not seem to be what is commonly thought of as morality.

Another problem is the euthyphro dilemma  If God must will what is good, then God seems limited - there is a higher priority than the will of god. 2 replies:

1. God could will other than the good, but chooses not to because he chooses to act in a loving way (N. Pike Omnipotence and God’s inability to sin, 1981)

2. Although God cannot will other than the good, “He” is, nevertheless, omnipotent. Richard Swinburne (1974) suggests that this is possible if a distinction is made between necessary moral truths (those which cannot fail to be true) and contingent moral truths (those which are true in particular circumstances). Necessary Moral Truths cannot compromise God’s omnipotence and more than his inability to make a triangle with 6 sides - such things necessarily cannot be

The second horn of the euthyphro dilemma makes goodness to be arbitrary. This is where Swinburne locates contingent moral truths - he believes that there is no problem in such circumstantial good depending on God’s will.

**God and the Moral Knowledge (an epistemological link?)**

While an acts being good or not may have nothing to do with God, but our knowing whether it is good might depend on God.

The basic argument might be to assert that one can have no knowledge of morality independent of God. The immediate and obvious problem is that many people might claim to know that murder is wrong without knowing, nor indeed believing anything about God.

One way round the problem is to suggest that although such people do not themselves have knowledge of God, they are influenced, albeit indirectly, by those
who do have such knowledge (e.g. via law, deriving from social convention, deriving from religious revelation generations ago) This shows a basic causal link between morality and religion, but amounts to nothing more than an admission that in the past moral commands were communicated via religion. Some would argue for a more essential relationship between religion and morality than this rather weak, historical, causal link.

A second way to explain non-theists moral awareness is to say that it is not really moral knowledge any more than a child who copies her parents can claim to have (real) knowledge of what she speaks. Still seems nonsensical - surely a theist wishing to defend a heteronomous relationship between ethics and religion would concede that sane adults really can know that murder is wrong irrespective of belief in God.

**God and moral motivation (a motivational link?)**

Good - itself may have nothing to do with God / religion
Knowing about Good may have nothing to do with God / religion
But, it could be claimed that knowledge of/about God (religion) is nevertheless the only reason for moral behaviour.

Some might argue that whatever the source of morality, or of moral knowledge, the only reason to behave morally is that god rewards the good and punishes the evil, either in this life or the next (or possibly, during some other subsequent life).

It is possible to suggest that knowing something is wrong provides no motivation to refrain from doing it. Generally, however, when people justify a moral principle it is intended that it should be followed. It would be hard to think of a way to justify a moral principle without providing reasons for following that principle; i.e. providing reasons for behaving morally are superfluous, just as providing reasons for doing what is (known to be) desirable.

A different way to interpret the claim that religion provides the only motivation for moral behaviour would be to suggest that it is not in the formulation of the moral principle, but in human psychology - i.e. human beings, as a matter of psychological fact, are not motivated to act morally independent of religion. However, this is obviously not true (unless we resort to the idea that ideas of reward / punishment from God are deep within the human psyche, and therefore, all those people who act morally apparently quite independently of religion, are not so independent as they claim).

**Conclusion**

Therefore, it is impossible to find any essential link between:
- religion and the idea of “good” itself, or
- religion and knowledge of the “good”, or
- religion and motivation to be “good”.

Although there are definite areas of overlap, sufficient for a theist to reconcile a belief in God with an understanding of morality, there is no proof which would convince a non-theist of any essential link between religion and morality.