Investigating the Relationship Between Religion and Morality: Insight from Hume

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relation between religion and morality. David Hume, an influential figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, provides insightful contributions to this discourse through his philosophical works. This article explores Hume's nuanced views on the relationship between religion and morality, drawing from his key texts such as "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" and "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals."

Hume challenges the traditional notion that religion is a necessary foundation for morality. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he argues that moral principles do not derive from religious doctrine or divine commandments but instead from human sentiment and reason. Hume contends that moral judgments are based on a natural sense of empathy and utility rather than religious authority. Furthermore, Hume critiques the idea that religion is essential for maintaining moral order within society. He suggests that religious beliefs and institutions may, in fact, be detrimental to morality by promoting superstition, intolerance, and dogmatism. Hume advocates for a secular approach to morality, where ethical principles are grounded in rational reflection and social cooperation rather than religious doctrine.

While Hume challenges the traditional link between the two, he acknowledges the historical influence of religion on moral development and societal norms. Hume recognizes the social utility of religion in fostering moral virtues and promoting social cohesion, albeit without attributing morality exclusively to religious sources.

Keywords: Religion, Religious Belief, Morality, Ethics.

Introduction:

Before the modern period of philosophy, it is generally coincided that religion is the incontrovertible basis of morality, meaning that there can be no morality without religion. This widespread and deeply ingrained notion that religion is a precondition for morality is still being held today. Many scholars assert that without God morality is unthinkable. Dostoevsky, for instance, insists that *"Everything will permit, if God does not exist."*

In Hume's philosophy, there is no God. Therefore, for him, religion is not foundation of morality. He claimed that ethics cannot survive by name of God or religious whip or divine command for a long run, rather ethics is to be autonomous and empirical based. He argued that morality is based on sentiment or emotion. However, he never wrote more systematically about the relation between religion and morality. Prior to meticulously describing the situation with respect to Hume's view on the relation between religion and morality, giving the meaning of religion and morality overall first is vital. Then, at that point, the article will examine about Hume's assessment of religion overall and his view on morality.

In Book 3 of "**Treatise of Human Nature,**" "**An Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals**," and a few articles, Hume outlined his moral perspective. Additionally, in **"Natural History of Religion"** and "**Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion,**" he shared his perspective on religion.

Definition of religion:

The etymological definition of "religion" traces back to the Latin word "religio," which has a complex and debated origin. Some scholars suggest it comes from "re-" (again) and "ligare" (to bind), implying a re-binding or reconnecting with the divine or spiritual realm. Others propose it originates from "re-" (again) and "legere" (to gather), suggesting the gathering or binding together of people in a community.

However, it's important to note that while etymology provides insights into the historical roots of a word, the contemporary understanding of "religion" encompasses a broad range of beliefs, practices, and cultural phenomena, which may not fully align with its etymological roots.

The original definition of religion is somewhat elusive, as it varies across cultures and historical contexts. However, at its core, religion typically encompasses beliefs, rituals, practices, and moral codes centered on the existence of a higher power or powers, the meaning of life, and the nature of the universe. It often involves a system of faith and worship, as well as a community of believers who share these beliefs and practices.

In its broadest sense, religion serves to provide individuals with a framework for understanding the world, interpreting their experiences, and guiding their behavior. It often addresses fundamental existential questions about the purpose and meaning of human existence, as well as ethical and moral concerns.

Different religious traditions have developed diverse beliefs, rituals, and teachings, reflecting the unique cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts in which they originated. These traditions can include organized religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and others, as well as indigenous or folk religious practices that may not fit neatly into conventional categories.

Definition of morality:

The etymological roots of "morality" trace back to the Latin word "moralitas," which itself derives from "mos" or "mores," meaning "custom" or "habit." Initially, "moralitas" referred to customs, manners, or behavior characteristic of a particular group or society. Over time, its meaning evolved to encompass principles or standards concerning what is right and wrong or good and bad behavior. Thus, the etymological definition of morality revolves around the customs, habits, and principles that guide human conduct within a society or culture.

Morality refers to a system of principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong behavior. It encompasses concepts of good and evil, justice, virtue, and duty. Morality guides individuals and societies in making ethical decisions and determining what actions are acceptable or unacceptable based on various criteria such as cultural norms, religious beliefs, philosophical principles, or societal consensus. The original definition of morality can be traced back to ancient philosophical traditions, religious teachings, and cultural norms, evolving over time as societies and individuals grapple with ethical questions and moral dilemmas.

Hume on Religion:

It is necessary to make some remarks regarding Hume's perspective on religion in general prior to

discussing the relation between religion and morality. According to Hume, religion is based on more fundamental natural characteristics of the human condition rather than a natural instinct or primitive experience. He recognizes 'True' and 'False' religion.

With respect of "True religion" Hume expressed: "The appropriate Office of Religion is to change Men's Lives, to clean their Hearts, to in force every ethical Obligation and to tie down Dutifulness to Regulation and common Justice."

This type of religion is that as it may, despite the fact that with no malicious outcomes concerning society is incredibly intriguing. Religion has normally been viewed as on the planet, is a danger of profound quality. The defilements of true religion, to be specific notion and excitement, are the famous type of religion love. This false religion is what Hume is referring to whenever he discusses religion without any qualifications.

For Hume, there are three adverse impacts of false religion: right off the bat, the pastorate has a certified interest in setting limits to human information. Hume arrives at this conclusion because the clergy, or at least a significant portion of it, is aware that religion derives from a fear of the unknown. As per him, far reaching information is significant in moral judgment and setting up rules, yet planning to keep individuals strict, it is in light of a legitimate concern for the pastorate to restrict human information that is to allow them to fail to remember the positive side of normal life. Worse still, the clergy wants to keep people unhappy because the circumstances in which they are unhappy are the very ones that give rise to religion and in which it thrives. Restricted information and stifle certainty and erotic nature are, be that as it may, dishonest advisers for ethical quality. Because of this, clerical interests pose a threat to society. Second, the God of false religion, according to Hume, is thought to be the source of our moral actions and commands. As far as he might be concerned, this God is the result of human projections. The creative mind, roused by shortcoming, dread, despairing, along with obliviousness is the genuine wellspring of "odd notion"; the human creative mind put into high gear by trust, pride, assumption … along with obliviousness is the genuine wellspring of Excitement. False religion's God is not a moral authority; either he is a demon because of the extension of so-called positive properties like knowledge, power, benevolence, and presence, which transform God into a new source of fear, or he embodies discordant elements because of the different motives in human nature that activate the imagination. Our feelings of dread propose the presence of pernicious, vindictive God. The all-seeing eyes of this demon can see everything. The God of popular religion goes against our instinctive notions of kindness, impartiality, generosity, and justice. Thirdly, false religion encourages an "artificial, affected" lifestyle and taints natural moral sentiments.

Overall, Hume takes an empirical and skeptical approach to religion. He emphasizes the importance of evidence and reason in forming beliefs, particularly in matters of religion. While he doesn't outright deny the possibility of a divine being, his skepticism leads him to doubt the traditional religious doctrines and to advocate for a more critical examination of religious claims. In summary, Hume's views on religion can be characterized as skeptical, critical of traditional religious beliefs, and grounded in empiricism and reason.

Hume on Morality:

David Hume, a prominent figure in the field of ethics, presents a unique perspective on morality that challenges traditional views. In this article I will delve into Hume's key ideas on morality, focusing on his rejection of moral rationalism and his emphasis on sentiment and virtues.

Hume, drawing from his empiricist philosophy, argues that reason alone cannot be a motive for the will. He posits that morality does not derive from reason but from sentiment or emotion. According to him, virtues and vices are inherent in human nature, a stance supported by his works **"The Treatise of Human Nature" and "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals".**

Regarding the origin of morality, there are two main theories. One of them is rationalistic ethics, and the other is sentimentalist ethics, or moral sense theory. The moral sense theory holds that morality is greatly influenced by feelings. The rationalist theory of ethics is in opposition to the philosophy of moral sensibility. In other words, moral sense theory might be seen of as opposing the views of rationalists. According to moral sense theory, morality is said to be founded on sentiments or feelings.

Hume contrasts the rationalistic ethics theory with the sentimentalist ethics, also known as the moral sense theory. While rationalists believe morality stems from reason, Hume asserts that morality is grounded in sentiments and feelings. He highlights that moral distinctions are discerned through sympathy, which he deems as the chief source of morality.

In Hume's philosophy, there is no God, but this order is set up by nature. Thus, for his, morality is not relying on religion. His account of moral motivation is based on his moral psychology. We can claim that Hume's theory is an example of modern ethical theories which do not refer to God.

Hume's approach to morality can be categorized as a form of virtue ethics, where moral value is attributed to virtue. He elucidates that virtuous character can be cultivated through experience and education, or it may manifest naturally. Hume refutes the idea that moral value is determined by reason and emphasizes the role of passions in moral motivation.

Relation between religion and morality:

In the realm of philosophy, few thinkers have offered as profound insights into the relationship between religion and morality as David Hume, the eminent Scottish Enlightenment philosopher. Through his works, particularly in his **"Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion"** and **"An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals**," Hume dissected the complex interplay between these two fundamental aspects of human existence, offering perspectives that continue to provoke contemplation and debate centuries after his time.

Hume's examination begins by recognizing religion and morality as distinct yet interconnected domains of human experience. While religion often claims to be the foundation of morality, Hume challenges this assumption by positing that moral principles can be derived independently of religious belief. He argues that human moral sentiments, such as benevolence, sympathy, and justice, are innate and arise from natural human faculties rather than divine revelation.

Central to Hume's critique of religion's role in morality is his skepticism towards theological explanations of moral concepts. He contends that religious doctrines, which attribute moral principles to divine commands or supernatural sources, fail to provide a rational basis for morality. Instead, he advocates for a naturalistic approach to ethics, rooted in human nature and the principles of reason and empirical observation.

In "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Hume presents a nuanced critique of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, highlighting the limitations of human understanding in grappling with the nature of divinity. He questions the validity of religious inference based on observations of the natural world, arguing that the existence of evil and suffering undermines claims of a benevolent and omnipotent deity.

Hume offered a naturalistic explanation for the origin and development of religious beliefs. He proposed that religious beliefs arise from human psychological tendencies, such as the desire for explanation, comfort, and social cohesion, rather than from divine revelation or supernatural intervention. Despite his naturalistic explanation of religion, Hume was critical of religious dogma and authority. He argued that religious institutions often perpetuate superstition, intolerance, and division rather than promoting genuine moral virtue.

Moreover, Hume explores the psychological origins of religious belief, suggesting that it arises from human ignorance, fear, and the desire for comfort and solace in the face of existential uncertainty. He posits that religious institutions often exploit these psychological vulnerabilities to assert control over individuals and societies, leading to dogmatism, superstition, and sectarian conflicts.

Despite his skepticism towards religious dogma, Hume acknowledges the social utility of religion in promoting moral order and societal cohesion. He recognizes the role of religious institutions in shaping moral norms and providing a sense of community and shared values. However, he argues that the moral authority of religion should be subject to critical scrutiny and tempered by reason and tolerance.

In "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals," Hume elaborates on his ethical theory, emphasizing the importance of moral sentiment and social utility in determining moral judgments. He rejects moral absolutism in favor of a pragmatic approach that considers the consequences of actions and the cultivation of virtuous character traits.

Hume holds that superstitious religion will always be treacherous to real, human morality. On his deathbed Hume said that *"the morality of every religion is bad"* and *"when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious."* (**Streminger, 1989**) He also made a comment about the relationship between morality and religion, saying that religion is morality's enemy rather than its friend.

Ultimately, Hume's insights on religion and morality challenge us to critically examine the foundations of our ethical beliefs and to recognize the complex interplay between reason, sentiment, and social dynamics in shaping human behavior. While his skepticism may unsettle traditional religious convictions, it also invites us to engage in a deeper and more nuanced exploration of the moral landscape of our shared humanity.

Conclusion:

Hume's perspective on religion and morality underscores the intrinsic connection between sentiment and virtue in ethical conduct. It can be asserted that, the popular form of religious worship is false. He cautions against false religious worship and advocates for reliance on innate human virtues for moral guidance. False religion is a threat to morality. Since clergy has an interest in setting bounds to human knowledge; since they keep believers miserable; since the God of false religion is no moral authority, for his properties are either contradictory or even immoral; and, in particular, since the believers have to live in conflicts. Because they feel that their moral acts are plainly natural, they have to find something that is done for God's sake. Hume contends the idea that all forms of religion to be found in history have been a form of superstition. Accordingly, he firmly contends that religion has in general a pernicious dominance on morality. In aligning with Hume's views, we recognize the importance of nurturing virtuous character through experience and education, independent of religious beliefs.

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