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Is religion necessary for morality?

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ABSTRACT

As a possible Hilbert question in the scientific study of religion, this article tries to explicate one specific relation between religion and morality: whether religion is necessary for morality. More specifically, how does the introduction of religion transform morality? The article operationalizes morality as normative and meta-ethical judgments and tries to specify ways to answer the question at three different levels: phylogenetic, historical, and ontogenetic. At the phylogenetic level, the possibility of moral judgments in non-human (and non-religious) primates is explored. At the historical level, a way to explore the question of how the rise of religions with Big Gods transformed morality is proposed. At the ontogenetic level, the effect of religious training in childhood and a shift to non-belief in adulthood on morality is explored. Finally, investigating the reverse causal influence (i.e., moral beliefs transforming religiosity) and the role of religious rituals (rather than religious beliefs) on morality are proposed as future directions.

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The relationship between religion and morality is one of the perennial philosophical questions and it is one that the scientific study of religion will eventually need to answer. It is possible to formulate the question of their relationship at several different levels. One of the classic questions is the following:

1. Is religion necessary for morality? More specifically, is religious belief necessary for being a moral, virtuous person?

Couched at this level of generality, the answer to the question seems to be obviously no: it is undeniable that there are virtuous people who lack any kind of religious belief. Thus, the religion–morality relation cannot be one of necessary entailment. However, it also seems undeniable that modern religions are imbued with moral teachings and a religious mind has a different understanding of morality than a non-religious mind. Thus, a more scientifically interesting question might be the following:

2. How does the introduction of religion transform morality at the phylogenetic, historical, and ontogenetic levels?

Even before the emergence of religion as a social institution, the capacity to have religious beliefs (e.g., about supernatural agents who can reward or punish now and in the hereafter) emerged as a product of the evolutionary process. At both phylogenetic and historical levels, morality with religion might be expected to differ from morality without religion. Furthermore, although recent research suggests that the roots of morality lie in the very early stages of child development (see Hamlin,

Wynn, & Bloom, 2007), acquisition of religious belief might be expected to transform the already existing moral schemas of a child. Thus, religion does not create morality but does transform it at the phylogenetic, historical, and ontogenetic levels. What might be the theoretically most interesting and at the same time empirically testable questions at each level? The following might be a good candidate for the phylogenetic level:

- 2a. Since true morality requires moral judgments, rather than simply prosocial behavior, can we demonstrate the capacity to pass good-bad judgments in non-human primates?

If the answer turns out to be yes, this would demonstrate once and for all the possibility of morality without religion. One fruitful avenue to answer the question would be to look for evidence of altruistic (third-party) rewarding and altruistic punishment in primates. If the behavior of the primate cannot be explained on the basis of individual gain, the primate might be said to be passing a “good” or “bad” judgment on the behavior of a third party. One of the very few existing studies failed to find evidence for third-party punishment in chimpanzees even when the opportunity existed (Riedl, Jensen, Call, & Tomasello, 2012). One major problem with this study, as with many similar studies, is the low sample size: with just 13 chimpanzees, it is virtually impossible to claim a null effect. One solution to this problem is to initiate a large-scale replication or collaboration project in comparative psychology similar to the one in general psychological science (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). The recent attempt by MacLean et al. (2014), where 36 different species were tested on virtually the same task in many different laboratories, is a useful step in this direction.

Norenzayan’s (2013) *Big Gods* has already provided a tentative answer to the question of how religions with Big Gods transformed cooperation/altruism at the historical level. However, altruism or prosocial behavior is just one aspect of morality. Thus, an unanswered question at the historical level is the following:

- 2b. How did the emergence of religions with Big Gods transform normative ethics and meta-ethics in ancient and modern history?

Answering this question requires understanding whether the issues humans see as morally relevant (i.e., their moral foundations), the basis on which they make normative judgments (e.g., utilitarianism or deontology), and the way they see moral claims (e.g., as objective or subjective; emanating from nature or from a divine authority) were transformed by the emergence of big religions. These historical questions can be best answered by examining the record in the Database of Religious History led by Edward Slingerland (<http://religiondatabase.org/landing/>).

Finally, a similar question might be asked at the ontogenetic level:

- 2c. How does religious training change normative and meta-ethical judgments during childhood? How does a shift to non-belief change the same judgments during adulthood?

The research interest in the ontogenetic roots of prosocial behavior has not yet been reflected in the roots of normative ethics and meta-ethics. One way to address this question is to conduct longitudinal studies where children getting or not getting religious training are periodically examined with respect to their normative and meta-ethical beliefs. Cross-cultural studies are also essential to determine whether each religious tradition (with or without moralizing Big Gods) has a differential effect on developing morality. Another interesting question is whether non-belief influences morality similarly across the globe. It seems entirely plausible that an atheist in India would have a different moral outlook from an atheist in England. Although both are atheists, the religious traditions they have been born into may shape their developing moral understanding differently. This possibility points to the importance of implicit religious attitudes, in addition to explicit religious beliefs, in shaping morality.

Further questions

One interesting question not touched upon in this proposal is an influence in the reverse direction: morality shaping religiosity. Why the least religious societies today turned out to be that way may partly lie in their changing meta-ethical views. Witnessing people with very different lifestyles and beliefs may lead to intergroup tolerance, which in turn shifts meta-ethical views toward subjective morality, which finally leads to decreased religious belief (see Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2015, for evidence on the final causal link).

Another question concerns the scope of religion. Religious belief is one aspect of religiosity. Religious ritual is another. Traditional explanations of religion emphasize ritualistic behavior in strengthening social bonds and building a moral community. In fact, Xygalatas et al. (2013) demonstrated that extreme religious rituals increase prosocial behavior. Demonstrating the influence of such rituals on normative and meta-ethical judgments would be just as interesting.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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