Professional Ethics
PE 3340
Ethics & Religion

Picture: Ursa Major
• Rachels begins by noting the appeal of the religious perspective.

• But what is the “religious perspective”? And what if anything, does it have to do with ethics?
The Religious Perspective

• In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions it means first and foremost that God exists and is:

1. All-loving or omnibenevolent.
2. All-powerful or omnipotent.
3. All-knowing or omniscient.

Note: It is the God of the traditional monotheistic religions that will be our main focus.
The Religious Perspective

• Some other common features of the religious perspective include the ideas that:

1. God is the creator (and ender) of the universe.

2. We are able to commune with God (e.g. prayer).

3. The universe has a purpose and meaning; and so do our lives. (see Rachel’s p.54)

4. There is code of conduct handed down from God that we should follow (e.g. The Torah).
Atheism & Agnosticism

- Of course not everyone adheres to the religious perspective.

- Some people are **atheists**: that is, they do not believe that God exists.

- And some people are **agnostics**: that is, they are unsure of what to believe.
Why Be An Atheist or Agnostic?

1. Social forces are the main causes of religious belief.

• If you believe in God, ask yourself *why*?

• Chances are your belief in God is not the reasoned outcome of dispassionate evaluation.

• The fact that religious belief is primarily instilled through social forces (e.g. family, community, etc) makes this thought “My religion is the only right one” highly doubtful.
2. The multiplicity of religious facts.

• There are some 1,200 Christian organizations in North America, and over 30,000 in the world. There are also over 1 billion Muslims (with variations), almost a billion Hindus (with variations), and countless other types of religions.

• These religions clash with each other on numerous points.

• How can we be sure one of these religions is the right one?

• Indeed, perhaps they are all mythological.
After all…

- No one believes in Thor the Norse god of thunder anymore. That is, everyone is an atheist with regard to Thor.
El Greco’s (1541-1615) - The Annunciation

• Is belief in the archangel Gabriel more rational than the belief in Thor?

• If so, why?
3. The problem of evil.

• Many think the following four premises are inconsistent with each other and refute the claim that God exists.

1. God is omnipotent.

2. God is omniscient

3. God is omnibenevolent

4. Evil - in the form of vast amounts of physical and mental pain and suffering -- exists in the world (e.g. babies die of cancer).
A Modest Conclusion

• There is no doubt that religion has strong appeal for many people and that it holds a powerful grip on how people think of right and wrong.

• However, given (1) that social forces shape religion, (2) the multiplicity of religious facts, and (3) the problem of evil, we can at least say this much.

1. We should be very cautious in appealing to religious convictions to justify ethical claims.

2. The atheist and the agnostic may be just as ethical (or unethical) as someone who accepts the religious perspective.
Religion, Ethics, and Homosexuality

Former evangelical pastor of New Life Church, which had more than 10,000 members.

In 2006 Haggard was exposed by his gay partner.
Religion, Ethics, and Football

Brendon Ayanbadejo
Texas Gov. Rick Perry said emphatically Saturday that the Boy Scouts of America shouldn't soften its strict no-gays membership policy, and dismissed the idea of bending the organization to the whims of "popular culture."

(Huffington Post 02/02/13)
1. Divine Command Theory: “morally right” is a matter of being commanded by God and “morally wrong” is a matter of being forbidden by God. (Rachels p.50)

2. Natural Law Theory: God, in creating human beings, determined that which is good for us and also determined the rules by which we should act. (Rachels p.53)
“Morally right” is a matter of being commanded by God and “morally wrong” is a matter of being forbidden by God.

(Rachels p.50).

- Rachels notes that under this (1) view right and wrong are **objectively true or false** and not, say, **relative** from culture to culture and (2) we have a **prudential** reason to be moral.
“[Some of my opponents] do not want to change the Constitution, but I believe it's a lot easier to change the constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God, and that's what we need to do is to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than try to change God's standards.”
A Question For The Divine Command Theorist

In one of Plato’s (427-347 B.C.) dialogues called the *Euthyphro* we find Socraes (470-379 B.C.) asking (a variation of) this famous question:

Is conduct right because God commands it, or does God command the conduct because it is right?
I. Something is right *merely* because God commands it.

1. This makes morality **mysterious** - how does God make something right and can he make anything right?

2. This makes God’s commands **arbitrary**.

3. This is **not a good reason for moral principles**.
II. God commands something because it is right.

• Rachels notes that this option means we are acknowledging a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God’s will. The rightness exists prior to God’s command, and is the reason for the command. (See Rachels p.53)

• This implies that the atheist and agnostic can try to be ethical too without relying upon a particular religion.
Natural Law Theory

There are three main elements to natural law theory, the official ethical theory of the Roman Catholic Church.

1. The ancient Greek idea that the universe has a rational order and everything in it has a purpose.

- Consider the following quote from Aristotle’s (384-322 B.C.) *Politics.*
Natural Law Theory

[W]e must believe, first that plants exist for the sake of animals, second that all other animals exist for the sake of man, tame animals for the use he can make of them as well as for the food they provide; and as for wild animals, most though not all of these can be used for food or are useful in other ways; clothing and instruments can be made out of them. If then we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.

--Aristotle, Politics Chpt VIII
• Later Christian thinkers, like St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), adopted this idea and posited that God is the creator of the rational order and the purpose things have.
1. According to the Catholic Church it is natural to be charitable.

   • This is natural for us, given the kind of creatures we are.

2. According to the Catholic Church it is unnatural to be a homosexual.

   • This is sexual practice not connected with making babies and therefore unnatural given the functional role of human beings and their sexual organs.
Natural Law Theory
3. That which is natural is determined by reason.

• As Rachels’s points out, the Theory of Natural Law endorses the familiar idea that the right thing to do has the best reasons on its side. (Rachels, p.56)

“To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.”

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
But since the devil's bride, Reason, that pretty whore, comes in and thinks she's wise, and what she says, what she thinks, is from the Holy Spirit, who can help us, then? Not judges, not doctors, no king or emperor, because reason is the Devil's greatest whore.

(Martin Luther - Last Sermon in Wittenberg 1546)
1. The world-view of the Greek and Middle Ages has been replaced by a scientific world view. For example, evolution explains better than creationism why birds have light bones.

2. Just because something is the case does not mean it ought to be the case. For example, the ebola virus is natural (it “is”), but we don’t think it’s a good thing (it “ought” to be).
3. Natural law theories will conflict with each other if they are based on different theological world-views, and so we’ll get different moral rules.

4. If ultimately it is reason and evidence that determines what is right and wrong, one need not be a theist or a theist of a particular kind in order to inquire into the nature of right and wrong.

“Believers and non-believers innhabit the same moral universe.” Rachels p.57