

Thomas Nagel on Relation between Religion and Ethics: An Assessment

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Abstract

One view on this relation considers religion and ethics to be psychologically interdependent. Dividing desirable life into good and moral life, Thomas Nagel, a contemporary analytic philosopher, has made an effort to defend the objectivity of the values of good and moral life. Making distinctions between (1) objective and subjective perspectives on life, (2) motivated and unmotivated desires, (3) internalism and externalism about the source of moral motivation, (4) minimalist and maximalist accounts of internalism, he argued for a minimalist account of internalism, and laid the foundations for supporting the convergent constituents of motivation and the objectivity of the values of good and moral life, i. e. prudence in good life and altruism in moral life. On the other hand, Nagel holds that one can strengthen motivational convergence in good and moral life by virtue of religious beliefs, and one can take religious beliefs' contribution to motivational convergence and the objectivity of the values of good and moral life as a kind of contingent psychological dependence of moral values on religious beliefs. The prominent points of Nagel's theory are that it splits desirable life into good and moral life, it makes a psychological defense of their objectivity. There are, nevertheless, some matters that could have been deserved to be reconsidered by Nagel's theory: (1) his reliance on psychological explanation, (2) his limiting moral values only to human relations, (3) his inattention to man's relation to God and the nature, and finally (4) his inattention to the differences of religious beliefs in various religions about how to explain their interdependence.

Keywords

Thomas Nagel, relation between religion and ethics, objective and subjective perspectives, normative ethics, motivation, prudence.

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