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[Religion](#), [God](#)



Voluntarists and non-voluntarists have had intense debate on the issue of religion and morality. The underlying central argument of the debate is whether the morality requires a religious foundation or not. While the voluntarists claim that morality does require a religious foundation, non-voluntarists assert that it doesn't. David Brink and George Mavrodes argues with this theme of voluntarist and non-voluntarist. My essay will largely focus on the strengths and weakness of both voluntarists and non-voluntarists associating with Mavrodes and Brink's idea on this issue.

Voluntarists are the people who insist that it is the will or the attitude of god that determines morality and its qualities, while the non-voluntarists argue that moral properties depend on their nature and that these exist without god's existence. With the argument of god's will and thus the morality, voluntarists centralize their position on the notion that morality depends on religion. That is, moral values consist in God's attitude. On the contrary, non-voluntarists don't presuppose a god. Although non-voluntarists deny theism and a metaphysical role of the god in morality, which the voluntarists agree on, they don't reject that god play an epistemic role, which god telling us reliably what is morally good and bad, or motivational role in morality, which god providing divine incentives for moral behavior. The logic behind voluntarism and naturalism can be explained using Socrates' label.

Voluntarism argues that something is pious, because the god loves it, while non-voluntarists argue that something is loved by the gods, because it is pious.

Voluntarists put strong focus on god's will that determines what is piety or not while non voluntarists think it is the very nature that determines piety of

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something. What Brink argues in his essay "The Autonomy of Ethics" is that non-voluntarists seek the autonomy of morality, a notion that implies that the objectivity of ethics demand the autonomy of ethics. On the other hand, Brink point out that voluntarists deny the autonomy of morality by saying that if objective ethics presupposes divine command (an idea that if god exists, something is good or right if and only if god approves of it), then an objective ethics stands or falls with religious belief and that ethics will be objective only if god exists and issues the divine command, which we humans can acquire moral knowledge.

As Brink mentions in his essay, challenges to the voluntarists argument are evident. First, voluntarism implies that every moral truth is contingent on the god's approval. If god's will had been different and he approved of different things, then these disparate things would become good and bad, or right and wrong. Furthermore, if god approved the things very different from those he now approves of, then the moral status of these things do change. Brink casts an example of this argument which if god hadn't criticize on rape and genocide, these things would not become morally wrong, and if god came to approve these things as morally right, then they would become morally acceptable. With this fundamental flaw, Brink understands that theists might reply that god would not approve such things because he is perfectly good himself. Brink, however, argues that even this response doesn't apply to what voluntarists argue.

The logic that "since the god is perfectly good, and therefore god wouldn't approve bad things" in fact undermines the voluntarism as this means that

voluntarists have to understand god's goodness as consisting in his approving of himself, which the approval is arbitrary and contingent. Thus, the first argument against voluntarism is that voluntarism implies contingency of what is right or wrong, but that contingency of right and wrong is very counterintuitive and thus voluntarism has a very counterintuitive implication.

The second opposition to the voluntarist's perspective of moral facts as contingent on god's will is "supervenience argument". If natural properties of the situation determine its moral properties, then the moral properties supervene on its natural properties. What Brink argues is that if the natural properties of a situation determine its moral properties, then its moral properties can't depend on god's will. He further states that if voluntarism were true, then two situations could have different moral properties even if there were no natural differences between them, i. e. , if god's attitudes to the two tokens of the same type were different, one system could be unjust, but an absolute same one of that system don't have to be unjust. Therefore, the second argument against to the voluntarism is that voluntarism implies a rejection of supervenience of the moral properties of natural ones, which rejecting supervenience is counterintuitive and thus voluntarism has a counterintuitive implication.

The third opposition is a substantive claim argument. This argument explains that if the god merely selects whatever he or she wants to be good or right, then when people say "God is good", this notion becomes trivial and non-substantive. This argument implies that if voluntarism is true, then praise of

god as good or right wouldn't be meaningful. For example, we can pick our own grades for the work we had done but don't consider their quality which are independent of our choice of grade. It would genuinely not count as substantive praise if one person says to another " you got an A. You did very well".

On the contrary, there are also arguments against non-voluntarism. To begin with, non-voluntarism can compromise god's omnipotence. What non-voluntarists argue is that moral properties are independent of god's will, and therefore they are outside the control of god. The notion here is that when moral laws are outside god's control, they become a challenge to god's omnipotence. Therefore, omnipotence is incompatible with naturalism, and with the existence of god, naturalism become a false notion.

Furthermore, George Mavrodes claims morality is dependent on religion. What he argues is that if religion were to fail, morality would also fail not only psychologically, but also actually. Mavrodes come up with Dostoevsky's saying that " If there is no god, then everything is permitted", and states that we can deduce religion from morality, a moral argument for god's existence. He suggests that if there was no god, people wouldn't actually be obligated to do moral responsibility. Mavrodes introduces Russell's world as one common non-religious view of the world in order to argue that morality would have an odd status in that world.

What Mavrodes point out is that in the world of Russelian, where we have moral obligations, fulfilling obligations may result in net losses to ourselves such as paying a debt, risking one's life, and serious injury which Mavrodes

concludes it would be a crazy world if fulfilment of obligations result in net losses, and that either the world is not Russelian world at all, or we don't have moral obligations. Thus, Mavodes claims that morality has an odd status in the non-religious view of the world, and therefore morality is dependent on religion. Mavodes' claim contradicts with non-voluntarist's perspective that moral properties don't require religious foundation.

In conclusion, the debate between voluntarists and non-voluntarists on morality has been constantly issued which both voluntarists and non-voluntarists having strengths and weaknesses. Voluntarists claim that god's will determines morality and make an argument against non-voluntarism that moral properties being independent of god's will means a challenge to the god's omnipotence while non-voluntarist deny this notion and rebuts voluntarist's arguments by arguing that either voluntarists implying contingency of what is right and wrong or implying a rejection of supervenience of the moral properties of natural ones are counterintuitive implication, and therefore should be rejected. Considering these two views, I personally prefer non-voluntarist's perspective to voluntarist's perspective with non voluntarists having stronger argument against voluntarists.