

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, September 1

I. General Grading Guidelines:

- C: What each author says.
- B: Why they say it.
- A: Whether they're right or wrong, and why.

II. What is Ethics?

Ethics is the study of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust, virtuous and vicious.
Morality is a set of rights and wrongs, goods and evils.

We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?

We obey laws? But what if they're unjust?

We obey customs, or religion? But there are many conflicting customs. For example, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice.

We follow our instincts? But is this infallible?

We use reason in addition? But still, is this infallible?

Furthermore, do we unwittingly participate in unjust institutions?

Slavery, like capitalism, had many defenders.

Is our attempt to spread democracy like imperialist attempts to civilize barbarian peoples?

This course will not tell you what is right or wrong, but may give you some insight into how to decide that for yourselves: reasons *why*.

Distinguish moralizing (1st order) from moral philosophy (2nd order).

We're not here to moralize, but to consider how one moralizes.

III. Separating Ethics from Religion.

We will proceed in this course to discuss morality in a completely non-religious manner.

This raises two questions.

First, does morality, as is often supposed, come from God?

Second, can one have ethics without religion?

As we start to study ethics, it's important to note that religion has played an important role in our ethical history.

But it can't be the main factor.

The Euthyphro dialogue seeks to answer, What is holiness?

We might think of this, instead, as 'What is ethical?' Or 'What is good?'

The same formal, philosophical questions apply.

Euthyphro first tries to define holiness as prosecuting wrongdoers, such as he is doing.

Socrates doesn't like this definition, because it provides only an example, and not a definition.

There are other holy things.

Next, Euthyphro's defines holy as that which is pleasing to the gods, and the unholy as that which is displeasing to the gods.

Socrates says, "I certainly did not ask you to tell me what action is both holy and unholy: but now it would seem that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them."

This is because the gods may disagree.

So, Euthyphro's second definition leads to a kind of contradiction.

Euthyphro responds by saying that there are acts which are neither holy nor unholy, and that his act is pleasing to all the gods.

Euthyphro thus amends the definition:

Holy = What is pleasing to all the gods.

Unholy = What is displeasing to all the gods.

Lastly, given this definition, Socrates asks whether the holy becomes holy from the love of the gods, or vice versa.

This question is one of the most famous in all of philosophy.

Consider a specific instance of this question:

Is murder unholy because the gods hate murder, or do the gods hate murder because it is unholy?

Which is the cause and which is the effect?

Note that the same question remains if we consider only one God:

Is murder unholy because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is unholy?

Also, the same structural problem arises for morality as for holiness:

Is murder wrong because God hates murder, or does God hate murder because it is wrong?

We will consider this last version of Socrates' question to Euthyphro.

The first option is called 'voluntarism', or Divine Command Theory.

Arthur's rejects this, in his article.

On voluntarism, ethics is a part of religion, and we should look to God for morality.

But this means that God could change his mind, and make murder morally acceptable.

That's uncomfortable.

Doesn't there have to be a reason to choose certain acts as good and others as bad?

So, maybe it's the other way around.

The second option is called 'natural law'.

(Arthur takes this position, but not by name.)

This means that there's a limit on God's power; she can't make murder morally right.

So she's not omnipotent.

This also means that there's ethical work to be done outside of religion.

God can still be the divine discoverer; but she's not the source!

One can look to God for information, but the problem then becomes one of access.

How do we know which of God's supposed pronouncements are really the divine word?

Another problem with looking to God for morality:

We may be tempted to confuse morality with self-interest.

If one does the right thing for desire of eternal reward or fear of eternal punishment, you have only acted in your own long-term self-interest.

This seems not to be what we mean by morality.

A further problem with looking to God for morality:

We're doing philosophy.

We want to ask questions about why things are right and wrong.

'God says to do p' sounds a lot like, 'do p and shut up'.

Arthur presents four arguments in attempting to separate morality from religion, rejecting the necessity of religion as a foundation for ethics.

1) Many people act morally without religious motivation, p 62.

But we might internalize the real motivation (i.e. religion).

An analogy: we don't fear a traffic accident when we drive.

We've learned to follow certain rules.

But the basic motivation is fear of an accident.

On the other hand, there are ethical atheists.

It's difficult to say that they've internalized religion.

Maybe they're acting out of bad faith, but Arthur's argument does seem plausible.

2) There are many religions, and we don't know which one is right.

They may conflict.

But we don't need to know the answer to be moral.

There are problems of revelation and interpretation.

Is the Bible God's word, or an historical account of God's actions?

Our answers to these questions project a prior understanding of morality, p 63

3) Moral arbitrariness of God.

(Already discussed, above; this only applies to Divine Command Theory.)

DCT entails the possibility of murder, torture being morally acceptable, if God changes her mind.

If you think that God can't change her mind, you've abandoned this position.

4) Linguistic argument: 'is morally required' does not mean 'is commanded by God'.

Societies without one concept can have the other.

IV. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

Consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

A) no morality;

B) exactly one morality; or

C) more than one morality.

You must decide which one of these options is right.

Each has a name:

A) is called moral nihilism

There is no morality, but just an illusion, an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.

Consider how morality is learned, through reward and punishment.
Nietzsche and the will of the strong.

C) is called ethical relativism.

There are 2 types:

1) Cultural relativism: Morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other grouping.

2) Subjectivism: Morality depends on the individual.

Again, consider how we learn moral facts.

On either position, there is no right/wrong outside society, or subculture, or family.

King Darius (Persians) brought the Callatians and the Greeks to court to prove relativism.

Callatians were cannibals, ate their dead.

Greeks cremated their dead.

Each thought the others' practice not just repugnant but immoral.

Sartre says that we project morality from inside ourselves, create it.

B) is called moral absolutism, there is just one set of rights and wrongs.

This is a claim about what exists, not what we know.

We may be ignorant of the right morality.

So, we can be absolutists, without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.

We'll see a variety of examples of absolutism, throughout the course.

A) seems incoherent.

It removes ability to debate. See Shaw, p 82.

Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.

We don't think that it's *wrong* to prefer broccoli to chocolate.

De gustibus non disputandum est.

We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it's up to them to decide.

We think that ethics is different.

When we urge someone not to rape or murder, for instance, we don't think it's up to them in the end. See Midgley, p 79,

Relativism is more compelling. We will examine it in the next class.