

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
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Lecture Notes: Introduction and Meta-Ethics

Review Syllabus and requirements

My general grading guidelines:

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

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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? What if they're unjust?

We obey customs, religion? But there are many conflicting customs. Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, e.g.

Instinct? Is this infallible?

Reason? Is this infallible?

Furthermore, do we unwittingly participate in unjust institutions? Does that make us unjust?

(Slavery, like capitalism, had many defenders.)

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*.

Interesting ethical decisions are not about right and wrong, but choices between competing rights and goods.

It can be hard to hear other opinions, especially when you feel strongly about an issue.

When you hear something with which you disagree, instead of saying why it's wrong, try to understand why the other person thinks this is right.

We have to listen to each other, proceed by argument guided by response rather than gainsaying.

Distinguish moralizing (1st order) from moral philosophy (2nd order). We're not here to moralize, but to consider how one moralizes. Though we will consider some actual cases, they aren't to be our focus.

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?

The Euthyphro

Plato: Greek philosopher, student of Socrates
Wrote dialogues, like plays, seeking answers to puzzling questions.
For examples: what is justice? what is friendship? what is knowledge?

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, and here's why.

[Arthur article covers much of this material, too.]

The dialogue seeks to answer: what is holy? holiness?

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

The same formal, philosophical questions applies.

Euthyphro first tries to define the holy 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 second definition:

holy=pleasing to the gods, unholy=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 (not just some)

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 (and difficult) 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 version of Socrates' question to Euthyphro.

If you choose the first option:

You are a voluntarist, and believe in 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.

The antecedent can change, and the consequent will change.

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 last problem with looking to God for morality:

We're doing philosophy.

We want to ask questions.

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

Arthur considers different arguments in his article, to be discussed shortly.

For now, consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

A) no morality;

B) exactly one morality; or

C) more than one morality.

You should decide which one of these options is right.

Each has a name:

A) Moral nihilism: There is no morality

It's just an illusion, an expression of preference, conditioning/ brainwashing.

(Consider how morality is learned - spanking, etc.)

Nietzsche and the will of the strong.

C) Ethical relativism.

There are 2 types:

1) It depends on your culture (cultural relativism).

2) It depends on the individual (subjectivism).

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) 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, and not insist on the truth of our morality.
We'll see a variety of examples of absolutism, throughout the course.

A) seems incoherent

Removes ability to debate: read 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.
But 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.
Midgley, p 79

Relativism is much more compelling

Everyone does decide for themselves how to act.
This could be misinterpreted as an argument for relativism.
We seem to learn ethics from those around us, from society.
Since there are different moral codes in different societies, it seems plausible that people might end up believing different moralities.
If ought implies can, and it's so hard to act in opposition to one's culture, morality can't really transcend culture.
Some societies accept polygamy, marriage of children, slavery, homosexuality.
People who live in these societies accept these practices.
Consider the Betty/Sarah examples from Shaw, pp 82-3.
Furthermore, relativism seems to be a respectful attitude toward other cultures, and we want to be respectful.
Midgley, p 78.

But there are problems with relativism.

Midgley calls this position 'moral isolationism', since it isolates each society's morality from others.

This prevents us from praising other cultures, too
In order to praise a culture, we have to be able to understand it
And if we understand it, we can criticize it
Still, we might accept this consequence
We can be respectful, in general, without understanding (and therefore not respecting) the details

One problem is that, on either A) or C), we can't say that other cultures are inferior when we do want to say that.

Aztecs practiced ritual human sacrifice.
Midgley provides the example of tsujigiri: trying out one's new sword on a passing stranger.
Do we really want to respect other cultures so much that we're willing to accept that?

Relativism makes each society perfect.

Right/wrong are determined by cultural standards, so there's no room for saying that the standards are wrong.
Similarly, change can never be viewed as progress (e.g. the end of slavery).

Midgley argues that we can maintain respect without lapsing into isolationism and relativism.

Understanding is necessary, and possible, if a little bit of hard work.

This understanding allows us to both praise and criticize other cultures.

We want to be isolationists to avoid hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

We can show respect, instead, by not passing crude, untutored judgments.

Midgley, p 79

In fact, Midgley argues, in order to try to defend isolationism, we lapse into applying our own standards.

We defend the samurai by appeal to honor and discipline.

We hypothesize the victim's consent.

These show that we aren't really isolationists.

The only way we can defend isolationism is to abandon it.

We can explain the social differences in morality without appeal to relativism

Shaw, p 83

Utility, expectations, responsibility

These can be seen as universal.

In every society, we have responsibilities, and must meet them.

The specifics of our duties vary, but not that we must fulfil such duties as exist.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem that condemnation of a society is sufficient to determine morality, after all.

We don't think it really immoral for someone to breach the mores of a culture, if those aren't really ethical standards.

E.g. intercourse on Sundays, from Shaw, p 83

Shaw provides several other arguments against relativism:

Problems of majority rule.

Problems of overlapping societies.

But the inability to criticize other cultures is probably the most problematic.

And this is tied to the problem of moral progress.

Consider this description of the massacres in Rwanda, in 1995:

Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region.

Following the militia's example, Hutu young and old rose to the task. Neighbors hacked neighbors to death in their homes, and colleagues hacked colleagues to death in their workplaces. Priests killed their parishioner, and elementary-school teachers killed their students. Many of the largest massacres occurred in churches and stadiums where Tutsis had sought refuge - often at the invitation of local authorities, who then oversaw their execution. In mid-April, at least five thousand Tutsis were packed in the Gatwaro Stadium, in the western city of Kibuye; as the massacre there began, gunmen in the bleachers shot zigzag waves of bullets and tossed grenades to make the victims stampede back and forth before militiamen waded in to finish the job with machetes.

Throughout Rwanda, mass rape and looting accompanied the slaughter. Militia bands, fortified with potent banana beer and assorted drugs, were bused from massacre to massacre. Hutu prisoners were organized in work details to clear cadavers. Radio announcers reminded listeners to take special care to disembowel pregnant victims. As an added incentive to the killers, Tutsis' belongings were parceled out in advance - the radio, the couch, the goat, the opportunity to rape a young girl. A councilwoman in one Kigali neighborhood was reported to have offered fifty Rwandese francs apiece (about 30 cents at the time) for severed heads, a practice known as "selling cabbages". (*The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995) Or, closer to home, the terror attacks of 9/11/01

If you think that there's something immoral here, you can't go for A) skepticism, or for C), either.

You must be an absolutist.

Shaw argues that appeals to reason-giving are essential to the establishment of a moral position
pp 84-5

We consider the Rwanda case, and respond by thinking of reasons why such behavior is wrong.
These reasons push us away from relativism.
They can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.

One last, more philosophical, problem with relativism:

Is the claim that all truth is relative itself an absolute truth?
If it is, then at least one truth is not relative, and so perhaps there are others.
If it is not, then perhaps the truths of morality are the exception.
That is, relativism is self-refuting!

So, let's put aside relativism (and skepticism) and, for the remainder of the course, adopt, at least tentatively, absolutism.

This means that we presume that there are morally correct answers to ethical questions.
It does not mean that everything that one might think is a moral question is in fact a moral question.
It should also not entail dogmatism.

And note that absolutists can agree with relativists that ethical behavior is determined by culture, and by self.

Now: How do we find out what the morally correct position is?
Are we led back to God?

Remember that Euthyphro identified piety with what is pleasing to the gods
And we recast this as:

$x \text{ is wrong} \Leftrightarrow \text{God hates } x$

The question was, which causes the other?

Copleston argues that Divine Command Theory (DCT), on which God directly creates morality, is the only way out of the Rwanda/ Nazi problem, the only way to found a moral absolutist position.

Arthur rejects DCT, rejecting the necessity of religion as a foundation for ethics.

Arthur's arguments against DCT:

- 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.)
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.

Another argument against religion as source of morality:

It's too easy to confuse morality with self-interest.

(This is not Arthur's argument.)

Arthur concludes that morality is social, requires education, can be found with reason.

Religion is a social construct, and has effect on morality, and vice versa.

But the influences on morality are broader.

We can still maintain a religious perspective, though, as in Natural Law, with God as divine discoverer.

So, if you're with me so far, we're all moral absolutists, and we know that we can search for morality in the world, independently of earthly, or otherworldly rewards.

How can we recognize a moral statement?

5 features (from Louis Pojman)

Prescriptivity (do or don't)

but it's not aesthetics (you should use more blue in that sky you're painting)

it's not law (you shouldn't make a right turn on red within the city limits)

it's not manners (you should tip 15% in restaurants)

it's not grammar (you should never end a sentence with a preposition)

Universalizability (holds for every one, not: every one should be treated equally)

Overridingness (over aesthetic, legal)

Publicity (secrecy defeats action-guiding role; doesn't mean we have to preach)

Practicability (ought implies can)

We need an ethical theory: a set of universal principles, valid for every one, that will tell you whether an action is right or wrong.

Examples of moral theories:

Divine Command theory (see Arthur article)

Utilitarianism (focuses on consequences)

Kantian deontology (focuses on intentions)

Egoism (Right=self-interest)

Next: Exploring utilitarianism.