

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 9

Finishing our discussion of metalogic.

I. The inability to praise and criticize other cultures is the most serious problem with ethical relativism.

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, Hutus 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 parishioners, 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 is something immoral here, you can not be a nihilist or a relativist.
You must be an absolutist.

II. Absolutism and Reason-Giving

Shaw argues that appeals to reason-giving are essential to the establishment of a moral position, pp 39-40. We consider the Rwanda case, and respond by thinking of reasons why such behavior is wrong. These reasons push us away from relativism. On cultural relativism, the only reasons required are the dictates of the culture. They can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.

Put relativism aside and, for the remainder of the course, adopt absolutism.

We've now put God, nihilism, and relativism behind us.

III. Moral Absolutism

Absolutism means 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.
Perhaps the specifics of how we deal with the remains of our dead is not a moral issue, contrary to King Darius's conclusion.

Absolutism should also not entail dogmatism.
It is not a claim that any one knows what the right morality is.
These are, at times, hard questions.

IV. Toward an Ethical Theory

How do we find out what the morally correct position is?
Are we led back to God?
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 justify a moral absolutist position.

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

x is wrong \Leftrightarrow God hates x

The question was, which causes the other?

Arthur rejects DCT, rejecting the necessity of religion as a foundation for ethics.
We have, with him, put God and religion aside, as well.
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.
We are seeking the reasons which naturally constitute morality.

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.
How can we recognize one?

V. Five features of an ethical statement (from Louis Pojman):

1. Prescriptivity (dos and don'ts)
There are other prescriptive fields: aesthetics (you should use more blue in that sky you are painting), law (you shouldn't make a right turn on red within the city limits); manners (you should tip 15% in restaurants); grammar (you should never end a sentence with a preposition).
2. Universalizability (holds for every one, not: every one should be treated equally)
3. Overridingness (over aesthetic, legal, etc.)
4. Publicity (secrecy defeats action-guiding role; this does not mean we have to preach)
5. Practicability (ought implies can)

VI. Examples of moral theories:

Divine Command theory (see Arthur article)

Utilitarianism (focuses on consequences)

Kantian deontology (focuses on intentions)

Egoism (Right=self-interest)

VII. Introduction to Utilitarianism

Greatest Happiness Principle:

The right act is the act which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Mill formulates it slightly differently, p 66.

There are really three clauses of the utilitarian creed:

1) Consequentialism: acts are judged by their consequences.

2) Hedonism: consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.

3) Egalitarianism: each person counts as one.

Be careful to distinguish utilitarianism from ethical egoism.

Ethical egoism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for me.

Note that it seems to fulfill the 5 requirements of a moral theory:

Prescriptivity

Universality

Overridingness (happiness is the only consideration)

Publicity

Practicability (though this may be debated)

Utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, pleasure is the ultimate end.