

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, March 23

I. The Prisoner's Dilemma

We can devise another moral theory, based on the social contract.
 To see this, consider the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Two conspirators are arrested, put into separate cells from which they can not communicate with each other.

They are each given the following options.

They may cooperate, or defect.

'Cooperate' and 'defect' refer to the relationship between A and B.

When they cooperate, they cooperate with each other.

When they defect, they defect from each other.

		Person A	
		Cooperate	Defect
Person	Cooperate	A and B each get 2 years in jail.	A goes free, while B dies.
B	Defect	B goes free while A dies.	A and B each get 7 years in jail.

There are many real life examples of this kind of relationship:

The employer-employee relationship.

Relationships between vendors and clients.

Between lovers.

Between students and teachers.

Among train riders, or car drivers.

There are links on the website to more examples.

The problem is that rational persons, committed to their own interests will always defect.

If A and B each defect, they end up in the lower right hand corner of the chart.

But they would like to be in the upper left hand corner.

The moral of the story of the prisoner's dilemma:

By each pursuing our own interests, we do not end up in the situation we in fact prefer.

This is thus a metaphoric response to the founding metaphor of capitalism, Mandeville's 'Fable of the Bees'. See the link on the website.

II. Hume, on the prisoner's dilemma [I neglected to read this in class.]

Your corn is ripe today; mine will be so tomorrow. 'Tis profitable for us both, that I should labour with you to-day, and that you should aid me to-morrow. I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me. I will not, therefore, take any pains on your account; and should I labour with you upon my own account, in expectation of a return, I know I should be disappointed, and that I should in vain depend upon your gratitude. Here then I leave you to labour alone: You treat me in the same manner. The seasons change; and both of us lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security.

III. Social Contract Morality

Morality is a set of rules that rational people agree to accept for mutual benefit
In terms of the prisoners' dilemma: morality moves us from the lower right-hand corner to the upper left-hand corner.

IV. Returning to the discussion of justice and property

Hobbes defends absolute power in the commonwealth, as the source of all rights and justice.
Locke defends a more limited governmental power via the social contract, assuming natural rights.
We are naturally entitled to whatever we need to survive (food, water, shelter).
In order to use something, like food, we have to make it ours first.
I have to own the apple to eat it.
I own my own body, and thus what I make with it when I mix my labor with the environment, p 345.
Compare with Proudhon's "Property is theft;" see link on website.
But we may not take more than we can use, p 345.
For Locke, our natural rights, moral facts, justify property ownership.
It's not just a legal justification, as it is for Hobbes.
It's not arbitrary, as it might seem by the U.S. tax code, e.g.
It remains an open question whether we can account for all our laws, and for government in general, by appeal to this abstract, general principle.

The laws are decided by a majority, p 346.
Compare with Socrates, in Plato's 'Crito'.

V. An objection to Locke's account

We have never signed any contract.
Locke responds by appealing to tacit consent.
We use the roads, police, schools, etc.
We are free to give up our property and leave.
But if we stay, we are bound to obey the laws.
We are also bound by the laws if we are merely visiting a foreign country, and using the protections of that government.

VI. Hume on natural rights

Hume thinks that all this talk of natural rights and hypothetical constructs (the social contract and the appointment of a leviathan) is bunk.

This talk of rights is misguided.

In a state of abundance, we would have no need for property rights.

Recall the Ring of Gyges.

We could have whatever we needed, and so wouldn't need to rely on 'rights'.

In a state of extreme necessity, we would give them up.

Survival would be our main focus.

'Rights' would lose relevance.

So, Hume concludes, they're just conveniences, given the world in which we live, p 450.

Rights aren't anything more metaphysically interesting, in the way that Locke would have them.

Property rights justified by utility, that's all, pp 450-451.