

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

I. Which is the right moral theory?

We have looked at two distinct moral theories, now.
Both have advantages, and problems.
What do you do when you are confused about which theory is right?

You might think that the right theory is somehow a blend of the two theories.
But then how do you know when to adhere to one theory and when to the other?
If you merely rely on intuitions to decide when to choose one theory and when the other, then the theories are not doing the work they are supposed to do.
You need another theory to help you decide.

Here are some questions which may help you decide:
What would the political views of utilitarians and Kantians be like?
Which would be a better society, one filled with utilitarians or one filled with Kantians?
Is either theory plausible as a guide to behavior? (I.e. Could one adhere to it?)
I leave these questions for you to consider.

Our next moral theory is quite different, as it is not an action-guiding theory, but a character-building theory.

II. Introduction to Virtue Ethics

It comes from Plato, and Aristotle.
Nicomachus was Aristotle's son, thus the 'Nicomachean Ethics'.
It has been recently revived, in several guises (e.g. feminist ethics).
It is a different kind of approach: 'How do I live?', rather than 'What shall I do?'

The right act is the act that a virtuous person would do.
In other words, evaluating individual actions is the wrong approach.
The questions of morality should be ones of development of character.
We can not evaluate individual acts without looking at the broader context.

Consider an investment scheme.
At first it looks good, the actions involved look at least morally neutral.
But when revealed in a wider context, we can see actions as leading to a scam.
Or consider the popular bully in school, who may eventually find himself without friends.
Or drug use, which may seem fun, and satisfying, at first.
Conclusion: you need a wider context, like a life, to evaluate the moral status of persons and their behaviors.

To find the answers to moral questions, you need to figure out what kinds of stories people tell about their lives.

The stories start before you were born.

This is your moral starting point, which includes your family and community.

And you do not find out the ending until the end of a life.

So, to say that the just (right) act is the one the good (virtuous) man would do is unhelpful.

We need to know who is the virtuous person.

This will be the one who has the most good, the one who has lived a good life, i.e. the good man.

III. Human good

The virtue ethicist is not primarily interested in 'What is right?'

The right is to seek the good.

Happiness (eudaimonia) is the chief good.

This sounds like Mill, but Mill identified happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain.

Eudaimonia is the state of a person at the end of a long, productive life.

There are two senses of 'good'

1) As opposed to evil.

This usually entails self-sacrifice.

Nietzsche decries this 'Judeo-Christian' notion.

This seems to be the notion that Mill and Kant are pursuing.

2) Beneficial.

This notion might entail some self-sacrifice.

But it is primarily about self-interest.

Mill thinks that focus on the first notion leads to the increasing the second.

If we obey the dictates of utilitarianism, happiness will increase.

Kant makes no such promises.

Aristotle focuses on the second notion, and only looks to the first if it is required to achieve the second.

If we want to know what is good (in this second sense) for humans, if we want to know how to live, we have to look at the particulars of what humans are, and what they do.

IV. Human ends

The end of all activities is that for which they are done.

Everything has a telos, a goal or end.

For example, plants have as a telos to flower and prosper.

Every activity has a telos, too.

The telos of playing drums is to play with rhythm and force.

The telos of dropping objects near the surface of the Earth is for them to fall to the ground.

So, what is the telos of human life?

See p 52.

This establishes, if we didn't know it already, that humans seek happiness.

This is the happiness Jefferson wrote of pursuing, in the Declaration of Independence.

It comes from growing and learning.

In particular, it comes from learning the virtues.

Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.