

# **Introduction to Philosophy**

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Russell Marcus

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Introduction to Ethics

# Blade Runner, Mind and Ethics

Are replicants persons?

- The nature of mind
- Also, is it morally permissible to kill replicants?
  - Depends in part on our answer to the question about minds.
  - Another part: more general principles of morality.

# Ethics

right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair,  
just and unjust, virtuous and vicious

- Right and wrong tend to characterize actions.
- Good and bad (and virtuous and vicious) are more applicable to people and their characters.
- Fair and unfair (and just and unjust) are usually used to describe social arrangements or distributions of goods.
- A 'morality' is a set of true claims about right and wrong.
- Either there is:
  - A. No morality;
  - B. Exactly one morality; or
  - C. More than one morality.

# Meta-Ethics

the study of the possibility of ethics

- Also, the meanings of ethical terms
- Distinguish moralizing, or first-order ethics, from meta-ethics, or second-order ethics.
- We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?
  - laws?
  - customs?
    - Aztecs
    - Aghori
  - moral instincts?
  - reasoning?
- Perhaps we participate in unjust institutions.

# Three Meta-Ethical Positions

Either there is:

- A. No morality;
- B. Exactly one morality; or
- C. More than one morality.

- A is called moral nihilism
- B is called moral absolutism, or moral objectivism.
- C is called moral relativism.
- A, B, and C are intended to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive.
- There are many different codes of behavior that people actually follow.
- The question is whether there is one correct code of behavior.

# Absolutism

- The absolutist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.
- The absolutist's claim is about what exists.
- It is not about what we know.
- Even if there is only one true morality, we may be ignorant of it.
- So we can be absolutists without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.
- Two standard examples of moral absolutism
  - utilitarianism
  - Kantian deontology.

# Two Types of Relativism

conventionalism and subjectivism

- Conventionalism says that morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.
- Subjectivism says that morality depends on the individual.

# Two Sorts of Subjectivism

- **Hobbes**
  - ▶ People call what they like 'good' and what they dislike 'bad'.
  - ▶ The social ramifications are devastating.
  - ▶ Life, in a state of nature is, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."
  - ▶ Thus, we enter into a social contract in which we give up all of our autonomy to a sovereign, or government.
- **Existentialism**
  - ▶ Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists claim that morality is created through action.
  - ▶ Each individual creates his or her own morality.
- **One problem with subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us.**
  - ▶ We learn moral facts from our communities.

# Conventionalism

## cultural relativism

- On conventionalism, right and wrong are determined by a society, subculture, family, or other group.
- Herodotus and King Darius.
  - ▶ The Callatians ate their dead.
  - ▶ The Greeks cremated their dead.
  - ▶ Each thought the others' practice was immoral.

# Darius's Puzzle

- What should we think when we discover conflicting social norms, specifically ones which are perceived as moral norms?
- Naively, we can defend our own views.
- We might take them to transcend our culture.
- Universality of customs can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.
- But, we can find significant departures from modern ethical norms.
- Since the normal varies, some people think, the moral also varies.

# Are There Really Conflicting Moral Principles?

- Some norms are mere expressions of preference.
- But some people elevate such preferences to the level of morality.
  - Native American two-spirits: males who play traditional female gender roles.
  - Is homosexuality a matter of convention?
  - Is homosexuality immoral?
  - The fact that some people believe that sexuality is a matter for ethics does not make sexual preference a moral issue.
- There are different practices in different societies.
- A person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral.
- But, none of that shows that morality itself is relative.
  - Sex on Tuesdays
  - Head-covering and worship

# Nihilism

- The relativist believes in morality, determined either by one's self or one's culture.
- The nihilist says that there is no morality.
  - ▶ What we think of as morality is just an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.
- Nihilism is similar to subjectivism.
  - ▶ Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.
  - ▶ The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.
- The nihilist believes can never make moral errors, while the subjectivist believes that we can.

# Justice in *Republic I*

- Socrates is engaged in an extended exploration of justice.
- Cephalus characterizes justice as telling the truth and paying back what one owes.
  - ▶ only two examples
  - ▶ The friend who has lent you a weapon.
- Polemarchus: justice is giving some one what he deserves.
  - ▶ helping one's friends and harming one's enemies
  - ▶ Socrates: the just man can not harm his enemies.
  - ▶ Harming some one makes them worse, but the just man wants to improve others.

# Thrasymachus

- Thrasymachus thinks that all of this discussion presumes a naive acceptance of morality.
- Morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want.
- What we ordinarily call injustice is actually a virtue.
- The petty criminal is served by his theft, as long as he is not caught.
- The more unjust a person is, the better he will be able to avoid being caught.

# Socrates and Thrasymachus

- Rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.
- The true ruler earns no personal benefit from ruling.
  - Rulers must be paid.
- Thrasymachus's analogy, p 10-11
  - The shepherd cares for his sheep, and wants them to be healthy.
  - But, the shepherd's only real concern is for him/herself.
  - The shepherd takes care of the sheep only so that they can be of greater use to the shepherd.

# Two Senses of 'Good'

- The first sense is opposed to evil and usually entails self-sacrifice.
- The second sense of 'good' involves actions of objects that are beneficial to us.
  - So, healthy food is good, and exercise is good.
  - Primarily about self-interest
- When Thrasymachus says that the unjust man is good, he uses 'good' in the second sense.
- Socrates seems to be using the first sense in order to draw a contrast with Thrasymachus.
- How are these two senses related?

# Nihilism Today

- Nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.
- If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our use of these terms as motivations is puzzling.
- The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.
- Contrast ethics with food preferences.
  - There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.
  - I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.
- When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.
- It has a force for others.

# Morality and Religion

- Can we justify morality without appeal to religion?
  - The religious moralist
  - The secular moralist
- The nihilist worries that secular morality is incoherent.
- If so, we have to choose between nihilism and religious morality.
  - Without religion, in a Godless universe, life appears (to some) to have no significance.
  - If life has no meaning in a Godless universe, then secular morality is unmotivated, and we must choose only between religious morality and nihilism.
- As a practical matter, the fear of God does not seem to work as a moral motivation.
  - Even religious people act immorally.
  - More importantly, respecting persons out of fear of God is mere egoism, and not morality.
- We will return to questions about moral motivation in our next class.