

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W
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More Meta-Ethics

Meta-Ethics Jargon

- Either there is:
 - A. No morality (nihilism);
 - B. Exactly one morality (absolutism); or
 - C. More than one morality (relativism: subjectivism or conventionalism).
- Darius's Puzzle
 - Specific codes of behavior vary with the society.
 - Underlying moral norms are stable across cultures.
- Thrasymachus's challenge
 - Morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want.

Nihilism and Moral Language

- Nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.
- Ethics and 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.
- Still, we might be deluded, as Thrasymachus urges.



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?
- More important, is doing good good for you?

Why Should I Be Moral?

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.



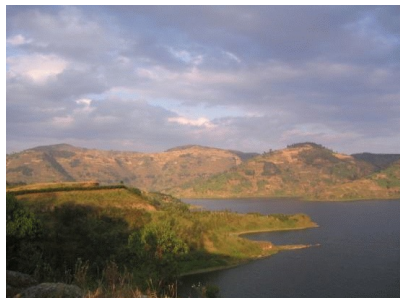
The Problem of Egoism

- It seems that the religious moralist has an easier solution to the problem of egoism than the secular moralist.
- But 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.
- Further, there are secular answers to the problem.
 - Socrates argues that we should be moral because it is in our interests.
 - Another option: we can find moral motivation in the abilities of humans to suffer and feel happiness, and in our desire to live in a world in which people are moral.
- But the last cookie?
 - Both secular and religious moralities have problems with moral motivation.



Relativism and Nihilism

- Both anti-absolutist positions entail that we can neither truly praise nor criticize other cultures.
- Words of praise (“That’s good”)
 - ▶ Nihilism: they are empty
 - ▶ Subjectivism: they refer only to my own preferences
 - ▶ Conventionalism: they refer to adherence to my cultural standards



Rwanda 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)

Absolutism and Reasons

- Absolutism allows us to consider objective reasons for morality.
- Appeals to reason-giving seem essential to the establishment of a moral position.
- We can talk about the reasons that an act is right or wrong.
- The reasons can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.
- 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.
- Absolutism should also not entail dogmatism.
- There are hard moral questions.