

# Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W  
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Class #23 - Ethics and Meta-Ethics

# Ethics

- We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?
  - laws or customs
    - Aztecs, Aghori
  - moral instincts
  - reasoning
- Ethics is the study of 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.

# Meta-Ethics

the study of the possibility of ethics

- Also, the meanings of ethical terms
- Contrast moralizing (first-order ethics) from meta-ethics (second-order).
- 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.

# 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.

# Objectivism

- The objectivist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.
- The objectivist'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 objectivists without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.
- Two standard examples of moral objectivism
  - utilitarianism
  - Kantian deontology

# Two Types of Relativism

conventionalism and subjectivism

- Conventionalism: morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.
- Subjectivism: 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 concern about the plausibility of either kind of subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us.
  - ▶ Only small, individual variations
  - ▶ Social conformity to central principles of morality should be no surprise.
  - ▶ We learn how to make our moral judgments from our communities.
  - ▶ Some philosophers take these facts to support cultural relativism, or conventionalism.

# 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 Conflicting Moral Principles?

- Some norms are mere expressions of preference.
- 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

Either there is:

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

- 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.
  - ▶ These are only two examples.
  - ▶ There are counter-examples.
    - The crazed 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.
    - Love even your enemy

# Thrasymachus

- Thrasymachus believes 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.

# Thrasymachus's Rant

The just is always a loser in comparison with the unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less. Secondly, in their dealings with the State: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is anything to be received the one gains nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses, and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends and acquaintances for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways.

But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking, as before, of injustice on a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable, that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little by little but wholesale; comprehending in one, things sacred as well as profane, private and public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he would be punished and incur great disgrace - they who do such wrong in particular cases are called robbers of temples, and man-stealers and burglars and swindlers and thieves. But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them, then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but by all who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they shrink from committing it. And thus, as I have shown, Socrates, injustice, when on a sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice; and, as I said at first, justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and interest.

# 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 Response

You fancy that the shepherd or neatherd fattens of tends the sheep or oxen with a view to their own good and not to the good of himself or his master; and you further imagine that the rulers of states, if they are true rulers, never think of their subjects as sheep, and that they are not studying their own advantage day and night. Oh, no; and so entirely astray are you in your ideas about the just and unjust as not even to know that justice and the just are in reality another's good; that is to say, the interest of the ruler and stronger, and the loss of the subject and servant; and injustice the opposite; for the unjust is lord over the truly simple and just: he is the stronger, and his subjects do what is for his interest, and minister to his happiness, which is very far from being their own

# 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.