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Lecture- 10



Theories of Morality

(1) Moral Subjectivism

Right and wrong is determined by what you -- the subject -- just happens to think (or 'feel') is right or wrong.

In its common form, Moral Subjectivism amounts to the denial of moral principles of any significant kind, and the possibility of moral criticism and argumentation. In essence, 'right' and 'wrong' lose their meaning because so long as someone thinks or feels that some action is 'right', there are no grounds for criticism. If you are a moral subjectivist, you cannot object to anyone's behaviour (assuming people are in fact acting in accordance with what they think or feel is right). This shows the key flaw in moral subjectivism -- probably nearly everyone thinks that it is legitimate to object, on moral grounds, to at least some peoples' actions. That is, it is possible to disagree about moral issues.

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(2) Cultural Relativism

Right and wrong is determined by the particular set of principles or rules the relevant culture just happens to hold at the time.

Cultural Relativism is closely linked to Moral Subjectivism. It implies that we cannot criticize the actions of those in cultures other than our own. And again, it amounts to the denial of universal moral principles. Also, it implies that a culture cannot be mistaken about what is right and wrong (which seems not to be true), and so it denies the possibility of moral advancement (which also seems not to be true).

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(3) Ethical Egoism

Right and wrong is determined by what is in your self-interest. Or, it is immoral to act contrary to your self-interest.

Ethical Egoism is usually based upon Psychological Egoism -- that we, by nature, act selfishly. Ethical egoism does not imply hedonism or that we ought to aim for at least some 'higher' goods (e.g., wisdom, political success), but rather that we will (ideally) act so as to maximize our self interest. This may require that we forgo some immediate pleasures for the sake of achieving some long term goals. Also, ethical egoism does not exclude helping others. However, egoists will help others only if this will further their own interests. An ethical egoist will claim that the altruist helps others only because they want to (perhaps because they derive pleasure out of helping others) or because they think there will be some personal advantage in doing so. That is, they deny the possibility of genuine altruism (because they think we are all by nature selfish). This leads us to the key implausibility of Ethical Egoism -- that the person who helps others at the expense of their self-interest is actually acting immorally. Many think that the ethical egoist has misunderstood the concept of morality -- i.e., morality is the system of practical

reasoning through which we are guided to constrain our self-interest, not further it. Also, that genuine altruism is indeed possible, and relatively commonly exhibited.

(4) Divine Command Theory

Many claim that there is a necessary connection between morality and religion, such that, without religion (in particular, without God or gods) there is no morality, i.e., no right and wrong behaviour. Although there are related claims that religion is necessary to motivate and guide people to behave in morally good way, most take the claim of the necessary connection between morality and religion to mean that right and wrong come from the commands of God (or the gods). This view of morality is known as Divine Command Theory. The upshot is that an action is right -- or obligatory -- if God command we do it, wrong if God commands we refrain from doing it, and morally permissible if God does not command that it not be done.

Divine Command Theory is widely held to have several serious flaws. First, it presupposes that God or gods exist. Second, even if we assume that God does exist, it presupposes that we can know what God commands. But even if we accept theism, it looks like even theists should reject the theory. Plato raised the relevant objection 2500 years ago. He asked:

Is something right (or wrong) because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?

If the latter, then right and wrong are independent of the gods' commands -- Divine Command Theory is false. If the former, then right and wrong are just a matter of the arbitrary will of the gods (i.e., they might have willed some other, contradictory commands).

Most think that right and wrong are not arbitrary -- that is, some action is wrong, say, for a reason. Moreover, that if God commands us not to do an action, He does so because of this reason, not simply because He arbitrarily commands it. What makes the action wrong, then, is not God's commanding it, but the reason. Divine Command Theory is false again.

(5) Virtue Ethics

Right and wrong are characterized in terms of acting in accordance with the traditional virtues -- making the good person.

The most widely discussed is Aristotle's account. For Aristotle, the central concern is "Ethica" = things to do with character. Of particular concern are *excellences of character* -- i.e., the moral virtues.

Aristotle, and most of the ancient Greeks really had nothing to say about moral duty, i.e., modern day moral concepts. Rather, they were concerned with what makes human beings truly 'happy'. True 'happiness' is called *Eudaimonia* (flourishing / well-being / fulfilment / self-actualization). Like Plato, Aristotle wants to show that there are

objective reasons for living in accordance with the traditional virtues (wisdom, courage, justice and temperance). For Aristotle, this comes from a particular account of human nature -- i.e., the virtuous life is the 'happiest' (most fulfilling) life.

Three steps to the argument:

- (1) The ultimate end of human action is happiness.
- (2) Happiness consists in acting in accordance with reason.
- (3) Acting in accordance with reason is the distinguishing feature of all the traditional virtues.

Aristotle thought that humans had a specific function. This function is to lead a life of true flourishing as a human, which required abiding by the dictates of rationality and so acting in accordance with the traditional virtues.

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(6) Feminist Ethics

Right and wrong is to be found in women's responses to the relationship of caring. Comes out of the criticism that all other moral theories are 'masculine' -- display a male bias. Specifically, feminists are critical of the 'individualistic' nature of other moral theories (they take individualism to be a 'masculine' idea). Rather, feminist ethics suggests that we need to consider the self as at least partly constructed by social relations. So morality, according to some feminist moral philosophers, must be grounded in 'moral emotions' like love and sympathy, leading to relationships of caring. This allows legitimate biases towards those with whom we have close social relationships.

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(7) Utilitarianism

Right and wrong is determined by the overall goodness (utility) of the consequences of action.

Utilitarianism is a Consequentialist moral theory.

Basic ideas:

All action leads to some end. But there is a *summum bonum* -- the highest good/end. This is pleasure or happiness. Also, that there is a First Principle of Morals -- 'Principle of Utility', alternatively called 'The Greatest Happiness Principle' (GHP), usually characterized as the ideal of working towards the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The GHP implies that we ought to act so as to maximize human welfare (though Bentham thought we should include all sentient animals in his utilitarian calculations). We do this in a particular instance by choosing the action that maximizes pleasure/happiness and minimizing suffering.

Jeremy Bentham -- the first to formulate Utilitarianism -- did not distinguish between kinds of pleasures. However, Bentham's student, John Stuart Mill, produced a more sophisticated version of Utilitarianism in which pleasures may be higher or lower. The higher pleasures (those obtained, e.g., through intellectual pursuits), carried greater weight than the lower pleasures (those obtained through sensation). The upshot is that in

determining what action to perform, both quality and quantity of pleasure/happiness count.

Note: Utilitarians are not a Hedonist. Ý Hedonists are concerned only with their own happiness. Utilitarians are concerned with everyone's happiness, so it is Altruistic. Ý In general, morally right actions are those that produce the best overall consequences / total amount of pleasure or absence of pain.

Modern versions of Utilitarianism have dropped the idea of maximizing pleasure in favour of maximizing the satisfaction of all relevant peoples' preferences and interests. Ý Also, some distinguish between Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism. Ý Act Utilitarianism is pretty much as described above, where we make the utilitarian calculation based on the evaluation of the consequences of a single isolated act. Ý It is thought by some that this leads to a number of significant problems -- for instance, that one person may be harmed if that leads to the greatest good for everyone. Ý To overcome these problems, some advocate Rule Utilitarianism -- the view that we should adopt only those rules (for governing society) that produce the greatest good for all.

Other key points:

- For Utilitarians, no action is intrinsically right or wrong.
- No person's preferences or interests (including your own, your relatives, friends, neighbours, etc.) carry a greater weight than any other person's.
- Usually we cannot make the required utilitarian calculation before acting. Ý So, in most situations, following 'rules of thumb' will produce the best consequences.
- Democratic and economic principles reflect Utilitarianism.

Some things to ask about Utilitarianism:

- How can we determine accurately what the consequences of an action will be?
- Do people have rights that cannot be overridden by the goal of the best consequences for all?

(8) Kantian Theory

Right and wrong is determined by rationality, giving universal duties.

Kantianism is a Non-consequentialist moral theory.

Basic ideas:

That there is "the supreme principle of morality". Ý Good and Evil are defined in terms of Law / Duty / Obligation. Ý Rationality and Freedom are also central. Ý Kant thought that acting morally was quite simple. Ý That is:

- you ought to do your duty (simply because it is your duty).
- Reason guides you to this conclusion.

Good Will (i.e., having the right intentions) is the only thing that is good without qualification. So, actions are truly moral only if they have the right intention, i.e., based on Good Will.

What establishes Good Will?

- only can be a law of "universal conformity" -- "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law".

This is called the Categorical Imperative = Principle of Universalizability (something like The Golden Rule). The basic idea is that we should adopt as action guiding rules (i.e., maxims) only those that can be universally accepted. Consider someone wondering if they could break a promise if keeping it became inconvenient. We might formulate the following maxim governing promises:

I can break promises when keeping them becomes inconvenient.

Can this be universalized? Kant says no because making promises then becomes, in essence, contradictory. The thinking is that a promise is, by definition, something you keep. The above maxim would lead to a contradiction of will, i.e., "I'll make a promise (something I keep), but I'll break it if I choose". The more general way to understand the Principle of Universalizability is to think that we must always ask the following questions: What if everyone did the action you are proposing? Or, what if I were in the other person's position? This leads to the basic idea behind the Golden Rule.

Kant had another way of formulating the Categorical Imperative that is worth noting.

Never treat anyone merely as a means to an end. Rather, treat everyone as an end in themselves.

We can understand this by noting an example, i.e., the slave society. What is wrong with the slave society, following the above principle, is that a slave is treated as a means to the slave owner's ends, i.e., as an instrument or tool, not as a person. The upshot is that no person's interests (or rights) can be overridden by another's, or the majority.

Many think that this way of formulating the Categorical Imperative shows that Kantianism is clearly anti-Utilitarian.

Some things to ask about Kantianism:

- Is it true that having good intentions is the only thing that counts morally?
- Must we always ignore good consequences?
- Is it always wrong to treat people merely as a means to an end? (Can we do otherwise?)

(9) Rights-based Theories

We are to act in accordance with a set of moral rights, which we possess simply by being human.

Rights-based views are connected to Kantianism and are Non-consequentialist. The basic idea is that if someone has a right, then others have a corresponding duty to provide what the right requires.

Most distinguish between positive and negative rights. A positive right is one in which the corresponding duty requires a positive action, e.g., giving a charitable donation in order to sustain someone's right to life, shelter, education, etc. A negative right is one in which the corresponding duty merely requires refraining from doing something that will harm someone. Some claim -- e.g., Libertarians -- that only negative rights count morally. For instance, the right to life does not require that we give what is needed to sustain life, rather merely that we refrain from taking any action that would take life. [Note: others argue that there is really no significant distinction between positive and negative rights, arguing that a positive right can be understood negatively, and visa versa. Also, that there is no morally significant difference between, for example, letting someone die and killing them. Obviously, this is a hotly disputed issue.]

Some things to ask about Rights-based theories:

- Where do rights come from? From nature (we have them simply by being human)? From principles of Justice? Or, from Utilitarian procedures?
- How do we decide between competing rights?

(10) Contractarianism

The principles of right and wrong (or Justice) are those which everyone in society would agree upon in forming a social contract.

Various forms of Contractarianism have been suggested. In general, the idea is that the principles or rules that determine right and wrong in society are determined by a hypothetical contract forming procedure. Here is John Rawls's example.

Through a thought experiment, Rawls developed a way of getting people to come up with universal principles of justice. The basic idea is nothing new -- i.e., of impartial developing a social contract of universal principles -- but many find Rawls' novel method very appealing. The idea is to start by thinking, hypothetically, that we are at the beginning of forming a society and we want to know which principles of justice to ground the society. However, in this 'original position' we do this without knowing which position we will occupy in the future society -- we don't know if we will be rich or poor, male or female, old or young, etc. We then advocate those principles that will be in our self-interest (though we don't know what 'self' that will be). This forces us to be impartial, and if we are rational, to propose universal principles. The idea of the thought experiment is not to think that we actually begin again, and construct a society from scratch. Rather, we can use the thought experiment as a test of actual principles of justice. If a principle is one that would not be adopted by people in the original position, behind the 'veil of ignorance' (about who they will be), then it is unjust and should be rejected.

[Rawls claims that people in this original position will choose conservatively when developing principles governing the distribution of benefits and burdens.]

This conservatism, Rawls claims, will lead to the choosing two basic principles:

(1) that each member of the society should have as much liberty as possible without infringing on the liberty of others; and

(2) the 'maximin' rule for decisions about economic justice -- namely, that they will choose those rules that would *maximize* the *minimum* they would receive.

Ý In other words, make the society in which the least well off are in the best possible position.

Ý Deviations from equality of distribution of benefits and burdens is justified only if it advantages the least well off.

Ý Rawls thought that some inequalities would be adopted because rewarding on the grounds of merit and hard work, for example, would lead to a society in which there was a greater production of social benefits, so the least well off would be better off than in a society of pure equality.]

SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

S.NO	Question	Option (a)	Option (b)
1.	Right and wrong is determined by what you -- the subject -- just happens to think (or 'feel') is right or wrong.	True	False
2.	Right and wrong is determined by the particular set of principles or rules the relevant culture just happens to hold at the time.	True	False
3.	Ethical Egoism is usually based upon Psychological Egoism -- that we, by nature, act selfishly	True	False
4.	Right and wrong is to be found in womens' responses to the relationship of caring.	True	False
5.	Right and wrong is determined by rationality, giving universal duties. Kantianism is a <u>Non-consequentialist</u> moral theory	True	False

Answers: 1-(a),2-(a), 3-(a),4-(a),5-(a)