

PHI 105: INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

LECTURE NOTES

LECTURE I: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS, AND MORALITY

I. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY, AND WHY IS PHILOSOPHY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES?

- A. **Philosophy is a discipline that asks significant questions and attempts to answer them.**
The three major questions in philosophy are, "What exists?" (**Metaphysics**); "What is knowledge and what can I know?" (**Epistemology**); and "How should I/we live?" (**Ethics**)
- B. **Philosophy is different, part I: One can question nearly every other discipline and one's own beliefs with philosophy:** E.g., there is Philosophy of:
- Physics, Science, Biology, Logic, Math
 - History, Society, Social Philosophy, Economics, Law
 - Art, Film, Literature
 - Language, Religion, Psychology
- C. **Philosophy is different, part II: Philosophy teaches one how to think more clearly by teaching one how to argue, discuss, and present views.**

II. WHAT IS ETHICS?

- A. **Ethics is the discipline within philosophy concerned with right and wrong human actions.** There are various subtypes within ethics:
1. **Descriptive Ethics: Psychological, anthropological, or sociological explanations, with the goal of attaining empirical knowledge of the morality of *accepted* moral views. The views could be current or past moral views.** E.g., Why did we as a culture accept slavery, as a practice? Why does this person have these views of abortion? Why did Tim McVeigh bomb the Murrah building?
 2. **Normative Ethics: An attempt to determine what is morally right and what is morally wrong with regard to human action. Normative ethics determine what *should* be the case, whether or not it currently *is* the case.** E.g., Applied normative ethics questions: Are abortions in the case of the imminent death of the mother morally permissible? Is the death penalty morally permissible?
 3. **Metaethics: Concerned with tasks such as analyzing the nature of moral judgments and specifying appropriate methods for the justification of particular moral judgments and theoretical systems.** E.g., Which theory is the better moral theory: Utilitarianism or Kantianism? Are consequences or intentions more useful in determining the rightness of actions? What makes a right action right and a wrong action wrong?

III. MORAL CONTEXT, MORAL CONFLICT, AND MORAL LUCK

- A. **Moral Context: What makes a situation or context one that involves morality or ethics?** A moral situation or context is one in which it makes sense to ask about its rightness or wrongness (**not** that it *is* right). What are the conditions of moral situations?
1. **Do moral situations only involve other people?** What about non-human animals? (E.g., kicking a dog - is there a moral context between the dog and me, or is there one between

my neighbor and me? Do we have a moral obligation to the Grand Canyon, as opposed to its effect on others if I filled it in?)

2. **The ability to freely choose and deliberate about our actions.** Moral contexts seem to be ones in which someone has an intentional effect on another's well being. So:
3. **Moral question = A question that concerns the way in which a society or we as individuals should live.** E.g., Is it morally permissible for Hilda to have an abortion? Or, "Is the death penalty morally permissible?"

B. Moral Conflict: Can the right action ever clash/conflict with another right action?

Suppose you're obliged to do two different things, but you cannot do both. In choosing to do one of the actions, am I doing wrong with respect to the other? Two examples:

1. You're walking to visit a terminally ill friend in hospital (you've promised to do this). Should you help another person on the way? Do you commit a wrong by choosing *either* action?
2. Sophocles' *Antigone*. If she obeys the laws of the state, she cannot bury her brother; but if she buries her brother, she disobeys the state. Is she wrong or right no matter what she does?

Tragedy writers (tragedians) believe that moral conflict is a real conflict. Rationalist philosophers (e.g., Kant) would say that in the end, one is really the right thing to do, and that these conflicts are *prima facie*. No matter how similar two actions seem, there is some distinction that is relevant. Suppose twins are drowning at opposite ends of a pool. Whom do you save?

C. Moral Luck: Is luck morally relevant: Can we be held morally responsible for fortuitous circumstances? Two examples:

1. Two drunk truck drivers (identical twins, same food and amount of alcohol) on different roads. One makes it OK, and he's lucky. Is this driver morally guilty even though he escapes? The other driver hits a child, has "bad luck." 2nd driver has more of a penalty because of (his bad) luck.
2. Oedipus killed his father - it was murder *and* patricide. He did not know it was his father.

There are only two possibilities: (1) Moral luck *does* exist: Factors beyond person's control are relevant. (2) There is no such thing as Moral Luck: We're only responsible for things that are in our control. Rationalists (e.g., Kant) would say that we should treat everyone the same and that there is not moral luck. Tragedians (Sophocles, Euripides) would say that there *is* moral luck.

IV. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN ETHICS? JOHN ARTHUR: "MORALITY, RELIGION, AND CONSCIENCE" (IN ARTHUR AND SCALET'S *MORALITY AND MORAL CONTROVERSIES*, 8TH ED., PP. 16-23).

A. What Is Morality? Arthur starts with the question, "what is morality?"

1. **What would it be like for a society to exist but that had no moral code?**
 - a. No duties, no rights, no sense of fairness or justice, guilt or moral responsibilities
 - b. There would be nothing that *should* be done. You could treat others badly or well, and it wouldn't matter.
 - c. You'd have no right to complain if you thought you were treated badly.
 - d. In sum, there would be no evaluation of others and no guilt.
2. **Could there be religion in this society?** Arthur answers: It's possible. The people could worship and sacrifice to God(s), believing that God(s) aid them and run the universe.

B. **How Might Religion and Morality Be Connected?** There is the view that religion is necessary for right action (religious moralists' view). There are three arguments for this claim:

1. **First Argument: Religion Is Necessary To Provide Motivation Through A Promise Of Rewards And A Threat Of Punishment.**

- **OBJ1: Religion is not necessary to provide motivation for right action.** [Side-Bar: This objection is a **Counter-Example: An example, real or imagined, but plausible, that *disproves* a principle or claim.** When given an effective counter-example to one's principle, one *must* give up or revise one's principle.]

2. **Second Argument: People Will Not Know How To Do The Right Thing Without The Guidance Of Religion.**

- **OBJ1: For this argument to work, we need to:**
 - (1) Confirm that God exists;
 - (2) Know what revelation is exactly and its relevance to religion;
 - (3) Know what religion is true, since there are many different beliefs from which to choose; and
 - (4) Know what God wants us to do.

3. **Third Argument: Divine Command Theory: Without God and religion there could *be* no right or wrong.**

- a. **OBJ1: "Is commanded by God" and "is morally required" are not the same thing.**
- b. **OBJ2: What if God commands us to torture innocent children?** [Side-Bar: This is a **Hard Case**: A case or example that is embarrassing to the principle, but one that can be admitted in order to retain one's principle.]
- c. **OBJ3: Plato's *Euthyphro* Argument:**

1. "The Holy" or "Holiness" is loved by the gods *because it is Holy*, and not because it is loved by the gods.
2. Because the Holy/Holiness is what it is, the gods love it – it is *not* because the gods love Holiness that Holiness is Holy.
3. So, the gods' love is not necessary in order for Holiness to be Holy.
4. So, what is Holy and what is loved by the gods are two different things, and Holiness is independent of the gods.

If Euthyphro held that the gods' love determines what everything is, then it would be arbitrary what the gods would like. In that case, we would be left with:

1. God wants us to do what is right = God wants us to do what He wants us to do.
2. "God is good" = God does what He pleases.
3. So, most theists (believers in an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God) find this unacceptable, and would reject the Divine Command Theory.

4. **Arthur Solves Some Potential Problems That Might Arise From Rejecting Divine Command Theory**, as follows:

- a. **Potential problem I: Is God limited then, because He can only discover moral truths and not invent or create them?** Arthur's reply: No.

b. Potential problem II: Can theists still have faith even though they reject the Divine Command Theory? Arthur's reply: Yes.

C. Evaluation of Arthur:

1. Religion may influence some people's ethical views; religion does not seem to be necessary in order to make ethical decisions.
2. The Divine Command Theory has some serious questions to address before it should be endorsed, especially given Arthur's solutions to potential problems.
3. Given 1 and 2 above: The best moral code is the one that is most justified based on the use of reason and consistency. If this is true, the theist, the agnostic, and the atheist can each have a shot at reasoning about what the best thing to do in a situation is, without appealing to God to do so.

V. ETHICAL RELATIVISM:¹ (That is, to an Individual Relativist, every person is the sole determiner of what is right and wrong; to a Cultural Relativist, each culture is the sole determiner of what is right and wrong.)

A. Definitions of Relativistic Views:

1. **Ethical Relativism:** The view that what is ethically right is relative either to the individual (Individual Relativism or Subjectivism) or to one's culture (Cultural Relativism or Conventionalism).
2. **Individual Relativism (Subjectivism):** The individual is the sole determiner of what is right and wrong.
3. **Cultural Relativism (Conventionalism):** One's culture is the sole determiner of what is right and wrong.

B. What Individual Relativism Is Not:

1. **Each person must determine for him/herself as best as he/she can what is actually right (Individualism).**
2. **We ought not to blame people for acting according to their sincere moral judgments (Toleration).**
3. Who are we to impose our beliefs on others? There are four interpretations of this claim:
 - a. **1st Interpretation: Individual Relativism = Tolerance**

1. It is intolerant to regard one's beliefs as more correct than the beliefs of those with whom you're arguing.
2. One ought not to be intolerant.
3. So, one ought not to regard one's beliefs as more correct.

OBJ's to 1st Interpretation: (i) This is self-refuting. (ii) Tolerance doesn't preclude one's having moral beliefs.

b. 2nd Interpretation: Not being a relativist = dogmatism.

c. 3rd Interpretation: "Who's to say?" = It's a difficult question and/or "Gosh, I do not know."

¹ This section is partially summarized/adapted from William Shaw's "Relativism in Ethics," in Arthur and Scalet's *Morality and Moral Controversies*, 8th ed., pp. 38-41.

- d. **4th Interpretation: Morality is subjective** (i.e., what is right or wrong depends among other things on human feelings).

C. Two Objections against Individual Relativism:

1. **It refutes itself.** If *whatever* each individual believes is correct about morality is right, then if one person thinks there is an *objective* truth about ethics (e.g., God sets the standard), then he or she is right (and everyone else would have to be wrong). But then the Individual Relativist is wrong ... right?
2. **There can be no argument about what is right and wrong, no matter how sure you are that someone does (or has done something) wrong.** Hitler is right, Stalin is right, and every action any one has ever done, as long as the person thought it was ethically right, is right. E.g., as a teacher, I can fail you if you get all A's on the coursework, and you would have to admit that I was correct, fair, etc. to do so, if Individual Relativism is the correct ethical theory.

D. Cultural Relativism: What It Is and Objections Thereto:

1. More information/explanation of Cultural Relativism:

- a. **Different cultures imply different answers to ethical questions.** Different cultures generate different answers to moral questions. E.g., Catholic Spain says abortion is impermissible, and it is permissible as a form of birth control in Japan. Therefore, for a Cultural Relativist, abortion is *wrong* in Spain and *right* in Japan.
- b. **There is *no absolute ethical standard*, independent of the culture**, according to Cultural Relativism. E.g., a Cultural Relativist cannot argue that there is a God who will objectively assess what is right and wrong and maintain that the culture is the sole determiner of right and wrong.
- c. **Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Relativism:** Sociology and anthropology are concerned with different questions than philosophy.

2. Five Objections to Cultural Relativism:

1. **Though helpful as an explanation of other cultures, it does not justify them.** This view may help us to understand why cultures have accepted cannibalism, slavery, sexism, racism, genital mutilation, having no human rights, etc., but it does not give a good argument as to why these actions are ever moral. (This is *not* a criticism of anthropology, sociology, psychology, or history; these disciplines are asking different questions than ethicists are asking.)
2. **There can be no argument about what is right and wrong between cultures, no matter how sure your culture is that some other culture has done something wrong.** Hitler's Germany is right, Afghanistan's policy of not educating females, ISIS, and so on, are right; every action any culture has ever done (as long as the culture thought it was right), is right.
3. **There will be "Immoral Rebels":** If you do not follow the culture's beliefs, you are immoral. For instance, not only is it illegal for one to smoke marijuana recreationally in a State where it is not legal, it is immoral as well, since that State's culture has decided that that action is wrong. Other examples: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks.
4. **What proportion counts?** Is it 51%? 66.6% 75%? 90%? Who takes the polls and how often? How do we know what our culture thinks about many *recent* ethical questions: cloning, genetic engineering, etc.?

5. **Whose culture is relevant?** What culture do I count as my own? What if my father is from one culture and my mother is from another and we move to a third country? Which culture is right? What about the subculture of being in a religion, being a professor, being an Arizonan, being a gang member, etc. What if these cultural beliefs conflict? How can one culture take precedence over another?

E. The Point: Reason Giving Is Essential To The Nature Of Morality

1. Why? [Answer given in class.]
2. There is a difference between one's having a personal quirk or an emotional reaction, versus having a reasoned opinion.
3. So, reasoning/argumentation is basic, and determines limits to what can be reasonably supported. Appeals to rights, fairness, and happiness of people involved are acceptable, and others are not.
4. So, there are agreed-upon standards in our moral practice, and we can judge them to be correct / incorrect, justified / unjustified.

VI. ETHICS (MORALITY), LEGALITY, RELIGION, AND ETIQUETTE

- A. **For our purposes, ethics = morality.** Scholars sometimes differentiate ethics from morality, but they are essentially the same, for our purposes.
- B. **Moral philosophy** = the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories (metaethics); it seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups (normative ethics).
- C. **Morality as Compared with Other Normative Subjects and Related Disciplines:**
 1. **Morality concerns not what *is* but what *ought* to be.**
 2. **Morality is not Etiquette:** Etiquette concerns proper and improper social behavior (i.e., polite behavior), rather than the essence of social existence (right and wrong behavior).
 3. **Moral Differences are often Rooted in Worldviews, not Moral Principles.** EX: The antiabortionist and pro choice advocates differ on whether the fetus has a soul and only rational beings' having a right to life.
 4. **Legality and Morality:** Two questions: (a) Is what is legal always moral? (b) Is what is illegal always immoral? Answer(s): Almost certainly not. Why? See this chart:

	LEGAL	ILLEGAL
(ARGUABLY) MORAL	Donating to charity	Helping slaves escape to freedom
(ARGUABLY) IMMORAL	Nazi science experiments on Jews	Killing people for fun

5. **Religion and Morality:** Two questions: (a) Is what is religious (according to a given religion) always moral? (b) Is what is irreligious (according to a given religion) always immoral? Answer(s): Arguably not. Why? See these examples:

- Religious but (arguably) immoral examples: The Crusades, Inquisitions, (intent to) sacrifice a son), 9/11 attacks.
- Irreligious but (arguably) moral examples: Giving a blood transfusion to a minor child of a Jehovah's Witness adherent, wearing mixed fabric clothes, giving a percentage of your income to charity instead of a religious sect.

VII. GREAT TRADITIONS IN ETHICS (DENISE, WHITE, & PETERFREUND – (DWP)): CHAPTER 1

- A. **"The unexamined life is not worth living":** To live a life of unreflective habit is to live like a nonhuman animal, mainly acting on instinct or "automatic pilot," and never questioning what we're here for, what the right things to do are, what one's values are, what values are good values, etc.
- B. **Principles and Practices:** When you start thinking about morality deeply and honestly, you may notice the difference between what these moral theories say that we should do, and what we actually do on the other hand.
- C. **Reason and Morality:** In this section, DWP refer to **social scientists** (which is their example of what I earlier called descriptive ethics), **casuistry** or **casuists** (which is applied ethics, or applying ethical theory or reason to everyday moral issues), **moralists** (or what I called normative ethics), and **ethical theorists** (or what I called metaethics).
- D. **History and Ethical Theory:** DWP say that there are two main historical influences on Western ethical theory:
 1. **Greek tradition:** For the Greeks, ethics was conceived as the art of living well, or the "good life." They were concerned with discovering the nature of happiness. There were different conceptions of happiness and means to achieve happiness, as we'll see. Two key words: Happiness and the good life (5).
 2. **Judeo-Christian ethics:** The ideals of righteousness before God and the love of God and neighbor, not the happy or pleasant life, constitute the substance of morality. Two key words: duty and the right (5).
- E. **The Nature of Ethical Theory:** What is the nature of ethics? DWP say, "Ethical theorizing is concerned with the construction of a rational system of moral principles and ... with the direct and more systematic examination of the underlying assumptions of morality" (5). Ethical theorists can do any of the following:
 1. **The analysis and explanation of moral judgments and behavior (5);**
 2. **The investigation and clarification of the meanings of moral terms and statements (5), and**
 3. **The establishment of the validity of a set of norms or standards for the governing of behavior, an ideal of human character to be achieved, or ultimate goals to be striven for (5-6).**

DWP great quote – keep the following in mind for the entire class: "... the challenge of ethics consists in the stimulation of its questions rather than in the finality of its answers. There is, moreover, the promise of the essential benefits of all philosophical controversy – the achievement of a measure of intellectual independence and maturity and a sense of security in dealing with abstract concepts" (6).

VIII. CONCLUSION FOR FIRST SECTION OF COURSE:

- A. In the first section of the course, we have seen:

1. That religion is not necessarily relevant to this class as a way of defending a morality, or a particular position.
 2. That individual and cultural relativism leave a lot to be desired as ethical theories go, and hence are unacceptable. And:
 3. That justifying one's position through reasoned argument (i.e., having reasoned opinions v. having unexplained feelings, intuitions, or impulses, and nothing else) is what is required to attempt to discover moral truths.
- B. Now we will examine many ethical theories, comparing and contrasting them along the way. We will first examine Plato's view.