

LECTURE 1-----PHILOSOPHY 13

"Abortion is morally wrong."

"Abortion is not morally wrong."

--What sort of disagreement is this? When we speak of ethical or moral claims, what are we talking about?

This question could prompt an empirical inquiry. A social scientist might observe what ethical and moral claims people make in various circumstances and the degree to which their behavior conforms to the norms they profess. She could try to figure out what causes people to exhibit these verbal behavior and conduct. These are perfectly reasonable questions, but in this class we are not seeking empirical description or explanation.

Moral claims belong in the category of evaluations, which are distinct and separate from the category of empirical (factual) claims. Empirical claims, from common sense judgments such as "there is a crow now on the roof" to sophisticated assertions of theoretical science, are confirmed by observation. They rest on the evidence of our senses. Evaluations are different. The category of evaluations includes aesthetic judgments and judgments about what is good and bad, desirable and undesirable, and much else. An empirical claim like "the cat is on the mat" is true just in case the cat is on the mat, but what in the world would make it true or false that abortion is morally OK?

Two views about evaluations, morals included:

Noncognitivism: Evaluative claims are not genuine assertions, they cannot be true or false, correct or incorrect.

Cognitivism: Evaluations are genuine assertions, they can be true or false, correct or incorrect. (Our main course authors, Mill and Locke, go for cognitivism.)

(On their face, evaluative claims have the form of assertions. But someone might hold this is systematically misleading. Our ordinary language of moral talk contains the assumption that moral claims are genuine assertions, but this assumption is systematically false. No moral claim can be shown to be true or false. On this view, when people use ordinary moral concepts and make ordinary moral claims, they are massively in error. This "error theory" about moral claims does not fit into either the cognitivist or the noncognitivist category as characterized in the preceding paragraph.)

One example of a noncognitivist view about ethics: **emotivism**. The emotivist holds that ethical judgments don't make assertions but instead express the pro and con attitudes of the speaker. Thus, saying "abortion is wrong" is roughly equivalent to "Boo on abortion!" and "abortion is morally OK" is roughly equivalent to "Yeah for abortion!"--this is according to the emotivist.

Another noncognitivist view: **prescriptivism**: moral evaluations are in the same category as orders and commands. A moral evaluation expresses the speaker's demand that something be done. So, "you ought to shut the door" might be paraphrased as, "Let it be the case that you shut the door!". This is close to "Shut the door!". (Some identify moral claims with universal prescriptions—prescriptions that the speaker wills for everyone in like circumstances. So, "You ought to shut the door" on this account is tantamount to "let it be the case that you shut the door and that everyone else in exactly similar circumstances should do the same!".)

Turn to the question, what distinguishes moral/ethical claims from the rest of the broader category of evaluations?

Suppose your toe is infected and sensitive and I stand on your foot to gain elevation to get a better view of a passing parade. What does it mean to say it's wrong for me to do this and to continue standing on your toe, which is causing you excruciating pain? Like most questions about ethics, the answers to this are controversial.

Some might identify morality with God's commands. The thought might be that God rewards those who obey these commands with huge pay-offs in an afterlife and punishes those who disobey. On this view, there is egoistic reason to be moral—doing what God commands is always in your long-term interest. But if we doubted God's existence, or doubt that God provides rewards and punishments in an afterlife, should we then think there is no reason to be moral? Also, a question arises as to the status of God's commands. If God commands X, is what makes X morally right the fact that God commands it, or is it the other way round—God commands X because X is independently morally right? If the former, morality may seem arbitrary, and if the latter, we are back to the question, what is it that makes morally right acts right (required or permissible) and wrong acts wrong. (In course readings, John Locke holds a divine command view and Robert Adams explores it.)

The suggestion this course explores is that the basis of morality is a belief that good and harm to particular people (or animals) is good or bad not just from their point of view, but from a more general (impartial) point of view, which every thinking person can understand. Good and harm to particular individuals matter from an impartial point of view, which regards all people's comparable harms as comparably important. (Notice that from this impartial standpoint, it might be the case that some kinds of partiality toward some people is justifiable. Perhaps an impartial norm says parents ought to favor their own children and friends ought to favor their own friends.) A big question arises here: what reasons for choice emerge when we look at our decision problems from an impartial standpoint rather than from the standpoint of our own interests, or the interests of those near and dear to us.

Reasons generated from this impartial point of view are general at least in the sense that if it's wrong for me to step on your infected toe in these circumstances, it would be wrong for anyone else to do the same in relevantly similar circumstances. Many hold that if there are such things as moral reasons, they must be general in a more robust sense. If it is wrong for me to step on your toe, causing you pain, the idea goes, there must be some general moral reason or principle that makes it wrong, for example, It's always wrong to cause gratuitous pain to others.

What sorts of things are moral reasons? What if I am just not motivated by the thought that my standing on your toe is causing you pain, or the thought that I am violating your rights, or the like? If I say, "I don't care," we may want to reply, "Nevertheless, you should care"--but what backs up this last claim? The thought is that in these circumstances your pain is a consideration that should move me to action or that partly fixes what I should do whether or not I am actually motivated to prevent or stop your pain. The alternative view is that moral considerations provide reasons for choice only for people who happen to want to be moral or care about morality.

Two views about moral reasons and motivation:

- a. If there is a moral reason for you to do something, and you understand/appreciate this reason, then you must be motivated at least to some degree to do that thing.
- b. If there is a moral reason for you to do something, and you understand/appreciate the reason, it may still be the case that you are not motivated even in the slightest to do that thing.

Both views are problematic. (It turns out Mill holds b.)

In the stepping on toes example, it may seem pretty clear where the balance of reasons lies, what the agent should do all things considered. In other cases, and maybe in all cases, this is far from clear, and we find widespread moral disagreement among people both about what to do in particular cases and about general principles.

In some cases what seems like moral disagreement may turn out to be disagreement about facts. One person may believe making war is always morally wrong and another may disagree. It may be that they hold different factual beliefs about what the consequences of war making are. One person may believe that wars always produce more misery than they prevent, and another person may deny this. In practice we may not be able to resolve such factual disagreement, but in principle, we can.

But even if two people agree about the facts, they may continue to disagree. Or they may disagree about the facts but also disagree about morals. One may believe killing innocent people is always wrong and the other may reject this claim. At this point, have we hit bedrock? Is argument about moral issues futile?

Not necessarily. In some cases, one may find one's moral view rests on a confused or incoherent idea. I may believe homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural, but when pressed I am unable to explain why being "unnatural" is bad, since morally innocent activities like composing opera count as unnatural by my lights.

For most of us most of the time, our ethical beliefs are in disequilibrium. I believe some particular judgments and I believe they are backed up by some general principles, but in fact the principles I want to affirm imply particular judgments I do not accept. My ethical beliefs taken together are inconsistent, so they do not cohere.

Consider a requirement of **articulate consistency**: one's particular ethical beliefs should be consistent with one another and should all be derivable from general principles one accepts.

Ethical argument appeals to this requirement. If I say abortion is OK but the principle I offer as showing that abortion is OK would also show that infanticide is OK, I have a problem if I do not accept that infanticide is OK. I am then challenged to revise either my particular or my general beliefs to gain consistency, and perhaps better, a system of beliefs that coheres (in which all elements are mutually supporting).

I may believe that terrorism, deliberate infliction of death and suffering on innocent people to further a political end, is always wrong, but also believe that the Allied terror bombing of German cities in World War II was morally OK. Something must give.

Notice that a move toward articulate consistency might not always be a move towards better conduct. Suppose my Nazi friend Hans holds the moral conviction that one ought

to strive as far as one is able to hate all Jews but also likes his Jewish neighbor Sally and treats her with respect and consideration. "Why is it right to treat other Jews differently from Sally?" I ask Hans. He reflects carefully and concludes that he ought to strive as far as he is able to hate all Jews including Sally, and proceeds to treat her badly.

What ethical truth might amount to: If one is a cognitivist, one needs to explain what it could be for evaluative (including moral) claims to be true or false, correct or incorrect. One suggestion appeals to the requirement of articulate consistency. Start with one's considered moral judgments--the ones made in a cool hour, not involving cases in which one has a strong personal interest, etc. These are moral judgments made in circumstances least likely to induce distortion. We then seek to reflect and examine one's beliefs to eliminate disequilibrium, to get a consistent, coherent set. This would be a state of reflective equilibrium.

Reflective equilibrium: the state of a person's moral beliefs in which the particular claims she affirms are consistent with the general claims she affirms.

A given reflective equilibrium can be upset by further thought or new experience, which changes one's mind. We might imagine reflective equilibrium attained after reflection and rational scrutiny of pertinent facts and arguments.

Wide reflective equilibrium: a state of reflective equilibrium reached after critical scrutiny. We can also imagine an ideally extended process of critical scrutiny that rationally considers all pertinent arguments with all relevant information.

Ideal reflective equilibrium: what an agent would believe about ethics after ideally extended rational scrutiny.

Suggestion: What is true ethically is what would be affirmed in ideal reflective equilibrium. What makes an ethical claim true or false is that it would/would not be affirmed in ideal reflective equilibrium. (Not that any of us could get to such a state any time soon, or in our lifetime.)

The fact of persistent ethical disagreement among individuals and between different cultures and societies and across the sweep of history suggests two other possible views about moral truth.

Relativism: Nothing is universally morally true or false, rather a moral claim is correct or incorrect relative to a given society or culture.

Skepticism: no moral claims are true or false. Appearances to the contrary are misleading.

The puzzling character of morality is exhibited in the handout excerpt from the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. In the novel Huck faces a decision, whether to help his friend Jim escape from slavery or whether to assist in returning this runaway slave to his owner. Huck sees this as a choice between wickedness and morality and he decides to choose wickedness, in this instance and in general. He will save his friend and in general do what he wants rather than try to follow conscience, the voice within that tells him what is morally right. (Huck seems to be a cognitivist and to adopt the b rather than the a position on moral motivation.)

The reader may applaud Huck's choice to help his friend but may be uneasy about the choice to pay no heed to conscience.

Reflections on Huck's choice:

1. Doing what you think is right, following your conscience faithfully is good or bad depending on how accurately your conscience detects what is right and wrong.
2. Huck's confidence that conventional Missouri morality circa 1850 is correct may give us pause. How do we know that our morality, conventional California morality circa 2008, will not from the standpoint of a future age seem just as defective as Huck's morality seems to us? So maybe I am in Huck's position, fundamentally wrong in my ethical beliefs without being able to grasp this.
3. A type of skepticism about morality might be supported by thinking about the case. We don't know that our morality is correct, and we may come to doubt there is such a thing as correctness in moral opinions. Huck's plight might also be taken as grist for the mill of the noncognitivist or the relativist. To defend the objectivity of morals in the face of these worries, we need some idea of what it would be for moral opinion to not just vary from time to time and place to place, but to improve and become increasingly credible. Of course I might have an idea of what it would be for moral opinions to improve without being able to tell whether mine are getting more enlightened or more corrupt.
4. Huck is incurious about conventional morality and not at all inclined to probe it by scrutiny and argument. We might say, Huck should distinguish between conventional and critical morality and also between morality as it appears to him and morality as it really truly is. He might then think that by argument he can improve his moral opinions somewhat, discover some flaws in his unreflective beliefs. For what it is worth, Mark Twain disagrees. For Twain, morality is a matter of feeling not reasoning. And your moral feelings are more likely to be true when they eschew civilization and society and spontaneously arise from one's mind in tune with nature, as Huck and Jim are when they are on the river, away from society on the shore. This course explores the path Mark Twain firmly rejects as wrong-headed. Of course the mere fact that we explore another path does not by itself rule out the possibility that Twain is right on this issue.
5. Another way of looking at Huck's choice: He sees moral reasons (respect private property; return slaves to their rightful owners) opposing nonmoral reasons (do what you like; be loyal to your friends) in his circumstances. Leave aside the issue whether or not Huck correctly identifies the reasons that bear on his choice of conduct. Another issue is what authority do moral reasons have when in practice they come in conflict with reasons of other sorts, such as reasons of self-interest. Do moral reasons always "trump" (that is, take priority over) any reasons that might oppose them? Huck might be construed as being of the opinion that moral reasons do not always trump other reasons, that sometimes the all-things-considered rational thing to do is different from the choice recommended by specifically moral reasons. (Of course he goes further and resolves to pay no heed at all to what he takes to be moral reasons.) Among our course authors, it is somewhat hard to pin down Mill's view on this issue. He does not decisively affirm that moral reasons always trump or outweigh all other reasons there might be and that a fully rational person will never act against what morality commands.
6. Notice that although Huck decides to pay no heed to what he takes morality to require and just do whatever he pleases, many readers will feel that in fact Huck is, without being aware of this, sensibly responsive to the true moral considerations that bear on his situation. These include the imperative not to treat a human being as private property and the norm to be loyal to one's friends. In his behavior toward the runaway slave Jim, Huck rejects morality (what he supposes morality to be) and follows morality (what morality better interpreted would indicate).