

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Business_Ethics/BEHome.htm

Lecture Notes, March 2

I. Some final considerations in favor of secular morality over religious morality

Nielsen argues that religious morality requires accepting a dogma, that we know God's will, whereas secular morality is supported by good reasons.

There are other reasons that we should study morality without considering religion.

1. Many people act morally without religious motivation.

There seems to be no need to consider religion, since atheists can be moral.

An objection: we might internalize the real (religious) motivation for our ethical behavior.

Consider that we do not fear a traffic accident when we drive.

We have learned to follow certain rules.

But our basic motivation for driving safely is fear of an accident.

Similarly, the existence of ethical atheists may only show that they have internalized the religious lessons.

It would be difficult to show that ethical atheists have internalized religion.

Still, the existence of ethical atheists does not seem decisive in favor of secular morality.

2. Religious morality embroils us in the intractable problem of selecting a correct religion.

There are many religions, and we do not know which one is right.

They may conflict.

But we do not need to know the answer to be moral.

There are problems of revelation and interpretation.

Is the Bible God's word, or an historical account of God's actions?

Our answers to these questions project a prior understanding of morality.

3. Religious morality may make God's will morally arbitrary.

We discussed this problem, which applies to Divine Command Theory, above.

DCT entails the possibility of murder, torture being morally acceptable, if God changes her mind.

If you think that God can not change her mind, you have abandoned this position.

4. Religious morality stunts reason-giving.

We are doing philosophy.

We want to ask questions about why things are right and wrong.

"God says to do p," sounds a lot like, "Do p and shut up."

I do not mean to say that religion has no ethical role.

Ethics has been a central element of many religions, for a long time.

But religious dictates, which are inappropriate for us here, are often confused with ethical ones.

Remember, we can take the Natural Law perspective, and search for reasons for morality outside of religion.

II. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

Consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

- A) no morality;
- B) exactly one morality; or
- C) more than one morality.

You should decide which one of these options you think is right.

Each has a name:

Position A is called moral nihilism

Position B is called moral absolutism, or moral objectivism.

Position C is called relativism.

We will examine each of these positions.

III. Nihilism and Thrasymachus

The nihilist says that there is no morality.

What we think of as morality is just an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.

Thrasymachus, in the *Republic*, presents a nihilist view.

(Friedrich Nietzsche presents a fuller nihilist analysis of morality as the will of the strong.

If you are interested in nihilism, try his *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Also, there is a section from *Beyond Good and Evil* in the Pojman text.)

In the *Republic*, Socrates is engaged in an extended exploration of justice.

Cephalus, a wealthy old man, characterizes justice as telling the truth and paying back what one owes.

But, this definition only list two examples of just actions, and is clearly incomplete.

To show that Cephalus's characterization is deficient, Socrates presents the example of a friend who has lent you a weapon, but who has now gone mad, and wants his weapon back.

In Socrates's example, it would be wrong to give back what one owes.

Polemarchus re-interprets Cephalus's claim: justice is giving some one what he deserves.

Polemarchus understands this as helping one's friends and harming one's enemies.

After two digressions (one on how justice is not to be isolated as a craft independent of other pursuits, and another on how one can make mistakes about who one's friends and enemies really are), Socrates argues that the just man can not harm his enemies.

Harming some one makes them worse, but the just man wants to improve others.

Thrasymachus thinks that all of this discussion presumes a naive acceptance of morality.

Morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want, p 11.

Those in power write the laws, and set the social standards.

And the rest of us learn to act in ways which serve the strong.

Thrasymachus claims that injustice is actually a vice.

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 avoid being caught.

The ultimate height of injustice is the enslavement of a nation.

Then, the subjects will laud the despot's actions, instead of denounce them.

What we call morality is learned through reward and punishment.

So, generally accepted guides for behavior are just expressions of the interests of those in the position to reward and punish.

Conversely, what is wrong is what is against the interests of the strong.

Those in power are really thieves, but ordinary people laud and obey them in order to protect themselves from punishment.

IV. Socrates' response to Thrasymachus

Against Thrasymachus, Socrates argues that the rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.

He first argues that rulers may be wrong about what is in their interests.

So, if we do what they tell us to do, we could actually be working against their interests.

Thrasymachus responds that the true ruler would always be right about what his interests are.

Socrates then argues that the true ruler works in the interests of his subjects, not in his own interest, p 10.

Later, Socrates notes that rulers must be paid, or threatened with the punishment of being ruled by a worse person, since the ruling itself is not in their own interests.

Socrates cheats a bit, here.

Thrasymachus has insisted that they consider true rulers, as those who know what their interests are.

But Socrates interprets 'true ruler' as one who rules for the interests of his subjects.

Thrasymachus's response, the sheep and shepherd analogy, seems apt.

The shepherd does want healthy sheep, but only so that they can be of greater use to the shepherd, not because he is concerned with the interests of the sheep, themselves.