

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 20

I. Quiz: Describe one problem with ethical relativism.

II. Pojman's defense of objectivism

We have looked at several problems with ethical relativism.

Still, if the problems with objectivism are worse, we might have to be relativists anyway, and find a way to be comfortable with the relativist's problems.

We will look at Pojman's general defense of objectivism.

He picks one general principle: torturing people for fun is wrong.

Suppose we found some one who tortured for fun.

We could either abandon this general principle, or we could call that person immoral.

We would always make the latter choice.

Still, even if every person and culture agreed on some principles, even if they were universal, objectivism would not be established.

For, it could be possible to imagine a culture which did not subscribe to these principles.

Pojman's strategy is to derive the validity of this principle (and others; see p 48) from human nature.

See the argument on p 48. In brief:

1. Human nature is relatively similar in essential respects.
2. Moral principles are functions of human interests.
3. Different principles promote human interests differently.
4. Those principles which promote human interests best are objective moral principles.

Thus, objective moral principles are derivable from a common human nature.

Now, one might object that there is no common human nature.

Still, Pojman is right that we all want some basic things: food, water, shelter, love.

Even if we can not agree on what these things are, we can agree that there are some needs.

If morality is just promoting these needs, then we can find some objectivity in it.

For, there are facts about whether certain actions, intentions, or human characteristics will promote or hinder the acquisition of whatever these goods are.

That is, the moral principles are not arbitrary, in the way that the relativist interprets them.

III. Relativism: a summary

The inability to praise and criticize other cultures is the most serious problem with ethical relativism.

Consider this description of the massacres in Rwanda, in 1995:

Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region. Following the militia's example, Hutu young and old rose to the task. Neighbors hacked neighbors to death in their homes, and colleagues hacked colleagues to death in their workplaces. Priests killed their parishioners, and elementary-school teachers killed their students. Many of the largest massacres occurred in churches and stadiums where Tutsis had sought refuge - often at the invitation of local authorities, who then oversaw their execution. In mid-April, at least five thousand Tutsis were packed in the Gatwaro Stadium, in the western city of Kibuye; as the massacre there began, gunmen in the bleachers shot zigzag waves of bullets and tossed grenades to make the victims stampede back and forth before militiamen waded in to finish the job with machetes.

Throughout Rwanda, mass rape and looting accompanied the slaughter. Militia bands, fortified with potent banana beer and assorted drugs, were bused from massacre to massacre. Hutu prisoners were organized in work details to clear cadavers. Radio announcers reminded listeners to take special care to disembowel pregnant victims. As an added incentive to the killers, Tutsis' belongings were parceled out in advance - the radio, the couch, the goat, the opportunity to rape a young girl. A councilwoman in one Kigali neighborhood was reported to have offered fifty Rwandese francs apiece (about 30 cents at the time) for severed heads, a practice known as "selling cabbages". (*The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995)

Or, closer to home, the terror attacks of 9/11/01

If you think that there is something immoral here, you can not be a nihilist or a relativist.

You must be an absolutist.

One of the most important benefits of being an objectivist, or absolutist, is that it allows us to consider objective reasons for morality.

Appeals to reason-giving seem essential to the establishment of a moral position.

We consider the Rwanda case, and respond by thinking of reasons why such behavior is wrong.

These reasons push us away from relativism, on which the only reasons required are the dictates of the culture.

The reasons can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.

Absolutism means that there are morally correct answers to ethical questions.

It does not mean that everything that one might think is a moral question is in fact a moral question.

Perhaps the specifics of how we deal with the remains of our dead is not a moral issue, contrary to King Darius's conclusion.

Absolutism should also not entail dogmatism.

It is not a claim that any one knows what the right morality is.

These are, at times, hard questions.

Put relativism aside and, for the remainder of the course, adopt absolutism.

We have now put religion, egoism, nihilism, and relativism behind us.

IV. Toward moral absolutism/objectivism

How do we find out what the morally correct position is?

We are seeking the reasons which naturally constitute morality.

We need an ethical theory: a set of universal principles that will tell you whether an action is right or wrong.

How can we recognize one?

Five features of an ethical statement (from Pojman, but not in our text):

1. Prescriptive (dos and don'ts)

There are other prescriptive fields: aesthetics (you should use more blue in that sky you are painting), law (you should not make a right turn on red within the city limits); manners (you should tip 15% in restaurants); grammar (you should never end a sentence with a preposition).

2. Universalizable (holds for every one, not: every one should be treated equally)

3. Overriding (over aesthetic, legal. etc.)

4. Public (secrecy defeats action-guiding role; this does not mean we have to preach)

5. Practicable (ought implies can)

Examples of moral theories:

Divine Command theory (The right act is the one which is commanded by God.)

Utilitarianism (Acts are right or wrong depending on their consequences.)

Kantian deontology (There are inviolable rules which should guide our intentions to act.)

V. Introduction to Utilitarianism

We will read about utilitarianism in the work of its most prominent proponent, John Stuart Mill.

Versions of utilitarianism predated Mill, and there are contemporary utilitarians.

Utilitarianism can be condensed into one single principle, called the Greatest Happiness Principle:

The Greatest Happiness Principle says that the right act is the act which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Mill formulates it slightly differently, p 141.

There are really three clauses of the utilitarian theory:

1) Consequentialism: acts are judged by their consequences.

Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition that consequences matter.

It is better than "Don't lie," and "Don't kill," or any other absolute proscription.

There are times when any such specific prohibition should be violated.

Consider being stopped by the SS when transporting Jews out of Nazi Germany.

It is better than, "You must fulfill your promises."

Meeting some one for lunch vs saving an accident victim.

In other words, it is a more honest theory in that it builds in the exceptions.

Instead of a lot of detailed rules, it gives you one flexible, general guideline.

Consequentialism captures some strong intuitions about morality.

The principle itself is more flexible, and candid, than theories which provide a variety of specific rules.

Utilitarianism gives you one flexible, general guideline.

2) Hedonism: consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.

Utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, pleasure is the ultimate end.

Bentham provides seven ways to measure happiness, p 114.

Intensity, duration, certainty, and propinquity (proximity) or remoteness measure the pain itself.

Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings) and purity (chance it has of not being followed by opposite sensations) measure the tendency of an action related to other actions.

Lastly, extent measures the way in which the act affects others.

To calculate the effects of an act, you just add up all the effects on each individual.

When adding effects, we can talk about units of happiness (utils).

We must be careful to distinguish them from money.

Money abides by a law of diminishing returns: more money is always more money, but more money does not always lead to more happiness.

The first cold drink on a hot day is great, the twelfth is not so good.

Utils do not suffer diminishing returns.

There may be a problem with quantifying happiness.

And some people argue that utilitarians have problems with interpersonal comparisons of happiness.

Harwood considers this objection, but dismisses it, pp 189-90.

There are some oddities.

For example, my daughter's happiness when getting a piece of chocolate seems much greater than my own.

But, this is just an argument that she should have more chocolate.

Economists make interpersonal comparisons all the time.

Though economists often work with preferences, rather than happiness, they do so with the implicit assumption that we are happy when our preferences are fulfilled.

The real problem arises from utility monsters, misers, for example, who suffer no diminishing returns on pleasure.

It looks like we might all have to work for the utility monster.

But I think a mature psychology could deal with the problem of the utility monster.

Mill's principle argument for hedonism is that any thing we value we do so because of the happiness it brings us or others.

Every one wants to be happy, and if we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.

3) Egalitarianism: each person counts as one.

The egalitarian clause is not too controversial, but maybe some people are worth more than others.

The utilitarian can account for valuing some people over others, without abandoning the basic egalitarianism.

The president, say, is not himself worth more, but actions that affect him, and which he performs, have a greater range of effects. There is no need to count each one as more than one.