

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, March 8

I. Quiz: Describe one version of the categorical imperative.

II. Criticism of Kant's Ethics #4: Different descriptions of the same acts may result in different outcomes of the C.I. test.

We considered the botanist example from Bernard Williams, described in two different ways.

Description 1:

Choose between

a) shooting a man

and

b) not shooting a man.

Description 2:

Choose between

a) saving 19 lives

and

b) aiding a corrupt military.

If we describe the act in the first way, we may not shoot the man.

If we describe it in the second way, it seems that we should shoot the man.

Kant would respond that Description 2 is incorrect, since it involves the actions and intentions of other people. One must focus on one's own moral life.

Kant's response presupposes that there is one and only one correct description of the act.

This description should be objective, non-controversial, and morally neutral.

Here, he relies on Hume's fact/value distinction.

Hume says that there are facts, in the world, and values, which we impose on it.

Facts are objective.

We project our values on to the world of facts.

For Hume, these values are subjective (though he claims universality).

(Hume uses the fact/value distinction for another purpose, to establish subjectivism, but that doesn't matter here.)

For Kant, values are universal, derived from the rationality that we all share.

The big question here is whether there is a fact/value distinction.

If not, then Kant will have real trouble describing acts in any morally neutral way.

Different descriptions of the same acts will result in different outcomes of the C.I. test.

Kant's theory collapses and has to be abandoned.

But whether there is a fact/value distinction or not is not a settled matter.

III. Which is the right moral theory?

We have looked at two distinct moral theories, now.

Both have advantages, and problems.

What do you do when you are confused about which theory is right?

You might think that the right theory is somehow a blend of the two theories.

But then how do you know when to adhere to one theory and when to the other?

If you merely rely on intuitions to decide when to choose one theory and when the other, then the theories are not doing the work they are supposed to do.

You need another theory to help you decide.

Here are some questions which may help you decide:

What would the political views of utilitarians and Kantians be like?

Which would be a better society, one filled with utilitarians or one filled with Kantians?

Is either theory plausible as a guide to behavior? (I.e. Could one adhere to it?)

I leave these questions for you to consider.

Our next moral theory is quite different, as it is not an action-guiding theory, but a character-building theory.

IV. Introduction to Virtue Ethics

It comes from Plato, and Aristotle.

Nicomachus was Aristotle's son, thus the 'Nicomachean Ethics'.

It has been recently revived, in several guises (e.g. feminist ethics).

It is a different kind of approach: 'How do I live?', rather than 'What shall I do?'

The right act is the act that a virtuous person would do.

In other words, evaluating individual actions is the wrong approach.

The questions of morality should be ones of development of character.

We can not evaluate individual acts without looking at the broader context.

Consider an investment scheme.

At first it looks good, the actions involved look at least morally neutral.

But when revealed in a wider context, we can see actions as leading to a scam.

Or consider the popular bully in school, who may eventually find himself without friends.

Or drug use, which may seem fun, and satisfying, at first.

Conclusion: you need a wider context, like a life, to evaluate the moral status of persons and their behaviors.

To find the answers to moral questions, you need to figure out what kinds of stories people tell about their lives.

The stories start before you were born.

This is your moral starting point, which includes your family and community.

And you do not find out the ending until the end of a life.

So, to say that the just (right) act is the one the good (virtuous) man would do is unhelpful.

We need to know who is the virtuous person.

This will be the one who has the most good, the one who has lived a good life, i.e. the good man.

V. Human good

The virtue ethicist is not primarily interested in 'What is right?'

The right is to seek the good.

Happiness (eudaemonia) is the chief good.

This sounds like Mill, but Mill identified happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain.

Eudaemonia is the state of a person at the end of a long, productive life.

There are two senses of 'good'

1) As opposed to evil.

This usually entails self-sacrifice.

Nietzsche decries this Judeo-Christian notion.

This seems to be the notion that Mill and Kant are pursuing.

2) Beneficial.

This notion might entail some self-sacrifice.

But it is primarily about self-interest.

Mill thinks that focus on the first notion leads to the increasing the second.

If we obey the dictates of utilitarianism, happiness will increase.

Kant makes no such promises.

Aristotle focuses on the second notion, and only looks to the first if it is required to achieve the second.

If we want to know what is good (in this second sense) for humans, if we want to know how to live, we have to look at the particulars of what humans are, and what they do.

VI. Human ends

The end of all activities is that for which they are done.

Everything has a telos, a goal or end.

For example, plants have as a telos to flower and prosper.

Every activity has a telos, too.

The telos of playing drums is to play with rhythm and force.

The telos of dropping objects near the surface of the Earth is for them to fall to the ground.

So, what is the telos of human life?

See p 52.

The telos of human life is happiness, since humans seek it.

This is the happiness Jefferson wrote of pursuing, in the Declaration of Independence.

It comes from growing and learning.

In particular, it comes from learning the virtues.

Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.

If we want to know what it is to be a good (thus happy, virtuous) person, we have to know what it is to be a person.

A good person will just be someone who performs that function well.

As the flute player and the good flute player have the same function.

What activity is particularly human?

Life?

But plants and animals have it
Perception, interaction with environment?
Other animals have this.
Only humans have rational activity.
See pp 52-53.

Human good is thus activity of the soul (mind and body) in accordance with virtue.
That is, the good person is the one who thinks, and tries to develop good habits.
Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.
Happiness (Eudaemonia) is achieved at the end of a good life, not in the middle.
It also requires certain "external goods," p 53.

So far, all we know is that there are some virtues (habits) that we should try to cultivate.
These will make us happy in the end.
But what are these virtues?

VII. The virtues

Aristotle discusses two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral, p 54.
The intellectual virtues are learned by teaching.
E.g. knowledge of history.
We need mainly experience and time to learn this.
Intellectual virtues are not our concern.

The moral virtues are learned by habit, practice.
These are the characteristics of the happy person.

Moral virtue is a mean between two extremes.
Excess and defect are fatal, pp 54-55.
We call these 'vices'.

Consider driving a car, at a moderate speed.
Courage lies between foolishness and cowardice.

There is no set list of virtues.
These will vary with our particular ends, and with our moral starting points.

Plato's four virtues:

Courage

Wisdom

Temperance (for most pleasures and pains)

Justice

(Plato was Aristotle's teacher.)

Note the differences between Plato's first three virtues and his fourth.