

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W
Fall 2014
Russell Marcus

Class #24 - Ethics and Meta-Ethics

Ethics

- We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?
 - laws or customs
 - Aztecs, Aghori
 - moral instincts
 - reasoning
- Ethics is the study of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust, virtuous and vicious
- ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ tend to characterize actions.
- ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ and ‘virtuous’ and ‘vicious’ are more applicable to people and their characters.
- ‘Fair’ and ‘unfair’ and ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ are usually used to describe social arrangements or distributions of goods.

Meta-Ethics

the study of the possibility of ethics

- Also, the meanings of ethical terms
- Contrast moralizing (first-order ethics) from meta-ethics (second-order).
- A 'morality' is a set of true claims about right and wrong.
- Either there is:
 - A. No morality;
 - B. Exactly one morality; or
 - C. More than one morality.

Three Meta-Ethical Positions

Either there is:

- A. No morality;
- B. Exactly one morality; or
- C. More than one morality.

- A is called moral nihilism
- B is called moral absolutism or moral objectivism or moral realism.
- C is called moral relativism.
- A, B, and C are intended to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive.
- There are many different codes of behavior that people actually follow.
- The question is whether there is one correct code of behavior.

Moral Realism

- The realist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.
- The realist's claim is about what exists.
- It is not about what we know.
- Even if there is only one true morality, we may be ignorant of it.
- So we can be realists without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.
- Two standard examples of moral realism
 - utilitarianism
 - Kantian deontology

Two Types of Relativism

conventionalism and subjectivism

- Conventionalism: morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.
- Subjectivism: morality depends on the individual.

Two Sorts of Subjectivism

- Hobbes
 - ▶ People call what they like 'good' and what they dislike 'bad'.
 - ▶ The social ramifications are devastating.
 - ▶ Life, in a state of nature is, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."
 - ▶ Thus, we enter into a social contract in which we give up all of our autonomy to a sovereign, or government.
- Existentialism
 - ▶ Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists claim that morality is created through action.
 - ▶ Each individual creates his or her own morality.
- One concern about the plausibility of either kind of subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us.
 - ▶ Only small, individual variations
 - ▶ Social conformity to central principles of morality should be no surprise.
 - ▶ We learn how to make our moral judgments from our communities.
 - ▶ Some philosophers take these facts to support cultural relativism, or conventionalism.

Conventionalism

cultural relativism

- On conventionalism, right and wrong are determined by a society, subculture, family, or other group.
- Herodotus and King Darius.
 - ▶ The Callatians ate their dead.
 - ▶ The Greeks cremated their dead.
 - ▶ Each thought the others' practice was immoral.

Darius's Puzzle

- What should we think when we discover conflicting social norms, specifically ones which are perceived as moral norms?
- Naively, we can defend our own views.
- We might take them to transcend our culture.
- Universality of customs can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.
- But, we can find significant departures from modern ethical norms.
- Since the normal varies, some people think, the moral also varies.

Are There Conflicting Moral Principles?

- Some norms are mere expressions of preference.
- Some people elevate such preferences to the level of morality.
 - There's no moral question about the preference of strawberry over vanilla ice cream.
 - Some people believe that there is a moral question about homosexuality.
 - There are moral questions about sexuality.
 - But the fact that some people believe that sexuality is a matter for ethics does not make sexual preference a moral issue.
- There are different practices in different societies.
- A person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral.
- But, none of that shows that morality itself is relative.
 - Sex on Tuesdays
 - Head-covering and worship

Nihilism

Either there is:

- A. No morality;
- B. Exactly one morality; or
- C. More than one morality.

- The relativist believes in morality, determined either by one's self or one's culture.
- The nihilist says that there is no morality.
 - What we think of as morality is just an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.
- Nihilism is similar to subjectivism.
 - Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.
 - The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.
- The nihilist believes can never make moral errors, while the subjectivist believes that we can.

Ginger on ***What is Right Conduct?***

Justice in *Republic I*

- Socrates is engaged in an extended exploration of justice.
- Cephalus characterizes justice as telling the truth and paying back what one owes.
 - These are only two examples.
 - There are counter-examples.
 - The crazed friend who has lent you a weapon.
- Polemarchus: justice is giving some one what he deserves.
 - helping one's friends and harming one's enemies
 - Socrates: the just man can not harm his enemies.
 - Harming some one makes them worse, but the just man wants to improve others.
 - Love even your enemy

Thrasymachus

- Thrasymachus believes that all of this discussion presumes a naive acceptance of morality.
- Morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want.
- What we ordinarily call injustice is actually a virtue.
- 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 be able to avoid being caught.

Thrasymachus's Rant

The just is always a loser in comparison with the unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less. Secondly, in their dealings with the State: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is anything to be received the one gains nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses, and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends and acquaintances for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways.

But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking, as before, of injustice on a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable, that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little by little but wholesale; comprehending in one, things sacred as well as profane, private and public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he would be punished and incur great disgrace - they who do such wrong in particular cases are called robbers of temples, and man-stealers and burglars and swindlers and thieves. But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them, then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but by all who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they shrink from committing it. And thus, as I have shown, Socrates, injustice, when on a sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice; and, as I said at first, justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and interest. [Marcus, Introduction to Philosophy, Fall 2014, Slide 15](#)

Socrates and Thrasymachus

- Rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.
- The true ruler earns no personal benefit from ruling.
 - ▶ Rulers must be paid.



Thrasymachus's Response

You fancy that the shepherd or neatherd fattens of tends the sheep or oxen with a view to their own good and not to the good of himself or his master; and you further imagine that the rulers of states, if they are true rulers, never think of their subjects as sheep, and that they are not studying their own advantage day and night. Oh, no; and so entirely astray are you in your ideas about the just and unjust as not even to know that justice and the just are in reality another's good; that is to say, the interest of the ruler and stronger, and the loss of the subject and servant; and injustice the opposite; for the unjust is lord over the truly simple and just: he is the stronger, and his subjects do what is for his interest, and minister to his happiness, which is very far from being their own

Two Senses of 'Good'

- The first sense is opposed to evil and usually entails self-sacrifice.
- The second sense of 'good' involves actions of objects that are beneficial to us.
 - ▶ So, healthy food is good, and exercise is good.
 - ▶ Primarily about self-interest
- When Thrasymachus says that the unjust man is good, he uses 'good' in the second sense.
- Socrates seems to be using the first sense in order to draw a contrast with Thrasymachus.
- How are these two senses related?

Nihilism Today

- Nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.
- If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our use of these terms as motivations is puzzling.
- The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.
- Contrast ethics with food preferences.
 - There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.
 - I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.
- When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.
- It has a force for others.

Relativism and Nihilism

- Both anti-absolutist positions entail that we can neither truly praise nor criticize other cultures.
- Words of praise (“That’s good”)
 - ▶ Nihilism: they are empty
 - ▶ Subjectivism: they refer only to my own preferences
 - ▶ Conventionalism: they refer to adherence to my cultural standards



Rwanda 1995

- Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region. Following the militia's example, Hutus 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)

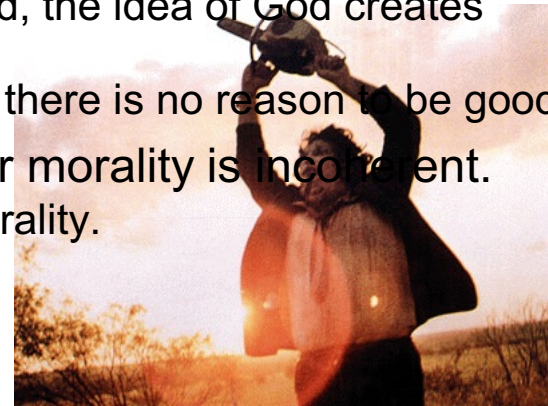
Objectivity and Reasons

- Moral objectivity allows us to consider objective reasons for morality.
- Appeals to reason-giving seem essential to the establishment of a moral position.
- We can talk about the reasons that an act is right or wrong.
- The reasons can be used as the basis for a universal morality.
- Objectivity 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.
- Objectivity should also not entail dogmatism.
- There are hard moral questions.

Morality and Religion

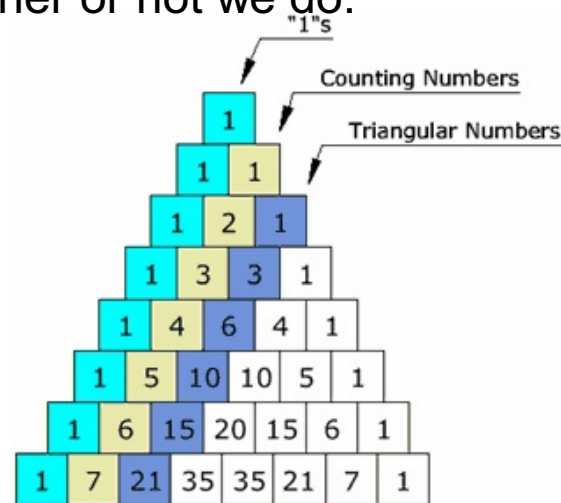
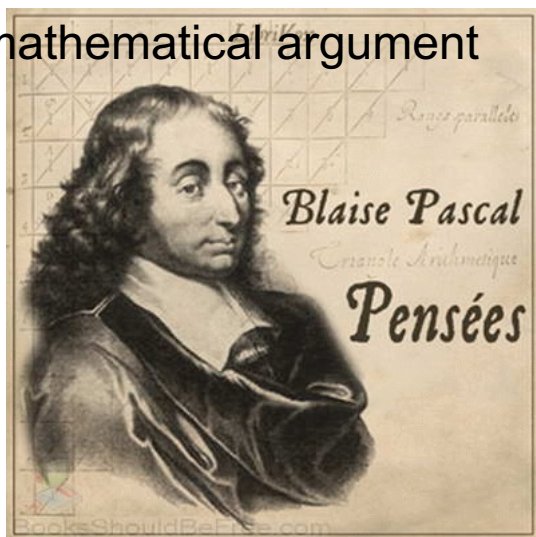
Can we justify objective morality without appeal to religion?

- Two kinds of objective moralists
 - ▶ The religious moralist
 - ▶ The secular moralist
- Some people believe that we must appeal to God to support moral beliefs, to motivate personal sacrifice.
 - ▶ By punishing wrongdoers and rewarding those who do good, the idea of God creates moral motivation.
 - ▶ Without God, some people argue, life has no meaning and there is no reason to be good.
- The nihilist and the religious moralist worry that secular morality is incoherent.
 - ▶ If so, we have to choose between nihilism and religious morality.



Pascal's Wager

- Some people hesitate to embrace religious morality in the absence of what they deem to be compelling proof of the existence of God.
- The seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal argued that we need not have decisive proof of God's existence in order to adopt a religious morality.
- We should act as if we believe in God, whether or not we do.
- A mathematical argument





Expected Value

- The expected value of a bet
 - ▶ $EV = (\text{Payoff} \times \text{Odds of winning}) - (\text{Cost of the Bet} \times \text{Odds of losing})$
- Imagine that you bet six dollars that you will roll a one or a two on one roll of a fair die.
 - ▶ If you roll a one or a two, you get six dollars.
 - ▶ If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose six dollars.
 - ▶ Your odds of winning are $1/3$; your odds of losing are $2/3$.
 - ▶ So, your expected value is $(6 \times 1/3) - (6 \times 2/3) = -\2 .
 - ▶ This means that on average, you will lose \$2 for each time you make this bet.
 - ▶ If you play this bet a thousand times, you are likely to lose about two thousand dollars.
- Imagine, instead, that you get 2 to 1 odds.
 - ▶ If you roll a one or a two, you get twelve dollars.
 - ▶ If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose only six dollars.
 - ▶ Now your expected value would be $(12 \times 1/3) - (6 \times 2/3) = \0 .
 - ▶ The bet is even and you can expect to break even, within predictable ranges of deviation, over any number of chances.

Four Possibilities

- In Pascal's wager, we are wondering whether or not to act as if God exists.
 - We do not know whether God exists or not.
 - We can act as if God exists, or we can act as if God does not exist.
- Four possibilities

	God exists	God does not exist
Act as if God exists	Finite Sacrifice + Infinite reward = Infinite reward	Finite sacrifice
Act as if God does not exist	Finite Reward + Infinite Punishment = Infinite Punishment	Finite reward

Expected Value and God's Existence

- The expected outcome of acting as if God exists:
 - ▶ $EV = (\text{Payoff} \times \text{Odds of winning}) - (\text{Cost of the Bet} \times \text{Odds of losing})$
 - ▶ $EV = P(G) \times \text{infinity} - P(N) \times \text{some finite value}$
 - ▶ The expected value of acting as if God exists will be infinitely large on any finite value of $P(G)$.
 - ▶ An infinite number minus a finite number is an infinite number.
 - ▶ So, the expected value of acting as if one believes in God is infinitely positive.
- The expected value of acting as if God does not exist is infinitely negative.
 - ▶ $EV = P(N) \times \text{some finite value} - P(G) \times \text{infinity}$
 - ▶ The expected result of acting as if God does not exist is infinite punishment.
- So, Pascal argues, purely on a rational basis, in the absence of knowing whether God does or does not exist, we should act as if she does.

The Problem of Egoism

- It seems that the religious moralist has an easier solution to the problem of egoism than the secular moralist.
- But the fear of God does not seem to work as a moral motivation.
 - Even religious people act immorally.
- More importantly, respecting persons out of fear of God is mere egoism, and not morality.
- Further, there are secular answers to the problem.
- We can find moral motivation in the abilities of humans to suffer and feel happiness, and in our desire to live in a world in which people are moral.
- Socrates argues that we should be moral because it is in our interests.
 - Balance in our souls
 - Against the ring of Gyges

Consequentialism

- Mainly we focus on Mill's utilitarianism
- The greatest happiness principle
 - The right act is the act which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.