Ethics and Ethical Reasoning

Chapter 1, Part 1

Ethics, Theory and Contemporary Issues

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Ethics and Contemporary Issues, SMSU, PHI 115
Why Study Ethics?

- It’s a dangerous world.
- Security may need to be purchased at the loss of privacy and civil liberties.
- These are moral questions about which ethics has something to say.
- This study may make possible better informed decisions.
What is Ethics?

- What is Ethics and can it be taught?
- It is a set of values or principles held by individuals or groups.
- Ethics is a critical enterprise.
- Ethics is a branch of philosophy also called moral philosophy.
What is Philosophy?

- Philosophy is the attempt to interpret the world in the framework of some coherent system.
- Philosophers ask basic questions about moral issues.
What is Ethics?

- Ethics, or moral philosophy, asks basic questions about the good life, about what is better and worse, about whether there is any objective right and wrong, and how we know there is.
What is Ethics?

- 3 Normative Ethics asks what is right or wrong.
- 3,4 Metaethics asks what we mean when we use a moral term like “good” in a sentence.
Some suggest ethical or moral views come from religion. “Philosophers... believe that ethics does not necessarily require a religious grounding.” “…ethics uses reason and experience to determine what is good and bad,” etc.
Ethics and Religion

- Does the good come from a divine command?
- Euthyphro asks a question that sets that debate.
- Is our belief in the existence of God a necessary motivation for doing good?
Ethics and Religion

4 Or can the atheist in attempting to live authentically be motivated as well as the religious person to be moral?
Moral Reasoning Skills

5 “For at least three reasons, we all must be able to develop our natural moral reasoning skills.”
Moral Reasoning Skills

1. (p 5) “We should be able to evaluate critically our own and other views of what is thought to be good and bad, just and unjust including religious views in some cases.”
Moral Reasoning Skills

2. (p 5) Believers and nonbelievers of many types ought to be able to discuss moral matters together.

3. Living in our society requires of us a reason-based connection to issues such as justice, fairness and moral ideals.
Types of Evaluation

- 5 Ethical statements or judgments are evaluative.
- They do not describe but tell us whether something is good or bad.
Types of Evaluation

- 5 “Descriptive (empirical) judgment: Capital punishment acts (or does not act) as a deterrent.”
- “Normative (moral) judgment: Capital punishment is justifiable (or unjustifiable.)”
Types of Evaluation

- There are normative judgments from many fields of endeavor (see chart top of p 6) but ethical judgments may trump aesthetic ones.
Ethical Terms

- Right and wrong usually apply to action—as in, ‘You did the right thing.’”
- Using the terms good and bad imply that the thing should be positively regarded.
Ethics and Reasons

- When we make a moral judgment, we need to be prepared to give reasons for it.
- To be able to give reasons for our moral position is essential to the ethical project.
- That does not mean, however, that our reasons must be purely rational.
Ethics and Reasons

- We need to be able to justify our position.
- To merely make a judgment or to hold strong feelings is not sufficient.
Reasoning & Arguments

7 “We should know how to reason well in thinking or speaking about ethical matters.”
Reasoning & Arguments

7 “What is a good argument?”

See examples page 7

“Some structure like this is implicit in any ethical argument.”
A Good Argument

8 “A good argument is a sound argument.”
― “It has a valid form in that the conclusion actually follows from the premises…
― “…and the premises or reasons given for the conclusion are true.”
A Good Argument

- The hardest part of proving an ethical argument is proving true the moral assumptions implicit in the argument.
Fallacious Arguments

- There are many ways an argument can go wrong.
  - informal fallacies
  - bad analogies
- There is a difference between an explanation for why we believe something and a justification of that belief.
Ethical Theory

9 “Good reasoning in ethics involves… reference to an ethical theory.”

“We can diagram the relationship between ethical theories and moral decision making” by referring to the diagram on page 9.
Ethical Theory

- Using a top down strategy we devise norms by ethical theory through ethical principles to make ethical/practical judgments.
- Or a bottom up strategy where we start with ethical judgments then organize them in terms of principles to derive a theory.
Top Down Ethical Theory

1. Theory: Always treat people as ends in themselves, not merely as means.

2. Principle: Employers need to consider the personhood of their workers.

3. Practice: Pregnant women should be allowed the opportunity to take half pay maternity leave lasting 2 months, and have their job waiting when they return.
Bottom Up Ethical Theory

1. Practice: Drunk drivers are responsible for the deaths of about 17,000 people a year in the US.

2. Principle: There should be some limits and restrictions on people who drink and penalties for abusers.

3. Theory: People should have a right to protect their own life, no one has the right to take it from them without consent.
Ethical Theory

- We can read the top down method like Plato deriving what we should do on the basis of the ideal world.
- We can read the bottom up method like Aristotle deriving a rule for deciding behavior on the basis of observed nature.
Formulating ethical theories is often a matter of experiment and evaluation, going back and forth between theory and practice to develop a method of dealing with moral decisions.
Ethical Theory

- This class will add balance to your moral evaluations and judgments.
- It will give you perspective for decision making.
- You will learn to both justify your beliefs and develop your own theories.
Types of Ethical Theory

- In the four types of theory we will examine in the first half of the semester, we will discuss their relation to:
  - the motive for the behavior
  - the behavior itself
  - the consequences of the behavior.
Can Ethics Be Taught?

- Plato thought that ethics could be taught.
- "All evil is ignorance."
- "If someone knows something to be the right thing to do, does there still remain the question why we should do it?"