Philosophy 1100 – Introduction to Ethics

Lecture 1 – Introduction – Part 1

I. Introductory Material: Critical Thinking, Meta-Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion

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An Overview of the Introductory Material: The Main Topics

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Question 1

How much exposure to philosophy have you had?

A. I haven't really been exposed to philosophy to any extent.

B. I've heard a little about philosophy, or I've read a few things written by philosophers.

C. I've had one philosophy course, either in high school or college.

D. I've had a few philosophy courses.

E. I could teach this class.

The Origin of Philosophy

Philosophy originated in Greek society, during a period when science began, when there were very great discoveries and advances indeed in mathematics, achieved by people such as Pythagoras (569?-500? B.C.), Zeno (495-435 B.C.), Eudoxus (408-355 B.C.), Euclid (330?-275? B.C.), and Archimedes (287-212 B.C.), and when democracy also originated.

The Three Greatest Greek Philosophers

Socrates (469-399 B.C.)

Socrates did not himself write anything. He questioned people, raising philosophical issues, especially about the nature of the good life. He was charged with not respecting the gods, and with corrupting the young, and he was sentenced to death. He died by drinking hemlock. He was Plato's teacher, and our knowledge of Socrates is based mainly upon Plato's dialogues, especially the early, 'Socratic' ones.

Plato (426-347 B.C.)

Plato wrote many dialogues. In all of them his teacher, Socrates, was the central figure. The early dialogues focus upon ethics, and are generally thought to provide an accurate account of Socrates' own views. In later dialogues, however, the figure of Socrates becomes a spokesman for Plato, and the range of philosophical discussion is greatly expanded: rather than focusing almost entirely on ethical questions, later dialogues address topics in metaphysics, in theory of knowledge, in philosophy of mind, in logic and philosophy of language, and in social and political theory.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

Aristotle was a student of Plato, and like Plato, he had a very strong interest in ethics, and in social and political philosophy. (*Politics* and the *Nichomachean Ethics*.) Like Plato, however, Aristotle was interested in all of philosophy. Thus he wrote about the nature of the mind (or soul); he wrote about knowledge and sense perception; he addressed questions in metaphysics about the ultimate nature of the world, and the existence of a prime mover.

Aristotle also investigated logic in a very systematic way, and he developed a theory of what are called syllogistic arguments that distinguished between those arguments that are logically correct (or valid) and those that are not. This theory endured for over 2100 years, with very few significant advances being made until well into the 19th century.

The Future Development of Logic

Significant contributions to the development in logic were made in the 19th century by George Boole (1815-1864), and by Augustus De Morgan. The great transformation in logic was made, however, by Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), who, with the publication of his *Begriffschrift* in produced "the first really comprehensive system of formal logic," and a system that went far beyond Aristotle's syllogistic logic.)

William Kneale and Martha Kneale, The Development of Logic (Oxford: Clarrendon Press, 1962), p. 510.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) - Continued

Aristotle's interests were, however, even broader than Plato's, since Aristotle was also very interested in science - specifically, both physics and biology. In the case of biology, it may well be that Aristotle examined more species of living things than anyone until the time of Charles Darwin. (Aristotle's most famous student was not a philosopher, but a general and ruler - Alexander the Great - who traveled a great deal, and who either brought back specimens of animals from other lands - including many marine animals - or else provided Aristotle with detailed reports of observations of animals made by others.)

Finally, in the case of physics, Aristotle's views completely dominated the intellectual landscape for over 1800 years, until the time of Galileo (1564-1642).

2. Ethics as a Branch of Philosophy

As one can see from the above, ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is not a new discipline: it began with Socrates, over 2400 years ago, and it was one of the central interests of the two other Greek philosophers who are generally considered two of the greatest philosophers who have ever lived - Plato and Aristotle.

This development, moreover, represented an enormous break with what had existed previously. For, before Socrates, ethics was almost invariably associated with religion, with moral rules being regarded as laws handed down by a deity, with right and wrong being a matter of divine injunctions and prohibitions - such as in the case of the Ten Commandments, which were held by the Jews to have been handed down to Moses on tablets of stone given to him by Yahweh.

The idea that moral truths are to be arrived at by some process of thought and rational reflection challenges this view that moral truths must come from a deity, and in doing so it raises an issue that is very important indeed:

Should one look to religion for answers to moral questions, or should one turn instead to philosophy?

This issue is, moreover, one that is very much alive today, as many people continue to maintain that we should turn to religion - or, rather, to some particular religion - rather than to philosophy, if we want to know what moral principles to accept.

3. The Nature of Philosophy

What is philosophy?

Philosophy, both as it has been practiced since the time of Socrates, and as it is practiced today, involves at least the following four activities.

(1) The Justification of Basic Beliefs

Philosophers are concerned with whether various basic human beliefs are justified, and, if so, precisely how.

Some examples:

1. Are we really aware of an external world? (Compare the movie, *The Matrix*.)

2. Can we know that other humans also have minds? (Compare also René Descartes' (1596-1650) view that non-human animals were mere automata.)

3. Are we justified in believing that we are really free?

4. Are there objective standards of right and wrong?

5. Is it true - as most people seem to believe - that we survive bodily death?

6. Was there a creator of the physical universe?

(2) The Analysis of Fundamental Concepts

Philosophers are also concerned with the clarification and the analysis of the fundamental concepts that enter into basic human beliefs - such as the concept of a physical object, of space and time, of the mind, of consciousness, of freedom, of right and wrong, etc.

(3) The Discovery of Necessary Truths

A related activity concerns the relation between fundamental concepts: philosophers attempt to establish truths involving those concepts that could not be otherwise, truths that are necessary.

Some examples:

1. In science fiction stories - such as *The Terminator* - people sometimes travel backwards into the past.

2. Is it logically possible - as many philosophers and scientists today claim - that the mind is just the brain, and that consciousness is just a neural process?

3. The Nature of Philosophy

(4) The Development of a Systematic Overview - a Synoptic View - of Reality as a Whole

The basic goal here is to arrive at a picture of reality as a whole that is both comprehensive and plausible.

One Illustration: The Nature of the Mind, and its Place in Reality

Another Illustration: Human Freedom and Moral Responsibility, and the Determinism of Newtonian Physics

4. The Nature of Ethics

Ethics is a branch of philosophy, and the four activities just mentioned are central to ethics as well.

(1) Justification Questions

1. Are there objective moral values?

2. If there are, how can we acquire knowledge of such values?

3. If we can acquire such knowledge, what basic moral principles are in fact the correct ones?

(2) Questions of Analysis

1. What does it mean to say that an action is morally wrong? Or that it is morally permissible?

2. What does it mean to say that some state of affairs is good or desirable, or that it is bad or undesirable?

(3) Questions Concerning Necessary Truths

1. Is it a necessary truth that the morally right action is the one that leads to the best balance of good states of affairs over bad states of affairs?

2. Is it a necessary truth that only pleasure is intrinsically good - good in itself - and that only pain is intrinsically bad?

3. Is it a necessary truth that an action that is forbidden by an omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe is morally wrong, and ought not to be done?

(4) Questions Concerning the Metaphysics of Value, the Place of Values in Reality

We inhabit a physical world in space and time. If there are objective values, how do they fit into things?

1. Do objective values exist somewhere in space and time? Are they, perhaps, non-natural properties of actions and states of affairs, as the English philosopher G. E. Moore believed? Or do they instead exist in some non-spatial, non-temporal realm - as Plato believed? Or do they exist in the mind of God, as some religious thinkers have claimed?

2. How do we acquire knowledge of objective values? Do they causally act upon our minds? If so, then things in the physical world are affected not just by physical forces - as most physicists appear to believe, nor even just by physical forces plus minds: objective values also exert at least an indirect influence, via their influence upon minds, and upon our beliefs about right and wrong.

5. Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics

In some readings, you may encounter the terms "meta-ethics" and "normative ethics". Meta-ethics is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with (1) the analysis of ethical concepts, (2) necessary truths involving such concepts, (3) the metaphysics of value, and (4) the most general questions about the justification of ethical beliefs. Normative ethics, on the other hand, is

concerned with setting out correct principles concerning the rightness and wrongness of actions, and the goodness and badness of states of affairs. Sometimes the goal is the highly theoretical one of constructing a general ethical theory that contains all of the basic moral principles. Sometimes, however, the focus is upon much more specific questions - such as whether premarital sex, or physician-assisted suicide, or late-term abortion, is morally permissible?

6. The Focus in this Course

In this course we shall not be tackling issues in meta-ethics. We shall not be concerned with the analysis of ethical statements. We shall not attempt to arrive at necessary truths involving ethical concepts. We shall not consider whether there really are objective values. We shall not reflect upon the metaphysics of value.

Nor shall we attempt to construct a sound, general moral theory that would, in principle, supply answers to all of one's ethical questions.

Our focus will instead be upon a number of detailed moral issues. We shall, then, be doing what might be called 'low-level normative ethics', rather than either meta-ethics or high-level normative ethics.

7. How Can Such an Approach Possibly Be Sound?

But can such an approach really be sound? For, in the first place, unless one has addressed the meta-ethical questions of whether there really are objective moral values, and of whether one can have knowledge of such values, isn't normative ethics a sham and a fraud? In the second place, how can one usefully tackle lower-level normative questions until one has established which general principles are correct? How can one tackle detailed ethical questions except by applying correct basic moral principles to those detailed issues?

It is certainly true that the ideal approach would involve, first, tackling the meta-ethical issues, establishing that there are objective moral values, and showing that it is possible to have knowledge of such values; secondly, using the method that one has just shown to be correct to arrive at a general theory that contains all correct basic moral principles; and, thirdly, then applying that general theory to arrive at the correct answers to specific, lower-level questions.

But the problems are, first, that no philosopher has yet advanced an argument for the conclusion that there are objective values that has gained anything like general acceptance, and, secondly, that even among philosophers who believe that there are objective values, there is great disagreement about how one can establish what the correct moral principles are?

Not a happy state of affairs. But if that's the way things are, then isn't one forced to conclude that, at present, it is a waste of time doing low-level normative ethics?

The answer is 'No', and the reason is this. Low-level normative ethics does not depend upon a solution to these high-level ethical issues is this: the application of techniques of critical thinking can often provide a person with good reasons for changing his or her moral beliefs.

How can techniques of critical thinking do this?

One Possibility: A Person Has Potentially Inconsistent Moral Beliefs

This possibly arises because people often have potential moral beliefs that conflict with their actual moral beliefs. What I have in mind here is that people may, on the one hand, believe that all actions of a certain type are wrong, but there may be cases of such an action that, if they were to consider the case, they would not think that the action was wrong.

Here's an illustration of how that can work:

Question 2

What do you think about the following claim?

"Pleasurable activities may have bad consequences, but pleasure in itself is always good."

A.   Strongly agree.

B.   I'm inclined to agree.

C.   I'm uncertain, or I want to pass on this question.

D.   I'm inclined to disagree.

E.   Strongly disagree.

Next, consider the following question:

"Are there any crucial, potential counterexamples to the claim that pleasure in itself is always good?"

One type of plausible counterexample involves the case of sadistic pleasure. Compare, for example, a serial killer who gets great pleasure form killing people with a serial killed who gets only mild enjoyment. Is the world a better place if it has the former sort of serial killer than if it has the latter sort – assuming that each will kill the same number of people? Most people, I suggest, will think that the first of these alternatives does not make the world a better place, even though it means that the world contains more pleasure.

If one shares that view, and if one initially thought that pleasure in itself is always good, one now has a reason to abandon that view. What has happened is that a type of case that one did not consider when one initially formed the judgment that pleasure in itself is always good is such that when one does consider the case, one judges that pleasure of that sort does not make the world a better place.

A Second Possibility: Moral Beliefs that Are Based Upon Non-Moral Beliefs that Turn out to be False

This second possibility is connected with the fact that not all moral beliefs are basic. Some rest upon beliefs concerning non-moral facts, and if those non-moral beliefs turn out to be false, that will destroy the basis of the moral belief that rests upon those non-moral beliefs.

Here's a simple example. Consider the case of someone who thinks that abortion is always wrong **because, and only because**, there is an immaterial soul present in human beings from conception. If it turns out that there is good reason to reject the belief that there is an immaterial soul present in human beings from conception, exposure to that will give the person in question a good reason to abandon the belief hat abortion is always wrong because the person we are considering accepts that belief only because he or she believes that there is an immaterial soul present in human beings from conception.