

Philosophy 1100

Introduction to Ethics

Ethics, Philosophy, Religion, and Critical Thinking

An Overview of the Introductory Material: The Main Topics

1. The Origin of Philosophy
2. Ethics as a Branch of Philosophy
3. The Nature of Philosophy
4. The Nature of Ethics
5. Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics
6. The Focus in this Course
7. How Can this Approach Possibly Work?
8. The Socratic Challenge and the Unexamined Life
9. Some Important Beliefs about the Nature of the World
10. Could Some of Your Most Important Beliefs Be False?
11. The Relation between God and Objective Moral Values
12. Are There Revealed Truths?

8. The Socratic Challenge and the Unexamined Life

Socrates thought that it was very important not to take the truth of one's most important beliefs for granted. So one of the things that he is famous for saying is

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Socrates held, then, that one should subject one's most important beliefs to close, critical scrutiny, to see if one really has good grounds for thinking that those beliefs really are true.

Many others, however, have held that, on the contrary, the most important beliefs that people have are generally true, and that it is at best a waste of time to examine them closely.

What do you think?

Question 2

To what extent are you inclined to agree with the following statement: "Socrates was wrong: closely examining your most basic beliefs is not really worthwhile."

- A. I strongly agree with that statement.
- B. I'm inclined to agree with it.
- C. I'm either uncertain what to think, or I want to pass on this question.
- D. I'm inclined to disagree with the statement
- E. I strongly disagree. Socrates was right.

8. The Socratic Challenge and the Unexamined Life

Discussions with Neighboring Students: Let's take a short break at this point, while you talk briefly with your neighboring students about this issue, and about what reasons one might have for different answers to this question.

General Class Discussion: What reasons can be offered for thinking that it is better not to subject one's most important beliefs to close, critical scrutiny?

9. Some Important Beliefs about the Nature of the World

What are there some beliefs that really matter to most people – beliefs whose truth or falsity is very important to most people?

Some possibilities:

- (1) The belief that God exists?
- (2) Beliefs about whether humans will survive bodily death?
- (3) Beliefs about what religion, if any, is true? Beliefs about what religion, if any, is true?
- (4) Beliefs about what things are right and wrong?
- (4) Beliefs about what things are right and wrong?

Question 3

How important is it to you whether God exists or not?

- A. It's very important.
 - B. It's somewhat important.
 - C. It's not important at all.
 - D. I'm unsure whether it's important or not.
 - E. I prefer to pass on this question.
9. Some Important Beliefs about the Nature of the World

Discussions with Neighboring Students: Let's take another short break, so that you talk with your neighboring students about why one might think, or not think, that this is important.

General Class Discussion: What reasons might one have for thinking that it is important whether God exists? What reasons might one have for thinking that it is not important?

9. Some Important Beliefs about the Nature of the World

Some possible reasons:

- (1) If God exists, then there is a better chance that death will not be the end of one's existence.
- (2) If God exists, one will be in deep trouble if one behaves badly.
- (3) If God exists, there are objectively true moral rules, whereas if God does not exist, there aren't any objectively true moral rules.

10. Could Some of Your Most Important Beliefs Be False?

One reason that Socrates thought that it was very important to subject one's most important beliefs to close, critical examination was that Socrates was pessimistic about the extent to which people had good reasons for thinking that their most important beliefs were true.

Question 4

How confident are you that your most important beliefs are true?

- A. I'm completely certain about that.
- B. I'm very confident.
- C. I'm reasonably confident.
- D. I have some serious doubts about at least some of my important beliefs.
- E. I prefer to pass on this question.

Question 5

Let's also consider two more specific questions:

How confident are you that your basic religious beliefs are true?

- A. I'm completely certain that they're true.
- B. I'm very confident.
- C. I'm reasonably confident.
- D. I have some serious doubts about at least some of my basic religious beliefs.
- E. I prefer to pass on this question.

Question 6

How confident are you that your basic moral beliefs are true?

- A. I'm completely certain that they're true.
- B. I'm very confident.
- C. I'm reasonably confident.
- D. I have some serious doubts about at least some of my basic moral beliefs.
- E. I prefer to pass on this question.

10. Could Some of Your Most Important Beliefs Be False?

Should a person be confident that his or her most important beliefs are true? Or his or her basic religious beliefs? Or his or her basic moral beliefs?

The Case of Moral Beliefs

Consider the case of beliefs about what actions are morally right and what actions are morally wrong. One way of thinking about whether one should be confident about the correctness of one's beliefs in this area is to begin by asking the extent to which the moral views of people have shifted with the passage of time.

In particular, are there any moral issues on which you think that there has probably been a significant shift in the distribution of opinions between, say, 1900, and the present day?

Some Possibilities:

- (1) Views on divorce?
- (2) Views on contraception?
- (3) Views on premarital sex?
- (4) Views on homosexuality?
- (5) Views on abortion?
- (6) Views on euthanasia?

Some Questions

- (1) If you had been born in 1889 - rather than, say, in 1989 - how likely is that you would have had, in the year 1907, all of the same moral beliefs as one now has in the year 2007?
- (2) If it is likely that one's values would have been significantly different, is that worrying or not?
- (3) If it is likely that one's values would have been significantly different, doesn't that tend to suggest that you shouldn't be overly confident that the moral beliefs that you presently have are correct?

10. Could Some of Your Most Important Beliefs Be False?

The Case of Religious Beliefs

One way of thinking about whether one should be confident about the correctness of one's beliefs in this area is to begin by considering the following question.

Question 7

To what extent would you agree with the following statement: "Even if I had been born in India with Hindu parents, my religious beliefs would probably be very close to what they now are."

- A. I strongly agree with that statement.
- B. I think it's probably right.
- C. I'm either uncertain what to think, or I want to pass on this question.
- D. I think that's unlikely.
- E. That statement is almost certainly false.

11. The Relation between God and Objective Moral Values

How is the existence of God related to moral values?

Question 8

Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing your own view on the relation between God and morality?

- A. If an action is morally wrong, what makes it morally wrong is that God has forbidden it.
- B. If an action is morally wrong, the reason that it is morally wrong has nothing to do with the existence of God: it would still be wrong even if God did not exist.
- C. Morality is purely subjective. No action is objectively wrong.
- D. I'm uncertain what to think on this question
- E. I prefer to pass on this question.

11. The Relation between God and Objective Moral Values

Plato and the 'Euthyphro' Argument

The question of the relation between the existence of God and the existence of objective values is an ancient philosophical question, and the claim that Jack makes is on a collision course with a very famous argument – often referred to as the 'Euthyphro' argument, since it was set out, by Socrates, in Plato's dialogue, the *Euthyphro*.

In that dialogue, Socrates put the argument in terms of the property of holiness, and he spoke not of God, but of the gods. The argument in question turns upon asking whether the gods love the things that are holy because they

are holy, or whether, on the contrary, the things that are holy are holy because they are loved by the gods.

If the second alternative is right, then the existence of the property of being holy depends upon the existence of the gods, and it depends upon what the gods choose to love.

If, on the other hand, the gods love certain things because they are holy, then it seems that the property of being holy cannot be a property whose existence itself depends upon the existence of the gods.

Plato thought that the first alternative was unacceptable, and the vast majority of philosophers since his time have accepted his view on this matter.

Why so? Let's shift to the case of God and to the existence of objective moral values, and consider the following thesis:

The Divine Command Theory of Morality

This is the following view:

An action is wrong because, and only because, an omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe forbids it.

If this view were right, then it would be true that if God did not exist, there would be no objective values. But is the divine command theory of morality tenable?

One crucial objection to the divine command theory of morality is this.

This view implies that if such a deity were to command people to torment other people as much as possible, then it would be obligatory for people to act in that way.

Some people seem to be happy with that consequence. But many people, including many religious thinkers – going back to Plato's argument in his dialogue, the *Euthyphro* – have been very unhappy indeed with that sort of consequence, and they have rejected the divine command theory of morality for precisely that reason.

A related objection is that basic moral principles are necessary truths – like the truths of arithmetic, it is logically impossible for them to be false. But if the divine command theory of morality were true, any ethical statement that is true as things stand would have been false if God had issued appropriately different prohibitions, or if God had not existed at all.

12. Are There Revealed Truths?

Most people in the world believe that there are one or more books that contain truths that have been revealed to human beings by the creator of the universe, or by some other deity, in some sacred book. Different candidates have been advanced, however, concerning what the sacred book in question is.

In the case of Western religions, for example, Jews claim that the Old Testament contains divinely revealed truths, while Christians claim that this is true of the New Testament as well. Muslims claim that truths revealed by Allah

are to be found, instead, in the Koran, while Mormons claim that the Book of Mormon is a source of divinely revealed truths.

General Class Discussion: Is there any way of deciding which of these and many other competing claims is correct?

One Answer:

(1) If the book in question advances any claims that can be empirically checked – such as historical claims, or scientific claims – one can investigate whether those claims are true, or at least plausible.

(2) If the book in question advances any moral claims, one can investigate those claims, either by considering whether those claims seems plausible to most people, or by evaluating them in the light of some general theory of morality that seems right to one.

The first two exercises in this class involve some first steps in the case of the Bible. But here is something else that is very relevant.

Question 8

Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing your own view on the age of the earth?

- A. The earth is less than 15,000 years old.
- B. The earth is more than 15,000 years old, but less than one million years old.
- C. The earth is more than one million years old, but less than one billion years old
- D. The earth is more than one billion years old.
- E. I'm uncertain what to think on this question.

Mini Exercise 1

An Internet search will generate many web sites that are relevant to this exercise.

Biblically-Based Estimates of Age of the Earth

1. Before you do the research for this exercise, make a note of your present estimate of the age of the Earth.
2. A man named Ussher estimated how old the Earth was. Who was he, and when did he live?
3. How old did Ussher estimate the Earth to be?
4. How did he arrive at that estimate?
5. Another person who lived at the same time as Ussher also estimated the age of the Earth. Who was this other person?
6. How old did that person estimate the age of the Earth to be?

7. Have you changed your own view on the age of the Earth as a result of the above information?