Philosophy 1100 Honors
Introduction to Ethics

Lecture 2 – Introductory Discussion – Part 2

Critical Thinking, Meta-Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion

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.

Question 1: What do you think most people would think about this? Would they think that taking the Socratic Challenge seriously, and so subjecting one's most basic beliefs and values to close, critical scrutiny, is a good idea, or not?

Question 2: What do you think? Is it a good idea to subject one's most basic beliefs and values to close, critical scrutiny, or not?

Question 3: What reasons might be offered for thinking it is better **not** to subject one's most basic beliefs and values to close, critical scrutiny?

With regard to Question 1, think about what **education** would be like if people in general thought that taking the Socratic Challenge seriously was a good idea. Wouldn't children be encouraged to think critically about important beliefs, and be exposed both to different alternative views, and to what can be said for and against those alternatives?

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?

(4) Beliefs about what things are right and wrong?

Question 1: How important are these beliefs?

Question 2: How important in particular, is it, whether God exists or not?

Some possible reasons why it is important whether God exists or not:

(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.

Questions Concerning People in General

Question 1: How confident are people in general that their most important beliefs are true?

Or, a bit more specifically:

Question 2: How confident are people in general that their basic **religious** beliefs are true?

Question 3: How confident are **people in general that their** important **moral** beliefs are true?

Questions Concerning Oneself

Question 1: How confident is you that your most important beliefs are true?

Or, a bit more specifically:

Question 2: How confident are you that your basic **religious** beliefs are true?

Question 3: How confident are you that your important **moral** beliefs are true?

The Related Moral Questions

Question 1: Should a person be confident that his or her most important beliefs are true?

Question 2: Should a person be confident that his or her basic **religious** beliefs are true?

Question 3: Should a person be confident that his or her basic **moral** beliefs are true?

10.1 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?

(7) Views about whether women should have the vote?

Historical Note

Women received the right to vote in the United States in 1920, with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

D. W. Griffiths, a very famous American director during the silent film era – his most famous film was his 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, about the United States after the Civil War – produced a short pamphlet, *Away With Meddlers*, in which he argued that giving women the vote would greatly reduce possibilities for innocent pleasures by leading to prohibition, and so to the closing down of bars. (The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which prohibited the sale,

manufacture, and transportation of alcohol, was ratified in 1919, and came into effect in January, 1920.)

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Some Questions

(1) If you had been born 100 years earlier, how likely is that you would have had, when you were, say, 18 years old, all of the same moral beliefs as you now have?

(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?

10.2 The Case of Religious Beliefs

Consider, next, the case of basic 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 1: To what extent would you agree with the following statement?

(1) "If someone who is now say, a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Mormon had been born in India with Hindu parents, his or her religious beliefs would probably be very close to what they now are."

What implication does the answer to this question have concerning how confident a person should be with regard to the likelihood that his or her religious beliefs are true?

 Question 2: To what extent would you agree with the following statements?

(2) "Even if I had been born in India with Hindu parents, my religious beliefs would probably be very close to what they now are."

(3) "Even if I had been born in Salt Lake City of Mormon parents, it is unlikely that I would still be a Mormon."

Here's one way of putting the argument that is lurking in the background here:

(1) Religions disagree about at least some important matters.

Therefore:

(2) At most one religion can be right about all of those important matters.

(3) Most people just accept the religion in which they were raised.

Therefore it's likely that

(4) Most people have religious views that are mistaken on some important matters.

11. The Relation between God and Objective Moral Values

A very important issue is this:

"How is the existence of God related to moral values?"

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

(1) If an action is morally wrong, what **makes** it morally wrong is that God has forbidden it.

(2) 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.

(3) Morality is purely subjective. There are **no objective values**, so no action is objectively wrong.

(4) While there are no objective values that are, for example, independent of human nature, there are what might be called **intersubjective values** that have been programmed into human beings by natural selection.

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 is involved in alternative (1) above 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 which of the following this is the case?

(1) The gods love the things that are holy **because** they are holy.

(2) 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 second alternative was unacceptable. Moreover, 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 view is sometimes formulated in the following way:

 An action is, by definition, wrong <u>because</u>, <u>and only because</u>, God forbids it.

But given this formulation, one has to ask what is meant by the term "God". Many people use that term as follows:

God is an all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient) and morally perfect creator of the universe.

But if one uses the term "God" in that way, the above formulation comes down to this:

An action is, by definition, wrong **because, <u>and only because</u>**, an omnipotent and omniscient and **morally perfect** creator of the universe forbids it.

This formulation seems unsatisfactory, since it is supposed to be defining what it is for an action to be **morally wrong** but it is making use of the idea of a **morally perfect** being, and the latter notion presupposes that idea of actions that are not morally wrong, so the definition is in effect circular.

 To avoid this circularity, one needs to drop the notion of being morally perfect. The result is the following account:

The Divine Command Theory of Morality

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

What is one to say about this view?

If this view were right, then it would be true that if an omnipotent and omniscient being 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 <u>torment</u> 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 – and that it is therefore 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 an omnipotent and omniscient being had issued appropriately different prohibitions, or if no omnipotent and omniscient being had 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.

Question: 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 there are some scientific questions that are also very relevant. One such question is the focus of the following, mini-exercise.

Mini Exercise: Biblically-Based Estimates of Age of the Earth

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

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?