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Notes #13: Meta-Ethics, Introduction

I. Basic Concepts

- Two kinds of judgements/propositions:
 - *Evaluative*: Makes a positive or negative evaluation of something; says something is good, bad, right, or wrong.
 - *Descriptive*: Non-evaluative.
- *Ethics*: The branch of philosophy that studies value, or: good & bad, right & wrong. 3 sub-branches of ethics:
 1. *Ethical Theory*: Deals with general theories about what is right/wrong and good/bad. Ethical theories try to state the *general conditions* for an action to be right, for a state of affairs to be good, etc.
 2. *Applied Ethics*: Deals with more concrete issues. Ex.: Abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia.
 3. *Meta-ethics*: Deals with the nature of evaluative judgements/statements. Addresses *non-evaluative questions about values*.

II. Some Questions of Meta-ethics

- What does “good” mean? Can it be defined?
- Is value objective? Are there ‘moral facts’?
- How do we know what is right and wrong?
- Why do people hold the values they hold?
- What motivates people to act morally (or not)?

III. The Question of ‘Objectivity’

- **Objectivity**:
 - *Objective property*: A property which a thing has independent of observers; a property that is “in the object”, or solely dependent on the nature of the object. Examples: Shape, size.
 - *Subjective property*: A property which a thing has or doesn’t have, depending on the attitudes or perceptions of observers; a property that is “in the subject” (“in the eye of the beholder”). Example: Funniness, attractiveness.
 - *Objective truth*: A proposition that is true, and whose truth does not depend upon (beliefs, desires, or other attitudes of) observers. Example: “The Earth is round.”
 - *Subjective truth*: A proposition that is true, but whose truth depends upon (beliefs, desires, or other attitudes of) observers. Example: “*Borat* is funny.”
- **Moral realism** (a.k.a. “objectivism”): The view that there are objective moral truths, or: Some things have objective moral properties.
- **Anti-realism**: The denial of moral realism.

IV. The Five Theories in Meta-ethics

Two forms of realism:

1. *Ethical naturalism* : Holds that (i) moral properties are ‘reducible’ to objective, natural properties. “Good” and other moral terms can be defined/explained in non-moral terms. (ii) Moral knowledge derives from observation.
2. *Ethical intuitionism* : Holds (i) that moral properties (at least one of them) are irreducible, (ii) that moral knowledge derives from ‘intuition.’

Three forms of anti-realism:

3. *Moral relativism / subjectivism* : Moral statements are true or false depending upon attitudes of observers. They report people’s attitudes or practices. Hence, their truth is relative to a person or group. Two common versions:
 - 3a) Individual subjectivism: Moral truths are relative to an individual.
 - 3b) Cultural relativism: Moral truths are relative to a culture.
4. *Moral skepticism / nihilism* : Moral propositions are false (or contain false presuppositions). Nothing is really right or wrong.
5. *Non-cognitive ethics* : Moral statements are neither true nor false; they do not assert genuine propositions. Instead they express feelings, or issue imperatives, or something else like that.

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Notes #14: Objections to Meta-Ethical Theories

I. What's Wrong with Subjectivism?

The Problem of Horrible Attitudes:

1. In Nazi Germany, the Nazis acted wrongly.
2. If subjectivism is true, then the Nazis acted rightly, not wrongly.
 - a. Cultural relativism says: right = what society approves of.
 - b. Individual subjectivism says: right = what the individual approves of.
3. Relativism is false. (From 1, 2.)

II. What's Wrong with Non-Cognitivism?

The Frege-Geach Problem:

1. Non-cognitivist says “ x is wrong” = something like “Boo on x !” (expresses a negative emotion towards x).
2. If so, then the following sentence would be nonsensical:
“If doing something is wrong, then getting your little brother to do it is also wrong.”
3. That sentence is not nonsensical.
4. Non-cognitivism is false. (From 1, 2, 3.)

III. What's Wrong with Nihilism?

1. A life of constant torture is worse than a life of bliss.
2. Killing people for the fun of it is wrong.
3. Therefore, value and wrongness exist. (From 1, 2.)
4. So nihilism is false. (From 3.)

Commentary on this argument:

- The nihilist presents some argument for his view.
- This argument has some premises. Call them P.
- Which of the following arguments is more persuasive?

Nihilist says:

P.

Therefore, agony isn't worse than bliss.

Realist says:

Agony is worse than bliss.

Therefore, not P.

- Nihilist's argument is better, if and only if P is more clearly correct than “Agony is worse than bliss.”
- Here are some examples of arguments nihilists use:
 - Moral properties are very strange things, utterly different from everything else in the world.
 - There's a lot of disagreement about moral questions.
 - Moral properties, if they existed, would be things that intrinsically move people to act in certain ways. But it's impossible for any property to be intrinsically motivating like that.

IV. Intuitionism

Central theses:

- Some moral propositions are objectively true.
- We know some moral truths because they are self-evident.
 - Examples of self-evident descriptive facts:
 - The shortest path between two points is a straight line.
 - No object can be entirely green and also entirely red.
 - If A is inside B, and B is inside C, then A is inside C.
 - Examples of self-evident evaluative facts:
 - Suffering is bad.
 - Other things being equal, one should bring about good things, rather than bad things.
 - If A is better than B, and B is better than C, then A is better than C.

Objection #1: We need arguments for believing intuition to be reliable, before we may rely on it.

Reply:

- This leads to a **global skeptical argument**: It entails that no one can know *anything* whatsoever.
- Global skepticism not relevant here. Besides its being absurd, we're interested in what might make ethics different from other fields, like science.

Objection #2: Intuitionists cannot explain moral disagreement.

Reply:

a. The prevalence of non-moral disagreements. Examples:

- Who shot JFK?
- The Mead/Freeman controversy
- Sports controversies
- Einstein/Bohr debate

No one thinks that any of these things are "subjective."

b. The fallibility of human beings. Humans have numerous sources of error:

Confusion, ignorance, oversight, misunderstanding/incomplete understanding, bias, miscalculation, etc.

c. Disagreements are especially common in 4 kinds of cases:

- i) When people have strong personal biases, esp. self-interest.
- ii) When people defer to their culture.
- iii) When people defer to religion.
- iv) All philosophical issues.

Objection #3: Intuitionists cannot resolve moral disagreements.

1. If two people have differing intuitions, the intuitionist can give no way to resolve the disagreement.
2. If a meta-ethical theory provides no way of resolving (some?) disagreements, then the theory is false.
3. So intuitionism is false.

Reply:

- a. Some ethical disagreements can be resolved by appeal to ethical arguments.
- b. What's the justification for (2)?
- c. No other theory provides a way of resolving all ethical disagreements either.

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Notes #15: Obligations to the Poor

I. Basic Issue

Many people are suffering/dying of starvation, disease, and other hardships in the Third World. We have many luxuries. We could assist them by giving up these luxuries, but we choose not to. Q: what is the correct moral assessment of our decision?

II. Singer's Position

- We (each, individually) have a *positive obligation* to give money to help people in the Third World.
- There is no morally significant difference between killing someone and allowing someone to die whom one could easily save.
- How much money should one give away? How much would be required to save everyone one can? (Lots.)
- Singer thinks that *any* reasonable moral theory will have to agree with this.

III. Argument for the Obligation to Assist

1. If we can prevent something very bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do so.
2. Absolute poverty is very bad.
3. We can prevent some absolute poverty without sacrificing anything of comparable significance.
4. Therefore, we ought to do so.

The Shallow Pond example: (supports (1))

You are walking to class, when you notice a small child drowning in a shallow pond. You could wade in and save the child, but if you did so, you would waste some of your time and get your clothes muddy. What should you do?

Singer thinks this is comparable to the people in the Third World whom you could save from malnutrition & disease.

Possible differences between Shallow Pond & Third World poor:

1. It is uncertain that my money will really save the people in the 3rd world.
 2. There are so many starving people in the 3rd world, and it's impossible to save all of them.
 3. There are many other people who could help.
 4. People in the 3rd world have such bad lives that it's hardly worth preserving them.
 5. Sending food will just cause them to increase the population, until the same level of starvation is restored. (Hardin)
- None of these replies seem good.

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Notes #16: Animals

I. Background Facts

- Human beings routinely ignore or severely discount the interests of animals. Examples: animal experiments, factory farming, fur/leather.
 - Costs for animals: Enormous suffering and death. *PETA* estimates 8 billion animals in the U.S. are slaughtered for food every year (www.goveg.com/).
 - Benefits for humans: Small amounts of money, temporary pleasure & entertainment. Not necessary to sustain human life or health. May be harmful to human health.
 - Most human beings say they are against animal cruelty, but continue to enjoy animal products.

II. Singer's View

- *The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests*: Holds that all interests should be counted, regardless of whose interests they are, for moral decision-making; no one's interests should be ignored or discounted, unless there is a reason for doing so. (See "important point" below.)
 - *Note*: Does not mean that any interest is of equal weight to every other interest; some interests are greater than others. E.g., my interest in living > your interest in having a donut.
- This implies that our treatment of animals (see above) is morally wrong. We should:
 - a) Adopt a mostly vegetarian diet (possibly excepting 'free range' animals).
 - b) Stop experimenting for cosmetics, shampoos, food colors, & other frivolous purposes.
- Cruelty to animals is caused by *speciesism*.

Speciesism: The attitude or practice of discounting the interests of other beings *merely* because they belong to a different species from oneself, and not because of any morally significant difference. Similar to racism, sexism.
- *Important point*: The proponent of animal cruelty must find a *morally relevant difference* between humans and animals, that justifies treating them cruelly. I.e., Why should one discount the interests of animals?

III. Objections

Note: With each of these, ask how they might apply to slavery or cannibalism, and then ask whether these arguments are motivated by speciesism.

1. "How do we know that animals can feel pain?"
2. "Animals eat each other, so it's ok for us to eat them."
3. "Humans are superior to other animals, so it's ok to torture them."
 - A) "Humans have souls."
 - B) "Humans have free will."
 - C) "Humans are smarter." Replies:
 - i) Does greater intelligence give one greater rights? Does Einstein have the right to torture you for amusement?
 - ii) Some animals are more intelligent than some humans. Would it be ok to use retarded humans in painful experiments to test new cosmetics? How about infants?
 - iii) Even if greater intelligence gives one more rights, it would be surprising that

- a) The greater intelligence of humans over animals means we may torture & kill thousands of animals in our lifetimes for minor increments of pleasure, but yet
 - b) The greater intelligence of geniuses over retarded people does not mean they have any greater rights *at all*.
4. "I'm not inflicting the pain on the animals directly, so I'm not responsible for it."
 5. "The animals would not exist in the first place if there weren't a market for their meat. So it's good for them that people eat them."
 6. Slippery slope argument: "If we accept this argument, then next we'll have plant rights!"

IV. Why Do We Discount the Interests of Animals?

- Speciesism. Possibly inborn.
- Social conventions.
- Self-interest. It is not in our interests to recognize Singer's argument; we don't want it to be true.

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Notes #17: Population Ethics

I. Evaluating Worlds: Population & Well-Being

- Is it good to make more people (whose lives are worth living)?
What if doing so lowers the average quality of life?
- Example: Two worlds:
 - A: A world of 1 million people, with a welfare level of 100 (very high).
 - Z: A world of 1 billion people, with a welfare level of 1 (barely worth living).

Which world is better? Most people say A.



Two Principles for Assessing Goodness

The Average Utility Principle: The best world is the world in which the average level of well-being is highest.

The Total Utility Principle: The best world is the world in which the *total* utility is highest.

This principle leads to:

The Repugnant Conclusion

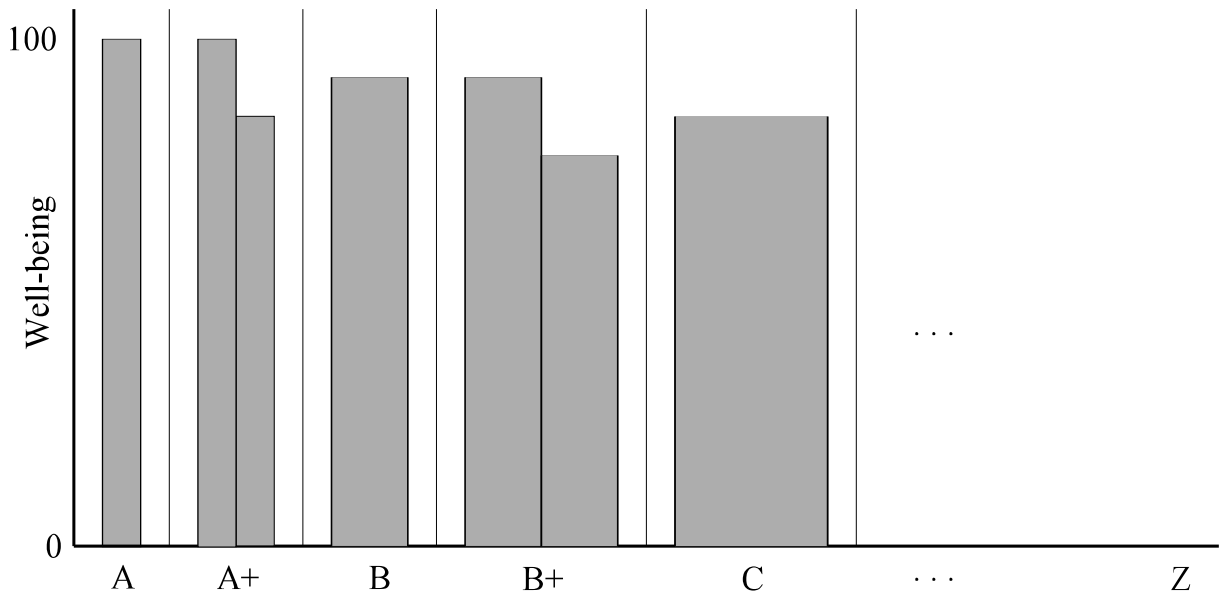
For any population of people with a very high quality of life, there is some much larger imaginable population whose existence would be better, even though its members would have lives barely worth living. (In brief: Z is better than A.)

- Parfit thinks this is “repugnant.”

II. The Mere Addition “Paradox”

1. If a person’s life is worth living (above 0), then it is good. (Premise.)
2. If one adds a good thing to the world, without taking away anything else or interfering with any other value, and without adding anything bad, the world is thereby better. (Premise.)
3. If two possible situations have the same total utility, and differ only in that in one situation, the utility is more equally distributed, then the situation with the more equal distribution is not worse. (Premise.)
4. The “repugnant” conclusion is true. Z is better than A.

(4) follows from (1)-(3): Imagine the following sequence:



- World A: 1 million people at 100 utils.
- World A+: 1 million people at 100 + 1 million people at 90
- World B: 2 million people at 96 utils.
- World B+: 2 million people at 96 + 2 million people at 86.
- World C: 4 million people at 92.
- ...
- World Z: Very large number of people at 1.

- ☞ A+ is better than A. B is better than A+. B+ is better than B. Etc.
- ☞ Conclusion: Z is better than A.

III. More Support for Making People

Against the average utility principle:

- This implies that the world would have been better if all but the most ecstatically happy people didn't exist. Does this mean that it would be good if everyone else died?
- It implies that you can worsen the world by adding something good to it (and not changing anything else). How can this be?
- Nothing else works like this.
 - Value of an individual life is not determined by the average level of well-being over time. It's not better to have 1 second of ecstasy and then die, than to have 100 years of mere contentment.
 - Value of art is not determined by the average level. It's not better to have 1 masterpiece and destroy everything lesser.

The analogy between time & space:

- We think it would be better if more people (whose lives were worth living) were added *later* in time.
(Analogous to adding more time to an individual life.)
- Analogously, it would be better if more people were added elsewhere in space.

The temporal (a)symmetry:

- You think it is good that you are alive (provided your life is worth living). It would not be better if you hadn't been born.
- Therefore, before you were conceived, it would have been correct for anyone to say that it would be good to create you.
- Therefore, it is now correct to say that it would be good to create another person, provided their life will be worth living.

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Notes #18: The Value of Equality

I. Basic Ideas

- *Egalitarianism*: Equality in the distribution of utility across persons is intrinsically good.
- *Utility*: How much well-being someone has. Happiness, success, whatever gives life value.
 - Total utility of a society: The sum of the utility of every person in that society.
 - Average utility: The total utility divided by the population.
- *Intrinsic value*: The value that something has considered apart from its effects; value something has as an end in itself.

II. The Argument Against Egalitarianism

Premises:

- *The Benign Addition Principle*: Other things being equal, if possible worlds x and y are so related that x would be the result of increasing the utility of everyone in y and adding some number of people all of whom have valuable lives, then x is better than y .
- *The Unrepugnant Premise*: Other things being equal, if possible worlds x and y are both perfectly egalitarian, x has a larger population than y , but x has both a lower average utility and a lower total utility than y .¹
- *Transitivity*: If x is better than y and y is better than z , then x is better than z .

Consider three Possible worlds:

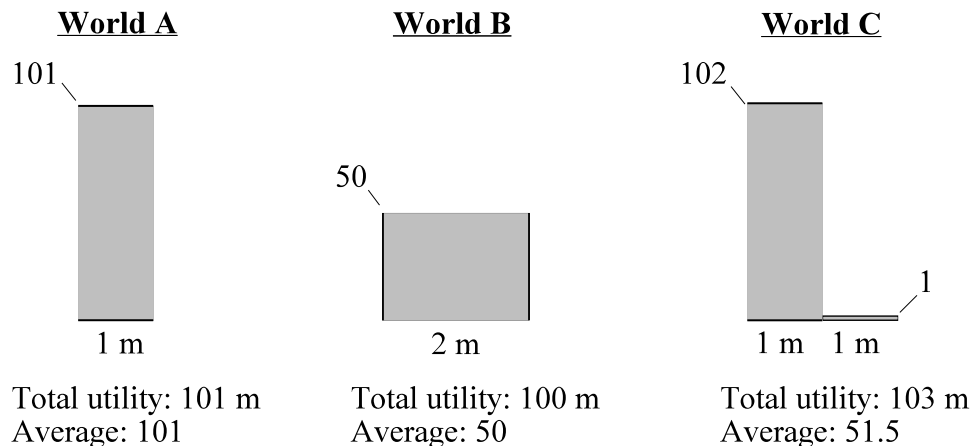


Figure 3. Graphical depiction of worlds A, B, and C. The width of each bar represents a population size; the height represents a level of well-being.

Argument:

1. A is better than B. (From the Unrepugnant Premise.)
2. C is better than A. (From the Benign Addition Principle.)
3. C is better than B. (From 1, 2, and Transitivity.)

¹An “egalitarian” world is a world in which utility is evenly distributed across persons.

Comment:

- This directly shows that the extra 3 points of total utility + 1.5 points of average utility outweighs the inequality in world C.
- This form of argument can be repeated for arbitrarily small increments in utility. Hence, the value of equality is zero.

III. In Defense of the Benign Addition Principle

Benign Addition is supported by:

The Modal Pareto Principle: If one possible world would be preferred over another by everyone existing in either world, then the former world is better than the latter.

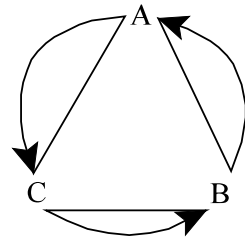
IV. In Defense of the Unrepugnant Premise

- This principle is accepted by everyone in population ethics.
 - Follows from Average Utility Principle.
 - Follows from Total Utility Principle.
 - Follows from any principle anywhere in between.

V. In Defense of Transitivity

The Money Pump:

- Suppose you have intransitive preferences: You prefer A to B, B to C, and C to A.
- You presently have A.
- You would be willing:
 - to pay a small amount of money to trade A for C.
 - to pay a small amount of money to trade C for B.
 - to pay a small amount of money to trade B for A.
 - etc.
- This seems irrational.



The Dominance Argument:

- Suppose A is better than B, which is better than C, which is better than A. Consider the values of the following two combinations:
 - $A + B + C$
 - $B + C + A$
- We can construct an argument that the first combination is better than the second. Why: It is better with respect to each of the three comparisons:
 - $A > B$
 - + +
 - $B > C$
 - + +
 - $C > A$
- This is absurd, because the two combinations are the same.
- Conclusion: The supposition is impossible: A cannot be better than B, B better than C, and yet C better than A.

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Notes #19: Review of Unit 3

Things to know:

These concepts & distinctions:

Evaluative vs. descriptive claims
Objective vs. subjective
Moral realism vs. anti-realism
Global skepticism
Speciesism

These philosophical theories & how they differ:

Subjectivism
Non-cognitivism
Nihilism
Intuitionism

These arguments & what they support or refute:

The problem of horrible attitudes, & the Nazi example
Frege-Geach problem
Main argument against Nihilism
Objections to intuitionism:

- Disagreement problem & response, esp.: How intuitionists could explain disagreement
- Reliability objection & response

The argument that humans are more intelligent than animals, & Singer's response
Parfit's Mere Addition Argument

Examples & Principles:

The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests
The Shallow Pond example
The Repugnant Conclusion
Average Utility Principle
Total Utility Principle
Egalitarianism
Transitivity
Modal Pareto Principle