

Morality part 1

Finding Moral Norms

Everything in moral theology or moral philosophy centers on one issue: finding moral norms. Without some type of moral law or framework through which to base our actions, morality is nothing more than conjecture; a desperate attempt to find some sense of right and wrong. Although it may seem simple to find moral norms, finding them has posed the greatest challenge in all moral reasoning. This entire session is devoted to the topic of finding moral norms because moral norms are that challenging to find. Throughout this session I will explain the challenges with finding moral norms. Then I will express some of the various viewpoints regarding morality. Finally, I will conclude by stating the basic view I will use for the remainder of this series.

Finding a moral norm

The process of determining the morality of an action starts with the premise that certain actions are considered right or wrong, good or evil. Which actions, however, are right or wrong, good or evil? Does this apply to all people in all circumstances or is the morality of an action subject to the circumstances? Debating this question may seem foolish, but a lot is at stake. If we cannot agree whether an action is immoral, then we cannot punish a person, claim he/she is wrong, or have principles that govern the functioning of society. Moral norms are necessary for keeping peace among people and calling humanity to something better. Here are the basic viewpoints in moral norms.

Subjectivity:

Although not used as a term in moral philosophy, those who ascribe to purely subjective moral norms believe that there are no moral norms. All moral norms are based on the people of that time and can change depending on the society or time. Those who ascribe to a subjective understanding of moral norms believe that no action is intrinsically morally wrong or evil or intrinsically morally right or good. Every action's moral character is based on the societal norms of that time. Here are some modern examples of this subjective moral viewpoint. Marijuana. Marijuana was considered illegal as a drug for many decades citing issues of health. As desire for the drug grew, so did new language regarding the safety of its use. Eventually, once close to legalization, people believed that marijuana is not considered a drug and therefore moral to use. The idea of subjective moral norms is far more common than most people think. Yet, most people do not outwardly want to ascribe to this moral framework for the simple implication that everyone feels that certain actions are clearly wrong.

Absolutists:

In contrast to the subjective viewpoint on moral norms, absolutists believe that certain actions are inherently evil or immoral and certain actions are inherently good or moral. These immoral actions are immoral for all peoples, cultures, times, and places. The basic logic behind their belief is that all cultures tend to have similar moral norms. The prohibition against murder and theft are two common examples. The most common critique of the absolutist ideology is that

absolute moral norms do not make sense in the complicated situations of moral philosophy. Some actions are immoral in one setting and moral in another depending on the circumstances. For instance lobbing a person's head off with a machete is considered murder unless the person was attacking you with a machete and trying to kill you. Then it is considered self-defense. The change in circumstance radically alters the prohibition against murder.

Proportionalist:

The middle ground between the subjectivist and absolutist ideology is the proportionalists. They believe that no moral norms exist because the label we give moral norms does not reflect the true moral character of an action. Take the example from above. The prohibition against murder would not leave an option for self-defense. Proportionalist want to leave open the ability for moral norms to reflect the situation and determine the morality of an action based on the circumstances. The main critique of the proportionalists is that some actions are deemed immoral by almost all cultures and peoples, therefore some moral norms exist. Their counter is that some specific actions are inherently immoral but not the label given the action.

Types of moral frameworks

The process of finding moral norms is immensely challenging. How do we find a moral code which holds true to all peoples, cultures, and times while leaving room to interpret the variety of humans circumstances? This challenge has spanned the course of human history. Here are some of the main thinkers who have tried to determine a moral framework.

Aristotelean Ethics:

Aristotle was a 3rd century BC Greek philosopher who attempted to find a code that would teach a person how to live well. He devised a system called virtue ethics. This system is based on a series of "moral norms" called virtues. I put the idea of moral norms in quotes since virtue ethics are not normative. A virtue is a proper behavior. Virtues fall between two extremes call vices. If an action falls on either extreme, it is called a vice. The middle ground between the two vices is the virtue. Here a few examples of virtue: magnanimity, fortitude, courage, gratitude, chastity. Virtues are highly dependent on the circumstances of the actions. For a person to live virtuously, the person must determine the proper use of the virtue in the given circumstance. Every circumstance has its own proper expression of the virtue. This means that the person must determine the proper use of the virtue in each new circumstance. Ideally this process gets easier with repeated use. Here are some examples of virtue ethics.

Courage: The virtue of courage falls between the two extremes of timidity and fool-hardy. A person who is timid doesn't act with an appropriate amount of courage for that situation. A fool-hardy person acts with too much courage for the given situation. Let's say that I am giving a speech at a local conference. I decide not to prepare since I know the topic very well. Depending on whether I am right about how well I know the topic, this is either courageous or fool-hardy. If, however, I am giving this presentation to secure a client, it would be fool-hardy to not prepare. Conversely, if I backed out due to my fear of loosing the client, this would be acting timidly.

Gratitude: The virtue of gratitude falls between the extremes of miserliness and self-harm. A miserly person is fearful of giving for the harm it may cause that person. A self-harming person will give to another even when it would require too much from him/herself. A truly gracious person knows how much the person can give and still maintain their basic needs.

Virtue Ethics is both complicated and simple to use. Its simplicity comes in the form of virtues with their extremes. The complexity is applying those virtues and extremes to circumstances. The glaring problem with virtue ethics is the lack of norms. One person may courageously perform an action and another person, in the same situation, be too timid. Virtue ethics is determined by the person **and** the circumstances. Therefore it is very difficult to determine whether someone acted virtuously in a given situation.

Deontological Ethics:

Emmanuel Kant, the great 19th century German philosopher, wanted a system of ethics that would have no loopholes. He wanted a system that could work for all peoples, cultures, and times. This system is called deontological ethics or rule-based ethics. Kant argued that we could determine a moral system from reason alone. If we can reason to a principle and prove it immoral, then that action is immoral for all times, peoples, and culture. Here's an example. If I took an apple from a street vendor, I am robbing him of his livelihood. If I rob him of his livelihood, then I am devaluing him as a person and subjecting him to my wants and desires. Since I would not want to be subjected to another or robbed, stealing is immoral. (yes, the reasoning is this simple.) Therefore stealing is immoral for all times, peoples, and cultures.

Where deontological ethics is valued for its simplicity, the greatest challenge is its simplicity. Since moral norms are immoral for all times, places, cultures, and people, this gives deontological ethics no middle ground for circumstances. This is the classic example that critiques this system. A group of Nazi soldiers show up at your door asking if you are hiding Jews in your basement. In fact you are hiding them in your basement. Since lying is immoral, you tell the soldiers that "yes, indeed I am hiding Jews in my basement." Since you cannot lie, you have no other option than to tell them the truth. This classic example is flawed in many ways. You could answer the soldiers in various ways that would not be considered lying. You could also not answer the door. People who critique this system tend to have simplistic examples and maintain their simplicity in order to critique the system when other options would equally apply.

The great value in deontological ethics is the hard-fast rules governing morality. With these moral norms we can determine if another person acted morally, we can know exactly how to act in every circumstance, and we can both determine and debate with a conclusion which actions are considered moral.

Utilitarianism:

Two 20th century philosophers by the names of Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mills decided to take a different approach to moral philosophy and the quest for moral norms. They entered the debate with a system called Utilitarianism. As the name implies, morality is based on a type of

utility. The goal of Utilitarianism is to find which actions cause the greatest good, aka Utilitarian calculus. The math is simple. Add up all the happiness or good that would be caused by the action and compare it to the amount of unhappiness or bad that would be caused by the action. If the amount of happiness caused by the action is greater than the unhappiness, then the action is moral and you have a moral obligation to do it. If the unhappiness is greater, then the action is immoral and therefore should not be done.

This system seems simple and almost democratic in nature. A few cautionary notes on Utilitarianism. First, this is not a democratic moral system as most people would desire. One person could evaluate the amount of happiness an actions causes and declare the morality of the action. Second, the morality of an action is not based on pure “good feelings” but a sense of overall happiness. Therefore we cannot assume that just because one person is happy with the action that all people must be happy.

Utilitarianism suffered from many challenges. The most prominent challenge is determining collective happiness. How do you determine the amount of happiness caused by an action? Mills and Bentham discussed this issue at length in their major works on Utilitarianism. Summarizing, you realize the amount of good that is caused by the action. The second glaring problem is that this system does not set moral norms. Each situation changes the morality of an action. Whereas one action may create collective happiness for one culture, it may create collective unhappiness for another culture.

Examples: Killing your child. In most western cultures the act of killing a child is considered abhorrent. In Utilitarianism, the act of killing a child brings a great collective unhappiness to western cultures. In Asian cultures the act of killing a child to provide for your elderly parents is considered a good moral decision. The collective happiness of providing for your parents greatly outweighs the collective unhappiness over killing a child.

Religious Ethics:

Religious ethics are one of the most challenging types of ethics to discuss and defend. The moral principles of a religious ethic are founded on revealed laws. Since these revealed laws are part of a belief system and not subject to change, they cannot be debated philosophically. For those in the religion the principles can be discusses and even debated. Are those principles truly from God? How do we know if the rules have changed or should be changed? Various religions throughout time have found ways to update rules or to announce changes to their religious ethical system.

Let’s get specific: Catholic Religious Ethics. The foundation of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church are founded on two principles: revealed truths and reason. Yes, we value both the revelations from God as well as the belief that any laws given by God must be reasonable and defended by reason. This focus on the value of reason gives us the ability to dialogue with other philosophical and social institutions while maintaining our religious moral norms. In a basic way, the most prominent form of our revealed truths are the 10 Commandments and from there the laws of Scripture. These laws are considered unchanging and equally valid for all peoples,

cultures, and times; eternal laws. Since we also believe that God does not change and neither do his laws, then the revealed laws will never change and will apply to all circumstances.

How does a religion change its moral stance? This question is complicated. Some religions cannot change their religious ethical stance without greatly changing the basis for their religion, for example Judaism. Judaism, as my example, will debate the proper interpretation of the law as opposed to saying that God's law has changed. In the Catholic tradition, laws don't change but our understanding of a law can. In simpler language, the founding principles of the law do not change but the expression of those principles can change. Slavery is a surprisingly good example. At the foundation of Christianity slavery was common throughout the Roman empire. Since the newly fledged religion thought it better to not challenge the general norms of the time, Christians didn't challenge the Roman Empire but instead challenged the expression of slavery. All Christians knew that slavery was wrong because of how it treated the individual person. So, they encourage each other to treat slaves as real people who are bound by the laws of the Roman Empire. Nineteen centuries the same question arose as we were evangelizing the Americas. Are these people considered human or can we enslave them? After much debate and the work of two prominent priests, the church declared the natives of the Americas human and therefore bound by the laws governing human dignity.

The greatest benefit of a religiously based ethic system is the immutability of the laws. These laws are not founded on human reason alone but have an all-knowing being who is directing the actions of humans. Similarly, the ability to agree to and accept some moral norms as normative and unchanged greatly aids the ability to condemn the actions of a person and keep society in order.

Concluding:

Finding moral principles that all people will accept as unchangeable moral norms is nearly impossible. We generally agree on a few basic principles given specific exceptions. Therefore, when debating with people over moral principles, we must be aware of the challenges inherent with moral norms. For the purposes of this series, I am going to assume the moral principles given by the Catholic Church with the underlying assumption that certain actions are considered immoral in all circumstances.