PHI-305 Lecture 6

Major Ethical Systems: Enlightenment, Utilitarianism, Ethical Egoism, Existentialism

Enlightenment Ethical Theory

*Introduction*

The Early Modern period in Western history is noted for its shift in the focus of ethics from "virtue" to "law," with moral thinking shifting from attitude to behavior. "Reason" became the preeminent way to measure ethics, though the early modern period continued to uphold what could be termed "traditional morality." Three key thinkers who interacted within this milieu were Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant.

Thomas Hobbes

In his book *Leviathan,*Thomas Hobbes (1588−1679) points to the need for a powerful central governing authority, a "leviathan," to avoid discord in a society. According to Hobbes, all people pursue their own self-preservation, and, without someone to enforce laws, people would live in a "kill or be killed" world: a "state of nature" in Hobbes' words. The state of nature is a state "which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan*, 13.9). So out of their own self-interest, people organize a society, a social contract formed for the sake of peace. Hobbes believes a strong sovereign authority to which individuals yield some of their own personal rights is necessary in order to maintain one's personal protection. Leviathan is a human representative of God, with an earthly "absolute authority" rule, and thus should be benevolent, provide safety and peace to subjects, and seek what is good and just.

According to Hobbes, principle virtues such as promise-keeping, justice, modesty, and mercy are needed to maintain one's own self-preservation. Morality, therefore, is in my best interest. While Hobbes does present his ethical views as consistent with Scripture and God, reason and experience essentially and ultimately trump religious authority because revelation and Scripture are authoritative only for those to whom God has revealed it to be so supernaturally: the elect. Ultimately, Hobbes utilizes reason and experience to provide the basis and justification for traditional beliefs and practices.

For Hobbes, there is no telos or natural inclination toward the Good or God; there is only self-interest and desire for safety and peace. The revolutionary times signaled for Hobbes and others the need for a powerful, unifying law and government to stop chaos. He thus reasons that the concepts of "right and wrong" are really a matter of agreement among self-interested individuals to give up their own desires in order to live in peace. Hobbes' emphasis is that obedience to the law, rather than becoming a certain kind of person, is what is most important.

David Hume

In contrast to Hobbes, David Hume (1711−1776) holds a much more optimistic view of human nature. Hume believes that moral sentiment, or feeling, is the basis of ethical motivation. Hume's famous dictum, "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions" indicates that human reason is not sufficient to motivate us to moral action. Rather, feelings such as "propensities" and "aversions" are what motivate individuals.

Hume feels that all people share a universal sentiment of benevolence. Since people's deepest moral feeling is to act for the good of others (not out of self-interest, contra Hobbes), all people have similar moral sentiments. It seems clear that how one answers questions about human nature directly correspond to how one answers questions about ethical reasoning. It also should be noted that Hume speaks of a moral agent's useful consequences or "utility." Hume's thesis would subsequently come to serve as the seedbed for Jeremy Bentham's highly influential ethical theory, utilitarianism, which will be discussed later in this topic.

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724−1804) often considered the greatest and most influential philosopher of the modern period, is concerned to discover, by the use of human reason alone, moral principles that are binding for all people. Kant argues that human reason gives itself the moral law, which is the foundation for belief in God, freedom, and immortality. For Kant, an action is good if it originates from what he called a "good will." By a good will, Kant did not mean that one should act moral simply because one feels good about it or because one desires to help people, although he would say that individuals are called to "cultivate feelings" in themselves that will help them do the right thing and love others. *A*good will means that one has a duty to the moral law and must act out of this personal sense of obligation. Even deeper, motiveis actually what makes a will good, and this means a motive toduty*.*

Kant explains that all people can know the moral law simply by applying a rational test, what he calls the "categorical imperative." The basic statement of the categorical imperative is "act only on the maxim whereby you can will that it should become a universal law." In other words, one must be able to "universalize" the principle behind his or her action if it is to be a moral act. Another important formulation of the categorical imperative states, "We ought to treat humanity in ourselves and others as ends and never merely as means." People are not instruments to other people's happiness; rather, they are valuable in themselves (intrinsically). Additionally, Kant would acknowledge that morality requires that people need God's help, which then leads to belief in God and the power of God to reorient their wills to achieve moral faith.

Kant's system is known as a "deontological" theory, which entails acting out of one's duty regardless of the consequences. While deontology has the advantage of being straightforward and supporting an objective sense of morality, challenges have been raised against this approach, particularly related to situations where one is faced with a conflict of duty, or an ethical dilemma. Though these types of situations may be rare, one can ask if such circumstances limit the usefulness of Kant's ethical theory. As a result, others have posited more nuanced accounts of deontological theory, such as contextual absolutism, the lesser of two evils view, and the greater good view.

Utilitarianism

*Introduction*

By the 18th-century, the general mood in the West shifted against "rule-based" approaches to moral reasoning and embraced more "democratic" means of making decisions. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that ostensibly seeks to recognize the value of each person and therefore to have regard for the interests of all. However, there is an awareness that people's interests often conflict. Therefore, one must sometimes sacrifice one's own desires for the will of the majority because that will result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Whenever the majority will receive greater happiness or pleasure, one has an obligation to honor that choice.

Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham's (1748−1832) version of utilitarianism is known as "quantitative utilitarianism." Bentham realizes that people need a way to determine which choices lead to the greatest amount of pleasure. So he develops a "hedonistic calculus," an objective way to quantify right and wrong, using seven categories: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. Bentham suggests people quantify how much pleasure they expect to gain in each category. Then people simply need to compare the totals in each category for each choice to find which action is the best. Bentham recognizes that "pleasure," broadly understood, is the source of moral reasoning, and his quantitative approach intends to maximize the amount of pleasure for all people involved in any decision. Though Bentham's approach may be a helpful approach to making moral decisions, it has been criticized as a "pig's philosophy" because it seems that by following this approach people would be justified in pursuing the basest of human pleasures. Moreover, Bentham believes that pleasure is the only good and that pain is the only evil; there seems to be little meaning to the world otherwise.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill (1806−1873) agrees with the basic premise of utilitarianism, that the best choice is the one that leads to the most happiness for all people, but he modifies utilitarianism to have a qualitative approach. Instead of simply focusing on how much happiness is the result of a decision, Mill claims the focus should be on the quality of the pleasure received. In order to know which pleasures are the better quality ones, Mill explains that humans have "higher" and "lower" desires. For Mill, the higher desires are associated with reason and intellect. He believes that people will know which pleasures are the higher ones if they have experienced both kinds of pleasures. The fool chooses the lower desires because he has not had the opportunity to taste of the higher desires. Although Mill grounds ethics in a nonmoral framework, his ideas on morality generally fall in line with religious ethics.

Mill's approach to utilitarianism has the advantage of seeking to keep people from pursuing their base desires, but one can ask if it is elitist, ultimately. According to Mill, not everyone is in a position to be a competent judge of moral decisions. It seems that this ethical theory that begins with the promise of being more egalitarian, in the end, is equally as authoritarian as previous approaches.

Problems with Utilitarianism

Though utilitarianism has some desirable characteristics as an ethical theory, particularly its seeking a balance between individual freedoms and social obligations, several problems should be noted. Two key issues have to do with consequentialism and individual rights. Utilitarianism is a consequential ethical theory in that its primary concern is the consequences of an action. It is the consequences that one must examine to determine if the greatest happiness has been achieved. But obviously, consequences of a decision can only be observed after a decision is made. The best one can do is conjecture or hypothesize what the consequences of an act may be (Holmes, 2007, p. 46). There is no way to conclusively know what the results of a decision must be, and there is no way to compare those results to an alternative consequence that does not occur. Furthermore, it is very difficult to gauge the scope of the consequences of an individual choice. The effects of any individual choice may ripple through generations without anyone being aware of them.

One also can also ask if individual rights are denied by utilitarianism (Wilkens, 2011, pp. 109-112). During World War II, many Japanese-Americans, who had committed no crime, were interred in camps as virtual prisoners. The justification for this action was undeniably that it was necessary for the greater good of the remainder of American citizens. But this act does not seem to cohere with moral intuitions. The contemporary debate regarding terrorism and the need for government surveillance is also related to this need to balance individual rights with the greater good for the majority. Finally, contemporary utilitarian theory has been used to justify acts such as cheating, stealing, lying, abortion, euthanasia, and even adultery. This also may be a consequence of denying intrinsic morality, such as the "image of God" that imparts equal worth to all human beings. Utilitarianism can be considered an "ends justifies the means" approach to moral reasoning, which by its nature is problematic (Pojman, 2012, p. 114).

Ethical Egoism

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Ethical egoism states that "it is necessary and sufficient for an action to be morally right that it maximize one's self-interest" (Shaver, 2010, para. 1). This theory is often associated with the 20th-century thinker Ayn Rand, best known for her novels *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead,* and as a staunch advocate of *laissez-faire* capitalism. For Rand, "selfishness" is a virtue; altruism, acting for the benefit of others, is both wrong and evil (Rand, 1964).

Several arguments have been raised against the coherence of ethical egoism. For instance, it is problematic from a Christian worldview perspective in the way that it asserts that what is "good" is defined entirely by the individual. Both Scripture and the Christian tradition affirm that God alone has this prerogative and that human desires are distorted without the intervening grace of God. Moreover, the pursuit of individual self-interest is the source of moral depravity (Wilkens, 2011, pp. 151-153). Others have asked if ethical egoism is self-defeating; it seems to work best if one is an egoist while others are not. Another problem is that egoism seems to be arbitrary in the way it defines who has value; there does not seem to be a way to define one's own interests as being any more important than those of others.

Existentialism

*Introduction*

The 19th-century saw great changes in Western society, including philosophical and ethical thinking. Technological innovations, the rise of atheism in Europe, and continued warfare all contributed to a mood that led some to a loss of their sense of humanity. For many thinkers, there was a renewed focus on "being," rather than thinking, as the basis of human nature; this included the idea of existence as the most important aspect of a human being. In this sense, existence describes "an individual who strives, who considers alternatives, who chooses, who decides, and who, above all, makes a commitment" (Stumpf, 1993, p. 483). This philosophy, known as "existentialism," has many concerns, but of central importance is the individual and their experience of life. In this period, thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche drew out the implications of atheism in order to attempt to develop a purely anthropocentric philosophy of life. Others such as Soren Kierkegaard just as strongly advocated God-centered ways of addressing the philosophical and ethical concerns of human beings. However, what was shared by many was a disdain for highly rational modes of thinking; instead, they focused on the concrete and everyday concerns of the average person (Stumpf, 1993).

Soren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard's (1813−1855) philosophy could be described partly as a reaction against the radical elevation of reason and empiricism that characterized much Enlightenment-era thinking. Though known for his outspoken criticism of the state church of his day, Kierkegaard maintained a robust Christian faith. He criticizes traditional approaches to ethics because he believes that they fail to underscore the real predicament that people are in. Even if people know what is right, they must still make a decision. Real life, says Kierkegaard, makes demands on individuals, and abstract and general ideas do not help.

According to Kierkegaard, humankind's essential nature entails its relation to God. The existential condition people find themselves in is a consequence of their alienation from God. Alienation and despair grow as individual's actions move them away from God, and life continues to be full of anxiety unless and until one is able to actualize oneself in God. This alienation and anxiety create within individuals a desire to recover one's essential self. The process of becoming an essential self or an "authentic person" is described by Kierkegaard as a movement through three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (Clark and Poortenga, 2003, pp. 91-95).

While Kierkegaard believes that God has given commands for moral living, it is not enough simply for God to issue a command; one needs to hear and obey willingly, rather than selectively or begrudgingly or refusing to obey altogether. Thus, individuals first need to cultivate faith. This requires at least believing the command has come from God, which may requires one to overcome the offense to one's reason and to adopt a tolerance for paradox, including belief/trust in the God-man paradox, Jesus Christ. Further, one needs to cultivate hope, patience, devotion, and above all love, and be prepared to suffer for love and for the ultimate spiritual identity.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Another 19th-century thinker dealing with the same issues of individual angst and existence was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844−1900). Nietzsche famously asserts that "God is dead." His point is not that God was once alive and had since died, but that the conventional Christian God is no longer a viable source of any absolute moral principles in Western civilization. Nietzsche attempts to construct a philosophy of life without God, claiming that through their own choices people can make their lives a work of art. Nietzsche values ideals such as strength, domination, and pride, looking to the values exemplified by the ancient Greeks in the pursuit of art, music, excess, joy, and passion. Such "Dionysian" or Homeric values ought to be pursued in order to overcome the constraining influences present in 19th-century European culture.

For Nietzsche, the main driving force within humanity is not simply the will to survive but the "will to power," an emphasis on "self-making," achievement, or ambition.  Christian values like self-denial Nietzsche considers the epitome of weakness; those who embrace such weak values as humility or forgiveness are followers of a herd or slavemorality, which make virtues of these vices and attempt to use them to gain power over the master class. The overman, sometimes called the "superman," is the superior person who overcomes the weaknesses of Judeo-Christian values and pursues strength and individual achievement. The world and other people are obstacles to the real goal of success, which one ought to press on toward: greatness. According to Nietzsche, the supermen will emerge as the next stage in human evolution.

Conclusion

Though existentialism as a philosophy does not come into its fullness until the 20th-century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche represent two distinct 19th-century versions that deal with the theme of individual meaning. Ultimately, their responses differ substantially, yet they work essentially from the same foundational ideas. These two approaches to ethics are forerunners to today's world; they illustrate that, at the end of the day, how one addresses the question of God, and what one holds as ultimate reality of the human condition, will direct the form of ethical thought that one embraces.

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