Ethics

MNSES9100

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An example

- You find a bag of money.

- What should you do?

- The honest solution:
- Find the owner and return the bag

- "honesty lasts longest"

- The dishonest solution:
- Take the money and throw away the bag

- "finders keepers, loosers weepers"

- Even an honest person would consider taking the money: <u>the value</u> of taking the money surpasses the feeling of <u>being honest</u>.
- Honesty requires us to return the money, but dishonesty has greater utility:

You can:
- Buy something you want.
- Pay debts.
- Save money for later.

The question is:

- What do you have reason to do in situations where dishonesty is both safe and valuable?

Possible answers:

- To be honest is to act without a reason?
- Only ignorant and weak persons act honestly in such situations.

- This previous question leads to two new questions:

1. *Do you have a better reason to be honest than dishonest?*

1. *Do you even have a good reason to be honest in the first place?*

- Both questions are troubling, especially the last.

- A good character is wortwhile having even at some cost to ourselves.
- Honesty is an important character trait (virtue).
- But is it possible to have a good character without being honest?
- How can doing something you have no reason to do be an expression of a good character trait?
- It seems like honesty in such situations only express ignorance or weakness, and that is certainly not praiseworthy.

Three branches of ethics

- Metaethics
- Normative ethics
- Applied ethics

Metaethics

- The study of moral concepts and language
- Is morality subjective or objective?
- Is moral knowledge possible, and if so how?

Normative ethics

- What actions are right and wrong from a moral point of view?

- How can we justify moral claims?

- What values are important?

- How should we live?

Applied ethics

- Ethics applied to practical problems:

Environmental ethics

Animal ethics

Bioethics

Climate ethics

Intergenerational ethics

Computer ethics

Research ethics etc....

The sceptic

- ”Ethics is a matter of taste” (”Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”)
- ”What´s right for you isn´t right for me”
- ”Morality is a fiction”
- ”Morality is relative”
- ”Moral progress is impossible”

Where do we start in ethics?

- Empirical studies of what people think?
- Reflection on values we care about.
- ✧ Friendship!
- ✧ Non-harm!
- ✧ Gratitude!
- ✧ Charity!
- ✧ Justice!
- ✧ Don´t lie!
- ✧ Equality before the law!

- What moral value(s) do I care about and why?

Moral reasoning

- Reasoning is important in ethics.

Reasons + Conclusion = **An Argument**

Good arguments / bad arguments

Moral reasoning

1. Some arguments contain false premises.
2. Other arguments rest on logical mistakes.

Moral reasoning

P1: Heroin is a drug

P2: Selling heroin is illegal

K: Using heroin is morally wrong.

Moral reasoning

P1: Heroin is a drug

P2: Selling heroin is illegal

P3: Any use of drugs is morally wrong.

P4: Anything that is illegal is morally wrong.

K: Using heroin is morally wrong.

Moral reasoning

P1: Heroin is a drug

P2: Selling heroin is illegal

K: Using heroin is morally wrong.

Logical validity is about the relationship between premises and conclusion – the *structure* of an argument!

Moral reasoning

P1: King Harald is either 78 or 79 years old.

P2: King Harald is not 79 years old.

K: King Harald is 78 years old.

Moral reasoning

P1: It is morally acceptable for animals to kill and eat other animals.

K: It is morally acceptable for humans to kill and eat other animals.

Moral reasoning

P1: If it is morally acceptable for animals to kill and eat other animals, then it is acceptable for humans to kill and eat other animals (this is the underlying assumption).

P2: It is morally acceptable for animals to kill and eat other animals.

K: It is morally acceptable for humans to kill and eat other animals.

Moral reasoning

i. Animals who eat other animals do not have a choice. But we do.

ii. A meat-eater must eat other animals to survive. But we don´t. We can live healthy lives on a vegetarian diet.

iii. None of the animals we usually eat are meat-eaters. They do *not* eat other animals. If their behaviour should be paradigmatic for us, then we too should abstain from meat.

iv. It is unreasonable to use animals as moral role models. They are not moral agents.

Morally relevant considerations

- What are morally relevant considerations to take into account when thinking about what is right and wrong to do?

- Any ethical theory should have an answer to this question

Good consequences

- The <u>consequences</u> of an action is important to what we should do.

- Morality is about improving the world to the best for all beings.

- Do as much good as you can!

- But what are good consequences (welfare, utility, happiness)?

Good consequences

- Most theories emphasise the importance of consequences, but some theories only pay attention to consequences – <u>Consequentialism</u>.

- According to consequentialism, an action is morally right if it has the best consequences for all those affected by the action.

- Demanding theory?

- Too permissive theory?

Moral constraints

- There are limits or <u>constraints</u> on what we can do to make the world better.

- There are some actions which are wrong independently of what we achive by doing them.

- Do not harm others, respect people´s autonomy.

- *Deontological constraints (duties)* – some actions are wrong in themselves!

Duties or moral reqirements

- We cannot fulfil our moral requirements just by refraining to perform certain actions. Morality seems to require something more than this.
- *Voluntary obligations* (promise)
- *Universal versus special obligations*
- *Perfect duties* ("you must not") *versus imperfect duties* ("du should")
- *Negative versus positive duties*

Supererogatory actions

- *Is there a point at which we have done enough for others?*

- To go beyond duty.

- Actions that are good or praiseworthy to perform but not bad or blameworthy not to perform.

- Heroic and saintly actions

- Consequentialism versus deontology

Permissions

- If there is a point at which we have done enough for others, we can give priority to ourselves.

- To realize our own projects.

Care, relations, happiness

- Are <u>consequences</u>, <u>constraints</u>, <u>duties</u> and <u>permissions</u> exchastive of morality?

- *Care ethics* (feminist ethics) emphasize the importance of caring for others and of human relations.

- *Virtue ethics* emphasieze the importance of developing certain virtues in order to lead a good and meaningful life.

Ethical theories

- An ethical theory takes a systematic perspective on right and wrong.

- An ethical theory tries to find answers to questions such as: <u>How should we live? How should we act?</u>

- An ethical theory demonstrates how moral claims can be justified.

"The two main concepts of ethics are those of the right and the good… The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions… The simplest way of relating them is taken by **teleological** theories: the good is defined independently from the right, and the right is defined as that which maximizes the good" (Rawls 1971, p. 24).

A **deontological** theory is: "one that either does not specify the good independently from the right, or does not interpret the right as maximizing the good" (s. 30).

- *Teleological* versus *deontological* theories

- **Teleological** (from gr. *telos*, goal, aim)
  - An action is morally right if it contributes to the realization of some goal – <u>the right is defined by the good</u>

- **Deontological** (from gr. *deon*, duty)
  - An action is morally right if it is in accordance with some norm – the right is defined independently of the good

The example with the bag again…

What should you do?

a. What am I bound by a duty to do? (deontological ethics)
b. What are the consequences of my actions? (consequentialism)
c. What would a virtuous person do? (virtue ethics)

Another example: *Throwing waste*

- How do we explain what is wrong with that?

- Bad consequences (consequentialism)
- Bad character (virtue ethics)
- Violation of duties (deontological ethics)

A third example: *death penalty*

Consequentialism

- How will the future look like with the death penalty?
- Death penalty is only justified if it has good consequences (increased security preventive effect on crime etc)
- If capital punishment is to be justified, we need to show that the world is better off with than without it.

Deontology

- What does the past require of us?
- Capital punishment is only justified on the basis of what persons have done.
- Justice requires that those who take lives must suffer the loss of their own lives.