**Online Writing Assignment 1**

**The Modern *Ring of Gyges* and a New Universal Ethical Framework**

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People do not need fear of punishment nor ambition of fame and fortune in order to act morally. *The Ring of Gyges* presents a thought experiment on moral motivations if there aren’t consequences of one’s actions. The character Glaucon proposes that people only behave justly to avoid the consequences of disobeying the law. His counterpart in the story, Socrates, proposes that behaving justly has intrinsic merit and that unjust men ultimately become miserable which guides individual decisions. Both sides of this argument will be addressed in support of the thesis that a “carrot and stick” approach of justice is not *necessary* for people to act morally. This will be done by comparing and contrasting some classical approaches to ethics, examining these approaches through the lens modern society, and lastly discussing the sensibility of ethical actions outside of fear consequences. Addressing these topics will serve as a guide to determining if there are universal moral principles that are right for all persons at all times.

One school of thought to ethics is the “common-good” approach proposed by classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. In essence, it states that society should value individual freedom but also calls for policy prescriptions are beneficial to all. Examples of these “common goods” are affordable healthcare and an unpolluted environment (Thinking Ethically). Another is Immanuel Kant’s approach which argues that individuals act on a maxim, or intent/motivation. He argues that morality is a set of laws that are the same for everyone and apply to all, therefore making universal morality possible. To establish an ethical framework, a test is conducted known as the Categorical Imperative which states “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant’s Ethics). In other words, only do acts that would be just if everyone else did them as well. For example, don’t lie because if everyone lied, then society will collapse due to distrust. Lastly, philosopher Thomas Hobbes presupposes humans are violent, brutish, immoral beings that need laws to control this “state of nature”, arguing that this state of nature “is a condition of war of every one against every one.” (Leviathan). To control this state of nature, he proposed a social contract that governments/rulers need to be unquestionably obeyed in the pursuit of peace, stability, and safety. A modern example of this social contract being implemented is the government of North Korea. These ethical approaches presuppose wildly different assumptions on the nature of humanity and propose solutions to maximize an argued moral end-state. The frameworks are inherently in contradiction with each other as the means of one’s approach violate another’s basic principles. If a Hobbes framework is imposed, then it would be in direct contradiction to Kant if murder of the citizenry was used to obtain Hobbes’ desired end-state of quelling the state of nature.

At their respective points in history the philosophers may have been mostly, if not entirely correct due to their experiences in their respective societies at the time (i.e., Hobbes living through the English Civil War (Stanford)). As time goes on and societies, people, and governments change, so do the respective philosophical views. Technology and the development of increasingly sophisticated scientific instruments furthers our understanding of the world and therefore influences moral and ethical change. When applying these ethical frameworks to modern society, there are aspects from each that are applicable and some that are not. The common-good approach would be considered ethical from some individuals as enacting policies that benefit all achieve the maximum amount of goodness. However, many such policies could also be detrimental by sapping individuals of resources, have diminishing returns on investment, and be considered a form of communism (a politically-charged rhetorical term used to label and portray policies as “evil”). This has overlap with Kant’s Categorical Imperative as if one individual contributes personal resources for a public good, then all should do the same which would have detrimental effects to the poorest members of society. This applies more so if someone contributes all of their wealth. The problem with the Categorical Imperative is that “it doesn’t address the question of whether the purpose is reasonable” (Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals, p.19). Taking the North Korean example mentioned earlier and how it is a near-perfect representation of a Hobbes-style government, we can immediately conclude that absolute adherence to a totalitarian ruler is detrimental in modern society. The DPRK has had systemic crises with famine, geopolitical isolation, and lack of basic necessities that contribute to early death. We analyze these frameworks through a modern lens, imposing our own values to determine if they are right or wrong based on the outcome of such a framework and placing that outcome on an internal scale that measures “well-being”.

In *The Ring of Gyges*, Glaucon proposes that people only behave justly to avoid consequences whereas Socrates says that good has intrinsic merit and unjust people become miserable. Both characters are correct and incorrect in their conclusions. To use contemporary examples, we’ll equivocate the Ring of Gyges’ ability to turn one invisibleas internet anonymity. To rebut Glaucon’s assumptions, just actions can be performed with this Ring as demonstrated when an anonymous donor gave $100,000 to a food bank in Sarasota, FL (Sarasota Magazine). This supports Socrates’ position that a purely just person would pass the test of the Ring. However, Socrates’ position that unjust men would eventually become miserable has rebuttal examples to support Glaucon’s position. Even without the Ring to cover for unjust acts, Nestle USA currently uses and successfully argued in the Supreme Court the right to use child slavery in Africa to harvest cocoa (CNBC). Even though it was a corporation that promulgates this act, it is still the people part of that organization that enable it. We cannot read the minds of the executives of Nestle to determine if they are miserable with their decision to use slavery for profit. But we can look at the totality of the company’s unjust actions beyond just child slavery, the publicity around them, and that people will continue to make decisions that knowingly result in such unjust actions. It is reasonable infer that those in charge are not ultimately miserable due to their conscious actions to perpetuate this cycle, supporting Glaucon’s position.

Ultimately, there is a moral argument to act ethically with the Ring because, in general, people strive to maximize well-being and reduce human suffering. Additionally, there is a trend where acting in a manner seen as ethical without the Ring is seen as unethical when done with a loudspeaker. An article published in *The New Statesman* depicts YouTubers giving large sums of money to homeless people. On the surface, it sounds noble. But what makes these acts questionably immoral is filming and posting the act online. This is increasingly seen as exploitative because as the article states, “If a YouTuber gives to charity and no one hears about it, it doesn’t make a sound.” So, it seems that there is a paradigm shift happening where people would rather have goods deeds be done anonymously rather than having them done in the pursuit of clout.

Based on the arguments in this paper and the inherent changing nature of humanity, a universal moral principle can be created. The main variable that needs to be accounted for is that inherent change which is correlated, if not a causation, to humanity’s understanding of the world. Even so, all of the proposed ethical frameworks do have a commonality according to Sam Harris’ TED Talk, “There is no notion – no version – of human morality and human values…that is not at some point reduceable to a concern about conscious experience and its possible changes.” To incorporate his views on morality with this author’s own, we can form a Universal Ethical Framework that accounts for change: *Humans and other beings are conscious creatures that live in a physical world whose actions and consequences are dictated by physical laws. The pursuit and subsequent gain of knowledge about the physical world informs humans on the consequences of their actions. Values are influenced by evidence-based knowledge about physical world. The level of compassion for well-being of conscious creatures is influenced by its range of exposure to conscious happiness and suffering. This compassion is placed on a continuum of values. Actions taken must be aligned with maximizing well-being and reducing suffering of conscious creatures based on the continuum of values which is dictated by the current understanding of the physical world.*

Analyzing the classical ethical frameworks, applying them to modern society, and through contemporary examples, some people will act regardless of positive or negative consequences proving that people **do not** need fear of punishment in order to act **morally**. But even fear of punishment for immoral acts still **does not** prevent individuals from acting **immorally**. By aggregating all of this information, it can be reasoned that each of the philosophers had one goal: create an ethical framework that promulgates a thriving society. This is achieved by maximizing individual and societal well-being. Individual and societal well-being are often in conflict and moral frameworks rarely reach consensus. Morality and ethics are in a constant state of flux, and are determined by the evidence in the world around us, prompting the need for a new ethical framework that accounts for human change and knowledge. According to this author’s favorite philosophy buffs, “Reality is the ultimate arbiter of what is right or wrong…we haven’t solved this issue of morality and we may never. It’s a process.” (Dillahunty).

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