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Philosophy 205G

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Essay 1 – Group 2

The question that I decided to answer was, “Can reason alone serve as an adequate ground for morality?” This question refers to Hume’s view and explanation of human behavior, and a majority of this argument will come from his original work. Reason alone is not an adequate ground for morality because the functions of reason cannot motivate a human to act, thus no moral or immoral actions can be performed by reason alone.

To begin, all of the functions and uses of reason can be exhaustively listed and examined, and when this is done, none of these purposes are related to motivation of action, which is needed for anything, in this case reason, to be used as a moral ground. Hume states that the three purposes of reason are: relations, matters of fact, and synthesization of information. The first use of reason, relations, is used to relate information in a logical fashion. For example, 1+1=2, *a=a*, and if someone is a bachelor, that person must be a single male. The second, matters of fact, is elements of the objective universe. These are known by perception and validation done by humans. The last, synthesization, is used to predict a variety of things. This use of reason is typically used combine the matters of fact with relations and to be able to predict future observations. There are other uses of reason, but these three encompass most of the others to some degree. Now that the functions of reason have been exhausted, reasons as to why reason is not adequate ground for morality may be discussed.

None of the functions of reason can motivate a human to act, emotion than must be involved to some degree to act as the primary motivation of an action. Reason cannot motivate someone to act simply because it deals only with information and the formation of ideas, it is one’s feelings about these ideas that motivates them to act. In other words, without the emotion, there is no motivation; without the motivation, there is no action; without the action, there are no moral consequences. Since reason cannot lead to moral consequences, reason alone than cannot be used to determine what actions one must choose to be moral without some other motivational factor being involved. Thus reason alone is not adequate ground for morality.

Secondly, the functions of reason cannot be used to determine if an action is moral or not. This is also an important aspect for something to be considered as adequate ground for morality. Reason cannot determine if an action is moral or not is because its functions are unable to do so. For every moral case, there seems to be some degree of emotion that is needed for the end moral pronouncement. Since emotion must be used, reason is not the only criterion being used to determine the morality of a situation. For example, cheating in school is wrong. It is wrong because the cheat is artificially raising the bar for their fellow classmates. For reason alone to determine the morality of this situation, its functions must be used. Using the first use of reason, or relations, the action would have to be immoral based solely on the situation. Using the relations, the situation would already have to immoral since the relationship must already exist in the situation to draw from; but there seems to be no moral pronouncement though until emotion is involved.

In conclusion, reason alone is not adequate ground for morality because when all of its functions are exhausted, reason nor its functions can determine the morality of actions without another criteria.