

MORAL SKEPTICISM

NOTE ON THE READINGS

1. Exam questions will appear from all of the suggested readings.
2. (1) isn't true when some part of the text in the suggested readings is explicitly marked for omission.
3. Exam questions may appear from all of the lecture content.
4. When (3) conflicts with (1), (3) will supersede (1). Class lectures have authority over and above the prescribed readings.

NOTE ON THE DEPARTURE FROM TEXT (SKEPTICISM ABOUT MORALITY)

Every use of the phrase “moral truth” and the phrase “moral knowledge” is to be substituted with “moral reality” and “moral standards,” respectively.

If you see this ¶ symbol in any of the slides, be aware that the slide departs from the readings. Refer to point (4) of the previous slide.

THREE KINDS OF MORAL SKEPTICISM

1. We have no basic moral obligations to others.
2. Moral rules or codes are not objective.
3. Morality is make-believe and moral standards are not real.

EGOISM

LIBERTARIAN ARGUMENT

1. Our moral duties to help others have only two sources, **consent** and **reparation**.
2. Any duty to aid another person stems either from our voluntarily agreeing to accept that duty (i.e., our **consent**), or from our having violated someone's rights, and so owing a duty to **repair the wrong** we have done.

If I do not consent to help other people, and have done them no wrong, then I have no duty to help them

THE RING OF GYGES



See last slide on information about resources.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point.

– Glaucon to Socrates [The Republic, Book 2]

ARGUMENT FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

1. If psychological egoism is true, then we can't be altruistic.
2. If we can't be altruistic, then it can't be our duty to be altruistic.
3. Therefore, if psychological egoism is true, then it can't be our duty to be altruistic.
4. Psychological egoism is true.

Therefore, it can't be our duty to be altruistic.

WE ARE JUST BECAUSE IT IS BENEFICIAL

And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there, he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice.

– Glaucon to Socrates [The Republic, Book 2]

¶ ARGUMENT FROM EXPECTED BENEFIT

1. Whenever you act with a view to do good, you expect to be better off as a result.
2. If you expect to be better off as a result of your actions, then you are aiming to promote your self-interest.

Therefore, whenever you act with a view to do good, you are aiming to promote your self-interest.

WHO IS HAPPIER? HE WHO IS GOOD/JUST OR BAD/UNJUST?

And at his side let us place the just man in his nobleness and simplicity, wishing, as Aeschylus says, to be and not to seem good. There must be no seeming, for if he seem to be just he will be honored and rewarded, and then we shall not know whether he is just for the sake of justice or for the sake of honors and rewards; therefore, let him be clothed in justice only, and have no other covering; and he must be imagined in a state of life the opposite of the former. Let him be the best of men, and let him be thought the worst; then he will have been put to the proof; and we shall see whether he will be affected by the fear of infamy and its consequences. And let him continue thus to the hour of death; being just and seeming to be unjust. When both have reached the uttermost extreme, the one of justice and the other of injustice, let judgment be given which of them is the happier of the two...

RELATIVISM

An act is morally acceptable because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.

WHY IS RELATIVISM AN ATTRACTIVE DOCTRINE?

1. Morality is made for humans. There is no morality without human beings.
2. Provides a scientifically respectable account of morality.
3. The source of morality is society itself.
4. Implies egalitarianism, since all cultures/moral codes have equal standing.
5. Offers support for tolerance, since no culture/moral code is superior to another.

WHY IS RELATIVISM AN ATTRACTIVE DOCTRINE? (REVISED)

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ERROR THEORY

¶ BASIC TENANTS OF ERROR THEORY

1. There are no moral features in the world.
2. No moral judgments are real.
3. Our sincere moral judgments try, and always fail, to describe moral features of things.

Thus There is no such thing as morality or moral standards.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DISAGREEMENT

1. If well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about some claim, then that claim is not objectively true.
2. Well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about all moral claims.

Therefore, no moral claim is objectively true.

THE ARGUMENT FROM THE SCIENTIFIC TEST OF REALITY

1. If science cannot verify the existence of X, then the best evidence tells us that X does not exist.
2. Science cannot verify the existence of objective moral standards.

Therefore, the best evidence tells us that objective moral standards do not exist.

¶ THE ARGUMENT FROM CATEGORICAL NORMATIVE REASONS

1. If there are objective moral duties, then there are categorical reasons to obey them.
2. There are no categorical normative reasons.

Therefore, there are no objective moral duties.

SOCRATES' REPLY TO GLAUCON

THE HARMONY OF THE SOUL

See book 4 of The Republic, by Plato.



FURTHER READINGS/RESOURCES

- The Republic - Plato [Book 4] <https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.5.iv.html>
- Glaucon's challenge (See course resources for this lecture.)
- Picture credits and audio-visual for the story of Gyges: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfVmW6sNux8>