Nicholas Rogers

Professor Kain

Introduction to Philosophy, MWF 10:30am

23 March 2017

The Structure of Moral Theory

Some moral theories aim to describe preferable states of character and mental attitudes, while other theories focus on the morality of acts and beliefs. Two types of moral theories arise when thinking about morality this way: attitude-based theories, which aim to advance some psychological attitude as a moral good and judgement-based theories, which aim to deem actions as moral or immoral. These two theories divide philosophers into two camps well-suited to describe the difference between ethicists like Kant and Mill and others such as Aristotle, Nietzsche and Sartre. One may perceive that these philosophers' different theories speak past each other, but recasting the foundation of their beliefs and their objectives demonstrates that such theories make competing claims that interact with one another. Adequate moral theories must be judgement-based, thus capable of denoting actions and beliefs as right or wrong, favorable or unfavorable. This does not mean that judgement-based theories neither have anything to say about the content of attitude-based theories nor allow for the existence of attitude-based theories, merely that a moral theory must view normative beliefs through a judgement-based lens, allowing values from judgement-based theory to transcend those of an attitude-based one.

Judgement-based theories are concerned with deeming specific acts and beliefs as moral or immoral. The primary question, then, is what does it mean for an act or a person to be immoral? An attitude-based theorist would object to the belief that one can deem a person as immoral and so judgement-based theories fail. This objection relies on a faulty understanding of judgement. Abstractly, one can talk about concepts, which express some meaning, like the concept of murder,

and properties, which state truths about concepts. It does not make sense, however, to claim that someone *has* a property; no one has the property of murder. Instead, murder refers to a concept about an *action*. Properties can refer to myriad concepts, such as the normative notion of an unjustified killing or merely the act of one ending another's life. A murderer is one, then, who undertakes this action, not one who somehow has some property that is murder; that would not make sense. It is not logical to claim that someone is immoral in the sense that one somehow *possesses* the property of immorality. One cannot possess properties in the way one possesses something like, for example, an arm; properties merely describe facts about something, which, in this case, is someone's actions. Instead, claiming that someone is immoral best refers to the concept of the morality of actions that such person has taken. When judgement-based theories deem a person as immoral, they actually refer to a set of actions this person has performed over some arbitrary period of time. Therefore, judgement-based theories primarily concern themselves with examining normative facts behind actions and beliefs.

The main objection to attitude-based theories comes from the issue of moral disagreement. Namely, attitude-based theories cannot accurately explain, from a moral perspective, what happens when moral claims about actions conflict. Any theory will require people to take certain actions (even if that means inaction). This presents a problem for attitude-based theories because their beliefs may require conflicting actions, given the same circumstances, for different people at different points in time. For example, consider the following problem from an Aristotelian standpoint: a young man raised in abject poverty discovers he has great talent for playing the piano and that he receives great fulfillment from doing so, though he does not own the instrument. Call him Pianist A. One day his friend, who has no talent for piano-playing and distains the activity, leaves his house unattended and the gifted pianist discovers he could easily burgle his friend's forsaken piano without any notice. This example might rekindle unsettled beliefs about Aristotelian

virtue, but consider the same case with one small alteration: another gifted pianist, Pianist B, is in every way like Pianist A except that he receives no fulfillment from playing the piano. No matter the final product of applying an Aristotelian framework to such a thought experiment, the issue lies in the process involved in applying the framework. The Aristotelian theory must admit that there is no fundamental moral disagreement between the action of stealing and the action of not stealing. Since the attitude the actor holds is involved in determining the morality of either action, Pianist A and Pianist B would not be disagreeing about whether theft is right or wrong, but instead only if their attitudes require theft; for an attitude-based theory, these beliefs are just attitudes that either pianist holds. However, Pianist A and Pianist B clearly *are* disagreeing because the act of theft and the act of non-theft diametrically oppose one another; one cannot both steal and also not steal at the same time. The issue is that attitude-based theories cannot explain what morally goes on during this disagreement, only that its believers hold different attitudes. Obviously one can deny that theft is a normative action, but this seems highly unintuitive and likely problematic for a desirable moral theory. Additionally, judgement-based theories can admit that a moral theory will produce different answers for different people at different points in time, but under the same circumstances, like the pianist example, they will always produce the same, universal answer not contingent upon a set of attitudes.

Attitude-based theories fail to condemn actions that clearly need condemning and in cases where they can condemn intuitively wrong beliefs, their application often requires contrived and awkward arguments. Nietzsche, for example, can do little to effectively and univocally thwart Nazism from an objective perspective. If the Nazis truly believe that they are the übermench, what could Nietzsche terminally say other than "thus I willed it" (94)? Sartre encounters the same problem when attempting to explain the importance of recognizing freedom. Indeed, it may be true that one's choice to act or believe precedes the act itself or the acceptance of a belief, but this

does little to confer truth onto beliefs themselves. These attitude-based theories try to escape this moral awkwardness by claiming they concern themselves with higher-level values. Their claim is specious, for how can a higher-level set of values not first condemn clearly reprehensible acts? Nietzsche examines the sources from which he believes people fabricate value in their lives, but explaining the source of attitudes behind people's acceptance of normative beliefs does little to explain the legitimacy of those beliefs. At best this process sheds light on to cases where people accept the right beliefs for the wrong reasons; at worst, this process is merely an amusing modicum of mental gymnastics. For example, the student who believes that two plus two equals four because his teacher said so can still state mathematical truths without internalizing the complexities of number theory. Furthermore, his belief in the *horrific* nature of truth, that accepting truth would lead to human paralysis, holds little force in cases were certain acts are clearly immoral. It does not make sense to assert that if one recognized the normative truth behind the claim, "it is wrong to murder innocent people" it would destroy him; in fact, if everyone recognized that claim, it might one day save his life.

Judgement-based theories do well when examining the normative structure of actions and beliefs under certain circumstances. However, they alone fail to handle some questions that normative ethicists should probably still consider important. Questions like, "which house should I buy?", "where should I live?", "should I stay home tonight and work on a personal project or go to dinner with a friend?" present interesting problems for traditional judgement-based theories. Proponents of such theories would likely deny that these questions have normative weight, but that seems too dismissive — like a deflection. Perhaps the real problem is the ethical theories themselves; it is likely that they are incomplete. Imagining ethical theories like functions that take information as inputs and, through their unique processes, produce information about what is right versus wrong, favorable versus unfavorable as their outputs. Even when provided with all the relevant

facts, it is hard to imagine how Kantianism, for example, would have anything intelligible to say about starting a personal project versus seeing a movie. Since these choices are grounded in different values (things the chooser finds valuable), there *should* be a theory that tells one how to respond to those values. Perhaps this is where attitude-based theories come into play or perhaps there lies a complete judgement-based theory just over the horizon of discovery. Regardless, any valid attitude-based theory must still be beholden to the constraints of a judgement-based theory.

Works Cited

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Nietzsche, On Eternal Recurrence*. PDF.