

PHI334: Basics of Ethics | September 18

Today we begin a new unit, as it were, and turn from business ontology to the ethics aspect. To give you an overview of how we will proceed, consider the following breakdown:

Today: Basics of Ethics as a Field

Wednesday: Two frameworks—utilitarianism and deontology.

Friday: Third Framework—Virtue Ethics

Next week, Monday: the three frameworks, getting started with using them.

Next Wednesday: Nietzsche and Schopenhauer against traditional ethics.

Next Friday: an overall discussion, and a suggestion I have about ethics.

So here is the thing—ethics is a very convoluted field, especially nowadays. Philosophers today who say they do ethics usually focus on highly abstract problems that no one ever actually faces. If you are interested, I can share, otherwise we move on. Moreover, they take the main ethical frameworks we will discuss—deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics—and controvert them into highly abstract and systematized frameworks that *just happen to work* for their particular view. We will discuss this in relation to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. So, my attempt for these next two weeks is to teach you ethics in a way that is actually helpful.

So, then, I would like to now ask: what do you think, or what comes up, when you see the following words, **MORALITY** and **ETHICS**? Anything goes, and please do not feel shy, otherwise I will call a dentist in.

I think that in the US, most of the time, people hear about morality and ethics in relation to religion. Religion, for a long time, was the default moral philosophy for most people, this includes all the main abrahamic religions, and eastern ones as well.

What do you think the point of religion is? Religion, the major ones, are world views. They explain to the follower why the world is, what way it is, and so on and so forth, and ultimately, they provide a set of instructions for how to live a good life. For example, in Christianity, and please someone correct me because I am not really aware of the tenets of Christianity, you are given a view of the world—there is God, there is Heaven, there are certain actions that you can engage in and some you cannot, and if you follow certain rules, you will get to go to heaven. This is a form of morality and ethics, if you live a certain life, by taking certain actions and not others, you will get a reward. Judaism is more complicated, there is not an inherent reward from God for acting well—it is just that one is expected to be a Good Jew by following the rules. In Islam, I am unfamiliar, but I suspect there is a certain rule set that one obeys and in return you get a reward.

The idea here that religion expresses is that there are actions. Some actions are very bad, such as murder, and some actions are neutral, like eating with a spoon or a fork, and some actions are very good, presumably helping others or something along those lines. If you do the good actions, you will live a good life,

and also, you might get a reward after. Religion, then, is both a metaphysics and an ethics. I should explain what these words mean.

Metaphysics is that part of philosophy that studies the ultimate nature of reality. Ethics, as I have said, is a field that studies how to act correctly and or how to live a good life, basically, how to be morally good. One's metaphysics dictate one's actions. For example, if you believe animals are mere automatons, they are fine to eat. You might believe that animals have feelings and experience, in which case they suffer, you then think they are not okay to eat. But, metaphysics dictates your actions, since a metaphysics is basically your worldview. How you view the world informs how you act in it.

So, for the longest time, religion provided both, a theoretical view of the world, and a practical guide for how to live well in such a world. Today, things are a bit different, and so we seek an ethic that is able to be secular. The reason being that religion based ethics are not universally accepted, and moreover, the metaphysics are incompatible with each other.

There is also the Euthyphro Dilemma, which originates from Plato's dialogue, "Euthyphro," in which Socrates asks Euthyphro the following question:

"Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

The dilemma can be rephrased in the context of monotheism and morality as:

"Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?"

In simpler terms, this dilemma raises the question of whether moral values are independent of God (and God simply recognizes and commands them) or whether they are determined by God's will alone, making them arbitrary.

So, because of the issue with Divine Command Theory, which is at the basement of all religious moral theories, we must move on to other frameworks, which we will do Wednesday and onward. For now, I want to talk about ethics and morality as such though.

Today, there seems to be a kind of obsession in ethics with actions. Everything is evaluated either in terms of the outcome of action (**CONSEQUENTIALISM**) or in terms of the intent and purpose behind the action (**DEONTOLOGY**). This is unfortunate, I contend, because neither of these guarantees a good life. Do you know people who acted correctly, whatever that means, morally, all their lives, and yet they are unhappy? This is because merely acting morally does not guarantee a good life. Utilitarians will disagree, but Kantian Deontologists grant this.

I find this incredibly unhelpful because in my view, the very point of ethics, and specifically of philosophy, is to help us figure out how to live a life that is good. Recall that a good life is hard to define, but in general, the idea is that when you are dying, you look back and say "You know what, that was pretty good" and then you are gone. I do not think you will remember actions specifically when you do that, rather the overall life picture you have. So, I think that frameworks that focus on virtue are better for this purpose, hence why Virtue

Ethics as a framework will be the only one that is spared, as it were, from the major critique that Nietzsche and Schopenhauer deliver.