

PHI 334 Lesson Plan : Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on Traditional Ethics | September 27

Rough Idea

We covered, so far, utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. As a brief knowledge check, I would like for you to explain to me what each of these theories posits in relation to how we ought to act in the world.

I have mentioned that there are significant issues with both utilitarianism and deontology. Today, I would like to drive the point home by presenting to you some of the critiques levied against them by two prominent philosophers: Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both of these philosophers are German and lived mostly in the 1800s. Schopenhauer was the eldest of the two, and went on to influence Nietzsche significantly. But that is just for context. I am going to now delve into the critiques.

Schopenhauer's Perspective

Critique of Deontology: Schopenhauer criticized deontological ethics, primarily associated with Immanuel Kant, for its reliance on abstract, a priori principles and duties, detached from the consequential realities of human actions. He argued that Kant's categorical imperative, which posits that one should act only according to that maxim by which one can at the same time will that it should become a universal law, lacks practical applicability. Schopenhauer contended that moral actions are not motivated by rational duty but are driven by innate desires and the metaphysical will.

The notion of a "moral law" within us, according to Schopenhauer, is an illusion, and it is the inherent will-to-live that fundamentally drives our actions. He proposed that the relentless striving and wanting embedded in the human condition lead to suffering, and adherence to abstract moral principles does not alleviate this suffering but often exacerbates it by denying the inherent nature of human beings.

Note the incoherence of the murderer at the door example, and how disconnected we felt with what Kant counseled—that we tell the truth. Schopenhauer would maintain, as one of you mentioned, that you have indeed every right to kill the murderer seeking to murder your friend. This is because for Schopenhauer, the will to life is at the root of our actions, as well as empathy.

Critique of Utilitarianism: Schopenhauer also criticized utilitarianism, a moral philosophy that posits that the right action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or pleasure. He argued that this philosophy reduces human motivation to a form of egotistical hedonism, merely concerned with the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. This reductionist perspective, according to Schopenhauer, overlooks the depth and complexity of human experience and morality.

Schopenhauer's moral philosophy emphasized compassion and a metaphysical connection between individuals. He argued that true morality arises from an intuitive recognition of the suffering of others and a desire to alleviate it. This

is in stark contrast to the utilitarian approach, which he perceived as a calculative and external assessment of actions based on their consequences, lacking a profound connection to the intrinsic nature of morality.

Remember the trolley problem? The utilitarian thinks that he or she who pulls the lever ought to feel good about themselves, for they did the right thing, morally speaking. But this view does not take into account the fact that even if pulling the lever is the right thing to do, the psychological harm of having done so is immense. You will feel pain and have nightmares having sacrificed the one man versus the five. In a sense, and this is also where the notion that utilitarianism appeals to the analytic sort of person comes into play. Notice that the very best scientists and engineers often lack in empathy—this is not a critique—but rather, a simple fact.

Nietzsche's Perspective

Critique of Deontology: Nietzsche, with his dynamic and radical philosophical approach, critiqued deontological moral systems for promoting what he termed “slave morality.” He perceived deontology as a value system that emerged as a reaction of the weak, the slaves, against the masters, the strong. Slave morality, according to Nietzsche, values humility, sympathy, and meekness, as it seeks to subvert the values of the strong, which are characterized by nobility, power, and assertiveness.

He argued that deontological systems stem from resentment—a psychological state marked by suppressed feelings of envy and hatred, coupled with an inability to act on them. The values of deontology, such as duty and obligation, are manifestations of this resentment, reflecting a denial of life and its inherent instincts and desires. Nietzsche contended that deontological ethics promote self-denial and the suppression of the will to power, the fundamental driving force of human beings, leading to a negation of life's vitality.

For context, as I have said in the past, Kant's ethics are a kind of Christian ethic, just secularized and with appeal to the moral law or the categorical imperative, as opposed to God as the issuer of commands. However, Nietzsche's view on Christian ethics is bleak—he thinks that if we look at the history, Christianity is a reaction against Roman rule. He notes that Jesus counsels his followers to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to turn the other cheek, and so on. It is a kind of moral theory that puts you down, while promising good things in the afterlife. Kant is the same, except he does not even promise happiness.

Critique of Utilitarianism: Nietzsche's critique of utilitarianism revolves around his concept of “herd morality.” He perceived utilitarianism as reflecting the values and preferences of the masses, promoting conformity and mediocrity at the expense of individuality and excellence. The utilitarian emphasis on the greatest happiness for the greatest number is, according to Nietzsche, a manifestation of the weak asserting their values over the individual, leading to a leveling down of humanity.

Utilitarianism, like deontology, is viewed by Nietzsche as reactive, emerging from a place of weakness and a resentment against life's inherent suffering. It is a morality that does not affirm life with all its complexities, pain, and pleasure,

but rather seeks to escape from it by prioritizing happiness as the ultimate goal and measure of life's worth. Nietzsche argued that this could lead to nihilism, a rejection of all moral and religious principles, as it devalues life when happiness seems unattainable.

Indeed, consider the following. Many today claim that we should forego scientific development into niche things, that we ought to forego space exploration, and forego trying to achieve world historical greatness, since we have far more pressing things on this planet, namely, for example, starvation. Calculus wise, yes, there will be more pleasure and utility and happiness all around if we feed the starving world wide, but there will also be an absence of crowding achievements that are only possible if people suffer. The same can be said of homelessness. There are more empty homes in the US than there are homeless people, but the homes that are empty are sometimes grandiose homes that would not be built if they were not such that almost no one could afford to live in them. Nietzsche's contention is that we lose greatness and beauty if we seek to maximize pleasure and contentment for everyone.

How you view this is up to you. Nietzsche was an aristocratic elitist, and this is not a critique, merely a factual statement that he himself admits. He proudly thought that most people were incapable of greatness, hence why they flock to religion and morality, and why also they seek to impose their views on everyone else. Again, I am not endorsing this view, rather merely sharing his critique for your consideration.

Nietzsche's Meta-Critique: Beyond these critiques, Nietzsche's meta-point delves into the very construction of moral theories. He proposed that moral theories are not objective truths discovered by philosophers through rational inquiry but are subjective constructions, reflections of the philosophers' personal intuitions, and prejudices. Philosophers, according to Nietzsche, have hunches about moral truths and then construct elaborate "castles in the sky" to justify and rationalize these hunches.

This meta-critique implies that moral philosophies, whether deontological, utilitarian, or otherwise, are inherently biased and are not universal truths about morality. They are constructs that arise from the subjective experiences, preferences, and desires of their proponents, and as such, they reveal more about the philosophers who propound them than about objective moral reality. Kant was famously closeted, a pietist Christian whose parents beat him for any perceived sin, and was well known to exhibit what we would today call obsessive compulsive personality disorder. Utilitarianism was devised by Jeremy Bentham, a known science-fetishist who thought that we were just fully rational calculating automata that merely need to maximize pleasure. He notoriously had an obsession with sexual pleasure and food.

This perspective challenges the foundational assumptions of moral philosophy, prompting a reevaluation of how we approach ethics and morality. It invites a reflection on the role of individual biases, cultural influences, and existential experiences in shaping our moral outlook and raises questions about the possibility of objective moral truth.

Conclusion

The point of this lecture was to show you that rule and action based moral theories usually are subject to these criticisms. You might ask: what about virtue ethics? Though we usually reference Aristotle for virtue ethics, they are rather a common folk based way of acting. They are rooted in Aristocratic ideas, hence immune from Nietzsche's critiques, and they advocate for empathy and dealing with people head on, hence saved from Schopenhauer's critiques. We will adapt VE for contemporary issues on Friday, as well as go over your second exam.