

Philosophical Ethics

Kevin J. Browne

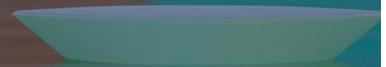
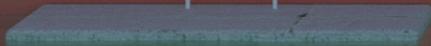


Table of Contents

Introduction
What is Morality?
The Challenge of Relativism
Does Morality Depend on Religion?
Psychological Egoism
Ethical Egoism
The Idea of a Social Contract
Utilitarianism
The Debate Over Utilitarianism
Deontology
Feminist Ethics
Virtue Ethics
What Would a Satisfactory Moral Theory Be Like?
Recent Ethical Theories
Final Thoughts
About the Author
Recommended Reading

Introduction

The first chapter in Bernard Williams's book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is titled Socrates' Question and as Williams points out "it is not a trivial question...what we are talking about is how one should live." This is the subject matter of this class and throughout the semester we'll investigate various answers to the question of how one should live. The very nature of an ethics class is different from many other classes you've taken. The difference is there from the very start and lies somewhat hidden in the word "should."

In many areas of knowledge and theory like physics, economics, sociology, and psychology, the central concern is over getting the facts straight. We are trying to find out how things *are*. Our theories in these areas are largely descriptive and predictive. This is not true in ethics. Sure, we're concerned about facts and predictions but there's another important element. That element is normative. This is a fancy word that simply means we're concerned with how things *ought* to be. This is what makes ethics unique and potentially controversial.

Disagreements about facts are common in such areas as physics and the social sciences. Sometimes they come to blows but as often as not the disagreements are restricted to polite academic discussions. In ethics and morality, there's more at stake precisely because we're asking normative questions and these inevitably involve value judgments. We're trying to formulate an answer to how we ought to live and this is a very personal issue but also very social since we are social beings. Our answers affect others and their answers affect us. Sometimes we find ourselves at odds with one another and what makes matters worse is the disagreements are much more difficult to resolve. This is because we're not simply dealing with observable facts. We're not just dealing with how things are, but with how they ought to be.

What I want to do this semester is to invite you to join me in a discussion of precisely these issues. However, I want to assure you that this discussion will be civil and I am not trying to persuade you or tell you what to think. There's always a fear in classes like this that the professor will try to unduly influence students or tell them what they ought to think and feel and believe about certain issues. I don't think this is my job. What I want to do is to expose you to some of the conversations that philosophers have on the questions of ethics and morality and allow you a forum to engage in those conversations as well. The hardest part about many moral issues is

discussing them. This is one of the most important values that philosophy has in ethics.

We shouldn't underestimate this factor. Philosophy provides us with a method for analyzing concepts and arguments and as we'll see throughout the semester this will be useful in helping us to sort through moral dilemmas. Philosophers have been thinking about these problems for centuries and we can certainly benefit from that collected wisdom. In closing, I want to consider four other important points that may get the conversation started for us.

1. Ethics and Morality: These two terms are often thought of and used synonymously. This is not entirely correct but there are similarities since both words have their origin in common. One is Greek and the other is the Latin word for custom. However, for us, we'll use them to denote different concepts. We can consider morality as the set of beliefs that we have regarding right and wrong. Ethics can be understood as the method for justifying these beliefs and the set of rules which guide us in applying them.

2. Ethical Theory: We can think of ethical theory as a decision model. As we'll see the critical element of morality is the need to make decisions regarding fairly difficult issues. What we need is a well-reasoned method for taking the facts and making the best decision we can in terms of our moral principles. This often involves the process of judgment.

3. Judgment: Many people have a bad impression of the notion of judgment. Who are we to judge other people and their moral beliefs? The simple fact of the matter is that judgment is an important part of human life and unavoidable in the realm of morality. What we need to do is make sure our judgments are well reasoned and justified. But, we cannot refrain from judging. Think about this. If you're married or in a relationship you had to make a judgment when you entered the relationship. Unless you just randomly picked someone to marry! You can probably easily think of other examples. The difficulty in ethics and morality is how to make these judgments with the facts at hand.

4. The Is-Ought Problem: The reason this is so difficult is because of something called the is-ought problem. This has probably been around ever since people began thinking of ethics but David Hume formulated it in concrete terms in the 18th century. The problem is that you cannot deduce from a set of facts what ought to be. For example, murders occur in this country. That's a fact. But, can we deduce from that fact that murders ought to occur? No. What's especially troubling is that we also cannot

deduce that murders ought not to occur. That's the problem. How we solve this problem will be an important part of our look at ethical theory.

To illustrate consider this case. You are a student in a writing course and have the assignment to write a 10-page paper. You know the following facts: the professor has a strong policy against plagiarism and being caught with a plagiarized paper means automatic failure of the course, studies show that at least 75% of students claim to cheat in one form or another during their college career, papers are easily available for purchase online that fit your assigned topic, you have a friend who has told you that you can use his paper from last semester. So, you have a decision to make! You can either decide what must be done and provide a good justification for this decision or ask for more facts first. But, you can only appeal to the facts to make your decision. If you ask for more facts I can provide them but ask yourself how will those additional facts help us answer the question of what they should do? Hume's point is that no additional facts will help.

Please bear in mind that the point of this case is to get us to think about the process involved in making decisions with an ethical component. Don't simply say that it is not our place to decide or that this is a personal issue or that you would never find yourself in such a situation. Of course, it is a personal issue but every case we examine will be a personal issue. The point of examining such cases is to force us to think about ethical issues in context. One way to think about these cases is as follows. At a certain point in your life, you may find yourself in a similar situation. Thinking about these cases now allows you to "rehearse" what you might have to think through in such a situation. The questions we need to consider include: How does one go about making a decision in such a situation? What factors are important? What principles can assist someone in making such a decision? From a philosophical point of view, in this class, we are also interested in questions such as: What justification can be provided for the principles used to make such a decision? Do some ethical principles provide conflicting advice in such cases? How do we resolve these conflicts?

A few other comments might be in order at the beginning of our investigation into ethics. A common question that prevents many people from taking a stand regarding issues of right and wrong is the question: Who are we to judge others? I've heard this question from students as well as adults serving on jury duty. I suspect it is a quite common question and one to which most who ask it believe they have the answer. Namely, it is not our place to judge others. After all, doesn't the Bible counsel not to make judgments: "judge not lest ye be judged?" But, we cannot live without

making judgments. The question philosophy can help with, in particular through the study of ethics, is how to make good judgments.

However, before we can directly address this point, we need to explore some preliminary topics. Why are so many people reluctant to make judgments? I believe this comes from three sources. First, people may believe that judgments are inherently negative. Second, people may believe that judgments imply objective standards, which they believe, do not exist. Third, people may believe that making judgments will cause unnecessary controversy or hurt feelings.

Let's begin by examining the notion of judgment itself. I believe most people's stated reluctance to make judgments (which differs from their action of making judgments) comes from the mistaken belief that judgments are inherently negative. But, judgment itself is a neutral term. Judgments can be negative such as "she's a bad dresser," "he's not a kind person," etc. However, judgments can also be positive when we favorably evaluate someone's athletic skill, charismatic personality, organizational skills in the office, or cooking skills. In each case, positive or negative, we are making an evaluative claim. My claim is simply that judgments are unavoidable. I sometimes ask my students who are reluctant to make judgments if they are married or in a serious relationship. When they say yes I point out that this fact alone illustrates that they must have made some judgments. Unless of course they simply choose the first person on the street they saw to marry! But, even in this case, they must have made the judgment that this was a good way to pick a mate. Judgments do imply objective standards and the problem many people have with this is their belief that there are no such standards. But, as we'll discuss later in the Relativism Lecture, there are good reasons for thinking that there are some objective standards.

A third reason for the reluctance to make judgments is very likely people's fear of causing controversy or hurting others' feelings. Discussing controversial ethical issues can be difficult for many precisely because they have strong emotional content. While no one suggests completely ignoring one's emotions when addressing these issues, it is beneficial and constructive to be able to distinguish reason from emotion and to allow reason to guide and inform our emotions. This may sound like an impossible task but it can be done. Several useful philosophical insights might make this task easier. First, we should distinguish the person making a statement or argument from the person himself. Second, we should distinguish between offense and harm. Lastly, we can benefit from the insights of the Stoic philosophers who have had a strong influence on the psychological school of thought known as rational emotive therapy. I won't be able to address all of

these points in sufficient detail here. But perhaps an introduction to each will help clarify the issues and inspire you to learn more about these useful insights so that you can benefit from them, not only in this class but also in other classes and perhaps in your life in general.

In logic, there is a fallacy of reasoning known as "argument against the person." The reason this is a logical fallacy (mistake in reasoning) is that there is a difference between the person and what that person says. If you disagree with something I say that doesn't mean you are disagreeing with me as a person. In other words, if you disagree with me it doesn't mean you are insulting me or attacking me personally. You may very well like me as a person but dislike something I think or say. For example, if I say I think golf is a great way to relax you may disagree with that. But does that mean you are insulting me or does that mean you dislike me? No. Now while that is a fairly tame example, logically speaking the same should hold for other issues as well. Perhaps you disagree with someone's view of capital punishment. You can say that you disagree and argue passionately for your view just as they can. But that does not mean that you dislike that person or are insulting or attacking them. Recognizing this should allow us to engage in spirited discussions without worrying about offending anyone. We just have to remember that we can discuss an issue without personally attacking or insulting someone.

Another useful distinction that will help us is the distinction between offense and harm. A good resource on this subject is Lou Marinoff's book *The Big Questions*. In one chapter he asks the question "if you're offended are you harmed? The answer turns out to be no. Consider this. Suppose someone walks up to you and steps on your toe. You have no choice about whether that's going to hurt. It is! So, here you are harmed. Being harmed is involuntary, you have no choice about whether to feel pain or not. Now, offense is not like this. If someone walks up to you and says "wow, you have really big feet" you have a choice to make. The choice is how you will react to this comment. I'm sure you've heard the expressions "no offense intended" and "none taken." These are very revealing. Offense is something that can be offered and it's also something that can be taken. But, importantly for us, offense is also something that can be refused. You have a choice in this and that's what distinguishes offense from harm.

As human beings, we are emotional beings. But, we are not slaves to our emotions. We can reason and think and this can aid us in our emotional reactions. This was a very important insight of the ancient Stoic philosophers. The basic idea behind stoicism is that we have no control over external circumstances. What we do have control over is our attitude

towards them. As Epictetus once said, "it is not things which disturb us, but our attitude towards them." This perfectly sums up the stoic idea as well as how to handle offense. Similarly, the Roman emperor and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius said "if you are pained by any external thing, it is not the thing that disturbs you, but your judgment about it. And, it is in your power to wipe out this judgment now."

Of course, this takes skill and practice but it can be learned. One good approach to learning this is discussed by the psychologist Albert Ellis who developed something called rational emotive therapy. His approach is very stoic since he maintains that what really disturbs us is not our emotions themselves but our rational (or more correctly irrational) beliefs. It is our beliefs that in large part determine what our emotional response to a situation will be. If we can formulate rational beliefs then our emotional responses won't be ones of depression, anxiety, or offense. One way to begin is to reflect on why you're having the emotional reaction that you're having. As Ellis would advise, ask what beliefs you have that are contributing to your emotional response. Then ask whether those beliefs are reasonable.

Chances are if the beliefs are unreasonable then your emotional response may be causing you to become unhappy or upset needlessly. It should go without saying that there is nothing at all wrong with emotions or having them. But, if our emotions are ones of depression and unhappiness then it's good to know that something can be done to address that. Notice that while we're discussing many emotionally charged issues the attempt is always being made to discuss them from the standpoint of reason. Of course, emotions inform our reason just as our reason informs emotions. The trick is not to allow either side to dominate to the exclusion of the benefits of the other.

Another very common question related to ethics regards who is to decide what counts as right and wrong. In large part, this question is misguided and reveals a lack of a clear understanding of the basic principles of ethical reasoning. Once again, philosophy can provide useful insight here. In particular, the insights of Wittgenstein prove helpful by illustrating that there are certain ways of living for human beings that all humans share; what Wittgenstein called forms of life. Just as all humans share a need to eat and seek shelter so too all humans have an interest in furthering their interests in terms of what will bring them happiness. But, don't radically different things bring people happiness? Not really. When you seriously investigate what brings happiness you find a great deal of similarity across cultures and times. Epicurus once said that all that is required for happiness is

friendship, freedom, and contemplation. Though Epicurus pointed this out centuries ago, these values still provide the basis for happiness today.

It is when we begin to investigate more specific issues that differences seem to occur and tempt people to conclude that there are no values in common and since ethics is just each person's opinion anyway, we are left with the problem of figuring out who should decide what is right and wrong. But, the mistake occurs in thinking that there are no values in common and ethics is nothing more than opinion. If we look at ethics as being deeply rooted in how we live as human beings we begin to see that there is much we have in common and far from individuals deciding for themselves, we arrive at ethical principles which naturally further our interests as human beings. I am not simply of the opinion that murder is wrong. It does not further human interests neither of the murderer or the victim. Yes, many ethical questions are more difficult to resolve but look closely at the disagreements that seem to be occurring when people discuss such issues as abortion. Are they really disagreeing about fundamental values and interests or how best to preserve these values and further these interests?

What is Morality?

This is a question we'll take the entire semester to examine but we may benefit from some introductory remarks to give us some direction as to how to answer the question. As we'll see, there are many answers to the question of morality and Rachels suggests that we begin by attempting to formulate a "minimum conception." Given all the variations in ethical theory, there may be some common ground that all these theories share. Perhaps this common ground can be seen by looking at how people attempt to resolve moral dilemmas. Most problems we encounter in morality are not cases where there is a clear right answer and a clear wrong answer and we choose the right answer. No, most problems are dilemmas. That is, there are several options each involving problems themselves and no one solution is perfect. In a dilemma, there is often a conflict of values and applying one often betrays another. Consider the cases Rachels gives us. Each involves a conflict that is not easily resolvable.

But, if you look at each case you'll notice that the attempt to come to some resolution proceeds similarly. We attempt to analyze the facts of the case and provide reasons for acting in a certain way. This might provide us with some clues as to important factors in morality.

1. We need to establish the facts of the case we're addressing.
2. We need to examine the reasons for acting.
3. We need to make a decision.

Each of these can be very difficult. For example, in many medical cases, it is often not easy to establish just what the facts are. Is the patient terminal? Is there any chance of recovery? Is the patient in pain? These are important factors to consider when we formulate our reasons for acting.

The purpose of any ethical theory is to help us through step two. We need a guide to formulate reasons for acting and evaluate whether those reasons are justified or not. Consider some of the arguments offered in the cases in chapter one:

The benefits argument

The argument that we should not use people as means to an end

The argument from the wrongness of killing

The argument that we should save as many as we can

The argument from the sanctity of human life

The argument from the wrongness of discriminating against the handicapped

The slippery slope argument

These arguments will not be on point in every case. For some cases, other arguments may apply. The point is that we need a way to sift through the various arguments and decide what the right thing to do is. Needless to say, this is often very difficult.

A third factor that adds to the difficulty is the need to make a decision. Unlike many philosophical issues which can be debated for centuries, moral dilemmas demand immediate action. Eventually, and usually sooner rather than later, a decision must be made. Often we won't have time to sift through every argument and every fact. This is why a class in morality is useful. It allows us the time to deliberate and analyze our arguments and prepare for a time when we may not have the luxury of time. If we can familiarize ourselves with moral reasoning in advance of needing it we can be more comfortable in our decision making under pressure when our reasoning capacity is not as sharp as it needs to be to evaluate competing claims and values. The Stoic philosopher Seneca called this pre-meditation. We should take time to reflect and plan for what might happen because when the time comes we have to act and may not be able to think through all the details. As he put it, "reckon on everything, expect everything." We'll discuss the Stoics later in the semester.

Have we arrived at a useful minimum conception of morality? The key seems to lie in step two. As Rachels puts it "moral judgments must be backed by good reasons." Why? Because moral judgments involve what ought to be the case. Not only for ourselves but for others as well. In most cases, moral judgments affect others and so we need to make sure our reasons for acting are well justified. Think of it this way. Suppose I tell you that you ought to give a portion of your income to charity. You may immediately agree with me but then again you may not. In any case, you should want me to give you a reason why you should do this. And, you should want the reason to be a pretty good one, that is, it should be well justified. Suppose my reason is that I said so. Is that good enough? It shouldn't be. You should want more and I'm guessing that you already do.

This brings us to the second point in Rachel's minimum conception of morality. Morality should involve impartial reasoning which takes into account the interests of all the people involved not just my own. For many of life's decisions, a self-referential reason is just fine. For example, you ask me why I drink orange juice in the morning and I answer by saying I like orange juice. I eat the way I want to, I dress the way I want to, and I read what I want to. But, for many moral decisions "I want to" doesn't seem like a sufficiently justifiable reason. Is it OK to harm another person just because you want to? Is it OK to cheat on an exam just because I want to? The

answer to both questions seems to be no. We may need to examine some ethical theories in detail to see exactly why, but even at this early point in the semester Rachels has provided us with some powerful examples of why the answer is no. That is, why does morality have to involve impartiality? The simple answer is that our actions affect others and because of this we should take their interests into account. As Rachels points out this rule prevents us from acting arbitrarily or treating people differently when there's no good reason for doing so.

This brings up an interesting final point about rules. As we'll see each ethical theory we examine attempts to formulate a rule or general principle to help us reason through ethical questions. Of course, rules have exceptions and can often be difficult to apply but this doesn't change the fact that we need rules and can benefit from having them. Given this, we should work against the existence of arbitrary rules. To be beneficial, they need to be fixed. To illustrate consider this example. Suppose we want to play cards and the rules are not fixed but rather fluid and arbitrary. So, sometimes my two pair beats your full house. Now, do you want to play me poker? I didn't think so! Of course, rules are subject to modification but we do need a foundation that is more or less stable to make the process of modification predictable. This is why our conversation concerning ethical theories will take into account theories that are centuries old as well as those of more recent philosophers. We can see the process of development but also recognize how many of our principles have remained stable over time and seem to be universal and timeless. It is to this question of whether there are universal moral principles that we now turn as we examine relativism.

The Challenge of Relativism

The first ethical theory we'll consider is relativism. This is a very popular theory but also deeply flawed as well and it is because of these flaws that we'll have to move beyond relativism to find an adequate ethical theory to base our moral judgments upon. Relativism is an ancient ethical theory and has its roots in the Greek philosopher Protagoras who once said "man is the measure of all things." What he meant by this was that each individual is their arbiter for right and wrong. Relativism can be seen at this individual level and still has adherents. In his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind* Allan Bloom wrote "there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of almost every student entering the university believes or says he believes, truth is relative." So, this view is pervasive still. But, being widely accepted does not make a view correct. Let's examine relativism and some of its problems.

As Rachels points out, relativism has several formulations:

Different societies have different moral codes.

There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code better than another's.

There is no "universal truth" in ethics; that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.

Are these claims correct? The first seems to be a mere observation and a correct one at that. The others seem to follow naturally and when we think about it seem equally true. The main argument for the truth of relativism is based on the seemingly obvious claim that different societies have different practices and codes of morality. Just consider the examples Rachels gives such as the difference between the Greeks and the Callatians in how they deal with death. Or the differences between us and the Eskimos when it comes to infanticide. So, from these differences, it follows that there are no objective moral standards. There are several problems with this line of reasoning which we'll consider in turn.

1. The premises do not support the conclusion.
2. Relativism implies that we cannot make moral judgments about our own culture or others.
3. Relativism implies that there cannot be moral progress.
4. There really is no fundamental disagreement on moral values.
5. All cultures have some values in common.
6. Relativism is self-refuting.

Let's look at each of these in turn. First, the argument for relativism is not based on sound logic. From the premise that different cultures have different moral practices, it does not follow that there are no objective moral principles. The flaw in this argument can be seen in the following example. Did you know that there are still some cultures that believe the earth is flat? There is still an organization called the Flat Earth Society! So, different cultures (and even individuals within a culture) disagree about the shape of the earth. But from this, it doesn't follow that there is no objective shape of the Earth. This is nonsense. From the mere fact of disagreement, it does not follow that there is no objective answer. This is not only true for empirical questions like the shape of the Earth but also true for ethical questions as well.

The very disagreement we witness implies that there are objective standards. The question is simply what these are and how they can be justified. If ethics were only a matter of opinion and cultural belief what would be the point of disagreement? Disagreement only makes sense if there's something objective to disagree about. But, relativism denies this.

From the perspective of relativism the mere fact that a culture believes something makes it so. But, does believing something make it so? Not the last time I checked. If it did I could believe I'm on the beach in Hawaii and it would be true. Unfortunately, life doesn't work like this! You might respond to this by saying "well perhaps it's true for you." But what does this mean? What could it mean to say that something like this was true for me alone? We'll have to consider this issue later when we address subjectivism in ethics.

A second problem with relativism is that it implies that we cannot make judgments about our own culture or other cultures as well. You might think this is a good thing. After all, who are we to judge that another culture is doing something immoral? But if we cannot judge other cultures then we must condone things like enslaving people, genocide, gross violations of human rights, etc. Are we really prepared to say that the mere fact that a culture believes these are right means that they are right and morally justifiable?

To see the problem let's consider the fact that relativism implies that we cannot even judge our cultural practices. Around 1820 in this country slavery was practiced and even thought to be morally permissible by some. So, the culture said this practice was fine. Was it? Weren't there people making well-reasoned arguments for abolition? If relativism is true then their arguments

would have been for naught. They would've had no basis for the claim that slavery was (and is) immoral. This leads to the third problem with relativism, the denial of moral progress.

Take the slavery example again. I'll also mention another example as well to help. In 1820 slavery existed in this country, now it doesn't. Are we better off without slavery? Also, in 1820 women did not have the right to vote, now they do. Are we better off because of this? I hope you answered yes to both questions! But, consider these answers from the point of view of relativism. How can you say one situation is better? You can't because this implies an objective standard by which to measure better or worse. But this is precisely what relativism denies. So, there can be no such thing as progress in the realm of morality because progress implies the possibility of things getting better (or worse) which implies an objective standard.

Interestingly enough, the foundation for relativism that cultures have fundamentally different moral practices may be false. This may sound strange to say since all we have to do is look at a culture's practices and we can see they are fundamentally different. Look at some Hindu countries where the people don't eat cows even if they're starving. Look at the Eskimos who practice infanticide. But, as Rachels points out there may be more to the story than these surface observations. Consider the Eskimos. Shouldn't we ask why they do what they do? Shouldn't we examine the entire context of their practice before we judge it? If we do this and consider for example the harsh environment and the fact that they do not indiscriminately kill babies we can see that their moral beliefs are not radically different from ours, only how they practice them.

The example of a culture that doesn't eat cows provides another useful insight. As Rachels points out the difference here may not be their values but their beliefs. They share the same values as we do but because they have different beliefs, their practices are different. So we do have some moral principles in common after all.

And, for a complex society to exist, there must be some objective moral principles despite relativism's denial of these. Rachels points to three in particular.

1. truth-telling
2. caring for the young
3. no indiscriminate killing

Every culture must have these values in common otherwise they couldn't even exist. Sure, some people lie sometimes, some people do not adequately care for their young, and some people kill others. But, the general principles hold for the majority of cases. If they didn't we would likely not even be here!

What Rachels is arguing for here is what he terms a culturally neutral standard for judging right and wrong. This is the whole point of ethical theory to adequately formulate just such a principle. Rachels suggests a tentative first formulation as follows: we should ask whether the practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people who are affected by it. This seems like a good first step and one we'll build on throughout the semester.

Still, some people are reluctant to abandon relativism. One argument is that relativism encourages tolerance. We should be tolerant of other individuals and cultures. But, look closely at this argument and you'll see a problem. Tolerance is a moral value. By saying we should practice this we seem to be implying that it's a universal principle. But remember, relativism denies these! So, the relativist is contradicting themselves. Another way of saying this is to say that relativism is self-refuting.

The basic idea of relativism is that there are no objective moral principles. But this claim itself is an objective moral principle. So, if relativism is true, it must be false!

Of course, we can learn something from the basic sentiment of relativism. It's only when we take it to an extreme and use it as the basis for morality entirely that we run into trouble. Come to think of it, this problem of taking things to extremes might be the problem with many ethical theories. A wit once said "all generalizations are dangerous. Even this one." Relativism offers a correction to moral absolutism but taken too far breaks down. We've examined what happens when you take relativism too far at the cultural level. What happens when you take it to the level of the individual? This we'll examine next in the chapter on subjectivism.

Subjectivism

Listen to any conversation about a moral or political issue and it won't take long for you to hear the phrase. "I feel..." People will say "I feel abortion is wrong," or "I feel that we should get out of Iraq." Is this all there is to morality and ethics; just feelings? The 18th-century philosopher David Hume thought so. "Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment." The famous economist, and good friend of Hume, Adam Smith wrote an entire work titled *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*. Morality begins with our feelings about our fellow human beings such as sympathy, compassion, and empathy. But is this all there is to morality? One theory says precisely that: subjectivism. As we'll see there are actually two different versions of this theory. The first we'll examine is called simple subjectivism. The second, slightly more refined but still somewhat flawed version, is called emotivism.

The basic idea of simple subjectivism is that all statements of morality are simply statements of approval or disapproval. So, if I say "murder is wrong" I am simply saying "I disapprove of murder." If you say "capital punishment is morally correct" you're simply saying that you approve of capital punishment. Nothing more.

Despite its intuitive appeal, simple subjectivism has several serious problems. The first is that it cannot account for our fallibility as human beings. Let's face it, we all make mistakes. Certainly, this applies to our moral judgments as well doesn't it? But, simple subjectivism seems to deny the very possibility of making a mistake. Being wrong becomes impossible because of what simple subjectivism says about our moral statements. Since all we're saying is that we approve or disapprove of something, it seems unlikely that we could be wrong about what our preferences, or as Hume puts it, our tastes regarding something were. If you like coffee, for example, you're not going to mistakenly say you dislike it are you? But, in the realm of morality, it seems clear that we can, and do, make mistakes. So, simple subjectivism cannot be correct.

A second objection is that this theory cannot account for the disagreements we have in the area of morality. Consider the example in the book about homosexuality. One person says that homosexuality is immoral and the other says that homosexuality is moral. Clearly, they are disagreeing, right? Not according to simple subjectivism. Think again about what these moral statements really mean in simple subjectivist terms. To say "homosexuality is immoral" is simply to say "I disapprove of homosexuality." Now, if you

believe homosexuality is immoral and say this to someone are they going to disagree with the claim that you disapprove of it? Of course not! And suppose they respond by saying "homosexuality is moral." Since all this means is that they approve of it, you're not going to disagree with them either are you? No. So, there is no disagreement. But wait. There really is a disagreement here isn't there? The fact that simple subjectivism cannot account for it is the problem.

Given these problems, perhaps we should look for an alternative and that's precisely what the American philosopher Charles Stevenson found in the 20th century. Emotivism is a more refined version of subjectivism. The main difference is what it maintains about the existence of moral facts. Simple subjectivism claimed that there were facts in moral statements. However, they were not objective facts about the world around us, but rather, facts about ourselves. The facts being what we approve and disapprove of. Emotivism disagrees with this and denies that there are such things as moral facts at all. So, moral statements are not factual statements about how we feel, they are expressions of those feelings. As Rachels puts it, we're not reporting an attitude in emotivism, we're expressing the attitude. So, when we say "murder is wrong" we're simply saying "murder, boo!" or "murder, yuck!" Or you can think of it like this. Moral statements can be interpreted as commands (which are also not factual since we cannot say that a command is true or false). So, "murder is immoral" could be interpreted as "Don't commit murder."

The advantages of emotivism over simple subjectivism are that the problems which plagued simple subjectivism are not problems for emotivism. The problem of fallibility is gone because emotivism is not saying that there's any factual content to moral statements. Since we're not stating facts, the question of being right or wrong simply doesn't apply. Also, emotivism can account for disagreement. How? Well, clearly emotivism would not say that moral arguments involve factual disagreements, but, as Stevenson points out, they do involve disagreements in our attitudes. This differs from simple subjectivism which claimed that moral statements were about our attitudes. Given this, it could not account for our disagreements. But, emotivism says that moral statements are expressions of our attitudes.

Are there any problems with emotivism? Yes, two in fact which turn out to be very serious. First, emotivism denies the use of reason in ethics. Secondly, it denies the existence of moral facts. In my estimation 3.5 and 3.6 are two of the most important sections in Rachels' book. Important because they lay the foundation for any theory of morality and remind us

that moral discourse is based on something more than just opinion and emotion.

Are there moral facts? David Hume denied that there were and this denial has carried forward very well and is still a pervasive attitude not only among philosophers but the public at large. After all, there don't seem to be elements to morality that clearly stand out as the facts which tell us that something is right or wrong. Remember the "is-ought" problem? According to Rachels, the mistake comes from thinking that there are only two possibilities regarding moral facts. Either they are like the facts of science or any other empirical study or there are no moral facts. But, this ignores an important third alternative. There are moral facts and these are facts of reason. The moral judgments we make are backed up by facts of reason which means that I can provide good, objective grounds for saying that a certain moral judgment is true and a certain other moral judgment is false. In other words, there can be proofs in ethics.

One of the reasons we think that there cannot be such proofs is because we look at the most difficult cases, like abortion, find them difficult and from this conclude that proving anything in ethics is impossible. This is the wrong approach. To illustrate let's consider some simpler examples considered by Rachels.

A student says that a test given by a teacher is unfair. Can the student prove this? Well, consider the evidence the student puts forward in our text. Given all of that, doesn't the student have a good, well-reasoned case for the claim that the test is unfair? Of course, you might be saying that this wouldn't convince the teacher. But, remember the distinction between proving the opinion to be correct and persuading someone. The two are different and the fact that someone is not persuaded doesn't mean you haven't proven your case. What we need is a way to evaluate, objectively, whether the evidence we're putting forward is good, and relevant, evidence. Certainly in the case cited, the evidence does prove the case. I mean, what else would you have the student do to prove their case?!

Notice, we can also do this for other moral claims such as:
Jones is a bad man.
Dr. Smith is irresponsible.
A certain used car dealer is unethical.

Granted these claims may be fairly easy to prove but the fact that they can be proven just shows that it is possible to offer proofs in ethics. The real question is how to do this for more difficult issues like abortion, capital punishment, and homosexuality? Clearly, subjectivism cannot handle these issues. What we need is something objective, a standard independent of our opinion and emotions. For some this objective standard is divine. We'll consider next time the possibility of basing morality on religion.

Does Morality Depend on Religion?

This could potentially be one of the more controversial subjects we discuss in ethical theory. Many people have very strong feelings regarding religion and also very strong views on the connection between religion and morality. It will be useful for us to remember what I said earlier that my job here is not to tell you what to think but to share with you some theories and different approaches to ethics. Also, I should point out that our conversation on this subject will be only the tip of the iceberg so to speak. We cannot address all the areas this conversation entails which would include theology, textual analysis of the Bible, and the history of various religions. While these are very interesting and worthwhile subjects there's only so much we can cover here in an ethics course. In that context what we are trying to address is the question of what would be an adequate foundation for morality. There are problems with making religion the foundation.

We can divide this subject into two parts and actually ask two questions. Is religion the basis or foundation for morality? Is God the basis or foundation for morality? It is really the second question that provides the basis for the strongest attempt to provide this foundation but first let's consider the possibility of religion being the foundation for morality.

I hope everyone is clear on the distinction I mean to make here between religion and God. As a way of illustrating this, we can think of religion as a man-made institution with many different variations, while God is independent of these religions and a transcendent being. While God may be the ultimate origin of one religion or all religions, it is very different to base morality on any one of these religions than to base it on God directly.

It is precisely the variations in religions that create the problem of basing morality on religion. Simply put, How do we know which religion is the right one to serve as the foundation? Of course, everyone would say their own is the correct one but can we provide any objective evidence for this? It seems difficult to establish such objective criteria. Even if we could we still have a problem of variation because each religion has many different denominations. To illustrate this one has only to look to the United States and the classic in the field Frank S. Mead's *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. This is a 350+ page book outlining all the denominations (and there are many) currently practiced. Even within major Christian denominations such as Baptist, Lutheran, and Methodist, there are many variations. If we're looking for a single foundation here we're in for some difficulties.

A third problem which we can only briefly touch on here is the problem Rachels alludes to with using Scripture as a basis for moral judgments. I have addressed some of these problems in the Bible and Moral Philosophy post located in the Introduction folder under Lessons. The difficulty here is how to be sure we're interpreting the works properly. Of course, this presupposes we've addressed the question about which holy book is the correct one to use in the first place. Assuming we have, there is still the problem of interpretation since each of the Scriptures we might use could be interpreted in many different ways. In addition to this, there is the problem of "cherry-picking." If someone uses the Bible (or any other sacred text) to derive moral principles they are very often picking the ones that are most palatable for this purpose. But, to pick some verses and ignore others you have to have some criterion by which to do this. This criterion is independent of the sacred texts.

This is why many philosophers look to a more abstract solution and attempt to base morality on God. There are two attempts to do this which Rachels outlines: the divine command theory and the theory of natural law. Let's consider each of these in turn.

The divine command theory postulates that morality is based directly on the commands of God himself. What God commands us to do is morally right and what God forbids us to do is morally wrong. The basis of morality then is the command itself. But, this raises an interesting question and the major problem with the divine command theory. Why is God issuing just these commands? Does God command us to do a certain action because it is moral or is it moral because God commands it? These seem to be the only two alternatives but each involves a serious problem and together a genuine dilemma for morality. Let's see why:

God commands us to do a certain action because it is moral. If this is true then God is not the ultimate origin of morality. God simply is communicating to us what is and what is not moral without being the originator. In other words, there is a reason different from God's actions themselves that makes something moral or immoral.

An action is moral because God commands it. If this option is true then morality becomes arbitrary. If the only reason that murder is immoral is that God said so, couldn't God say something different, and then that would be immoral? Or couldn't God declare murder to be moral and then it would be moral?

This dilemma has led many religious thinkers to seek an alternative. One of the most influential of these thinkers was St. Thomas Aquinas who was a strong advocate of the theory of natural law. This provides a way to base morality on religion without raising the problems of the divine command theory.

The theory of Natural Law is not a strictly religious approach to the question of morality. It has its origins in Aristotle's theory of ethics and is the idea that everything in nature has a purpose. Because everything has a purpose this can tell us what the foundation for morality is simply because things that have a purpose ought to be used for that purpose. The justification for such normative statements is precisely the natural purpose that everything and everyone has.

The major problem with natural law theory is that it seems to violate the is-ought problem. Again this is the difficulty we have in deriving statements of what ought to be the case from statements of what is the case. The natural purpose of the eye is to see. So, does this mean that the only use the eye should be put to is to see? We could think of other examples as well including ones surrounding sexuality. Indeed, many issues here seem to turn on whether we can determine what certain body parts' uses ought to be. But it seems inadequate to deduce this from the simple fact that there are certain natural uses. As Rachels points out we can say that sex is used to produce babies but logically it does not follow that sex should or should not only be used for that purpose.

The heart of natural law is the idea that we can use reason to determine what ought to be the case. This raises a problem for the original question we asked, because, if reason is the basis of morality then religion is not playing the fundamental role we supposed it to. Saying this does not deny that religion has a role to play in morality and moral judgments. Only that religion is not the foundation for these judgments.

The connection between religion and morality is a complex subject, to say the least. We've only provided a brief look at the subject here. But many philosophers are convinced that there are enough problems involved to look elsewhere for a foundation for morality. One important attempt to do this is the philosophy of humanism. An important recent work in this area of philosophy is Greg Epstein's book *Good Without God*. In the book, he addresses many of the questions religious people have about how one can find a foundation for ethics without God and what principles are implied in secular ethics. For those who are interested, I would encourage you to read the *Humanist Manifesto*.

However, seeking an alternative foundation for morality does not necessarily deny that religion has important connections to morality. Many scholars speculate that religion serves to express morality and gives us a context in which to teach moral principles. A good example of this approach is advocated by Michael Shermer in his book *The Science of Good and Evil* which we'll discuss later. Certainly one of the functions of religion is to discourage sentiments toward selfish behavior and encourage us to be concerned with the welfare of others. However, there is an approach to ethics that questions whether this is really possible. Can we really act unselfishly? Should we? These are questions we'll address in the next two lectures on egoism.

Psychological Egoism

Egoism deals with the concern for oneself usually to the exclusion of others. In ethics, there are two forms of egoism we'll investigate. Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory and maintains that people do act primarily out of self-interest. Ethical egoism is a normative theory (remember what normative means) and says that people ought to act according to self-interest. We'll examine ethical egoism in the next lecture. For now, we'll focus on the psychological version of the theory.

On the surface, it may seem odd to say that every human action is done for self-interest. After all, don't we sometimes do things for the sake of others? Aren't some of our actions selfless? The example of Raoul Wallenberg seems to suggest that this is true. However, psychological egoism maintains that these actions are just as self-interested as any other more obvious examples of self-interest. No action is truly selfless. Why not?

The reason becomes clearer if we ask why people act the way they do. Inevitably the reason comes around to something self-serving or self-beneficial. Why do people give to charity? It makes them feel good. People find many seemingly selfless acts personally satisfying and psychological egoism maintains that this is the real motivation. A good example of well-reasoned egoism comes to us from Thomas Hobbes who looked closely at some seemingly selfless human actions and feelings and recognized their inherent (or so he thought) self-interest.

Take charity for example. For Hobbes charity "is a delight one takes in the demonstration of one's powers." We feel important and powerful when we are charitable and this is why we do it. It is a secondary effect that others benefit from. The same holds for pity as an emotion. We feel this sentiment primarily because we project ourselves onto the awful circumstances others are facing. As the saying goes, "there but for the grace of God go I." Nothing too selfless here!

There are two primary arguments in favor of psychological egoism. First is the argument that we always do what we most want to do. Our actions seem to demonstrate this and in the case of Raoul Wallenberg, for example, the fact that he chose to go to Budapest just shows that this is what he most wanted to do. You may not think this is true because you might think of alternatives that you would prefer but in any given situation, the egoist would say, you are where you most want to be given the constraints.

However, there are problems with this argument. As Rachels points out, the argument implies that people never do things unless they want to do them. This just isn't always true. He gives a good example: I don't want to go to the dentist but I do anyway. Also, sometimes we do things because we ought to do them, not because we want to. The whole idea of ethical obligation which we'll discuss soon presupposes that there is a difference between what we want to do and what we ought to do. Furthermore, sometimes we choose the obligation.

A second flaw is to define self-interest or selfishness as doing what we most want to do. If I most want to help others this is the exact opposite of acting selfishly! Again, Rachels helps clarify by distinguishing the object of the desire from the desire itself. The fact that I desire to do what I want to do doesn't tell us whether I'm selfish. It's the object of the desire that tells us this. If my object of desire is to be helpful and compassionate it's hard to call this being selfish or purely self-interested.

The second argument in favor of psychological egoism is the belief that we do what makes us feel good. The example of Lincoln is supposed to illustrate this. While this example is supposed to illustrate that Lincoln was only acting in self-interest it illustrates the opposite. A truly selfish person would not have cared about the little pigs. The fact that Lincoln gained peace of mind from helping them is precisely what tells us that he was not acting selfishly.

To see just where psychological egoism goes wrong we can clarify some distinctions. First, is the confusion between selfishness and self-interest. There are many things I do that are in my self-interest but that are not selfish. Going to the doctor, eating healthy meals, and exercising are all good for me and it is in my self-interest to do them. It seems strange to call them selfish. To be selfish is to ignore the welfare of others or actively work against it.

A second confusion is between self-interest and the pursuit of pleasure. It's easy to see the difference here with the example of smoking. No one would argue that smoking is in their self-interest though it may be pleasurable. As Rachels points out these two distinctions show that 'it is false that all actions are selfish and it is false that all actions are done from self-interest.' This alone ought to spell the end for psychological egoism. In case that's not enough, keep reading!

A third confusion occurs when we think that concern for ourselves is incompatible with concern for others. This is very definitely not true. This is not an either-or proposition. We can do what's best for ourselves and others.

The Dalai Lama is especially insightful on this point in his counsel to "be wisely selfish." What he means is that it is important to be concerned with ourselves sometimes. After all, sacrificing oneself is not necessarily the best means to help others. But, acting selfishly all the time is not wise either especially when you recognize that the best way to be happy yourself is to help others.

Finally, the major problem with psychological egoism is that it is **irrefutable**. This may sound strange since you might think being irrefutable would be a good characteristic for a theory to have. This is not the case. Every good theory can be refuted at least in principle. What this means is that there must be the possibility of evidence counting against the theory. It must be possible to imagine what this contrary evidence would be. But, psychological egoism doesn't admit this. The example Rachels gives about the doctor pretending to be a mental patient illustrates this very well. So, psychological egoism is untestable. And if it were ever to become testable it would be shown to be false. Our arguments against it would ensure this. But that's not necessarily the end for egoism. While it might be false that people act from self-interest, it still might be the case that this is how they ought to act. It is to ethical egoism that we now turn to investigate this possibility.

Ethical Egoism

A central tenet of morality is that we should be concerned for the welfare of others. Some theories maintain that we must help others when they need our help. However, ethical egoism postulates that the only duty we have is to ourselves and our welfare. We ought to act according to our self-interest. Regardless of whether psychological egoism is correct, ethical egoism can be defended as a normative theory. In this lecture, we'll consider three arguments in favor of and against ethical egoism.

The first argument is that altruism is self-defeating. Our attempts to help others very often fail or worse have the opposite effects than those we intend. Not only that, altruism is overly paternalistic and intrudes on the liberty of those we're trying to help. John Stuart Mill discusses this point in his essay titled *On Liberty*. As Mill points out, the only justifiable reason to restrict someone's liberty is to prevent them from harming others. We have no right to intrude on anyone's liberty for their good. Another interesting philosophical source for this line of reasoning is the classical economist Adam Smith. As he points out in *The Wealth of Nations*:

"Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view. But the study of his advantage naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society."

Furthermore, Smith says "I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it."

But the ethical egoist misunderstands the point of Mill's and Smith's reasoning. Consider the point of the argument. We shouldn't act to further the interest of others because this will not, in fact, further their interest. The best way to further the interests of others is to follow our self-interest. But, this is the opposite conclusion from what the egoist means to draw. The egoist's concern is not furthering the interests of others at all. So, why should they care that pursuing one's interest is the best way to help others? Adam Smith's point was simply that we can help others better by pursuing our self-interest and since we should be concerned about helping others we should pursue our self-interest. No ethical egoist would make such an argument.

A second argument for ethical egoism was put forward by the 20th-century philosopher Ayn Rand. She was famous for her novels celebrating self-interest and free-market capitalism such as *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Her basic line of reasoning is that altruism is self-destructive of our most important possession; ourselves. The supreme value is the individual's existence and since we have only one life to live it is immoral to ask one to sacrifice this life for the sake of others.

One problem with this line of reasoning is that it presupposes that there are only two options. As we discussed in the lecture on psychological egoism, being concerned about the welfare of others is not necessarily at odds with being concerned with oneself. From Rand's perspective, it seems that the only way to express concern for others is to completely sacrifice one's welfare. This, of course, is not necessary.

The third argument for ethical egoism is that it is compatible with our common-sense moral intuitions. According to this view, egoism is the best theory to explain the duties we have to others such as the duty not to harm others, not to lie, and to keep our promises. In each case, the main argument for having these duties is that it is in our best interest.

But, ethical egoism also fails here because it cannot demonstrate that it is always in our best interest not to lie or harm others. And, of course, from the perspective of the egoist, if it is in fact in our best interest to lie or harm others this is exactly what we should do. So, it appears that ethical egoism is not always in line with our common sense notions of morality. Also, egoism doesn't seem to be able to explain the fundamental reason why certain actions are right to do. As Rachels points out, egoism cannot adequately explain why it is morally right to contribute money to help people who are suffering from famine. This seems like a good example of something common sense would tell us is morally correct. But, ethical egoism couldn't explain why. The answer does not exclusively if at all, involve our self-interest. The main reason we should contribute money is to help starving people!

In addition to these problems, there are also three arguments against ethical egoism. Two of these arguments may be very confusing. Specifically, these are the argument that egoism cannot handle conflicts of interest and the argument that egoism is logically inconsistent. The third argument, that egoism is arbitrary, should be clearer.

The argument that ethical egoism cannot handle conflicts of interest is illustrated by the example of B and K given by Kurt Baier in his book *The*

Moral Point of View. The idea is that egoism doesn't give us a method to resolve cases where one person's interests conflict with another's. But, this is precisely what an ethical theory should do. Of course, the egoist might simply say that this is how life works. Sometimes our interests conflict with others and we can only resolve this by one person prevailing over another. Harsh, but true perhaps.

The second argument is that ethical egoism is logically inconsistent. Rachels outlines this complex argument in 9 steps. The main point is that egoism seems to entail that the same action is both right and wrong at the same time which, of course, is contradictory. But, the contradiction can be eliminated if we eliminate premise 5 from the argument which says "it is wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty." The ethical egoist would probably not accept this premise anyway so we are unable to destroy egoism using this line of reasoning.

A third possible argument against ethical egoism is that it is unacceptably arbitrary. Ethical egoism maintains that only my interests count and I should act to further those interests. But what makes me so different from everyone else? Why am I so special? If you think about it you discover that there's no good reason for singling one person out as better or more special. We're all the same in our desire for happiness and our right to be treated with respect and dignity. Unless there are any relevant differences between ourselves and everyone else we cannot justify different treatment. If my desire for happiness should be fulfilled and if my basic needs should be met so too should everyone else's. There's no good argument for disregarding the interests of others. This seems to be a solid argument against ethical egoism and should encourage us to seek out a theory that addresses the welfare of others.

The Idea of a Social Contract

So far we have examined several options for a foundation for ethical theory and moral judgments. Many have been found wanting due to serious problems. But can we maintain that there is no basis for morality? If this were true wouldn't we still need to invent some basis just to prevent social disorder? Perhaps not. One possibility is that the need for social order and certain inherent constraints might provide us with a natural basis for morality. While it might seem that there are strong incentives for social anarchy without an outside objective (and perhaps supernatural) source of morality, according to some philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, the incentive is built into the social system by the very nature of our existing among each other. The need naturally exists for us to form some sort of agreement to treat each other with basic respect and follow certain basic rules. That is, we find it most advantageous to form a social contract to base our lives in general and our moral judgments.

What would life without such a contract be like? According to Hobbes, it wouldn't be pretty! Unbounded liberty can be very dangerous and life without any rules at all would, according to Hobbes, be "solitary, nasty, brutish, and short." But why should this be? Can't we just live and let live? In a word, the answer is no due to four important factors which together conspire to put us at odds with one another unless we form some sort of social contract to mitigate these factors.

1. Equality of need: We all have certain basic needs in common such as food, clothing, and shelter.
2. Scarcity: Factor one wouldn't be a problem at all except for factor two which is scarcity. There is not an unlimited supply of food, clothing, and shelter just to name the essentials. Economists know this all too well and often define economics as the study of the scarce allocation of resources that have alternative uses.
3. Equality of human power: Here is the factor that creates a serious problem when combined with factors one and two. For a time, a few can perhaps take control and take what they want at the expense of everyone else. But, in the long run, this power cannot be sustained because one person's weakness is another person's strength. One person may have force on their side, but perhaps others have another advantage. In the end, these differences tend to even out which creates a situation where everyone is, in Hobbes' phrasing, at war against everyone else for the same scarce resources.

4. Limited altruism: One solution to the problem is to rely on the kindness of strangers (to paraphrase the famous play). But, this won't work either since we all have limits to how altruistic we are. Let's face it we are not infinitely compassionate towards our fellow human beings.

So, taken together these factors create real problems in the absence of any social order or moral rules. How can we prevent these factors from leaving us in the brutish position Hobbes calls the state of nature? What incentive do we have to come together or cooperate in any way to mitigate these factors? The strongest incentive is to avoid the state of nature and the "war of all against all" that Hobbes warns us about. To do this we need to establish a mutual agreement that involves two factors that Rachels addresses. First, that we will not harm one another, and second that we will keep our word with one another. These two factors, which Hobbes saw as the primary responsibility of government, would allow us to come together and cooperate socially as well as economically.

Escaping the state of nature has its benefits but the social contract does come with a price. We must be willing to give up some of our liberty to secure a stable social context. We must give some of our power to a centralized authority to enforce the rules we agree to for not harming one another and keeping our agreements. For Hobbes, this central authority had to be very strong and ideally in the hands of one or a few people. Hobbes advocated a monarchy as the best form of government. Other advocates of the social contract like John Locke saw that it was possible to gain the benefits of cooperation within the framework of a democratic republic. Lucky for us, Thomas Jefferson recognized this as well. As did Madison, who authored many of the Federalist papers which argued for the ratification of our Constitution, which turns out to be a tangible form of the social contract.

Interestingly one of the co-authors of these papers, Alexander Hamilton, was more sympathetic to Hobbes' beliefs in the need for a strong central government.

In either form though, social contract theory says that "morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well."

Another argument for the social contract is known as the prisoner's dilemma. As you've seen from answering the question concerning this, there is a powerful incentive to defect to preserve your interest. Of course,

everyone else thinks about it the same way and also defects. But the result is that we're all worse off than we would have been had we chosen to cooperate. And that's the point. To see this, we must look beyond the short-term consequences of our actions to their long-term consequences.

Again, economists have known this for many years and have written eloquently about this. The best example of this is Henry Hazlitt's book *Economics in One Lesson* where he exposes a lot of faulty thinking in economics and attributes much of it to a specific fallacy which he calls the broken window fallacy. As it turns out this fallacy is very similar to the faulty reasoning many use in the prisoner's dilemma which ends up making them worse off.

Briefly, the broken window fallacy occurs when we only look at the short-term, visible consequences of our actions instead of the long-term consequences. The name comes from the following story. A shopkeeper becomes the victim of vandalism when a young hoodlum breaks his window. As people gather around the shopkeeper's store they begin to reflect on how unfortunate the incident is. But someone points out that it might be a good thing after all since this way glass makers stay in business. If it wasn't for broken windows what would glassmakers do for business? So, there has been an economic benefit to the unfortunate incident. From this, we might conclude that destruction is a good thing since it creates jobs.

What this line of reasoning misses is that the very day the shopkeeper was going to get a new suit from the tailor just down the street. So, now instead of having a window and a new suit the shopkeeper just has a new window. So, there's been no net addition to the economy. There has been a loss overall. Economics is replete with examples of this fallacy and it turns out that the prisoner's dilemma is vulnerable to the same mistake. No one is really better off by defecting and choosing not to cooperate though in the short run it seems that we are better off. And of course, this makes sense if we consider that we could end up in a worse situation if we cooperate and the other person defects.

As Rachels describes the dilemma related to ethical theory we have two choices. Either we act benevolently or we are egoists. Of course, everyone else has this choice as well. While the best situation would be if I were an egoist and everyone else was benevolent, that's very unlikely. What's more likely is that everyone will think this way and we all end up as egoists which is not the worst scenario but only one step better. This, of course, is Hobbes' state of nature. We can improve on this by cooperating.

The social contract theory has advantages but also disadvantages. As Rachels points out the major benefits of social contract theory are that it provides very clear answers to very difficult questions in ethical theory. For example: What moral rules are we bound to follow and how are those rules justified? Why is it reasonable for us to follow the moral rules? Under what circumstances are we allowed to break the rules? It also seems to provide an objective basis for morality.

The major disadvantages involve questions about whether the social contract ever had a basis in history and how it addresses non-participants in the contract. More recent defenders of the social contract such as John Rawls are clear about the fact that the social contract does not necessarily refer to a real historical event. The point of the social contract is to act as a test for the justification of moral principles. Also, it can be said that we implicitly participate in such a social contract by acting cooperatively in our social arrangements. We vote and those who don't tacitly assent by going along with the outcome.

The second objection Rachels raises has to do with non-participants in the contract. Here he seems to have two groups in mind; non-human animals and non-rational humans. Strictly speaking, both groups are left out of the social contract and so our treatment of them need not be guided by the moral principles within the contract. This seems problematic at the very least and disturbing at worst.

Remember that the utilitarians pointed out that the only criterion necessary for claiming that certain treatment was immoral was the capacity for suffering. Whether certain parties are involved in the social contract seems irrelevant to how we ought to treat them. Even Kant would have recognized that we owe respect and decent treatment to people (and animals) regardless of their capacity for entering into contracts either explicitly or implicitly.

Utilitarianism

There are two dominant approaches in ethical theory today. One approach maintains that we judge actions by their consequences and the other maintains that we judge actions by appeal to rules. The second theory, called deontology, will be addressed later. The first theory, utilitarianism, we will consider in this lecture and the next.

The idea of applying utility to ethics has its roots in 18th-century philosophy. David Hume mentions it in his *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and Adam Smith devotes a portion of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to the concept. However, as a fully formed ethical theory, utilitarianism was the product of two philosophers in the 19th century. The first of these was British philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham began with what he considered to be a self-evident psychological principle. Human beings act for two motives: the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. This being the case, the principle of utility can be formulated as "the doctrine that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest balance of pleasure over pain." However, there are two problems with this initial formulation. First, it seems overly concerned with pleasure as opposed to the right action or behavior. The second problem is that this principle of utility doesn't address whose pleasure we should be concerned with.

From Bentham's perspective, the first problem was not a problem at all. Good, strictly speaking, is equated with pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure simply is the pursuit of good. And as we'll see momentarily, for Bentham what counts is the quantity of pleasure. However, the second problem needs addressing. Bentham was concerned not only with self-satisfaction but also with social reform. This being the case, Bentham reformulated the principle of utility to say "that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Note also, the change in terminology from pleasure to happiness. This is to remind us that the utilitarians are not only concerned with physical pleasure and pain but all types of pleasure.

Bentham's version of utilitarianism emphasized the quantity of pleasure and he developed a way of calculating the quantity to determine the correctness of any given action. This "hedonic calculus" consisted of seven points which included the intensity of the pleasure, its duration, certainty, and extent. So from a purely quantitative perspective, various pleasures were identical as long as their numerical value on the calculus was identical. This is what led Bentham to say that "the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts

and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either."

If you're curious about Bentham's calculus here's the complete list of attributes:

Intensity: or how strong the pleasure is

Duration: how long the pleasure lasts

Certainty: how likely it is to occur

Propinquity: how near at hand the pleasure is

Fecundity: the ability of one pleasure to produce others

Purity: how free the pleasure is from pain

Extent: how many people are affected by the pleasure

Bentham even composed a poem to help remember the list:

"intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure

Such marks in pleasures and in pains endure.

Such pleasures seek, if private be thy end:

If it be public, wide let them extend.

Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view:

If pains must come, let them extend to few."

As inviting as it might be to quantify ethical theory, there may be problems with this approach. First, how can pleasure or happiness be quantified? Whatever scale we might use seems inherently arbitrary. Even the choice of which scale to use is arbitrary. Plus, if we were to formulate some objective criteria to evaluate and quantify pleasure and pain, it would seem that this would be the foundation of ethical theory instead of utility. A second problem is that this quantitative approach implies a sort of relativism of values. Between two competing goods, for example, reading poetry and playing a game, is there really no way to distinguish them? If so, then there seems to be no way of making sense of the central normative feature of any ethical theory. For example, if I were to say that you ought, to tell the truth, but you get just as much quantitative value out of lying, then you are perfectly justified in lying. To say the least, this seems odd. There may be an alternative.

The alternative was offered by a student of Bentham named John Stuart Mill. While he was deeply impressed by the utilitarian theory of Bentham, he did think that certain modifications were needed. In particular, Mill wanted to de-emphasize quantity in favor of quality for happiness. To illustrate the difference Mill asked whether anyone would rather be a pig satisfied than a human being dissatisfied. The idea is that when it comes to happiness

quantity is not enough. It's not the amount of happiness that counts but the kind of happiness. Another way of putting this is to say that some pursuits are inherently better than others. How can Mill justify this claim?

The answer goes back to an idea developed by Aristotle. To be truly happy, human beings must fulfill their potential. Part of this potential is to be rational agents. So any pursuits which require a rational component are inherently better than those pursuits which do not require such capacity. Here, better means more effective at creating happiness. So Mill's point is that the conditions for human happiness are different and related to our rational capacity. Still, we need clear criteria for deciding which actions to take to achieve happiness. For example, how can we decide between two activities if we've only tried one? The answer, for Mill, is simple. We rely on the expertise of those who have tried both. According to Mill, those who have tried both inevitably choose for the higher pleasure thus illustrating that it is the correct choice.

As Rachels points out, Utilitarianism has great potential for practical application and some form of reasoning based on utility is an important part of many decision models which address public policy questions. One issue which we will have occasion to discuss later in the semester is euthanasia. As Rachels points out in the chapter the conclusion that utilitarians come to regarding this issue is quite different from what some moral principles seem to dictate. While many classical utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill are quick to point out that the principle of utility is not at odds with more religiously based moral principles there do seem to be radical differences.

Also, utilitarian principles are not restricted to human beings as the example involving nonhuman animals makes clear. The unifying criterion of morality for utilitarians is whether an action involves suffering or not. As Bentham points out the important consideration is not whether animals (or humans for that matter) can reason or talk, but "can they suffer." If so, we cannot justify actions that cause their suffering. This ethical theory has major implications. But there are also major problems to address and it is to these problems that we turn next.

As we saw last time, utilitarianism has two distinct approaches both of which have important practical implications for social issues. Since John Stuart Mill's version represents the more refined version of the theory we'll address the problems his version raises and attempt to formulate a response to these problems though in doing so we may be led to consider an entirely different approach to ethical theory called deontology.

The Debate Over Utilitarianism

Before considering some of the problems Rachels raises we can pose an important general question to Mill's theory. One he asks and answers though his answer is shockingly inadequate. How can we prove the validity of the claim that certain actions are the correct ones to pursue? In short, how can the principle of utility itself be proven? Again, Mill appeals to Aristotle. As he points out, in his short work titled *Utilitarianism*, "questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term." However, we can provide a proof of sorts. "The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it, and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do desire it."

Herein lies the problem. Can we infer that something is desirable from the fact that people desire it? It seems not. This would imply that murder is desirable simply because some people desire it. We could think of worse examples but hopefully, you see the point. This is simply an instance of the is-ought problem. From a given fact we cannot infer that something ought to be the case. The irony of Mill committing such a basic logical fallacy is that he wrote a work titled *System of Logic*!

In addition to this problem there are several others that Rachels points out in chapter 8:

Is happiness all that matters?

Are consequences all that matter?

Should we be equally concerned for everyone?

Let's consider each of these in turn. Utilitarianism seems to imply that the answer to all three of these questions is "yes" but that answer raises disturbing implications in each case.

Is happiness all that matters? The utilitarians would seem to answer this question by saying yes. But, this seems to create a problem by implicitly denying other important values such as friendship and artistic creativity (among others). As Rachels points out the question at issue here is not only what the nature of happiness is but how it relates to what counts as good. Is something good simply because it makes us happy? If so, then having a friend who ridicules you without you ever finding out would be a good thing

because having that person as a friend makes you happy. There seems to be something very wrong with this!

Are consequences all that matter? Again the utilitarians would seem to say yes. But, once again this seems to deny the importance of other values such as justice and human rights. How so? Well, consider the case of something that is done in violation of your rights but which leads to good consequences for you and others. Then by the principle of utility, this would be justifiable. However, the violation of one's rights in such cases is a wrong that outweighs the positive outcome. Another example Rachels gives involves the notion of obligation. If I have made a promise to someone to do something (say, help them move) and I get the opportunity to do something I would enjoy more (like play golf) should I take this opportunity? If this would lead to greater happiness for me and this could outweigh the unhappiness of the person I am not helping then I should do it. But, don't obligations count for something more than this? That is, doesn't making a promise mean more than simply promising to do something unless a better offer comes along?

Should we be equally concerned for everyone? Here the answer for utilitarians would also be yes but it might be harder to see why this is a problem. John Stuart Mill goes to great lengths in his treatise *Utilitarianism* to point out that in deciding what ought to be done we each get one vote in the decision. No one counts for more than any other person. But this seems to ignore cases when impartiality is inappropriate. For example, when faced with a decision between saving the life of your child versus saving the life of another person's child you would quite naturally choose your child. Even in a case where the choice is between saving your child versus someone else's children (plural) you would quite naturally choose to save your only child. Is there anything wrong with this? The utilitarian might say yes since you were not treating everyone impartially and you were ignoring the principle that you should act to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Another issue that we need to address is exactly how to apply the principle of utility to making decisions and carrying them out. Remember, the principle of utility says that we ought to act so as to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The question is whether we need to apply this to each specific act or simply formulate ethical rules. Mill himself was somewhat unclear about this but 20th-century utilitarians developed a distinction between two approaches: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. To see what's at issue, consider an example. Suppose you're driving down the street and you get to a yellow light and are just about to turn red. As it turns you wonder whether you should run the light or stop.

An act utilitarian would say that in every case like this you need to apply the principle of utility and decide on a case by case basis. In some cases, it might be justified to run the red light. For example, if you're rushing your sick friend to the hospital. In other cases, like driving to the mall, you would be justified in stopping at the light. The point is that each case is different. On the other hand, a rule utilitarian would say that you should follow the rule in all cases. After all, the rule has been formulated by appealing to the principle of utility. So, to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number you follow the rule. These are radically different approaches.

Whichever approach you take there are problems with the application of the principle of utility. We've seen that you might be able to justify running a red light with act utilitarianism. However, things might get worse. Since we are simply looking to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number, we are still thinking in quantitative terms. This, despite Mill's qualitative approach. It would seem, then, that as long as we can ensure that we have generated the greatest happiness for the greatest number, a small number might be allowed to be unhappy. In essence, we can purchase the happiness of the majority with the suffering of a minority. By this logic, utilitarianism could be used to justify discrimination of all sorts or worse actions.

In addition to this, applying the principle of utility requires us to speculate. To judge the correctness of the action we have to await the consequences. Before this, our analysis of the action's moral worth is somewhat of a guess. Granted, the outcomes of some actions are predictable, but many consequences are not. Economists ever since Adam Smith have known that, for any given action, there will always be unintended consequences. Given the fact that we did not intend them, they are difficult to predict. However, we cannot adequately determine the action's moral worth without taking into account all consequences; intended and otherwise.

But utilitarianism has another problem that is more serious than a question of application. We can illustrate this problem with an example. Suppose I have a very wealthy and very sick relative; an uncle let's say. I don't like this uncle very much (by the way this is just an example!). Truth be told, I don't like going to the hospital either. But, I'm pretty sure I stand to inherit something after my uncle's death. Unless, of course, I do something to make him mad, like not visiting him in the hospital, in which case he'll write me out of the will. So, I decide to visit him. Now, from the standpoint of the principle of utility, this is a good action. After all, all the consequences are good. My sick uncle is comforted in his time of need and I get the inheritance. But, isn't there something deeply troubling about this example. Even though utilitarianism justifies it, the action seems immoral. Why?

Perhaps because my motivation for acting is immoral. In other words, it's not only consequences that matter when judging an action's moral worth, but also the reasons for acting. We now turn to consider a theory that deals with these reasons: deontology.

Deontology

As we've seen, an ethical theory that focuses solely on consequences leads to serious problems. While consequences are important to consider, there may be another important aspect of ethical theory that needs addressing. For Immanuel Kant, this is motivation. We should judge the moral worth of an action by its motivation and, according to Kant, only those actions motivated by duty are morally praiseworthy. Strangely enough, inclination decreases the moral worth of an action. To see why let's examine deontology which focuses on the role of duty.

Kant begins with the claim that nothing is good without qualification except the good will. Many things are good but they can be used for evil purposes. Consider intelligence. This is a good thing but, when put to use by a criminal, can be very dangerous. The same applies to wealth. It can be a good thing but when used to fund drug trafficking or terrorism is, indeed, evil. However, the good will is good in all cases; it's good by definition. What is the good will? By will, Kant means our capacity for making decisions. The good will, then, is that will that acts in accordance with the moral law. That should pretty much answer all the questions about Kant's theory except one. What is the moral law?

Kant believes that the moral law is an objective standard by which we judge the correctness of our actions. It does not depend on consequences and is not contextual. Instead, the moral law is universal and should be followed regardless of the consequences. This may sound strange inasmuch as we would hope that following the moral law would have good consequences. And, indeed, Kant believed this. However, we should not judge the moral worth of our actions by the consequences. Rather, we should follow our duty, and doing so will, in the end, generate the best consequences.

The moral law defines what our duty is and is expressed by the categorical imperative. Before addressing this, we should clarify something about imperatives which are simply commands to act in a certain way. There are two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical. Hypothetical imperatives take the form of conditional statements. For example, "if you want to be a good musician, you should practice a musical instrument every day." Now, when I give you this imperative have I obliged you to practice a musical instrument every day? No. After all, you could say, "I don't care anything about being a musician, good or bad." So you are under no obligation to follow the imperative. All hypothetical imperatives are like this and can be opted out of. They are, in a sense, optional and only hold in

cases where you want to achieve the antecedent condition, be it becoming a good musician or whatever.

The interesting question for Kant's theory is whether the moral law could be expressed as a hypothetical imperative. An example of this might be: "If you want to be a good person, you should tell the truth." On the surface, this might seem acceptable but a closer inspection reveals a problem. If the moral law were expressed as a hypothetical imperative, then the moral law would be optional! You could choose to opt out of it. This seems wrong somehow. Certainly, it goes against Kant's claim that the moral law is universally binding. In fact, by virtue of being a rational agent, we are all bound by the moral law. It is for this reason that the moral law must be expressed as a categorical imperative.

The categorical imperative itself has two formulations.

The first is called the principle of universalizability. This is a complicated term but the idea is pretty simple. The way Kant describes it is to say that we should act such that the maxim of our actions can be made into a universal law. This still probably sounds complex. Consider the following example. I need some money and I'm coming to you for a loan. However, to convince you to lend me the money, I need to promise to repay it. The problem is that I have no way of repaying the money. So the question is, "Should I make a promise I know I can't keep?" To test whether this is morally correct I apply the categorical imperative. I ask whether I can make this maxim a universal rule of action: Make promises you know you can't keep.

If we consider the logic of this we can see a serious problem. Pretend that we've made this a universal rule of action. Now, I say to you if you need help on the next exam I will be available to talk tomorrow at 7:00 P.M. You ask if we can meet then and I say I promise to be available. Would you believe my promise? You shouldn't since we've made it a universal rule to make promises you know you can't keep. Promising would be rendered contradictory in such a case. So this rule cannot be made universal and that's what tells us that my original action is immoral.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative is called the principle of respect. Simply stated, this says that we should never treat people, including ourselves, only as a means to an end. The important word in this phrase is "only." We use people as means to an end all the time. When I visit the grocery I use the grocer as a means to an end; the end of getting my groceries. Don't be too alarmed at this, since my grocer is using me to

further the end of making a living. You are using me as a means to the end of furthering your education, but don't feel guilty about that since I am using you as a means to further the end of making a living. None of these arrangements are problematic. The trouble occurs when we use people only as means to an end. How can we tell whether we're doing this?

People deserve to be treated with respect simply by virtue of being human beings. People deserve our respect quite apart from what they can do for us. If we only treat them well because of what they can do for us, we are violating this principle. In addition, our interactions with others should be voluntary and uncoerced. However, according to this principle, we are obliged to treat ourselves with respect as well. One of the more controversial implications of this that Kant saw was that this renders suicide immoral. For Kant, suicide amounts to using oneself as a means to an end; the end of relieving one's suffering. In addition, suicide implies a "contradiction in a system of nature whose law would be to destroy life by the feeling whose special office is to impel the improvement of life."

As with utilitarianism, there are some problems with Kant's deontology. One of these, of course, is the radical separation from consequences. Kant tells us that the consequences of our actions cannot be used to judge the morality of the actions. What counts is the motivation. This, however, leads to a rather strange implication. According to Kant, an action is morally praiseworthy if it is done out of respect for the moral law and in accordance with our duty. But what if we are disposed to behave in certain ways that happen to coincide with our duty? For example, if my duty to my friend requires me to visit him in the hospital. But, since he's my friend I'm already naturally inclined to visit him whether it's my duty or not. And so, I follow my inclination and visit him. In Kant's view, the action has no moral worth. Why not? Because it was not done out of respect for the moral law. So, it seems that the things we want to do are not moral even if they happen to be the right thing to do! It's not that they're immoral. They simply have no moral worth. A peculiar situation indeed.

In the next lecture, we'll consider a couple of other problems and implications of Kant's theory including his notion of retributivism and some of the other duties he outlines.

Deontology part 2

In this lecture, we'll consider some other problems with Kant's deontology as well as his theory on retribution. As we saw last time, one of the strange implications of Kant's theory is that actions we might be inclined to do have no moral worth because they are not done out of a sense of duty. This may seem to be at odds with the notion of respect that Kant encourages us to foster since the implication is that our actions towards others should be motivated primarily by our duties. Of course, Kant might maintain that we have a duty to treat others with respect but isn't this duty at odds with what we mean by respecting someone? Perhaps.

One of the most serious problems with the categorical imperative is that it forces us to formulate rules that have no exceptions. This can lead to problems. Take the example of lying. Kant claims that it is always immoral to lie and this clearly violates the principle of universalizability. But, aren't there cases where it might be necessary to lie? Or worse, aren't there cases where this moral law conflicts with another moral law? The example in the text on p. 126 of the Dutch fishermen illustrates this. It seems that in cases such as this one of the moral laws we formulate must give way.

There may be a way out of this problem though. We find ourselves in dilemmas like this because we formulate the rules too vaguely. The rule "don't lie" is too general to be applied. If we were to formulate it more specifically we might resolve the dilemma. For example, we could formulate the rule to say "don't lie unless doing so would save an innocent person's life." Of course, this solution raises another problem. The categorical imperative doesn't provide us with clear criteria for how to formulate the rules that we then test to determine their moral worth. How do we know whether we're formulating a rule that's too specific or too general? Trial and error might be the method we end up using but this seems too casual an approach for such a systematic theory as Kantian deontology.

This may explain why Kant formulates the categorical imperative in two ways. Perhaps they provide a check on each other. A rule is only acceptable if it is both universalizable and respects others. Perhaps we should investigate this notion of respect in more detail.

Certainly one of the important features of the principle of respect is that we treat people as rational agents. That is, we must treat them in a way that recognizes their ability to reason through situations and freely act on these reasons. Freedom is a central part of Kant's ethical theory. The entire notion of duty seems to rest on this freedom. As Kant famously said, "ought implies

can." If we ought to do something, it follows that we can do that. However, if we are not free rational agents we cannot be obligated to follow the moral law. Of course, some people are not rational agents and so in fact cannot be bound by the moral law. We recognize this not only as a matter of morality but as a matter of law as well. In our judicial system, someone cannot be convicted and sent to jail if they cannot understand the nature of the charges against them and the fact that what they did was wrong.

For many, the legal implications of Kant's theory are very controversial, in particular, his defense of capital punishment on the grounds that this fulfills the principle of respect. The utilitarians are, of course, at odds with Kant's notion primarily because it decreases the happiness of the people involved and this violates the principle of utility. Also, the consequences are not good, or not as good as the alternatives. After all, other criminals won't be deterred and the criminals subjected to the death penalty may be rehabilitated.

Why does Kant claim that, as Rachels puts it, the utilitarian theory of punishment "is incompatible with human dignity?" In part, it is because it uses the criminal as a means to an end which violates the principle of respect. By viewing the criminal as in need of treatment or correction it denies the responsibility the criminal has for their actions. Designing punishment as a way of benefiting society at large is nothing more than using people for the benefit of others. And of course, since they're in jail their participation is not voluntary!

Also, it is important to recognize that punishment, for Kant, should be proportional to the crime. For the crime of murder there is only one proportional punishment and that, of course, is death. This is, to many, a disturbing implication of the theory of retribution because applied to other crimes it has unsettling consequences. What punishment is proportional to the crime of theft or rape or torture?

But, again, the main point of Kant's theory is that punishment must rest on the principle of respect. We treat people as responsible agents and punishing them for the crimes they commit is part of this notion of responsibility. Remember, for Kant the moral worth of an action is not judged by its consequences. In the case of retribution, this would mean the consequences to the criminal as well as the consequences to society as a whole. So, Kant's argument is not really affected by the argument that capital punishment is not an effective deterrent. This argument appeals to consequences and whether it's true or not, Kant would see it as largely irrelevant. Justice demands punishment. If the punishment deters others, then so much the

better. Of course, we should be concerned with deterrence but as a separate issue.

Up to this point in the lectures, there also seems to be another emphasis missing from our treatment of moral principles. You may have noticed that most of the philosophers we've been discussing so far are men: Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. Well, you get the idea. Are we missing anything by not addressing the ideas of female thinkers? Are we missing something distinct by not addressing how women in general approach morality? Are there differences between men and women on such issues? We'll address these questions in the next lecture.

Feminist Ethics

Not too long ago a prominent university president suggested that there might be differences between men and women and in doing so sparked a heated controversy both in and out of academia. This is a potentially contentious issue. For those who disagree with this idea, it must be rejected outright as a dangerous and outdated notion. For those who agree it seems nothing short of obvious and good common sense. Are there differences between men and women? Are these purely cultural or biological or a combination of both? If there are significant and intractable differences what implications do they have for ethical theory? We may not be able to address each of these questions in the detail they deserve but we will try to shed some light on these issues and investigate what part they may play in ethics.

The debate these days concerning sex differences seems to revolve around what their origin is. I don't think most people would argue about the fact that there are some differences between men and women. In fact, John Gray has created a cottage industry and sold countless books based on the idea. As he puts it, men are from Mars, women are from Venus. Clearly, he thinks there are differences! And many agree with him. But, are these simply cultural differences, or do they go much deeper than that? The answer to this question seems to be central to the debate. If they are cultural then they can be mitigated and cannot be used to justify different treatment. On the other hand, if they turn out to be more fundamental and intractable, many fear that this will be used to justify different treatment and worse than that discriminatory treatment. Then, the question has ethical implications.

There's another twist to the story as well which is this. What do we mean by "different?" On the one hand, we could mean that the difference can be cast in terms of better or worse. One sex could be better than the other or, as has often been claimed in the past, superior. In fact, Aristotle believed that men were superior to women and that women lacked the capacity for rational thought. Or they were not as good at it as men. Kant might have agreed and would have also maintained, as Aristotle did, that women should not participate in public life. It has taken a long time to refute this rationale for different treatment. Consider that it has only been within the last century that women won the right to vote.

Countless studies have been put forward purporting to show differences and to speculate on their cause. One study in particular that is interesting was recounted in James Q. Wilson's book *The Moral Sense*. The studies were done by Melford and Audrey Spiro on an Israeli collective farm known as a kibbutz. They were attempting to show that sex differences were due to

cultural influences and so they resolved to take these influences away. A kibbutz was the perfect environment for this since the children were separated from their parents at a very early age. In this particular study the children, from a very early age, ate together, wore the same clothes, did the same chores, slept in the same buildings, and in all ways were treated the same regardless of whether they were male or female. For a while, this seemed to eliminate sex differences. Girls and boys played the same games and exhibited similar behaviors. But, as they grew older differences started to creep in even though they were treated the same and encouraged to regard each other the same. The study concluded that at least some portion of sex differences were innate.

In ethics, one of the famous examples of a study of sex differences was conducted by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Studying children led Kohlberg to maintain that there are six distinct stages of moral development and women seem to progress more slowly through these stages and perhaps don't progress as far as men. The stages begin with an emphasis on punishment and obedience and seem very egoistic. Slowly, children begin to progress toward notions such as rights, duties, and responsibilities. Eventually, these ideas become more abstract until the child can formulate and understand universal ethical principles. This, for Kohlberg, signaled full moral maturity though not everyone attained this level. While Kohlberg observed that many men don't make it to stage six, many more women seem to fall short. Here we see that the differences carry through to ethical thinking and seem to validate Aristotle's claim. Or do they?

As with other cases of differences, the real question seems to be what we mean by "different." Aristotle and Kohlberg mean better or worse. That is, men have a better or more advanced thought process when it comes to ethical thinking. But, could the differences suggest something else? This was the idea put forward by another psychologist named Carol Gilligan in her book *In A Different Voice*. Yes, says Gilligan, men, and women think differently but one is not inferior to the other. Their emphasis is just different.

In the Kohlberg studies what we see is that the male kids focus on some aspects of the dilemma, while the females focus on other areas. It's not that one focus is better than the other, it's simply that they're different. The females tend to focus on personal relationships and caring while the males focus more on rules and rights and abstract principles. Not surprisingly we have focused more on the latter perhaps because the philosophers we've looked at have been mostly men (Ayn Rand being a prominent exception).

But, these other sentiments seem to be important for ethical theory and so we should investigate what role they play in our moral judgments.

When we investigated the ethics of utilitarianism and deontology we focused primarily on the ideas of consequences, duties, and impartiality. Both theories encouraged us to treat people in certain ways as a matter of principle not based on how they were related to us. Remember that the utilitarian stressed the greatest happiness of the greatest number and Kant pointed out that our actions were only moral if they were done out of recognition of our duty. But these seem at odds with the notions of love, family, and friendship; precisely the caring relationships that many feminist philosophers emphasize. An ethical theory should address these relationships. But, our previous theories seem unable to make room for the sentiments expressed here. Kant would not endorse treating your family differently simply because they were family. John Stuart Mill suggests that we treat everyone impartially. But if you had a choice between saving one of your children or a houseful of another person's (say there's a fire), you would save your own. And we would expect you to do so and perhaps even question you if you didn't. To explain this we need to appeal to the ethics of care.

But, there are shortcomings to this ethics of care. As Rachels points out, the actions we're bound to do depend on their being a relationship, and if there's not we may have no incentive to act. As Rachels points out, some feminist philosophers such as Nel Noddings, recognize the implications here and say that we have no obligation to help "the needy in the far regions of the earth." We don't have these obligations because there is no relationship of caring between us and them. This is at odds with other ethical theories such as utilitarianism.

For this reason, we may regard feminist theory and the ethics of care as a supplement to other ethical theories which do outline further obligations and principles. Many feminist philosophers regard the ethics of care as part of a much larger tradition known as virtue theory. This theory contrasts with the more abstract theories such as deontology by emphasizing the character of a person as opposed to their obligations. The irony here is that one of the important founders of virtue theory was Aristotle! It is to his version of virtue theory that we turn next.

Virtue Ethics

It's ironic really that we're discussing virtue ethics last in our treatment of ethical theories in Rachels's text since Aristotle's virtue ethics was one of the first systematic treatments of ethical theory in the west. While this was a very popular approach in ancient Greece and Rome it languished in the Middle Ages. Then, with the rise of other approaches including social contract theory, deontology, and utilitarianism, virtue ethics seemed consigned to be a historical curiosity. A central figure in the resurgence of virtue ethics is Elizabeth Anscombe who published an important article in 1958 in the journal *Philosophy*.

More recently virtue ethics has staged a comeback due in large part to such works as Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 book *After Virtue*. Less than ten years later virtue was to work its way further into the conversation of popular culture with William Bennett's collection titled *The Book of Virtue*. One of the points that Bennett's book illustrates, with stories from different eras, is that virtue never really went away. Indeed, it has always been an important part of our ethos and our ethical theory. One can find significant examples of this throughout the history of philosophy after the middle ages in such works as Montaigne's essays in the 16th century to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the 18th century. But what exactly is virtue ethics and how does it differ from other theories we've considered so far?

The major difference can be described as follows. As different as they are, social contract theory, deontology, and utilitarianism are similar in their emphasis on ethical principles as a guide to conduct. What each theory attempts to formulate is a decision model for addressing moral dilemmas. The real debate among them is what the decision model should look like and what principles should be followed. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, addresses the role of character and addresses the question of what makes a good human being. The idea is that if we can train ourselves to be good human beings moral dilemmas can be solved more easily. And this is something we can train ourselves to do, or so Aristotle thought. For him, virtue was a matter of getting into the habit of acting virtuously. Of course, to get into the habit, we have to know what it means to act virtuously in the first place.

To address this we will attempt to answer five questions concerning the virtues.

1. What is a virtue?
2. What are the virtues?

3. What do these virtues consist of?
4. Why are the virtues important?
5. Are the virtues the same for everyone?

Let's begin with the first question.

What is a virtue? Rachels offers a good definition borrowed from a professor at the University of Texas. A virtue "is a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that it is good for a person to have." Notice that the habit that Aristotle spoke of is included in the definition. Why would it be good for the person to have such traits? Aristotle said that having such traits would lead to a happier life. This is not an egoistic approach however since many of the virtues are not self-directed but involve benefiting others.

What are the virtues? A complete list might be very long indeed but Rachels does provide a small list on p. 176. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* he outlines many of these virtues in detail explaining just what they consist of and how they can be practiced. The common thread running through these explanations is that the virtue in all cases consists of the mean between two extremes. Take the virtue of courage for instance. There is such a thing as too little courage and this is the vice of cowardliness. But, there's also such a thing as too much courage and this too is a vice; the vice of foolhardiness. The virtue then lies in the middle though this is not the same for everyone. The virtue of courage for a soldier is much different from the virtue of courage for a schoolteacher. Each may benefit from the virtue of courage but in different ways. A detailed account of virtue ethics such as Aristotle's work would provide an in-depth analysis of the virtues and their extreme vices.

Why are the virtues important? The next question for us concerns why these virtues are important. The general answer as Rachels puts it is that "people will fare better in life." This doesn't necessarily mean you'll make more money with the virtues or have a bigger house but it does mean that you'll live a more contented, happier life and that seems to be the point of Aristotle's theory. Not a bad incentive really for following the virtues! We can also provide a more detailed account of each virtue of why it is important as Rachels does in this section.

Are the virtues the same for everyone? Lastly, we can ask whether the virtues are the same for everyone. We are each different and depending on what we do in our lives and what projects we take on some virtues may be more important to us than others and so a certain amount of variety is to be

expected. But, given our common nature as human beings, it also should not come as a surprise that many of the virtues are universally important.

Among these Aristotle rates friendship and contemplation among the highest. Friendship is important because we live in communities and are inherently social beings. This was a very important aspect of life for the Greeks and Romans and they placed a great deal upon public service to the community. We live in a more individualistic society but even so, there is no denying the importance of a strong network of friends to contribute to our happiness.

The other virtue Aristotle places great emphasis on is contemplation. Again there are parallels to other ancient thinkers such as Epicurus who placed friendship and contemplation among the necessities of life. We are rational beings and for many philosophers such as Aristotle, a full happy life implied realizing all our potential. Since we have the potential for reason this capacity must not be ignored. For Socrates, the unexamined life was not even worth living. This may be a little strong but for Aristotle clearly, the unexamined life was not as fulfilling. There is still a great deal to be said for this sentiment.

There are several clear advantages as well as several serious problems for virtue theory. Among the advantages is the ability to explain what motivates our actions as well as a reason for not being impartial in all situations (a serious flaw in utilitarianism). The example Rachels gives concerning motivation is a classic problem within deontology. A friend visits you when you are sick in the hospital and you thank you, friend, for being there. But your friend responds that it was just their duty. How does this make you feel? Probably not good. But virtue theory says that the value of friendship is motivation in and of itself. One need not explain why friends support each other by appealing to abstract notions of duty. Friendship is the explanation.

Remember one of the problems with utilitarianism is that it demanded impartial treatment towards everyone seemingly making no distinction between friends, family, and strangers. This seems odd. But virtue theory can address the question more adequately illustrating that in some cases impartiality is correct but in other cases it is inappropriate. Not only does virtue ethics maintain that impartiality is sometimes inappropriate, but it can also explain why. The virtue of love, for example, simply doesn't make sense when practiced with strict impartiality. Of course, neither does friendship.

There are, of course, several problems with virtue ethics that we should address. The two main problems are that virtue ethics is an incomplete

ethical theory and it doesn't provide a clear decision model for making moral decisions. We have seen how virtue theory can offer useful insights into ethical theory and addresses important points that other theories such as utilitarianism and deontology don't. However, there seem to be aspects of morality that virtue ethics on its own cannot account for. In particular, virtue ethics seems ill-equipped to address questions of action. In other words, we can address what counts as good character traits but often we need to be able to assess what action would be right to take in a given situation, and virtue ethics doesn't seem to address this question.

Closely connected to this is the second problem. Virtue ethics doesn't provide a clear decision model. Despite their flaws, both utilitarianism and deontology provide reasonably clear accounts for how to decide in a given situation what to do and why this decision can be justified. It's much harder to see how virtue theory can do this. For these reasons perhaps the best alternative is to view virtue theory as a supplement to other ethical theories which can address these problems.

In physics, the current project is to unite two fundamentally disparate theories (relativity and quantum mechanics) into one unified whole. Einstein first postulated the possibility of such a unified field theory in the early 20th century. Perhaps this is what we need in ethics as well. A unified field theory in ethics would take the best elements of many of the theories we've addressed and combine them into a coherent unified whole. But, be careful! This is not as easy as it sounds. Physicists today are still in search of this grand unification theory and they've been at it for decades. Ethicists are only now starting to inquire about such a unified theory so it may be centuries till we have some possible candidates. Still, it's interesting to ask what would such a theory look like and it is to this question that we now turn.

What Would a Satisfactory Moral Theory Be Like?

In one sense the principles of morality are fairly obvious and have been constant for centuries. Aristotle said that the two highest virtues were friendship and contemplation. Epicurus agreed as did the Stoics. Of course, friendship is only possible within a context of other important values such as trust, caring, sympathy, and empathy. These were well-known important character traits to the Greeks and were still being discussed and endorsed in the 18th century during the Enlightenment by such thinkers as David Hume and Adam Smith. We've seen so far the importance of reason as a guide to our moral thinking and our quest to offer justification for moral judgments.

This is where things get complicated. While our moral intuitions have remained constant our ethical theories seem to always fall short of their intended goal which is to provide a rational framework for moral judgments. For some ethical theories, this shortcoming is internal. We saw this in the case of egoism, emotivism, and relativism in particular. For other ethical theories, the assault is external. For many people, the assault on values is coming from the culture itself. This is a complicated issue, to say the least, and it's often hard to gain perspective on such issues while we are in the era we're speaking of.

Are we having more problems with morality today? Some issues seem to be more prevalent and worrisome but perhaps we are making progress on others. As an educator, I experience problems of academic honesty regularly and the prevalence of plagiarism is sometimes shocking. Are moral lapses like this due to the lack of a satisfactory moral theory? Perhaps. There could be many other factors involved as well. Moral theory on its own cannot address all of the issues we face. But some conclusions are in order to assess what we've gained so far in our investigation of moral philosophy.

Rachels specifies some interesting factors which would be involved including:

- Modesty
- Reason
- Desert
- Motives
- Consequences
- Community
- Justice and fairness

Let's consider each of these in turn in order to understand what we can about a satisfactory moral theory.

Modesty: Human beings have trouble with this one sometimes as we think we're the most important creation in the universe. But, given the history of that universe and our relative recent arrival, Rachels suggests that a little modesty is in order. Another factor involved in this is the simple fact that we do not know nearly as much as we think we do or think we should about the world in which we live. The biologist Lewis Thomas is particularly eloquent on this subject pointing out that biologists don't even know fully how a cell works! Our ignorance is much greater than our knowledge in almost every field we study: physics, psychology, biology, cosmology, and yes philosophy too. This has inspired some thinkers to advocate a provisional theory in ethics. We'll consider a more recent attempt to do this in another lecture.

Reason: The importance of reason in morality cannot be overstated. Given the normative element involved, we need good justification based on reason to back up our moral judgments and imperatives. Our struggle in ethics has been to reason in a consistent logical way. Furthermore, reason requires us to act impartially. That is, if a particular fact justifies acting in one case, then we must accept that the same fact would justify the same action in similar cases. We also must be able to recognize that some reasons are not relevant to justify differences in treatment. Among these Rachels lists differences in skin color and gender.

Desert: But, we've seen that impartiality itself can be taken too far as the utilitarians did. We offered a possible solution by adding feminist and virtue ethics to our moral thinking. The general notion involved here is to treat people as they deserve to be treated. We saw this emphasized in Kant's principle of respect and Hobbes' social contract. People deserve to be treated with a minimum level of respect and dignity but people who knowingly harm others deserve punishment as well. Perhaps we will find that Kant's brand of retributivism is too harsh but some form of desert is necessary for an adequate moral theory.

Motives: Another important aspect of Kant's theory was motivation. We need to evaluate our actions, in part, according to what is motivating them. Clearly, an action is better if our motive is to help someone as opposed to being only self-serving. And as feminist and virtue theory showed us focusing on motivation is important because it helps explain why impartiality does not always apply. We are motivated to act towards our friends, parents, and children differently than strangers and this is appropriate. One cannot always act according to the principle of utility which demands that we act to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers. Nor should we

always act this way. We have to balance our competing motives towards ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, and so on.

Consequences: Of course, this is not to deny the importance of consequences in our actions. We ought to strive to make the consequences of our actions as good as possible. Rachels advocates what he refers to as "multiple strategies utilitarianism." Here the standard is not simply the abstract principle of utility but that principle combined with the more personal considerations of motive and desert. "What is important is that people be as happy and well-off as possible." In economics, this is often referred to as the Pareto Optimum after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto. The basic idea is that we should strive to reach a state where everyone is as well off as possible without making anyone worse off in the process. It's a pretty high standard to achieve but perhaps worth using as the ideal. The important point about multiple strategies utilitarianism is that we recognize that there may be many ways of achieving the ideal and at different times, different strategies are necessary to achieve the result. Sometimes focusing on our own concerns is the appropriate course of action, while at other times our actions should be more selfless.

Community: We don't live on islands to ourselves and our actions take place within a moral community. The Greeks recognized this and defined the self in large part in relation to the community: the polis. From this concept, we get our word politics. This word often has a negative connotation but the basic point seems valid that morality exists within a communal setting and as the political commentator George Will eloquently puts it "statecraft is soulcraft." Of course, Thomas Hobbes also recognized the importance of community as providing a rational justification for our entering into a social contract as a basis for our morality. As Rachels puts it "we ought to be concerned about everyone whose welfare might be affected by what we do." A tall order but given that our actions do affect others we ought to be cognizant of that and work to make the effects as positive as possible.

Justice and Fairness: These subjects have received increasing attention in the 20th century due in large part to books like the late John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* written in 1971 and Robert Nozick's response to that book written in 1974 titled *Anarchy State and Utopia*. Of course, concern for justice and fairness is not a new thing in ethics but we saw how utilitarianism did fail to take these important concepts into account. Kant saw his theory of retributivism as a corrective to this shortcoming at least in the area of punishment. Fairness relates as well to our recurring emphasis on impartiality and has many practical implications not only in the justice system but also in the workplace.

A nice synopsis of much of what we've covered so far this semester is offered in a book by Anita Allen titled *The New Ethics*. In this book, she addresses some very practical issues such as cheating at home, work, and school, end-of-life issues, family issues, and other important concerns. She concludes with what she calls an agenda for better ethics which consists of 12 points most of which are self-explanatory. I'll leave you with these to consider until our next lecture.

1. Take yourself seriously
2. Resist temptation
3. Accept blame
4. Learn from mistakes
5. Be a cleaner competitor
6. Do not try to outthink ethics
7. Nurture caring, fair-minded youth
8. Enforce ethical standards
9. Search for hidden ethical issues
10. Self educate
11. Acknowledge interdependence
12. Value but improve traditions

Recent Ethical Theories

Many of the ethical theories we've addressed so far have deep historical roots, some going back to classical Greek philosophy such as virtue theory. Others have a shorter history and really began in earnest in the 18th-century enlightenment. These would include deontology and social contract theory. There are still important contributions being made to these theories today and there are other important developments that might direct ethical theory in interesting directions in the 21st century. Two contributions, in particular, I would like to address briefly if only because they receive little treatment in conventional ethics textbooks and because they are inherently interesting and add to our moral landscape.

The first actually represents a resurgence of an 18th-century theory in ethics called the moral sense tradition. The idea is that there is an important innate component to morality which was often termed the moral sense. The economist Adam Smith was an advocate of this idea. In 1993 James Q. Wilson published a book titled *The Moral Sense* in which he makes the case that there may be tangible evidence for this innate component of morality.

He does not argue that morality is completely innate. Like Aristotle, he recognizes that moral actions must be practiced to become habitual and natural. But the very possibility of being moral at all is innate. Such sentiments as sympathy, fairness, self-control and duty are strongly affected by environment and training but they do have a strong innate component as well and research seems to be bearing this out. That there might be scientific evidence for this would not have surprised the likes of Charles Darwin who was also an advocate of the moral sense. Oddly enough Smith's book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was published exactly 100 years before Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Anyway, in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin remarked that "any animal whatever endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience."

On the subject of the connection between religion and morality, there has been some interesting research that seems to indicate an innate component to religion as well. Perhaps this is not surprising given the close connection we make between religion and morality. This may provide a way out of the dilemma many scholars debate about which came first the moral rules or religious belief. If there is an innate component they may arise together and influence one another in many complex ways.

Two books, in particular, shed light on this subject. One book by Pascal Boyer titled *Religion Explained* examines the possibility of religion originating as an evolutionary response. The connections here to Darwin's comments above should be obvious. The important point to make about this line of thinking is that the notion that religion may have originated evolutionarily does not imply that there is no God. Given that religion is a human institution the emphasis is on how this arose and what effects it has on morality. Another treatment of this subject is Michael Shermer's book titled *How We Believe*. But, it is to Shermer's book on ethics that I want to turn now to share with you another approach to ethical theory.

Titled *The Science of Good and Evil*, Shermer's book attempts to provide a scientific reason for why people cheat, gossip, care, share, and follow the Golden Rule (this is the subtitle of the book!). He begins by pointing out the dangers of two extremes in morality: relativism and absolutism. We've discussed the problems with relativism early on, and seen at least somewhat, the problems with absolutism when addressing deontology. For Shermer, the best chance for a solid moral theory lies somewhere in the middle. Not too dissimilar from Rachels's multiple strategies utilitarianism which he might have called a provisional moral theory.

This is exactly what Shermer advocates though it may be disturbing to think of morality in these terms. As he points out, every scientific theory is inherently provisional in that scientists recognize the possibility that evidence may be discovered in the future which will force us to alter or modify our theories. He claims that the same holds true for morality as well and puts forward a provisional morality that consists of four principles:

1. The Ask-First Principle:

The ask-first principle states that the moral agent should ask the moral recipient whether the behavior in question is moral or immoral.

This sounds like an obvious principle once stated but it is an interesting approach to the question of right and wrong since it forces us to consider those who are affected by our actions. Do you wonder whether it's wrong to lie to someone? Ask them first! They'll let you know!

2. The Happiness Principle:

The happiness principle states that it is a higher moral principle to always seek happiness with someone else's happiness in mind, and never seek happiness when it leads to someone else's unhappiness.

This turns out to be a fairly timeless principle advocated by Aristotle, Epicurus, and the current Dalai Lama. Happiness cannot be aimed at directly but is a by-product and the best way to be happy is to strive to make others happy.

3. The Liberty Principle:

The liberty principle states that it is a higher moral principle to always seek liberty with someone else's liberty in mind, and never to seek liberty when it leads to someone else's loss of liberty.

We'll be discussing John Stuart Mill's famous essay on liberty but this principle also has a rich history. Remember when we discussed Kant's theory he pointed out that "ought implies can." Morality requires that we have freedom.

4. The Moderation Principle:

The moderation principle states that when innocent people die, extremism in the defense of anything is no virtue, and moderation in the protection of everything is no vice.

This principle is a variation on Barry Goldwater's famous quote: "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice." Shermer's point is that extremism can certainly be a vice, especially when innocent people die.

In some ways, these sentiments are not unfamiliar to ethical theory but given our current scientific context, it shouldn't surprise us to see scholars seeking a scientific basis for morality. This need not conflict with our other foundations for morality. In fact, it may strengthen them.

Not only can we benefit from science informing morality, but science can be informed by morality as well. This will be especially true of many ethical issues such as abortion and euthanasia. A second important factor we need to discuss these issues freely is liberty. As a society, we need to address controversial issues and this can only be productive and successful if we recognize the importance of liberty of thought and discussion.

Final Thoughts

I first want to commend you for the good discussions over very controversial (and unsettled) issues. The recurring theme of many conversations was the issue of determining how to go about deciding what is the right course of action. This, of course, is the central focus of ethical theory. I don't pretend to claim that we've answered that question for all people and all-time. What we have done is illustrate different methods for going about finding the answer and illustrated some different options. Given that we didn't really resolve anything in a final sense it might pay to ask the question: What was the point of studying ethics at all?

I think such questions are not often enough asked and when asked not sufficiently answered in the classroom. I suspect that many instructors simply assume that the answer is obvious and so never bother to explain why studying the particular field they teach is important. Even if it is obvious why we should study ethics I'd still like to clarify some important points regarding this question.

One of the points I made early on was the necessity of judging. As I said then judging has gotten a bad reputation. However, this is mainly because many people make bad judgments. The problem is not judging itself (which is unavoidable) but rather how we discover the correct criteria to use when making judgments. We've looked at several:

1. Our own cultural standards (relativism)
2. Our own opinions/feelings (subjectivism)
3. Our own selfish desires (egoism)
4. Our religion (divine command theory/natural law theory)
5. The greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism)
6. Our duty to ourselves and others (deontology)

We saw throughout the semester that all of these options (and others such as social contract theory, and feminism) had problems. Some of the problems made the theory untenable. Of course, the fact that a theory is logically or philosophically untenable doesn't prevent people from using it. Often what seems to occur is that we make up our minds about what we believe and then find a justification that makes sense afterward. This is not uncommon. As Louis Menand points out in his book *The Metaphysical Club*, Oliver Wendell Holmes admitted that many Judges use the same process when ruling in court cases!

This brings me to the next point. Though we are often reluctant to admit it, many of our ethical principles are provisional and adapted to fit the circumstances we find ourselves in at the time. Notice, I said many, not all. As Rachels pointed out in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, there is good reason to believe that some ethical principles are universal. These would include principles governing the care of the young, indiscriminate killing, and truth-telling. Think of how often these principles have come up in our discussion of issues such as capital punishment, euthanasia, sexuality and marriage, liberty, and war and terrorism. But, also remember how often they were interpreted differently and applied differently. This is where the real debates are in ethics; the details. Of course, these are important. As the architect, Mies van der Rohe once said: "God is in the details."

For example, no one seems to argue that we should kill everyone (no one advocated this in our discussions!). The question is under what circumstances is killing permitted and under what circumstances should it be prohibited? No one seems to argue that children should be left to fend for themselves with no care at all. No, the question is what effect would same-sex marriages have on children? My point is that despite our differences, we do have some important things in common when it comes to ethics and morals.

Many students are fond of the insight that everyone has different morals. But, is this really true? What is the evidence for this claim? Could it possibly be true? Let's look at it.

While it's not clear who the "everyone" is in this claim let's examine it in two ways. First, let's look at our own culture in the United States. With roughly 300 million people could everyone have different morals? It seems impossible that there could be 300 million different moral codes! Even more so when we look at the world at large. Could there really be over 6 billion moral codes?

This semester we have examined roughly a dozen ethical theories including subjectivism, relativism, emotivism, egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, feminism, and social contract theory. The vast majority of ethical codes are simply variations on these theories. Could we really have overlooked so many more? It seems unlikely!

Perhaps the belief in this claim that everyone has different morals is the fact that people disagree about moral issues. But, we need to look at this disagreement closer to see if it is really a disagreement about moral principles or the facts concerning the issue. A good example can be seen in

the abortion debate. This is an especially good example in that I am sure it is one that people think of as validating this claim that everyone has different morals. After all what could be more different than the position of pro-life versus pro-choice? But, how much do they really disagree with each other about fundamental moral principles? The pro-life advocate may say that innocent human lives should not be taken. Innocent children should not be murdered. Would a pro-choice person disagree with this? I doubt it.

The question is not whether we should kill innocent children or not (that would represent a major difference in moral principles) but instead whether the fetus constitutes such an innocent child. Like it or not, this is a question of certain facts or definitions, not moral principles.

On the other hand, a pro-choice advocate may claim that a woman has the right to choose what happens to her own body and ought not to be told what to do with her own body. Would a pro-life advocate disagree with this? Again, I doubt it. While this would represent another example of a difference in moral principles, the pro-life advocate is not saying that women should be stripped of their autonomy with regard to their own bodies. No, they are making a claim about the status of the fetus (i.e. that it is different from the woman's body).

Again, like it or not this is not a moral claim but a factual or definitional claim. While I am not saying that this disagreement is easily resolved I am saying that it is not a disagreement over fundamental moral principles.

I suspect that this analysis could be done with most other issues as well. If we only look closer and examine the claims made we could see that there is much agreement in moral principles even among people who differ on such issues as euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, etc.

But, why does the belief still persist that everyone has different morals? It could be a simple misunderstanding of what an agreement really looks like. Let's suppose that everyone operates on the exact same moral principle: the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If everyone acted by this moral principle (most religions have this as a moral principle and I suspect many secular moral codes also include it) would we all agree about abortion, euthanasia, and the countless other issues facing us? I doubt it. Why not?

Well, look at the principle itself. It is universal (based on our assumption) in the same way that everyone must eat is universal. But, it does not specify what each individual would have done unto them even as everyone needing

to eat doesn't specify what they need to eat. If I act such that I do unto others as I would have them do unto me and you act that way as well, we could still act differently simply because I prefer different things done to me than you do! Of course, these differences are not necessarily differences in our moral preferences though they could be. The point I am making is that even if everyone acted by the same moral principle we could still end up with major disagreements.

So, where does that leave us? In truth, it seems that if we examine our own reasoning on ethical questions and closely compare it with others we'll see that we have much in common concerning our moral principles. But, if we only look at the outcome we may mistake this disagreement for something much deeper. I suspect that this is the major cause of the belief that we all have different morals. We are not willing to take the time to ask ourselves and others *why* we believe what we do about morality. It is not sufficient to simply say we all have different morals and leave it at that. At its best, this is simply false and at worst precludes any chance for moral consensus.

In his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams points out the importance of setting priorities when addressing ethical values. I think this makes an important point about our implicit ability to recognize right and wrong. Some actions are immediately recognized as right and wrong before any moral deliberation. This turns out to be a good thing. As Williams puts it "an effective way for actions to be ruled out is that they never come into thought at all, and this is often the best way. One does not feel easy with the man who in the course of a discussion of how to deal with political or business rivals says, 'Of course, we could have them killed, but we should lay that aside right from the beginning.' It should never have come into his hands to be laid aside. It is characteristic of morality that it tends to overlook the possibility that some concerns are best embodied in this way, in deliberative silence."

We can, more often than not, take comfort in this deliberative silence. Our neighbors are not plotting to kill us (most are not!). But, silence can become dangerous when the issues are unsettled. Then it becomes useful to discuss our thinking regarding ethics and morals. This gets me back to my original point. What is the point of studying ethics?

First and foremost, it gives us a framework to have these discussions. Like many activities, we have to be taught to engage in moral discourse. It takes practice and a facility with subtle concepts. Mastering them is difficult enough; applying them is even harder. Once again, I want to commend you for your good work in doing this. Hopefully, this won't be the end of your

ethical and moral discussions. This should be just the beginning. We will always face unsettled issues which have a moral component to them. It is immensely useful to engage in civil discourse about these issues. Sure, we'll have disagreements but we should be able to exchange ideas and perhaps even resolve issues.

We certainly have an interest in doing so. One recurring theme in many of the (viable) ethical theories is this interest in the welfare of others. For many philosophers this interest is natural. Of course, we benefit from the well-being of others but even without this benefit, there is something in us that more often than not desires to see that others can pursue happiness as we do. The Dalai Lama talks extensively about this as do the utilitarians.

Even the classical economist Adam Smith famous for his doctrine of economic self-interest recognized this universal impulse. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith writes that "how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it." A nice sentiment to end on, I think.

About the Author:



Kevin J. Browne is an adjunct professor of philosophy at Jefferson Community & Technical College in Louisville, KY. He is also a certified philosophical counselor through the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. He writes a regular blog and records a weekly podcast on topics such as applying philosophy to everyday life, cognitive biases, insights from logic, ethics, and psychology.

He can be found online at [Kevin J. Browne](#)

Recommended Reading

Ethics

James Rachels	The Elements of Moral Philosophy
James Q. Wilson	The Moral Sense
Robert Wright	The Moral Animal
Randy Cohen	The Good The Bad and the Difference
Michael Shermer	The Science of Good and Evil
Anita Allen	The New Ethics
Hugh Curtler	Ethical Argument
Robert Cavalier	Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy
The Dalai Lama	Ethics for the New Millennium
David Callahan	The Cheating Culture
Rita Manning	A Practical Guide to Ethics
Alasdair MacIntyre	After Virtue
Philippa Foot	Theories of Ethics
James Hunter	The Death of Character
Matt Ridley	The Origin of Virtue
Marc Hauser	Moral Minds
Elliot Sober	Unto Others
Sam Harris	The Moral Landscape
R.M. Hare	The Language of Morals
	Freedom and Reason
Plato	The Republic
Aristotle	Nicomachean Ethics
G.E. Moore	Principia Ethica
W.D. Ross	The Right and The Good
J.S. Mill	Utilitarianism
Immanuel Kant	The Critique of Practical Reason

Habits & Decisions

Charles Duhigg	The Power of Habit
James Clear	Atomic Habits
BJ Fogg	Tiny Habits
Stephen Covey	The 7 Habits...
Gretchen Rubin	Better Than Before
Warren Berger	A More Beautiful Question
Zachary Shore	Blunder
Daniel Kahneman	Noise
Ori Barman	Sway
Bill Burnett	Designing Your Life
Thomas Sowell	Knowledge and Decisions
Dan Pink	Drive
John Kay	Obliquity
Steven Johnson	Farsighted
Carol Tavris	Mistakes Were Made
Brian Christian	Algorithms to Live By
Gary Klein	Sources of Power
Jonah Lehrer	How We Decide
Cass Sunstein	Wiser
Barry Schwartz	The Paradox of Choice
Jamie Holmes	Nonsense
Richard Thaler	Nudge
Chip & Dan Heath	Decisive
	Switch
Dan Ariely	Amazing Decisions
	Predictably Irrational

Happiness

Joan Oliver	Happiness
Richard Schoch	The Secret of Happiness
Nicholas White	A Brief History of Happiness
Jennifer Hecht	The Happiness Myth
Jonathan Haidt	The Happiness Hypothesis
Michael Argyle	The Psychology of Happiness
Darrin McMahon	Happiness A History
Daniel Gilbert	Stumbling on Happiness
Sonja Lyubomirsky	The How of Happiness
Richard Layard	Happiness
Victoria Harrison	Happy by Design
Chris Guillebeau	The Happiness of Pursuit
Johnathan Rauch	The Happiness Curve
Neil Pasricha	The Happiness Equation
Megan Hayes	The Happiness Passport
Martin Seligman	Authentic Happiness
Alan Wallace	Genuine Happiness
Andrew Weil	Spontaneous Happiness
Sharon Salzberg	The Kindness Handbook
Piero Ferrucci	The Power of Kindness
Will Bowen	A Complaint Free World
Viktor Frankl	Man's Search for Meaning
	Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning
	The Will to Meaning
The Dalai Lama	The Art of Happiness
	The Art of Happiness at Work
Gretchen Rubin	The Happiness Project
	Happier at Home

Meaning & Purpose

Julian Baggini	What's It All About?
Sasha Sagan	For Small Creatures Such as We
Shunmyo Masuno	The Art of Simple Living
William Irvine	A Guide to the Good Life
Emily Smith	The Power of Meaning
Chris Guillebeau	The Happiness of Pursuit
Alex Pattakos	Prisoners of Our Thoughts
Jean-Francois Revel	The Monk and The Philosopher
Daniel Klein	Travels With Epicurus
Will Craig	Living the Hero's Journey
Ken Mogi	Ikigai
John O'Leary	In Awe
Todd Henry	Die Empty
Po Bronson	What Should I Do With My Life?
Stephen Cope	The Great Work of Your Life
Craig Kielburger	Me to We
Roy Baumeister	Meanings of Life
Meera Lester	Rituals for Life
Beth Kempton	Wabi Sabi
Martin Hagglund	This Life
Thomas Moore	Ageless Soul
William Damon	The Path to Purpose
Hector Garcia	The Book of Ichigo Ichie
	Ikigai
Viktor Frankl	Man's Search for Meaning
	The Will to Meaning
	Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning