

HUM 400: Ethics

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I. Rationalist Ethical Theories

- “Rationalism”: the belief that the exercise of reason is the foundation for ethics/ethical behavior
- Presumes that human nature is universal, and that rational people behave in predictable (hence more ethical) ways
- Contrast with “emotion” or “subjective” feeling, superstition, religion
- Theories rose in Europe in the 17th/18th centuries, during the Age of Enlightenment: science, logic foregrounded

Rationalist Theories: Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham (British, 1748-1832), founder
 - Assumption: By nature, humans are driven towards pleasure and away from pain...
 - Therefore, always act to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (the end justifies the means)
 - Motivation (moral/immoral) is unimportant
 - The best morality is impartiality
 - Everyone counts equally
 - Example: Dam on the Yellow River

Problems With Utilitarianism

- How do you measure happiness? With a spoon? A cup? A scale? Are there different qualities of happiness? Which are more important? Who decides?
- Majorities rule; minorities suffer
- Who should determine and what should constitute the boundaries of a group?

Rationalist Theories:

Contractualism

- Like utilitarians, contractualists presume that human nature is universal and consistent
- Major thinker: Thomas Hobbes (British, 1588-1679)
 - Assumption: Human nature is driven between fear and desire, but with the capacity for reason
 - Therefore, the social contract arises: people trade their individual natural rights under the protection of an authority (sovereign/gov't.)
 - Contracts are entered under voluntary consent. Ethical claims are entertained only after this consent, and are based on contractual obligations
- Like utilitarianism, contractualism is a cornerstone of Western law and politics

Problems with Contractualism

- Justice doesn't exist before the contract, only after.
What about the situation preceding the contract? The conditions under which the contract is signed? (e.g. “fish in a barrel” situations)
- Presumes that all people are “rational.” (e.g. what if your king wants to kill you?)
- What about the people who are not part of the contract? (e.g. illegal aliens)

Rationalist Theories: Deontology

- Argues for a rule-based approach to ethics in which moral principles have an absolute and categorical prescriptive status: “If we’re going to make a rule, everyone has to always follow it”
- Major thinker: Immanuel Kant (German, 1724-1804)
- Assumptions: Humans have natural reason/natural law embedded in them (as distinguished from animals), and it can be grasped rationally, independently of passions and interests
- Kant: If people choose rationality, they can discern moral law and act on it

Deontology & Kant

- Kant: Moral principles are universal, and we must believe in them, not just follow them blindly or for the wrong reasons
- Kant: To decide what's right/wrong, apply the “Universality Test”: what if X were a universal rule for all people? If it fails for one person, no one should do it.
- Kant: Anything passing the U.T. becomes a “Categorical Imperative”: and must be followed by everyone
- Kant privileges morality over utility and the sanctity of the individual. If it's morally right, it must be done, despite hardship

Problems with Deontology

- What is rationality, again?
- What if people don't choose rationality?
- Deontology works better in theory than practice:
 - Barely anything can pass a Universality Test
 - Who gets to decide whether something has passed?
 - When something passes, it's often hard to enforce

Alternatives to Rationalism:

Virtue Ethics

- Takes starting point not from moral rules or principles, but from what kinds of people are “good” or “bad”
- Traced to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who was concerned w/ living “the best kind of life”
- Virtues: temperance, justice, prudence, courage
- The Golden Mean: Finding a middle way between excess and lack. Virtuous people walk this path
- Problem: Good for individual human beings, but not for entire ways of life

Alternatives to Rationalism:

Feminist Ethics

- Feminist ethics = a branch of feminist philosophy
- Criticizes systems in Western philosophy because they systematically privilege men over women
 - Aristotelian ethics holds women inferior to men. “The good life” does not include women!
- Feminist ethics criticizes rationalist-based ethics, because
 - The chooser is presumed to be independent, with discretion over his body and capabilities. Presumed to be a property-owning citizen/head of household
 - Whole dimensions of life are screened out—including the private sphere. This distorts the ethical landscape

Alternatives to Rationalism:

Feminist Ethics

- Consider the stereotypes:
 - Reason = Masculinity
 - Emotion = Femininity
- “Reason”/Masculinity prevails
- Consider: 90% of ethical dilemmas I searched either overtly presumed the “chooser” was male (e.g. “You and your wife...”) or implied that the “chooser” had power to solve specific ethical dilemmas (e.g. “A madman runs into a grocery store with explosives strapped to him...”)

Postmodern Ethics

- Before we go “post,” what is the “modern”?
 - The later nineteenth century is the age of modernity, where science and technology, including networks of mass communication and transportation, begin to reshape human perceptions. Power is privileged to the point of dogmatic truth
- Postmodernism (c. 1960) is a reaction/criticism to this “modern” age



Postmodern Ethics: Assumptions

- There is no absolute truth. The notion of truth is an illusion, misused by people and special interest groups to gain power over others
- “Facts” are too limiting to determine anything. What is fact today can be false tomorrow.
- Traditional authority is false and corrupt, and should be “deconstructed” in order to disempower it

Postmodern Ethics: (Frustratingly) Anti-Dogmatic (but Fair?)

- Collective (not private) ownership would most fairly administrate goods and services
- Morality is relative, so it can only be personal. Morality is each person's private code of ethics without the need to follow traditional values and rules
- All religions are valid, but the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as being the only way to God (for example) are problematic
- Pro-underdog: postmodernists defend the causes of feminists and homosexuals (for example)
- Pro-environment: Postmodernists blame the powerful/dogmatic for the destruction of nature