

HUM 400: Ethics

Dr. Julie Chisholm

“Global” Ethics

- A field of theoretical inquiry that addresses ethical questions and problems arising out of global interconnection
- NOT “Applied” Ethics: i.e. professional ethics/environmental ethics/medical ethics

Defining Terms: “Ethics”

- Often described as “moral goodness”
- More formally: “Codes of behavior or sets of values that set out what’s right or wrong to do within particular contexts.”
- Covers all aspects of human behavior

Ethics Attempts to Answer These Questions

- Why is a particular ethical claim convincing/persuasive?
- What should be the substantive content of ethical values?
- Who carries moral responsibility for past/future actions?
- How should a particular principle/value be actualized?
- Remember: We are not here to judge; we are here to explore and discuss

This Class Will Investigate

- How to ground the authority of moral claims about moral issues
- A range of answers to moral questions about war and peace, the global political economy, the environment...
- Different stakeholders in the moral sphere
- Different practical implications drawn from the above

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

Rationalism vs. Revelation

- Review: In the 17th Century, Western intellectuals proclaimed autonomy from God (aka “the Enlightenment”). Truth & ethics are found via human reason alone. Hence: utilitarianism, contractualism, etc.
- However, Western “revelatory” ethics pre- and post-date the Enlightenment
- Whereas rationalism depends on the operations of the human mind and is human centered, divine revelation depends on a “higher law” which comes from the mind of a deity and is therefore god-centered
- “Divine command” theory says something is wrong simply because God has said so in a sacred writing - that “good” is defined in terms of what God wills. Whatever action God defines as a good action is a good action, and whatever action He defines as evil is evil – moral, “rational” justification isn't needed.
- Assumption: You have faith

Religious Ethics: Judeo-Christian

- Judeo-Christian ethics: the application of a J.C. worldview and values to the decision-making process
- Takes the Bible (332 BCE) as “God’s word revealed to man [sic]” via 66 books written by 40 men:
 - Old Testament (Jewish and Christian religions)
 - New Testament (Christians only)
- Deontologically speaking, mankind’s ultimate duty is to obey God and His revealed will.

The Ten Commandments (Exodus, Deuteronomy)

- I am the LORD thy God
Thou shalt have no other gods
No graven images or likenesses
Not take the LORD's name in vain
Remember the sabbath day
- Honour thy father and thy mother
Thou shalt not kill
Thou shalt not commit adultery
Thou shalt not steal
Thou shalt not bear false witness
Thou shalt not covet

The Extreme: Ethical Fundamentalism

- Ethical Fundamentalism: a moral theory of ethics wherein an individual looks [completely] to an outside source for ethical rules or commands
- The outside sources can be a historical person or book. Under this ethical theory such an individual then would judge conduct as ethical or unethical based on the source of their own reference.

Religious Ethics: Islam

- Islamic ethics: the application of a Islamic worldview and values to the decision-making process
- Takes the Qur'an (609 AD) as "Allah's word revealed to the prophet Muhammad"
- Deontologically speaking, mankind's ultimate duty is to obey Allah and His revealed will.

Moral Commandments

- **Worship only God:** (Quran 17:22) **Thou shalt have no other gods**
- **Be kind, honourable and humble to one's parents:** (Quran 17:24) **Honour thy father and thy mother**
- **Be neither miserly nor wasteful in one's expenditure:** (Quran 17:29)
- **Do not engage in 'mercy killings' for fear of starvation:** Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. (Quran 17:31)
- **Do not commit adultery:** (Quran 17:32) **Thou shalt not commit adultery**
- **Do not kill unjustly:** Nor take life – which Allah has made sacred – except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heir authority (to demand qisas or to forgive): but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life; for he is helped (by the Law). (Quran 17:33) **Thou shalt not kill**
- **Care for orphaned children:** (Quran 17:34)
- **Keep one's promises:** ...fulfill (every) engagement [i.e. promise/covenant], for (every) engagement will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning). (Quran 17:34)
- **Be honest and fair in one's interactions:** (Quran 17:35) **Thou shalt not bear false witness**
- **Do not be arrogant in one's claims or beliefs:** And pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge; for every act of hearing, or of seeing or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning). (Quran 17:36) Nor walk on the earth with insolence: for thou canst not rend the earth asunder, nor reach the mountains in height. (Quran 17:37)

Leftovers

Not included: **Thou shalt not steal (?)**

 Thou shalt not covet (?)

Hinduism: The Basics

- Oldest living religion in the world: originally an oral tradition
- Monotheistic (*Brahman*), polytheistic (*Shiva, Vishnu*), atheistic: you name it. Different ways of interpreting and practicing it. Tolerant of/flexible with differing beliefs
- Many sacred texts, including the *Vedas, Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, with no certain authors. Many contain views of ethics

Hinduism: Ethical Assumptions

- Life continues, like a circle. One dies and is reborn, depending on the quality of deeds done while alive (reincarnation, or *samsara*)
- *Karma*: the consequences (often, in your next life) of one's deeds. Good begets good; bad begets bad
- The highest goal: *moksha/nirvana*, or release from the cycle of life, into “full realization of *Brahman* (God) = *Atman* (Soul)”
- Virtue is always in context: who you are (*varna*) and at what stage of life you are (*asrama*)
- *Dharma*: “Way,” “practice,” “to hold,” “ethics”: how to get there. Active, not static

Dharma: Path to Moksha

- Virtues of the body: Charity, helping the needy
- Virtues of speech: Truthfulness, benevolence, gentleness, recitation of scriptures
- Virtues of the mind: Kindness, unworldliness, piety

- Vices of the body: Cruelty, theft, sexual indulgence
- Vices of speech: Falsehood, harshness, scandal
- Vices of the mind: Hatred, covetousness, unbelief

Highest virtue: *Ahimsa*

- Sanskrit: *a* = not; *himsa* = harmful
- Not just non-violent, but non-hatred. Scope is universal; no exceptions
- Ambassador for *ahimsa*, Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948). Brought *satyagraha* (nonviolent protest) to the streets in India

Eastern Religious/Philosophical Ethics: Buddhism

- Based on what Buddhists view as “the enlightened perspective of the Buddha (c. 500 BCE, Nepal or India)
- The Four Noble Truths (assumptions)
 - Suffering is universal (dukkha)
 - People suffer because of desire (samsara)
 - It is possible to end suffering and attain enlightenment (nirvana)
 - Follow the Eightfold Path (of acceptable behavior)

Buddhism: The Eightfold Path

- Right understanding (see the Four Noble Truths)
- Right thought—rid yourself of wrong/immoral qualities
- Right speech—no lying, divisive, abusive, idle speech
- Right action—The Five Precepts: no killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, or intoxicants
- Right livelihood—An ethical career: honest, spiritual practice
- Right effort—accentuate the wholesome; deemphasize the unwholesome
- Right concentration—meditate and focus

Easter Religious/Philosophical Ethics: Taoism

- A tradition emphasizing living in harmony with the *Tao*, or “way,” “path,” or “principle.” *Tao* is both the source and driving force behind everything that exists
- Primary texts: *Tao Te Ching*, Laotze (600 BCE), *Writings of Chuangtze* (400 BCE)

Taoist Ethics

- Most important ethical principle: *wu-wei*, or “non-action.” Not laziness or indifference: it is “being oneself” in the “flow” of the *Tao*. Acting spontaneously, not forcing things to happen
- Ideal state: “the uncarved block”: a state of naturalness before the imprint of human culture
- The Three Treasures: compassion, moderation and humility

Eastern Religious/Philosophical Ethics: Confucius

- Confucius (Khong Phu Tu), born 551 BCE, Qufu, China
- China's most noted educator and learned man
- Teachings were social and ethical, but became a sort of religion. Nothing supernatural (no deity)
- Doctrines were pragmatic and practical:
 - Assumption: Improper conduct throws man out of harmony with the universe
 - Goal: To regulate relations between people, and to facilitate harmony between heaven and earth.

Confucian Ethics

- A type of virtue ethics (personal characteristics)
- The individual is always less important than the family
- The living person is the link between the dead and the unborn, so all actions must consider the welfare of those two classes, which are more important than one's own fate
- In other words: You Aren't That Special

Confucius: The “Superior” Person

- Follows the path of righteousness through constant effort
- Takes the practice of virtue as their fundamental motive
- Is never done
- Integrates the practice of virtue into daily life

Nine Characteristics of the Superior Person

1. Practices harmonizing with all things. Doesn't force things. Is patient. Elevates others by deepening own practice
2. Can go anywhere in thought/action due to their universal insight
3. Naturally comes to embrace/practice virtue, serving others. Profit is not a primary consideration
4. Is free and open, because all they care about is practicing virtue

Nine Characteristics of the Superior Person

- 5. Is peaceful, without arrogance, because primary goal is to practice virtue
- 6. Is like wind; inferior people are like grass [?]
- 7. Goes up; inferior people go down [?]
- 8. In poverty, the TSP keeps to his/her principles; the inferior person will do anything for money
- 9. Examines him/herself; inferior people point the finger at others

Most importantly: Superior people follow righteousness;
inferior people follow profit