

Ethics from the ground up:

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Lecture 1: Where to start with ethics

1. The Question: What is ethics *really* about?

Talk about ethics involves a great number of different sorts of concepts – rules, virtues, values, outcomes, rights, etc ... Ethics is about all those things, but it is not *fundamentally* about them. Let's review them with a view to seeing why they are not basic:

Rules: “Thou shalt not kill”; “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

How we should act is ethically important, but surely a list of rules can't be the answer to basic ethical questions. We can always ask whether a rule is right - or not right, or right with exceptions. For example, we ask about the rule “Thou shalt not kill”, could killing in self-defence be allowed? Surely protecting myself is good, since my being killed is bad. The *reason* for the “Thou shalt not kill” rule is that being killed is bad, and that is not about rules of action, it's about the badness of something happening. Whatever we decide in the end about the allowability of self-defence, the debate about it makes us think about the reasons that lie behind the rules. Those reasons are more ethically basic than the rules.

(The same applies to **dilemmas**, which are the staple of teaching in school and undergraduate ethics: such as “if a lifeboat can't hold everyone, who should go first?” While there may be better or worse answers to such dilemmas, they mostly reveal how strongly we prefer not to “solve” them, because we value *all* the people in the lifeboat equally and strongly resist having to sacrifice any one.)

Divine (or church) commands: Ten Commandments; “No eating pigs”.

What if the rules were laid down by God? Would that make them right? The “divine command” theory of ethics (held to some extent by Calvinist Christians and Muslims) says it would. But can we accept that God could command genocide? Perhaps we ought not to believe in any God who commands genocide. The rules can still be criticized (and in any case, a list of simple commands like the Ten Commandments will need to be interpreted for a variety of new circumstances).

Socrates asked a classic question, “Is something good because the gods commands it or do the gods command it because it is good?” The general Catholic view has been that what is good is inherent in the nature of things and that God is of course on the side of good but cannot change it, e.g. command genocide. For example Benedict XVI's 2006 [Regensburg speech](#) praised the medieval Greek emperor Manuel II for saying “Not to act reasonably, not to act with *logos*, is contrary to the nature of God”.

Habits we've evolved: Sacrifice yourself for your tribe; drive on the left

The “naturalistic” or “relativist” view of ethics, supported by atheist materialists like Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, holds that all there is to ethics are the behaviour patterns or customs that humans have evolved. For example altruistic habits have evolved because it helps the survival of human tribes (or human genes). Different tribes, of course, might evolve different customs.

That view has severe problems. If ethics is just whatever has evolved, there is no standpoint from which one can say that one tribe's customs (e.g. those of the Nazi tribe) are worse than others, or that there has been moral progress (e.g. in abolishing slavery). If racism has evolved (as is likely if altruism derives from helping those with whom one shares genes), there will be no way of criticising that. Nor will there be any reason why I should do as my tribe says (if I can get away with not doing it).

Dawkins' book has a section on “If there is no God, why be good?” Strangely, the section does not contain an attempted answer to the question. Perhaps because he can't think of one, given his views on ethics.

The most consistent follower of a naturalistic view was the Australian philosopher John Mackie, who believed ethics was about **nothing at all**: according to his “error theory”, we are completely mistaken in thinking there is any such thing as ethics (there are only customs, which don't oblige us in any way to

follow them). One might wonder if other versions of naturalistic or “evolutionary” ethics differ from Mackie’s really or only cosmetically.

The greatest happiness of the greatest number: Calculate the optimized outcome of any action

The “Utilitarian” theory of ethics (promoted by, for example, Australia’s most famous philosopher Peter Singer) says that the sole purpose of ethics is to promote “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. It does not give any further reason for that.

Undoubtedly happiness is a good thing and more of it is better, but why should happiness be the *only* good? Utilitarianism holds that it would be all right to heap all the world’s unhappiness on a single scapegoat, since that might give the greatest total happiness. Justice to the scapegoat does not get a look-in on utilitarian theory.

Virtues and character: Be courageous and temperate to “live the good life”

“Virtue-based ethics” says that the point of ethics is not rules or similar, but living the “good life” of justice, courage etc.

Virtues are important, but surely they are *for* something outside themselves – for example, the point of courage is to enable necessary action to protect life or health in difficult situations. The worth of the life to be protected is what gives courage its ethical point.

Too much focus on one’s virtue may tend towards self-centredness or narcissism.

Values: Tolerance, Altruism

It is important to have good values, but what are the reasons why some values are better than others? Like virtues, the point of values is something beyond themselves. Tolerance, for example, has the purpose of showing respects for the opinions of others just because they are persons, and hence containing potentially violent disagreements.

The word “values” has a possibly dangerous suggestion that we can all choose our own values as we please – though the word need not be used in that way. As with the customs of tribes, there must be an ethical standpoint from which one can criticize values as better or worse.

Rights: Right to life, liberty, equal pay for equal work, gay marriage?

Especially since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), there has been more and more appeal to rights. For example, the rights to free speech and other political rights embodied in the Helsinki Declaration (1975) played a significant role in the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.

Reference to rights is good as a reminder of how strongly most people are committed to objective ethics – most people believe that basic rights cannot be overridden by anyone’s decision (even, for example, a majority decision of a parliament). Our legal system acts to protect rights from violations by powerful interest groups.

But surely rights too are not basic. What is it about humans that means they have rights? We have a right to life *because* our life is valuable, not vice versa. And rights are largely meaningless without correlative duties, e.g. a right to asylum doesn’t mean much unless it is the duty of some actual persons to grant asylum. The right and the duty arise from the person’s need existing at the same time as the ability of someone else to deal with it.

2. A suggested answer: what is ethically basic is the worth of persons

When we are confronted with pictures of genocide victims dug up (e.g. of Srebrenica) we think “Those were people like us, and something terrible happened to them.” Our emotional reaction gives us an immediate perception of the violation and destruction of something of immense value, a human life. To lack such emotions (as can happen with autistics) is to miss out on important ethical understanding. So while reason is important in ethics, so is emotion. (Which is not to say either reason or emotion is infallible.)

Rai Gaita, in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (p. 319) asks us to imagine “a tutorial in which one of its members had been a victim of terrible evil of which all the other members were aware, and in which the tutor invited them to consider whether our sense of the terribleness of evil was not an illusion. Everyone would be outraged if the tutor was serious and struck by unbelieving horror if he was.” Being

sceptical about something as ethically basic as the terribleness of evil (as Mackie is), Gaita says, is not only wrong but an evil act against the victims of evil.

It is especially in such extreme cases of evil that we are forced to admit our sense of the worth of persons, but we can equally become aware of it in more positive and ordinary circumstances. Indeed the normal experience of mutual positive affirmation between friends, family and colleagues has the purpose of affirming human worth. We assure people of their worth because we believe in that worth. We are also in general firmly convinced of the *equal* worth of persons. That is what drives our unwillingness to decide in lifeboat-style dilemmas. (Equal worth need not imply equal treatment irrespective of circumstances, however – children have equal rights to legal protection but they don't have equal rights to vote because they don't have the ability to vote.)

There are questions about whether beings other than humans have worth and rights (for example, animals, ecosystems). Those are real questions, but wondering about them should not shake our solid sense of the worth of persons. I have a good idea what it would be like to be shot in ethnic cleansing, because I am a human, but I don't have much idea what it is like to be a cat, so my ideas on feline rights may be poorly informed.

3. Bodies of knowledge that can deepen our understanding of the worth of persons

We look at a few examples of material that can help us understand how precious humans are.

New Testament perspective: Good Samaritan and Sermon on the Mount

Unlike the priest and Levite who are restricted by rules, the Samaritan responds directly to the victim on the road simply because he is a human being in need.

Matt 6:26, “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (A direct affirmation of the worth of persons and of God's valuing that worth – something of a contrast to other ancient writings; the Incarnation confirms that in the strongest possible way.)

Matt 5:21-22 “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, “Thou shalt not kill” ... But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement ...” (The emphasis moves away from rules of action to the inner orientation of the heart towards others.)

The perspective of serious literature: A serious novel gives a rich description of the inner life of characters that makes it easy to answer “Why do these characters matter?”

Handout: Jane Austen, section of ch. 3 of *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth and Darcy first meet.

Handout: Susan Moore, ‘The dragon on road’ (*Quadrant*, May-June 1989): a short article surveying how some of the famous items of world literature enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human.

Psychology and psychiatry: For example John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* trilogy, based on careful observation of children and others, confirmed our naïve understanding of the importance of love and the tragedy of loss. A film by an associate of Bowlby, ‘A two-year-old goes to hospital’, revealed the distress suffered by children who believe they have been abandoned by their parents.

4. God and ethics

If God is not needed to invent ethical rules, is there any connection between God and ethics at all?

The **problem of evil**, usually thought to be the most serious objection to religious belief, asks “If God exists and is good, why is there such terrible evil in the world?” That is a serious problem for religion, but it is a problem for atheism as well (at least for the classical materialist atheism of, e.g. Dawkins, which thinks the scientific picture of the world as a heap of atoms is the full picture). For in that case, we're the same sort of thing as a lifeless galaxy. But we know that the explosion of a lifeless galaxy is just a firework while the death of a human is a tragedy. Atheist materialism cannot make that distinction, so it really believes there is no serious evil (animals that don't like what happens to them, certainly, but that is not enough to create an ethical problem of evil).

So there is a difficult problem as to what view of the universe is needed to ensure there is such a thin as objective ethics. It would take us far from the topic of these lectures to try to answer that.

3 views on the foundations of ethics

	FOR	AGAINST
NATURALIST: Customs tribes have evolved	Fits well with science; Explains well both similarities and differences among tribes	Doesn't allow moral criticism of other tribes (e.g. Nazi tribes); Doesn't give a reason to <i>be</i> moral; Moral progress meaningless
NATURAL LAW: Based on "natural" preciousness of humans	Fits well with actual intuitions?: We understand our own worth, and know others are the same	Hard to fit with scientific world picture?
THEOLOGICAL: What God(s) command(s)	Clear answers in scriptures	Doubts if God exists; Conflict of alleged revelations; Socrates: "Is something good because gods command it or do the gods command it because it is good?"

Summary of the three main positions on the foundations of ethics