PHI 1100: Ethics & Critical Thinking

Sessions 7 & 8
February 18th & 20th, 2020

Intro to Ethics: Normative Ethics
Now we will undertake a whirlwind introduction to

- **normative ethics**: the study of how we should act in order to do the right thing / be a good person

- Different normative ethical theories emphasize different aspects of being a good person / doing the right thing.

- **Rather than studying each theory at length** (which is time-consuming, to get all of the details just right),
  » we are going to talk through their key concepts, namely:

  - moral duty / rule-following
  - freedom / autonomy
  - happiness
  - flourishing / well-being
  - virtue (good character)
  - care
  - equality / reciprocity
According to some philosophers, **being a good person requires identifying ethical rules that it is your duty to follow.**

- **Deontology** = an approach to ethics where doing the right thing means fulfilling your obligations to obey moral rules
  - ("deon" = Greek for obligation, duty)

Different defenders of this approach to ethics point to different types of rules we must follow:
- e.g., deontologists who are also moral realists assert that the rules we ought to follow reflect objective facts about right/wrong:
  - **Theistic deontology** = we must follow objective moral laws that issue from divine commands
    - (e.g., the “Ten Commandments”)
  - **Kantian deontology** = we must follow objective moral laws derived through proper use of our reason …
**deontology** = an approach to ethics where doing the right thing means fulfilling your obligations to obey moral rules

- **Kantian deontology** = we must follow objective moral laws derived through proper use of our reason *(video: bit.ly/2SSBbY6)*

**Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) proposed the following fundamental laws of morality, which are absolutely binding:

- **no one is exempt from them; nor are there any circumstances in which we can violate or override them.**
  - **Act as if your choices will set the standard of behavior that everyone else after you will follow**
  - **Only act in ways that you would deem acceptable for any person at any time in any circumstances**
  - **Always respect other people’s autonomy** (their ability to make their own decisions to shape the course of their life);
    - **…don’t force people to act against their will.**
**deontology** = an approach to ethics where doing the right thing means fulfilling your obligations to obey moral rules

Deontologists who are moral anti-realists argue that we are obligated to follow subjective rules invented & agreed upon by humans:

- **contractarianism** = we do the right thing when we obey government laws (when these laws arise from legitimate political authorities)
  - i.e., stealing & assault are wrong because they are illegal; if they were legal, they would not be wrong.

- **contractualism** = we do the right thing when we act in accordance with a set of principles that everyone would willingly & knowingly agree to
  - **Tim Scanlon** says we can think of the rules we need to follow as an agreement on “what we owe to each other” (1998)
An objection to versions of deontology that focus on following human-made rules is that:

• *humans can come up with (& agree upon) very bad rules:*

Plenty of actions which have been considered right according to the laws or conventions of certain groups of people — (e.g., slavery, segregation, forced marriage, child labor…)

• …now appear to us to be totally *wrong*, either because they reflect false beliefs about morality, or because they lead to unacceptable consequences.

➢ e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. asserted that *we must disobey unjust laws:*

» just because something is legal doesn’t make it right.

• (He didn’t reject government laws completely as a standard of ethics; e.g., he argued that discriminatory local laws (like Jim Crow) should be abolished because they contradicted federal laws;

• however, he also appealed to objective moral laws (like the Christian God’s command “Love your neighbor as yourself”) as the reason to reject “unjust” human laws.)
An objection to all variations on deontology concerns the rigidity & generality of rules

• (contrasted with the flexibility & specificity of other approaches to defining good behavior):
  
  – Rules tend to be very absolute (“black-and-white”) in their description of how we should act:
    
    • they tend not to allow for “grey area” about ethics (where the rightness/wrongness of a particular action is unclear),
    • nor to allow exceptions in light of specific circumstances,
      
      – …and for some people this leads to unacceptably inflexible thinking about what it means to be a good person.

➢ One’s duty to obey moral rules can come into conflict with common sense (or other interests).

  – E.g., an implication of one of Kant’s objective laws of morality (that we must always respect other people’s autonomy) is that it’s always wrong to lie,
    
    » …but being completely honest at all times can make other people unhappy, or even put people in grave danger. (video: bit.ly/1tpdXCS)
We’ve seen that some approaches to ethics (like Kantian deontology) place a lot of emphasis on:

**autonomy** = our freedom to make choices that determine the course of our own lives

The difficulty with this concept is identifying where its *limits* lie,
– because allowing people *absolute* freedom to do literally *anything* they please is (for many thinkers) not an option;
  • even if we value the exercise of freedom,
    some actions must be off-limits,
    – either because they cause undue harm to others,
    – or because they limit other people’s ability to exercise their own autonomy.

Some political theorists explain this by invoking
  » **negative liberty** = freedom from obstacles or constraints imposed upon us by other people (e.g. coercion)

...which sets the boundaries on the exercise of
  » **positive liberty** = freedom to act in accordance with our own will
autonomy = our freedom to make choices that determine the course of our own lives

A lot of moral disagreements rest upon differing interpretations on where the boundaries of freedom ought to lie:

» E.g., the debate over gun control can be understood as a dispute over whether the freedom to own & possess a weapon overrides the freedom other people gain when the risk of bodily harm from firearms is minimized.

» The debate over vaccination can be understood as a dispute over whether parents’ freedom to make choices about their children’s healthcare can override the freedom other people gain from “herd immunity”

• (protection from disease that arises when enough members of a population are inoculated against the disease)
HAPPINESS

- **hedonism** = an approach to ethics where the ultimate goal of ethical action is to increase happiness
  » (“hedon” = Greek for **pleasure**)
  
  - One controversial approach to ethics that centers on happiness is:

  **egoism** = the theory that **good actions** increase the happiness of the person performing the action

  Critics of this view say this isn’t an **ethical** theory at all, since it is blatantly **self-centered**, and doesn’t display any concern for the interests of other people.

  Most moral philosophers defend the view that in order to act ethically,
  - we must be able to overcome our tendencies toward selfishness & egocentrism:
    - **we must learn to think about other people, and how they are affected by our choices.**
  
  - **video:** [bit.ly/37U298n](http://bit.ly/37U298n)
The most popular ethical theory that emphasizes the value of happiness is:

**utilitarianism** = the theory that good actions increase the total amount of happiness in the world

- *utility* = the benefit gained from an action;
  - utilitarians measure this benefit in terms of happiness,
    - based on the assumption that people feel happier when they get what’s good for them.

- Utilitarians urge us to take into account how an action would affect the happiness of every individual it could possibly impact (not just the person performing the action).

- The **Greatest Happiness Principle**:
  - an action is right if it results in an increase in happiness (or decrease in pain) among all of the people affected;
  - an action is wrong if it decreases happiness (or increases pain) among all people affected
    • (video: bit.ly/2O0Vznw)
HAPPINESS

➤ An challenge for hedonists: how do we measure happiness?

Many utilitarians have asserted that some types of pleasure are more valuable or “higher quality” than others:
• if we have to choose between two types of pleasure we could bring to another person, we should choose the higher quality pleasure.

Some philosophers even developed systems for calculating pleasure:
• they thought that you could use these criteria to compare different actions,
• in order to figure out which of two actions generates a superior quality of pleasure.

Bentham’s Felicific Calculus
Pleasure can be ‘scientifically’ calculated according to the following 7 criteria of the Felicific Calculus

1. DURATION
   How long it last...

2. INTENSITY
   How intense is it?

3. PROPINQUITY
   How near / remote?

4. EXTENT
   How widely it covers

5. CERTAINTY
   How probable is it?

6. PURITY
   How free from pain is it?

7. FECUNDITY
   Lead to further pleasure?
There are two competing schools of thought on how we should measure happiness:

- **Objective theories** of happiness say that someone is happy when their life satisfies criteria that are necessary for happiness.

  - Objectivists about happiness tend to regard *self-report* (what people say about their own happiness) with suspicion, because our feelings don’t necessarily track the reality of our situation:
    - people who have everything can be miserable;
    - people who have nothing can think they’re happy because they don’t know what they’re missing.

- **Subjective theories** of happiness say that someone is happy when they feel, from their perspective, that they are happy.

  - Subjectivists about happiness tend to defend *self-report* as the most appropriate measure of happiness available to us:
    - They trust people as authorities on their own happiness, even if their feelings seem out of touch with reality.
An objection to utilitarianism is that it may not be our place to try to make other people happier (even if we have good intentions in doing so).

- Our attempts to make other people happy can come in conflict with their autonomy.

- We run the risk of verging into paternalism:
  - believing one knows what’s best for other people, instead of trusting people to choose what’s best for themselves.

- e.g., former Mayor Bloomberg’s proposed ban on “Big Gulp” sodas was strongly opposed (and eventually blocked by the NY State Supreme Court):
  - despite its intended outcome of increasing happiness by benefitting New Yorkers’ health,
  - the ban’s imposition on New Yorker’s autonomy and appearance of paternalism led to its rejection.
Another quite serious **objection** to utilitarianism is that

- **utilitarians may claim that actions like murder can be justified if the result of these actions is an increase in happiness.**

  » E.g., a utilitarian is likely to say that Batman should kill the Joker in order to increase happiness (by preventing future deaths),

  - or that subjecting a murderer to the death penalty is justified because it deters murders by other would-be murderers, and/or brings satisfaction to the victim’s loved ones.

Deontologists in particular are likely to counter that murder is never acceptable, even when it would have very positive consequences.

➢ More generally, **some critics of utilitarians say this system of ethics is much too permissive** (accepting of wrongdoing),

  - because **any action could potentially be deemed “right” according to the Greatest Happiness Principle.**
A potential problem for any hedonist approach to ethics comes from empirical findings about
- the unpredictability of what causes happiness & what makes it last.

Psychologist **Dan Gilbert** has found that people are often deeply mistaken in their predictions about what will bring happiness (or unhappiness):
- one year after winning the lottery, winners rank their happiness on par with people who became paraplegic a year earlier. *(TED Talk: bit.ly/1HcOTJH, esp. 2:20-4:35)*

This suggests that:
- high levels of happiness are hard to maintain, since all feelings fade;
- it’s hard for us to make decisions that are guaranteed to bring happiness to ourselves or others.
Philosopher Robert Nozick offered a famous critique of hedonism by presenting a thought experiment (a fictional scenario, meant to help us think through a difficult topic) known as The Experience Machine:

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired.

» Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book.

» You can pick and choose [your simulated life] from [a] large library or smorgasbord of [desirable] experiences...

» All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.

Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences?”
According to Nozick, “The key question this thought experiment raises is:

- **What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?**

  - Nozick suggests that “perhaps what we desire is to live...ourselves, in contact with reality.
  - ...we want to be a certain way, to be a certain sort of person.”

In other words, we want to face challenges that will lead to personal growth,
  » instead of remaining complacent with ourselves, or never taking chances to prove our worth.

Another idea raised by “The Experience Machine”:

- we need to experience displeasure in order to truly recognize the value of happiness:
  » a life of constant pleasure would be monotonous, or may cease to feel pleasant if pleasure is “normal”.
• Some people who deem happiness to be too shallow or too unpredictable to be the main goal of ethical action urge for an alternative approach:

➢ **eudaimonism** = an approach to ethics where the ultimate goal of ethical action is *flourishing* / achieving well-being

This view is **derived primarily from ideas presented by Aristotle** (384-322 BCE),

• who argued that **all humans are shared a common goal**, called **eudaimonia** (flourishing) = maximizing your potential, becoming your best self, & fulfilling your purpose as a human being.

**Flourishing is not about feeling good** (though it may lead to feelings of happiness), **but rather doing the best that you can.**

– Aristotle does *not* say that we are obligated to help other people to flourish,

» …only that **doing the right thing & becoming a good person is necessary for us to flourish**, *(which to some interpreters seems like a pretty egoistic way of looking at ethics (since it suggests we should do the right thing because it benefits us personally))*
eudaimonism = an approach to ethics where the ultimate goal of ethical action is flourishing / achieving well-being

A version of this theory which says we ought to be committed to helping other people flourish is:

– Martha Nussbaum & Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach,
  • where we should treat other people in ways that ensure they can exercise abilities to do & to be things deemed valuable.

– The capabilities approach focuses on what someone is actually able to do with their life,
  » …which has something to do with the amount of resources they have (food, shelter, capital, etc.),
    • but also depends upon what it costs to satisfy one’s needs where one lives, and one’s individual needs.
  » e.g., a person who uses a wheelchair may not be able to participate fully in school or the workforce if their city’s public transportation system does not provide ramps & elevators in addition to stairs.

  • (videos: bit.ly/2UH5nIn, bit.ly/2unA1fl)
**eudaimonism** = an approach to ethics where the ultimate goal of ethical action is **flourishing** / achieving well-being

Another theory that emphasizes promoting others’ well-being:

- **care ethics** = a view that emphasizes the obligations we have as human beings to provide support to others who depend upon us
  
  • For many care ethicists, **healthy family relationships**
    - (involving mutual support, consideration of everyone’s needs, an unconditional commitment to each member’s continued well-being & self-improvement…)
  
  • …**represent a moral ideal we should all strive to replicate in all of our social interactions.**

(This theory is sometimes construed as a “feminine approach to ethics”,
- but it has defenders of all genders.)
– Though he does not say that we are obligated to help other people to flourish,
  • (only that doing the right thing & becoming a good person are necessary for us to flourish),

**Aristotle does elaborate a theory about what it means to do the right thing:**

» **virtue ethics** = doing the right thing results from developing good moral character, which involves cultivating moral virtues

➢ **virtue** = a state of excellence in one’s character, developed through repeated practice, which allows a person to make good choices & do the right thing at the right time

  • E.g., someone whose character is *just* (who has developed the virtue of *justice*) knows what to do in order to settle any kind of dispute in a way that is fair for everybody involved;
  • they have the skill necessary to perceive what each situation requires, & to take whatever action is needed to respond appropriately.
**Virtue ethics** = doing the right thing results from developing good moral character, which involves cultivating moral virtues

– **Virtue** = a state of excellence in one’s character, developed through repeated practice, which allows a person to make good choices & do the right thing at the right time

» Aristotle thought

  your actions determine your character,
  • so the only way to gain virtue is to repeatedly act the way a virtuous person would.

Virtue ethicists typically consider virtues to be **attainable by anyone** who is willing to put in the time & effort to develop good character,

• though some acknowledge that developing virtue may be much more challenging **for some people** than it is for others:

  – E.g., philosophers Claudia Card (1940-2015) & Lisa Tessman discuss how social circumstances beyond our control (an “unnatural lottery”) can impose serious obstacles upon our pursuit of virtue.
Virtue ethics = doing the right thing results from developing good moral character, which involves cultivating moral virtues.

Let’s contrast this theory with one we studied earlier:

Deontology = an approach to ethics where doing the right thing means fulfilling your obligations to obey moral rules.

Virtue ethicists tend to deny that the complex matter of how we ought to behave can be reduced to a set of rules, laws, or formulas for good behavior:

» They suggest that doing the right thing is best pursued by adopting some general guidelines that help you make good choices in any situation, and they emphasize that “the right thing to do” should be determined by assessing each situation on a case-by-case basis.

Hence, this approach to ethics is more flexible than deontology, but it sometimes gets criticized for being too vague or open-ended about how we should behave.
**virtue ethics** = doing the right thing results from developing good moral character, which involves cultivating moral virtues

- A general guideline Aristotle suggested, to steer you towards a good choice in any situation:

  ➢ Identify & strive to achieve the moderate, middle-ground option (the “golden mean”) between the most extreme responses to the situation.

  - Note that this is just a guideline, and not a strict rule, because Aristotle believed that there are situations that call for extreme responses:
    - the challenge of becoming a good person is working to develop the judgment necessary to know when extreme responses are right, vs. when they ought to be avoided.
- **virtue ethics** = doing the right thing results from developing good moral character, which involves cultivating moral virtues

Aristotle also proposed that
- each of the moral virtues [middle column] can be understood as a “golden mean” (ideal balance/midpoint) between two extreme forms of behavior [side columns]
  - (each of which is a *vice* = a character flaw we should *not* develop)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deficiency (−)</th>
<th>BALANCE</th>
<th>Excess (+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cowardice</td>
<td>COURAGE</td>
<td>rashness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stinginess/miserliness</td>
<td>GENEROSITY</td>
<td>extravagance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sloth</td>
<td>AMBITION</td>
<td>greed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humility</td>
<td>MODESTY</td>
<td>pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secrecy</td>
<td>HONESTY</td>
<td>loquacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moroseness</td>
<td>GOOD HUMOR</td>
<td>absurdity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quarrelsomeness</td>
<td>FRIENDSHIP</td>
<td>flattery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-indulgence</td>
<td>TEMPERANCE</td>
<td>insensibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apathy</td>
<td>COMPOSURE</td>
<td>irritable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indecisiveness</td>
<td>SELF CONTROL</td>
<td>impulsiveness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some questions we might ask an Aristotelian virtue ethicist:

- **Is it fair to expect everyone to strive for good character when it might be an unattainable ideal for some people?**

- **How can we be sure when we’ve done the right thing by behaving as a virtuous person would?**

- **Different people may make different judgments about where the golden mean lies;**
  
  » perhaps the “golden mean” guideline allows too much room for subjectivity in the process of deciding how we ought to treat others.

- **Are general guidelines all we need to make good choices about how to treat other people, or do people need the clarity & rigidity of strict rules to keep their conduct in line?**
Last but not least, we’ll consider:

- **egalitarianism** = an approach to ethics (and justice) that prioritizes equality

There are a lot of variations on this perspective:

- Some egalitarians assert that humans are naturally equal, and doing the right thing just means acting upon the fact of equality
  - E.g., the U.S. Declaration of Independence states “All men are created equal”
- …others believe that:
  - humans are naturally unequal, but we should treat each other in ways that produces equality
    - E.g., Jean Jacques Rousseau said we should create laws that put all citizens on a level playing field by compensating for “caprices of fortune” (natural differences arising from luck)
  - or we are naturally equal but society makes us unequal,
    - so we should treat each other in ways that corrects for socially-caused inequality
egalitarianism = an approach to ethics (and justice) that prioritizes equality

Moreover, different people have different ideas in mind when they say they want to achieve equality.

Here are six major categories of “equality”:

1) equal treatment = interacting with all people in the same way

   – Some philosophers argue that this is neither feasible nor desirable:
     » people have different needs, so perhaps it’s better to treat people in accordance with their needs.

     • Nussbaum & Sen’s “capabilities approach” says it’s appropriate to give people differential treatment in order to make sure each person’s needs are satisfied:

       • e.g., people with disabilities may get to use a assistive device to cast a ballot in an election,
       • but this “special treatment” is not unjust (not providing it might be)
...six major categories of “equality”:

2) **equal rights** = everyone is treated the same under the law

   – Some philosophers (like Nussbaum) say that “rights” are too vague of a concept for us to act upon:
     » When we say that someone has a “right” to something, we imply that it would be wrong for this person to be deprived of this thing,
     » but it’s often not clear whose obligation it is to fulfill a person’s “right”.

   e.g., we may believe all humans have a right to employment,
   • but we probably wouldn’t say that any particular employer has an obligation to hire a particular candidate,
     • nor that they would be violating a person’s rights if they choose not to hire them for a particular job.
...six major categories of “equality”:

3) equal outcomes = creating the same situation for everyone

– What kind of “outcomes” should we try to equalize?

» material equality = everyone has the same resources
  (or at least, the same / value of assets)

» capability equality = everyone is able to do the same things

» welfare equality = everyone has the same quality of life

➢ Is this possible when
different people have different standards for
what qualifies as a good life?

Philosopher Ronald Dworkin call this
“the problem of expensive tastes”:
• some people are hard to satisfy,
  • and it’s unclear whether
  we owe it to them to satisfy their high demands,
• or if they should lower their expectations.
…six major categories of “equality”:

4) **equal opportunities** = everyone has the same chance to succeed

Though this is an appealing goal for many people, it can be difficult to define what it involves.

– E.g., if we want all candidates to have equal opportunity to be hired for a prestigious job, we could ensure that the application and/or interview process is not discriminatory

  • (for example, by blinding the hiring committee to features of the candidates (race, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) that have nothing to do with successful job performance,

  • or by making sure that process does not impose undue hardship on specific types of people (e.g., not insisting that the interview take place after normal business hours, which could mean that a single parent can’t participate)

  • Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson has highlighted the latter example as a way to combat a form of inequality that results *not* from an intent to discriminate, but from a failure to properly account for diversity.
4) **equal opportunities** = everyone has the same chance to succeed

...it can be **difficult to define what this involves.**

– E.g., if we want all candidates
to have equal opportunity to be hired for a prestigious job,
  » we could ensure that the application and/or interview process
    is not discriminatory
  » ...but there remains the worry that the process
    is still biased against some candidates, because of the role of luck:
    • someone who had the bad luck to be born into poverty
      & have minimal access to good education
      is going to be at a disadvantage
      through no fault of their own,
    • as is someone who is born with less raw talent
      for the type of work the job requires.

**John Rawls** (1921-2002) opposed the idea that
people’s lot in life should be defined by their luck:
• he defended a contractualist process through which
  we might figure out how to cancel out the role of luck.
...six major categories of “equality”:

5) **equal consideration** = everyone’s concerns & input are given equal weight in deciding what should be done when it affects everyone

– E.g., care ethicist Virginia Held suggests that it doesn’t make sense for parents & minor children to have equal rights under the law,
  » but each member of a family should have their needs & interests taken into account when the family makes important decisions.

6) **equal respect** = everyone is regarded as having value & dignity

  » Anderson points out that even if everyone is equal under the law,
    • they will be unequal if their society harbors negative attitudes about people belonging to particular groups
      • (perceiving them in light of unflattering stereotypes about their intelligence, competence, moral character, and so on.)