

Bioethics - Introduction to moral philosophy

II

Three classes:

1. ~~27 February - Introduction to ethics I: the challenge of cultural relativism; overcoming relativism is not enough (chapters 1, 2);~~
2. **1/3 March - History of ethics II: virtue theory (chapter 13), religious ethics (chapter 4) and the social contract (chapter 11);**
3. 6 March - History of ethics III: consequentialism and deontology.

Reference to Rachels, J. 2003. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 4th edition. McGraw Hill International Editions, New York (1st ed. 1986).

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Summing up last class

In the last class we saw that cultural relativism denies the existence of super-cultural moral standards of evaluation of courses of action.

We analysed one of its arguments, showing that:

1. cultural relativist arguments are not sound if they derive a negative ontological claim (i.e., the non-existence of super-cultural moral standards) from a claim about what people believe;
2. In the end, beneath cultural variation, **there might exist trans-cultural or even moral cultural universals**, i.e., super-cultural moral standards of evaluation of courses of action;
3. Two general ethical principles were introduced, such as the evaluation of a course of action in terms of its consequences or in terms of universalisable maxims of conduct.

Summing up last class

The challenge of cultural relativism can thus be resisted. Indeed, Rachels argues that all ethical theories and cultures share a “minimum conception” of morality (chapter 1):

1. Moral judgements must be supported by **good reasons** and **sound moral principles** instead of expressions of taste and culturally-relative customs;
2. Moral arguments require the **impartial consideration of each moral agent's interests.**

Rachels might be right, but this is irrelevant when we consider that **the deeper problem in ethics is that the moral principles at the basis of different ethical theories clash.** What ethical theory should we choose then? And why?

Plan for this class

How are general ethical principles grounded or justified? Why should we assume them as general?

- 1. Religious ethics: the idea of Divine perfection and benevolence - supernaturalistic, universalistic.**
- 2. Aristotle: the rational idea of virtuosity - naturalistic, universalistic.**
- 3. Social contract: knowledge of human nature - naturalistic, somehow localist.**
4. Kant: based on the requirement to make a maxim of conduct a universal law - rationalistic, universalistic.
5. Mill: a hedonistic theory of good - naturalistic, universalistic.

* Most of these ethical theories concern what an individual should or ought to do. But bioethics is also about the ethical justification of social policy.

Plan for this class

Today I shall briefly expose the rudiments of three ethical theories: religious ethics, virtue theory and contractualism (i.e, social contract theory).

I shall show - more or less following Rachels' argument - that these three theories are either **incoherent or somehow incomplete** and need to be complemented by more general moral principles such as, for instance, those at the basis of consequentialism (e.g., utilitarianism) or deontology (e.g., Kantian ethics).

In the next class we shall go back to consequentialism and deontology, which we have already introduced in class 1 (section 4).

1.1 - Religious ethics

Divine command's theory (for an analysis, see section 4.2 in Rachels)

God has given us a series of moral rules and standards. These rules and standards are objective. What is good/right and bad/wrong is determined by God.

Problem: is course of action x right because God commands it or does God command it because x is right?

If it is argued that a course of action x is right because God commands it, then God's commands seem morally arbitrary. What if God told us to kill and lie? Killing and lying would become good/right.

If it is argued that God commands a course of action x because it is good/right, then we are acknowledging that there is a moral standard that is prior to and independent of God's judgement.

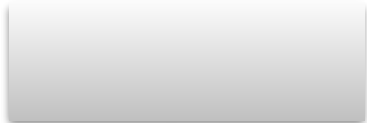
It is because of such implications that Divine Command Theory has been largely abandoned.

1.2 - Religious ethics

The Theory of Natural Law

Elements of the theory of Natural Law:

1. Everything in nature has a purpose. Nature is a rational system where every part of it - every natural thing and object - has a specific purpose. In the end, the ultimate purpose is human-centric. This view has its roots in Aristotle (Rachels p. 54):

 If then we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.

The difference is that Aristotle did not consider God part of the picture (e.g., his ethics does not make any appeal to God). Christianity added God the creator of the rational order to this picture.

1.3 - Religious ethics

The Theory of Natural Law

Elements of the theory of Natural Law:

2. There are laws of nature governing natural phenomena: every natural object behaves in accordance to its purpose. There are also moral laws that, ultimately, derive from the laws of nature that God created. **Some moral behaviours are thus natural and purposeful, other unnatural and without purpose.**
3. God created a rational order and we are creatures of God, so we can understand the moral natural order. This means that the correct course of action can be rationally evaluated (in effect making morality independent of religion). St. Thomas Aquinas in fact said, “To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God” (Rachels p. 57).

1.4 - Religious ethics

Are there any distinctively religious positions on major moral issues?

As Rachels argues, **religious ethics is either logically incoherent** (Divine Command theory, slide 1.1) **or parasitic on independent moral considerations and principles** (Natural Law theory, slides 1.2 and 1.3).

This might be perceived as a misinterpretation of actual religious practice, which is based on the teachings of the Scriptures and the dictates of religious institutions.

However, Rachels (p. 58) asks whether there are any “distinctively religious positions on major moral issues”? Consider abortion. Is there a distinctively religious position on this issue?

1. Religious practices differ (Jewish vs old Christian tradition vs contemporary Catholic position);
2. It is difficult to find support for the position of the Catholic Church in the Bible;
3. Religious positions historically change;

1.5 - Religious ethics

Are there any distinctively religious positions on major moral issues?

3. Religious positions historically change:

“Pope Pius IX challenged the canonical tradition about the beginning of ensouled life set by Pope Gregory XIV in 1591. He believed that while it may not be known when ensoulment occurs, **there was the possibility that it happens at conception. Believing it was morally safer to follow this conclusion, he thought all life should be protected from the start of conception.** In 1869 he removed the labels of ‘animated’ fetus and ‘unanimated’ fetus and concluded that abortions at any point of gestation were punishable by excommunication.”

From <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/pope-pius-ix-1792-1878>

What moral principle explains the change in position of the Catholic Church? The precautionary principle (i.e., in the light of ignorance, act with precaution in order to avoid irreversible damage).

1.6 - Religious ethics

Are there any distinctively religious positions on major moral issues?

Consider now the frequently used “appeal to nature” arguments.

Basically their point is that **what is natural is good**. God is benevolent and created nature, so nature is good.

Every human shares a nature given by God.

Every human must behave in accordance to what our common nature requires.

Some behaviours are thus natural and purposeful, other unnatural and without purpose.

Is the moral principle that what is natural is good sound?

1.7 - Religious ethics

1. Homosexual behaviour can be observed in nature and also in the human population (factual premise);
2. Human homosexual behaviour is not reproductively advantageous and hence not adaptive (factual premise);
3. There is no genetic basis for homosexual behaviour because it reduces fitness (factual premise);
4. Homosexual behaviour is unnatural (factual premise);
5. **What is not natural is bad (MORAL premise);**

MORALLY JUSTIFIED
JUMP ?



Hence, homosexual behaviour is immoral (MORAL conclusion)

RELIGIOUS ETHICS RATIONALE: Human homosexual behaviour is unnatural because without reproductive purpose.

1.8 - Religious ethics

1. Homosexual behaviour can be observed in the case of many animals, including bonobos, the species phylogenetically nearest to us (factual premise);
2. There is a biological basis (probably even genetic) for homosexual behaviour because it increases the fitness of the social group (factual premise);
3. Homosexual behaviour is natural (factual premise);
- 4. What is natural is good (MORAL premise);**

MORALLY JUSTIFIED
JUMP ?



Hence, homosexual behaviour is good and moral (MORAL conclusion)

ALTERNATIVE RATIONALE: not all behaviours evolve because of reproductive advantage and sexual reproduction is not the only purpose of sex.

1.9 - Religious ethics

1. Raping behaviour can be observed in the case of many animals (factual premise);
2. There is a genetic basis for raping behaviour because it increases Darwinian fitness (factual premise);
3. Raping behaviour is natural (factual premise);
- 4. What is natural is good (MORAL premise);**

MORALLY JUSTIFIED
JUMP ?



Hence, raping behaviour is good and moral (MORAL conclusion)

(See Thornhill, R. & Palmer. 2000 in secondary literature)

Given that it is possible to concoct a variety of arguments with incoherent and counterintuitive moral conclusions from the application of the moral principle that what is natural is good, the principle is not sound. In the end, there is not a distinctively religious position on major moral issues.

2.1 - Virtue ethics

Virtue theory is - with contractualism, utilitarianism and Kantian ethics - one of the four major naturalistic options in current moral philosophy (Rachels 2003, p. 155).

Aristotle “Nicomachean Ethics”: central ethical question concerns character, i.e., **what is a virtuous person?** What traits of character make one a good person?

God does not play a role in Aristotelian ethics.

In contrast with the ethical theories trying to answer the question of what makes a course of action good.

2.2 - Virtue ethics

What is a virtue?

Aristotle: a trait of character manifested in habitual action. Virtues are not manifested on an occasional basis, but always.

But even vices might be traits of character manifested in habitual action.

So what distinguishes virtue from vice?

We can as a consequence define a virtue as a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that it is good for a person to have.

But then the question of what makes the virtue *good* remains pending.

2.3 - Virtue ethics

Which character traits are virtues?

benevolence

civility

compassion

conscientiousness

cooperativeness

courage

courteousness

dependability

fairness

friendliness

generosity

honesty

industriousness

justice

loyalty

moderation

patience

prudence

reasonableness

self-discipline

self-reliance

tactfulness

thoughtfulness

tolerance

Rachels p. 176

2.4 - Virtue ethics

What do virtues consist in?

Aristotle: virtues are the mean between two character traits, excess and deficiency. *In medio stat virtus.*

Courage is between the extremes of recklessness and cowardice.

Generosity is between the extremes of extravagance and stinginess.

Honesty is between the extremes of naivety and deception.

Loyalty is between generalised benevolence and betrayal.

2.5 - Virtue ethics

Why are virtues good for a person to have?

- Courage is a good thing because life is full of dangers and without courage we would be unable to cope with them.
- Generosity is desirable because some people will inevitably be worse off than others and they will need help.
- Honesty is needed because without it relations between people would go wrong in myriad ways.
- Loyalty is essential to friendship; friends stick by one another, even when they are tempted to turn away.

Aristotle: **there is something general about these virtues: they are needed to live a successful life.** Given the kinds of social life we live as humans, the virtues are all qualities needed to be successful in life. The virtuous person will fare better in life.

2.6 - Virtue ethics

Are virtues universal?

Is a single set of virtues applicable to all persons in all life circumstances, in all societies and all cultures? Should we speak of the virtuous person as “the good person”?

Aristotle was making a general claim about the kind of social life we live as humans. Is this claim justified?

On the one hand, it might be said that he was merely talking about the life of a philosopher in classical Athens, a very peculiar kind of life.

On the other, Aristotle was proposing an argument against cultural relativism: **the major virtues (i.e., courage, generosity, honesty, loyalty) will be needed by all people at all times and thus are not mere social conventions or cultural values, but basic facts about our common human condition.**

2.7 - Virtue ethics

Limits of virtue theory

How does virtue theory approach the question of what makes a course of action good and how should we behave?

Moral (especially bioethical) problems are often about what we should do: should I relieve my ill father from suffering? Should I become vegan? Etc.

The answer of virtue theory is that the correct course of action is the one a virtuous person would choose. Does this help?

Consider a moral conflict case.

2.8 - Virtue ethics

Limits of virtue theory

My father is extremely ill and his condition is getting worse by the day. He is in extreme pain and the doctors say that he cannot improve. He is also semi-conscious and it is almost impossible to communicate with him. However, in the past he told me that he harbours strong feelings against euthanasia.

Should I relieve him from his pain and **act courageously**

or

should I **act loyally** by upholding his beliefs against euthanasia?

What would a virtuous person do in case the virtues of courage and loyalty clash?

2.9 - Virtue ethics

Limits of virtue theory

What would a virtuous person do in case the virtues of courage and loyalty clash? As Rachels (2003, p. 189) argues “The admonition to act virtuously does not, by itself, offer much help” in cases of conflict.

Virtue ethics is, at best, incomplete. Consequentialism and deontology offer moral guidance in this case.

Consequentialism: relieving my father from pain will have, in this case, a net positive effect on the moral community, thus acting courageously is the moral course of action.

Deontology: respecting the rationality, dignity, autonomy and freedom to choose of humans is a duty and universal maxim of conduct, thus acting loyally towards my father is the moral course of action.

3.1 - The social contract

Suppose we start our ethical analysis from a standpoint that is opposite to that of religious ethics. More precisely:

1. from the ontological assumption that there is no God and divine source of morality;
2. and from a particular hypothesis about human nature: humans are naturally self-interested and altruism is wishful thinking (i.e., psychological egoism, cf. chapter 5 Rachels).

Where does morality come from if there is no God and if we are selfish?

From the social contract that self-interested human beings “sign” in order to solve a practical problem: avoiding the state of nature and live a peaceful and cooperative existence.

3.2 - The social contract

The state of nature is a fiction in a way. But it remains an important analytical tool (Rachels p. 156-7).

Thomas Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651) asks us to think what it would be like if there were no social contract and no social institutions (no government with its laws, police and courts).

Hobbes nonetheless based his fiction on historical considerations: what would happen if a viral infection with a high mortality rate engenders a pandemic? Or if war spreads to all Europe?

This thought experiment leads Hobbes to postulate the existence of a state of nature, a situation in which there is:

“.... continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Rachels p. 142).

3.3 - The social contract

The rationale of Hobbes argument is the following:

1. Equality of need: all humans need the same resources to survive;
2. Scarcity of resources: the resources are scarce;
3. Essential equality of human power: no human is superior to everyone else;
4. Limited altruism: we cannot count on spontaneous charity and generosity because people are essentially self-interested.

Scarcity of resources and equality of need means that humans will be in continuous competition for the acquisition of resources; but given that we are essentially equal and that no one will ever prevail in the competition, and given that self-interest and limited altruism cannot be a basis for social cooperation, then **the state of nature is a state of “constant war, of one with all” (Rachels p. 143).**

3.4 - The social contract

The social contract is thus the instrument to escape the state of nature.

The social contract is based on:

1. rules guaranteeing that humans will not harm one another;
2. rules that enforce cooperation and the respect of their agreements.

Hobbes' main point is that only Government and its social institutions (its system of laws, its policing authority and its judiciary) can establish and ensure that these kinds of rules are respected.

It is only within the context of the social contract that we can become altruists, cooperative, beneficent or, as Rousseau* put it “different kinds of creatures” (Rachels p. 144-5).

*Jean Jacques Rousseau conceived the state of nature as a presocial primitive state, morally neutral and peaceful.

3.5 - The social contract

The social contract explains the role of the Government and also what morality consists in:

1. What moral rules should I follow? Those that are necessary for social living;
2. Why are these moral rules justified? Because otherwise there would be no possible cooperation with other humans;
3. Why is it reasonable to follow these moral rules? Because it is to our own advantage and, a fortiori, mutually beneficial to all members of society;
4. Does morality have an objective basis? No “special” facts but objective basis: agreement between rational people for mutual benefit.

3.6 - The social contract

Hence, contractualism has several advantages. It also partially shares the commitments of the minimum conception of morality:

1. Moral judgements must be supported by good reasons (the social contract is an agreement between rational people) and sound moral principles (justified within the framework of the social contract);

But consider the other commitment:

2. Moral arguments require the impartial consideration of each moral agent's interests.

Rachels - 2003, pp. 157-9 - argues that contractualism is flawed because it does not comply with this principle.

This is the topic of next class + the foundations of utilitarianism (Mill) and deontology (Kant).

Primary resources:

1. Rachels, J. 2003. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 4th edition. McGraw Hill International Editions, New York (1st ed. 1986). Chapters 4, 11 and 13.
2. Rachels, J. 2004. Elementos de Filosofia Moral, Gradiva, Lisboa. Capítulos 4, 11 e 13.

Secondary resources

1. From <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/pope-pius-ix-1792-1878>
 2. Rachels, J. 2003. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 4th edition. McGraw Hill International Editions, New York (1st ed. 1986). Chapters 5.
 3. Thornhill, R. & Palmer, C.T. 2000. A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion. MIT Press
Thornhill, R. & Palmer. 2000. Why Men Rape?
<https://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/merlinos/thornhill.html>
 4. On Hobbes and the social contract see for instance:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/#StaNat>
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is an excellent resource for deepening your knowledge and understanding of philosophy and ethics.