

PHIL 140

§§0103 (1:00pm Armory 0103), 0106 (10:00 am Art & Soc 3221), 0107 (12:00 pm Phys 4208)

Discussion Notes

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Note: I will be periodically posting material from discussion sections on a website linked to my homepage, whose link you can access by clicking [Recent Courses Taught and TA'd](#) in my homepage: <http://www.glue.umd.edu/~wkallfel> ...or you can scroll down to the appropriate section in my homepage. I will send you an email announcement first if and when I post items.

Preliminaries¹ (Useful Terms and Notions)

- **Morality:** Our beliefs concerning what is morally **right versus wrong, permissible/ versus impermissible, good versus bad.**² Such beliefs can involve *rules, principles or norms (i.e., standards), judgments, theories.*
- **Values:** In the case of morals and morality, it is a predicate or property we use to modify an action, entity, or state of affairs. Like the **true versus false** distinction, such ascriptions usually come in the form of simple dichotomies like **right versus wrong, permissible/ versus impermissible, good versus bad, praiseworthy versus blameworthy.** Note that the concept of **values** extends beyond **moral notions.** (One speaks of non-moral *aesthetic* values like **beautiful versus ugly**, non-moral values of utility like **practical versus impractical**). In general (concerning both moral and non-moral values) one speaks of action, entities, or state(s) of affairs having **extrinsic value** (being valuable as a means to something else) versus **intrinsic value** (being valuable in itself, “for its own sake.” (7))
- **Obligations:** Actions considered as duties, i.e. what one should do.
- **Ethics:** “The philosophical study of morality.” (7) Note that this implies a **systematically critical analysis and reflection on** morality and one’s moral beliefs, which need not require any special philosophical training. Rather than offering moral ‘answers’, ethics supplies us with *tools for systematically analyzing moral arguments, ideas, theories, norms, judgments.* Such a study presupposes the **preeminence of reason (7), the universal perspective** (“a moral statement (...principle, rule, or judgment) that applies in one situation must apply in all other situations that are **relevantly similar**” (7)), the **principle of impartiality** (“the welfare and interest of all individuals [**all things being equal**] should be given the same weight as all others” (8)). In addition, one way to think of ethics as being such a vital enterprise is the **dominance of moral values and norms (they seem, or should seem, to take precedence over non-moral values and norms.)** **Ethics** is subdivided into three main branches: a) **Normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics.**

¹ You’ll find all these in Chapter 1 of your text (pp. 3-12). This chapter wasn’t assigned as mandatory reading by your instructor, but I highly recommend it as supplemental reading

² Note that these moral properties or predicates certainly overlap in meaning.

- **Normative ethics:** The “disciplined study” or systematically critical analysis and reflection of *rules, principles or norms (i.e., standards), judgments, theories* which guide actions and judgments.
- **Meta-ethics:** The study of the nature and meaning (including logical structure) of one’s moral *beliefs*.
- **Applied ethics:** The study of application of particular moral norms or standards in a given context or situation (e.g., *medical ethics* is applied ethics in the context of medicine, *legal ethics* is applied ethics in the context of law).
- **Objectivism:** The meta-ethical position that moral principles are valid for everyone, because moral judgments refer to “some underlying fact of the matter.”
- **Cultural Relativism:** The meta-ethical position that moral principles and actions *X* are deemed morally right *because* of one’s cultural perspective (i.e. whether or not cultural standards, norms, etc. approve of *X*).
- **Subjectivism:** The meta-ethical position that moral principles and actions *X* are deemed morally right *because* of one’s personal perspective (i.e. whether or not the subject’s standards, norms, etc. approve of *X*).
- **Emotivism:** Moral claims have no truth-content but express emotions or attitudes.

Discussion Questions:

1. Note in the definition of ethics, the **principles of universality, impartiality** come equipped with qualifications like “relevantly similar,” “all things being equal.” Can you think of exceptions that wouldn’t violate such principles? Do you think there are ways we can precisely pin down the meanings of such notions?
2. Do you agree with the **dominance** principle? (That moral norms and values override non-moral ones) in any given situation where they may conflict? Why or why not?
3. How does cultural relativism reduce to subjectivism?
4. Can cultural relativism promote universal tolerance? Why or why not?
5. Does subjectivism reduce to emotivism? Why or why not?
6. “Do you believe there has been moral progress in the past thousand years of human history? Why or why not?” (Discussion question #8, p. 34 text)

Further clarifications:

- Emotivism can be viewed as a special case (hence rather contentious) of subjectivism (i.e., subjective relativism) the way absolutism relates to objectivism (as a contentious special case):



- While subjectivists claim that one’s subjective approval determines rightness, and more generally that subjective perspective determines moral value, emotivists claim something stronger (and more restrictive and hence controversial): Such approval is determined by “non-cognitive” factors which reduce to emotions or sentiments.³ A subjectivist on the other would grant that there are cognitive factors (thus making their moral judgments truth evaluable) that go into one’s approval or disapproval. In other words, moral appraisal, though *subjective*, is not just *sentiment*.

Note that while the criticisms of subjectivism (which of course also apply to emotivism) that disagreement is impossible as well as moral fallibility, the *analogy* with respect to taste was applied (regarding strawberry versus chocolate ice cream) to illustrate that *there is no underlying fact of the matter*, hence no grounds for dispute. However, only in the case of emotivism does taste correspond more ‘tightly’ with sentiment. In the general case of subjectivism, ‘taste’ corresponds in a looser manner with one’s preferences (which are based on perspective, personal experience, etc). But it doesn’t follow that such preferences are entirely based on feeling alone.

- Consider some of the “hedging” or qualifications that inevitably come up in ethical principles or presuppositions. For example, in the above definition of ethics the author (Vaughn) hedges the universal and impartial principles in the following manner (with the hedging qualifications highlighted in red): **The universal perspective:** “A moral statement (...principle, rule, or judgment) that applies in one situation must apply in all other situations that are **relevantly similar**” (7), The **principle of impartiality** states that “the welfare and interest of all individuals [**all things being equal**] should be given the same weight as all others” (8).

Much of these qualifications are what inevitably give rise to the ‘shades of grey’ aspect to doing ethics, and what makes ethics a field which is often so rife with controversy. To name one example, the objectivist is willing to accept a notion of “relevant similarity” in the case of the universal perspective--admitting therefore that legitimate exceptions to norms can exist: “Don’t lie in this and all relevantly similar cases. However there are other exceptional instances that therefore aren’t ‘relevantly similar’ in which lying is therefore permissible”.⁴ The absolutist, however, would deny in such a notion as degrees of “relevant similarity.” “Don’t lie” means: “don’t lie, *period*.” I.e. one should *always* choose *not* to lie in *any* case in which the possibility of lying can come up.

Another way to think of this is that the absolutist states something much stronger (hence more controversial and contentious): That a *moral perspective free of*

³ Emotivism has sometimes been satirically referred to as the “boo! / hurrah!” theory...i.e. that moral judgments can be paraphrased away as exclamations (either ameliorative or pejorative: to say “X is right/wrong or good/bad or permissible/impossible or..” is essentially the same as saying “Hurrah for X !” or “Boo on X !”)

⁴ Consider lying to spare one’s feelings as a matter of courtesy (“Do you like my hair this way?”) Or in more extreme or stark cases: lying to save the lives of others (soldiers hunting down innocent refugees knock on your door asking if you have any hidden away, and you happen to have hidden a refugee family in your basement, etc.)

context is possible to achieve. In such an absolute context-free perspective there is one absolute set of norms or standards, without qualification or hedging. The objectivist, on the other hand, would argue that though moral judgments refer to some underlying (therefore objective) fact, the facts' *appraisal* remain mediated by subjective and cultural and other contextual factors. An analogy might help: suppose a scientist measure the velocity of an object. If the scientist claims that only *one* value of that object's velocity is possible, measured relative to some *absolute frame of reference*, then s/he is stating something analogous to what the moral absolutist would claim: Only *one* moral assessment is possible, from the standpoint of an *absolute moral* frame, i.e. a frame purged of all context. On the other hand, if scientist states that the velocity can take on *any* value (measured relative the someone's frame of reference) s/he is certainly *not* saying that there does not an exist an objective or physical *property* like velocity, only that the particular value of that velocity is determined by the measurer's relationship to the moving object. By the same token, the moral objectivist does not deny that there are moral facts in the world, but that our assessment (analogous to "measurement") of them depend on our particular relation to those facts. Such a relation is of course determined by factors like perspective (whether personal, subjective, or cultural), which are based on context. For that matter, even a commandment as seemingly absolute as "Thou shalt not kill" should be interpreted as "don't murder, i.e. don't kill for an unjustified reason," as **Corey Levine** (§ 0106) mentioned. In this respect, one could argue that Ten Commandments can be interpreted in objectivist instead of an absolutist manner.⁵

- Some ethical positions maintain that all moral values are *extrinsic* (see definition above). An example would be the consequentialist or utilitarian one: an action is *good/bad* based on its *consequence*. Other positions (like Kant's absolutism) maintain that all moral values are *intrinsic*, as valuable in and of themselves. For Kant, for example, this meant that the *intentions* of the person are what should be held to moral appraisal, and not the consequences of the person's moral decisions.
- Last of all, it should be stressed that the positions of cultural and subjective relativism, versus objectivism don't "corner the market" on ethical positions to take. Vaughn however mentions (chapter 1) that they appear to be very common kinds of positions, and most people seem to tacitly carry a mixture of all three of them around in their day-to-day moral life: In one situation, given one moral case, a person may defer to subjective relativism ("Who am I to judge? S/he knows best what's right for him/herself) while waxing culturally relative in another ("You might find it a little rude, the way s/he behaved, but you have to

⁵ Though the issue is by no means a simple one. Some classical theists advocate a *Divine Command Theory* of morality, which could be paraphrased as "X is of moral value because God commands it." It's just a short step toward absolutism (if the theist assumes additionally that one has reliable access to "the will of God.") On the other hand, Plato already voiced in the *Euthrypto*: "Is it good because God wills it, or does God will it because it's good?" many theists (St. Augustine, Maimonedes, Leibnitz) did not subscribe to a Divine Commandment theory, arguing instead that reason is a gift, and hence one should use this gift by following God's example who wills X *because* X is good. The latter position falls naturally more in line with ethical objectivism (for our reasoning is contextual, and therefore fallible). For details, see pp. 10-12 of Vaughn, in his section on religion and ethics.

understand that's their *custom...*") while maintaining objectivism is still another scenario ("Do I think Hitler and bin Laden are evil? What kind of question is that? Of course, they are...")

Class Discussion

By far the most interesting variety of responses was generated by the last question highlighted in red: "Do you believe there has been moral progress in the past thousand years of human history? Why or why not?" (Discussion question #8, p. 34 text). **Sahiba Chopra and Joseph Hall** (§ 0103) both answered affirmatively, citing concrete instances from culture and history. **Joseph** mentioned that in the present, human life seems to be valued in greater regard, than in the past. In other words, in terms of our present-day *norms* (not to be confused with how people *actually* behave, which is privy to *descriptive ethics* like sociology and anthropology), killing is taken more seriously in the sense that wanton or indiscriminate state-sanctioned brutal slaughter is generally regarded as impermissible. Whereas in previous times (European Middle Ages, etc.) vanquishing armies were allowed to 'sack and burn' and wreak arbitrary havoc over their subject. **Sahiba** also mentioned a concrete instance of the outlawing the practice of burning widows alive with their dead husbands during cremation, in India. This practice was up until recent history regarded as permissible. When pressed further to clarify *how* and *why* such notions can be viewed as progressive, (though it may seem obvious), both **Joseph** and **Sahiba** agreed that progress has been achieved in the direction of treating human beings as having intrinsic value (as ends in themselves), and not just as having extrinsic value (as means to some other end), as their examples show. Though it doesn't automatically follow that by valuing human life only extrinsically you're prone to mistreat people, it's also certainly true that by valuing human life intrinsically, it becomes much harder to *justify* mistreatment, than in the extrinsic case.

Alexander Marbach (§ 0107) responded to the question with a meta-ethical one: "what do you *mean* by progress?" **Alexander** further explained that the meaning of progress is determined by a subject's or culture's aims or values. **Zina Marlar** (§ 0107) added to **Alexander's** point by citing the empirical basis of J. S. Mill's ethics (that one must *experience* before one can *understand and live up to* a standard like dignity). In other words, one progresses in treating someone with dignity only insofar as one has *subjectively* experienced such. Does Alexander's notion of "progress relative to an aim or goal" become a form of subjective or cultural relativism? Perhaps on the face of it, but **Zina's** example leaves the subjective/objective issue open: An objectivist can buy into Mill's claim (that we appraise the dignity of others *based on* our subjective experience thereof), and still argue that there's an underlying 'fact of the matter' concerning this moral value. Dignity, in other words, is not purely in the eye of the beholder. Later **Alexander** clarified more what he considered is a regulative way to assess the moral progress of a subject or a culture: by the diminishment of hypocrisy. In other words, the better able a culture or subject is able to 'walk its talk,' and not just pay lip service to its norms, so the better one is able to judge that moral progress has been made. One could call **Alexander's** notion a type of "sincerity principle."

Zina Marlar (§ 0107) also responded by pointing out that though it may be unclear that moral progress has occurred, it is undoubtedly the case that the public forum of open and relatively free discussion on ethical matters has greatly increased in breadth. Certain issues, for example, like gay marriage were until relatively recently considered taboo. Not to mention issues dealing with race, sex, etc. So in terms of breadth of content in *communication* there has been obvious progress. An open society may not guarantee a fair or just society, but it is hard to

imagine how a closed and secretive society could move towards greater fairness and justice. Quite the contrary, as history continuously shows.

The second question:

Do you agree with the **dominance** principle? (That moral norms and values override non-moral ones) in any given situation where they may conflict? Why or why not?

...also generated an interesting variety of responses. **Joseph Hall** (§ 0103) pointed out that when one selects a mate or life partner, many non-moral values override the moral ones: we tend to judge a person's aesthetic values (good looks), performative values (intelligence, 'earning power'), social and psychological values (confidence), etc., over the person's moral values like the quality of a person's character. When pressed further, Joseph explained he was making a *normative*, not a *descriptive* claim. In other words, in selecting a mate or life partner, we ought *not* to let the moral values override the non-moral ones. **Joseph's** points echo a particular ethical position that has been thriving in the last several decades: *evolutionary ethics*. The idea is that our notions of value are derived from 'evolutionary fitness,' so in the case of selecting a mate or partner, non-moral values (sex appeal, looks, strength, etc.) are strong determiners since such selection practices strengthen genetic robustness and diversity of the human species. In more general terms, this position is profoundly *naturalist* in the sense that any 'ought' of a moral norm is fundamentally underwritten by an 'is' from evolutionary biology.

To illustrate by way example, I pointed out a scenario in which an employer looks over the resumes of two candidates A and B. Candidate A has an absolutely stellar record, reflecting his or her optimal performative values suitable for the position. Candidate B's record, on the other hand, is mediocre. Only one 'glitch': Candidate A is a sociopath, *unable* to distinguish right from wrong. According to the dominance principle, the employer would hire B, on the grounds that moral virtues like honesty, etc., take precedence over non-moral values like skill.

Benjamin Hiaasen (§ 0106) however pointed out that it seems unclear that in certain cases the dominance principle is always invoked. His example was the 'cutthroat' world of big business, which all too often appears to acquire the reputation of promoting non-moral values over moral ones.⁶ **Corey Levine** (§ 0106) also gave the example of a bomber pilot, which could be extended to training for combat in which "operant conditioning" teaches the soldier to actively suppress certain moral values (like viewing human life as intrinsically valuable) to strengthen other non-moral ones (battle-effectiveness, etc.) The topic of war is a complex one, however, which we'll examine in due course. **Alexander Marbach** (§ 0107) mentioned that it may not be so much a question of *dominance* but rather *weighing*: depending on the situation: we weigh the non-moral virtues against the moral ones. Though the latter may be more heavily weighed, it doesn't guarantee they'll always dominate or override non-moral virtues.

⁶ One need hardly search for examples here. "Greed is good," as Donald Trump proclaimed in the late 1980s. The whistleblower is seldom rewarded, and usually punished, etc.