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CHAPTER 1 – THE NATURE OF MORALITY

General Overview

The objectives of this first chapter are to introduce the core terms and ideas of morality, distinguish morality from other closely related areas and then move towards a basic working definition of morality. Most students will have had little real exposure to these concepts so carefully organizing and presenting the material here will enable students to begin to build a “picture” of philosophical ethics for themselves.

Class Suggestions

In those first humbling moments of class you’ve introduced yourself and established your “right” to speak. Perhaps before a thorough review of your syllabus and an ethics icebreaker you might give a general introduction to the course. Students will want to know how this class will be of interest and relevance to them. You can explain this best by tying the objectives of the course to a current example of a moral issue. The newspapers are full of these examples every day. There will be many current examples of moral issues that relate directly to their major and their lives. In fact this would tie in to a first homework assignment: tell them to find a current topic or issue that interests them in the news and tell them to be prepared next class to explain why it is a “moral” issue, asking them to think also about the pros and cons of the issue and perhaps offer a view on it. Having explained the relevance of ethics through a current example you might then begin to introduce some of the key terms, concepts and questions for this chapter found in the next section of this handbook. Towards the end of the first class I would have students in pairs doing a basic questionnaire on what makes something moral to prepare them for the homework assignment and next class.

Chapter Summary

What is Philosophy and Ethics’ Relationship to it?

Philosophy – *philia/sophia* – means “love” or “friend” of wisdom. Philosophers try to be a friend of wisdom by asking questions and studying why something is the case. Ethics seeks wisdom by asking about right and wrong, good and bad.

Terms and Characteristics

Ethics comes from the Greek *ethos* meaning character. Morality derives from the Latin *moralis* meaning customs or manners. Commonly we speak of people being ethical or moral to mean *good* or *right* and unethical and immoral to mean wrong or bad. Philosophical ethics is the study of what makes something moral or ethical, good or right, and unethical or immoral, *bad* or *wrong*.

Philosophers have considered what makes something morally good or bad, right or wrong in relation to a range of characteristics. For example, does moral goodness involve some relation to *happiness* or *pleasure*? Does the good involve *excellence* of some sort? Or *harmony* and

creativity? Is it possible to be *amoral* – that is, indifferent to right and wrong? What things are *nonmoral*? For example, my pen that I write with appears neither moral nor immoral in itself but if I use it as a weapon it enters the domain of morality.

Approaches to the Study of Morality

There are two major approaches to the study of morality:

1. The *scientific* or *descriptive* approach emphasizes the observation of human behavior and the positing of conclusions based on those observations. Psychologists, for example, have claimed that human beings are basically selfish based on observations of conduct. This approach is descriptive in that it is “value-free” making no judgments about the rightness or wrongness of the behavior.
2. A second approach is more properly philosophical and has two parts.
 - a. The first part is *normative* or *prescriptive*. How *should* or *ought* we to act?
 - b. The second part is *metaethical*. A metaethicist is committed to the analysis of the language, concepts, reasons, and foundational structure of ethical systems. Thiroux’s text is committed to synthesizing *all* of these approaches.

Morality and its Applications

What is morality? In order to further define morality we need to say how it is similar to and different from other areas and nonmoral uses of key terms.

Aesthetics: Ethics like aesthetics is a part of philosophy concerned with *values*. Ethics differs from aesthetics in that it is concerned with *moral* value although moral value and aesthetic value connect and overlap.

Nonmoral uses of key terms: Good, bad, right, and wrong are often used in a nonmoral sense, e.g., good meal, bad tooth, etc. These uses often refer to function. Aristotle argued that morality is tied to the function of a human being. This should not be confused with any idea that meals or teeth are directly linked to the ethical use of language or the moral domain of human life.

Manners or etiquette: Manners and etiquette are forms of socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior. For example, swearing or use of foul language is in most contexts considered unacceptable. However there is no necessary connection between this and immorality. Of course manners and morals overlap but care is required to distinguish them when there is no obvious connection.

To whom or what does morality apply? Morality may be applied to four areas:

1. *Religion*. Morality determined by relation between human being and supernatural being.
2. *Nature*. Morality determined by relation between human being and nature.
3. *Individuality*. Morality determined by relation the individual has to him or herself.
4. *Society*. Morality determined by relation between human being and society.

Most moral systems involve all four of these areas with one being primary.

Who is morally responsible? Should only human beings be held morally responsible? Are all animals nonmoral?

Where Does Morality Come From?

Morality can be considered as having a *subjective* or *objective* origin.

As objective there are three possibilities for the origin of value:

1. Values are given by a supernatural being
2. Values are part of the fabric of nature
3. Values are part of the “furniture” of the world, independently of human beings

These possible explanations of the origin of values are expressed in the “supernatural theory,” the theory of “natural law,” and “objectivism.”

As subjective, the origin of value is related to human beings. Without human beings, subjectivist theorists argue, there would be no value.

Evaluation of objective and subjective positions. Criticisms of:

1. Supernatural theories. Belief based on faith. Diversity of traditions makes it unclear what values are best and why.
2. Natural law theories. So called “laws of nature” are descriptive Are there natural *moral* laws, i.e., laws that are prescriptive?
3. Objectivism. Can something have a value if there is no one there to value it?
4. Subjectivism. Are values entirely subjective? Would the world have value without the presence of humans?

Synthesis: values perhaps best viewed as both subjective, objective, and emerging out of a context. Thus three variables:

- A. Object value – thing of value or thing valued
- B. Subject value – a conscious being that values
- C. Situational value – context in which valuing is situated

Where do Values Come From?

Values might be thought of then as originating in a complex relation among the three variables: an interaction between conscious human beings, things (variously material, emotional, and mental) and a specific context.

Customary or Traditional and Reflective Morality

We can separate morality into two forms:

1. Customary or traditional morality. Traditional morality refers to the moral systems handed down through custom from generation to generation. We might call this static morality.
2. Reflective morality. Reflective morality requires that moral ideas are carefully examined and tested. Traditional morality can become reflective and dynamic when those moral ideas that are simply handed down and accepted are subjected to analysis and criticism.

Morality, Law, and Religion

Morality also overlaps with law and religion but shouldn't be confused with them.

1. Morality and law. Morality and law are not the same although of course they overlap. Law might be thought of as a public codification of morality for a culture, although certain laws in that system, or even the system itself, might be deemed immoral, e.g., apartheid. Law is not a necessary attribute of morality although morality may well be thought to be a necessary attribute of law.
2. Morality and religion. Is morality dependent upon religion? Can you be moral and non-religious?

Morality need not be based exclusively on religion for five reasons:

1. Supernatural existence cannot be proven.
2. Non religious people can be moral.
3. Religious foundation for ethics is difficult to establish.
4. Which religion would be best ethically?
5. How could it be shown that one religion is best?

Therefore, there is no necessary connection between morality and religion.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's Cognitive Theory of Moral Development sets up three distinct levels of moral thinking, and each level is arranged in two stages which are "structured whole" or organized systems of thought that give rational consistency to moral judgment.

Why Should Human Beings be Moral?

Why should human beings do what is right?

1. Enlightened self-interest – I will be better off
2. Tradition and law – best to do because some authority says so
3. Shared human needs, goals, desires and objectives

Morality: a working definition. Morality deals with humans and how they relate to others and the world around them. It deals with how we treat one another so as to promote what is good and right.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

| | |
|------------|--------------------|
| Philosophy | Amoral |
| Ethics | Nonmoral |
| Morality | Descriptive ethics |
| Good | Normative ethics |
| Bad | Metaethics |
| Right | Values |
| Wrong | Subjective |
| Hedonism | Objective |
| Happiness | Situational |
| Pleasure | Custom |
| Excellence | Tradition |
| Harmony | Law |
| Creativity | Religion |

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. What is the relation between philosophy and morality?
2. What is morality?
3. What are the different approaches to morality?
4. How does morality differ from aesthetics, etiquette, law, religion, or custom?
5. Where does morality come from?
6. Why should you be moral?

TRUE/FALSE

1. Philosophy means “love of wisdom.”
2. Ethics is solely concerned with the question “What is knowledge?”
3. Ethics is the study of human conduct and human values.
4. There are two major approaches to the study of morality.
5. Morality is the same as law and custom.
6. Morality is a subfield of religion.
7. Philosophical morality is the study of right and wrong actions *and* good and bad persons.
8. Atheists cannot be moral.
9. I already know right from wrong.
10. Morality cannot be either true or false.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

11. Ethics is
 - a) the study of knowledge.

- b) the study of the nature of reality.
- c) the study of human behavior.
- d) the study of right and wrong.
- e) the study of what is socially acceptable.

12. Goodness is

- a) that which brings happiness and pleasure.
- b) excellence.
- c) harmony and creativity.
- d) whatever I say it is.
- e) defined by God.
- f) a combination of a, b, and c.

13. A cat toys with a live mouse throwing it the air and dragging it along by its tail. After one hour it leaves it to die on the floor. Is this

- a) immoral?
- b) amoral?
- c) nonmoral?
- d) moral?

14. "Human beings should always act in the interests of others." Is this

- a) descriptive?
- b) prescriptive?
- c) analytic?
- d) metaethical?

15. Who said that morality was bound up with the *function* of a human being?

- a) Sophocles
- b) Jacques Thiroux
- c) Your instructor
- d) Aristotle
- e) Bill Clinton

16. The most important moral issues arise for most ethicists when human beings come together in

- a) harmony.
- b) religions.
- c) social groups.
- d) matrimony.

17. If human beings are the source of value then morality is

- a) supernatural.
- b) natural.
- c) objective.
- d) subjective.

18. Philosophers demand in general that beliefs, propositions, and ideas be examined

- a) according to tradition.
- b) without evaluation.
- c) with the Bible in hand.
- d) critically.

19. According to the author of the text moral conflicts can be resolved through

- a) religion.
- b) tradition.
- c) social acceptability.
- d) rational compromise.

20. Why, according to the author of the textbook, should humans be moral?

- a) self-interest
- b) law
- c) tradition
- d) common human needs

Answer Key to Chapter 1 Test Questions

True or False:

- 1. T
- 2. F
- 3. T
- 4. T
- 5. F
- 6. F
- 7. T
- 8. F
- 9. F
- 10. F

Multiple Choice:

- 11. D
- 12. F
- 13. Any
- 14. B
- 15. D
- 16. C
- 17. B
- 18. D
- 19. D
- 20. D