

Other Influential Moral Theories: Does Morality Depend on Culture, God, Nature, or Emotions?

Chapter 5

Learning Objectives

- After reading this chapter, you will be able to:
 - 5.1 Analyze both the good intentions and the problematic deficiencies of cultural relativism.
 - 5.2 Critically evaluate Aquinas' Natural Law, its problems including Hume's succinct objection to it, and its cultural influence.
 - 5.3 Articulate the dilemma presented by Socrates in *Euthyphro*.
 - 5.4 Discuss the moral significance of emotions according to David Hume.

Ethics

- Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies questions about right and good.
- Moral theories provide a frame work for answering such questions and for evaluating human action.

Are There Ethical Facts?

- It is a fact that the Rocky Mountains are located in North America.
- Are there similar sorts of facts in ethics?
- If so, why do so many people disagree about what is right and wrong.

Amoralist

- There is no right or wrong.
- There is no ethics.

Ethical Skepticism

- This view claims that moral knowledge is not possible.
- **Strong view:** This view claims that we cannot, as rational human beings, determine what is objectively right or wrong.
- There may be a truth, but we can't know it.
- **Weak:** we cannot figure it out in some cases.

Relativism

- Species Relativism
- Descriptive Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Religious Relativism
- Individual Relativism (subjectivism)

Species Relativism

- This view claims that ethics is relative to our species, or relative to humanity as a whole.
- There is one ethical truth for all humans, even if we disagree.

Descriptive Relativism

- Descriptive Relativism says that as a matter of empirical fact, different cultures have different beliefs about what is morally right and what is morally wrong.
- This seems to be true. In other words, different societies have different moral standards. (But those standards might be wrong)

Cultural Relativism

- This view claims that ethics is determined by each culture. What is right and wrong ought to be determined by culture.
- All moral standards that are endorsed by a culture are true. This leads to relativism as different cultures believe different things to be moral.

Religious Relativism

- Morality is determined by God or religion.
- This view is what many people subscribe to; however, with more than 10,000 different religions, which one is the right one?
- This leads to relativism as different religions believe different things to be moral.

Individual Relativism (Subjectivism)

- This view claims that each person ought to determine what is ethical for themselves.
- As long as you do what you think is right, then you have acted correctly.
- "I do, what I do, because, it's the right thing to do." ~ Jimmy Carter
- This leads to relativism as different people believe different things to be moral.

Sentimentalism

- The Notion that our sentiments or feelings can be used to determine morality.
- **David Hume** is often viewed as an ethical sentimentalist although some moral philosophers, such as Alan Goldman or William and Mary University, interpret him as a utilitarian.

No reason, no argument...

- "The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of reason," according to Hume.
- The main problem with any view that relies on sentiments, feelings, or intuitions is that not all people share those same feelings.
- What is one to do when they don't?
- For example, several years ago a man in Texas called 911 claiming to be eating his girlfriend for breakfast. (He was, in fact, eating what was left of her remains and practicing cannibalism)
- If he "felt" it was okay to eat someone, did that, in fact, make it okay?

Divine Command and the Euthyphro Problem

- If you are sure of your God and you are sure you got the message right, there is a problem. This basic problem, one that has plagued theologians for millennia, was first pointed out by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*.
- A young man looking for an answer on ways to live right and do the right thing offers Socrates a possibility, namely, that the right thing to do is whatever that pleases the Gods.
- That is, the right thing to do is what God commands you to do. "Morally right" means "commanded by God," and "morally wrong" means "forbidden by God." Simple.

What are God's Commands?

- This question remains: Is an act right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?
- This is one of the most famous questions in the history of philosophy, and, like so much in Plato's challenging dialogues, it creates more questions than answers.

St. Thomas Aquinas

- St. Thomas Aquinas knew the *Euthyphro* problem very well, and his strikingly original (if ultimately flawed) Natural Law theory went a long way to avoid Divine Command theory.
- Following Aristotle and synthesizing the pagan Greek's philosophy into a Christian morality, Aquinas suggested the following.
- Our reason reveals to us how the world works. So far so good—this is what Aristotle suggested with his theory of the four causes, and it is the basis of today's scientific method. That is, unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle thought that we could trust appearances to get us closer to the truth and, by using our reason and asking questions, we could even get to moral truths. Then Aquinas added something Aristotle would not have countenanced.
