Chapter 2

Introduction: Morality, Ethics, and Philosophy

2.1 Homework

Readings - EMP 1

- RTD 1

Study Questions – Write a short answer to the following questions

1. Imagine that you are an hospital administrator. You want to put together an Ethics Committee. Who would you like to on the committee?
2. What are your deepest values? Do you endorse all the values of this nation, as they reflected in the federal laws?
3. Do you think cheating is immoral? Why? Why not?
4. Give an example of an ethical dilemma, that is, a situation in which your moral values conflict with one another and no option lets your conscience free. How do you usually solve such situation?
5. Have you always acted upon your sole self interest? Imagine an example of a disinterested action.

2.2 Why ethics? Why philosophy?

2.2.1 What is a moral issue?

Examples – Compare:

1. Go buy groceries
2. Go buy groceries for the old lady next door with retribution

3. Go buy groceries for your mom when she is ill

Now, what if you don't get yourself/ the old lady / your mom what she wanted, but something she dislikes instead? Under what circumstances is this a moral issue? How does the fact that you do voluntarily or not impact the answer to this question?

Clear examples of non moral issues?

Clear examples of moral issues?

Conclusion –A moral issue usually involves:

- a specific content: duty, character, human rights – anything that has to do with what we *ought to do*.

- a specific perspective: impartiality, compassion, conscience etc.

2.2.2 Why is the discussion of moral issues important?

Moral issues are unavoidable. Assuming that our plan is to have a fulfilling life, the question arises immediately about how to answer moral concerns such that we have such a fulfilling life.

Two questions: what is a fulfilling life? what are the possible bases for deciding upon moral issues?

1. What are the important elements of a good life?
   (a) Pleasure?
   (b) Health?
   (c) Wealth?
   (d) Social relationships?
   (e) Friendship?
   (f) Love?
   (g) Power and honors?
   (h) Clean Conscience?
   (i) Being a good person?
2. What are the possible bases for deciding upon moral issues?

   This is where we will appeal to philosophy.

2.2.3 Why appealing to philosophy to discuss moral issues?

Morality and Controversies – Moral issues not easy to answer: sometimes what is right to do seems obvious, sometimes not. In addition, it does not take much to realize that others have ethical convictions which conflict with ours, and that, without any other argument than: "this is just obvious", or "this is shocking", the dispute is very unlikely to satisfactorily settled. We sometimes even find ourselves having conflicting views ourselves, and we get stuck in a ethical dilemma. We need a better plan than our first, often emotional, intuitions, to decide upon moral issues.

Philosophy as the search for truth through rational discussion – This is why we need philosophy to discuss ethical issues. Philosophy is not about ready made answers. So, in this class, we should not expect to reach any definite answer to the question of what is right and wrong. Instead, we should expect to draw a conceptual map of the various ways in which one can think about what is right and wrong.

The main idea behind philosophy is that the best way to approach the truth (in any topic, really) is by rationally discussing the various possible answers to a question. In the case of ethical beliefs, this applies in the following way. Given an ethical view, or an ethical *claim*, one wants to look into it: check whether it is consistent with other beliefs, look into how we can support it, that is, whether there are *good arguments* in support of that claim.

Philosophy: analysis and arguments - Analyzing a claim is similar to performing a dissection. The idea is to figure out what is hiding behind the claim: assumptions and arguments could be seen as the skeleton and muscles of a claim. The point of analysis is to figure out on what assumptions and on what arguments a claim relies on. Once these assumptions and arguments are uncovered, one can turn to *assess* the claim in study.

- Concerning the assumptions, one has to check whether they are acceptable or not. A typical case in which assumptions are not acceptable is when they conflict with the claim under study: in this case, the view is simply inconsistent, which is philosophically unacceptable. In order to check on the acceptability of the assumptions uncovered, one often has to check on the *implications* of these assumptions. Here again, one might find some inconsistency.

- There are various kind of bad arguments. We will come back to this during the next lecture. Appeal to personal feelings and authority typically do not count as arguments at all. Arguments are primarily based on *logic*. An argument which does not abide by the rules of logic is said to be *invalid*, and is not an acceptable in philosophy.

Rules of the game – In order to get your ethical convictions philosophically acceptable, you need to:

1. make sure there is no conflict between your ethical beliefs
2. be able to provide rational reasons for your beliefs.

These are the rules of the game we will play in this class. Note that this game is *not about winning or losing* over your discussion partner. The point is not to defend your views whatever it takes. The point is to rationally assess ethical views, the other's and our own.

Definitions – At the end of the day, we have:

Definition 1 – ***Morality***

Set of beliefs and practices about how to lead a good life.

Definition 2 – ***Ethics***

A second-order, rational reflection assessing ethical beliefs.

The discipline of Ethics divides into three sub-disciplines:

Definition 3 – ***Normative Ethics***

A rational account of which general moral standards we should adopt. Intent: Normative.

Definition 4 – ***Meta-Ethics***

A rational accound of the status of moral norms (where they come from, the extent to which they are universal, etc.) Intent: Descriptive or Explanatory.

Definition 5 – ***Applied Ethics***

A rational examination of specific moral controversies such as euthanasia, pre-emptive war stem-cell research, birth-control, etc.

2.3 An example: Baby Theresa

The Story – Baby Thesera is a anencephalic infant (no conscious life, no chance of survival). Her parents volunteered her organs for transplant (to save other children). By the time she died, her organ were too deteriorated to be transplanted.

Class Survey – Let see what your classmates' intuitions are on this case.

- Do you think it would have been right to take Theresa's organs to save other (viable and conscious) children?

- Why?

The Benefit Argument – "If we can benefit someone, without harming anyone else, we ought to do so. Transplanting the organs would benefit the other children without harming Baby Theresa. Therefore, we ought to transplant the organs."

Sound argument:

1 - assumptions are true

2 - conclusion logically follows from assumptions

Assumption here? no harm is done to her when we take her life from her.

- Is Theresa harmed if her life is taken from her?

- Contrast between: to have a full life / to have a few days of mere biological life (non conscious).

- It seems that Theresa did not *benefit* from these few days. Conversely, if no benefit is taken from her, then it seems reasonable to say that no harm is done in taking her life from her.

The Argument of not treating people as means – "It is wrong to use people as means to other people's ends."

Clearly, "using" other people sounds like a bad things. That said, under what conditions can we say there is a case of "use of people as means" ?

- clear cases: manipulation, trickery, deceit, coercion

- use of people = violation of *autonomy*: ability that people have to decide for themselves

- but what about people who are unable to make decision for themselves??

1. what would be her best interest?
2. what would she say?

The argument about the wrongness of killing – "It is wrong to kill people"

Does this assumption need qualification, that is: is it always wrong to kill someone

- Possible exceptions for some: Self-defense? Death Penalty? War?
- Refinement: "it is wrong to kill an *innocent* person
  Examples:
  1. the terrorist, the train station and the school.
  2. Life of suffering
- Is Baby Theresa an exception?
  - she'll die soon anyway
  - other babies can be saved
  - she is already dead? brain death?

Slippery slope argument – "This would open the doors to other people to decide who should live and should die"

It is easy to see what some people some precedent could *lead to*. Should we kill the elderly, the disabled, the unconscious for transplant??? Of course not.

The problem with slippery slope arguments:

- Vagueness of boundaries does not imply that there is no clear cases

- Uncertainty of the predictions about the future : example of in vitro fertilization

Slipery slope arguments are most of the time to be taken with caution!

Conclusion – Despite our first emotional reaction which seemed to support the idea that what Theresa's parents wanted to do is wrong, it seems that, upon reflection, *there are no good arguments supporting this claim.* For the philosopher, the conclusion is that our intuition was misguided, and that we should change our view on the subject. This means that, once our analysis has been conducted, it is not philosophically acceptable to say: "I still think it is wrong to kill the baby for her organs". Unless you provide a new and compelling argument...

We cannot rely on our feelings and emotional reactions, however strong they may be, to discover the truth. The core idea of philosophy is that the rational discussion of the arguments supporting the various possible views on the matter is our best hope to approach the truth. In doing philosophy, and hence in doing ethics, we commit to fight prejudices, intellectual dishonesty, and bad faith. This is not easy task.

Two steps in deciding upon a moral issues:

- establish the facts – not easy !

- discuss the principles and arguments – apply our knowledge of ethics

This is where our study enters the stage: what are the basic principles for deciding upon moral issues. We'll wrap up the class with an overview on the theories that we will study during the semester.

Note – There are two other examples in the book that you should study and think about.

2.4 The bases of Morality

Class Survey: On what basis do we make our decisions upon moral issues?

1. The values we grew up with?
2. Whatever the Bible / the Qur'an / or other sacred text tells us ?
3. Our own interest?
4. The best interest of the community?
5. Our personal conscience?
6. Our duty?

7. Our respect for other people?
8. The values that we have agreed on as a community?
9. Human rights?
10. Justice?
11. Our idea of what a good person would do?

Relativism – What is considered right is relative to the customs of one's society

Obvious examples of discrepancies in values between societies: the Greek and us upon infanticide

What is interesting about Relativism: the idea that we should not judge other societies' values just on the basis on our society's values. Herodotus, Montaigne: skepticism and open mindedness

We will see, however, that there exists powerful objections against Relativism.

Divine Commands – What is right is what God tells us to do

What is interesting about the Divine Command Theory: the idea that moral rules have something that is above our personal taste and interests.

We will see, however, that there exists powerful objections against Relativism.

Egoism – What is right is just what is in one's own best interest

What is interesting about Ethical Egoism: it takes at face value one important element of human psychology

Utilitarianism – What is right and wrong is what is the most beneficial for the community/society/world as a whole

What is interesting about Ethical Egoism: it takes into account the importance of the consequences of our actions

Duty and respect – What is right and wrong is what your duty tells you it is.

Duty is determined by reason. This has been developed by Kant.

What is interesting about the Ethics of Duty: it takes into account the importance of the intentions in our actions. Plus, it gives a full articulation of the "golden rule".

Social Contract – What is right is what we recognize and accept, as rational agents, as the best rules for a mutually cooperative society, provided that the other will follow these rules as well.

What is interesting about Social Contract theories: the ideas of mutual agreement and of mutual exchange.

Virtue ethics – What is right is what a good person would do

What is interesting about virtue ethics: a holistic view on ethics: what counts is not only what you do and why, but also how you do it. Example: you best friend and his girlfriend.