

ETHICS: Morality & Relativism

Lecture 21

Phil 1000, Fall 2008
Prof. Bryan Benham

Quick Review

- LOGIC
- GOD
- KNOWLEDGE
- MIND
- FREEDOM
- ETHICS
 - Purposes
 - Relativism
 - Objectivism
 - Divine Command
 - Utilitarianism
 - Social Contract

2

What is Ethics/Morality?

- Simply: determining what one should do...
- Examples of principles:
 - Don't kill, hurt, steal, cheat, steal, lie, etc.
 - Do some good, help others, achieve your goals, etc.
- Why do we have these principles?

3

Purpose of Morality/Ethics?

- Guides action (individual and social)
- Guides judgments or resolves disputes
- Promotes social harmony
- Ameliorate suffering
- Pursue the "Good Life" or the "Righteous Life"

Caution: Ethics does not equate to religion

4

Description vs. Prescription

- **Descriptive Claims:** claims about how things are or appear to be; more about the facts than the relevant values.
- **Prescriptive Claims:** claims about how things should or ought to be; more about the relevant values than the facts. Prescriptive claims are 'normative' claims, about how things should be...
 - **Naturalistic Fallacy:** a fallacious argument that says because this is the way things are (facts), therefore this is the way things ought to be (values); draws a prescriptive conclusion only on the basis of descriptive claims; derives an "ought" from an "is".

5

What is the nature of Morality?

- Are moral principles universal or relative?
 - Are the values that guide actions applicable to everyone (at all times) or does it depend on the situation, culture, time period?
 - Moral Objectivism vs. Moral Relativism
- Generic Example: **Person X, kills person Z.**
 - How should we normatively evaluate this action?
 - What facts are relevant? What values?
 - Are these value universal?

6

Moral Objectivism

- The view that moral principles are universal and objective.
 - Universal: all people (moral agents) are subject to these principles, irregardless of time, place, culture, etc.
 - Objective: they are publically evaluable by rational discourse (argument), and not merely subjective views or feelings that are not open to public evaluation.

7

Moral Relativism

- The view that there are no universal or objective moral principles. Morality is relative to a given culture or group.
 - More than simply saying different cultures/groups have different moral beliefs;
 - Asserts that for each culture/group what is right or wrong is what that culture/group believes to be right or wrong; that is all that “right or wrong” amount to...

8

Benedict’s Account

- P1:** Morality is the set of cultural beliefs that determine acceptable or unacceptable behaviors; that is what is ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal.’
- Morality = normality...
- P2:** Different cultures have different beliefs about normality/ abnormality, that are conditioned by history (non-rational and subconscious).
- No one notion of normalcy is better than another...
- C:** Therefore, there is no objective (universal and non-relative) truth about morality.

9

Benedict (p. 450)

Normality, in short, within a very wide range, is culturally defined. It is primarily a term for the socially elaborated segment of human behavior in any culture; and abnormality, a term for the segment that that particular civilization does not use...

We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, “It is morally good,” rather than “It is habitual,” and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous.

The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good. It is that which society has approved. A normal action is one which falls well within the limits of expected behavior for a particular society. Its variability among different peoples is essentially a function of the variability of the behavior patterns that different societies have created fro themselves, and can never be wholly divorced from a consideration of culturally institutionalized types of behavior.

10

Questions

- Is Benedict correct that there is no morally objective/ universal principles?
 - Review her argument...
 - Does she confuse descriptive and prescriptive claims?
- Even if Benedict is incorrect, there is something appealing about moral relativism.
 - What is appealing about relativism?
 - What can we learn from its observations?

11

Next Time

Moral Objectivism Strikes Back (Rachels)

12