

ETHICS BEYOND BIOETHICS: HOW TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG
FROMM INSTITUTE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING
FIRST CLASS, SEPTEMBER 15, 2009
PROFESSOR JONSEN

People make moral arguments all the time, that is, they make claims that certain actions or situations or persons should be called right or wrong, good or bad. The purpose of this course is to explore the ways in which moral philosophy has attempted to explain what makes a sound argument, what sort of evidence is necessary to support a good argument, and what sort of certitude attaches to correct arguments. We will do this in two steps. First, we will examine a series of current arguments in the field of bioethics, the study of ethical problems in medicine and biomedical science. Second, we will review the systems of moral philosophy to test the validity of these arguments.

SCHEDULE: This class is held on Tuesday mornings at 10AM, EXCEPT ON OCTOBER 27. A makeup class will be held on NOVEMBER 10.

READING: Jonsen, *Bioethics Beyond the Headlines. Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Decide?* Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. Supplemental Reading: Appiah, KA. *Experiments in Ethics*. Harvard University Press, 2008.

WHAT IS MORALITY? WHAT IS A MORAL ARGUMENT?

1. Two Untenable Views.

2. "Montaigne's mind followed wherever his attention settled, and his regard was always the same—intent, amused, compassionate, contrarian and irresistibly eclectic...but when it came to the big philosophical questions that absorbed him—the nature of justice, say, or morality—he seemed to be saying...that there may be no truths, only moments of clarity, passing for answers." J.Kramer, "Me, myself and I". *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2009.

3. Aristotle says, "A young man is not a fit person to attend lectures on moral philosophy since he is not versed in the practical business of life from which morality draws its premises and subject matter. Besides, he tends to follow his feelings, with the result that he will make no headway and derive no benefit from his course, since the object of it is not knowledge but action. It makes no difference whether he is young in age or youthful in character. The defect is due not to lack of years but to a life pursuing one's aims under sway of the feelings." *Ethics, Book I, ch.iii*

4. Morality: a mélange? a medley? Morality is not a specific, identifiable segment of life, as, for example, going walking, playing golf, making a living, making love, paying taxes, etc. It is not simply feelings, emotions, nor rationality and judgment; not simply intentions or choices or behaviors. It encompasses all these in some way, and more. Can this mélange be transformed into a medley, that is, a single orderly

composition made up of different parts? (*Bioethics Beyond the Headlines*, Introduction, Appendix A, *Precis of Moral Philosophy*).

5. Four Levels of Moral Discourse (Adapted from HD Aiken, *Morality and Conduct*, 1962)

- a. **The Expressive Level.** Spontaneous, unreflective expressions of pleasure and displeasure, liking and disliking.
- b. **The Level of Moral Rules and Values.** A problem of conduct arises, calling for appraisal and ultimate decision: factual appraisals of relevant means and consequences, together with rules or values in relation to which the moral relevance of such appraisals can be established.
- c. **The Level of Ethical Principles.** Are the moral rules and values *really* right and good, and should they continue to be obeyed?
- d. **The Post-Ethical Level.** Why should I be moral?

6. The Object of Moral Philosophy (Adapted from GJ Warnock, *The Object of Morality*, 1971). The object of morality is to contribute to the improvement of the “human predicament,” that is, “things are liable to go badly” because humans have limited information about themselves and the world, limited intelligence to figure out what is needed, and limited sympathy to serve the interests of others.

7. This course will examine moral arguments and moral judgment in light of particular cases drawn from Bioethics: is it ever right to terminate human life? (ch. 2,3,4,7) Is it wrong to deliberately design human character by genetic modification? (ch. 6,9, 10) Is it ever right to experiment on a person? (ch. 5) Is it wrong to have a market in human organs? (5, 12). Each of these cases will lead us further into the mélange and medley of morality.

8. A Moral Dilemma: Trolleyology

Reading for Class 2: Jonsen, *Bioethics Beyond the Headlines*, Introduction, pp. 10-14, Appendix A “A *Precis of Moral Philosophy*”, pp.181-187

NOTES

TWO MORAL DILEMMAS

A. You are walking up Hyde Street from Bay toward Lombard. To your horror, you see the Hyde Street Cable hurtling out of control. It is aimed at five tourists who are unaware of the danger. You are standing at a switch that can divert the cable car onto a side track on which there is a single Muni repairman working on the cable. Should you pull the switch? Circle Yes or No.

Yes

No

B. You are walking up Hyde Street from Bay toward Lombard. To your horror, you see the Hyde Street Cable hurtling out of control. It is aimed at five tourists unaware of the danger. You quickly see that you can stop the progress of the car by pushing a very fat man walking ahead of you onto the track. Should you push him in front of the cable car?

Yes

No

If you answered A and B with different answers, give your reason: