

HOW TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG

THIRD CLASS: SEPTEMBER 29

EXAMPLES OF DEONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: ENDING HUMAN LIFE

1. Review of “Ethical Systems”: **Deontological**=telling right from wrong by reference to *rules and principles* of behavior; **Teleological**=telling right from wrong by reference to the *results* of behavior. (Google: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

2. The Deontological Mind/Brain Set: Emotional, Intuitional=medial frontal cortex, posterior gyrus, amygdala. Pushers have delayed response: override of emotional, intuitional by rational calculation?

3. Prime deontological example: “Thou Shalt Not Kill (Murder)”. Deut. 5:17. Sanctity of life (*pikua nefesh*). “Do not destroy life intentionally” (Five Precepts of Buddhism); Non-violence in Hinduism (*ahimsa*).

4. A Terrible Story

5. The Rules and the Reality: “The pursuer” (*rodef*); “License to kill in war,” Self-defense (St. Augustine); Just War doctrine (Cicero, Augustine, Crusades); Doctrine of Double Effect, Doctrine of Causing and Allowing; Right action, right intention, right motive. Exceptions?

6. The Question: does (must) morality contain absolute, exceptionless obligations?

a) What are we to make of such absolute appearing, and quite fundamental moral assertions as “Do Not Kill!” “Do Not Harm!” Expressions of personal feeling? Advice? Generalizations with specific exceptions? Innate moral intuitions? Moral sense? Social constructs with behavioral consequences?

b) We are led to the ethical question: are there any obligations that are absolutely binding, without exceptions, and not arising simply from the invention and acceptance of individuals? Some might say that, unless there are, all morality becomes only a collection of personal preferences. Abraham Lincoln: “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

7. A philosophical approach to the problem of “absolute principles”: The Qualified Attitude Thesis,” (R.B.Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, 1959) An “absolute principle” is one that stands up against review by the Qualified Attitude” approach to moral reflection.

“We decide particular problems both by appeal to principles that we already have more or less explicitly in mind (e.g. do not harm, keep promises, reciprocate favors, etc.) and by appeal to our preferences, feelings of obligation, etc. 2) we correct our principles if they are incompatible with our criticized attitudes and we rely on our criticized attitudes in filling our and weighing our principles, (3) judgments must be consistent and generalizable; (4) Attitudes are discounted if they are not impartial, informed, incompatible with a consistent set of general

principles, not excessively complex. Ethical thinking, then, is a complex interplay of circumstances, attitudes, principles, and formal requirements for principles. None of these can be submerged in the others.” (p. 250 modified).

8. Listen to the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), strongest proponent of a deontological ethic:

“Everyone must grant that a law, if it is hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity...Therefore, the ground of obligation must not be sought in the nature of the human being (i.e. its variable inclinations and needs) but simply in the concepts of pure reason...If there is a supreme practical principle, or in respect of the human will, a **categorical imperative**, it must be one which, being drawn from the conception of that which is necessarily an end of everyone because it is an end in itself, constitutes an objective principle of will, and can therefore serve as a universal practical law. The foundation of this principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. Man necessarily conceives his own existence as being so; so far then this is a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being regards its existence similarly, just on the same rational principle that holds for me; so that it is at the same time an objective principle from which as a supreme practical law all laws of the will must be capable of being deduced. Accordingly the categorical imperative will be: so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end and never as a means only.” (*Foundation of Metaphysics of Morals, ch.2, 66*)

NOTE. FOR THE FOURTH CLASS, ON OCTOBER 6, THE LECTURE WILL BE DELIVERED BY VIDEO IN THIS CLASSROOM. THE PROFESSOR WILL DO HIS BEST TO WIN AN OSCAR FOR HIS PERFORMANCE. BELOW ARE THE READINGS AND TOPICS FOR ALL FUTURE CLASSES.

Readings for the FOURTH CLASS, OCTOBER 6.

DEONTOLOGY AND AUTONOMY. Jonsen: Topics One to Topic Four, pp.26-58. Three, pp.40-48. Note the objection made on pg. 38, “An important point...” Is this a deontological argument? If so, how might it be justified? Note the cases of Dax Cowart, pp. 40 and Elizabeth Bouvia, on pg. 48. If it is morally wrong to take human life, then does it make it right just because a person wishes to do so? Look carefully at the list of arguments on pgs 53-54. Assisted dying stands or falls on the moral principle that autonomy “trumps” other moral principles. If it does, are we not back at morality as personal preference?

Readings for the FIFTH CLASS: OCTOBER 13

EXAMPLES OF CONSEQUENTIALIST ARGUMENT: MAXIMIZING HUMAN WELFARE. In Jonsen, Topic 5, Organ Transplantation; Topic 8, Research with Humans; Topic 9 Genetics; Topic 11 Cloning. Are there cases in which the appropriate ethical argumentation centers on deciding how to improve and sustain some state of

human welfare? How is that state to be defined? How is “maximization” compatible with the rights of individuals?

Readings for the SIXTH CLASS: OCTOBER 20

JUSTICE: CAN IT BE VIEWED AS DEONTOLOGY PLUS

CONSEQUENTIALISM? In Jonsen, Topics 3, Autonomy and Topic 12, Health Care System. What is justice? Is the moral principle of justice compatible with the principle of autonomy? How does justice apply to sickness and health, health care? Is there a Right to health care? What are Rights?

NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 27.

Readings for the SEVENTH CLASS, NOVEMBER 3.

NEUROETHICS. In Jonsen, Topic 10, Neuroscience. How are moral responses, choices, judgments, attitudes, emotions related to the brain? Is Morality anything more than the responses of the human neural system to various stimuli? If moral choices and behavior are processes of the physical neuropsychological system, how do we deal with determinism? Is there Free Will (without which morality is implausible)?

Readings for the EIGHTH CLASS (MAKEUP WEEK) NOVEMBER 10.

CULTURAL BIOETHICS AND MORAL RELATIVISM. In Jonsen, Topic 13, Cultural Bioethics. Is it possible to demonstrate that any moral principles are universal, across all cultures? Is morality, or some aspects of it, innate? Is Morality anything more than the customs of place and time, with penalties for aberration? If so, should all practices be tolerated (except perhaps when they impinge on our own values?).