**Deontological Ethical Theory**

Chapter four presents you with what may be to many of you a confusing set of ethical theories—the deontological approach and the teleological (ends oriented, consequentialist) approach. One approach attempts to define how we should act *without* regard to the consequences of our actions (deontological), and one attempts to define how we should act *only* in regards to the consequences of our actions (teleological). In this lecture, I would like to try to sort through the ideas behind the first of these approaches, and in my second lecture I will tackle the ideas behind the second. While the text is careful not to go too deeply into philosophical theory, I feel a little more background into some of the major ethical theories should be of interest to you since this is a philosophy course!

A philosopher’s ethical theory generally follows from the metaphysical beliefs held by the philosopher. That is to say, one’s view of what is real in the philosophical sense determines whether one holds certain truths to be real. “Real” to the philosopher means that it exists independent of experience—your headache is not real by this definition, since it exists only as a part of your experience, regardless of how real it may be to you! If you believe that your keyboard exists when you no longer perceive it, you believe in material realism. If you believe that God exists apart from any perception, you are a theological realist, and so on.

Plato is regarded as the Father of Western Philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead once said that all of Western Philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato, and that may be a bit of an exaggeration, but not much! Plato learned from his mentor, Socrates, and taught Aristotle for twenty years. Aristotle, as an aside, taught Alexander the Great. (Here you had four very smart and influential men!) It was once said about Aristotle that he was the only person in the world to know everything. Before him, no one was smart enough, and after him there was too much knowledge for any one person to know. Until Socrates, philosophy basically asked questions about the nature of the world. What caused motion, and where did everything come from? Socrates was really the first philosopher to question the ideas of justice, truth, virtue, and knowledge. His execution made a profound impression on Plato, and it set Plato on his life’s work.

Plato believed that ideas had a greater reality than objects in the material world--that anything we perceived in the material world was an imperfect reflection of the perfect idea of the object at the highest level of reality, and he outlined his thoughts in the metaphor of the “Divided Line” in *The Republic*. What’s key is that at the fourth and final level of reality one would have the kind of knowledge that God has. This kind of knowledge would consist of self-evident truths and intuitions. Does anyone have that kind of knowledge? No. Is anyone seeking that kind of knowledge? “Yes,” says Plato, “anyone who seriously seeks knowledge is seeking exactly that kind of knowledge.”

The influence of this belief on Western thought cannot be overstated. Plato is the articulator of the most fundamental notion of our Western civilization, and that is the idea that our universe is governed by law and by reason and that when humans govern one another they should do so by law and by reason. The idea that there exists the ideal of the perfect good, justice, and virtue is something that is now ingrained in us, and it forms the basis of the deontological theory of ethics.

It is not a theory that can be dismissed lightly. We have all heard from our parents “do not steal” and other deontological maxims. Those of us who were raised in homes that followed religious tenets are aware of the Ten Commandments. Whether the maxims that one learned were religious or secular in origin, the force of the rules was powerful. One always thought twice about breaking these rules, and one always felt a sense of guilt in doing so. I know that I did, at least!

The text is correct in identifying Kant as the modern day proponent of this sort of reasoning, and the results of his thoughts are not to be dismissed lightly either. Kant believed that there were two kinds of knowledge. Both are familiar to us if you think about it. One is everyday knowledge that comes from experience in the world. This kind of knowledge, what Kant called *a posteriori* or experiential knowledge, is always *contingent* knowledge, meaning that it could be other than it is. It is always *probable* knowledge—it is never certain. To say that “all robins’ eggs are blue” is to make a statement of probable, not certain, knowledge. One can always at least *imagine* an exception to a statement of an empirical “fact.”

But there seems to be another kind of knowledge that is different. It’s what Kant called *a priori* knowledge, or knowledge that is not derived from experience. It has two characteristics to Kant: it is universal and necessary. To say that a triangle in a plane is a three-sided figure whose interior angles add to 180 degrees is to say something both universal and necessary. It is universal because the statement applies to all triangles, everywhere, and it is necessary because it cannot be otherwise. You do not need to measure any triangle to know that the sum of its interior angles equals 180 degrees, nor can you imagine an exception to this fact.

Kant’s epistemology added two more elements to those discussed above. One was a statement that he named *synthetic*. By this he simply meant a statement in which the predicate was not covertly contained in the subject. “This house is large” would fall into that category. And finally, he called the opposite—where the predicate was contained in the subject—an *analytic* statement. “A rose is a flower” is a good example. Without going into the detail of 669 pages of his *Critique of Pure Reason,* suffice it to say that Kant wanted to find examples of *synthetic a priori* statements. These would be statements that were universal and necessary, and yet ones that would give us practical knowledge of the world in the same way as *synthetic a posteriori* statements.

The results of his analysis are formulated as his categorical imperatives. “Act so that your action is one that you could will that it be a universal law” is his classic formulation. The other, which he calls his “practical imperative” in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* is the one about never treating another person as a means only but as an end in itself. I am a little surprised that the text does not give Kant credit for virtue ethics as well because the theory is a large part of the book cited. In it, Kant is clear that no virtue exists in a person acting *according to duty* instead of *from duty*. The shop owner who always gives correct change because people will send their children to him, knowing that he is honest, is acting *according to* duty. His belief that “good ethics make good business” may have a lot to do with good business, but to Kant it has nothing to do with good ethics!

To act *from duty*, one must have no natural inclination to do so, and one must divorce oneself from any notion of personal gain. Hence, the shop owner who acts the same but does so only because it is the right thing to do and for no other reason is acting morally and *from duty*. Notice that an observer would see only the action and, in Kantian terms, would be unable to know whether the shop owner was really acting in an ethical manner. Only the shop owner knows his or her own motivation. Kant, being a reasonable fellow, admits that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to know for certain whether one ever can achieve this aim. How do we know that some trace of self-interest has not crept into our decision to act?

Yet always for Kant there lurked in the mind the force of conscience. We *know*, deep down, when we have acted badly, don’t we? For Kant, that is our conscience acting as our personal barometer. Ultimately, the conscience becomes one of the cornerstones for Kant’s argument for God’s existence, but that is a subject for another discussion.

Having said all of this, the text is certainly correct when it points out that the deontological approach has been criticized as being too rigid. What happens when you have to make an ethical choice, and all of the choices that you have are bad ones? What if you know that the best of the bad choices goes against everything you have been taught by your parents, your church, or your personal beliefs? Well, it seems to me that one’s ethical code of conduct should be able to handle that, shouldn’t it? Hold that thought, and we’ll explore some alternatives soon in another installment.

Discussion Questions:

1.      Why do I say that the statement “all robin’s eggs are blue” is only probable and not certain knowledge?

2.      Should one’s motives count more than the results of one’s actions?

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