

PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



**Week 5. Are we free to act morally?
13th February 2019**

Class aims

- Recap on deontology
- Discuss what moral dilemmas we've found
- Are we free?
- Hume's scepticism about morality and arguments for custom
- Spinoza's argument for centrality of desire and emotions in ethical life
- Virtue ethics



Class recap

10 years of dying at Dignitas

COMMENTS (407)

By Philippa Roxby

Health reporter, BBC News



Class recap

- Evaluate Utilitarianism
- Introduce deontology: duty-based ethics, and the ideas of Immanuel Kant
- Discuss the categorical imperative, the highest good, and why *obedience* = *freedom*
- Question free will and moral agency
- Reflect on what factors truly motivate your own moral decision-making

Deontology in a nutshell

- A duty-based ethics (*deontology*)
- *Wanting to do good* is what really matters
- *Selflessness* – doing good even if this is not what would benefit us; in fact, it might be contrary to what would benefit us
- *Difficulty* – being moral shouldn't be easy; it's not the same as being 'nice' or having good manners
- *Free will* – all human beings have an independent capacity to make decisions and act on them, which is separate to and can be more powerful than desire, emotion, or custom

Kantian ethics

1. What can I know?
 2. What ought I to do?
 3. What may I hope?
- Kant wants a universal, rational basis for making moral judgements – an unconditional good
 - Ought implies can
 - Reason observes a universal moral law in which we derive duties or maxims that command how to act
 - Obeying out of duty the categorical imperative: one's actions should be universalisable, respecting others as ends not means
 - The good will and the highest good

Problems for Deontology

- But it puts a very high value on conscience and principle, over the practicalities of living well every day
- It is unclear how in each situation we will formulate the same maxim to obey e.g. euthanasia, the value of human life and the imperative to reduce suffering
- Some imperatives might pull in different directions, e.g. Sartre: fighting for the Resistance vs not risking his life for his mother, who had lost other sons to the war already
- In inflating the value of conscience, is this in fact selfish?
- Doesn't resolve problems of akrasia, emotions or political issues

Moral dilemmas



Can we even act morally?



- Deontology relies on free will...
- Consequentialism relies on clear knowledge of consequences
- Both ignore other influences on our behaviour
- These could be social, cultural, personality-driven, emotional, unconscious, etc. ...
- 'I see the better, and approve, yet I follow the worse'
- Our two moral theories do not account for the problem of *akrasia*

Spinoza (1632-1677)



‘After men persuaded themselves that everything which happens, happens on their account, they had to judge that what is most important in each thing is what is most useful to them... Hence, they had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: *good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness*’

Reason ‘demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage ... and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can’

Spinoza on morality

- We think we are free because we are unaware of the causes of our actions
- Most of the time, these relate to our emotions e.g. love, hatred, envy, whose influence on our judgement we are unaware of
- But we are deluded if we think we are free, because everything we do has been determined by a prior cause
- Human beings think that God made the world for their advantage, as they confuse the satisfaction of their desires with the intentions of 'God'
- He is therefore a moral anti-realist: good and evil are relative terms

Spinoza on morality

- If God doesn't care, who does?
- All beings share a common impulse to stay alive: 'Conatus', the drive to persevere in being
- For humans, our biological appetites are part of this basic striving. In our minds, these appear as desires
- In a world of competing forces, our power is in being as active or self-determining as we can
- Our mind's activity is in rational thinking, and its passivity is in confused ideas of the imagination
- Events that make us stronger or weaker result in corresponding states of joy or sadness
- Moments of akrasia occur wherever one passion is in conflict with another

Spinoza on morality

- Spinoza's argument is however that we act in our own interest best when we cooperate and assist others
- Not only does this bring security from conflict, and enable us to meet our basic needs, it also gives us the pleasure, learning and friendship needed to truly enjoy life
- This involves doing whatever we can to maximise our power, including: reducing the influence of sad passions and being as joyous and content as we can, striving to help others, living according to reason, and increasing our store of knowledge
- Spinoza calls on us to accept that while we cannot control the events of 'fate', we can control our internal reactions and resilience to them

David Hume (1711-1776)



‘Reason is, and only ought to be, the slave of the passions’

‘Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. ‘Tis that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past.’

Morality of feeling

- Reason alone cannot be a motive to the will, but rather is the 'slave of the passions'
- Moral distinctions are not derived from reason, but instead from moral sentiments
- These are feelings of approval (esteem, praise) and disapproval (blame) felt by observers contemplating a character trait or action
- While some virtues and vices are natural, e.g. beneficence, temperance, others, including justice and fidelity to promises, are artificial
- Moral judgements are ultimately based on feelings, or emerge from them
- God is therefore insignificant to our moral behaviour...

Free to *ought*?

- The *Is-ought fallacy*: just because things are a certain way, they should be that way. No ‘ought’ judgement can be reasonably inferred based on simply what already is
- Instead, human beings are both determined by causal necessity *and* that they are free
- Just as we observe necessity in the conjunction of bodies, so we can observe it between motives, character, circumstances *and* our bodily actions
- So a ‘compatibilist’ when it comes to free will
- Not that reason is invalid when it comes to influencing our behaviour – rather, reason *alone* cannot move us to action
- We must also recognise feelings and desires, and the way our mind acts *spontaneously* through them

Virtue ethics



Virtue ethics

- Not how we should act, or to what end, but focuses on the individual's character and virtues
- For Aristotle, we should seek happiness as our ultimate end in itself, *Eudaimonia*
- *Arête* (skill, excellence of character within our dispositions), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom)
- Intellectual virtues can be taught (e.g. wisdom, practical skill, judgement), while moral virtues are qualities of character, developed in habit and experience (courage, temperance, generosity, etc.)
- 'We become just by doing just acts'
- Reason will help us in finding a 'golden mean' between excess and deficiency

Virtue ethics

- ‘Not having a certain right theory, rather having a certain character’ – Alasdair MacIntyre
- Different societies have different values, from which virtues emerge and change
- Ideas about ethics are founded in social relations.
- But this needn’t result in fatalism: moral activity and discussion can lead to wider social change
- Virtue ethics may then find itself too weakly relativistic
- Nor can it explain *why* a given act is right or wrong, as it only focuses on internal traits

Virtue ethics

- Martha Nussbaum rejects any implied relativism in Aristotle
- There are objectively true forms of the human good, such as fair distribution of resources, freedom from fear, bodily appetites, etc.
- Corresponding to these, courage, moderation, justice and generosity are all objective, universal forms of *Eudaimonia*, living well
- There are a core group of entitlements, or needs, in order for a person to exercise their moral agency or *capability*
- The notion of *capability*, developed by Nussbaum with Amartya Sen, has influenced the UN's Human Development Index

Nussbaum's Capabilities

1. Life
2. Bodily Health
3. Bodily Integrity
4. Senses, Imagination and Thought
5. Emotions
6. Practical Reason
7. Affiliation
8. Other Species
9. Play
10. Control over one's environment

Rounding up

- Having heard from Utilitarians, Deontologists, as well as the approaches of Spinoza, Hume, Aristotle, MacIntyre and Nussbaum, which are you finding most persuasive so far?
- Which approach do you find most persuasive to tackling your chosen moral dilemma?
- Which is least persuasive?

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Next week

- We will be finishing our journey through moral philosophy with the roles of religion and the perspectives of existentialism
- We'll explore Hegel's account of the 'unhappy consciousness', Kierkegaard's account of an authentic life and creating our own morals, and Sartre and Camus's accounts of human freedom
- We'll also round-up on the course so far
- Please select and choose one moral problem you'd like to focus on in class