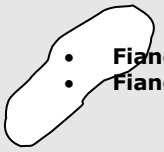
Knowledge & Ethics

Notes and Class Exercises

Introduction:

There is probably no better way to introduce ethics than to actually be doing or practicing it. Read the following scenario and complete the task below:

Exercise: Shipwrecked Love - Pre-theory Discussion



A ship sank in a storm. Five survivors scrambled aboard two lifeboats: a sailor, a girl, and an old man in one boat; the girl's fiance and his best friend in the second.

That evening the storm continued, and the two boats separated. The one with the sailor, the girl, and the old man washed ashore on an island and was wrecked. The girl searched all night in vain for the other boat or any sign of her fiance. The next day the weather cleared, and still the girl could not locate her fiance. In the distance she saw another island. Hoping to find her fiance, she begged the sailor to repair the boat and row her to the other island. The sailor agreed, on the condition that she sleeps with him that night.

Distraught, she went to the old man for advice. "I can't tell you what's right or wrong for you," he said. "Look into your heart and follow it." Confused but desperate, she agreed to the sailor's condition.

The next morning the sailor fixed the boat and rowed her to the other island. Jumping out of the boat, she ran up the beach into the arms of her fiance. Then she decided to tell him about the previous night. In a rage he pushed her aside and said, "Get away from me! I don't want to see you again!" Weeping, she started to walk slowly down the beach.

Her fiance's best friend saw her and went to her, put his arm around her, and said, "I can tell that you two have had a fight. I'll try to patch it up, but in the meantime I'll take care of you."

Source: *Developing Human Resources*, J. William Pfeiffer, Editor. University Associates, 1989.

Task: rank the following characters in order of how much you liked/valued them. Fill in the values of 1-5 in the spaces below, putting '1' next to the person you like the best, and '5' next to the person you like least. After you've ranked the characters yourself, discuss your rankings with your group and try to come up with a common group ranking.

Character	**Your Ranking**	**Your Group's Ranking**
Sailor		
Girl		
Old Man		
Girl's Fiance		
Fiance's best friend		

Discussion

1. Was it easy or difficult to rank the characters? What did you have to do?
2. Was it easy or difficult to come to a group decision? Why?
3. What struck you most in the discussion you had with your team members?
4. What would make this exercise easier?

One of the things that probably came up during the discussion is someone appealing to a commonly agreed moral principle before proceeding to show that a particular action falls under it. Consider, for example, the following argument:

P1: Cheating on a test is wrong
P2: Tom cheated on the test
C: What Tom did was wrong (P1-2)

Here, in order to show that what Tom did was wrong, the proponent had appealed to a commonly agreed moral principle in P1. And perhaps that was how you or your friend justified a particular ranking order for the exercise above. The difficulty however is which moral principle to appeal to and that is what will be covered in the next section.

A) Ethical Theories – The Major Positions (Normative Ethics)

There are many different kinds of ethical theories out there but they generally fall into the following 2 categories:

- **Teleological**: from Greek word *telos* which means a goal
  - Hence, a teleological moral theory will justify its moral theory in terms of the outcome, the aim, purpose that is supposed to be good and desirable.

- **Deontological**: from Greek *deon* which means a duty or obligation
  - A deontological moral theory will justify its moral theory in terms of duties or obligations.

Teleological Theories

- Currently the most influential: **Utilitarianism**
  - Came into existence in the 19th Century through the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham
  - However, the term "utilitarianism" was actually coined by his protégé, John Stuart Mill

- **The Moral Principle**: you should act so as to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number

- **Justification**: Why is it a principle and why should I follow it and accept it?
  - A utilitarian will ask you, "What is it that you want out of life? You seem to do many things, like study, buy cars, work etc."
  - The answer? Because you want to be **HAPPY**!
  - So you do whatever you do because you think, rightly or wrongly, that these things will ultimately make you happy; even intermediate reasons like respect, etc. all lead back to happiness
  - The one answer that people give that you can ask no further is that "I want to be happy!"
  - It makes no sense then to ask any more why you choose to do what you do
  - Hence, utilitarians conclude that happiness is the ultimate telos!
  - Thus, they argue that the greatest happiness for the greatest number is the greatest outcome of all

- How does it work in practice?
  - E.g. choosing between 2 moral options
  - Simple! Just work out which option will bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number, i.e. don't just think of YOUR happiness, but everyone else's! (Some like Peter Singer argue that even animals' happiness should be considered!)
  - It is a cold, mathematical formula
- But how to measure happiness?

  - Bentham invented a unit of happiness: *the util*!
- Still, no one really expects, in this age and time, to be able to calculate your happiness precisely
  - All that is expected is that YOU work it out for yourself as honestly and precisely as possible, working out the **consequences** of your action.
  - Then, you ask the question, "Do I prefer a world with the consequences of decision A or with the consequences of decision B?"
    - NB: you have to do this in a <u>disinterested</u> manner, i.e. without concern for your own particular welfare. Think for the **greatest number**
  - This will then tell you what you ought to do
  - Sure, you might be wrong, but scientists, with all their gadgets and what-nots still get their calculations wrong
  - This version of utilitarianism that does not expect you to work out the utils of each action but only take into account the various consequences is called **CONSEQUENTIALISM**

- <u>Criticisms</u>:

  - Difficulties of calculation: in practice, it is extremely difficult to measure happiness and to compare the happiness of different people.
    - For instance, how do we compare the pleasure a football fan experiences when his team wins with the delight experienced by a parent watching his child's first steps? And how about the physical sensations of pleasure, like eating and sex?
    - Mill proposed that there are higher pleasures (mainly intellectual) which are better than lower ones (like physical pleasures). It is better to be 'Socrates dissatisfied,' than a 'pig satisfied.' Some people have criticized this for being elitist.
    - Then there is also the problem of how much to count: should we count only the immediate effects of hitting a child or must we take into account the long-term effects?
  - Can justify many cases usually thought to be immoral:
    - If hanging an innocent man could act as a deterrent and so benefit the public more, then hanging him would be the right thing to do.
    - If a state of bliss is considered happiness (Jeremy Bentham), then why not give everyone a drug-induced state of bliss?
  - Experience Machine: many people say that they do not want to be 'brains-in-a-vat' even if can provide them with a range of blissful mental states.
    - This suggests that happiness is not just a matter of mental states, but includes a notion of how those states are produced

<u>Deontological Theories</u>

- Most famous proponent: the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (19th C)
- Unfortunately, he has quite a few versions!
- One version: Act only on the moral maxim that it should become a <u>universal</u> law **(Universal Legislator**)
  - E.g. You should not kill indiscriminately because if you do, then you would allow everyone to kill indiscriminately as well!
  - Yet this does not seem immediately recognizable and understandable to the layman
- Fortunately, Kant gave another formulation of this moral principle called the **Categorical Imperative**
  - i.e. you just have to obey it, no ifs no buts, as opposed to a Hypothetical Imperative (conditional)
- **Categorical Imperative**: Act such that you treat humanity, either in your own person or in the person of others, <u>always as an end and never as a means only</u>

- What does Kant mean by "an end"?

  - A rational being who acts for a particular purpose of his/her choosing
  - Because you are autonomous and can choose, you have an end and thus are an end in yourself
  - You should thus never be simply a means to someone's, or even your own, ends
- Essentially, the Categorical Imperative exhorts you to treat everyone with respect and dignity

- Yet it seems that such a seemingly understandable formulation is often misunderstood!
  - Kant **never** said that you cannot treat people as a means!
  - He only said that you cannot treat them **only** as a means
    - E.g. Taxi-driver is a means to your end of going home
    - Is that going against the Categorical Imperative!?
    - No as you are not treating him as a means only
- How to tell the difference?
  - When I treat someone as a means, **without violating that person's right**, without overriding and frustrating his own end, then I am treating him <u>as a means but not only as a means</u>
  - This is so when my treating him as a means fits in with that person's own end!
  - Hence, in the case of the Taxi-driver, I am not treating him only as means because his end is to earn a living, an end that my treating him as a means (i.e. taking the taxi) is helping to fulfill.
  - He becomes only a means to my end when I refuse to pay the money, thus frustrating his own end.

[NB: Obviously, real-life situations are a lot more complicated than that. Hence, we have to be a lot more nuanced and take into account many other factors, like intentions etc.]

- Kant: from this Categorical Imperative, we can get **4 main principles/ duties** that can guide us in our everyday life:
  - 1) Duty to tell the truth/ never to lie to anybody
  - 2) Duty to keep all your promises/ never to break a promise/ never to make a promise that you do not intend to keep
  - 3) Duty to be benevolent to others
  - 4) Duty to cultivate your talents, whatever they may be

- For Deontological theories like Kantianism, it is far more important that you perform moral actions out of a sense of duty rather than because the ends justify the means.
  - As noted earlier, each person is to be treated as an end in him/herself and not only as a means to an end.
  - For Deontology, **the ends never justify the means**, i.e. the consequences will never justify your treating someone only as a means.
  - This then is the major difference between Utilitarianism/ Consequentialism and Deontology.
  - Indeed, the same act can be deemed moral by one and deemed immoral by the other:
    - E.g. Attempting to save a drowning child but accidentally drown the child instead
    - Consequentialism: more negative than positive consequences, hence immoral
    - Deontology: You acted out of a sense of duty to your fellow man. Hence, your motive was right. **The motive matters, not the consequences.** Thus, moral.
- <u>Criticisms</u>

  - But what of situations where you have a conflict of duties? Which duty takes priority then?
    - E.g. a murderer asks you whether his target is hiding in your room. Surely then it seems immoral to tell the truth.

- To make the situation even more pronounced, you could have made a promise to the guy who is hiding in your room not to reveal his location no matter what. What then? There seems to be a conflict of duties (not to break a promise vs to tell the truth)
- Kant's response: Don't be stupid; there are no such conflicts
  - It only seems to be the case because you have not thought things through sufficiently
  - Moral rules, like religious rules, need to be applied with WISDOM or CASUISTRY (the art of applying religious rules)
  - So a Kantian response to the situation could be stamping your foot on the floor and say "he's not here!" – not lying nor are you breaking your promise!!
- David Ross' response: simply rank your duties
  - 1) duties of fidelity
  - 2) duties of reparation
  - 3) duties of gratitude
  - 4) duties of justice
  - 5) duties of self-improvement
  - 6) duties of non-maleficence
  - 7) duties of benevolence

- Consequences are important too, not just motives!
  - E.g. how would you feel if a well-intentioned maid tried to dry your baby in a microwave?

- Downplays the role of emotions (such as compassion, sympathy, and pity) in morality.
- Critics: there are distinctively moral emotions, such as sympathy, remorse, guilt, and to separate these from morality is to ignore a central aspect of moral behavior.

Agent-Oriented Ethics

- Unlike the above 2 ethical theories which are **action-oriented**, **Virtue Ethics** is agent-oriented
- This means that Virtue Ethics is concerned about the **person who acts**, i.e. the agent, rather than the action, i.e. that your moral principles should tell you whether a person is good or bad and not whether the act is good or bad
- This is because one and the same action can be morally permissible if this person does it in one situation and morally impermissible if that person does it in another set of circumstances
  - E.g. Abortion - is this action morally permissible or not?
  - If one were to focus merely on the action, then one has to make the same judgement for abortion regardless of the situation
  - Virtue Ethicists: this cannot be right. Surely there is a difference between a rape victim and a mature woman who got pregnant voluntarily and wants to abort due to it being an impediment to her career
  - At the very least, you are not going to judge the rape victim on the same level as the career-woman
  - But if you simply look at the act alone and not at the person, that is what happens
  - Hence, Virtue Ethicists argue that both Deontology and Consequentialism are flawed.

- But what exactly is Virtue Ethics?
  - Seems rather murk - they do not seem to give you any precise formulated principle that can be applied to a given situation (unlike Consequentialism and Deontology)
  - The best they can say is that you should act in such a way that your life is a good life
    - NB: stated in such a manner, it looks a little like consequentialism. However, the desired outcome is living well, not living happily (the two can overlap but not necessarily); also, it looks towards the person, not the action
  - But what does it mean to live well? No clear answer!
  - Many say that one should live to achieve *eudaimonia* (the good or fulfilled life)
    - Eu: good; daimon: spirit

- Euthanasia: good death
- Eugenics: good birth
- Eulogy: good word

- This is all rather vague…
  - Aristotle: You can't expect any science to be more precise than the subject matter permits
  - E.g. mathematics permits absolute precision. Thus, you can expect precision
  - But not so for more complicated and abstract stuff, like agricultural science and even more so for moral philosophy
  - Virtue Ethicists do at least tell you to go read up on the lives of great and good people of history and learn from their virtues and emulate them
  - What they propose is that you can reach eudaimonia by cultivating various virtues in your life.
  - For Aristotle, the virtuous person is someone who has harmonized all the virtues into a fabric of his life. It is not enough to simply intend to be virtuous; one has to BE virtuous.

- <u>Criticisms</u>

  - Which virtues should we adopt? Which traits get designated as virtues? Different virtue theorists have lists of virtues which, at some point or other, do not overlap. This suggests that there is room for debate about which virtues to include (although there are common ones like courage, justice, compassion and humility).
  - Some think it's dangerous that virtue theorists may simply be redefining their prejudices and preferred ways of life as virtues, and the activities they dislike as vices.
  - Presupposes that there is such a thing as human nature and that there are some general patterns of behavior and feeling appropriate for all human beings.

<u>Divine Command Theory</u>

- Divine Command Theory is a **rule-based** ethical system
- **Moral Principle:** An act is right or wrong because God commands it
  - A right action: the action that is in accordance with what God commands because God commands it
  - Example: Christian ethics – the 10 commandments list various duties and forbidden activities, and Christ's teachings extend/modify the rules set down in the Old Testament
  - Someone who believes that the Bible is the word of God will have no doubt about the meaning of 'right' and 'wrong'.
  - Some may say that Christian ethics functions on the basis that there is something at stake
  - For instance, Christians may avoid sin to avoid God's displeasure, or an eventual punishment. Or they could also seek long-term rewards.

- <u>Criticisms</u>

  - Difficult to find out God's will when it is not explicitly stated in the Bible or when there are conflicting interpretations of the bible
    - E.g.: Is 'thou shalt not kill' an absolute command? Is killing always wrong?

  - Euthyphro's dilemma: Does God command or love what a person does because it is morally good? Or does God's commanding or loving it make it morally good? In other words, <u>is morality independent of God</u> (occurring in the universe) or does God determine what is good?
    - In the first instance, God would not be the source of morality.
    - In the second instance, on what basis does God decide that an act, for instance murder, is wrong? Some believers would say that God can be trusted because 'He

is good.' But then this just postpones the question: why does He approve of Himself?

- It assumes the existence of God: not everyone believes in God or in the same God. 'If God doesn't exist, then anything is permitted" - Dostoevsky

Exercise: A Comparison of Ethical Theories

Your class will be divided into 4 groups and each group will be assigned one of the above ethical systems / theories. Following the theory you've been assigned, try to decide what would be the right thing to do in the following situations, and complete your designated column in the table below.

Situation A: Your country is at war and you have captured an enemy soldier whom you believe knows secrets about bombs on timing devices hidden in public areas. If you can get him to tell you the secrets quickly, you believe you can save the lives of hundreds of civilians. He refuses to talk. Should you torture him?

Situation B: A woman is pregnant with sextuplets, following fertility treatment. The doctors think they will not survive, because she is unlikely to carry the pregnancy to full term and the babies will be too small and premature to live for more than a few hours. However, if two of the fetuses are aborted, the remaining four have a very good chance of survival. The mother has to choose what to do. Should she have the abortion?

Situation C: There is a famine in your country, and you cannot feed your children. They are becoming weak. Some government officials remain quite wealthy, as they are corrupt and keep a lot of the aid money and food for themselves. When you are passing the house of one of the governmental officials, you see that he has left his car open, and there are bags of food inside. Should you steal the food?

Group	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Ethical theory	Divine Command	Consequentialism	Deontology	Virtue Ethics
Example	Christian Ethics	Utilitarianism	Kantianism	Aristotelianism
Central question	How does God want me to act?	What ought I do to get what I want/what's good?	What is my duty?	What habits should I develop? What sort of person should be?
Primary object of evaluation	Acts	Consequences (states of affairs)	Acts	People (agents)
What is 'good'?	What God likes	Maximum happiness	Right, dutiful, action	The sort of thing a virtuous person would do in the situation
The 'right' action in Situation A				
The 'right' action in Situation B				
The 'right' action in Situation C				

Discussion

1. How easy was it to know what would be the 'right' thing to do, following the ethical system you were assigned? Did it give you enough guidance? Was it too flexible, or not flexible enough?

2. How far did your system allow for individual circumstances to be taken into account? Was this an advantage, or a disadvantage?

3. Do you think that your assigned system leads to acceptable moral choices? Why, or why not? Can you give any examples, using the choices you made?

4. What do you think are the main strengths and weakness of your ethical system?

5. Do you think people should switch between different systems depending on the ethical problem at hand? Why or why not?

6. If you were forced to pick ONE of the above systems, which of the four would you most prefer? Why?

Source: UCLES materials and http://www.trinity.edu/cbrown/intro/ethical_theories.html

Exercise: Evaluating the Ethical Theories

For each example below, try to apply the ethical theories discussed above and show how the examples highlight certain flaws or strengths in the theories.

Example 1: The Work of Mother Teresa

Most of the work of Mother Teresa and her helpers in Calcutta involved looking after poor and friendless dying people.

Now for the utilitarian, the poor and friendless dying can scarcely appear anywhere on the utility scale. If their needs appear at all on the scale of utility it will be very low down.

Of course, some happiness is brought about by the work, and the dying themselves are possibly somewhat happier, or at any rate more comfortable, at least for a short time, than they would otherwise have been.

The point though is that on a utilitarian estimate it would have been better for Mother Teresa to have directed her efforts at caring for the living. Perhaps she ought to have got a job in an ordinary hospital. For efforts to help the living will make a difference in the relatively long term as well as in the short term.

Is it misguided work?
Is the world not a better place because it has contained Mother Teresa and her helpers?
If this work is valuable and noble, where does its value lie?

Example 2: The Rights of the Innocent

Suppose terrorists hold a plane full of passengers to ransom, but say that they will let all passengers go free provided that a particular local citizen is handed over to them to be killed. Perhaps this citizen belongs to a group opposed to their aim, or is rightly or wrongly believed to be responsible for some counter-terrorist activities. In any event they wish to kill this person; and if the local authorities do not co-operate with them in this aim, then they say, will blow up the whole plane.

The local authorities know that the citizen is innocent of any crime and moreover has no connection with any counter-terrorist activity. But they have no time to argue with the terrorists. And they have no doubt the terrorists will carry out their threat if this innocent person is not handed over. Should they surrender an innocent life in order to save the lives of the passengers?

How would Duty Theory or Utilitarianism fare here?

Source: Jenny Teichman & Katherine C. Evans. Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide. 3rd Edition. UK, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Some people remain sceptical about whether the ethical theories outlined above will actually change people's fundamental *prejudices* about what is right and wrong. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* said most moral philosophers end up justifying 'a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract'. In other words, they give complicated analyses which appear to involved impersonal logical reasoning but which always end up by demonstrating that their pre-existing prejudices were correct.

Others point out that as long as people adopt different ethical theories, there will not be any easy resolution to the host of moral dilemmas that we face, and we will continue to struggle in our ethically challenged world.

Put this way, the study of ethics could be rather depressing. But still others have said that perhaps this is not the point of ethics. The aim of ethics "is not to be a rule book, or even an uplifting sermon. Rather the aim of ethics is to improve our navigational skills, to help us find what the ancient Chinese called the 'Tao', but we would call 'the way'. It is no coincidence that Plato's most detailed description of the nature of 'justice' describes the person who has discovered the answer as like a traveler who knows the path to their destination, as opposed to those, like the rest of us, who are strangers in an unknown land, reliant on the odd landmark and half-understood instruction." (Cohen in *101 Ethical Dilemmas*)

While philosophy does not give easy answers to moral questions, Nigel Warburton (in *Philosophy the Basics*) suggests that at least it does provide a framework within which such questions can be intelligently discussed.

As we try to apply the ethical theories in the next section, see which of the above views appeal to you more. **If one does appeal more to you, what does that suggest about the nature of that particular theory?** Would you hold it to be superior to others, that it is **objective and true**, or would you merely hold it as **an opinion, subjective, and nothing more?**

B) Moral Dilemmas (Applied Ethics)

In this section, we will consider some common ethical dilemmas and see if an understanding of the ethical theories in the previous section will help us discuss these dilemmas more meaningfully.

Exercise: What Would You Do?

Scenario 1: Imagine you are standing beside some train tracks. In the distance, you spot a runaway train hurtling down the tracks towards five workers who cannot hear it coming. Even if they do spot it, they won't be able to move out of the way in time. As this disaster looms, you glance down and see a lever connected to the tracks. You realise that if you pull the lever, the train will be diverted down a second set of tracks away from the five unsuspecting workers. However, down this side track is one lone worker, just as oblivious as his colleagues.

What would you do? Pull the lever, leading to one death, but saving five? Or allow the five to die.

Scenario 2: Imagine you are standing on a footbridge above the train tracks. You can see runaway train hurtling towards the five unsuspecting workers, but there's no lever to divert it. However, there is a large man standing next to you on the footbridge. You're confident that his bulk would stop the train in its tracks.

What would you do? Push the man on to the tracks, sacrificing him in order to stop the train and thereby saving five others?

Scenario 3: Imagine you are a doctor and you have five patients who all need transplants in order to live. Two each require one lung, another two each require a kidney and the fifth needs a heart. In the next ward is another individual recovering from a broken leg. But other than their knitting bones, they're perfectly healthy.

What would you do? Kill the healthy patient and harvest his organs to save five others?

Interestingly, the trolley problem (which is the abovementioned problem) has been actually tested out in psychology. Psychologists from the Ghent University in Belgium recreated this dilemma in real life by using mice and getting its human subjects to decide the fate of the mice. What the researchers did was to gather 200 people and told them that they were about to zap a cage of five mice with a strong electric shock. Participants were told if they pressed a button, then the electric shock would be diverted to a cage containing one mouse instead. (Just like the Milgram Experiment however, there is no real shock.) Before this though, they asked the participants how they thought they would hypothetically react to this problem.

What would you do?

Result? 66% of people would press the button in a hypothetical scenario.

However, when it came to the 'real' test where the real mice were in front of them, 84% of people chose to press the button and actively zap the one mouse.

Q: Did the disparity in results between the hypothetical and the 'real' scenario surprise you? Why?

Reading: "A Defense of Abortion" by Judith Jarvis Thomson

You might think that the trolley problem and the various other ethical dilemmas that ethics is famous for are just academic exercises. Yet if you are the AI engineer for self-driving cars, the trolley problem becomes more relevant. For example, when you design the software for the car, what decision would you have it make when someone suddenly runs across the road? Should you make the driverless car serve out of his/her way, causing a massive pile-up of multiple cars and potentially killing the driver and passenger? Or should you have it simply carry on and kill the pedestrian, on the rationale that it is merely *one person*?

Another feature about morality that complicates the issue is what we call Moral Luck. It seems absurd that you could be doing something moral, just by chance, or doing something immoral, just by chance. But is it really that unintuitive?

Exercise: Moral Luck

I was bicycling down the main street in Oxford and getting ready to turn right. (This was England, where a right turn is a left turn.) In a hurry, I gave only a quick look back before pulling away from the curb. I didn't see the cyclist behind me, crashed into him, and sent him sprawling into the roadway.

The cyclist was lucky. If there had been a car coming he would have been killed, but there wasn't. He brushed off his clothes, accepted my apology, and continued down the street.

I too was lucky. If there had been a car coming I would have been guilty of carelessly killing someone, a serious moral wrong. As it was, I had been only harmlessly negligent - nothing to be proud of, but no great sin.

But wait. How can luck have the second effect? How can fortune affect the wrongness of what I did? ...

Consider a feature of our legal system: it punishes attempted crimes less severely than successful ones.

This might make sense if the law's purpose were just to prevent crimes. Stiffer penalties for successful crimes dissuade people who've already tried a crime unsuccessfully from trying it again. But if punishment is a response to guilt, the law is puzzling: why should a gunman be thought less guilty if his victim wore a bullet-proof vest?

We believe, it seems in "moral luck," in luck that affects not only what happens but the moral quality of what we do.

From: Thomas Hurka, "Questions of principle," The Globe and Mail, April 10, 1990

Discussion

1) Which of ethical theories bring about Moral luck?
2) Which theory might circumvent the problem of moral luck?
3) What is your response to Hurka?

"Kant sought to make morality as pure and disconnected as possible from the vagaries of circumstance and individual personality. Whether an action is right or wrong was to depend solely on the principle of action that lay behind it, and in particular on whether the agent could regard that principle as one that everyone ought to follow in all possible circumstances. Professor Williams ingeniously showed how hard it is for any such insular conception of morality to survive contact with the messiness of real life. He coined the term "moral luck" to mark a fact that is incomprehensible to Kantians, but which—once he had highlighted it—came to seem undeniable: that whether or not a person's behavior emerges as good or bad can sometimes depend on pure chance. Soldiers know that a man can become a hero partly by accident. The ancient tragedians knew that he could be undone by fate, which comes to much the same thing."
—"Bernard Williams," The Economist, June 28, 2003

C) The Nature of Ethical Knowledge (Metaethics)

Setting up the Problem

In the previous section, we saw that even though we might have 4 major theories which purport to give us some guidelines on how to behave morally, there seems to be quite a few areas where these theories do not agree with one another. Perhaps this means not just that one is right and the others wrong, but that **all are wrong**...

Exercise: The Last Man

Consider the following scenario:

You are the last surviving human being on Earth, perhaps because someone 'accidentally' launched a nuclear missile one day and started a nuclear war. Suffice to say, the world is in ruins and nuclear radiation is everywhere. In a few minutes' time, you are going to die due to the radiation.

Yet before you die, you discover a weapons facility and discover this new weapon that can blast this entire galaxy to smithereens. If you decide to launch this weapon, it will somehow only activate itself 5 minutes after your heart stops beating (there is a computer programme that can somehow do this).

A) The million-pound question is this: assuming that there are no surviving animals, is it morally okay, or even morally laudatory, for you to launch this weapon and destroy the entire galaxy?

B) The million-and-one pound question: if you discover that there are still animals on this earth, is it morally okay, or even morally laudatory, for you to launch this weapon and destroy the entire galaxy?

C) The million-and-two pound question: assuming that there are no surviving animals, no aliens, no living animate object, is it morally okay, or even morally laudatory, for you to launch this weapon and destroy the entire galaxy?

In groups of four, discuss your answers with your classmates.

What you have just considered is known as the "Last Man Argument". Essentially, it shows up what seems to be a major flaw in the 4 ethical theories presented in unit A – they seem to be intrinsically **anthropocentric**, i.e. that they are human-centred. What this simply means is that when it comes to the crunch, these ethical theories will always privilege the status of Man over the Environment. Why? Because these theories either argue that human beings are the only living beings that have value (an

absolutist anthropocentric approach) or that human beings have *more* value than other beings (living or not) around them. Another way to put it is that human beings have **intrinsic value** while the environment only enjoys **instrumental value**. In Kantian terminology, human beings are to be treated as ends in themselves and the environment to be treated as a means to an end.

This might seem trivially true at first sight. After all, what is the value of a fruit if it is not meant to be consumed and appreciated by man?

Hence, with regard to the issue of environmental degradation, it is wrong **primarily** because human beings require a sustainable environment in order to survive. If human beings did not require a sustainable environment in order to survive, then the moral force for an argument against environmental degradation is invariably diminished in the eyes of the 4 major ethical theories outlined in unit A.

Such an approach has obviously seen quite a bit of criticism in the recent past from philosophers who argue for an **environmental** ethic, i.e. an ethic that bestows **independent** moral status upon the environment. These theorists argue that it is precisely because of such anthropocentric ethical theories that the environment has been treated quite so badly. After all, we reason to ourselves, it is morally okay, and maybe even morally laudatory, to manipulate the environment so as to create a better life for us and our posterity! And yet, if these theorists are right, then it would seem morally okay (if not morally laudatory) for the last surviving person on earth to destroy the galaxy! This seems to be a problematic stand. The environmental ethicists argue that this is so because the environment does have value independent of mankind. In such a framework, the environment is not seen to be valuable simply because it is instrumental to mankind. Rather, like man, the environment (animals, plants, and maybe even stones and rivers) enjoys intrinsic value as well.[1]

And so, not only do the 4 major ethical theories disagree on seemingly important issues, there is now a challenge from the environmental ethicists that they have missed out an important aspect of morality! Indeed, the 4 theories seem inherently **biased**.

Further, some ethical theorists believe that since we are now in the Computer Age, then an environmental ethic is not good enough. While an environmental ethic has moved in the right direction by bestowing intrinsic value upon the environment, it is still biased as it is biased towards **biological** entities. On an environmental ethic, **non-biological** entities, such as a computer and a piece of software, are discriminated against. This is why, when the computer malfunctions in the hospital, it is difficult to lay moral blame according to an anthropocentric or biocentric ethic. Hence, Luciano Floridi, a moral philosopher, came up with an Information Ethic which is **ontocentric**, i.e. *anything* that has being has intrinsic value. Such an ethic, according to Floridi, is not only able to deal with moral issues just as well as the anthropocentric and biocentric ethics, it is also better placed to deal with the special moral issues that have arisen during this Computer Age, an e.g. being non-invasive hacking.

Putting the issue of just how such an information ethic will work aside (you can 'google' for his work online – "Information Ethics: On the Philosophical Foundation of Computer Ethics"), the questions that should have already risen in your minds should be something like this:

Which ethical theory is RIGHT?
And because we are doing KI, how can we KNOW which is the right ethical principle to hold to?
How can it be that something that is supposedly as objective as Morality has seen so much debate?
How can an ethical theory be biased? Surely Morality is universal across cultures?
If Morality is not universal across cultures and is thus not objective, does it then mean that Morality is but a human construct and will disappear once we disappear, i.e. that Morality is mind-dependent?

[1] Note that even within the area of environmental ethics, there is considerable disagreement, as can be expected. There are those who argue that only animate objects (animals and plants) should have intrinsic value while there are those who argue for inanimate objects (rocks and rivers).

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher of the late 19th century, certainly seemed to think so. In his book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche outlines how he thinks society has arrived at this current conception of "Good".

Exercise: Construction of Ethical Knowledge
A Summary of *On the Genealogy of Morality, Essay One*

Nietzsche begins his study on the genealogy of morality by attacking the hitherto largely unchallenged 'scientific' and supposedly historical view held by the English psychologists of that time – that how the term 'good' and morality came about was not so much an emotional event, but more of a cold, heartless, utilitarian event. The quintessential fish example explains it. A poor, starving man is given a fish by a rich man, and he ravenously demolishes the fish, shouting, "Good! Good!" and the rich man goes away thinking that he has done a 'good' thing and feels good about himself, thereby receiving some utility from that act. By and by, the actual meaning of the word "good", as first mentioned by that poor man is distorted and forgotten, according to the English psychologists, and lo and behold, the word "good" has now arrived at the meaning it has today, which is to be moral, noble etc.

Now Nietzsche thinks this is all a load of bullocks. If it was truly a utilitarian concept, then it makes no sense to think that it should be forgotten quite so easily for the simple fact that if something is so beneficial for you, and it keeps on being done to you, then it makes no sense to think that you would have forgotten how beneficial (or good) it was to you!

Indeed, Nietzsche argues that the word "good" got its meaning because it was an emotional event, in the sense that it was the noble man who felt good at being able to show mercy and kindness to the poor man, that he coined the word "good" to describe how he felt. And Nietzsche then proceeds to back this argument up with a whole series of etymological and philological investigations.

And then he arrives at the most important part of the essay: the master-slave set of values/ morality. He argues mainly that the current set of values that we have are not the original set of values that man started out with. Rather, it is a consequence of the slave revolt in morality that resulted in us having this 'negative' of values. Pointing to his etymology and philology, Nietzsche argues that morality first started out as a positive affirmation of one's strengths. Hence, morality was a 'master-morality'. Things were good simply because the strong and noble saw themselves as good and strong and affirmed themselves in their goodness. The slaves and priests were then looked upon as 'bad' in response to the goodness of the masters. However, somewhere down the line, the slaves 'revolted'. Not so much a physical revolt, but one more insidious and cunning – an intellectual, worse, moral 'revolt'. They overturned the noble set of values, the master morality, and implemented their own set of values, the slave morality, or priestly morality. While the master morality was a positive affirmation of their goodness, the slaves and priests, being the weak ones, had nothing to affirm themselves with. Rather, according to Nietzsche, the only way they could feel good about themselves was to first postulate the Other as evil, and then look at themselves and saw that they were different, the anti-thesis of evil (and not so much the thesis of good). Hence, the slave/priestly morality is a negative one. And the only reason we don't realise this is because the victory of the priests over the masters have been so complete that the battle is no longer in our consciousness.

Nietzsche also argues that since it is the clerical function that sets the priests apart from the rest, it would also be in their 'title description', i.e. that they would make the system such that only the clerics are the strongest ones. And who should be the heir to this slave revolt (of the Jews) but the Church, that institution that, according to Nietzsche, introduced the doctrine of the soul. But why? Simply because before there was this doctrine, the nature of animals and the things they do are one and the same thing, i.e. it is in the nature of the eagle to prey on the lamb simply because it is a bird of prey. It is not an evil thing to do, but good! Yet with this doctrine of the soul, the slaves have triumphed completely over the masters by introducing the concept of choice. True, they argue, your nature might be thus, but your nature and your will are different. Just as you can now make a promise, you can now choose to do certain things, and not to do certain things. Thus, it is not an excuse to say that it is in your nature to prey on weaker and smaller creatures. Rather, you choose to do it. Hence, you shall be punished for it. The end result? The strong cannot control the weak. No, indeed the strong shall protect the weak. And who is the weak? The slaves! The priests! "How ingenious!", Nietzsche cries. The tables have indeed been turned by such a seemingly harmless concept and doctrine.

Discussion

1. Is Nietzsche's theory an example of a foundationalist construction of ethical knowledge or a coherentist construction?
2. What do you think of Nietzsche's theory of how we have arrived at the current conception of good? Should we accept it? Why or why not?
3. If Nietzsche is right, does it then mean that Morality is necessarily a human construct and not objective?

JJL

<u>The Problem: Moral Scepticism VS Ethical Objectivism</u>

A position like Nietzsche's is known as Moral Scepticism. A **Moral Sceptic** is one who doubts that morality is objective, i.e. they **deny** that there can be an ethic that is true independently of what anyone thinks of it. For moral sceptics, morality is the product of **human invention**. In other words, moral sceptics are anti-realists with regard to the existence of moral truths.

There are three basic kinds of Moral Sceptics – **Moral Nihilists**, **Ethical Subjectivists** and **Ethical Relativist**.

1) Moral Nihilism **denies** that there are any moral truths.
- This means that there is no such thing as good and evil; nothing is ever moral or immoral.
- Why? Because our moral commitments are either always mistaken (**error theory**) or that we are always mistaken in our moral talk (**non-cognitivism**).
- According to error theorists, we are almost always trying to speak the truth when it comes to our moral pronouncements but since there is no truth in ethics, we are invariably mistaken. Hence, the error.
    - Just as how a Marxist would deem talk of religion to be always invariably mistaken as it presupposes a (for them) non-existent God, the error theorist would deem talk of ethics to be always invariably mistaken.
- According to the non-cognitivists, moral judgments aren't capable of being either true or false in the first place. All these moral judgments are designed to do is to give vent to our emotions (**emotivism**), to coordinate our responses with one another, to persuade others to share our feelings, to issue commands, or to express our commitments. These ways of using language are not susceptible to truth and falsity.
    - When someone says that abortion is immoral, what she is really doing is counseling others not to have one. These sorts of things can't be true or false – "Don't have an abortion" is a sort of claim that is neither true nor false; it is simply a command or an exhortation. Non-cognitivists believe that moral judgments are meant to *prescribe*, not to *describe*.
- In essence, both the error theorists and non-cognitivists argue that there are no true moral standards at all.

2) Ethical Subjectivism claims that there are such truths, but that **each person** has the final say about what they are.
- So there is a moral reality, but it is a reality of each person's own making.
- Hence, good and evil exists but only in the eye of the beholder, i.e. what is good is good for me and not necessarily for you.
- Indeed, everyone is **as trustworthy** a moral judge as anyone else.
- Thus, everyone gets to create his/her own moral reality and the truth of moral judgments answers to each person's tastes and endorsements.
- What this means is that for the subjectivist, my moral judgments are true just in case they are sincere and accurately report what I am feeling at the moment.
- The upshot of this is that an individual is usually, if not always, right!

3) Ethical Relativism also allows for moral truth, but places its source within **each culture**, rather than in personal opinion, i.e. whatever society says, goes.
- According to the relativist, individuals can make moral mistakes but only because they have failed to note what society truly endorses.
- Social agreement is the ultimate measure of right and wrong. So rather than ethics being in the eye of the beholder, it is at the centre of social understandings.
- Hence, creating genuine moral standards is a collective, not an individual, undertaking
- Morality, in this way, is really no different from the standards that operate in the law or in etiquette.
- The upshot: a society is usually, if not always, right!

In opposition to these 3 kinds of Moral Scepticism is the position which holds that ethics is objective; rather, these truths exist independently of humanity. This position is known as **Moral Realism**.

4) Moral Realism holds that ethics is objective, that moral standards are neither fictions nor human constructs (and thus nihilism is false) and that such standards are the product neither of individual preferences nor of social agreements (exit relativism and subjectivism).

- Indeed, moral realists claim that even the ultimate moral commitments of individuals and societies can be mistaken.
- Just as mathematical truths can be objective in the sense that they are true independently of what anyone, anywhere, happens to think about them, so too can ethical truths be objective.

Examples of Realist Positions:

- **Ethical Naturalism**: There are objective moral properties that are reducible to non-ethical properties, such as duty (I. Kant)[2], pleasure (J. Bentham), and happiness (J S Mill). We can derive some 'oughts' from the state of human nature. If some 'oughts' can be discovered from human nature, then there may be an absolute code of ethics that applies universally to all human beings bound to such 'nature' (T. Aquinas).
- Moral properties such as "goodness" are not purely abstract entities, but are always instead realized and embodied in particular physical states of affairs. These moral realists often draw analogies between moral properties and scientific properties such as gravity, velocity, mass, and so forth. These scientific concepts are commonly thought to exist independent of what we think about them, and yet they are not part of an ontologically distinct world of pure, abstract ideas in the way that Plato envisioned. So too might moral properties ultimately be reducible to scientific features of the world in a way that preserves their objectivity.

- **Ethical Non-naturalism**: There are objective and irreducible moral properties (such as the property of "goodness") and we sometimes have intuitive or *a priori* awareness of such properties or of moral truths. These properties are irreducible because they cannot be defined, but they can be recognised (intuitively).
- Moral properties such as "good" cannot be solely defined by scientific, natural properties such as "biological flourishing" or "social coordination" for the simple reason that, given such an alleged definition, we could still always sensibly ask whether such scientific properties were themselves truly good or not (G E Moore). The apparent ability to always keep the moral status of any scientific or natural thing an "**open question**" led Moore to reject any analysis of morality that defined moral values as anything other than simply "moral," period. (Incidentally, Moore is a moral Platonist).

Exercise: Who is right about the nature of Right?

You should have learned by now that ethics is not as simple as it looks, especially seen in the light of how the dominant ethical theories can appear to be inherently biased.

Your tutor will now break your class into 4 groups, each taking up a position with regard to the objectivity of ethics. Within your group, discuss your particular position and try to defend it against any possible criticisms from the other groups.

The following questions can be used to help guide your discussion.

[2] It should be noted that there is debate about whether Kant is a realist or anti-realist with respect to ethics. For example, John Rawls held that Kant's categorical imperative is essentially a procedure through which we can test maxims or moral rules; those that pass it are then accepted into the set of moral rules, a result of construction, not discovery. Karl Ameriks, on the other hand, argued that Kant insisted on an independent standard of morality that can be known by human reason but yet is not created by it. For more on this discussion, go to https://muse.jhu.edu/article/13462 for an article by Frederick Rauscher who incidentally argues that Kant is an anti-realist.
Another interesting side note is that the term "moral realism" itself undergoes much debate in philosophy…

Discussion

1) What are the strengths of your position? Are they unique to your position or are these enjoyed by the other positions as well?
2) What are the possible weaknesses of your position? Are there possible scenarios where holding to your position would result in a less than desirable outcome? Is this outcome necessarily worse than if you were to hold on to a rival position?
3) What is the intuitive appeal of your position? Why would a man walking down the street believe in your position over and above the other positions?

In the following article, Shafer-Landau outlines several reasons for why he thinks so many people nowadays believe intuitively in Moral Scepticism.

Article: The Nature of the Problem in *Whatever happened to Good and Evil?* by Russ Shafer-Landau

Here's a line I often hear: goodness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. If I think something is good, it is. If you think it's bad, it is. Personal opinion is the measure of morality. To suppose that there are moral standards independent of such opinion – well, that's just wishful thinking, or an expression of arrogance. Clearly, morality is something that we made for ourselves. Others have come to different conclusions about how to live their lives. Who are we to say that they are mistaken?

Perhaps you feel the force of these thoughts. They've gained a lot of credence in the last half century. …

… What do we know that they didn't, that could account for why so many people nowadays regard morality as a kind of make-believe?

There are a variety of factors that might do the explaining. Whether these factors also justify this scepticism is, of course, quite another thing.

There is first of all the loss of faith in traditional authority figures. Their edicts once served as moral bedrock for their followers. But we are nowadays far more willing to question the clergy, to doubt their spiritual integrity and to suspect their moral wisdom. And we've scrutinized our secular leaders within an inch of their lives. It hasn't done much to elevate their moral status.

There is also the greater exposure to other cultures, whose practices are incompatible with our own. It is harder to think of one's way of life as the only way, or the only natural way, when so many functioning, intelligent societies are organized along different principles.

Add to this the cautionary tale of our century's fanatics, whose certitude has cost tens of millions their lives. These people were convinced that theirs was the side of Good, that they had a monopoly on the Truth. Wouldn't a little self-doubt have been in order? If we have to choose between the hesitations of those who have their moral doubts, and the fanaticism of those who don't, then perhaps a bit of scepticism isn't such a bad idea after all.

There are also specifically philosophical sources of moral scepticism. If good and evil really exist, then why is there so much disagreement about them? Why isn't there a widely accepted account of how to make moral discoveries? Moreover, if there are correct standards of good and evil, doesn't that license dogmatism and intolerance? Yet if these are the price of good and evil, maybe we do better to abandon such notions. And doesn't the existence of good and evil require the existence of God? But what evidence is there that God exists? Doesn't the amount and degree of sorrow is in the world, not to mention the scientific unverifiability of a divine being, give us excellent reason to doubt God's existence?

Taken together, these considerations have done a good deal to convince people to adopt a sceptical attitude toward moral claims. Without an answer to these (and other) worries, too many of us are likely to find ourselves acting and thinking inconsistently. Though firm in our conviction of a terrorist's depravity, we might, in other contexts, find ourselves claiming that our ethical views are merely our opinion, true (if at all) only relative to the culture we live in. The implication of this last thought is that those who disagree with us need not be making any error. When we think about concrete examples, of the sort that we were forced to contemplate on September 11, that kind of view can seem hollow and artificial, But the concerns that bring so many of us over the sceptic's side have yet to be dispelled. Until they are, we are likely to be morally schizophrenic: full of outrage at moments, and at other times just as full of reservations about the status of our moral condemnations.

Discussion

1) Do you agree with the reasons that Shafer-Landau have outlined above for the rise in general sympathy for Moral Scepticism?

2) Shafer-Landau points out that if we are a moral sceptic, then it seems that those who disagree with us need not be making any error, which means that someone like a religious fanatic might not be making any error at all. Is this a real problem for the Moral Sceptic or is it simply a cost one has to pay in order to ensure that everyone's view is heard and treasured?

Solving the Problem

While Shafer-Landau seems to have pointed out various good reasons for why Moral Scepticism is on the rise and Moral Realism is on the down, he argues that there are serious problems for Moral Scepticism, problems that only a Moral Realist can solve. Let us now take a look at some of these problems.

1) The possibility of Moral Error

- It seems trivially true that even conventional morality can sometimes be wrong for not every established practice is morally acceptable. E.g. Slavery
- But according to the Ethical Subjectivists and Ethical Relativists, whatever the person or society feels is the case *is* the case, i.e. that conventional morality can never be wrong.
    - What this means is that there is only a limited space for critique and only an **internal** critique at that.
    - In essence, an internal critique is made from within a practice and do not challenge the fundamental assumptions of a practice.
    - Instead, they take these for granted, and try to reveal any internal inconsistencies.
    - Still, one can be an internally consistent Nazi and thus be deemed moral according to an Ethical Subjectivist and Relativist. This is surely problematic.
- The Error Theorists fare a little better as ALL elements of conventional morality is a mistake.
    - So while the basic moral views of a Nazi is false, it also means that the moral views of a saint and a freedom fighter are false as well! This is also problematic.
- Moral Realists however are able to account for the possibility of moral error more positively.
    - An objective ethics allows the space for not only an internal critique but an **external** critique as well because there is some standard, independent of man and his convictions, that exists which can then serve as a basis for comparison and justification.
    - It is this external critique that allows one to say that the internally consistent Nazi is morally condemnatory because he fails to live up to the objective moral standards.

2) Moral Equivalence

- Moral Scepticism is essentially a doctrine of moral equivalence for if there are no right answers to ethical questions (nihilism) or what right answers there are are given just by personal opinion (subjectivism), then any moral view is just as (im)plausible as any other. If the relativists are right, then the basic views of all societies are morally on a par with one another. Hence, on all sceptical theories, the basic moral views of any person, or society, are no better than those of any other.
- While this might seem decidedly democratic, a serious problem arises: how do we discern between the moral opinions of Mahatma Gandhi and Osama Bin Laden?
    - Surely we do not want to say that the moral opinions of Osama are just as morally laudatory as those of Gandhi?
    - Indeed, no matter what your stance on abortion or the death penalty, you don't seriously think that the views of those in opposing camps are just as correct as yours, and vice versa.
    - Hence, when push comes to shove, no one, really, puts much stock in the idea that all moral views are just as good as all others, a view that moral scepticism is committed to.
- Moral Realism obviously faces no such problems once again; it gives that space for critique and condemnation of opinions.

3) Moral Progress and Moral Comparison

- Since there is no fixed, objective standard with which a person or a society can compare him/itself to, then Moral Scepticism does not allow for moral progress/regress and comparison

- This can only be achieved within the framework of Moral Realism.
- A Moral Sceptic might want to say that it allows for moral progress by saying that a person can become internally more consistent, abandoning false moral beliefs and better at achieving some of our goals.
- However, on this view, a Nazi who has become more internally consistent has had moral progress! This is problematic because it seems, intuitively, that a more internally consistent Nazi is one who is experiencing moral *regress*!

4) Contradiction and Moral Disagreement

- Subjectivism is generates contradiction when you and I disagree about a certain moral issue, say, abortion.
    - So long as our true feelings are really being expressed, then neither of us is making a moral error.
    - In this case, then abortion is *both* morally acceptable *and* unacceptable! Contradiction.
    - The way out for the Subjectivist is to say that something is wrong *for me* or *for my society* for a Relativist.
    - This eliminates the contradiction but also eliminates the possibility of moral disagreement.
    - This is because one can definitely agree with another that in *his* culture, abortion is morally acceptable while still holding on to one's own view that in one's own culture, abortion is morally unacceptable, and vice versa.
    - However, there is now little room left for disagreement! The only way one can disagree with another is to say that the other is not sincere or does not really understand his culture.
    - Yet this is not the kind of moral disagreement we normally experience in our lives. We want to be able to say that abortion is right or wrong for all cultures and not only for some. Or maybe not abortion but something as reprehensible as child slavery. Surely we don't want to say that yes, according to your culture, it is morally acceptable and hence, please go ahead with it.
- Relativists are especially vulnerable to the charge that their theory generates contradiction.
    - The question to think about is this: can an act be performed in more than one society at a time, or is every action performed in just a single society?
    - At first glance, the answer seems easy – surely a given action occurs at a particular time and place, and thus occurs in just a single society.
    - While this might have been the case in the past, this is usually not the case in our pluralistic and globalised society as there are subcultures located within such societies.
    - This creates a real problem for relativism because we need to know, in such a case, which of these cultural codes is going to take precedence when it comes to making moral appraisals.
    - Do we follow the majority? But if so, then what happens to Tolerance, the value which supposedly lends the most justification to Moral Scepticism? In what way then is this importantly different from the Moral Realism?
- Only Moral Nihilists and Moral Realists can escape the scourge of contradiction.
    - For the Nihilist, since moral judgments have no truth-value, they cannot be both true *and* false. Hence, there can be no contradiction.
    - This however is achieved only at the cost of saying that moral convictions can never be true.
    - This is obviously not the case for the Moral Realist. He can arrive at non-contradictory moral pronouncements *and* say that our moral convictions can be true.

5) Tolerance

- The nail-in-the-coffin has to be that Moral Scepticism, which seems so committed to Tolerance, is unable to guarantee Tolerance.

- For under Moral Scepticism, even though Tolerance might be your moral conviction or the conviction of a particular society, this in no way guarantees that Tolerance is a universal moral value that should be practiced by all societies and peoples!
- Indeed, under Moral Scepticism, if a person's or a society's morality is tyrannical, then it can be morally tyrannical and be intolerant, and there is nothing a moral sceptic can do about it.
- However, a Moral Realist can argue that Tolerance is a moral value that is universal and objective across all cultures and peoples.
- Hence, it seems like it is Moral Realism in the end which can guarantee Tolerance and not Moral Scepticism.

These are just some of the problems that Moral Scepticism faces. For a more complete discussion, you can turn to Shafer-Landau's *Whatever happened to Good and Evil?* which is available in the library.

Hopefully, the discussion above has revealed to you the inadequacies of Moral Scepticism. Still, you might think that the criticisms offered above are unfair. Notable philosophers who hold to such positions are Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Richard Rorty. Such a position is also known to be a Postmodernist position.

Their most important argument is that holding on to Moral Realism means that certain voices will end up being judged to be morally condemnatory, what Lyotard calls the terrorism of the 'little narrative'. The Postmodernists argue that such objectivity can lead to terrors like that experienced at Auschwitz where the Nazis judged the Jews to be morally condemnatory according to their 'objective' Aryan ethic. Since terrorism is to be avoided at all costs, then one has to accept Moral Scepticism, in the form of Relativism and Subjectivism, and its drawbacks. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari even argued that within *oneself*, there are many small voices; *none* of these voices should be silenced and justified against an objective standard. Hence, they posit that we should all be schizophrenics in the sense that we should listen and be true to all these small, and differing, voices in our heads. While this might seem a little extreme, this, they argue, is something we must accept in order to do away with terrorism.

So far, this section has dealt primarily with the nature of ethical knowledge: is it something objective, and possibly eternal, that is to be discovered (like Plato's Good) or is it something that we create (like Nietzsche's Good)? Moral Scepticism seems to run into a whole host of problems that can be solved rather easily with Moral Realism, and yet Moral Realism does seem to run the risk of being tyrannical and terroristic. **Still, answering this question does not give a ready answer as to which ethical theory to use.** All it does say, if you believe in Moral Realism, is that there is an objective moral standard out there for us to discover and use. This, at least, will then lend a certain authority to ethical theories. But the jury is still out on exactly which ethical theory to use.

We now move on to other meta-ethical issues:

1) Moral Semantics

One of the central debates within analytic metaethics concerns the semantics of what is actually going on when people make **moral statements** such as "Abortion is morally wrong" or "Going to war is never morally justified." The metaethical question is not necessarily whether such statements themselves are true or false, but whether they are even the sort of sentences that are capable of being true or false in the first place (that is, whether such sentences are "truth-apt") and, if they are, what it is that makes them "true." This is basically the problem that we examined earlier with the non-cognitivists.

On the surface, such sentences would appear to possess descriptive content—that is, they seem to have the **syntactical structure** of describing facts in the world—in the same form that the sentence "The cat is on the mat" seems to be making a descriptive claim about a cat on a mat which, in turn, is true or false depending on whether or not there really is a cat on the mat. To put it differently, the

sentence "The cat is on the mat" seems to be expressing a belief about the way the world actually is. The key is whether moral statements are such truth-apt statements.

Cognitivism

Gist: Moral statements express truth-apt beliefs about the world; in other words, they express propositions that can be true or false and are not just expressions of feelings or emotional states, but are expressions of genuine propositions.

It is the **default view of our moral discourse** given the apparent structure that such discourse appears to have. Indeed, if cognitivism were not true— such that moral sentences were expressing something other than truth-apt propositions—then it would seem to be difficult to account for why we nonetheless are able to make logical inferences from one moral sentence to another.

Key Argument: If cognitivism were not true, how can we make logical inferences from one statement to another?

Frege-Geach Problem (famous for being a counter-argument to Non-Cognitivism)
Consider the following argument:
P1: It is wrong to lie.
P2: If it is wrong to lie, then it is wrong to get one's sibling to lie.
C: Therefore, it is wrong to get one's sibling to lie (P1-2)

This argument seems to be a valid application of the logical rule known as modus ponens. Yet, logical rules such as modus ponens operate only on truth-apt propositions. Thus, because we seem to be able to legitimately apply such a rule in the example above, such moral sentences must be truth-apt.

Rejecting cognitivism would force us to show the separate occurrences of the sentence "it is wrong to lie" in the above argument as homonymous, i.e. to have 2 or more meanings: according to such non-cognitivists, the occurrence in sentence (P1) is an expression of a non-truth-apt sentiment about lying (i.e. "lying sucks!" or "lying – boo!"), whereas the occurrence in sentence (P2) is not since it is only claiming what one would express conditionally. Since this homonymy would seem to threaten to undermine the grammatical structure of moral discourse, non-cognitivism must be rejected.

Examples of Cognitivist Positions:
All moral realist positions are cognitivist positions since realists believe that moral statements actually express genuine propositions (that can be true or false) and these correspond to a moral reality.

Non-Cognitivism

Gist: Moral statements ultimately express not beliefs which may be true or false.

Key Argument: Moral distinctions are not derived from reason, but instead represent emotional responses. So, moral statements do not express genuine propositions but desires or feelings which are neither true nor false (**David Hume**). For Hume, reason alone cannot motivate us to action, only desires can.

An example should illustrate this point. Mathematics is, if anything is, a desire-free, or stance-independent, area; its truths do not, in any way, depend on what attitudes people have towards it. Whether they like it or not, 1+1=2, and that is that. Yet knowing such a proposition hardly seems like it can motivate us to do something, and even if it does, this ability seems markedly inferior to that which we normally associate with morality. So while knowing the proposition "1+1=2" might motivate me to go and borrow another dollar if I wanted that two-dollar muffin and I only had a dollar on me,

this proposition is not going to motivate me to do something most of the time. In fact, strictly speaking, it was not the mathematical proposition that motivated me but my *desire* for the muffin that motivated me; any motivational force that mathematical proposition may have seems minimal at best. This, however, is not the same kind of motivation that we are looking for when we are looking at morality. That, for example, the proposition "stealing is an immoral act" is true should seem to always motivate me to think twice before shoplifting, even when I have an ostensibly good reason to do so, say, that I was starving and the only way I could get food was to shoplift from the supermarket. Yet if morality is stance-independent like mathematics, then it is hard to see how motivation enters the picture at the kind of level that we would normally associate with morality.

In this way then, moral truth seems to be the result of facts *and* desires. For example:

Version 1
P1: Abortion involves the killing of a foetus
C: We ought not to allow abortion (P1)
This is the "is-ought" problem that Hume brought up. P1 is an "is" statement that describes a situation but somehow, the conclusion is an "ought" statement. Such a move would be invalid given that the conclusion is going beyond what the premise contains. If we were to have a valid argument however…

Version 2
P1: Abortion involves the killing of a foetus
P2: We ought not to do anything that involves killing a foetus (a moral principle)
C: We ought not to allow abortion (P1-2)
Here, the argument is valid but Hume would argue that P2 is a statement that can neither be true nor false since it is merely the expression of the desire, "Killing – boo!" Hence, moral truths (i.e. the conclusions of the arguments) are only ever the result of both facts (which can be known through reason or experience and thus be true or false though most ethicists agree that if morality exists, then it is a priori and not aposteriori) and desires (which are not truth-apt). But if so, then moral truths can neither be true nor false.

Furthermore, not only are moral disputes often heavily affect-laden in a way that many other factual disputes are not, the kind of facts which would apparently be necessary to accommodate true moral beliefs would have to be very strange sorts of entities. Specifically, the worry is that, whereas we can appeal to standards of empirical verification or falsification to adjudicate when our non-moral beliefs are true or false, no such standards seem applicable in the moral sphere since we cannot literally point to moral goodness in the way we can literally point to cats on mats.

Examples of Non-cognitivist Positions:

Vienna Circle (**Logical Positivism**): anything not empirically verifiable is semantically "meaningless".

A J Ayer (**Emotivism**): Moral statements are indexed always to the speaker's own affective state. The moral utterance "Abortion is morally wrong" would ultimately mean only that "I do not approve of abortion," or, more accurately (to avoid even the appearance of having descriptive content), "Abortion—boo!"

R M Hare (**Universal Prescriptivism**): Moral utterances contain both descriptive (truth-apt) as well as ineliminably prescriptive elements, such that genuinely asserting, for instance, that murder is wrong involves a concomitant emotional endorsement of not murdering. The act of making a statement (that is, the statement's "illocutionary force") can be distinguished from other acts that may be performed concomitantly (that is, the statement's "perlocutionary force")— as when, for example, stating "I do" in the context of a marriage ceremony thereby effects an actual legal reality. Similarly, in the case of moral language, the illocutionary act of describing a war as "unjust" may, as part and parcel of the description itself, also involve the perlocutionary force of recommending a negative attitude or action

with respect to that war, i.e. to give a command, which can neither be true nor false. The prescriptive dimension of such an assertion must be constrained by the requirements of universalizability.

Alan Gibbard (**Norm-Expressivism**): The individual speaker's normative endorsement and an appeal to a socially-shared norm that helps contextualize the endorsement are both in-built in moral expression. Moral statements express commitments not to idiosyncratic personal feelings, but instead to the particular (and, for Gibbard, evolutionarily adaptive) cultural mores that enable communication and social coordination.

Simon Blackburn (**Quasi-Realism**): A quasi-realist is someone who endorses an anti-realist metaphysical stance but who seeks, through philosophical maneuvering, to earn the right for moral discourse to enjoy all the trappings of realist talk. Hence, for quasi-realists, non-cognitivism is a claim only about the moral, not the logical, parts of discourse. Moral claims behave linguistically like factual claims and can appropriately be called "true" or "false" even if there were no such facts to correspond with.
To say that "If it is wrong to lie, then it is wrong to get one's sibling to lie" can be understood as expressing not an attitude toward lying itself (which is couched in merely hypothetical terms), but rather an attitude toward the disposition to express an attitude toward lying (that is, a kind of second-order sentiment). Since this still essentially involves the expression of attitudes rather than truth-apt assertions, it's still properly a type of non-cognitivism yet by distinguishing expressing an attitude directly from expressing an attitude about another (hypothetical) attitude, Blackburn thinks the logical and grammatical structure of our discourse is preserved. Since this view combines the expressive thesis of non-cognitivism with the logical appearance of moral realism, Blackburn dubs it "quasi-realism".

2) Moral Epistemology

Analytic metaethics also explores questions of how we make moral judgments in the first place, and how (if at all) we are able to know moral truths. The field of moral epistemology can be divided into questions about what moral knowledge is, how moral beliefs can be justified, and where moral knowledge comes from.

Like in the previous sections, metaethical positions may also be divided according to how they envision the requirements of justifying moral beliefs. Traditional philosophical accounts of epistemological justification are requisitioned and modified specifically to accommodate moral knowledge.

A popular version of a theory of moral-epistemic justification may be called **metaethical foundationalism**—the view that moral beliefs are epistemically justified by appeal to other moral beliefs, until this justificatory process terminates at some bedrock beliefs whose own justifications are "**self-evident**", thereby stopping the infinite regress. Classical Empiricism and Rationalism are evoked here – **metaethical empiricists** believe that ethical knowledge is gained through observation and experience, while **metaethical rationalists** believe that ethical knowledge is known *a priori* by reason alone. (more on this in the two readings below)

In addition, **ethical intuitionists** also believe that basic moral propositions are self-evident—that is, evident in and of themselves—and so can be known without the need of any argument. Intuition is immediate apprehension by the understanding (think of intuition as the rational equivalent of empirical perception). It is the way that we apprehend self-evident truths, general and abstract ideas, "and anything else we may discover, without making any use of any process of reasoning" (Richard Price).

Two examples of such foundationalists are Samuel Clarke and Thomas Nagel: "These things are so notoriously plain and self-evident, that nothing but the extremist stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit, can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt concerning

them" (Clarke); "In arguing for this claim, I am somewhat handicapped by the fact that I find it self-evident" (Nagel).

By contrast, **metaethical coherentism** requires for the epistemic justification of a moral belief only that it be part of a network of other beliefs, all of which are jointly consistent (compare, Sayre-McCord 1985; Brink 1989). Mark Timmons (1996) also defends a form of **metaethical contextualism**, according to which justification is determined either by reference to some relevant set of epistemic practices and norms (a view Timmons calls "normative contextualism" and which also bears strong similarity with the movement known as virtue epistemology), or else by reference to some more basic beliefs (a view Timmons calls "structural contextualism" and which seems very similar to foundationalism). Kai Nielsen (1997) has offered another account of contextualist ethical justification with reference to internal systems of religious belief and explanation (aka Religious Epistemology).

Sources:

- DeLapp, Kevin M., *Metaethics*, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy
- Sayre-McCord, Geoff, *Moral Realism*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy
- Joyce, R., *Moral Anti-Realism*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

Discussion Questions:

1. Which moral epistemological positions are compatible / cohere with which semantic and ontological positions?

2. How do normative positions follow from the above ontological and epistemological positions? Which positions may surprise?

Readings: "Moral Knowledge and Experience" and "Moral Knowledge by Perception" by Sarah McGrath

D) Ethical Inquiry: How Should Knowledge

For the purpose of KI, we have to take the study of ethics one step further. Apart from applying ethical theories and discussing ethical dilemmas like euthanasia and abortion, we also have to turn our attention to the specific question of how knowledge should be acquired and used. This includes considering how research should be conducted in, for instance, the science and the social sciences, and how findings from these studies should be used in society.

KI students may find it useful to turn to the several well-established sub-fields of applied ethics below to gather examples regarding the ethical use of knowledge. We will only have time here to consider a few examples from some of these sub-fields; you should look into the other areas that are of interest to you.

- ❑ Business ethics
- ❑ Medical ethics
- ❑ Environmental ethics
- ❑ War ethics
- ❑ Bioethics
- ❑ Ethics of reproductive technologies
- ❑ Ethics of globalisation
- ❑ Ethics of multi-culturalism

- ❑ Ethics of Sociological/Behavioral Studies
- ❑ Computer ethics

Exercise: The Milgram and Stanford Experiments

Read the following real case studies and discuss the questions that follow.

Case Study 1: The Milgram Experiment

Towards the end of World War II, when the world learnt of the atrocities carried out against the Jews by the Nazis, many wondered how the perpetrators of the tortures could possibly have carried out the horrendous acts so callously. As more information was released, many realized that these German torturers were in daily life what would be described as “decent people” – presumably with no less conscience than the man-next-door and the most common response was: “Have they no conscience?”

In 1965, Stanley Milgram, a psychologist, set out to investigate this question. The people who participated in his experiment were told that they were going to take part in exercises designed to test other people's abilities to learn. They were seated at a mock "shock generator" with thirty switches marked from 15 volts ("slight shock") to 450 volts ("danger--severe shock"). Through a small glass window they could see the "learner" in the adjoining room strapped to a chair with electrodes on his or her wrists.

The subject was told he or she was to test the other person's ability to memorize lists of words, and to administer a "shock" when the learner made the mistake, increasing the intensity each time. As the intensity of the "shocks" grew, the “learner” pretended to cry out in more and more pain, eventually “fainting”. The experimenter told the subjects that even in such situations, they were to continue to administer the “shocks”.

What was disturbing was that even though many of the subjects showed signs of becoming very disturbed and anxious, more than two thirds of them continued to administer the “shocks” as instructed by the experimenter. Many even went up to the high ranges when instructed to do so.

From the experiment, Milgram concluded that when people are ordered to do something by someone they view in authority, most will obey even when doing so violates their consciences.

Source: http://www.new-life.net/milgram.htm

Case Study 2: The Stanford Prison Experiment

Prof Philip Zimbardo of the prestigious Stanford University conducted an experiment in 1971 on the power of roles, rules, group identity and an investigation into the kind of situation that would encourage people to engage in behaviour that they would normally consider repulsive.

About 70 college students were voluntarily recruited for an experiment on prison life. After extensive testing and interviews, 24 young men judged to be the most normal, average and healthy were selected and assigned randomly either to be guards or prisoners. Those who would be prisoners were booked at a real jail, then blindfolded and driven to campus where they were led into a mock prison at the basement of the college. Those who were selected to be guards were given uniforms and instructed not to use violent tactics.

What happened was that from the second day onwards, as they got into the role, the ‘guards’ were observed to become increasingly aggressive, humiliating and de-humanizing the ‘prisoners’ by asking them to clean out toilet bowls with their hands, hooding them and tripping them up. The Stanford staff had to repeatedly advise the ‘guards’ to tone down their behaviour. But the worst abuses occurred in the night when the ’guards’ thought that the Stanford staff was not watching.

The experiment was called off when one of the psychologists involved in the experiment, Maslach, was so appalled by the treatment meted out to the ‘prisoners’ and the extent to which the role of ‘guard’ dehumanized the students playing their part that she agitated for it to end.

Source: http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/relaged/970108prisonexp.html

Discussion

1) Were the above experiments ethical?
2) Should the inquirer have been allowed to conduct the experiment? Why? Why not?
3) Do the ends of the inquiry justify the means?

Source: CPDD Resource Package

Video: ER and Genetic Testing (Bioethics)

Watch ER Season 8, Episode 4. Then read and discuss the following article.

Synopsis: Susan Lewis arrives in Chicago to interview around town and have lunch with Mark. She gets reacquainted with the nurses and Carter, meets Corday, and is later offered a job by Mark. Chen and Weaver discuss an upcoming risk management meeting for the Marfan's patient death; Weaver's presence is not required, but she wants to be there anyway. At the meeting, the focus quickly shifts away from Chen to Weaver, as she is forced to admit that Chen was 5 days short of attending status, and she herself was off hospital grounds. After Weaver decides to save her own ass, Chen is suspended for a month and must resign her chief residency. She tells Kerry to go to hell and quits. Weaver offers the position to Carter, watches silently as Malucci cleans out his locker, and attempts to unwind at a gay bar.

Mark and Elizabeth treat a six-year-old Edwards Syndrome patient, whose parents abandon him while he is in surgery. Benton must resort to calling Roger to pick up Reese after he's tied up treating a man who tried to kill himself for the insurance money. The waitress from Luka's favorite bar appears with a cut hand. As Abby watches somewhat jealously, Luka helps her after her boss threatens her immigration status.

To Test or not to Test: Ethical Issues in Genetic Testing
by Kathryn Plaisance

Oct. 19, 2001 - Medical technology has been rapidly advancing over the past few decades, with no slowing-down in sight. Technologies such as organ transplantation, in vitro fertilization, genetically modified foods, and genetic testing are just some of the advances that are quickly becoming commonplace in Western societies. Unfortunately, lagging behind are the myriad of ethical questions that naturally arise with new technologies. NBC's ER is a model setting in which to bring these issues to the forefront. What obligations do doctor's have to their patients? When, if ever, is allowing a patient to die morally permissible? How much medical intervention is too much? Who decides how to allocate our medical resources? What should be the goals of genetic testing, and is this morally advisable?

Many of these issues, and more, emerge from this week's episode of ER, "Never Say Never." From an ethical standpoint, one of the most interesting story lines was that of the six-year-old child who was brought into the ER by his parents. The child, whose name was Kenny (we think), had been brought in for a hernia, a painful condition that can usually be corrected with a simple surgery. It turned out that Kenny had a genetic disorder called trisomy 18, a terrible condition with which most children do not live past their first birthday. While Doctor Corday is preparing to take Kenny up to the operating room, the parents ask her to give their son some morphine for the pain. When she answers that she is already doing that, they ask her to give him more, enough to "end it for him." Of course Dr. Corday is quite shocked and appalled that these parents would want that for their child. After consenting to Kenny's surgery, the parents tell Dr. Corday that they are going to the cafeteria, but are never seen again. It later turns out that Kenny's parents had filled out the hospital forms with fake information, so that they could not be contacted. During the surgery, Dr. Romano comments on the severity of the disorder, then later implies that the child has no true quality of life. When Dr. Corday tries to understand the emotional burden from the parents' point of view, Dr. Romano replies that people who want to be parents should just "shut up and do their job."

In this scenario, there is one issue in particular that begs for attention: genetic testing and selective abortion. On this topic, many questions are brought to mind. What are the ultimate goals of genetic testing or screening? Is it ethical to test for a condition when no effective treatment is currently available? Should quality of life be considered in the decision to abort a fetus, or is all human life inherently valuable? Should the unfortunate fact of limited resources be taken into consideration when testing for a genetic defect?

While genetic testing can take many forms, tonight's episode allows us to focus on one particular aspect: prenatal diagnosis. There are several techniques that can be used to detect genetic disorders, most of which are generally effective and highly accurate. The most common technique is a routine ultrasound, which is non-invasive, but only detects disorders that manifest themselves visually. This is generally not used for genetic testing, but rather to confirm the normal development of a fetus and determine the sex. Two other popular techniques are amniocentesis and chorionic villi sampling, both of which carry more risks but can detect genetic defects more effectively than routine ultrasound. "At present, approximately 100 genetic and chromosomal defects can be determined through amniocentesis, a process by which fluid is withdrawn from the amniotic sac within which the fetus lies, and which is usually carried out in the 15th or 17th gestational week. A new technique - biopsying the chorionic villi (a part of the fetal sac) - has allowed determinations in the late first trimester (8th to 10th week of gestation)" [1]. Maternal serum screening is a forth technique, which is the "least invasive and most promising… With this procedure, information about the fetus is obtained simply by studying components of maternal blood" [2]. The general view of these procedures is that they would ideally test for treatable conditions, but the reality is that in most cases abortion seems to be the only option besides carrying the fetus to term. Clearly, this was the case for this week's episode, as there is currently no treatment for trisomy 18. In light of the events on ER, we must ask whether parents who are not willing to care for their child regardless of the child's physical and mental condition, should undergo this testing with selective abortion in mind.

Trisomy 18 (Edward's Syndrome) is a rare genetic disorder in which a fetus has three copies of chromosome 18, where two copies of each chromosome is considered normal, one from the mother and one from the father. The condition "occurs in approximately 1 of 8000 live-born infants. It is associated with severe mental retardation and multiple physical malformations" [3]. Characteristics include "heart defects, kidney defects, low-set and malformed ears, [and] small eyes… Birth weight is low, and the mean survival time is about 2.5 months, 90% of all cases dying within a year" [4]. To say the least, trisomy 18 is a terrible disease in which an affected child's already shortened life often consists of a need for constant medial attention, multiple surgeries, and intravenous feeding. In addition, there is often constant pain and suffering, and a significant reduction in cognitive function [5]. These unfortunate details, coupled with the feelings and actions of the parents portrayed on ER, illuminate certain arguments for genetic testing.

First, regardless of the parents' final decision regarding abortion, prenatal diagnosis enhances reproductive choice. It provides the mother and father with additional information with which they can make an informed decision to either abort the fetus or carry it to term. Thus, genetic testing increases an individual's autonomy, which many bioethicists argue is an important principle for people to uphold. "Parents have argued that, had they sufficient information, they would either not have conceived the child or, had they conceived the child, they would not have brought it to

term" [6]. Furthermore, some parents use the information obtained from prenatal diagnosis to prepare "emotionally and practically" [7]. Should they decide not to have an abortion, in light of positive test results, they are at least choosing so with their eyes wide open.

For the parents of this week's ER, prenatal diagnosis may have been something to seriously consider (in hindsight). While it is obviously too late for them, there is a lesson to be learned from their example. Although prenatal diagnosis is generally suggested to women over 35 years of age, given their increased risk for carrying a child with a genetic disorder, it is widely available to women of all ages. One method for diagnosis, the non-invasive ultrasound, is so routine that most doctors simply assume that their patient will want it [8]! The question that comes to mind here is whether quality-of-life should be considered once diagnosis of a genetic disorder has been made.

In the case of trisomy 18, affected children will probably not live past their first birthday. Moreover, their short life will be filled with physical suffering and mental retardation. Would it be morally responsible to allow fetuses with such a serious disease to be brought into the world? The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recognizes this problem: "there is something profoundly troubling about allowing the birth of an infant who is known in advance to suffer from some serious disease or defect. While the prevention of that suffering is attained… by eliminating the potential sufferer… many would consider it an act of mercy" [9].

The American legal system agrees that it would be worse to knowingly have a child in such a terrible condition than it would to abort it. Not only do our laws permit abortion, in some cases they would actually allow the child (in theory) to sue his or her parents for bringing him or her into the world! In 1980 there was a case, Curlender v. Bio-Science Laboratories, concerning a child born with Tay-Sachs disease, arguably less devastating than trisomy 18, but very serious nonetheless. The judge ruled that "the child could have sued the parents, had the parents brought the child to term in the face of information concerning serious risks to the child" [10].

Finally, one must decide whether the burdens imposed on the parents and society, as well as the strain on our already limited resources, should be taken into consideration. In the case of trisomy 18, following through with the pregnancy "could have a significant emotional impact on the family… the family's experience might include frequent trips to the hospital, participation in difficult medical decisions affecting the well-being of their infant, constant worry about the infant's condition, and grief about her plight" [11]. Second, there is the fact of the financial burden on the parents and society. "A one-month stay [in the hospital], for example, might cost thirty-five thousand dollars or more" [12]. Third, there is a consideration about the strain on the hospital's resources, such as providing monetary funds and the time and effort of doctors and nurses. While most people have a general distaste for discussions of "burdens" when weighing them against a human life, the sad fact is that our society has limited resources for medical care. Thus, this consideration could be viewed as a weighing of one human life against another, for which our resources can be effectively put to use.

Here are some questions that can be extracted from the preceding arguments:
Are there some "qualities" of life that are not worth living?

If there are, who decides what degree of suffering or decreased physical and/or mental ability warrants that judgement?

Should we consider the fact of limited resources or emotional and financial burdens to the parents and society?

Would aborting fetuses with serious medical disorders be "an act of mercy" or a program of eugenics?

Some bioethicists and disability rights activists contend that genetic testing is merely eugenics in disguise. Eugenics is essentially an attempt to improve the human race by controlling reproductive actions. It generally has a negative connotation in most literature. Some people argue, especially those who oppose abortion, that the "quality" of life should not be considered given that all human life is inherently valuable. By supporting genetic testing, and selective abortion in cases such as trisomy 18, we are in effect declaring which human lives we believe are valuable, and which are not. Even if we do agree that such extreme cases warrant abortion, we must then ask, where do we draw the line? What degree of suffering would be required to say that a fetus would be "better off" had he or she been aborted? In making these decisions, we must be especially careful not to start sliding down a "slippery slope." Once we say that a child such as Kenny does not have any "quality" of life, what's to stop us from saying that a fetus with Down's Syndrome, or one with minor physical impairments, would not have a high enough level of "quality" to justify bringing that fetus to term?

A second problem with genetic testing, which can often be overlooked, is the issue of societal pressures to abort a fetus with positive test results for a serious disease. Given that there are many pregnant women with little or no education, can we really say that their choices are informed and autonomous? Wouldn't some women simply follow their doctor's advice, with the idea of "doctor knows best" in mind? Given the devastating effects of trisomy 18 and the strain on our medical resources, a woman would most likely be pressured to abort her fetus if the genetic test was positive. Moreover, a fear of being sued for "wrongful life," such as in the case mentioned above, may lead to an overall increase in prenatal testing, even for those women who are not at higher risk.

Many questions are raised with the issue of genetic testing and selective abortion. While there are some definite downsides to this practice, this week's episode of ER illuminated some of the reasons why a person may want to consider genetic testing. Had the mother submitted to a genetic test, she could have chosen to abort the fetus, rather than enduring six years of emotional anguish and ultimately abandoning her child. However, this one example does not fully extinguish the forceful view that all life is inherently valuable no matter what the condition.

Reading: Stem Cell Research Needs Regulation

Cloning in S. Korea raises host of questions
by Arthur L. Caplan
COMMENTARY

Dr. Woo Suk Hwang and Dr. Shin Yong Moon of Seoul National University in South Korea have become key figures in the emerging field of stem cell research.

The South Korean scientists published a paper in Science magazine Friday showing that they were able to generate 11 stem cell lines from the clones. While they did not intend to do so, the achievement of the South Korean team will now become the center of international

discussion about the ethics of using Dolly-style cloning techniques to create stem cells for research and ultimately cures. It is time to end the debate and start regulating the research.

What is especially impressive about what Hwang and Moon did is that they figured out a way to make the technique work. Previous attempts to create a human embryo by cloning — transferring DNA from a body cell into a human egg from which the DNA has been removed had required hundreds of tries just to get one embryo. Using new techniques the South Korean teach got a viable human stem cell line once in every 17 attempts.

Cloning is the gold standard for stem cell research. When stem cells are made from cloned embryos it means that you can transplant any cells made from the stem cells back to the person from whom the DNA was taken without fear of rejection. You are you own source of stem cells so if scientists can go on to figure out how to make muscle cells, spinal cord cells, or insulin cells from stem cell lines derived from your own body then there is no reason they could not easily use them to fix your torn tendon, grow back your injured spinal cord, repair your damaged heart or treat your diabetes.

Host of ethical questions
But a host of ethical questions arise in the wake of this remarkable achievement. The critics are already jumping all over the South Korean announcement.

What Hwang and Moon and their colleagues did is illegal in many states in the United States. President Bush and some in the Senate and House want to keep it that way. Tom DeLay, Bush and Bill Frist say that no public funds should go to support this type of research in the United States. It is killing the innocent to save lives in their view. They may even move to outlaw funding by individual states of cloning for stem cell research, which will soon begin in California. And they certainly don't want to see the House pass a pending bill that would allow some forms of embryonic stem cell research.

It is not clear what rules should govern human cloning for stem cell research. The South Koreans say they had these new human cloning experiments reviewed by local ethics committees, but what rules or principles did such committees use?

There are no agreed-upon rules governing issues such as how and when you get consent from women to donate their eggs to be used in cloning experiments to create human embryos. Can or should those whose DNA or eggs are used have a say in what researchers can do with anything they create from them? How long can South Korean researchers keep stem cells made from cloned human embryos? Can they sell them to others inside and outside their country?

A moral Catch-22
None of these questions have answers because many politicians and religious leaders who oppose stem cell research don't want these questions answered. They want to win their argument by keeping cloning in a moral Catch-22.

Rather than argue about how best to control the rapidly evolving technology of cloning for stem cell research, they know that you will be more worried and more opposed to cloning for research if you worry that the technology will get out of control. If there are no rules at all then you have a reason to keep worrying. So the critics prefer to continue to leave cloning for research unregulated so that you will stay scared and cloning will stay banned.

Those who oppose cloning for research do so because they want you to treat embryos as people. But since this position is impossible to defend they fall back again and again on the scare tactic that if cloning for research is allowed then human clones will be living in your neighborhood soon thereafter. And who knows what these human clones might do once they get a load of the neighborhood! If you think "Desperate Housewives" is a den of inequity, just wait until the clones set up shop on Wisteria Lane.

Making people by cloning them interests only the opponents of stem cell research, nuts, fruit balls and Hollywood film producers. If the prospect of a clone moving to your neighborhood really frightens you then urge the president and his political pals to pass a law forbidding human reproductive cloning. But don't hold the science hostage. Having no rules at all except "don't do any cloning for any reason" is neither ethically sensible nor, as the work in South Korea shows, practical. The best way to keep an eye on cloning is to regulate it rather than to hide behind the fig leaf that it has to be banned, lest it be used to make people.

Nor does the moral objection at the core of the opposition to what the Koreans did make ethical sense. Is destroying cloned embryos to get stem cells the moral equivalent of murder? This is to confuse potentiality with actuality.

Think about it. If a squirrel eats an acorn is that really the same as when lightning destroys a mighty oak tree in terms of value lost? If there was a young child inside an infertility clinic that had caught on fire and a shelf full of embryos in a freezer, which ought to saved first? If the embryos were to be destroyed, that would be unfortunate. If the child were to be killed that would be a tragedy beyond belief. It is only a blind adherence to a religious belief about cloned embryos that could have anyone say that cloning embryos to find cures is wrong.

The critics of cloning embryos for research would have you fear the Korean breakthrough by gravely intoning that cloned people are next. But, it is not really there worry because if it were the solution — a ban on reproductive cloning is readily at hand. No, the critics are really arguing is that it is just plain immoral to make and destroy a cloned embryo from cells taken from your skin, tongue or the lining of your mouth that might, if stem cell research is allowed to go forward, help cure you of Parkinsonism, spinal cord injury, diabetes or the damage done by a heart attack. That view, if allowed to prevail, means that you can look forward to a lot more announcements from South Korea and other countries and a lot fewer cures for you and your family. And where is the ethics in that?

Source: http://www.bioethics.net

Links
For other bioethics articles, see http://www.bioethics.net/articles.php?viewCat=2
For more information about the Dr Woo Suk Hwang case, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4656733.stm and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woo_Suk_Hwang#External_links

Video: How Far Should Science Go?

Watch excerpts from *Gattaca* or *AI* and discuss the passage that follows.

Ethics and the Responsibility of Science
A Background Paper

With scientific progress, new and unfamiliar situations continually emerge, creating circumstances in which our traditional concepts (of, for example, truth, reality, space-time, mind, human nature and morality) are called into question. Classical notions may no longer seem applicable to reality by the new descriptions offered, and our habitual, accustomed attitudes or ways of life may come to appear threatened. Rapid scientific advance seems to outstrip our moral sensibility and judgment. There is often a dramatic tension between 'good' and 'bad' uses of new scientific concepts, theories and methods; as well as the notoriously tricky problem of deciding who is to determine what is good or bad: scientists? politicians? the general public? This is apparent in the advance of numerous disciplines; e.g., biotechnology questioning the human identity and person, the brain sciences questioning the self, or information technology threatening with cyber wars. The challenges are manifold: to construct a coherent ethical position that covers a wide variety of related issues; to balance emotional reactions against rational arguments; and, not least, properly to understand the scientific facts that underlie the situation.

(a) Biotechnological advances (e.g. recombinant DNA-techniques) have provided humans with tools giving rise to many difficult ethical problems. As the genome of various species (including the human) is gradually decoded, we gain possibilities to interfere with and design other living organisms. Consider, for example, the fact that we learn more and more about genetic dispositions that may or may not develop. Should we and/or others have unlimited access to this information? Given that we have the information, to what extent should it lead to action? Who is responsible for making these decisions? Concepts such as human dignity, and integrity are essential parts of this debate. The UNESCO Declaration on the Human Genome is an important measure to adopt a unified policy towards these important ethical issues. Similar problems emerge with non-human uses of biotechnology. The release of genetically modified organisms into nature, for instance, may have a profound impact on the existing gene pool. What risks should we regard as ethically acceptable?

(b) Developments in the brain sciences, psychiatry and the philosophy of mind, call into question many traditional views; notably, of the self. It is traditionally assumed that for each single 'normal' human being, the number of personalities, persons, or selves must be exactly one. Various forms and interpretations of this belief have dominated most of mankind's intellectual history both in philosophy, science, religion, psychiatry, legal and social theory. But allusions to divided, fragmented minds, and to multiple, successive selves are nowadays commonplace in both theoretical and empirical studies. We no longer accept unquestioningly the various Western traditions these concepts challenge, which posit a single subject of experiences in every human. Scientific beliefs about the nature of the self have strong ethical relevance. Conceding a person a self is more than a logical conclusion: it is a moral gesture of admission into a socially important group.

(c) The revolution in information technology (IT) has risks as grand as its potentials. The development of Internet and the Web has not only brought fruitful advances in IT, but also created dependence on these results. As our deep concern for the switch to a new millennium reveals, many countries are extremely vulnerable to cyberspace breakdowns in their information-dependent systems, such as infrastructure (air traffic, electric power, etc.). Such breakdowns could happen due to accidents, or intentional interference (by hackers, for example); or they could become objects in a cyberspace war. Difficult problems of scientific ethics and international security ensue from this new situation; and, as Molander & Siang (1998) point out, "a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cyberwarfare has eluded the international security community", which is a cause of concern:

Consider the prospect of a carefully constructed strategic warfare campaign seeking to achieve the strategic leverage of effecting mass disruption through combined attacks on key infrastructure nodes and other infrastructure target via conventional means (e.g., electromagnetic weapons), and via information warfare tools and techniques. Such a capability poses a wholly new kind of threat to international stability.

In November 1988, a committee of the UN General Assembly addressed this issue in a resolution, calling upon all Member States to: "promote the consideration of existing and potential threats in the field of information security", and help develop "international principles that would enhance information security and combat information terrorism and criminality". It is presumably not unreasonable to demand that the scientific community that developed the Internet and the Web share the responsibility of finding solutions to these rather dramatic problems.

Source: ICSU's Standing Committee on Responsibility
and Ethics in Science (SCRES) at http://www.unesco.org/science/wcs/background/ethics_borders.htm#crossing

E) KI Essay Questions

1. 'If there is absolute truth about right and wrong in ethics, we have no way of knowing what this truth might be.' Discuss. [Cam 2007]

2. 'We do not have the right to punish someone, because we do not know what is wrong.' Discuss. [Cam 2010]

3. Critically assess the view that morality is just a matter of convention. [Cam 2011]

4. '*We cannot know what cannot be falsified*'. Discuss. [Cam 2013]

5. *'Being moral is solely about obeying the moral law*'. Critically assess this view. [Cam 2015]

6. *'All moral truths are relative to particular times and places*'. Critically discuss this view. [Cam 2016]

7. Critically assess the view that our moral knowledge is based on intuition. [Cam 2017]

8. 'Sound ethical judgements require that we step back from our feelings and make an objective and rational assessment.' Critically assess this view. [Cam 2019]

9. Are fundamental moral principles knowable a priori? [Cam 2020]

10. 'Applying the principle of utility enables us to know what laws we should make.' Critically discuss this view. [Cam 2021]

11. ''The fact that people disagree about what is moral shows that morality is subjective.' Critically assess the implications of this view for the nature and construction of ethical knowledge. [Cam 2022]

12. ''The presence of moral disagreements shows us that morality is completely subjective.' Discuss. [RI 2023 Y6 CT2]

13. "Moral truth can never be found even if it exists. Hence, we will never know what the right action to take is." Discuss. [RI 2021 Y6 Prelim]

14. Ethics is really just rhetoric in which language can be manipulated to suit one's desired outcome.' Discuss. [RI 2019 Y6 CT2]

15. Critically assess the view that our moral knowledge is simply the consensus of the society in which we live. [RI 2018 Y6 CT1]

16. "Science is able to achieve knowledge not only of the natural world but of the moral world too." Critically assess this view. [RI 2018 Y6 CT2]

17. 'Any legitimate moral rule must be adaptable to the changing needs and preferences of society.' Critically assess this claim. [RI 2018 Y6 Prelims]

18. *Ethical judgements are attempts to rationalise our subjective choices rather than a determination of what is moral.'* Discuss. [RI 2016 Y6 CT2]

19. *"Religious convictions – as* ***convictions*** *– feel strongly like they are objective truths, but are in fact nothing more than subjective beliefs."* Discuss. [RI 2016 Y6 Prelim]

20. *'The same action committed by the same person at different times may be at one time good and at another bad. How then can we say that there is objectivity in ethics.'* Discuss. [RI 2015 Y6 CT1]

21. To what extent can ethical inquiry give us knowledge? [RI 2015 Y6 Prelim]

22. 'Moral claims are objective but moral facts are not.' Discuss with reference to nature and construction of knowledge in ethics. [RI 2014 Y6 Prelim]

23. 'Morality is objective, ethics is not.' Discuss. [RI 2014 Y6 CT2]

24. "*About things on which the public thinks long it commonly attains to think right*" (Samuel Johnson). Discuss with reference to the nature and construction of knowledge in ethics. [RI 2013 Y6 CT2]

25. "*Ethical reasoning boils down to justifying rather than prescribing decisions*." Discuss with reference to the nature of knowledge in Ethics. [RI 2012 Y6 CT2]

26. "*Claims of objectivity inevitably invite objections.*" Discuss with reference to knowledge in ethics or aesthetics. [RI 2012 Y6 Prelim]

27. Discuss the view that knowledge in ethics is self-evident. [RI 2011 Y6 CT2]

28. "*'Cheshire Puss,' asked Alice. 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' 'That depends a good deal on where you want to go,' said the Cat. 'I don't much care where,' said Alice. 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat."* How apt is this a metaphor for knowledge construction in ethics? [RI 2011 Y6 Prelim]

29. *"Because morality consists of differing notions of the good, it can never be objective."* Discuss. [RI 2011 Y5 Promo]

30. *"Ethics is not definable because it involves not only our thinking but also our feeling."* Discuss with reference to the nature and construction of knowledge in ethics. [RI 2010 Y5 Promo]

31. *"Realists have little in common apart from the fact that they refer to themselves as realists."* Discuss with reference to **two** of the following areas of knowledge: a) sciences, b) mathematics, c) ethics. [RI 2010 Y5 Promo]

Further questions to guide you in your study of knowledge and ethics:

1. 'The pursuit of knowledge should know no bounds if progress is to be achieved.' Discuss this view using illustrations from at least two different fields of knowledge to support your ideas.

2. "That which is beautiful is moral. That is all, nothing more." To what extent is the knowledge in ethics and aesthetics similar?

3. "What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like – and immorality is what they dislike." Discuss.

4. Is moral knowledge relative?

5. Think about your ethics. How do you know which ethical system to apply to which decision?

6. How should we know what is the 'right' or 'wrong' thing to do?

7. There are actions that we can incontrovertibly know are wrong. Do you agree?

8. Should we limit our pursuit of scientific knowledge?

9. Compare the roles played by reason and emotions in shaping our moral knowledge.

10. If someone says, "I know this is the right thing to do," how can the claim be evaluated?

11. To what extent should culture affect what we know to be right or wrong?

12. Do questions like "Why should I be moral?" or "Why shouldn't I be selfish?" have definitive answers as do some questions in other areas of knowledge? Does having a definitive answer make a question more or less important?

13. "All ethical statements are relative." By examining the justifications for, and implications of making this claim, decide whether or not you agree with it.