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Basic Themes in Theory of Ethics

(Note: I use the terms "ethics" and "morality" and their cognates as synonymous with one another. I assume that you have covered this material in your Phil 104 class and that this outline will serve as a brief "refresher" for you.)

I. Nature of Morality

A. Meaning of Moral Statement "X ought/ought not do Y"

Such statements are directed to those capable of free action (i.e., having the self-agency to select from a range of possibilities). These statements direct people to choose or refrain from certain possibilities as morally right or wrong (the specific criteria for determining what is morally right or wrong means is a function of an ethical theory or position)

B. Moral Agents (those capable of giving moral consideration)

Those entities (humans for our purposes) who are actually free and "rational": can recognize the meaning of right and wrong and act accordingly. (Most philosophers would restrict to class of moral agents to a sub set of the class of humans.)

C. Moral Patients (those capable of and due moral consideration)

Those entities who are to be taken account of by moral agents, at least in the sense that they may not be harmed, injured or interfered with by moral agents without good reason and justification. (The scope of the class of moral patients depends on the criteria for being worthy of moral consideration: being rational (potentially or actually), capable of suffering, having interests, etc.)

II. The Status of Moral Standards

(Suppose that I believe that I ought or ought not do something, e.g., tell a lie. How is that statement to be justified? This section outlines the basic options for providing such justification)

A. Invented (In this case moral standards are the product of human preferences and tastes)

1. Personally invented (Absolute Subjectivism)

In this case, moral statements merely express the preferences and tastes of an individual at a particular moment (emotivism). In this case there are no moral standards, since an individual may do whatever he or she feels like doing and there is no basis for challenging the individual or suggesting that his or her moral statements are true or false. So, if I feel like doing X, then I "ought" do (it's ok for me to do) X.

2. Socially invented (Cultural Relativism)

In this case, moral statements express the collective preferences and tastes of a particular community (more precisely, of those within the community who have the power to shape tastes and preferences); the individual is obligated to follow the moral commands established within their community.) Hence, the moral codes of one community can not be assessed according to the moral codes of other communities or of the same community at a different point in its history. So, if my community says I ought or ought not do something, then I ought or ought not do it. (When in Rome, do as the Romans do.)

B. Discoverable

Negatively, moral standards cannot be reduced to human preferences and tastes. ' Positively, they are to be discovered in a non-arbitrary way either through human reason or religion (these are the two most common bases for discoverable standards.)

1. Absolute

Moral standards exist which are universally binding on all persons in all times and places without exception. Typical examples of this type of morality would be Kantian morality or a Divine Command theory (e.g., the Ten Commandments). So, if a universal rule exists which commands that people always ought do or not do X, then I always ought or ought not do X.

2. Contextual

Moral standards must be determined with reference to or take into account the specific situation in which people act. Whether or not rules or principles play a role in moral decisions and what factors are relevant vary according to philosophers. E.g., utilitarians, natural law ethicists and some deontologists will approach situations in different ways. So, given that certain principles and/or empirical features of the situation demand that I ought or ought not act in a certain way, then I ought or ought not act in that way.

C. Note:

A1, A2 and B (both forms) are mutually incompatible. That is, one cannot consistently hold A1, A2 and any form of B. However, B1 and B2 are compatible in this sense that one might think that certain sorts of actions are always right or wrong, while other sorts of actions are right or wrong according to the situation in which they take place.

III. Philosophical ethical theories positing discoverable standards

A. Teleological

1. Refers to virtue/natural law ethics characteristic of ancient and medieval philosophers (Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas)
2. Humans are to live in a way in which they promote human flourishing for themselves, others and their community, where human flourishing (the telos or goal of human existence) is determined by human nature (typically, living rationally).
3. Virtues promote and are themselves constitutive of human flourishing; vices inhibit such flourishing. (So, being courageous is virtuous not just because of consequences extrinsic to courageous actions, but because this way of acting (when done for the right reasons = intention) allows people to rightly order their passions in the face of fear. This right or rational ordering of passions is one constitutive element of living well or flourishing.)
4. In its classical form, this type of ethics depends on the existence of a common human nature which can be rationally discovered as well as on the ability to discern natural functions of human capacities, powers etc.

5. While this type of ethics may universally forbid or mandate certain sorts of actions (Aristotle and Aquinas, e.g., have their own candidates), morality is not a matter of a mere following of principles but of prudence - the ability of the good person through proper habituation and deliberation to determine the "mean" in a particular situation.
6. Classical virtue ethics has run into considerable opposition in since the end of the Medieval period for a variety of reasons: widespread scientific and philosophical rejection of a common human nature and a single to s for human life as well as widespread belief that humans are fundamentally products of their social and historical contexts, both in terms of who and what we are as well as in terms of our ability to gain knowledge of ourselves and the world.

B. Consequentialist

(Consequentialist ethics judges acts to be good solely with reference to their consequences.)

1. Ethical egoism -- each person should do what is in his own self-interest without regard to the interest of others
 - a. Ethical egoism is not related to two forms of psychological egoism, which are descriptive theories of how people do in fact act.
 - (1) Strong psychological egoism says that people are compelled to act in their own interest and cannot do otherwise. This theory is a type of hard determinism which renders all moral theories, including ethical egoism, meaningless.
 - (2) Weak psychological egoism says that people typically act solely in their own interest but that they need not do so always. This theory, even if true, offers no support from ethical egoism since one cannot infer what people should do from what they in fact do.
 - b. Ethical egoism is not a type of subjectivism or emotivist ethics since self-interest is not necessarily identified with what people feel like or prefer doing.
 - c. By disregarding the interests of others, ethical egoists are not justifying carte blanche injury of others, just that others are considered only as they bears on and is a means to the egoist's self--interest.
 - d. However attractive, ethical egoism suffers from deep incoherence as an ethical theory. For example, ethical egoism, as a theory, has to apply to all people not just the ethical egoist. Consequently, if it is in someone else's interest to harm the ethical egoist, the ethical egoist has to grant, by virtue of the theory, that the person should act in his or her self-interest. On the other hand, the ethical egoist cannot do this by virtue of the theory since it forbids the individual from doing things which are not in his or her self-interest.

2. Utilitarianism -- those acts are right which promote the greatest good (happiness) for the greatest number and wrong otherwise.
 - a. The utilitarian does not abandon self-interest, but insists that it must be subordinated to what is in the general or greatest interest of the greatest number.
 - b. Utilitarianism inherently involves a calculus to determine the greatest good. Any utilitarian calculus must deal with these factors:
 - (1) What are the criteria for goodness or happiness: Bentham thought pleasure alone, Mill made a distinction between intellectual and sensual pleasures; other factors might be adduced as well.
 - (2) Who is counted is determining the greatest number? those immediately affected by the act, all existing persons, future generations, etc.
 - (3) How far into the future are the consequences of an act morally relevant?
 - (4) How is one to determine whether gives greater good than another of the same kind (e.g., how do you calculate the pleasure which an act gives)?
 - (5) How is one to rank goods of different kinds.
 - c. Although very attractive as a moral theory, especially when applied to social and political problems, utilitarianism is often criticized as being unable to prevent the sacrifice of an innocent minority for the benefit of a greater majority (i.e., do justice and utility really mix)?
 - d. So too, some think utilitarianism either becomes a matter of guess work or arbitrariness. E. g., can we really calculate the greatest pleasure for the greatest number in the U.S, or is this just a matter of guesswork and statistical fancy?
- C. Deontological Ethics -- acts are right or wrong independently of consequences, or on the basis of features inherent to the act itself.
 1. In Kant's ethics, acts are universally right or wrong in all cases, any attempt to contextualize ethics brings consequences into account which renders, ethics subjective, since consequences aim at happiness which is the maximum satisfaction of pleasure or inclination.
 2. Kant uses the categorical imperative to determine whether or not maxims should be followed. First version: act only according to those maxims which you can will to be universalized. Second version: always treat people as ends and never just as means.
 3. This type of ethics places strong emphasis on the performance of duty for the sake of duty and on the respect for persons.

4. Historically this type of ethics has been plagued with several types of criticisms: it is impossible to resolve conflicts between duties without recourse to consequences; many Kantian duties (e.g., beneficence) seem to rely on an appeal to consequences; an ethics which severs duty from the human quest for well-being misses the whole point of ethics.

D. Rights based ethics

Rights are claims against others (whether individuals or social entities) to be treated in certain ways. Rights claims generate correlative duties on the part of others. There are two basic divisions of rights:

1. Natural and conventional -- natural rights pertain to us by virtue of our humanity; as such they apply to all persons. Conventional rights are created by humans, generally within the context of social and political organizations.
2. Negative and positive -- negative rights impose duties of non-interference on others. Thus my right to life as a negative right is a right not be killed. positive rights impose duties of assistance on others. For example, welfare rights impose on the state the duty to assist those who cannot provide for themselves.
3. So, there are four possible categories of rights: natural negative, natural positive, conventional negative, and conventional positive. No one doubts the existence of the latter two categories. There is controversy about the existence of natural rights, and much greater controversy about whether there are natural positive rights.
4. The existence of natural rights is an important matter since if such rights exists they provide a basis for supporting or challenging existing the presence or absence of conventional rights within particular societies.