Lecture 2: Moral Reasoning & Evaluating Ethical Theories

I. Introduction

In this ethics course, we are going to avoid divine command theory and various appeals to authority and put our trust in critical reason and experience. Thus, reason and experience will be the ground evaluating ethical theories. Our starting point is the common moral beliefs that permeate through society and our own moral beliefs about things. In this class we will be critical of whether these views withstand critical discussion. In order to evaluate our common morality, we need (1) ways to categorize the different parts of our ethical theories, and (2) criteria for evaluating the lot of ethical theories, and (3) logical skill to argue from true premises to true conclusions.

PART I – The Three Levels of a Moral Theory

II. Common Morality and Moral Theory

A. MORAL THEORY: A systematic ordering of moral principles.
   1. Not randomly organized
   2. Obey certain rules for structure
   3. Intertwined rules and ideals.

B. COMMON MORALITY: Common Morality is the stock of our common moral beliefs.
   1. Moral Rules: certain actions that we have to obey
      a. Not murdering
      b. Not stealing for kicks
   2. Moral Ideals: certain ideals that we ought to strive towards
      a. Helping others
      b. Doing the right thing

C. Moral rules differ from moral ideals in that
   1. rules are primarily negative; ideals positive
   2. rules are demanded; ideals are encouraged.

III. The Three Levels of a Moral Theory

A. Introduction
   First, we will analyze three different levels of a moral theory. We said that a moral theory is a systematic ordering of moral principles, and now we are going to show this system. This analysis allows us to dissect the different parts and see which parts are more fundamental, and which ones are more in connection to our daily experiences.

B. First Level: Moral Judgments
   1. MORAL JUDGMENT: Normative (ought) moral claims about specific individuals or actions (44).
2. Makes claim about something **particular**.
3. Examples
   a. John’s murdering that man was wrong.
   b. You are wrong for stealing that candy bar.

4. **Morally Obligatory Judgments**
   a. Description – Right to Do, Wrong not to Do
   b. Example: Tell the Truth
   c. Give money if Rich

5. **Morally Impermissible Judgments**
   a. Description – Wrong to Do, Right not to Do
   b. Example: Murder, Lying
   c. E.g. You should not lie.

6. **Morally Permissible Judgments**
   a. Description: Morally Neutral Judgment
   b. Example: Chewing Gum
   c. Morally Non-trivial permissible Judgments
      i. Description – Neutral but Important Consequences
      ii. Example: Surgery
   d. Morally Trivial Permissible Judgments
      i. Description – Neutral but Unimportant Consequences
      ii. Example: Chewing Gum, Jaywalking.

7. **Supererogatory Moral Judgments**
   a. Supererogatory Moral Judgments of Commission
      i. Description: Above and Beyond the Call of Duty through doing something.
      ii. Example: Saving everyone from a burning building
   b. Supererogatory Moral Judgments of Omission
      i. Description: Above and Beyond the Call of Duty through not doing something.
      ii. Example: Criminal breaks in your house, and you don’t kill them.
   c. Non-trivial Supererogatory Moral Judgments
      i. Description: Above and Beyond the Call of Duty w/ RISK
         1. Example: Risking your life to save someone
         2. Example: Trying to calm down a crazed hobo.
   d. Trivial Supererogatory Moral Judgments
      i. Description: Above and Beyond the Call of Duty w/o RISK
1. Example: Giving some change to the Salvation Army guy
2. Example:

C. Second Level: Moral Principles
1. MORAL PRINCIPLE: Normative (ought) moral claims about types or classes of action (44).
   a. Makes claims about something general.
   b. Apply to a Wider Area of Conduct than Moral Judgments
      i. Capital punishment as opposed to a specific murder
      ii. Racial discrimination instead of a particular act of it.
   c. Plurality of principles in a Moral Theory
   d. Derive our moral judgments from moral principles (RELATION).

2. Examples
   a. MP: I should preserve my physical health
   b. MJ: I should start jogging at least three times a week.
   c. MP: Capital punishment is wrong
   d. MJ: This act of capital punishment is wrong.

3. Personal and Social Ethics
   a. Personal Ethics: The relationship of individuals to other individuals.
      i. Duties to Self: Right to life, Take care of one’s self
      ii. Duties to Others: Right not to invade another’s privacy
   b. Social Ethics: The relationship of individuals to groups and of groups to other groups
      i. Examples: Our relationship to the U.S. Government
      ii. E.g. Relationship of one company to another, e.g. monopoly
      iii. Libertarianism: Relation of the Government to Individuals
      iv. Active Government

D. Third Level: Moral Standard
1. Description:
   A Moral Standard is the most fundamental moral principle, the principle that provides the criterion for right and wrong moral principles and/or judgments. DOES NOT REFER TO INDIVIDUALS OR TYPES PERSAY, but designates the condition or characteristics all actions must have in order to be called good. The moral principle of moral principles.

2. Examples
   a. Actions are right if and only if they promote the egoist’s self-interest.
   b. Actions are right only if they increase happiness and decrease unhappiness.
c. Actions are right only if they adhere to the **moral law**.
d. Actions are only right if they are **virtuous**.

3. Widest Area of Application
   a. Moral Judgments
   b. Moral Principles
   c. Moral Standard

4. Derive the Goodness from the Moral Standard

5. Importance of Defining Crucial Terms
   a. What does Happiness, Self-interest, Moral Law, Virtue Mean
   b. Do good, but what is the good?

**PART II – Four Criteria for Evaluating a Moral Theory**

IV. Four Criteria for Evaluating a Moral Theory
A. Introduction
   1. We have established the basic levels of moral theories, and shown how the parts are interconnected. Now it is time to learn some key tools for evaluating whether these parts and their relations are the best one.
   2. Evaluative criteria as opposed to Descriptive analysis
   3. Time to establish the criteria for evaluating moral theories through four criteria
      a. **Formal** – Logical Consistency and Coherence
      b. **Rational** – Concerns rational, believable justification
      c. **Common-sense** – Would anyone actually hold this view
      d. **Pragmatic** – Is the theory helpful in its application

B. Criterion 1: Consistency and Coherence

1. **Consistency**
   a. Description
      i. The logical compatibility of predictions or judgments
      ii. We want a theory that gives *consistent* instructions.

   b. Example
      i. Moral Standard $\rightarrow$ Moral Principle $\rightarrow$ Moral Judgment
      ii. Theory elicits the moral obligation to end a suffering patient’s life and also not end the suffering patient’s life.
      iii. Help people $\rightarrow$ Yields inconsistent instructions

   c. External Criterion
      i. External because it refers to the incompatibility of predictions *generated* by the theory. Not internal to the theory itself.
      ii. Moral Principle $\rightarrow$ Moral Judgment 1 and Moral Judgment 2
2. **Coherence**
   a. Description: a theory is coherent if it does not contain logically incompatible parts, such as standards, principles, rules, or concepts.
   b. Example
      i. Moral Principles Conflict
         1. MP1: Capital Punishment is Wrong
         2. MP2: Capital Punishment is Right
      ii. Moral Standards Conflict
         1. MS1: An action is right if it leads to one’s own self-interest
         2. MS2: An action is NOT right if it leads to one’s own self-interest
   c. Internal Criterion
      i. Internal because it refers to the incompatibility of the theory itself, not the judgments. At the level of moral principles or standards

C. **Criterion 2: Justification**
   1. Description
      Calculation of reasons for believing a moral standard. What certifies or justifies our belief in one moral standard over another?
   2. Example
      a. Coincides with our religious beliefs; God says its right.
      b. Resistant to being undermined; critical-resistance
      c. Works well, people seem to believe it

D. **Criterion 3: Plausibility**
   1. Description
      Assessment as to whether our moral judgments make sense given our moral principles and standards.
   2. Bottom Justification: Does our moral standard and principles produce moral judgments that we hold to be absolutely good?
   3. Example
      a. Deontology: Do not lie
         i. Crazed Murderer
      b. Utilitarianism: Produce Happiness for the Greatest Good
         i. Chopping someone up
   4. **Reflective Equilibrium (53)**
      An agreement between our moral theory and our “considered moral judgments,” which are those judgments that are made with the greatest confidence.
   5. RE: Moral Theory and Moral Judgments
      a. Change moral theory
      b. Change moral judgments
E. Criterion 4: Usefulness
1. Description
   Moral theories ought to be tools that we can use in certain situations.
2. Two Types of Difficulties
   a. Difficulty in its Application
      i. Description
         1. Not clear when the moral principle does and does not apply.
         2. Range of application is indefinite.
         3. Requires that we grope in the dark, hoping not to step into any wrong.
      ii. Example
         1. Bribery is wrong but fails to say what is and what is not bribery.
         2. Murder is wrong but fails to say when a given case is murder.
   b. Difficulty in Providing Conflicting Directives without Resolution
      i. Description
         1. Tells us to do conflicting things without a way to choose one over the other.
      ii. Example
         1. Promised to meet a friend at 5p.m. but you see a man drowning in a lake.
         2. No lying, but also a duty to protect the innocent.

F. Conceptual Summary
1. Three Levels of a Moral Theory
   a. Moral Judgment
   b. Moral Principle
   c. Moral Standard
2. Four Criteria for Evaluating a Moral Theory
   a. Formal – Logical Consistency and Coherence
   b. Rational – Concerns rational, believable justification
   c. Common-sense – Would anyone actually hold this view
   d. Pragmatic – Is the theory helpful in its application

V. Problems in Applying Moral Principles
A. Relevance Problems
B. Conflict Problems
C. Room for Disagreement
D. Conceptual Summary
Part 3: Logical Thinking, Modus Ponens, and Modus Tollens

VI. Introduction
We have already looked at the three levels of a moral theory and have looked at four ways to evaluate the parts and relations that are found in them. Finally, we are going to learn two very common logical arguments.

A. Modus Ponens

Modus ponens (the mode that affirms) is a deductively valid type of logical argument that consists of two premises: a conditional (If-then), which consists of an antecedent and a consequent, and the antecedent of the conditional (The if). In common language it is of the following form:

\[ P_1: \text{If John is a criminal, then he has committed a crime.} \]
\[ P_2: \text{John is a criminal.} \]
\[ C: \text{Therefore John has committed a crime.} \]

In logical notation, it occurs in the following form:

\[ P \to Q \]
\[ P \]
\[ \therefore Q \]

In set-theoretical notation, it occurs in the following form:

\[ P \subseteq Q \]
\[ x \in P \]
\[ \therefore x \in Q \]

We could rephrase the above argument to say:

\text{Every } x \text{ is}

\text{X is Y}

This is an important logical rule that we will employ throughout the semester. For example, let look at an argument we discussed in the first lecture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual Claim</th>
<th>The wealth of the United States is at present unevenly distributed among its citizens.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Claim</td>
<td>An uneven distribution of wealth in a country is wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Conclusion</td>
<td>Therefore, the present distribution of wealth in the United States is morally wrong.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we translate this to the form of the argument we have discussed above, we get:

| Factual Claim | The wealth of the United States is at present unevenly distributed among its citizens. (P) |
### Moral Claim
If there is an uneven distribution of wealth in a country, then that country is doing wrong. \( P \rightarrow Q \)

### Moral Conclusion
Therefore, the present distribution of wealth in the United States is morally wrong. \( Q \)

#### B. Modus Tollens
Modus tollens ("the mode that denies") is a deductively valid form of argument, alternatively known as denying the consequent. Modus tollens involves two premises, namely a conditional and the negation of the consequent of the conditional. Simply put, a conditional is a proposition in form of "if-then." The first part of a conditional is an antecedent, while the latter part of a conditional is a consequent. In the proposition, "If I am hungry, then I want something to eat," "I am hungry" is the antecedent, while "I want something to eat" is the consequent. The two premises of modus tollens then involve a conditional and the negation of the consequent of the consequent:

- **Conditional:** If \( P \) then \( Q \)
- **Negation of the Consequent:** Not-\( Q \)
- **Conclusion:** Therefore, not \( P \).

In logical notation, modus tollens appears as:

\[
P \rightarrow Q \\
\sim Q \\
\therefore \sim P
\]

In set-theoretical form, modus tollens appears as:

\[
P \subseteq Q \\
x \notin Q \\
\therefore x \notin P
\]

If prisons are community-based facilities that are safe, then no (or few) individuals should die of unnatural causes in prison.

Individuals (prisoners) do die of unnatural causes in prison (suicide, homicide, etc.)

Therefore, prisons are not safe facilities.

### Part 4: Fallacies

#### VII. Fallacies

A. Definition: A type of argument that seems to be correct but contains a mistake in reasoning.

B. Fallacies of Relevance

1.

C. Fallacies of Defective Induction

D. Fallacies of Presumption

E. Fallacies of Ambiguity

1. Abuse/ad hominem
2. Appeal to Emotion/ad populum
3. Appeal to Pity
4. Force
5. Appeal to Inappropriate Authority or False Statistics