Basic Moral Issues

Moral Reasoning and the Concept of Moral Judgment

Whether one is conscious of it or not, people are constantly using their faculty of reason to make moral judgments. Although it is up to debate as to whether or not there are any absolute moral principles, it is possible to reasonably weigh moral options to an extent. One tool to be used in weighing moral options is to distinguish between basic and mediate moral principles and moral judgments. More importantly, one must have a justifiable reason for making a moral judgment. Explanatory reasons do not make a belief justifiably true. Moral arguments can be arranged into two different types of premises: descriptions of the case and moral principles. One distinguishing factor of moral principles is their universality. Moral principles apply to all. One must be willing to allow something to be done to him or her to will it on another. Moral arguments can be evaluated by looking at the relationship between the premises and the conclusion and by determining whether or not nonmoral premises are at least true or reasonable. It is important, however, to distinguish between sound and cogent arguments. There are three components to a moral issue: an impartial perspective, whether or not the issue will result in harm or benefit, and the debatable issue of free will.

Moral Disagreement

Moral disagreement is, first and foremost, dependent upon the subjects posing moral judgments in the first place. In many cases, there is disagreement about singular moral judgments and moral principles. Also, people often disagree because the outcome of the different moral judgments will affect them personally or materially. People will weigh moral principles differently based on the priority they give to the principle.

Moral Theories, Morality and Religion, and Natural Law Theory

Throughout history, religions have played a major role in the development of moral theories. Natural law theorists believe that actions taken to enhance life are wrong because they are unnatural. They believe that those who promote these actions are playing God. The Stoics of ancient Greece were among the first natural law theorists. Stoics believed that the world is intelligible, that everything in the world had a purpose, and God gives purpose to everything. They held that humans have a natural right to obey reason above all else. Thomas Aquinas is another important natural law theorist, following Stoic thought. Aquinas holds that God gives everything a "proper end," and all of these ends are purposeful. Natural law theory breaks down insofar as one is unable to determine to what extent one is interfering with the natural order of things; however, Thomas Hobbes came along as the first secular, natural law theorist. Hobbes recognized the need for defining the natural order of
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humans before listing a set of rules that he believed humans should follow. Hobbes’ philosophy is based on the idea that humans thrive within a community.

Divine Command Theory

The divine command theory follows the line of reasoning that it is right to obey God and wrong to disobey God. In God’s omnipotence, God knows all right from wrong. However, with this line of reasoning, something is wrong only because God forbids it. Therefore, a divine command theorist cannot say that God forbids something because it is wrong. While the divine command theory is one of the most accepted moral theories, it breaks down in proof.

Egoism

Common sense morality and moral egoism are two moral theories in conflict. Moral egoism states that there is no moral duty to give up our own self-interest to help others. Furthermore, our self-interest always outweighs the necessities of others in making moral judgments. Commonsense morality, on the other hand, holds that sometimes we must sacrifice our will in the good interest of others. Moral egoism differs from psychological egoism in that it describes a theory of how people should behave, not as psychological egoism, which is how people actually do behave (Barcalow, 2007). Psychological egoism neither supports nor denies commonsense morality or moral egoism.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarians work on the belief that one should increase pleasure and decrease pain for as many as possible. It is important to distinguish between the two types of utilitarianism: act and rule. There are many advantages and disadvantages to both of these philosophies. Utilitarianism is among the most widespread consequentialist moral theories.

Kantianism

Kantianism is one of the most important nonconsequentialist moral theories. While secular, Kant believes that humans can know when something is inherently wrong. He would say that judging a wrong action to be right would be contradicting. Contradicting ideas are logically inconsistent or wrong. It is important to understand Kant’s categorical imperative and the difference between maxims and universal laws.
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Reference