

Summary:

Today's lecture concerns ethics. You will learn to distinguish between claims made about ethical claims and the ethical claims themselves. You will also learn the three general categories of responses to the question of whether there are any ethical truths.

1. Distinguishing between ethics and metaethics
2. Position One: There are ethical truths
3. What makes ethical truths true?
4. Position Two: There are no ethical truths

1. Distinguishing between ethics and metaethics

In philosophy, we make a distinction between the discussion of ethical issues themselves and the discussion of issues about ethics.

Consider the following two questions:

1. Is murder is always wrong?
2. Are there any ethical truths?

Question #2 is what we call a metaethical question. The 'meta' prefix is from the Greek which can be translated in numerous ways including "next after", "above", or "concerning." Metaethics, then, is the area of moral philosophy that focuses on questions about ethics. Question #1 is an ethical question. In this lecture you will be introduced to some answers to two metaethical questions: Are there any ethical truths? What makes the ethical truths true? The answers to these two questions represent three general philosophical categories of ethical positions.

2. Position One: There are ethical truths

First of all, we need to ask: What is an ethical truth? An ethical truth is an ethical statement or claim that one holds to be correct or true. Here are some examples of ethical claims:

Lying is sometimes right

Segregation is wrong

Abortion is wrong

Killing animals is OK

Murder is always wrong

Stealing from the rich to give to the poor is OK

Euthyphro believes that murder is always wrong. Martin Luther King, Jr. argues that segregation is wrong. Both of them are making ethical claims. Both would agree that there are such things as ethical truths because they believe the ethical claims they are making are true. But why do they believe these particular claims are true?

### 3. What makes ethical truths true?

There are two broad ways of explaining what makes an ethical truth true. The first way says that ethical truths are true independent of anyone's authority. We call this ethical or moral realism. If you are a moral realist, you believe that moral facts "just exist" or "just are". They exist as brute facts of human life (or perhaps brute facts about the cosmos, which would also include human life). What's a "brute moral fact" like? I'm sure you are all familiar with what I call the "Mommy argument."

You: But Mom, everyone else gets to stay out until 11pm. I don't understand why I have to be home by 6pm.

Mom: Why? Because I say so.

You: But why?

Mom: Because I'm the Mommy, that's why.

What is the Mom's justification? Her status and authority as your mother. It is as though she were saying: "By the power vested in me, having duly taken on the responsibilities of being your guardian, I, your mother decree that you will be home by 6pm." Admittedly from a child's standpoint, she's not given you a good reason. Nevertheless, she does state a reason: Because of her authority as your mother.

When someone states that a moral claim is true independent of anyone authority, they have taken the "Mommy argument" one step further. In effect, a moral realist says that it does not take anyone's authority to justify or guarantee the veracity of a moral claim. Ethical truths simply are moral facts. They are moral facts just "because" or "just because they are moral facts."

This is just one response, however, to the question "What makes ethical truths true?" The other response is to say that ethical truths are made true by someone's authority. But whose? Persons who say that ethical truths are true based on someone's authority adopt a form of conventionalism. They believe that there is a moral convention or agreement in place which sanctions moral claims. There are three conventionalist theories I will discuss here. Each of the theories places the source of moral authority on either (1) God, (2) Society, and (3) the Individual.

#### (1) God

Take the moral claim "Segregation is wrong." What makes this ethical claim true in King's estimation, is that segregation goes against the "eternal law" or God's law. Segregation is an unjust law. Unjust laws are wrong. Therefore, segregation is wrong. Any law is unjust which is not in accord with the eternal or divine, moral law.

Euthyphro, too, looks to a divine source for the truthfulness of moral claims. Whatever is pious is pious because the gods love it, Euthyphro says. If the gods put their stamp of approval on something, then that assures us that it is pious. To appeal to divine approval of something as a justification for the veracity of a moral claim is to ascribe to what philosophers call the Divine Command Theory. We can capture the view involved by the following very straightforward sentences.

God said it.  
I believe it.  
That settles it.

Question: What makes it the case that abortion is wrong?  
Answer: Because God says that killing is wrong.

Question: Why is lying wrong?  
Answer: Because one of God's Ten Commandments says that you're not supposed to "bear false witness" against others.

Besides Divine Command Theory, we have the idea of Natural Law which derives from the notion of eternal or divine law. Theologians and philosophers characterize eternal law as a law that is in the mind of God. The view is as follows: God is a rational, intelligent being. God's intellect was used to create the universe. There is a pattern or evidence of God's rational plan (i.e., there is an order, rule, reason, or operating law) in creation. In other words, the eternal Law is imprinted in the nature of the entire universe. Natural Law is humanity's participation in the Eternal Law. What does this mean? It means that we, as rational animals, have the ability to apprehend (discern, understand, intuit) the truth intellectually. Natural Law, through its relationship with the Eternal Law, provides an objective standard for human behavior.

One of the most popular arguments for the existence of God is called the "Argument from Design". It is useful in illustrating what Natural Law is. The Argument from Design is an argument from analogy:

A is to B as C is to D

Just as a watchmaker designs a watch, God designed the universe. When we take apart a watch and examine it we find evidence of the watchmaker's design. Similarly, when we examine the universe, when we study it with our minds, we find evidence of a rational mind at work. From an ethical perspective, the ethical law that God prescribes (i.e., the eternal law) is as "perceivable" and discoverable as the design of the watchmaker's watch.

## (2) Society

How else are ethical truths held to be true? Some persons appeal to society. Society says or decrees which moral claims are true. Of course, since there are many different societies in the world it often occurs that there are societies that have competing moral claims. When this happens, we are confronted with moral or ethical relativism. For instance, it may be perfectly moral for children to be sold into slavery in country X, while in country Y such an act would be deemed immoral. What we in America consider horribly brutal treatment of women is culturally acceptable in other countries. On the other hand, our use of the death penalty is seen as barbaric and morally wrong from in many other countries. Yet we as a nation think the death penalty is morally right.

But even within the same country there may be vast differences in what counts as a true moral claim. One state may outlaw interracial marriages because such marriages are thought to be morally wrong. One state may be segregationist while others are not. Obtaining an abortion in one state may be very easy while in another it may be very difficult to obtain one. Each culture, each state, each community can (to a certain degree) make its own moral code. So persons who appeal to society as the source upon which moral claims are made true must be prepared to accept moral or ethical relativism. With ethical relativism, we cannot have a guarantee that any one of our moral claims is absolutely, 100% true and binding for all persons everywhere. Such surety could only happen by the sheer accident: every society in the world would have to "just happen" to believe that the exact same moral claim is also true for them.

## (3) Individual

Last, there is the view that moral claims are made true solely by the authority of each individual. Here, you create your own ethical facts, as it were, based on your own values. You create an individual morality where you decide what is morally right and morally wrong. This view

captures the philosophical perspective of existentialism, i.e., existentialist ethics. From an existentialist perspective, each person must decide what kind of person she or he will be. I choose what kind of person I will be and my subsequent actions then count as being good or bad with respect to how authentically I act based upon the kind of person I have chosen to be. No one -- not God, not society -- can tell me how I should live or what choices I should make or which moral claims are true.

The three kinds of conventionalist ethics described above state that ethical truths are made truth based on some authority, be it God's authority, society's or one's own authority. But what about the person who says that there are no ethical truths at all?

#### 4. Position Two: There are no ethical truths

So far, we've examined the position that there are ethical truths and we have explored the ways in which that position is supported: (a) either ethical truths are considered to be true independent of anyone's authority or (b) ethical truths are true by the authority of God, society, or the individual. But what if you think that there aren't any ethical truths at all? To accept this view is to ascribe to ethical subjectivism. Ethical subjectivism is the view that ethical statements are neither true nor false, but rather are simply expressions of one's attitude, emotion, or opinion toward or about the subject. Here, all one is saying is that "I disapprove of segregation" or "I approve of segregation". Ethical subjectivism is often called "emotivism."

For ethical subjectivists, the claim "Segregation is wrong" is neither true nor false. But what does it mean to say that a claim is neither true nor false? Consider the following sentences.

Today is Tuesday.  
Murder is always wrong.  
You are an ignorant pig.

The claim made in the first sentence is verifiable: we can prove that it is either true or false. For a moral realist, or for any of the moral conventionalists, the claim made in the second sentence is also verifiable. For the realist, the claim being made is a moral fact. It is *prima facie* true. That is, it is true just on the face of it. The conventionalists, too, can verify the claim made in the second sentence. Either it is true because God has commanded it to be so, or our society says its so, or I personally hold it to be so. But what about the last sentence? Is it verifiable?

Let's suppose that it is. Imagine if you were to say to Gary Gator, "You are an ignorant pig!" Would we take Gary to the Biology lab to confirm whether he was, in fact, a pig? Would we go

to the Psychology Department and ask one of the kind folks there to administer the IQ exam to Gary? No, we would not. When you call this individual an "ignorant pig," you are, perhaps in anger, expressing your disgust and disappointment in Gary Gator. You are spewing out your emotions and feelings about him. What you've expressed is your opinion, your attitude about Gary Gator. Your comment about him isn't the kind of claim that is either true or false.

Just as we do not consider the claim "You are an ignorant pig" is neither true nor false, ethical subjectivists do not believe that moral claims are either true or false. To them, when a Susy Spartan says, "Abortion is wrong," what that she has done is to express her attitude toward abortion. Susy Spartan has simply expressed her feelings or emotions. Your claiming that Gary is an ignorant pig is nothing that can be true or false, and neither is a person's claim, they would say, that abortion is wrong.

#### Summary:

In today's lecture you learned to distinguish between claims made about ethical claims and metaethical claims. You will also learned three general categories of responses to the question of whether there are any ethical truths: (1) ethical realism, (2) ethical conventionalism and its sub-categories of (a) Divine Command Theory and Natural Law, (b) ethical or moral relativism, and (c) ethical existentialism, and (3) ethical subjectivism.