

PATHWAYS TO PHILOSOPHY E

Moral Philosophy 'Reasons, values and conduct'

Essay Question 2

“The principle of universality ... is not the guaranteed touchstone for all moral decisions but merely the expression of the minimal requirement of consistency' (4/80). – Discuss.

Introduction

Universality as the standard or criterion by which moral decisions are judged or recognized is a high ideal that many philosophers seek. What is good for me is good for you and good for everybody. What is bad for you is bad for you and bad for everyone. In this essay I will consider the views of those that proposed universality and those who proposed alternatives such as moral relativism. My own conclusions follow.

Protagoras (490-421BCE)

Protagoras is famous for saying “man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not” (Ref 1). He held that truth is relative to the individual who holds it. This implies morality is relative as well.

Plato (427-347 BCE)

Plato's philosophy is based on a theory of ideas (Ref 2). These ideas or forms are the basis of reality. Imperfect copies of these forms are what we see in our world like the inhabitants of his famous cave. The forms are objective and universal whereas the imperfect copies are subjective and local. Some of these forms such as Good, Justice and Virtue are moral in nature. Moral decisions could then be judged in these terms.

Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716)

Leibniz developed the “Principle of Sufficient Reason” a principle that dictates that moral actions are based on sufficient reason. The Principle of Sufficient Reason in its classic form is simply that *nothing is without a reason or there is no effect without a cause*. As Leibniz remarks, this principle “must be considered one of the greatest and most fruitful of all human knowledge, for upon it is built a great part of metaphysics, physics, and moral science.” (Ref 2) A truly noble and moral thing to do can be expressed in terms of the reason for doing it. The “ultimate sacrifice” made with the reason to save the nation from being overrun by tyranny is one example. The universality of moral decisions is questioned by this principle, as what is sufficient reason for one is insufficient for another. One eats mud if one has sufficient reason to do so even though it might be at first glance a stupid thing to do and others might not feel the same way.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

Kant in his work “Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1785)” (Ref 3) develops our everyday, seemingly

obvious, rational knowledge of morality into philosophical knowledge. The outcome is his Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative is a universal duty on us all, in all situations and circumstances if our behavior is to observe moral law. It states that one is required to “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law”. It is from the categorical imperative that all other moral obligations are generated, and by which all other morals can be tested.

Jeremy Bentham (1748 -1832)

Jeremy Bentham (Ref 2) was a key initiator of the theory of Utilitarianism which holds that the moral and proper course of action is the one that maximizes utility, specifically defined as maximizing happiness and reducing suffering. Again this is a universal moral decision making theory. The assumption that happiness is the ultimate moral requirement is unproven although accepted by many. Virtue might be one of another requirement although some would argue that this is only a stepping-stone to happiness.

Since the original Utilitarianism was proposed a number of variations have been proposed to cover cases where unsatisfactory outcomes might result from a strict implementation of the original theory. These variations included Ideal Utilitarianism to cover more idealistic outcomes than just hedonistic ones. Rule Utilitarianism makes it easier to choose the right action because of the problems of calculating the consequences on each and every occasion would almost certainly result in frequently choosing something less than the best course of action. Other variations are Preference Utilitarianism, Two – level Utilitarianism (R.M.Hare) and Motive Utilitarianism. All these variations don’t affect the universal feature of Utilitarianism.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Darwin (Ref 4) and others after him (such as Mary Midgley – Ref 5) see moral intelligence as part of humankind’s evolving social nature as an animal species. Morality makes society possible, Darwin believed, by minimizing criminal behavior and social conflict. Human morality in the form of a conscience is an evolving feature as much as how our hands have evolved to be able to perform the many complex tasks in the modern world. Again morality is a universal concept applying to all members of a species.

Ruth Benedict (1887-1948)

American Anthropologist and moral relativist Ruth Benedict sees Morality as a dependent cultural variable and the idea of a universal moral principle cannot be applied to people whose culture does not accept it. She derived her research proposition from studying and gathering empirical facts on both primitive and modern cultures, which reveal an extreme variation in customs, manners, taboos, moral values, daily habits and attitude among people varying tremendously from one environment, culture, and society to another throughout history.

Conclusions

Protagoras saw the world and morality as human centric, a concept that humanity has moved away from since. Humans are only one species on a small planet associated with a minor star in the universe. My own experience in life has also made it difficult to accept that the basic moral standards of others are fundamentally different from the world standards set down in such documents as the UN Declaration of Human Rights. During World War 2 Australians were heavily indoctrinated to believe the Japanese people were less than human and lacked

many of the moral values of Australians. After travelling to Japan and meeting many Japanese Engineers in particular I have made a study of Japanese language and culture and found that the same basic moral standards apply there as in Australia.

Plato's idealized perfect forms make up a beautiful fantasy story to me. If only they were true but I haven't seen any evidence of truth.

Leibniz's "Principle of Sufficient Reason" rings true when considered in the light of other associated accepted concepts such as the law of cause and effect. I don't accept that this principle destroys the idea of moral universality and makes universality merely the expression of the minimal requirement of consistency. Another person may make a different moral decision to me but if I was "in his shoes" I might make the same universal type decision. Leibniz points out that we don't necessarily know all the reasons for a moral decision and may never know them. The decision of the other that I can't see might well be made with the best moral concern for his family.

Minimal requirement of consistency would be a value of moral decisions based on sufficient reason if we knew all the reasons and could compare. But we don't.

I have found Kant's categorical imperative practical and useful in discussing some moral issues such as need for all citizens' to pay their share of taxes and do jury duty. In many cases, however, it turns out to be a difficult and counter productive concept such as telling the truth to the Gestapo so they can find Jews. This is case of what Hume would say "ought" to be rather than "is" (Ref 7).

Utilitarianism is another "ought" providing for mathematicians (such as myself in an earlier life) an analytical method of identifying the most suitable moral path to follow. I understand it was used originally in the successful promotion of the cause for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. It shows the practical and useful value of Philosophy.

Darwin was on the right path in that he produced evidence (in accordance with scientific method from the Philosophy of Science) for his "is" theory on how moral standards have developed. Ruth Benedict's work contradicts Darwin's theory and suggests a moral relativist position. I am skeptical about this and point as evidence that a lot of the work by another famous Anthropologist Margaret Mead about Coming of Age in Samoa has since be found to be wrong and the islanders actually follow more universal moral standards. Margaret Mead studied under Ruth Benedict at Columbia University.

In summary Universal Moral Standards seem to me to be an "is" part of the evolution of humanity and a highly desirable "ought" for the future.

Notes

1. P.H. Epps *Protagoras' Famous statement* Classical Journal V 59, No 5 P223-6
2. Plato, Leibnitz and Bentham from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
3. Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1785) on line translation by Jonathan Bennett 2008
4. Origin of Species (1859) and the Descent of Man (1871) by Charles Darwin

5. *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality* (1994) Mary Midgley

6. *Patterns of Culture* (1934) Ruth Benedict

7. David Hume (1711-1776), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*