

A Romp Through Ethics for Complete Beginners

Session One:

Rules, truths and theories: an introduction to ethical reasoning

**Marianne Talbot
Department for Continuing Education
University of Oxford
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Preliminaries:

Podcast:

Reading:

Ethical Theory: An Anthology edited by Russ Shafer-Landau (Blackwell, 2007 ISBN: 978-1-4051-3320-3)

In this session we shall be:

- using a moral dilemma to examine the nature of moral reasoning**
- reflecting on the role of rules in moral reasoning**
- asking whether moral beliefs are true or false, and what might *make* them so;**
- reflecting on whether moral truth is absolute or relative.**

Imagine your friend has just come home from the hairdresser's....

....she strikes a pose and says 'what do you think?...

....you think: 'Yuk!'

You have a problem...

...what is your problem?

Moral dilemmas of this sort are common...

**...because it is in the very nature of our
everyday moral rules...**

... to conflict in particular situations

You might think that it is easy to get out of this particular moral dilemma...

- **Don't you sometimes have to be cruel to be kind?**
- **Don't *white* lies differ from 'black' lies?**

But the dilemma will always return

Moral dilemmas rationally require us to reflect on our values...

...to ask what it IS to be *kind*, or to be *honest*...

But we undoubtedly yearn for moral rules...

...consider, for example, how tempting it is to make ourselves *further* rules....

...in the case of our moral dilemma:

Possible new rule one:

When kindness and honesty conflict I' ll *always* be honest.

Possible new rule two:

When kindness and honesty conflict I' ll *always* be kind

In this yearning for rules we reveal ourselves to be....

.... MORAL GENERALISTS...

...people who believe...

...that morality is governed by rules...

...if not by simple rules like 'don' t lie' ...

....then by more complicated rules like...

... 'don' t tell black lies' ...

...or 'don' t tell black lies except in situations in which....'

The PARTICULARISTS deny that moral reasoning is governed by rules of any sort...

Jonathan Dancy of Reading University is a Particularist:



**Dancy claims that *all* reasons for acting are
'context-sensitive' ...**

**....such that they are in some contexts reasons
for acting...**

**...and in other contexts they are *not* reasons for
acting...**

So imagine that your reason...

...for refusing to perform action A...

... is that in performing action A you would be telling a lie...

...does this mean you should refuse to perform any and every act...

...that has the property of being a lie-telling?

Or imagine that your reason...

...for performing action B...

.... is that in performing action B you would be keeping a promise...

...does this mean you should perform *any* and *every* act...

...that has the property of being a promise-keeping?

Dancy believes that the answer to questions of this sort will always be 'no' ...

...because no reason for acting...

...is *always* reason *for* or *against*...

...performing an action

If you think that some (but not all) lies *should* be told...

...or that some (but not all) promises *shouldn't* be kept...

...then perhaps you too are a Particularist?

Particularists believe that no moral rule is always and everywhere true...

...that they are, at most, 'rules of thumb' ...

...useful for practical purposes...

...but not unbreakable, not *absolutes*

**I wonder how many of you are tempted to say
you are Particularists?**

In thinking about such things we are engaged in moral theorising...

...which is a very different activity from everyday moral decision-making.

Moral theorising is called ‘second order’ moral thinking...

...everyday decision-making about how we should act is called ‘first order’ moral thinking...

...moral theorising is **thinking about our **thinking about** how we should act.**

Can you sort the following questions into ‘first order’ (practical) questions, and ‘second order’ (theoretical) questions?

- 1) Is lying morally acceptable?**
- 2) Should female circumcision be illegal?**
- 3) How can we know that a given moral judgement is correct?**
- 4) Could it ever be right to kill an innocent human being?**
- 5) What makes a moral judgement right or wrong?**
- 6) Is it wrong to kill embryos that have the gene for Huntington’s Disease?**
- 7) What sort of evidence can we give for saying something is right or wrong?**

Now let's look at moral truth

Consider the following statements:

‘The earth is elliptical’

‘The cat is tabby’

These statements are straightforwardly true or false.

They are made so by facts about, respectively, the earth (its being elliptical or not) and the cat (its being tabby or not).

But if we look at statements such as:

‘It is wrong to kill innocent human beings.’

‘We should always tell the truth.’

it is less easy to see that there are facts that make these statements true or false.

In particular it would seem that we can't...

***...see or feel* these facts (if they exist)...**

***... or conduct experiments* to discover them**

Recognition of this prompts some to deny that there are moral facts

If there are no moral facts then perhaps...

... moral statements are neither true *nor* false...

...or perhaps we are free to decide for ourselves...

.... whether they are true or false?

**I wonder how many of you would want to deny
there are moral facts?**

**If you would like to learn more about this view
check out this website:**

**[http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-
moral/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-moral/)**

Most philosophers believe that there *are* moral facts

We shall be looking at four theories about moral facts:

- 1. Virtue Ethics – an action is right if a virtuous person would perform it.**
- 2. Non-cognitivism – an action is right if a person with a ‘stable and general’ perspective would approve of it.**
- 3. Deontology – an action is right if it falls under a rule that prescribes it**
- 4. Utilitarianism – an action is right if it produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number.**

**Another common question about moral truth
is....**

...is it absolute or relative?

Moral absolutism:

You are a moral absolutist if you believe that...

...there is *at least one* moral statement that is true absolutely

***A non-moral* example of an absolute truth is...**

... ‘the earth is round’ ...

...which is true everywhere, for everyone, at all times...

...irrespective of what people believe

So you will be a moral absolutist...

... if you believe there is at least one *moral* statement...

... that is like ‘the earth is round’ ...

...in being true everywhere, for everyone, at all times...

.... and irrespective of what people believe

Moral relativism:

You are a moral relativist if you believe that *all* moral statements...

... are true or false only *relative to something*

There are different types of moral relativism:

- **You can believe moral statements are true only relative to cultures**

(compare: ‘a meal consists of meat and two veg’ or ‘prayers are said five times a day’)

- **You can believe moral statements are true only relative to individuals**

(compare: ‘sardines are tasty’ or ‘red is the most beautiful colour’)

- **You can believe moral statements are true only relative to situations**

(compare: ‘it’ s cold here’ or ‘it’ s raining now’)

Are you a moral relativist of some kind?

Why are you a moral relativist?

Arguments for moral relativism:

1. All moral views should be respected
2. Different people differ in their moral beliefs
3. Different cultures differ in their moral beliefs
4. Different situations make different moral demands.

**The first argument (‘All moral views should be respected’)
is self-defeating...**

**... in trying to derive moral relativism from a moral
absolute:**

All moral truths should be respected

Therefore moral relativism is true

is an argument known as ‘vulgar relativism’

The second argument (‘Different people differ in their moral beliefs’)...

...assimilates moral statements to statements of personal preference thereby:

- underestimating the importance of morality**
- ignoring the possibility of moral error...**

The third argument (‘Different cultures differ in their moral beliefs’)...

... ignores the possibility that different circumstances...

.... might generate different moral beliefs...

...and the possibility that we might be justified in saying, of another culture, that it is wrong

The second and third arguments might rest on a confusion...

...between 'P' and 'believing P' ...

...first a demonstration of the difference...

This shows us that...

.... 'P is morally acceptable for S' is ambiguous:

(i) *S believes P is morally acceptable*

(ii) *P is morally acceptable for S*

For example:

‘Mugging elderly ladies is morally acceptable for Fred’

...is ambiguous:

- a) Fred *believes* that mugging elderly ladies is morally acceptable**
- b) Mugging elderly ladies *IS* morally acceptable (for Fred)**

Fred believes that mugging elderly ladies is morally acceptable

This is entirely unremarkable...

...poor Fred may have had the sort of unfortunate upbringing...

... that results in this sort of belief...

...it doesn't mean his belief *is* true

Mugging elderly ladies IS morally acceptable (for Fred)

This is an expression of individual relativism...

...if we believe this and Fred mugs an elderly lady in front of us we must stand back...

...because even if mugging elderly ladies is morally unacceptable for *us*...

...for *Fred* it is morally acceptable

Should we believe that mugging elderly ladies is morally acceptable for Fred...

....simply because we believe Fred *believes* that mugging elderly ladies is morally acceptable?

So far we have looked at the first three arguments for moral relativism...

... (we should respect others' views/different individuals have different beliefs/different cultures have different beliefs)...

...now let's look at the fourth (different situations make different moral demands).

The fourth argument (‘Different situations make different moral demands’)...

... assumes that the only form of moral absolutism on offer...

...is ‘lower order absolutism’

...where the only candidates for moral absolutes are everyday moral rules.

In fact there are three types of absolutism:

(a) Lower order absolutism

(b) Higher order absolutism

(c) Token absolutism

Lower order absolutism: the belief that moral absolutes are every day rules like:

Don' t lie

Don' t kill

Keep promises

Notice that if you are a Particularist you deny lower order moral absolutism...

...because you believe that our everyday moral rules are nothing more than 'rules of thumb'

Higher Order Moral Absolutism: the belief that moral absolutes are rules like:

Produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Utilitarianism)

Treat others as ends in themselves (Deontology)

Token Absolutism: the belief that moral absolutes are imperatives about *token* actions:

It would be wrong to tell *that* lie
You must keep *that* promise

Higher order moral absolutism and token absolutism go together...

If it is absolutely true that we ought to produce the GHGN or treat others as ends...

...then it will be absolutely true in any given situation...

...that we should perform whichever token action....

... will promote the GHGN, or results in treating others as ends

Higher order absolutism and token absolutism together may explain:

- (i) Why lower order rules are *not* absolutely true

- (ii) Why lower order rules are important to us

Lower order rules are *not* absolutely true (perhaps)...

...because if telling a lie in a given situation wouldn't promote the GHGN/respect others as ends...

... then we ought not to tell it...

...but if it *would* promote GHGN/respect others as ends...

...then we *ought* to tell it.

Lower order rules are important because...

...if we see many situations in which token lies are absolutely wrong...

...and only a few where they are absolutely right...

...then 'don' t lie' becomes a useful rule of thumb...

...(we go wrong only if we think it is absolutely true)

Another reason we might think of lower order rules as important...

...is that when we were children we were all taught lower order moral rules...

...as if they were absolutes...

....can you guess why?

Our discovery that the rules we were taught as absolutes...

...are not absolutes...

...can prompt us to think that the 'standard view' ...

... is that lower order moral rules *are* absolutes...

..rather than merely that they are taught to children as such

So not only might we be absolutists...

... whilst accepting that lower order moral rules...

... are not absolutely true....

...we might think absolutism explains *why* lower order moral rules...

...are not absolutely true

**It is important to distinguish token
absolutism from:**

(a) individual relativism

(b) situation relativism

***“Mugging Mabel Smith at 5.30 on Tuesday 6th
December 2009 was wrong”***

Token Absolutism: If this statement is true it is true absolutely (anyone who thinks it is false is wrong)

Individual relativism: Even if this statement is true it is true only in relation to individuals (so there might be people for whom it is false)

Note: the individual relativist is not saying just that there are people who *believe* it is false, but that there are people for whom it IS false)

Token absolutism claims that lower order moral rules are only rules of thumb, so even if *most* lies are wrong, there can be token lies that are right

Situation relativism claims that lower order moral rules are true only in relation to situations (so in situation S, lying is wrong, whereas in situation S*, lying isn't wrong)...

I think that our ‘kneejerk’ moral relativism is a combination of...

...several of the errors we have examined....

...and often the result of the following process:

The process:

- 1) Recognition that 'abortion is wrong' is controversial (some accept it and others reject it)**
- 2) Respect for each other leads to reluctance to disagree**
- 3) Agree that 'abortion is wrong' is right for you and wrong for me**
- 4) Acceptance of lower order relativism**
- 5) Rejection of moral absolutism**

1. *'Abortion is wrong' is controversial (many accept and others reject)*

Best explanation of this..

...is that 'abortion is wrong' is a rule of thumb...

...generated by beliefs about whether abortion promotes the GHGN or treating others as ends...

...where these higher order beliefs are moral absolutes...

...which generate token absolutes in given situations

2. Respect for each other leads to reluctance to disagree

This seems to be vulgar relativism...

...why should we think that disagreeing with someone is failing to respect them?....

...it is entirely consistent with respecting someone that we should disagree with them...

...it is the *way* we disagree that might fail to respect them

Agree that 'abortion is wrong' is right for you and wrong for me

Here the logical blunder threatens....

....I might *believe* 'abortion is wrong' whilst you *believe* 'abortion is right' ...

....but that is merely a statement about what we *believe*...

...not about the *truth* of our beliefs.

Acceptance of lower order relativism

The logical blunder once made leads us from the unremarkable belief that...

.... I believe abortion is wrong and you believe abortion is right...

...to the relativistic beliefs ‘abortion IS wrong for me’ and ‘abortion IS right for you’ ...

...both of which are, if you think about it, hugely controversial

Rejection of moral absolutism

We might then go from lower order moral relativism...

...to the belief that *all* moral truth is relative...

...by ignoring or being ignorant of the possibility of higher order or token absolutism

I wonder how many of you would now claim to be relativists?

If you would like to do some reading for this week's lecture try:

Jonathan Dancy's 'An Unprincipled Morality', pages 771-775 of Ethical Theory: An Anthology edited by Russ Shafer-Landau (Blackwell, 2007 ISBN: 978-1-4051-3320-3)

The following two papers are from the very reliable Stanford encyclopaedia:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-particularism/>

You might also like to read, from Shafer-Landau, the introduction to, and papers in, part XII *Prima Facie Duties and Particularism*.

If you would like to test yourself on your understanding of this lecture ask yourself whether you can explain:

- what moral dilemmas are and why they won't go away;**
- the distinction between moral particularism and moral generalism;**
- whether and why you are a Particularist or a Generalist**
- the distinction between first and second order moral thinking;**
- Which facts (if any) might make moral beliefs true or false;**
- the difference between moral absolutism and moral relativism;**
- the different types of relativism and absolutism;**
- whether, and why, you are a relativist/absolutist;**
- Whether Particularists are committed to absolutism or relativism**

If you would like to do some reading for next week's lecture look at:

'The Main Idea of a Theory of Justice' , an excerpt from A Theory of Justice by John Rawls (pages 631-634 of Ethical Theory).