


Psychological Aspects of Social Issues

Chapter 4
The Power of Moral Theories


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Outline/Overview

- Moral theories
- Consequentialist theories
- Non-consequentialist theories
- Evaluating moral theories
- Rawls "Veil of ignorance"

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Moral Theory

- Explanatory framework - what is good?
- Nature of "goodness" or "rightness"
- Theories of value
- Theories of obligation
- Contrasted with moral codes – example of each?

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Moral theory (cont.)

- Framework to make judgments in a wide range of situations.
- Moral code – essentially a set of rules.
- Rules may be important, but moral theory can help us to see beyond the rules.
- Classic utilitarianism – (Ch. 5) an example of a moral theory – right action is that which produces greatest happiness for everyone involved.

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Consequentialist vs. Non-consequentialist theories

- Consequentialist – the ultimate consequences determine right or wrong.
 - act-utilitarianism
 - rule utilitarianism
 - ethical egoism
- Non-consequentialist –rightness depends on nature of the action
 - Kant's theory
 - natural law theory
 - divine command theory

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Consequentialist theories

- Act-utilitarianism – focused on specific actions, “right” actions are those that directly produce the greatest overall good.
- Rule utilitarianism – focused more on general patterns of behavior, morally right behavior is that, if generally followed, most favorable outcomes for everyone involved.
- Ethical egoism – morally right action provides most favorable results for oneself
- Problems with these approaches?
 - Placing a value on good vs. bad outcomes
 - Examples?

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● ● ● | **Non-consequentialist theories**

- Kant's theory
 - rooted in the categorical imperative
 - which says what?
- "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."
- What does this mean in plain English?

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● ● ● | **Non-consequentialist theories (cont.)**

- Natural law theory
 - morally right action is one that follows the dictates of nature
 - natural law reflects how the world is as well as how it should be
 - design is by God
 - Constitution/Bill of Rights, reflect natural rights
- Divine command theory
 - morally right action is one God commands
 - can be right even though good not maximized

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● ● ● | **Evaluating moral theories**

- What makes a moral theory a good theory?
- What criteria can we use to evaluate?
 - Minimum criterion – coherence

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Three criteria of good moral theories

1. Consistency with considered judgments
 - views that we form after careful consideration
 - can be difficult to apply
2. Consistency with moral experiences
 - needs to be consistent with foundational moral experiences
3. Usefulness in moral problem solving
 - a necessary, but not sufficient condition

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Rawls “veil of ignorance”

- John Rawls - ideas about what constituted a just society and an adequate moral rule.
- We would agree on it behind a veil of ignorance.
- What do you think this might mean?

- Bruce's philosopher song
[A closing funny, if we can spare 5 minutes](#)

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