Meta-Metaethical Insight: Inquiry Into Three Major Theories

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The field of ethics is defined by James Fieser as the field that “involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior” (1). Ethics is all about determining what morality is, and what codes we ought to follow in order to be moral people. Metaethics is the subfield of ethics which ponders why we believe in certain moral principles– where values come from, and what they mean for us. Another subfield of ethics is normative inquiry, also known as normative ethics. The definition we came up with in class for normative ethics is “the subfield of ethics in which principles are sought, capable of providing guidance for how we ought to act in all cases” (in-class). Metaethics questions the importance of normative ethics, saying that moral principles are determined in three main ways. First, relativism, which says moral principles solely rely on the environment one lives in. Secondly, divine command theory, which says one’s religion should dictate how one acts. Lastly, the view of egoism, which views that one should act according to one’s best interest exclusively. These three views of metaethics will be discussed in this essay, showcasing their merits, as well as where they fall short.

The first metaethical theory is relativism. This comes in two flavors: cultural relativism, and individual relativism. Cultural relativism is the principle that “morality is grounded in the approval of one’s society” (Fieser 2). Individual relativism is the principle that “individual people create their own moral standards” (Fieser 2). These both are practical moral theories in that they say to go with the flow of one’s own society. They encourage diversity by acknowledging that the world is a vast place with

many different ideas of what is morally right. Cultural relativism in particular recognizes that different cultures have different traditions. It disables us from putting more importance on the morals of our own culture. As Rachels puts it, “If we assume that our ideas of right and wrong will be shared by all peoples at all times, we are merely naive” (617).

However, Rachels also points out how cultural relativism isn’t the end-all-be-all moral theory that some claim it to be. It falls flat when one considers how seemingly huge differences in cultures, like Eskimos’ attitude towards infanticide, and the difference between the Greeks and Callatians’ funeral activities, are actually rooted in the same moral principles (Rachels 621). Evolutionary psychology calls that societies need to adhere to a few key principles in order to survive, such as condemning murder, lying, and social isolation. For Eskimos, although infanticide is a cultural practice, it is done out of necessity, not malice. Brutal conditions, and a reliance on “food-producing males” leads to brutal practices in order to adapt and survive (Rachels 621).

Cultural relativism also encourages a defeatist attitude towards injustices in our own society as well as other societies. Social movements wouldn’t be possible if we only did what was culturally accepted. Social reformers like MLK Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi wouldn't have done anything to better their societies (Rachels 620). A cultural relativist attitude towards atrocities like Nazi Germany’s containment camps, as well as its expansion of territory over Europe would have sat by, and accepted that Germany simply had a different moral system. Individual relativism also fails in the same ways, but on an even smaller scale. If someone enjoys torturing animals, we have no right to criticize them; all we can do as individual relativists is sit back and make a point to not

do that ourselves. Relativism in general relies too heavily on what other people think is right, and what traditionally has been seen as morally right.

The next major metaethical theory is divine command theory, also known as deontology. It is a subfield of objectivism. This theory says that there is no need to philosophize moral standards because there already are concrete moral standards, and they are perfect, “absolute truths” (Fieser 2). Proponents such as Plato argue that moral codes exist abstractly, and it’s up to us to follow what God has set for us. This one, in my opinion, holds more merit than relativism. For one, it takes the guesswork out of establishing one’s own moral system. Religious text also can be interpreted in myriad ways, if one still wants to philosophize. Great Christian philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas believed in this but were still left to their own reason to determine what the best way to live was. Rather than constricting, divine command theory is more freeing for many.

Of course, divine command theory has its quirks. It mandates that one must follow a religion. If you are atheist or agnostic and looking for a set of principles to live by, then you will have to skip this and head to normative inquiry. I also think religion-based moral systems can have questionable ethics, especially in regards to womens’ rights, slavery, homosexuality, and anything else that has historically been opposed by fundamentalist zealots. Again, religious text interpretability leaves people able to go either way on these topics. It falls into a similar problem that relativism has, where one has to accept rules as they are written, with no hope of sweeping changes.

Most interestingly, even though religious texts spell out in words how each of us should live, its interpretability can leave questions unanswered. In Plato’s Euthyphro,

Socrates and Euthyphro famously run into a dilemma about how the things loved by the gods are chosen to be loved: what makes these morals so good? Socrates asks what exactly holiness is, and Euthyphro replies, “the holy is what I am doing now” (Plato 5). Of course, this is an example, not a definition. This prompts a long-winded dialogue that almost ends with the definition of holy being “what is loved by all the gods” (Plato 9). Rather than accept this definition, Socrates dives deeper and posits, “Then what is dear to the gods is not the same as holy, Euthyphro, nor is the holy the same as dear to the gods, as you claim: the two are different” (Plato 12). Even Socrates couldn’t figure out what about the things the gods of his time loved that made them so good. It follows that following these codes is either arbitrary or the gods are not all-powerful if they are forced to love these innately holy things.

Next in line in order of attractiveness is ethical egoism. “Ethical Egoism is the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively” (Rachels 77). Ethical egoism is half-metaethical theory and half-normative theory. It is a simple view that supersedes any attempt to arrive at our own set of moral principles, but it is also a moral standard on its own. One of the benefits of ethical egoism is in the power it puts into the individual. As Ayn Rand puts it in regards to altruism, “to demand that a person abandon his projects or give up his goods is an effort to ‘sacrifice his life’” (Rachels 81). By embracing ethical egoism, one puts themself first.

Ethical egoism also doesn’t have to mean acting selfishly, at least in theory. If helping someone else helps the individual, too, then that’s the right thing to do. Egoists support social doctrines like not lying and murdering, because otherwise, they would “suffer all the ill effects of a bad reputation” (Rachels 83). My own thoughts are that the

potential to have a guilty conscience also impacts how egoists might act, since that leads to less happiness. Egoism can also coexist with other schools of thought, where obtaining maximal happiness is still the end goal. For example, if an egoist embraces divine command theory, they do so because spirituality and following their religion makes them happy. Surprisingly, egoism can also be better for society as a whole. An argument Rachels makes for ethical egoism is that minding one's business is more altruistic, and better for others: "If each person looks after his or her own interests, it is more likely that everyone will be better off" (79).

However, there are some downsides to this philosophy. For one, the altruistic argument about minding one's business isn't even rooted in egoism, but in the end, "the ultimate principle is one of beneficence" (Rachels 80). Ayn Rand's argument also has flaws, primarily because it assumes the worst in altruism, in the least nuanced way possible, leaving us with a false dichotomy. It also leaves some morally questionable things on the table, like stealing, cheating, and hurting others when one knows they're not going to get caught. Rachels also compares it to racism, saying: "[Ethical egoism] advocates that each of us divide the world into two categories of people– ourselves and all the rest– and that we regard the interests of those in the first group as more important than the interests of those in the second group" (89).

Overall, although there are strong reasons to adopt each of these metaethical theories, they all have their own shortcomings. Cultural relativism embraces diversity and acceptance, but is a little too forgiving, and arbitrary. A nuanced view would be to consider one's environment, as well as what other people view as morally right

themselves, but not let that undermine the many other ways to measure morality. Following divine command theory emphasizes spirituality, and can be used as a tool for interpretation and individuality. However, it excludes non-religious people, and can be arbitrary as well. Ethical egoism provides a framework for living the best life by following what is the most beneficial for someone long-term. However, this philosophy embraces selfishness as well as treating people as lower than ourselves. Rachels concedes that although it has its issues, “there is still much to be learned from examining it” (78). That phrase can be extended to any one of these theories; they all provide varied insights into how we can choose to see the world.