Morality and Society

MONDAY, 9/26

On Monday, 9/26, we will start on a new area of philosophy -- moral theory. The first question that needs to be addressed is whether or not we can look at people's actions and make moral judgments about them, and if we can, whether or not these judgments are universal and hold for all people at all times in all places. As Stace points out, there are two main views on this. The ethical absolutist says that there are fundamental ethical principles that hold universally, whereas the ethical relativist says there are not. Instead of absolute ethical principles, the ethical relativist believes that each group at each time in each place holds a set of ethical standards that they follow, and the fact that the people believe these are true makes the principles true for them.

Let's explore where you stand on this issue. Think about the following two cases, and briefly respond to the questions that follow them.

Case 1. Before the coming of the Christian missionaries in the 19th Century, the people of Hawaii had a sexually open society. Young people explored sex naturally and freely, experimenting with a variety of partners and positions. The missionaries were appalled by this, and worked hard to change it. They taught the Hawaiians that sex outside of marriage was wrong and that only the "missionary position" was moral. Many of the Hawaiians adopted these new beliefs.

Questions:
1) What was wrong with the Hawaiians' original beliefs and practice? It was what they thought was right. Wasn't it right for them?
2) What could possibly justify the missionaries' attempt to superimpose their values on another people?

Case 2. Your roommate and you do not see eye-to-eye on a number of issues. You like to go to bed early, and she likes to stay up late and party. You like classical music (played at reasonable levels), and she likes hip hop (played at 105 decibels). You are rather neat, and she gives new meaning to the word "slob." The first three weeks of the semester, she has partied in your room until 3 a.m. every day, blown out two sets of speakers, and built up a disgusting pile of trash and garbage in the room. You finally decide to ask her to change her behavior a bit, and she says, "Whatever, change rooms if you don’t like it."

Questions:
1) What is wrong with your roommates' original beliefs and practice? It is what she thinks is right. Isn't it right for her?
2) What could possibly justify your attempt to superimpose your values on another person?
WEDNESDAY, 9/28

Browne writes, “...what could be more important than your happiness?....The Morality Trap is the belief that you must obey a moral code created by someone else....As you examine each of the rules you’ve been living by, ask yourself...if it is a morality that’s aimed at [you] and against [your] self-interest? Or is it a morality that’s for [you] and comes from [you]?...The Unselfishness Trap is the belief that you must put the happiness of others ahead of your own....When the reason for your actions is to avoid being called “selfish” you’re...restricting the possibilities for your own happiness....Everyone is selfish; everyone is doing what he believes will make himself happier.”

This is a general principle of morality. Although it does not tell us what to do in specific situations, we can use it in a chain of reasoning to conclude what we should do.

What would Browne's principle (usually called "Ethical Egoism") imply we should do in the following two situations?

**Case 1.** Pam has just bought a bag of Hershey kisses, which she likes very much. Her roommate, Helen, also likes Hershey kisses -- so much so that if Pam left the candy out where Helen could find it, Helen would eat the candy up before Pam could have more than a few pieces. Pam is thinking about hiding the candy, but is worried if it would be "nice" (that is, moral) to hide it away from Helen since Helen likes Hershey kisses so much. What should Pam do?

**Case 2.** Mom has bought a Milky Way candy bar. Her daughter, Wendy, likes Milky Way bars better than any other candy, but Mom likes them best, too. Mom can afford only one candy bar, and she is thinking about sharing it with Wendy because of the happiness it will give Wendy. Of course, if Mom shares the Milky Way bar, she will lose the enjoyment of eating half of it. What should Mom do?

Our discussion in class will start with these two cases.

FRIDAY, 9/30

Bentham presents a general ethical principle that differs from Browne’s Ethical Egoism. Bentham defines the Principle of Utility as "that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." So far, it sounds like Ethical Egoism -- do the action that promotes your happiness.

However, the difference between Browne's Ethical Egoism and Bentham's Utilitarianism becomes clear when you focus on the phrase "party whose interest is in question." If an action would truly affect only the person doing it, then only he or she would be the "party whose interest is in question," and Utilitarianism would require the person to consider only his or her own happiness. This is indeed the same position as Ethical Egoism. **But this would be the case only for an action that affects just the person doing the action.**
If an action would affect not only the person doing the action, but others as well, Bentham says the others are "parties whose interest is in question," and this means their happiness also has to be considered. He discusses the "summing" process by which the happiness and unhappiness of all parties are weighed against each other. This process gives moral approval to actions that give the best balance between happiness and unhappiness for the entire group that is affected by the action. Although Bentham grants that the person doing the action might be most immediately affected and, therefore, have the greatest interest in the action, everyone else who has an interest must be taken into account. The difference between this view and Egoism could not be clearer.

As on Wednesday, we will look at some cases. The first two return for a curtain call.

Case 1. Pam has just bought a bag of Hershey kisses, which she likes very much. Her roommate, Helen, also likes Hershey kisses -- so much so that if Pam left the candy out where Helen could find it, Helen would eat the candy up before Pam could have more than a few pieces. Pam is thinking about hiding the candy, but is worried if it would be "nice" (that is, moral) to hide it away from Helen since Helen likes Hershey kisses so much. What should Pam do?

Case 2. Sam is fairly wealthy, and has a large chunk of extra cash. This chunk is big enough to do one of two things (among others). One thing he could do is buy a small Caribbean island and build a great house on it. He would really like this. Another thing he could do is give several million dollars a year to charities that help children. He really feels badly about children suffering. He can't do both. What is the moral choice for Sam?

Our discussion in class will depart from these two cases.

MONDAY, 10/3 – NO CLASS, Fall Recess

WEDNESDAY, 10/5

MacIver discusses the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." He points out that this never tells you what to do in a particular situation, but rather it tells you the attitude you should have, and the process you should use, when you determine what to do. Since the Golden Rule refers to a decision-making process and not specific actions, MacIver says everyone can adopt it, even if they have different beliefs about right and wrong actions.

How can the Golden Rule be adopted universally by people who have different specific beliefs? MacIver points out that everyone believes that their own belief is correct and, moreover, that they should be allowed to believe it even when they are in a minority. This means that the Golden Rule always implies you should grant others freedom of belief. But doesn't this result in everyone doing whatever they like? No, because the Golden Rule implies it is wrong to cause harm to others, and it probably also implies it is right to cause good for others.

As we did previously, we will look at some cases. The first two return for a curtain call.
Case 1. Pam has just bought a bag of Hershey kisses, which she likes very much. Her roommate, Helen, also likes Hershey kisses -- so much so that if Pam left the candy out where Helen could find it, Helen would eat the candy up before Pam could have more than a few pieces. Pam is thinking about hiding the candy, but is worried if it would be "nice" (that is, moral) to hide it away from Helen since Helen likes Hershey kisses so much. What should Pam do?

Case 2. Sam is fairly wealthy, and has a large chunk of extra cash. This chunk is big enough to do one of two things (among others). One thing he could do is buy a small Caribbean island and build a fantastic house on it. He would really like this. Another thing he could do is give several million dollars a year to charities that help children. He really feels badly about children suffering. He can't do both. What is the moral choice for Sam?

FRIDAY, 10/7 – NO CLASS

MONDAY, 10/10 – NO CLASS

WEDNESDAY, 10/12

Baxter and Singer offer two radically different perspectives on making moral judgments about pollution. Both accept the notion that some acts of pollution are moral, and some are not. However, they argue for different sets of values on which to base these judgments.

Baxter says these judgments must be based on a set of values that give primacy to humans and their needs and wants, because trying to give moral value to the natural world makes no sense. This leads him to develop a theory about optimizing pollution, rather than eliminating it.

Singer argues that it does make sense to give moral value to other animals, plants, and "nature" in general. This approach supports what has been called “deep ecology,” which requires us to eradicate pollution and harm to the environment.

Who is right?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT #6 -- Due in class Wednesday, 10/12.

Baxter states four basic criteria for developing solutions to problems of human organization, that is, four general moral principles. Are they Utilitarian? Egoistic? Do they adhere to the Golden Rule? If they do not, what is the common premise behind the four criteria?

What if there is no common premise, and Baxter’s four criteria apparently contradict each other in terms of the general moral premise behind them, that is, is one premise Utilitarian, another Egoistic, and so on? If there is some contradiction, does he give us any guidance about what to do in a situation where one criteria says, “Do X,” and another criteria says, Do Y?”
FRIDAY, 10/14

Levin argues that torture is acceptable — perhaps even mandatory — in certain cases. His approach appears to be straight-forward Utilitarianism. However, there is a strong tradition in the United States for individual rights. For example, the Declaration of Independence declares that we have “inalienable” rights, that is rights that are absolute and cannot be infringed upon for any reason whatever. Moreover, the Constitution includes a Bill of Rights, many Supreme Court decisions have upheld individual rights against the claims of increased welfare for society as a whole, and so on.

Do you accept Levin’s argument? If you do, does that mean that somehow you have rejected our American tradition of individual rights? If you do not, can you still somehow be a Utilitarian, or do you have to adopt another general moral theory? Which one?

MONDAY, 10/17

Harris advances the following radical notion: whenever two or more people need organ transplants to survive (each person needing different organs), chose another person by lottery from which to harvest the organs.

1) Harris claims a Utilitarian would be in favor of this proposal. Is he right? What would the Utilitarian's argument be? Would a different result follow from the other ethical theories we examined, namely, egoism and the Golden Rule?

2) The Golden Rule is not the only form of absolutist ethical theory. Another version holds that valid ethical principles must meet two tests:
   - Universal -- can apply without ethical or logical contradiction to all persons at all times.
   - Reversible -- willing to apply to yourself.
   Is Harris' proposal valid by these two tests?

3) Can you think of any other instances in which society randomly (or arbitrarily) selects people to die so that a greater number can live? What are they? Do they differ in significant ways from the situation Harris proposes? If they do not, does that mean we should accept Harris' proposal, or does it mean we should stop the other practices?

Our discussion in class will start from these questions.

WEDNESDAY, 10/19 – Mid-Term Exam