

COLLEGE GUILD
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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 4 of 6

Epistemology to Ethics

So far we've been to ancient Greece in Plato's cave to lead into metaphysics, Kant's office to talk about epistemology, and now we're here in the Netherlands at Descartes's house to talk about ethics. We are going to introduce this philosopher in a second, but let's set the groundwork for ethics briefly here.

The philosophical study of ethics (also known as "moral philosophy") attempts to decide what values and principles we should use to judge human action as morally right or wrong. It attempts to consider questions such as: How can I know what is right? How should one live? The study of ethics works with such concerns as human rights, racial justice, affirmative action, environmental ethics, and business ethics in order to determine what would be the morally right thing to do.

Now the philosopher's home we are visiting is that of René Descartes (1596-1650). In his book *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes set out to prove the authenticity of our knowledge. To do so he decided any knowledge that can be doubted was to be discarded.

So, you may be asking, how does this relate to ethics at all? Isn't Descartes's work merely an epistemological issue?

- 1. Can you think of a way in which claims of justice are related to epistemology? (It may be helpful to think of the way courts operate in the U.S. What is the responsibility someone has in order to show that their call for justice is legitimate?) Pick one other field of philosophy and show how it is related to ethics. Bonus points if you're able to connect to all of them. 😊**

Now, back to Descartes!

Take a look at his introduction below from his *Meditations on First Philosophy* in his chapter, "First Meditation: What can be called into doubt":

"Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last".

- 2. Have you ever been in a situation or experienced a moment in your life where everything you thought you knew was crumbling? What are some of thoughts and feelings you had during that time?**

- 3. How did you deal with such a situation?**

Crises in our life often lead us to making ethical choices. One might ask, what is the right way to move forward with the situation?

Descartes continues:

“But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions”.

4. What was Descartes’s strategy when he felt everything he knew was in doubt? When he could not tell not only right from wrong, but true from false, how did he deal with this crisis?

Descartes states:

“Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses - for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?”

5. What does Descartes mean when he talks about how “the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance?” Can you give an example of what he is talking about?

6. Can you give an example of when your senses played a trick on you?

Since Descartes was so skeptical of our senses and what they make us believe, he discarded the world as we know it saying this could all be a dream (a matrix of sorts) and we do not even realize it. Descartes went so far as to say that an evil demon could be deceiving us about everything we think we know. We might not even exist! Finally, he came to his singular truth. Because he was able to doubt and question, it could only mean that he existed. In order to doubt he must be thinking. This line of inquiry led him to his most famous phrase: “Cogito ergo sum.” (I think; therefore, I am).

7. How does the act of thinking prove you exist according to Descartes? Can you layout his argument step by step?

8. What is the ethical dimension to Descartes’s search for unquestionable knowledge? One response to this can be found in his underlying motives for pursuing such an investigation. Another element can be in the areas that interested him or the methodology Descartes used to explore possible answers. There is no right answer to this question! Get creative! 😊

One of Descartes’s objectives was to prove the existence of God. The quest to prove God’s existence has been at the center of the fiercest debates among the philosophical schools of thought. The problem that continually arises is that no one has been able to prove God’s existence “without a shadow of doubt.” For every argument resurrected to prove there is a God, a healthy rebuttal has been ushered forth.

There are several arguments in the defense of God’s existence.

- A. The ontological argument argues “for the existence of God holding that the existence of the concept of God entails the existence of God”.

Saint Anselm (1033-1109) argues “which would be greater, a being who is merely thought, or a being who actually exists?” To him, the answer is a being who actually exists. “Since God is by definition the greatest being who can be thought. He must therefore exist. God cannot be nonexistent even in thought.” Anselm argues the idea of an eternal being who either does not yet exist or no longer exists is self-contradictory, so that the very idea we have of such a being requires existence.

Descartes puts forth his position as follows: “I cannot conceive of a God without the property of existence. (His existence cannot be separated from His essence.) Therefore, God exists.”

Descartes also says, “My conception of God is such that he has every sort of perfection. Existence is a perfection. Therefore, God necessarily exists.”

9. Between Anselm and Descartes who put forth the more convincing argument, and why?

Now it’s time to delve deeper into ethics and to get some terminology in! The study of ethics can be divided into two main branches: consequentialism and deontology.

Consequentialism is the theory that the results or outcomes of an action decide if the person was acting rightfully or wrongfully. With this theory, the motive or intention behind taking an action is irrelevant.

With consequentialism, let’s say one lies to someone in order to protect someone’s privacy or to even save someone’s life. For example, during a genocide, someone hid another to protect that person in danger and lied that they knew where they were. Then, even if lying is generally considered wrong, in this situation it may be deemed appropriate.

Deontology is the theory that by following duty or obligation, one can act morally. With this theory, the results of the actions mean nothing. For example, one helps people not because one finds helping people gratifying or because one wants to make the world a better place. With deontology, one helps others because it is simply the right thing to do.

10. What are some weaknesses and strengths within each doctrine? In what situations is one ideology better than the other?

Many of us are familiar with ethical dilemmas. An ethical dilemma is a debate between two moral principles, where two sides can argue about what is wrong or what is right.

Within the branch of ethics is the theory of moral reasoning called Utilitarianism. It holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest benefit over any harm for everyone affected. Here, morality is determined by its usefulness. The phrase “the greatest good for the greatest number” comes from Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832). Another utilitarian was John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873). A modern term for utilitarianism is “situation ethics”.

Here’s an example by philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (born 1929): *A brilliant transplant surgeon has five patients, each in need of a different organ, each of whom will die without that organ. Unfortunately, there are no organs available to perform any of these five transplant operations. A healthy young traveler, just passing through the city the doctor works in, comes in for a routine checkup. In the course of doing the checkup, the doctor discovers that his organs are compatible with all five of his dying patients. Suppose further that if the young man were to disappear, no one would suspect the doctor.*

11. If you were this brilliant transplant surgeon, what would you do and why?

12. Does utilitarianism fall under consequentialism or deontology? Explain and support your position.

In the questions of ethics, we generally ask: “How should I live?” or “What ought I to do?” But in utilitarianism, the question is asked: “What effect will my doing this act in this situation have on the general balance of good over evil?” Thus, morality must depend on balancing the beneficial and the harmful consequences of our conduct.

13. What problems, if any, do you see with this theory of utilitarianism?

One major challenge of utilitarianism is how we go about assigning a value (worth or importance) to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and comparing them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions.

14. Does the principle of utilitarianism take into account considerations of criminal justice? Explain.

One challenge of utilitarianism is that it leads to an “end justifies the means” mentality, when truly the end does not justify the means. If that was the case, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race.

15. Describe an ethical dilemma you’ve experienced and how you dealt with it. How did the situation affect or influence you?

16. Who would you consider is an ethical person and why? (Can be living or historical.) How does this person influence you?

In the next unit, we will go all the way to China to explore the idea of a Chinese philosopher named Confucius known for his unique ethical position. We’ll see you at Unit 5! ☺

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes