CHAPTER FIVE
Ethics and Moral Decision Making

General Outline:
Here’s a starting position: *no one person has the right to make a value judgment on the actions or character of another.* Of course, if this were the case we could all quit stressing over moral questions and just conclude that all values are simply a matter of personal preference. As easy as this answer to our central question may seem, it does present a serious problem of logic: how can opposite and conflicting moral positions both be right at the same time? Logic dictates that they can’t.

Chapter five explores a vast array of ethical perspectives from ancient thinkers such as Plato and his virtue-based character ethics to the modernity’s Ayn Rand and her “virtue of selfishness.” As well as being exposed to both the rational and nonrational approaches to the ethical debate, students will be presented with a sequence of diverse ethical discussions based on such concepts as transcendent rationality, altruism, ethical egoism, feminist theory, and those contained within religious moral codes (e.g., Islamic, Hindu, and Christian).

Class Suggestion:
The “Know Thyself” *The Ethical Perspective Indicator* is a good introduction to the ideas covered in this chapter, and more importantly, helps the student identify her/his own moral assumptions and presuppositions. One thing I’ve found to be an interesting exercise is to ask the students to do the self-diagnostic before taking up the contents of this chapter, and then to complete the same self-diagnostic after completing the chapter. It’s interesting to compare notes both on the individual level and to expand that into a class activity of self-reflection, critique, and discussion of moral decision making.
CHAPTER FIVE
Ethics and Moral Decision Making

The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who,
in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.
-- Dante

Primary Questions
What is one to do? What is the right response to a given situation?
How can anyone justify the action they took?

Morality is not always dealing with the ‘big issues out there,’ but is often an inside job of internalizing individual moral standards.

• Without proper resolution to moral conflicts, the individual (mind) is left disturbed and conflicted (Freud, Christianity, etc.) – moral doubt can be a significant source of stress in modern life.

Strategies to Cope with Moral Suffering

• 1) Some turn to experts, or gurus, or cult leaders, or in desperation, Führers.

• 2) Some quit thinking and conclude all values are matter of personal preference (relativistic position) – but this can lead to illogical propositions of no right or no wrong.

Or...

• 3) Thoughtful, mature adults evaluate moral values from a rational, objective perspective.

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Starting the Moral Trek

Character Ethics

Plato: On Being Good
To be a good person and live the good life, a smooth functioning psyche constitutes a healthy, well-ordered soul.

• If one wishes to live a life of virtue, certain inner adjustments may be required.
Plato’s Teleology
Everything in the universe has a proper function to perform within a harmonious hierarchy of purposes.

- For example, if a pen writes smoothly and does not blot ink, it performs its function.

Plato’s Vision of the Soul
Three components:
1) Appetite (desire) – targets biological/instinctive urges.
2) Spirit (passion) – targets glory, honor, reputation, good name.
3) Reason (intellectual) – targets knowledge, understanding and foresight.

Moral Balance and Plato’s Functional Explanation of Morality
Human soul’s function is to strive for harmonious balance – reason should govern both appetite and spirit.

- We are unhappy when we lose harmony.
- We confuse appearance with reality, and make wrong choices – we fall prey to moral evil and corruption.

Plato’s Character Types
1) Timarchy/Timarchic Character
   - Dominant force in the soul is the spirit.
   - Very driven - Much like modern "A-types."
   - Polite and obedient, but lacks knowledge and education for proper sense of authority over subordinates. (Uncertain and jealous of other's ambitions.)
   - Disordered soul feeds off (false) success, glory and honor.

2) Oligarchy/Oligarchic Character
   - Dominant force in the soul is appetite.
   - Dethrone "parental idols" of glory/honor, and replace with desires, profit seeking, etc.
   - Replaces ambition with avarice. Always on the "make." Only fear, punishment.
   - Although they may have social respect, and know the difference between necessary and unnecessary desires, they do not experience inner tranquility.
3) Democracy/Democratic Character
- Dominant force is appetite.
- Versatile nature (one day monk, next day sinner) is really due to a lack of principles.
- Lack of rational coherence -- like a child in a candy store. (Raised in oligarchic household where pleasure denied.)
- Unnecessary desires, immediate pleasures, and extravagant tastes eventually transform the oligarchic person into a democratic character.

4) Tyranny/Tyrannical Character
- Essentially, criminal personality that has all idle desires controlled by the mania or "madness" of one master passion.
- No shame or guilt is felt by this person. Driven by drunkenness, lust and craziness.
- When they can't afford their passions, they borrow. When they can't borrow, they steal.

Plato’s Just Society
Ideal Society corresponds to three parts of soul.
- Those driven by appetites would be craftsmen, artisans, and traders (i.e., workers, consumers, and business class)
- The auxiliaries are those driven by the 'spirit' and are the police, militia, and civil servants who preserve internal state order.
- The last group would become the most highly trained members of an elite guardian class, the Philosopher-Kings (or rulers).

Plato’s Philosopher-Kings
- Morally virtuous individuals.
- They are temperate and are not enslaved by physical appetites or material desires (cannot be corrupted).
- They display a virtue of courage that supports reason.
- They are wise and just. They know what is best for each part of the soul (society).
- Reason alone gives us perfect knowledge (the rest is imperfect or false knowledge – e.g., Plato's Cave).
Utilitarian Ethics
Bentham’s Utilitarianism
Educated as lawyer, but devoted himself to the principle that ethical questions could be answered in a spirit of scientific objectivity (no need for authority figures or religious dogmas).

• Introduction to the *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) held that the greatest happiness should govern our judgment of every institution and action.

• People’s actions and those of governments could, and should, be evaluated according to their practical consequences of how much good they produce.

Utilitarianism is, therefore, a form of consequentialism --defined as that which produces benefit, advantage, pleasure, happiness, and goodness.

Principle of Utility
Moves from the psychology of wanting (seeking happiness), to the ethical principle that we should pursue it.

• Pain is bad. Pleasure is good.

Problem of Utility
Problem proving this axiom.

• Fails by the *Is-Ought Fallacy* - fails to present an argument that justifies the ethical "ought" from an "is" of experience.

He counters with, “that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved: a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere. To give such proof is as impossible as it is needless.”

The Theory of Sanctions
A *sanction* is the source of pain and pleasure that gives value to actions - - the cause of our behavior.
**Bentham’s Four Sanctions**

1) Physical - Restraints by the Laws of Nature.
2) Moral – Informal relationships that bind one to public opinion.
3) Religious - Obeying God because of punishment or reward.
4) Political - Refrain from crime because of punishment.

**Law, Punishment and Political Reform**

- Laws should only be used to discourage acts which produce evil consequences for society.
- Should not be used for matters of individual or private morality.
- Punishment should not be retributive (eye-for-an-eye).
- The pain of punishment is justified only if it excludes a greater pain to society.
- Compensation for crime is punishment enough.
- Punishment should be avoided when it creates more pain than the crime (e.g., spending a million dollars in tax money to save $100,000 in fraud).
- Punishment must outweigh profit of offense committed (e.g., city parking costs $15, parking fine only $10).
- Bigger crimes deserve bigger punishment (e.g., punishment for illegal beer should not be as harsh as dealing one pound of opium).
- Offenders of the same crime should receive the same punishment.
- The punishment should never exceed the bare minimum required to make it effective (e.g., 'three-strikes’ rule and its fairness).

**Bentham’s Hedonic Calculus**

Definition: Hedonic Calculus is the calculation of pleasure or hedonistic consequences in the spirit of scientific objectivity -- a type of "cost/benefit" analysis.
Criteria for Hedonic Calculus:
1) Intensity- How strong is the pleasure or emotional satisfaction?
2) Duration - Is pleasure short-lived or long lasting?
3) Certainty - How likely or unlikely will action result in pleasure?
4) Propinquity - How soon will the pleasure occur? How near are the consequences?
5) Fecundity - Will the action produce more pleasure in the future? Will the good/pain ratio produce more of the same down the road?
6) Purity - Is there pain accompanying the action? Is there some bad you have to take with the good?
7) Extent - How many people will be affected by the considered action?

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Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe…the starry heavens above and the moral law within.

-- Immanuel Kant

Deontological Ethics
Immanuel Kant

The Rational Basis of Morality
Kant: Not an ethical relativist.
• Morality in not matter of personal opinion or subjective preference.
• Morality should not be completely dependent on cultural, historical or societal factors.

If morality is to make sense, then moral certainty must be found somewhere apart from the diverse world of everyday experience.

Morality is found, therefore, in the structure of reason.
• It is independent of experience or from observation of people's behavior.
• Morality is purely rational - a priori
For example: We can condemn the torturing of children regardless of whether or not anybody actually engages in this practice (experience) and whether or not any society condones it.
Kant’s Concept of The Good Will
Kant recognizes:
1) **Talents of the Mind** (e.g., intelligence, judgment, and wit)
2) **Qualities of Temperament** (e.g., courage, resoluteness, and perseverance),
3) **Gifts of Fortune** (e.g., power, riches, honor, and contentment)

Note: these things are not *unconditionally good* in themselves.

"The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, that is, it is good in and of itself."

-- *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Even uninterrupted happiness in life is not worthy without the influence of good will.
- It is our duty to do the right thing.

**Notion of Duty**
1) Duty should be of first/primary ethical inquiry.
   - Focus should not be self-captivated, obsessed or degrade inner worth – action should be taken out of ethical duty to do so.
   - Naturally inclined actions, although good, are not based on moral worth – action must be done because of ethical duty to right thing (motive), not because you feel like it (inclination).

**Moral Duties to Oneself and to Others**
A prior condition of our duties to others is our duty to ourselves.
- We must maintain our inner worth as moral subjects – do not degrade or damage our personal dignity with actions that would cause us to be objects of moral contempt by others.
Kantian Formalism and The Categorical Imperative

The Categorical Imperative, or absolute moral law:
There is ... only a single categorical imperative and it is this:
Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time
will that it should become a universal law.

- There is a universal moral law, and it is to be found in the
structure of pure reason.
- It is purely rational (a priori) -- not empirical or derived from
experience (a posteriori).
- A person is morally good if he or she performs an act motivated
by the desire to do one's duty, simply for the sake of duty alone
(not for advantage or gain).

The Categorical Imperative:
- The essence of morality lies in acting on the basis of an impersonal
principle which is valid for every person, including oneself.
- Principles must be logically consistent, and be able to be
universalized.

The test of the Categorical Imperative is reversibility.
- Would you want to be on receiving end of the action?
- Moral maxims (universal principles) must be impartial, and
binding on all rational beings unconditionally. They cannot be
hypothetical imperatives (conditional to certain people or belief
systems).

Kantian Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives
1) Categorical Imperatives imply universal necessity and prescriptivity
(must apply to everyone).

2) Hypothetical Imperatives imply conditional and particular (specific)
properties.
- Cannot be universalized and prescribed unconditionally.

For Example:
1) Technical Imperatives or Rules of Skill
- Certain things are done to achieve a specific end (not universal).

2) Prudential Imperative
- Commands us only under certain conditions to do a ‘good
thing’(such as social gatherings).
• These imperatives are not a 'moral duty' as such, but are a 'nice' thing to do for others.

**Autonomy vs. Heteronomy of the Will**
When people act morally, they act freely or willfully out of respect for the moral law.
• Moral agents do their duty for duty’s sake, not because of external incentives or coercive influences (such fear of punishment) – to obey laws or rules of injunction from any other source besides reason is to suffer *heteronomy of the will*.

**Realm of Ends**
An ideal moral universe in which the intrinsic worth and dignity of all persons is respected.
• We never treat people solely as means to our ends, but as ends in themselves.

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**Feminine Ethics**

*Masculine and feminine values, together and in balance yield complementary benefits that enrich life. When either overwhelms the other, neither is life giving. In our society – deprived of soul and therefore of a conscious understanding of the feminine – we’ve been looking at the feminine through the wrong lens, the lens of masculine understanding. However, just as masculine values were never intended to be evaluated through a feminine perspective, feminine values can’t be understood from a masculine viewpoint.*

-- Kathleen Hurley and Theodore Dobson

**Feminine Ethics: Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings**

**Male Bias in Moral Research**
Unfortunately, research done on moral reasoning development has suffered from male-dominated community that devalues feminine perspective and considers it less developed.
• Rational male presentation of ethics too ‘mathematical’ and male biased.
• For example, Kohlberg’s study (Harvard) of moral reasoning development (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages) was limited to only male subjects.
Gilligan argues: Feminine ethics can be based in the *receptive rationality of caring*.

- Women’s ethical experience operates from feminine position of moral care and relationship, not masculine position of rational morality and impersonal justice.

Women are not less developed morally; rather, theorists fail to produce models of human growth that respectfully acknowledge male-female differences.

**Gilligan’s Morality of Care**

Female identity formation occurs in a context of ongoing relationships.

- Experience of attachment is fused with process of identity formation – males prefer emotional separation/rational detachment.

**Gilligan’s Conclusion**

Women tend to display perspectives different from men when it comes to (a) images of humankind, (b) the human condition, (c) human development and (d) what is of value in life.

Feminine morality is characterized by interdependence and responsibility for others.

- The Kantian-Rawlsian-Kohlbergian model of masculine morality defined by autonomy, impartiality and rational self-interest.

**Nel Noddings: Romanticizing Rationality**

Like Gilligan, draws attention to limitations inherent in male dominated, purely rational, principled approach to morality.

- Many universal principles often followed by “except in the case of…”

Efforts to *abstract universals* from concrete situations cause us to lose sight of the unique features and personal variables that give rise to moral questions in the first place.

- Consequently, the detached application of a universal principle from one situation to another is not appropriate.

Feminine ethics do not proceed deductively from principles superimposed on situations.

*To be human is to be in relation to others.*
• Morality comes not from *a priori* structures of reason, but from the dynamics of persons in relation – care-based ethics.
Roots of Existentialism

Perhaps no other thinker explodes our moral complacency as much as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche does.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900): *God is Dead*
- In previous centuries, God was understood as grand architect of the universe (order, structure, and predictability).
- The task of life to do God’s will (we only have freedom of choice to realize our God-given potentialities as His servants).
- With the rise of secularism in European society, Nietzsche proclaims we are no longer bound by supernatural superstitions – we are free from the invented moral restraints of the Judeo-Christian traditions.
- The man-made idol called God is ‘dead,’ we no longer have to hate our “sinful nature” or discount the value of our flesh and blood lives.

*Will to Power*
- With God out of the equation, Nietzsche concludes it is our own will to power – the human drive to push onward – the drives human beings to exceed limits and constraints to achieve.
- The goal of human beings is manifested by self-overcoming and self-mastery.
- The will to power is natural and life affirming.

*Master vs. Slave Morality*
- Those of us who do and are able to chart our own course and determine our own values live by a master morality.
- Those who lack the strength to stand alone must satisfy will to power in another fashion - it is possible to find strength in numbers and obedience to authority.

*Master moralists* are psychologically powerful, strong-willed individuals - nobles not interested in conforming to social conventions.
- They worship power in all of it forms and venues of expression (toughness and rigor), and psychologically honest in admitting their self-assertive tendencies.
Slave moralists condemn the virtues and unbridled achievements of the master moralist.

- They create a reaction against the values of the powerful - those whom they fear - and create a conception of what is negative or evil and then constructs a framework of morality that supports it (e.g., priests/religion).
- They consider good those qualities that enable sufferers to endure their ‘oppressed’ life situation.

Therefore, slave morality is not life affirming, but life denying.

Traditional (Herd) Morality and the Revaluation of Values

Slave morality is degenerate in its negativity, dishonesty, inconsistency, and reactivity -- herd morality is similar.

- Traditional morality suppresses thinking and requires people to surrender their power and freedom for the sake of the collective herd.
- Whereas slave morality is reactive to master moralists (resentment), traditional (herd) morality’s principal function is control (maintain life of herd) not revenge.
- Herd moralists wish to preserve their situation, whereas slave moralists wish to change theirs.

The Superman/Übermensch

In contrast to Christianity’s life denying nihilism, Nietzsche’s ideal for humanity is image of übermensch – a union of spiritual superiority with well-being and an excess of strength (a Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul).

- The ‘overman’ or übermensch as aesthetic phenomenon is a combination of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.
- The Dionysian element is the dynamic stream of life that knows no restraining barriers and defies all limitations.
- The Apollonian is symbolic representation of the power to control and restrain the dynamic forces of life – is sublimates destructive forces and transforms them into creative acts.
**Objectivist Ethics**

*That which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is evil.*

Ayn Rand (1905-1982): *Objectivist Ethics*

Most of us equate selfishness with ‘evil’ – a person who pursues nothing but immediate gratification of mindless whims and momentary desires.

Rand challenges ‘conventional understanding’ of the term, selfish – argues that our failure to understand the concept has led to arrested moral development of humankind.

- Self-interest cannot be determined by random whim or blind desire – it must be discovered and achieved by the guidance of rational principles.
- Morality must be consistent with one’s *rational self-interest/selfishness* (ethical egoism).

**Altruism is Inhumane**

Any *collectivist thinking* which requires the individual to sacrifice personal interest for the benefit of group, society, or state (ethic of altruism) is ultimately destructive.

- Has problem with *beneficiary-criterion of morality* (doing only for oneself is bad, doing for others is good) – that is, making beneficiary of an action only criterion of moral value is grotesque and absurd.
- Dutifully sacrificing for others and hoping that others will dutifully sacrifice for oneself breeds mutual resentment, not pleasure or happiness.
- Altruism transforms people into *sacrificial animals* (those giving of themselves/victims) and *profiteers-on-sacrifice* (those gladly accepting ‘offerings’/parasites) – does not permit room for those who wish to live their lives by sacrificing neither themselves nor others.

For Rand, the view of human beings as either victims or parasites allows for no acceptable concept of justice, nor the possibility of benevolent coexistence among equals – it breeds only cynicism and guilt.

- *Cynicism* because they neither practice nor accept altruistic morality, *guilt* because they dare not reject it because of the peril
of rejecting the ‘collectivist herd’ waiting for your sacrificial offering.
Rand: The Basis of Morality Must Come from Human Nature

Objectivist ethics holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action.

- Our only code of values should be those to save civilization – morality should only be a choice between existence and nonexistence.
- Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action – it is this life that gives humanity its goals.
- One cannot meaningfully discuss the concept of value outside the context of life.
- We make our value judgments in order to secure our survival (our nature) – continued existence is the purpose of valuing.

Rand believes she has dismissed the logical problems of deriving a moral ‘ought’ from ‘is’ of experience.

- The foundation of morality need not have a mystical, social or emotional foundation – nature decides what is necessary for survival.

Values and Virtue

Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep – virtue is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it.

Values: 1) reason, 2) purpose and 3) self-esteem
Virtues: 1) rationality, 2) productivity and 3) pride.

1) Reason is the only source of knowledge and guide to action – to live by the work of one’s own mind.
2) Productive work is the process by which man’s mind supports and sustains life – encompasses the most complete and purposeful use of the mind.
3) Pride is something one earns by working toward one’s own moral perfection – we are required to reject any philosophy, doctrine or religion that preaches self-denial as a virtuous moral duty; to reject any role of sacrificial animal.
Rational Selfishness

The principle of trade is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of justice.

-- Ayn Rand

- Life is the irreducible primary, and it is in support of life that all rational value judgments can be made -- happiness is the purpose of ethics, but not the standard.
- It is not in one’s rational interest to injure, enslave, rob or murder others; therefore, it is a ‘true trader’ who earns what they get, and refuses to take the undeserved – traders deal with each other as equals.
- One can be a trader in business, or a trader in friendship, admiration or in a ‘spiritual transaction’ such as love relationships.

Government’s only purpose is to protect human rights and allow for laissez-faire capitalism.
- Without property rights, no other rights are possible.
- Society is only a number of individual men, and it is government’s only job to protect their lives, property, and right to pursue individual happiness.

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Religion and Ethics: Islamic, Hindu and Christian Perspectives

Islamic Ethics
- Islam began over 1400 years ago when Muhammed was given the word of God by the angel Gabriel in a cave just outside Mecca.
- These divine messages were recorded in the Qur’an, a term that means ‘Reading’ or ‘Recital.’
- Morality is ultimately dependent on God.
- Islam (submission) provides the ‘blueprint’ for opening one’s heart to God, developing the mind and cultivating spiritual strength.

The second source of inspiration is the recorded testament of Muhammed’s life in the Sunnah – inspiration through example.
There are two main sects in Islamic community: Sunni comprise 85 percent and Shi’as comprise the rest. There are many sub-sects including the more well-known mystical sect, the Sufis (e.g., Jalaluddin Rumi).

Hindu Ethics
- Originating in India around 1500 B.C.E., it has grown as a diverse religion both within and outside the South Asian continent.
- Its diversity has allowed it to assimilate elements from many local and regional traditions.
- Major sacred texts include the Vedas (Knowledge/Wisdom), Upanishads, Vedanta (Ultimate Wisdom), and Bhagavad-Gita.

The Bhagavad-Gita (a segment from the larger text, Mahabharata)
Perhaps most direct treatment of “ethics of duty” as it discusses,
- Human nature and the nature of the world,
- The human spirit in relationship to the God,
- The nature of the mystical experience.

The main story is of Arjuna, a member of the Pandavas family, who must go to war with his relatives, the Kauravas family. The dilemma -- to do his duty as a warrior and protect the kingdom by fighting his relatives, or protect his family and friends from physical harm.

His charioteer, the incarnation (avatar) of Krishna (God), explains how Arjuna is justified in going to war.
- As long as wars are not fought for personal gain and power, but for a justifiable cause, it is Arjuna’s duty to follow the laws of dharma (laws of duty).
- The empirical self is limited and transitory, and not something that can be ‘killed’ – he is not ‘killing’ his relatives as such.
- Because nobody can achieve perfection through inaction or renunciation, and because Arjuna is a man of action, he should fight the war.
**Christian Ethics**

Does not start off with a number of philosophical concepts and principles, and then through them construct a comprehensive understanding of universe – starts with revelatory historical events from which it draws conclusions about ultimate nature and structure of reality.

Despite the large number of sects and denominations, they all have the core belief of:

- The reality of one God, and his creation of the universe.
- The *Holy Trinity* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is the divine incarnation of God.
- Christ’s reconciliation of man to God through his death and resurrection – his spirit continues to operate within each of us.
- Human history will end, and God will fulfill his purpose for his creations.

The life of Jesus is central to Christian moral guidance.

- You shall love God with all your heart, and follow the *Golden Rule*, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Although a great variation in moral, social and political behavior, Christians accept:

- The inherent worth of every person who is created in the likeness of God;
- The sanctity of life;
- Imperative to strive for justice in a fallen world.