Chapter 7 – Setting up a Moral System: Basic Assumptions and Basic Principles

General Overview
In this chapter the author tries to deal with a number of issues that up to this point have been left unresolved. These include consequentialism and nonconsequentialism, self and other, act and rule, reason and emotion, absolute and relative, universal and particular. These are some of the most basic poles of ethics and the lack of closure will no doubt have left some of the students frustrated and disappointed. To address this the author proposes to state and justify five basic principles that form the basis for an ethical system that the author calls humanitarian ethics.

Class Suggestions
That students can and should attempt independently to develop their own ethical system is the real objective behind this chapter. Getting students to think about whether they would accept all of the principles argued for here, which ones they might remove or add and how they might all fit together, can be a very interesting learning experience for them. One possibility is to get students to do a review of the coursework so far and think about the principles they might derive from this work. This would entail looking over the chapters on consequentialism, nonconsequentialism, etc., with a view to taking the best ideas from each theory and then figuring out whether one might construct principles that cut across and cohere with these ideas. One can then experiment with these principles in particular contexts or applied moral topics as the author does here in the second part of the book. Alternatively, get students to come up with as set of principles that they can agree to as a group (of say five) and then give them an issue to work on where they apply and test the principles they’ve chosen. In the book the issues are ‘living together without marriage’ and ‘rape’, but any issue will do. In any case, getting students to think hard about how they might construct their own ethics through reflection on basic principles is valuable in itself.

Rallying points. This is also a useful point for instructors to pause, take stock, find out what material you may need to go over again and to point to where you’re going, i.e., that the course will now look at more ‘applied’ issues and cases, etc. Giving students a clear sense of the course as a unified whole with a beginning, middle and end really helps them to order, classify and structure the things you’re asking them to think about learn. Although learning in philosophy is not about ‘banking’ or building up information the quality of learning in philosophy is aided –and at this level – by carefully shaping and guiding their learning process toward some end: i.e., that they are on their way to being able to do something important and worthwhile that they couldn’t do before.
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Key Questions: 1. Pick out one unresolved problem from our list and attempt to push through to a conclusion, clarifying as many smaller parts as you can. 2. State and defend five basic principles that would form the basis of your own ethical system, paying attention to strengths as well as potential weaknesses. 3. Critically evaluate the author’s stated principles and their priorities. Which ones would you replace and why? 4. Choose a moral issue and apply your own moral principles to it, dealing with inconsistencies and/or problems that arise. 5. How does your moral framework repeat, conflict with or depart from the moral system that you came into class with? Explore the differences and explain what you’ve learned. You should ask this question again at the end of the course.

Chapter Summary
Aim at synthesizing the various theories and frameworks to move towards a workable ethical system.

Conflicting general moral issues
Consequentialism versus nonconsequentialism
Basic concern for consequences in any moral system but be aware that end does not justify means.

Self versus other – interestedness
Need to bring about best consequences for all including self.

Act versus rule
Act approach allows for more freedom, rules for more stability. Try to make both work together.

Emotion versus reason
System should be based on reason without excluding emotions.

Basic assumptions:
1. Rationally based
2. Logically consistent
3. Universalizable
4. Should be teachable
5. Have the ability to resolve conflicts

Including the rational and emotional aspects
Human nature – rational and emotional.
Humans are both rational and emotional. But moral appeals to emotion alone solve nothing

Emotion
Reason should guide the emotions but recognize the prominent role they play.

Reason
Reason is a power and reasoning is the exercise of that power. There are formal rules for reasoning that all can learn to support decisions we make.

Reasoning implies:
1. Logical argument
2. Logical consistency
3. Detachment from feelings
4. A common means to arbitrate differences

Logical consistency with flexibility
Consistency: Similar claim/obligation/right, etc. in like circumstance but this should not become an absolutism divorced from complexity of reality.

Including universality and particularity

Universality
Moral system must be broad based enough to include as many as possible.

Particularity
Shouldn’t be so general as to not apply to particular situations and individuals.

Ability to be taught and promulgated
Moral system must be able to be taught or disseminated.

Ability to resolve conflicts
If a system cannot decide between interests then not a good theory. If not capable of resolving conflicts then not much use to people. If these are the assumptions of our moral system, what basic principles support them?

Basic principles, individual freedom and their justification
Can we cut across all the principles of each system to distil our own basic principles?

Choosing principles

Number of principles
One or many?

Golden rule
“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
1. Cannot be only principle since others must want different things than we do
2. Doesn’t tell us what to do; only a basis for evaluating what we have chosen to do

The value of life principle (all life or just human life?)
“Human beings should revere life and accept death.” All ethical systems concern themselves with the value of some lives.

Justification of value of life principle
Life is basic without which no good or bad. Individuals have right to life and death, unless justification can be shown otherwise. Value of life empirically proven.

The principle of goodness or rightness
Always try to do good and avoid doing harm. Ethicists argue over how to achieve this but most agree that this is a sound objective.

Justification of the principle of goodness
If one accepts morality one is committed to the idea of goodness in one way or another. Although ethicists differ some agree on the basic goods. Pluralism is the idea that there are many (more than one) goods. Principle of goodness is logically prior.

Principles of justice or fairness
Human beings should treat others fairly and justly. Justification: If goods are to be shared they should be shared justly. Each should have an equal opportunity to acquire the goods of society. Recognize equality of human beings and yet allow for individual difference.
Principle of truth-telling or honesty

Moral systems cannot function without this principle, ideas cannot be communicated or agreements made if real doubt about the honesty of those involved.

Justification: This principle is necessary but perhaps the hardest to comply with. Because of this vulnerability carefully justified exceptions are allowable but a very strong attempt must be made to be truthful and honest in all relationships.

The principle of individual freedom
Principle of autonomy means that individuals must have freedom to choose how to be moral with the framework of the first four basic principles.

Justification: Each person is unique and each has different needs, abilities, talents, etc. Must recognize and allow for this. For a moral system to work individuals need latitude to make decisions and choices appropriate for their individual differences.

Priority of basic principles
Two ways in which priority of principles may be determined:

1. General: logical and empirical
2. Particular: actual situation or context

A general way of determining priority – two categories
The primary category
Logical priority (goodness) and empirical priority (value of life)

Secondary category
Covers the other three principles. The principles of goodness and value of life are essential to any moral system, although one may take precedence over the other. The other three principles are interchangeable among themselves but not with the first two principles.

Particular way of determining priority
The five principles must be applicable in real moral situations and these situations will determine the priority that one gives to the principles. This is an example of a mixed deontological approach to ethics. This system is then tested with the examples of marriage and rape.

Conclusion
The five principles together constitute what the author calls ‘humanitarian ethics’ and allows for diversity and variety in the context of stability and rationality.