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(Before reading the following lecture, watch and listen to the RealPlayer presentation for Module Three entitled “After Human Nature?”)

New Views on Where Morality Comes From

In the slide presentation for this module, we emphasized both the significance of the new theory for understanding ethics that came with Immanuel Kant in the 18th century as well as some of the ways in which those who came after Kant questioned many of the traditional assumptions of ethics. In these lectures and the readings,

I hope you’ll come to a better understanding of all these views. *As with the previous modules, get into the habit of (1) reading the “Background” section, then (2) the actual primary source reading in our textbook, then (3) back to these notes for a recap of the main points in “The Argument” back here for each of the thinkers discussed.*

I. Kant: duty above all

A. BACKGROUND

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is one of the most influential philosophers of modern times, and created a kind of revolution in moral thinking as well. As one of the foremost Enlightenment philosophers, Kant was primarily concerned with the concepts of *reason* and *freedom*, which as we have already seen are both significant to philosophical ethics. Kant’s so-called “critical project” was the writing of three long books, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87), the *Critique of Pure Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). In these works, Kant tried to provide new and solid philosophical foundations for science and knowledge, morality, and art and beauty, respectively. The attempt was not entirely successful, but it did have an enormous impact on thought and culture after Kant’s time.

Kant’s religious and moral background and the influence of **Stoic** philosophy convinced him of two things regarding morality:

1. we humans often mistakenly believe that we are being moral when we do things that we do for reasons of sympathy, emotion, self-interest, or purposes of “saving face,” but we’re not, and
2. the most important characteristics of moral thinking and action are *good will*, or good intentions, and *duty*, that is, the recognition of our moral obligations.

When you consider (2) in light of (1), you may be able to see that Kant could be (and was!) highly critical of other views in ethics, especially those such as Hobbes’s (based on enlightened egoism) and Hume’s (based on sympathy). As a thoroughgoing advocate of the power of reason, Kant thought that he could show that moral duty provided a necessary motivation to our thinking and acting, and effectively claimed that to be

immoral was to also be irrational! Caveat: I know that Kant is difficult to read, but the value of his ideas is so great, he is a must for a course such as this.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Kant develops his view of what is fundamental to morality by creating two contrasts, both of which can be seen on p. 39. The first of these is the contrast of “duty versus inclination.” By the latter of these terms, Kant means “interest” or what we are “inclined” to do to achieve our purposes (note this doesn’t have to be narrow *self-interest*—I can be inclined to help feed starving children in Central America because I sympathize with their plight, and this is still one of my interests, for Kant). This is an important distinction, because for Kant, my moral duties are the sort of things I *must* do, even if I *do not want to do them*. Can you think of examples from your own life that fit this view of duty?
2. Kant’s second distinction is “*physical, psychological, and biological laws of nature versus the moral law.*” We are the kind of creatures that Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hume described us as, says Kant, and we are in many ways like animals: if you prick us, do we not bleed? But we are raised *above* that status, he says, by our knowledge of and answerability to the *moral law*. Kant puts our special status this way: “*Everything in creation which he wishes and over which he has power can be used merely as a means [by humans]; only man, and, with him, every rational creature, is an end in itself.*” Here, the contrast is between things that have no inherent worth (like tools and maybe plants and animals) and the human being who, because each is rational and capable of being moral, is an “end-in-itself.”
3. Because we have this special status, we are due *respect*, which means that we aren’t to be treated merely as means to somebody else’s ends. You may have also noted Kant’s use of the term *autonomy*. As autonomous, we are capable of making our own moral decisions—no one should take this ability from us. Given these views, how do you think Kant would feel about human rights?
4. We will hear more from Kant—this is only an opening shot in a long conflict (for example, module 9 is all about him). In this selection, and as we read more from Kant, I think you will notice that Kantian morality is based on the two fundamental distinctions that I presented in (1) and (2) above. One implication of this (to be discussed in later modules) is that morality has nothing to do with our emotions or our interests: the only reason to do our duty is “for duty’s sake.” The entanglements that our moral life has with family, church, tradition, sympathy for the aged, infirm, children, and those less well off than us are *not moral motivators*. Some people criticize Kant for making ethics too abstract, or stripping away everything valuable and beautiful about treating others and ourselves morally. Perhaps it is too soon to ask, but what do you think?

II: Marx & Engels: materialism and morality

A. BACKGROUND

If the test of the quality of a philosophical idea is how many people it has influenced, then surely **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) and **Friedrich Engels** (1820-1895) rank up there with Jesus, Confucius, and the Buddha. Marx and Engels are the famous (some think *infamous*) founders of a school of communism that, while primarily systematic economic and social doctrine, is based on cultural criticism and certain philosophical tenets. The philosophical basis for their views is known as *historical materialism*, a view that takes the basic framework of thinking of the idealist **Georg W.F. Hegel** and “turns him on his head.” Historical materialism, at its most basic, is characterized by three main ideas:

1. We are creative creatures: humans develop themselves and their world through *labor*, a good and positive use of human energies (and which can be distinguished from *work*, which is what we do simply to earn a living). Labor creates *value*.
2. The basis for all our ideas about ourselves and our world stems from our labor and value creating; thus, at root, our existence is *economic* (or “material”).
3. History develops according to a pattern in which the labor of some is exploited by others; classes develop in terms of who is exploiting and who is exploited, and historical revolutions occur when one class gets fed up with being exploited.

If you read carefully and critically in Marx and Engels, you’ll find threads of all these ideas. Remember this “chicken-or-the-egg” type question: Which came first, moral rules or labor? Taken together, the excerpts from Marx and Engel’s *German Ideology* and *Communist Manifesto* create the foundation for a stinging indictment of modern morality.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Marx and Engels say that humans can be distinguished from animals in many ways, but the most basic way in that they “produce their means of subsistence” (p. 41) What do you think this means? Do you agree with them that “what we are...coincides with *what* we produce and *how* we produce?” (p. 42) Remember the broad sense of *labor* from the background section above: it could include university schooling, work to become a professional or pass a test, even hobbies!
2. One objection to the quote from p. 42 in (1) above is that, beyond our *labor*, we also have *ideas*, *traditions*, and *values*. We do not produce these—they are given to us, or we are trained up in them. Read p. 42 over carefully—what argument do the authors give against this objection?
3. In a state based on communism, exploitation would be at an end. Do Marx and Engels think that totally new forms of religion and morality would arise in such a

state? Do you agree that religion and morality support the social *status quo* and economic exploitation, or is this just conspiracy thinking?

III. Darwin: an evolving moral sense

A. BACKGROUND

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) has gradually become a singularly important figure in the subfield of ethics called “empirical ethics” since his death. Best known as one of the two people responsible for first promoting the theory of evolution by natural selection (the other was Alfred Russel Wallace), Darwin was the author of the classic work *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, published in 1859.

Darwin’s views were often misunderstood and were roundly condemned in his own time. Even today, he and later Darwinian evolutionary thinkers are the target of a vocal religious minority who have little understanding of the fundamental importance of Darwin’s views in zoology, botany, biochemistry, genetics, and evolutionary psychology. Darwin’s views have been misapplied repeatedly in ethics, from the “social statics” of Herbert Spencer at the turn of the 20th century to the movement known as sociobiology near the end of that century. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin himself weighed in on the implications of his theory for understanding where morality comes from.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Notice Darwin’s interest in morality in terms of his “*attempt to see how far the study of the lower animals throws light on one of the highest psychical faculties of man*” (p. 44). Notice also how he approvingly quotes Kant as putting a finger on the sense of obligations or duty as the difference between humans and animals. It’s worth noting that for Kant, the difference between humans and animals was a *difference of kind*—we have reason, we can be moral, *and these facts make us something qualitatively different than any animal*. For Darwin, we are a kind of very clever, very subtle animal—so the difference he sees is a *difference of degree*, not of kind (Kant would probably not have approved of Darwin’s admiration, since according to him, rational humans are different in kind from animals!).
2. Darwin seems to think that “any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man.” This is partly why I say that the human/animal difference is just one of degree, for him. Why does Darwin think each of these four factors help to make “clever animals” moral:
 - sociability?
 - memory?
 - language?
 - habit?

And finally, how do *rules* moderate and channel our impulses, according to Darwin (p. 45)?

3. What is Darwin's brief discussion on animal sociability (pp. 45-47) intended to show? Is social instinct a natural adaptation (natural adaptations, if successful, contribute to survival)? How does sociability contribute to survival, if this is so? What roles do sympathy and the need for approval play in human sociability?

IV. Nietzsche: beyond good and evil

A. BACKGROUND

Like Marx & Engels, German thinker **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) was, in his time, a thoroughgoing critic of both conventional morality and philosophical ethics. But this is not unusual for him, because Nietzsche was critically destructive of much in the Western philosophical tradition. Today, his ideas on the pervasiveness of power in society are used by followers of Michel Foucault in a thoroughgoing critique of social relations and human institutions, and his views on language and ideas form one of the pillars of the "deconstructionism" in postmodern thinking, a school which undermines most traditional ways of interpreting literature and conversation. Throughout his life, Nietzsche suffered from chronic migraines and irritable stomach and bowels, which may partially explain his philosophical negativity. In January 1889, he collapsed in the street after rushing to the defense of a horse being whipped by its owner, and insanity set in. He never recovered.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. One of the central themes in Nietzsche is the idea of the "revaluation of values." In this short selection, we see Nietzsche at work telling us a story (much like Hobbes's or Rousseau's states of nature) that he thinks we will find persuasive; this story is based on the idea that in human history, there have been major revolutions in what cultures find moral. Much of Nietzsche's early interest as a **philologist** was in the languages and cultures of dead civilizations—his favorite was early Greece, before the rise of Athenian democracy and philosophy (think the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*)⁺.
2. See if you can identify the two types of morality here. Nietzsche described an older type on p. 48, a type that may sound familiar given what you now know about the "solitary, nasty, brutish, and short" lives of the people in Hobbes's state of nature. Nietzsche doesn't think this kind of morality is bad: it is a morality of leadership, of domination of the inferior by the superior, of creativity, of life-strivings unchained. Then, there is what he calls "herd morality"—what are its characteristics? Does the term "herd morality" have a good or bad sound—does Nietzsche mean to imply this, do you think? Nietzsche often identifies democracy and Judaeo-Christian tradition with this kind of morality, and also often uses a term found on p. 49 to describe it—"mediocrity."

3. If you understand Nietzsche's basic points, consider these two interpretations of his view: (1) If Nietzsche is calling for another "revaluation of values"—the morality of power, of leadership, of unhampered creativity—then most of us are sunk, and the best we have to hope for is that those for whom "might makes right" will treat us nicely. (2) Nietzsche correctly identifies a "subculture" that venerates power and domination that lays below Western cultural norms of Judaeo-Christianity, democratic equality, and fairness. Maybe this subculture of powerful leaders explains why we often see the actions of politicians and business leaders as unethical, even as we admire them for their strength and charisma.

V. Freud: ethics and the return of the repressed

A. BACKGROUND

In the modern age, few thinkers have done more to change the way we think about ourselves than **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939). An Austrian neurologist known as the "father of the psychoanalytic method," Freud pioneered both the theory and the method of what he called "the talking cure" for mental illness and distress. "The theories distinctive of this school generally included hypotheses that (1) human development is best understood in terms of changing objects of sexual desire, (2) the psychic apparatus habitually represses wishes, usually of a sexual or aggressive nature, whereby they become preserved in one or more unconscious systems of ideas, (3) unconscious conflicts over repressed wishes have a tendency to manifest themselves in dreams, parapraxes ("Freudian slips"), and symptoms, (4) unconscious conflicts are the source of neuroses, and (5) neuroses can be treated through bringing the unconscious wishes and repressed memories to consciousness in psychoanalytic treatment" (from Wikipedia.com).

In this selection, Freud reasons from the idea that ethical behavior is a manifestation of the **superego** repressing the **id**'s impulses to the idea that the ethical values present in a culture may be symbolic of a "cultural superego" of sorts.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. At the beginning of this selection, Freud states a now-familiar theme that we encountered in Hume, among other places: that we have instincts toward fulfilling our own self-interest as well as instincts to be with and care for others (and be cared for), and that these urges sometime come into conflict. For Hume, this is where ethics come in. For Freud, it is not so simple. What are the parallels between the development of the individual and the cultural superego, or "subconscious policeman," according to Freud?
2. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the influence of strong "father figure" types on us produces in us our superego. Sometimes this is good, because this part of our mind checks our worst impulses; sometimes this isn't so good, as when our superego obstructs us entirely in the pursuit of desires that we need, like sex or

companionship. What problems do the “unlikely demands” of the individual and cultural superegos cause for us, according to him (p. 51)?

VI. Gilligan: gender and morality

A. BACKGROUND

“Could there be not *human* ethics, but *man’s* ethics and *woman’s* ethics? **Carol Gilligan**—who is, not coincidentally, the only woman included in this section—argues that much of what men have written about ethics has presented only a partial picture, because it has taken the masculine view of ethics as the only possible one” (from Singer, p. 20). In Gilligan’s (1932—) famous 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, she takes issue with the then-dominant theory of moral development authored by Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg, whose study was based on the moral thinking of boys and men, theorized a six-stage developmental progression: (1) we respond to rewards and punishments; (2) we accept rules that have personal advantage for us; (3) we help and care for others, even if it has no obvious benefit to us; (4) rules must be followed; (5) we think in terms of social contracts and maximizing preferences or happiness; and finally, (6) we respond to universal principles of justice govern thoughts and actions. Gilligan found it troubling that, according to her studies with girls and women, females seldom progressed beyond stage (3) of Kohlberg’s hierarchy.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Gilligan’s argument is, as the Background section said, to pose the possibility that there might be different moral standards for men and for women. The excerpt presented here assumes two important presumptions underlying this view:

1. “Categories of knowledge are human constructions” (p. 51)—that is, the rules that govern science or ethics are not given, but grow up over time dependent upon cultural traditions, relationships of power, etc.
2. “Theories formerly considered to be sexually neutral in their scientific objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent observational and evaluative bias” (p. 51). Notice that up until now, no thinker we have studied has said that their standards are different for men and women. For Gilligan, this reflects the blindness of male-dominated philosophy and ethics. Men don’t realize their view of ethics applies only to them, because *they only see the world from their own perspective*.

For Gilligan, there is a deeply sexist bias at the heart of Kohlberg’s, and indeed, many other moral theorists’ work. Kohlberg’s research indicates, among other things, that women in general (who only reach stage (3) of his hierarchy, remember) are basically *morally immature*.

2. We find a positive response to this bias on p. 53, where Gilligan observes, “[T]he very traits that traditionally have defined the ‘goodness’ of women, their

care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development.” This approach is typically referred to as *care ethics*, and while not restricted in application to women, it does originate from their distinctive experiences of being daughters, caregivers, mothers, and wives. According to Gilligan, care ethics focuses on “the understanding of responsibility and relationships,” and is a different way of thinking about morality than Kohlberg’s stage (6) appeals to fairness, which “ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules” (p. 54).

3. Read over the male and female perspectives from Gilligan’s interviews on pp. 54-55 and compare them to your own thinking about what is more important in being ethical. Do you think that such a thing as a care ethics exists? If so, are women better at it or more comfortable in it than men? Finally, what does Gilligan’s theory imply for our understanding of moral maturity (see 1 above) in men and women?

C. Module 3 Writing Assignment (10 points)

1. Consider this passage from the selection from Kant in this module: “The majesty of duty has nothing to do with the enjoyment of life; it has its own law, even its own tribunal, and however much one wishes to mix them together, in order to offer the mixture to the sick as though it were medicine, they nevertheless soon separate of themselves; but, if they do not separate, the moral ingredient has no effect at all, and even if the physical life gained some strength in this way, the moral life would waste away beyond rescue” (pp. 40-41). Although Kant makes it explicit, the view that morality must mean something other than self-interest and acting emotionally is commonly held by many. Evaluate this view: do you agree or disagree with it, and why?
2. According to Nietzsche, what kind of virtues does the person who rejects “herd morality” cultivate? If we identify these virtues with Freud’s “id,” why does Freud think society tries to suppress them?



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