Moral Reasoning

Moral Judgments and Judgments of Taste

- Moral judgments are prescriptive (ought/ought not/must/must not/can)
- Judgments of taste are descriptive (like/dislike/desire/aversion)
- Moral judgments are supposedly justifiable, while tastes are not
- Moral judgments are supposedly generalizable, while tastes are not

Moral Justification

- How do we justify moral claims?
  - With other moral claims, but then how do we justify these claims?
  - Ultimately with appeal to moral principles, which gives us a moral theory

- How do we justify moral principles?
  - We cannot do better than an appeal to intuition or faith
  - We can judge moral principles according to their logical consequences
• What kinds of moral principles/theories have been proposed?
  
  o Deontological theories: the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be determined by an objective moral principle according to which actions of that type are right or wrong
  o Consequentialist theories: the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be determined by appeal to the goodness and badness of the consequences of all the actions open to the agent; the right action is the one that has the best consequences

Appeals to Principles of Right and Wrong

• Moral principles are considered to apply generally and so the rightness or wrongness of an action can be determined by determining if the principle upon which an action is based is generalizable

• This gives the generalization principle:

  A right action is one that is entailed by a principle that is acceptable when applied generally, and a wrong action is one that is entailed by a principle that is unacceptable when applied generally
Examples of applications of this principle are called **generalization arguments**

Diane: *I don’t see anything wrong with not paying Carl the twenty dollars I owe him.*
Jean: *How can you say such a thing! How would you feel if someone refused to pay you money that they owed you?*

- The approach to the generalization argument here is to apply the principle: *It is always wrong to treat others in a way that you would object to if others treated you that way and it is always right to treat others in the way that you demand others to treat you.*

The approach to moral reasoning using generalizations arguments proceeds in something like the following manner:
1. One appeals to some general moral principle according to which one’s particular moral judgment is correct
2. One defends the general moral principle by showing that one accepts that it would be morally right for others to follow it, even when it is applied against oneself
3. The claims made in step 2. must be sincere; if challenged, one must be able to make a convincing case for one’s sincerity
4. If unsuccessful in steps 2. or 3. one must go back to step 1. and look for another general moral principle that will allow us to carry out steps 2. and 3. successfully.
Appeals to Consequences

- This approach to moral reasoning considers the goodness or badness of the consequences of alternative actions in order to determine right action.

- To give an example:

Suppose that I hear a weather report that it may rain in the afternoon (50% P.O.P.). I have two possible courses of action: to take my umbrella or leave it at home. To make the decision I need to weigh the consequences of each action. If I take the umbrella I might carry it around unnecessarily, or I might be able to keep myself dry if it rains. If I don’t take the umbrella then I won’t have to be bothered by carrying it around if it doesn’t rain, but I’ll get wet if it does. Which consequences (taken as a whole) are better/less bad? This determines the right action.

- Appeals to consequences follow three main steps:

  1. One must identify all of the alternative actions that are open to one in a given situation
  2. One then identifies the consequences that will result from each of the alternative actions identified in step 1. and then one determines how much good or bad will result from the consequences identified in each given case
  3. One compares the net amount of good produced by each alternative and one chooses the alternative that produces the greatest net amount of good (total good minus the total bad)
• This raises two issues:

1. How do we determine what is good/bad?
   • Some kind of criterion is necessary. Many have been proposed, such as pleasure/pain, (ecological) benefit/(ecological) harm and happiness/unhappiness
   • The last of these is the (historically) most common, being associated with Mill’s utilitarianism

2. How do we measure goodness/badness?
   • There is rarely a precise way to do this so it must be a kind of estimate

• The general principle at work here is that one must choose, from the alternatives open to one, the action that produces the most good (least bad). In the case that good/bad is taken to be happiness/unhappiness, this principle is called the **principle of utility** or **the greatest happiness principle**.

• The limitations of this approach to moral reasoning are that
  1. one must consider, in principle, all (or at least all the relevant) consequences of the alternative actions
  2. The assessment of goodness/badness is vague