

Ethics I

Autumn 2011

1 Housekeeping

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My office is room 705 in the philosophy department and my office hours are Tuesdays from 2:30 - 3:30.

I've posted the required readings and most of the optional readings for this course online. Go to theshabbypedagogue.blogspot.com and there you should find the readings that you need.

Typically, there will be two readings each week. You should do both to prepare for lecture and for tutorials. Each week, there is a short question that I want you to think about and write about after you do your readings. Try to write about 500 words in response to organize your thoughts. This is not required and these written remarks will not be collected. You should do this to practice putting your thoughts into words and to monitor yourself to see if you understand the material. This should help you prepare for your formative essays and exam.

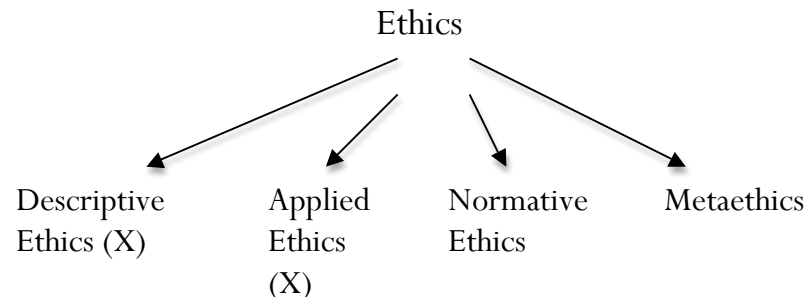
There are special examinations arrangements for UG Study abroad students who are at King's for one semester. They should submit to the departmental office 2 X 1000-word essays by FRIDAY 16 DECEMBER 3 pm (i.e. the last day of Semester I).

These essays correspond to the formative essays that all students are normally required to write. However, in the case of Study Abroad Students who are unable to sit exams in May-June, they will count as their summative assessment.

To ensure parity with other students, study abroad students will have the opportunity to submit drafts of these two essays to their teaching tutors who will provide feedback. The first essay draft will be due before reading week; the second essay draft will be due by Friday 25 November (i.e. end of second week in the second mini-term).

During the first meeting of their tutorial/seminar groups, students who will leave at the end of Term 1 should let their teaching tutors know. Specific modules (e.g. Logic modules) might have different arrangements. Please check with your teaching tutor or with the module tutor.

2 Branches of the discipline



- In *descriptive ethics*, you study human behavior and ethical thought. Descriptive ethics describes our actions and attitudes without evaluating them (e.g. it might tell us about when the Romans left infants out to die of exposure, but not whether they were right to do so).
- If you work in this area, your work would be based on empirical research and your findings would be non-normative. This is not an area of philosophical research.

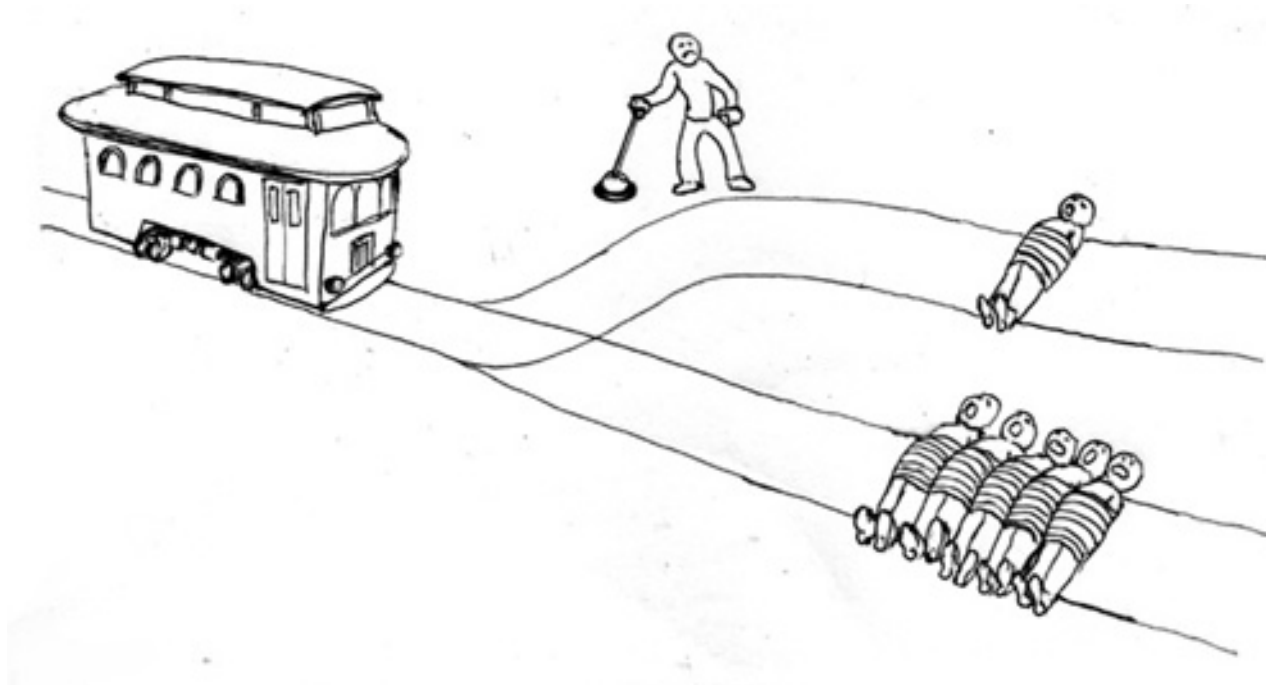
- In *applied ethics*, you try to resolve debates about controversial moral issues. You don't simply tell us that n number of people had abortions, you try to determine when (if ever) it is wrong to have an abortion. These arguments should not rest just on empirical research and they support normative conclusions.
- “Normative” comes from *norma*, which is the Latin word for builder's square. The normative has to do with virtue and vice, right and wrong, or good and bad.

Debates about controversial issues can sometimes turn on non-normative disagreements (e.g., some people don't believe there is an obligation to do anything about carbon emissions because they believe on religious grounds that we won't suffer the effects of climate change; some people thought that non-human animals weren't conscious and so saw no reason not to perform vivisections on dogs), but sometimes disagreements don't stem from disagreements about the non-normative facts (e.g., sometimes equally well-informed people disagree about whether there's an obligation to refrain from eating meat that comes from factory farms because of disagreements about whether sentient animals have moral status). When these disagreements arise and there is a clash of intuitions, you can reach for a principle. In *normative ethics*, we try to see if there are any general characteristics that good things, right actions, or virtuous people have in common and how these various notions are related. Thus, normative ethics is largely concerned with whether there are any general principles and what these principles are.

Let's pause for a moment and think about normative ethics. According to the deontologists, the right is prior to the good. What this means is that we do not determine what is right/wrong simply in terms of some prior conception of what's good/bad. A deontologist might say, for example, that this is a genuine moral principle:

(P1) Above all, you should do no harm.

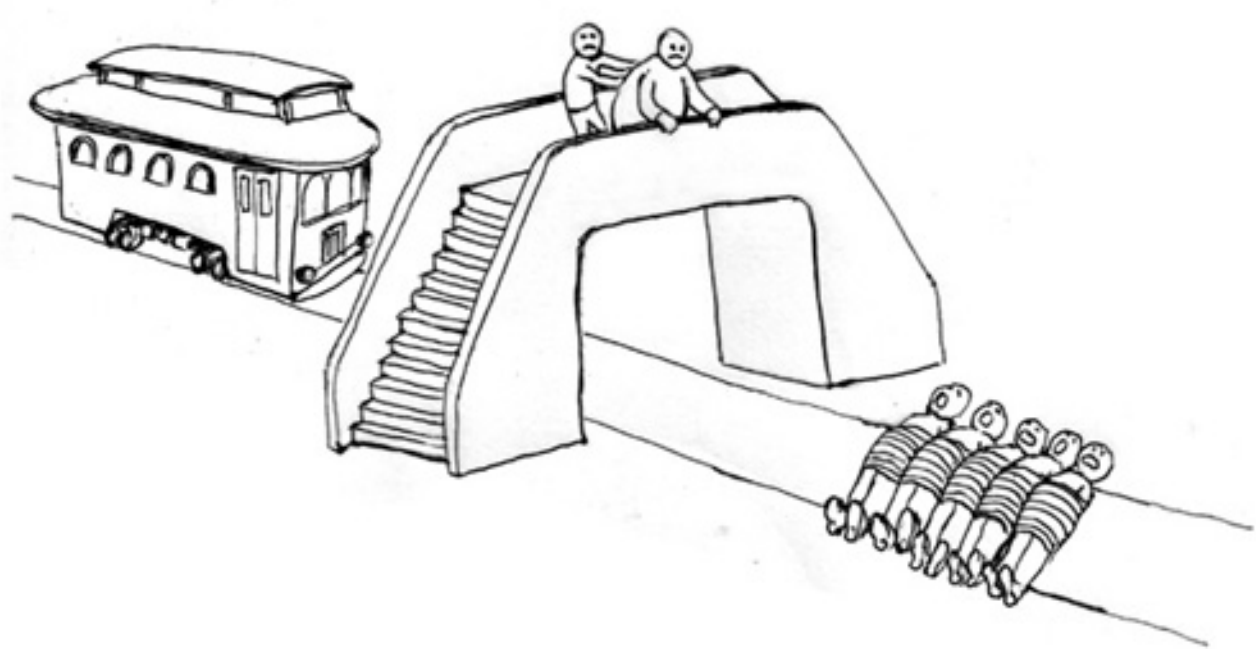
To evaluate this, consider an example:



We need a better principle:

(P2) The ends always justify the means (i.e., do what's best).

P2 seems to me to deliver the right verdict for Simple Trolley. Consider one more example:



Some of us think that it would be wrong to push someone over the bridge in Bridge. If you disagree, consider a variant on Bridge. In Obvious Bridge, your only reason for pushing someone over would be to see if they are big enough to stop a trolley. Would curiosity justify pushing? Suppose you saw your younger brother trying to push someone over the side. He says he wants to see how many bodies it takes to stop the trolley. You would say, “You shouldn’t push that man over the side!” Maybe your advice is often wrong, but you might later think that you *knew* you were right this time. This was an easy case.

According to *commonsense moral realism*, you know that some of your moral opinions are correct. Over the course of the first four weeks, we will see that this view is difficult to defend. Today, I want to briefly discuss two challenges to commonsense moral realism. The first has to do with motivation and moral psychology. The second has to do with moral metaphysics.

3 Moral judgment and motivation

Hare thinks that moral judgments guide or motivate action and the evidence for this is that what we do provides solid if defeasible evidence for claims about our moral commitments:

If we were to ask of a person “What are his moral principles?” the way in which we could be most sure of a true answer would be by studying what he did. He might, to be sure, profess in his conversation all sorts of principles, which in his actions he completely disregarded; but it would be when, knowing all the relevant facts of a situation, he was faced with choices or decisions between alternative courses of action, between alternative answers to the question “What shall I do?”, that he would reveal in what principles of conduct he really believed.”

Michael Smith suggests something similar:

Suppose we are sitting together on Sunday afternoon. World Vision is out collecting money for famine relief, so we are waiting to hear a knock on the door. I am wondering whether to give. We debate the pros and the cons of contributing and, let's suppose, after some discussion, you convince me that I should contribute. There is a knock on the door. What would you expect? I take it that you would expect me to answer the door and give the collector my donation. But suppose I say instead, "But wait! I know I should give to famine relief. But what I haven't been convinced of is that I have any reason to do so!" And let's suppose that I therefore refuse to donate. What would your reaction be? It seems to me that your reaction would be one of extreme puzzlement. The conversation we had was about whether or not I should give. But this just seems equivalent to a conversation about whether or not I have a reason to give to famine relief. Given that I claim to have been convinced by that conversation, and given that reasons have motivational implications, my refusal will therefore quite rightly occasion serious puzzlement. Perhaps I will be able to explain myself: perhaps I think there is a better reason to do something else; or perhaps I am suffering from weakness of will ... But absent some such explanation, the puzzlement will be such as to cast serious doubt on the sincerity of my claim to have been convinced that it is right to give to famine relief at all.

Here's a plausible view. When judgments about what ought to be done don't move someone to act (e.g., when someone suffers from weakness of will or temptation), we think there has to be some explanation as to why this is. We don't think a special explanation is required to explain why people or gods are motivated to do what they sincerely judge should be done.

Example. When someone says that infidelity is wrong and then we discover that they have had the occasional affair, we might think that they have failed to live up to their own standards. If, however, there is a long history of infidelities, we think that they weren't really being sincere. Their commitments and their deeds did not match their words. This suggests that there must be some defeasible connection between judgment and motivation. Otherwise, the history of acting contrary to one's moral claims would not be evidence of insincerity.

These observations support the view known as *judgment motivational internalism* (JMI). JMI says that there is a necessary connection between the judgment that you should A and the motivation to A.

According to Hume, reason is the slave of the passions (this is the “slavery of reason” thesis (SRT)). For Hume, reason is responsible for the formation of belief. He thinks reason/belief cannot motivate you to act on its own either directly or indirectly by producing a desire or a volition to act.

Why think that? Hume argued that our beliefs concern either:

- (a) analytic propositions/mere relations of ideas (e.g., things that are true by definition (e.g., all vixens are foxes));
- (b) synthetic propositions/matters of fact (e.g., things that we observe, what we infer from these observations, causal relations that hold between events).

Hume thought that beliefs concerning analytic propositions cannot motivate us to act unless they helped produce some synthetic belief. (This seems plausible. Learning the definition of a new word doesn’t ever move you to do anything all on its own.) Thus, if belief or reason ever moves you to act on its own, it has to be belief in some synthetic proposition. The problem with the idea of beliefs in synthetic propositions moving you to act is, as Hume observes:

It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us.

Thus, Hume concludes, beliefs are motivationally inert. Belief does play a role in motivation, but only when combined with a pre-existing desire. On Hume's picture, desires provide goals or determine your ends. Beliefs tell you how to achieve these ends, but they do not overturn any desire or provide you with any new ends.

If the SRT is correct, it would be possible for someone to harbor just your beliefs and remain wholly unmoved (e.g., if their desires differed from yours). Suppose you believe that there is a bus coming quickly down the road. You might jump back. Someone with just your belief might jump forward if what they desire is their demise.

[Smith defends the Humean theory of motivation, the view that whenever you have some motivating reason to do something, this motivating reason will involve a desire and a belief about how to attain that desire that explain why you are motivated to act this way.]

We now have our first argument against cognitivism and against CMR:

1. If moral judgments expressed belief, there would be no necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation [SRT].
2. There is, however, a necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation [JMI].
3. (Therefore) Moral judgments do not express belief.

Remember that commonsense moral realism tells us that moral judgments express beliefs and that we know that some of these beliefs are true. The argument just sketched suggests that moral judgments do not express beliefs. As Hume suggests, truth-apt attitudes do not move us to act. As Hare suggests, moral judgments do move us to act. Some respond to this sort of argument by embracing its conclusion. According to *non-cognitivism*, moral judgments express something other than beliefs (e.g., emotions). On this view, moral judgments do not express anything truth-apt and so cannot be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity.

4 Moral judgment and metaphysics

Let's turn to a second problem for CMR. Suppose moral judgments do express belief. Are these moral beliefs ever true? According to CMR, they are. Mackie and the error-theorists think this is a mistake. Yes, moral judgments express belief just as judgments about what witches do and what unicorns like express belief. They express *false* beliefs. There are no unicorns, no witches, and no moral properties.

In judging that an action is wrong, I attribute a property to the action (i.e., wrongness) much in the way that I attribute a property to an action if I judge that it is illegal (i.e., illegality). There's no mystery surrounding illegality (on most views of illegality). Whether an act is legal or not seems to depend upon legal conventions. Whether an act is moral or not, however, seems not to depend just upon conventions. What in the world determines an action's moral status?

Moral realists have two options:

1. Naturalism: Moral properties are natural properties (i.e., the properties studied by the sciences (including psychology) which can enter into causal relationships)
2. Non-Naturalism: Moral properties are non-natural properties (i.e., properties distinct from the natural properties).

Moore's open question argument (OQA) was supposed to deal a decisive blow to naturalism. The property of being desired is a natural property. If naturalism is true, all the normative properties are natural properties, so let's consider the hypothesis that to be good is to be desired (or that 'good' just means 'desired').

Consider three questions:

Q1: I know that x is desired, but is x good?

Q2: I know that x is a bachelor, but is x married?

Q3: I know that x will wrestle a bear, but will x win?

Moore thought that if the property of being good and being desired were just the same property, 'good' would be defined in terms of 'being desired'. He thought, however, that 'good' cannot be so defined.

Moore thought that questions like Q3 are the sorts of questions that you could grasp the meaning of without thereby seeing what the answer was. It's an open-question. Q2, on the other hand, is a closed-question. Anyone who knows what the terms mean should be able to see what the answer to the question is without needing any further information.

Moore thinks that Q1 is also an open-question. Even if you know what 'good' and 'desired' mean, you won't thereby be in a position to settle this question. He also thought that this problem generalized. Plug in any natural property you like, you won't get a proper definition of 'good'. Thus, goodness is not a natural property.

Moore was a non-naturalist. Is non-naturalism a tenable position? Two worries. First, if moral properties are not studied by the sciences and they enter into no causal relationships, how could we ever know about them? Typically, the way we know about some property is that we know that having it/lacking it makes a difference and we learn about the differences having it/lacking it makes (e.g., think about the property of being positively charged, being smaller than a breadbox, being easily visible). Second, don't we have good reason to think that the natural properties are all the properties there are?

According to Mackie, Moore was right to reject naturalism but wrong to embrace non-naturalism. Mackie thinks that our moral judgments are truth-apt (i.e., they aim at the truth or purport to state the truth in the way that, say, wishes and commands do not), but they are never true. In this way, moral discourse is similar to discourse about witches. The judgment, "She is the witch who blighted my crops" is truth-apt (i.e., can be evaluated in terms of truth/falsity) but it is not true. The judgment, "She is the woman who wrongly burned my crops" is also one that can be evaluated in terms of truth/falsity, but there's nothing in the world that could make it true.

We'll get into Mackie's reasons for rejecting non-naturalism later. He thinks that CMR cannot overcome his metaphysical objections in that he thinks that moral properties can neither be natural nor non-natural properties. If he's right, none of our moral beliefs could be true.

- *Metaethics* is concerned with questions about the questions addressed by normative ethics and applied ethics. In metaethics, you study the semantic function of moral discourse (e.g., do we use moral language to express our beliefs about moral facts or do we instead use it to emote or command others to act in certain ways?), the metaphysics of morality (e.g., are moral properties really properties that figure in the natural sciences and enter into causal relations?), the epistemology of moral judgment (e.g., can we ever know which acts are right and which things are good?), the psychology of moral agents (e.g., do moral judgments motivate us to act and, if so, what does this tell us about the psychology of moral judgment?), and the authority of morality (e.g., do moral norms give all rational creatures reasons to act or are moral norms more like laws in giving us reason to act only if there is some further incentive to obey the law?).

5 The very professional map I made

