Philosophical Ethics: the main areas and issues (keynote talk)
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Being an introductory survey this talk will not be either deep or original. It will be an attempt to do what analytic philosophers often do: make a number of distinctions and clarifications which are, in fact, neither distinct nor clear – inevitably so because the area is so complex and controversial.

Thinking about morality.

In every human culture and society there are kinds of activity, whether overt behaviour or thinking, that are characterised as 'moral'. Very roughly, it is considered appropriate that it can be judged or evaluated as good or bad, right or wrong, and the people involved can be praised or blamed, even punished or rewarded. What comes to be characterised as moral differs somewhat from society to society, but it generally includes deliberate behaviour that causes pain, distress, pleasure, embarrassment, or happiness in people (or animals) or which concerns deeply held beliefs about what is important, holy and sacrosanct. We can study this activity and thinking in several ways.

(1) Descriptive Ethics. This is the scientific or empirical study of moral practices and beliefs; the sort of thing that anthropologists, sociologists or psychologists might do.

There is already material for philosophical debate. For example: (i) someone might say 'I think abortion is wrong because I am a Catholic' and offer this as a justification of their view when it merely describes their position. (ii) How does an anthropologist or sociologist decide what to include in their study of moral behaviour? Here science slides into philosophy. (iii) At the descriptive level it is obvious that different societies (and individuals) may hold different beliefs about not only what is to be categorised as moral, but also what behaviour is judged right or wrong and what is to be valued as good or bad. Hence relativism is an empirical fact; but this does not settle the philosophical question whether moral principles and values are relative or absolute.

(2) Normative Ethics. At the everyday level this refers to the activity of making moral judgements, deciding what ought to be done, giving moral advice, praising and blaming and so on. I.e. It is what goes on in the actual practice of morality. But normative ethics also includes the more systematic and theoretical activities of formulating and evaluating moral principles and theories, devising ways of making moral decisions and deciding what to value. Hence the various philosophical theories of morals come under 'normative ethics'. For example:-

(i) Deontological ethics. Moral theories that focus on what it is our duty to do. This is generally associated with the view that certain acts are right or wrong simply because of the kind of acts they are: they: they are right or wrong intrinsically and not solely because of their effects. Deontological theories emphasise rules and principles. E.g. Kantian ethics.

(ii) Consequentialist ethics (including utilitarianism). Moral theories that centre on the idea that an act is right or wrong depending on the goodness or badness of its consequences – the latter being judged according to what pleasure or pain is produced, or by some more sophisticated notion such as general wellbeing.

(iii) Virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is unlike both deontological and consequentialist ethics in that it does not offer a method for discovering our duty or for calculating the right actions. Instead it focuses on the role of one's character and the virtues that it embraces. It enjoins us to act virtuously: that is as someone who is virtuous would act. Our behaviour is not calculated but should be in accord with the "good life" (*eudaimonia*).

(iv) There are several other less popular theories such as intuitionism; contractarianism and those stemming from religious beliefs e.g. Christian ethics. One theory which will be

discussed later is that of John MacMurray. He developed a moral theory using ideas taken from psychoanalysis which stresses the importance of relationships between human beings. We act within a network of relationships and the resulting "community of friendships" is intrinsically valuable.

In recent decades philosophers have taken up the important moral problems such as war, abortion, euthanasia and so on. These substantive debates now form a large part of contemporary normative ethics.

(3) Metaethics. This is the analysis and clarification of moral concepts such as 'goodness', 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', 'duty', 'fairness' etc. (E.g. Not *what* is wrong, as in normative ethics, but *what it means to say* that something is wrong.) It also includes the evaluation of moral arguments and the logic of moral discourse.

It is claimed that it is in Metaethics that we explore the deep foundations of morality since we not only examine the meaning of moral concepts, we also investigate their "status". That is to say, we ask whether moral values and judgements are objective or subjective, and what is the relationship between values and facts. This gives rise to cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories which differ over the question of whether moral judgements are capable of being true or false. There are debates about whether our moral principles are ultimately relative (as suggested by descriptive ethics) or in some sense absolute. If morality is absolute then if two people disagree about what is right or wrong, or good or bad, then one or both of them must be wrong, since there will be a correct answer.

There are philosophical issues concerning Metaethics itself. For example, some philosophers have adopted a "neutrality thesis" that assumes that we can engage in Metaethics in a morally neutral way; just as we can discuss the rules of a game without playing it. It is not obvious that we can.

I will end by considering a few of the main metaethical issues:-

Is, ought and can.

At first sight it seems obvious that we can distinguish between such *facts* as 'Dr Crippen was hanged in 1910' and *evaluative statements* such as 'Dr Crippen was morally reprehensible'. However, we can ask if facts and values are always distinguishable. Statements such as 'She is in pain' seem inextricably mixed. Is this just an accident of language? Could we separate 'She is in pain' into 'She has a persisting sensation S' (a fact) and 'Sensation S is undesirable' (an evaluation)? Those moral realists who believe that moral values are objective must see them as a variety of fact: hence moral judgements can be true or false.

David Hume famously argued that facts and values are distinct, so we cannot deduce evaluative conclusions from purely factual premises. So, whatever facts Nigel Farage may list about immigrants, we cannot conclude that we *ought* to do something about them without adding an evaluative premise.

Hume's claim is controversial but if we accept it several issues emerge. For example, (i) is friendship between people just a fact about them? If it is, can McMurray conclude that this relationship is valuable? If friendship is valuable, is this because it brings pleasure to those involved or is it intrinsically valuable? What about the friendship between Hitler and Mussolini?

The relationship between 'ought' and 'can' is of fundamental importance. Some philosophers, including Kant, have claimed that 'ought' implies 'can' – it cannot be our duty to do, or be praised or blamed for, what we cannot do. But if this is so what becomes of such Christian injunctions as 'Love thine enemies', since it seems plausible to argue that we cannot deliberately choose our feelings?

Similar issues arise about the vexed topic of *human nature*. If some of our behaviour is innate, moral injunctions or condemnations seem irrelevant. Here the debate disappears into the forest of freewill and determinism.

Good and right.

'Good' is a typical evaluative word but, unfortunately, our use of it is immensely varied. We speak of a good man, a good knife, a good forger, a good argument etc. How can we tell which are the moral uses? When we have answered that question we can ask what exactly does it mean to call a person or an act 'good'? When we call something good are we claiming that it is intrinsically good or instrumentally (extrinsically) good?

What is the connection between 'good' and 'right'? Is it always right to do an act deemed good and never right to do a bad act? Consider questions relating to military interventions, self-defence and the familiar "trolley" problems.

Perhaps the most difficult problems about 'good' and 'right', indeed all moral evaluations, concern whether moral judgements are *relative* or in some sense *absolute*.

A popular view is that morality is ultimately *subjective*: that it is just a matter of individual opinion. But there are problems. If to say that something is good *means* that it is valued or approved of by me, then (i) moral argument becomes impossible since opponents are merely stating their personal convictions and there is no dispute; and (ii) the goodness or badness of something would change if I change my mind.

Despite being supported by empirical evidence, the anthropological or sociological thesis that morality is relative to a society or culture is equally problematic. If saying that something is good *means* that it is considered so in my society then (i) whether something, such as capital punishment, is morally good or bad must be settled by a vote, and would change if opinions changed. (ii) Individuals within the community could not both hold different opinions from the majority and be right. They are wrong by definition. (iii) Disputes between different societies or cultures would be impossible because there would be no disagreement..

It seems more convincing to claim that when I say that something is good I mean that it is not only valued by me but *ought* to be considered valuable by others, including you. But where does this 'ought' come from?

Since I appear to be claiming that my evaluation applies to all others does this mean that moral values are absolute, or at least, universal? What could make a value absolute? Must we resort to invoking a God? This leads to numerous problems, not least those discussed in Plato's *Euthyphro*. What exactly is supposed to be 'absolute'? Are there things that are absolutely right, or are there things that are absolutely good? Can we think of a moral principle which is right in all circumstances and situations? Is there anything, such as happiness or human wellbeing, that is always morally good?

One possibility is that moral judgements are always context dependent. Given the full facts about the situation (which, of course, we cannot know) then it could be argued that there is a moral judgement that is absolutely right. Our task is to try and find it. (Perhaps some version of *particularism* might be relevant here.) But this takes us back to Hume and the difficulty of passing from the facts of a situation to a moral conclusion. What evaluative premise did we sneak in and is that premise absolute or at least correct in this context?

Finally, I leave you with what is possibly the most difficult problem concerning morality, especially today when various forms of physicalism and materialism are so popular. It is essentially the familiar problem of freewill versus determinism, but I shall call it "Levin's problem" only because that

character in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* poses it so succinctly. He says: '*If goodness has a cause, it is no longer goodness; if it has a consequence – a reward, it is also not goodness. Therefore goodness is beyond the chain of cause and effect.*' This leads Levin to the belief that goodness is divine: God gives us both truth and goodness.

As a gnarled old agnostic-cum-atheist I don't like this conclusion (note that that is descriptive, not a justification for my views), but the task is to find a better conclusion.