Introduction To Ethics: Review Of Ethical Theories And Applied Ethics

Ethics. The word ethics is derived from both Greek and Latin backgrounds. In Greek, ‘ethos’ means character while in Latin ‘moras’ means customs. As a result, ethics is defined as the personal and professional behavior with regards to the values, customs, behaviors, principles, and morals a society is based upon. There are several various opinions on how certain situations and events can be handled based on society’s morals and ethics. This paper will give a recap of the nine ethical theories covered in class, as well as discuss how some are applied to the topics of environmental issues and global poverty.

Section 1 – Review of Ethical Theories

Subjective Ethical Relativism

Subjective Ethical Relativism is the theory that an action is only deemed morally right if one approves of it. In other words, a person’s actions make that action morally correct. This view is in stark contrast to moral objectivism and the view that moral principles are valid for everyone. One strength of subjectivism is that morality is entirely dependent on an individual and not society as a whole. One major weakness of this theory is that it implies that individuals can never have a genuine moral disagreement as this concept makes morality essentially useless; it would only be a matter of one person’s principles versus another’s.

Emotivism

Expounded by A.J. Ayer, emotivism teaches that there are no objective moral facts and is based on the emotive effect of moral language. Emotivism pays close attention to the manner in which people use language. It views moral judgements not as statements of fact, but rather as expressions of an individuals feelings. This theory demonstrates that moral statements are meaningless and only express an individual’s feelings about a certain issue. Philosophers think ethical statements cannot be converted into statements and be empirically tested. One major strength of emotivism is that emotions guide human reasoning. Therefore, there are a multitude of moral codes that must come down to only opinions. A weakness of this theory includes how unsatisfying it is; philosophers have adopted reasoning that states there is more to ethics than just the expression of an attitude or an attempt to influence someone else’s behavior.

Cultural Ethical Relativism

Cultural Ethical Relativism is the view that believes moral and ethical systems vary from culture to culture. Within this theory, all systems are valid and no one system is considered better than other systems. CER is based upon the idea that every judgement about what is right or wrong is a product of society since there can be no ultimate standard of good or evil. As a result, any and all opinions about morality or ethical issues are subject to each individual's cultural perspective. One strength of cultural ethical relativism is that it promotes tolerance for differences within each culture or society. People from different societies have varying moral beliefs and therefore

should not be judged for their views. One weakness of CER is that it makes it impossible to use moral arguments against the status quo within individuals own culture, regardless of how strong an argument a person has against the status quo.

Egoism

Egoism was furthered by philosopher Ayn Rand and focuses on maximizing individual pleasure. It proposes that all actions should be motivated by self-interest. This theory claims that people should be motivated by their own interests and desires. One strength of egoism is that it promotes self-development; it can help individuals reach their full potential and can help remove people's guilt regarding altruism. At the same time, one major weakness of this theory is that it could be destructive as a whole to society. If everyone is concerned about themselves, problems in society would arise as a result. People would start acting arbitrarily in selfless and careless manners. There would be no rational foundation or commonly shared values.

Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer, a Social Darwinist, believed this theory was an extension of natural selection to society. He arrived at the explanation that those who were economically and socially successful were due to the fact that they were biologically and naturally the fittest. Spencer also used this as a way to reason that the poor were naturally weak as well as unfit. This led him to believe it would be an error on society's part to allow the weak to continue to breed, therefore allowing him to coin the phrase "survival of the fittest." One strength of Social Darwinism is that it helped promote the idea that only the strongest and smartest in a society are able to flourish, leading to an innately better population. On the downside, a weakness of this theory is that it has been used time and again to justify imperialism, racism, eugenics, and social inequality.

Utilitarianism

Classical utilitarian's Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill both believed that an action is deemed morally right or wrong depending on its consequences. More specifically, this influential moral theory believes that the purpose of morality is to make life better through increasing pleasure, happiness, and the number of good things in the world while decreasing pain, unhappiness, and bad things. One strength of utilitarianism is that it aims to treat everyone equally by trying to maximize the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. One weakness of this theory is that it is difficult to define happiness. What one person may perceive to be happiness may be different from what other individuals view as happiness.

Deontology

Associated with philosopher Immanuel Kant, deontology is an ethical theory that focuses on rules when distinguishing whether or not an act is moral. This duty based ethical theory does not focus on the consequences of an action, but rather the action itself. One major strength of this theory is that it is easy to follow and does not require one to weigh the costs versus benefits in a particular situation. It avoids uncertainty and subjectivity as well. However, despite its strengths, one weakness of this test is its rigidity. This ethical theory can be extremely stiff in its rules and duties and can sometimes lead to a disregard for the outcome of a situation.

Virtue Ethics

Developed by Aristotle, virtue ethics is a philosophy that aims to understand morality through a character-based approach. Aristotle believed that humans acquired virtue through the practice of being honest, generous, brave, just, etc. Over time, after practicing these behaviors, an individual would come to develop an honorable and moral character. He also believed that by honing virtuous habits, humans would make the right decision when faced with ethical challenges. One main strength of this theory is that it centers ethics on each individual and what it means to be human. One weakness is that it does not always provide clear guidance in moral dilemmas and that there is no general agreement on what the virtues are.

Divine Command Theory

This theory is the view that morality is dependent upon God. As a result, moral obligations are also dependent upon the obedience of God's commands. This theory states that the specific content of God's commands vary for each particular religion but ultimately have the same moral obligations. Numerous philosophers, including Plato, criticize this theory. In the Euthyphro Dilemma, he questions if an action is morally good because God commands it (DCT), or if God commands it because it is morally good. Saying that God commands something because of its morality undermines His sovereignty. Therefore, it was concluded that God commands certain actions as good or bad because He commands it; it is or is not good because it is a reflection of His divine nature. One strength of DCT is that it gives individuals a sense of purpose; it allows for them to feel as if they are doing God's work. One weakness of this theory is that it removes a sense of responsibility from an individual to find their own morality; it leaves little room for people's own opinions.

Section 2 – Applied Ethics

Environmental Issues

Environmental Issues Defined – Climate change, excessive use of fossil fuels, deforestation, and pollution are some of the key issues from which the Earth is suffering. Environmental ethics is the philosophical approach to considering the moral obligations human beings have regarding the environment. This disciple of ethics considers the moral and ethical relationship people have to the environment; it questions whether or not people have an obligation to preserve and care for the Earth. Environmental issues are ethical issues at heart because people have to take into account rights, welfare, politics, virtue, etc.; humans have a moral responsibility to protect the planet for future generations and other living creatures that are a part of the ecosystem. It is vital that people learn how to respect, honor, and protect the planet.

Utilitarianism – A utilitarianist would view the topic of environmental issues, such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, etc., in a cost-benefit type of standard logic. Utilitarians believe in the consequences of an action rather than the action itself. In this specific case, standard economic logic (costly approaches to a cleaner and healthier planet) would be "weighed against environmental protection/conservation" (Richards, 2013, p. 42). When the benefits to individuals are slight and uncertain with the use of fossil fuels, deforestation, and pollution while the costs are immediate and real, the rational choice a utilitarian would counter is that applying green methods of action would promote the best for the most amount of people (Richards,

2013). Because this theory centers around consequences of an action, not using sustainable resources and furthering environmental issues would lead to a disregard for future generations, something that goes against the core beliefs of this theory (it must consider the best for the most amount of people). As a result, this theory does not support the continuation of environmental issues.

Egoism – On the other of the spectrum, egoism ethics would promote companies to only think of themselves and their revenue when considering green methods of action regarding environmental issues. For example, in “Eudaimonia, Economics, and the Environment,” Richard states that companies who depend upon fossil fuels, deforestation, and the addition of pollution to the ozone do not “recognize the ‘intrinsic value’ of nature considered apart from whatever it afford the human species” (Richards, 2013, p. 43). This aligns with the theory of egoism as Ayn Rand also believed in people achieving morality through maximizing their own self-interests. However, with this theory, environmental issues would continue to exist as companies and individuals would only think of their own profit rather than trying to minimize the damage done to the planet.

Divine Command Theory – In a Yale article by Richard Somerville, Devine Command Theory is used to rationalize the morality of ethics regarding climate change. DCT stresses that morality is based upon God’s given word due to Him being divine. In all cultures, regardless of what holy text it is derived from, God commands all beings to respectfully treat each other. Somerville (2008) claims that in an ideal world, “effective international agreements to restrict greenhouse gas emissions” would be issues to avoid harmful climate change and the harming of wildlife (para. 2). However, because environmental issues are ethical issues, he also states that one major aspect to consider is assessing “responsibility to future generations who must live with a climate we are shaping today” (Somerville, 2008, para. 2). As a result, DCT would oppose the progression of environmental issues as God commands all humans to treat each other and all living creatures with equal respect and honor and furthering the progression of climate change would be an injustice to future generations.

Global Poverty Defined– Global poverty is and has long been a concern of ethics. The eradication of poverty is a problem that can be solved through equal access to quality education as well as people who dedicate time, money, and effort into awareness about it in the world today. This issue considers the moral obligations human beings have regarding the welfare of other individuals. This disciple of ethics considers the moral and ethical relationship people have to the people they live around; it questions whether or not people have an obligation to help aid those in need. Global poverty is an ethical issue because it concerns the universal access to fair education and basic human rights (shelter, food, safety) in a society; human beings have a duty to ensure human dignity and question inequality by helping those in need.

Social Darwinism – A Social Darwinist would view the topic of global poverty as natural selection. They would argue this because Social Darwinist theory supports the extension of Darwinism to social and economic parts of society. The reasons they would argue it is not wrong is because they believe that people who are economically blessed (rich) are more naturally fit and suited to excel in the world, whereas people who are poor are unfit, weak, and should be unallowed to breed. People in poverty do not support the “survival of the fittest.” One study claims that around six million children under the age of five die each year as a result of hunger (Sanchez, 2010). Sanchez goes on to claim that poverty, inequality, and survival are closely related to social inequalities over time. Social Darwinist would argue that they are unable

to live amongst the strongest of society and believe that they should not be given aid.

Deontology – A deontologist, from Kant's point of view, would see global poverty as something to work on ethically. To Kantian's, poverty is a duty based issue that can be resolved. They argue it is wrong because people have a duty to help others regardless of the consequences when it comes to doing the right and morally correct thing. In this case, helping others by contributing money, time, and effort is morally correct and as an end result can aid global poverty. Within the article "Our Problem with Global Justice," a duty-based approach to poverty is discussed. If this urgent moral predicament was handled through a rigid system of "duties of democratic citizens to noncompatriots," then the issue with poverty would slowly be resolved over time (Nili, 2011, p. 631). This article goes on to discuss how a "deontological rationale" would stress people's duties to contributing their time, money, and effort into helping get rid of global poverty (Nili, 2011, p. 631). This view would support the riddance of global poverty.

Virtue Ethics – Virtue ethicists would view the topic of global poverty as immoral. They would oppose it because they believe in ethics through character. The reasons they argue it is wrong is because not helping people in need, especially hundreds of thousands of people who are hungry, shelter-less, jobless, etc., goes against their belief of being an honorable human being. It is not honorable to not help those in need. Nili states in his paper about how global justice is about "' us' treating 'them'" and how helping others is an "honorable" and respectful way of constituting the contemporary philosophical injustice of global poverty(Nili, 2011, p. 629). The only way to become a virtuous, honorable and ethically moral being is by practicing generosity and bravery through helping others. Because aiding others through a character-based approach is what virtue ethics is about, it goes against global poverty.

Conclusion

This paper gave a brief overview of each of the nine ethical theories that were covered in Phil 201, as well as discussed how some of the theories are applied to Environmental Issues and Global Poverty. The personal conclusions one should draw from this paper include that each of the nine theories offer their own strengths and weaknesses regarding how to approach certain ethical dilemmas. It is also important to note that while multiple theories can be applied to a certain situation, not all theories will give a similar outcome. When using these theories in regards to both Environmental Issues and Global Poverty or other ethical dilemmas, it is best to consider what each theory's views are, what it supports, and what its outcomes will be. Ethics is a gray area that expands over all topics. One can only make the most morally and ethically right decision after becoming informed about all theories and their applications.

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