

Virtue Ethics: Theory or Not, Here I Come!

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Kant (Phil 5100, Bovens)

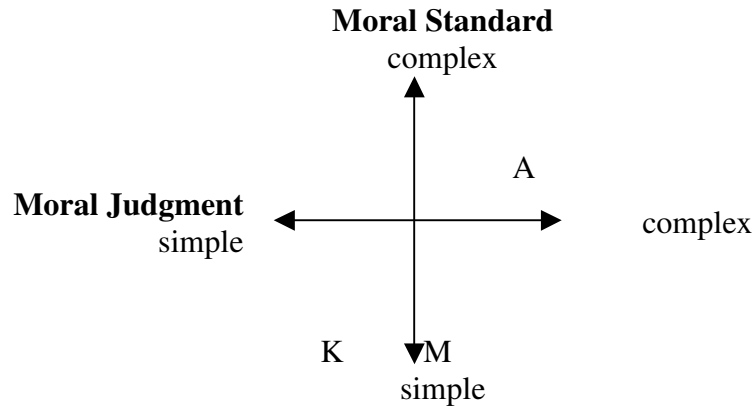
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Introduction

- Today: Slote's conception of virtue ethics, particularly his discussion of theory versus anti-theory debate and his basic conception of substance of moral theory ought to be. Particularly concerned with unpalatable prospect of moral relativism.
- Want to make explicit distinction between two aspects of moral theory:
 - Moral standard is abstract principle against which the morality of states of affairs, characters, principles, and/or actions are judged. E.g. Kant's Categorical Imperative, Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, Aristotle's concept of eudemonia.
 - Moral judgment is process of applying that abstract principle to everyday moral situations. E.g. Kant's universalizing the maxim of action and looking for contradictions of thought and will, Mill's adding and comparing of utilities, Aristotle's relying upon cultivating dispositions, skills, and habits.

Against Moral Theory

- Slote summarizes anti-theorists as arguing against the oversimplification and reductionism of theory-based ethics. With respect to the moral standard, theory is on misguided "quest for hierarchically ordered, exceptionless, and universally applicable moral principles" (179). With respect to moral judgment, theorists "conceive all moral disputes as resolvable by decision procedures that see all moral disputes as reducible to and measurable in terms of some single commensurating moral consideration," i.e. the moral standard (179). Anti-theorists argue that just not possible, that ethics not so neat and clean.
- Slote notes that Aristotle not really subject to these criticisms, and neither are Baron and Pettit. Doesn't say so, but clearly Kant and Mill are legitimate targets. How? My thought is that seems to be a trade-off in between simplicity and complexity in both moral standards and judgment.
 - Simplicity is attractive because offers clear and easy way to apply ethic to daily life. But price of simplicity is that ignore relevant moral distinctions.
 - Complexity attractive because does capture relevant moral distinctions. But price is that much harder to use as guide to everyday choices and actions.
- More clear on 2-D grid. Rough sketch. Debatable.



- Simple moral standard means that have single, clear moral rule to apply everywhere. Kant: CI (complicated by non-equivalence of various versions.) Mill: GHP.
- Complex moral standard means multiple or fuzzy ultimate ends. Aristotle: Well-being somewhat amorphous (although definitely fact of the matter) and mean (or well-being itself) is relative to the individual.
- Simple moral judgment means clear algorithm for moral decisionmaking. Kant: Four steps to apply CI #1 (identify maxim, universalize, conflict of thought, conflict of will) and two steps to apply CI #2 (preservation of humanity, furtherance of humanity). Mill: Intermediate generalizations because of difficulty of calculating collective well-being.
- Complex moral standard means that no algorithm of judgment, very particularistic. Aristotle: Virtue cannot be taught because requires habituated skills of judgment. But Aristotelian complexity doesn't give rise to calculation problems, because are relying upon subconsciously-regulation, not conscious calculation.
- Want moral standard and moral judgment that rich enough to capture all complexity of particulars of a situation, but simple enough to be effectively applied to daily life. Aristotle closest to this ideal. Kant and Mill seem to have dramatically oversimplified as part of Enlightenment project of making ethics into science.
 - Mill: Argument for moral standard largely appeal to intuitions. So intuitions clashing with demands of standard is legitimate objection. Various examples that discussed in class, e.g. double effect, rights. Also major oversimplification in regarding all people's well-being equally. Why should woman care about happiness of rapist in deciding whether to grab gun from nightstand? Moral calculation might give right answer, but including rapist in calculus is revolting.
 - Kant: No objections from intuitions because willing to bite the bullet. Lying not even permissible to save life of innocent person. But can argue, consistent with Baron, that Kantian ethics not as simple as he thinks can be. Various versions of CI not equivalent. Have to object to his argument for good will as only unconditional good.
- Slote argues that Aristotle not really subject to these concerns about oversimplification and reductionism. No exceptionless moral principles. Ethical claims "only for the most part true" (1194b). Also not impartialist. Heavy concern for particulars.

For Moral Theory

- Slote gives just one argument for necessity of moral theory, namely that need moral theory to resolve “paradox and internal incoherence” of “ordinary intuitive moral thought” (180). Sorting through moral intuitions requires moral theory. Two examples of clashes:
 - Moral luck: If not paying attention to road while driving and swerve into lane of opposing traffic momentarily without causing any harm, then don’t blame self. But if hit another car and kill driver, then do blame self. Judgments of blameworthiness depend upon factors outside our control.
 - Obligations to self: Common intuition says that no obligations to promote own well-being. Reason is that naturally love the self and inclined to promote it, so no need for additional moral claims. But do say that have obligations toward friends and family, who we also naturally love and whose well-being are inclined to promote. And, in fact, people are often self-destructive, so not even egoism easy. So if consistent, either ought to say that have moral obligation to promote own well-being or no obligation to promote well-being of friends and family.
- Slote sees need for coherence in ethics as same as need for coherence in science and math. When found contradictions in those areas, looked for overarching theory to explain grounding of arithmetic or validity of some scientific claims but not others. Goal to preserve intuitions where possible, but also consider desirable features like simplicity and scope. (As anti-theorist, Williams argues that that’s all well and good... but don’t pretend that not already engaged in ethics in concern for coherence. Can’t develop ethics from value-neutral perspective. Constraints like coherence are normative. Slote likely not concerned.)
- Would add that also need moral theory to negotiate clashing intuitions between people. Personally don’t share Slote’s intuitions about moral luck and obligations to self cases. Moral theory gives us common ground for discussion. Otherwise, lapse into stupid form of moral relativism in which conflicts between moral intuitions can’t be fruitfully discussed. For example: I say that ought to speak out when people saying stupid things. You say that better to stay quiet. End of discussion. Some common ground on moral theory allows us to appeal to further reasons and values. Don’t necessarily need strict, universalist theory like Kant and Mill, but at least some abstract moral concerns to make discussion possible.

Common Sense Morality

- So by advocating weak form of moral theory, Slote avoids problem of moral relativism between individuals. But own theory, in which adopting common sense morality of culture, leads to just as stupid form of cultural moral relativism.
- Slote argues that Aristotle’s ethics largely based in the “ordinary ethical thinking of his own day” (184). But times have changed. Christianity injected notions of guilt, compassion, and kindness as central features of common morality. So wants to include those. Problem is that no real argument for doing so other than intuitive appeal. Consequently, has no argument for excluding other moral ideals that found appealing. Why not also add asceticism of Christianity of old, so that particularly moral to go live on pillar for 40 years? Why not add glory of martyrdom for Allah by blowing up children,

as common enough in some parts of the world? Heavy notion of original sin? Spare the rod and spoil the child, as found in America's Puritan roots? No means of rejecting these, other than purely subjective appeal of "But I don't want to!"

- Slote has no principled way of deciding in favor of some values and against others. So back into relativism. Just choosing based upon own preferences.

Conclusion

- Unfortunate that Slote was choice for virtue ethics. Miserable job. Lots of interesting work in virtue ethics, but Slote seems to be a dead end.