

BIOETHICS

Bioethics or **Medical Ethics**: The study of the ethical issues arising from the biological and medical sciences.

Bioethics is a branch of *applied* ethics, i.e., the kind of ethics that is concerned with addressing specific areas of potential ethical controversy. Other instances of applied ethics are business ethics and environmental ethics.

However, in order to address any area of ethical importance, we need to have a basic sense of the structure of ethical judgments. Take this one, for example:

(1) Murdering innocent people is wrong.

What does it mean to state (1) sincerely? What kind of judgment is (1)?

SUBJECTIVISM

Here's a first stab at an answer:

Moral subjectivism: Moral statements are neither true nor false. They do nothing more than express our attitudes toward various actions.

On moral subjectivism, to utter (1) would, roughly, amount to saying "Boo for murder!" This is not the kind of statement that is true or false, unlike the following:

(2) That chair is brown.

This has a couple of funny consequences:

Disagreement: If moral statements are neither true nor false, we can't disagree with one another on moral matters. When I say that abortions are sometimes permissible, I'm just saying "Yay for abortions!" and am not disagreeing with someone saying that abortions are never permissible any more than someone saying "Yay for the Red Sox!" is *disagreeing* with someone saying "Boo for the Red Sox!"

Perplexity: Sometimes we feel perplexed about moral issues, in the sense that we really don't know what is right or wrong. However, if moral statements are neither true nor false, there is nothing to be perplexed about; there is no moral fact of the matter.

Moral Advice: We often engage in ethical dialogue for the purpose of seeking moral advice. But if moral statements can neither be true nor false, there is no advice to be had.

RELATIVISM

So, saying that moral statements are neither true nor false seems to commit you to a fairly strange view about ethical language. So let's try another answer:

Moral Relativism: Moral statements are true or false only relative to the standards of a cultural group. More specifically, a moral statement is true for a person in so far as it reflects the prevailing moral standards of her cultural group, and false otherwise.

This may sound refreshing, but has a couple of strange consequences:

Disagreement: If we aren't members of the same cultural group, and different moral standards prevail in our respective groups, *then we're not in disagreement*. If we are members of the same group, *the way to resolve the dispute is by way of an opinion poll*.

Perplexity: What should we be doing if we're perplexed according to the relativist? Identify the relevant cultural group and go with the majority.

Moral Advice: What kind of advice can we give on moral relativism? One kind and one kind only: Identify the relevant cultural group and go with the majority.

This sounds far less progressive than one would've expected from relativism. Indeed, it sounds utterly reactionary. And it gets worse. Consider (1) above. When is (1) true according to the relativist? Well, first of all, no ethical judgment is ever true as such, according to the relativist. Ethical judgments are only true relative to a cultural group. So when is (1) true *for you*?

The statement "Murdering innocent people is wrong" is true for you if and only if the majority of your cultural group take it to be morally wrong to murder innocent people.

So what should you do if you happen to be part of a culture that takes it to be morally right to murder innocent people? That's right: murder innocent people.

MORAL OBJECTIVISM

Here's a third attempt at an answer:

Moral Objectivism: There are correct answers to moral questions, which are independent of what any individual or group of individuals believes.

Let's see what follows from moral objectivism in relation to the above themes:

Disagreement: At least one person is right in cases of moral disagreement, but the objectivist doesn't say who that person is. This is in line with how it *feels* when we're disagreeing with someone on a moral matter.

Perplexity: There is a right answer to the moral question you're perplexed about, but the objectivist doesn't tell you what it is. This is in line with how it *feels* when we're morally perplexed.

Moral Advice: The objectivist says that there is advice to be had, but does not tell us what that advice is. This is in keeping with our tendency to seek advice.

So, moral objectivism implies that there are morally correct answers to moral questions. However, it doesn't tell us *what* the correct ethical answers are. As such, it implies something that seems true: that ethics is hard.

GOAL OF THE COURSE

What I've tried to do so far is to throw some doubt on some things that we're prone to say about ethics before paying careful attention to the details, such as "It's all relative" and "There are no moral facts." However, there is one thing commonly said about ethics that I think there's some grain of truth to, and that is that every ethical case is unique, and not always amendable to systematic rules and norms.

This also gets at the core of what I'm hoping that we'll attain in this course, which is *not* to work out simple rules that will tell you what's morally right or wrong, but rather provide you with some conceptual tools that may help you think clearly about often quite complex ethical matters in the medical sciences.