

The Concept of Morality

Since the beginning of civilization, moral philosophers have tried to answer the question of where humans get their morality from and why. There are many theories which have been offered to explain this phenomenon; often times being the exact opposite of each other. However, some theories have blatant issues when trying to satisfy the Minimum Conception of Morality (MCM). The arguments against the basic principles of Cultural Relativism, Subjectivism in Ethics, the Divine Command Theory, the Natural Law Theory, and Ethical Egoism reveal how each of these theories are unable to provide a logically consistent concept of morality based on the tenets of the MCM.

Notably, James and Stuart Rachels define the two main points concerning the nature of morality in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*: “first, moral judgments must be backed by good reasons...second, morality requires the impartial consideration of each individual’s interests” (10). Moral reasoning must be fueled facts and not feelings, as facts exist independently of what individuals *feel*: “It is a fact that some people are homosexual and some are heterosexual; it is not a fact that one is good and one is bad” (33). The requirement of impartiality derives from the idea that “...each individual’s interests are equally important; no one should get special treatment” (12). Together they define the Minimum Conception of Morality: “...the effort to guide one’s conduct by reason...while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual affected by one’s decision” (13).

Although the theory of Cultural Relativism may sound like the place to start when talking about morality – the idea that there are no universal moral truths as customs of different societies are all that persist; having the ability to say the way one culture does something is “right” or

“wrong” implies that we can judge their customs by an independent standard of “right” or “wrong” which does not exist (16) – there are disagreements when it is broken down next to the MCM. One disagreement is that there are some universal values amongst societies that allow them to exist; outlawing murder allows people to feel safe and rules against lying allow people to communicate (23). Another disagreement showing how it cannot provide a logically consistent concept of morality is that we can form culture-independent standards of right and wrong when it comes to deciding if a practice is helpful or harmful as a whole. In the Japanese game *RapeLay* “the point of the game is to score points by molesting and raping a young woman, her mother, and younger sister” (D2L Clips, *RapeLay*). Although Cultural Relativism would want us to not judge the goal of the game as it comes from a different culture, rape is morally wrong as it is against the interests of those affected, so therefore we can deem the concept of this game morally wrong.

Alternatively, Subjectivism in Ethics tries to explain that “where morality is concerned, there are no ‘facts,’ and no one is ‘right.’ People just feel differently...” (Rachels 33). Nazi film maker Leni Riefenstahl created propaganda which presented Nazi party members as upstanding members of the government who help the youth and gave the German citizens jobs (D2L Clips, *Triumph of the Will*). Subjectivism would defend Riefenstahl’s films as she *felt* she was portraying the truth, when really the Nazis were on a mission to ethnically cleanse Europe. Since Subjectivism claims that morality is all about feelings, it automatically disagrees with the MCM because it throws out moral thinking altogether by abandoning reason and opting for feelings.

Conversely, another theory opposite of Subjectivism is the Divine Command Theory - instead of individual feelings, God determines what is right and wrong; actions commanded are morally required, actions forbidden are morally wrong, and everything else is morally neutral

(Rachels 51). One main disagreement is that atheists and those who do not believe in God cannot accept this theory. Another identified by Plato as he asked, “Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?” (51). His question accounts for issues that conflict with Divine Command Theory and reason in the MCM: morality becomes mysterious - how could the mere act of commanding something make it right? - , morality makes God’s commands arbitrary - God creates the reasons so he could command anything - , and morality provides the wrong reasons for moral principles - if God did not exist, violent actions would not be wrong because God would not be around to make it wrong (53).

Together with Divine Command Theory, the Theory of Natural Law states everything has a purpose because that is what God intended (55). Members of the Westboro Baptist Church claim homosexual intercourse is morally wrong because same-sex sex is not natural; the natural outcome of intercourse being procreation (D2L Clips, *Westboro Baptist Church*). This theory has three main shortcomings when trying to stay logically consistent with the MCM: the idea that “what’s natural is good” is flawed - disease is natural and it is bad - , it confuses what can and what ought to be done - sex can create babies, but it does not follow that Catholic families ought to continuously having unprotected sex even if they cannot support that many? (*Every Sperm is Sacred*) - , and it conflicts with modern science - the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology work blindly with no set purpose (Rachels 57).

Lastly, Ethical Egoism fails to remain logically consistent with the MCM because it focuses on the individual - dividing the world into two categories of people, ourselves and everyone else, and urging us to put our own interests above theirs (81). The theory provides no solid moral reason to treat ourselves better and goes against impartiality; it is a theory that completely challenges the MCM.

In conclusion, the arguments which break down each of the five theories prove how they are all logically inconsistent with the Minimum Conception of Morality, from polar opposites on to finding the truth behind popular moral debates like same-sex marriage and abortion. To this day there is no clear conclusion to answer where morality comes from, therefore it would be impossible for any of these theories to completely agree with the MCM; there is no handbook for handling all the moral situations which occur in life as we continue to search for moral clarity.

Works Cited

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