Handout 7: Absolute Moral Rules

1. Absolute Moral Rules

An **absolute moral rule** is a rule that states that some actions ought to be done (or ought never to be done), no exceptions. Examples include:

> We should never intentionally kill an innocent person.
> We should never lie.
> The Ten Commandments
> We should never knowingly betray a person's confidence.

In thinking about the nature of absolute moral rules, it is helpful to distinguish two different kinds of sentences that make use of words like "ought" and "should".

2. Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives

A **hypothetical imperative** is a rule that specifies what we *ought* to do *if* we want to reach some end, satisfy some desire, or accomplish some goal. Hypothetical imperatives are typically expressed as "if you want x, you ought to do y." For example, *if you want an A on the exam, you ought to study* is a hypothetical imperative. Hypothetical imperatives only apply to those individuals who have the relevant end, desire, or goal they want to accomplish. And so, if I don't desire to get an A on the exam (maybe I am happy with a D), the hypothetical imperative *if you want an A on the exam, you ought to study* does not apply to me. In short, *desires* make hypothetical imperatives possible.

A **categorical imperative** is a rule that specifies what we *ought* to do something (period), i.e., not on the condition that we have some desire we want to satisfy or goal we want to accomplish. Whereas hypothetical imperatives are typically expressed as "if you want x, you ought to do y", categorical imperatives are expressed as "you ought to do y". Whereas hypothetical imperatives only apply if I have the relevant desire, categorical imperatives apply *universally* and are *independent* of our desires and goals.

Whereas *desires* make hypothetical imperatives possible, it is thought that the faculty of *reason* makes categorical imperatives possible. This is because every individual with the capacity to reason ought to accept the following principle:

> The Categorical Imperative: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

The categorical imperative can be used to specify various moral rules. Actions done in accordance with these rules are *morally good* or *morally permissible*, while actions that violate these rules are *morally wrong*. The procedure works as follows:

Step #1: Consider some action.
Example: I am going to promise to pay back a loan (but I know I won't be able to do this)
Step #2: Ask what maxim (rule) guides it
Example: It is okay *for me* to promise to pay back a loan even if I know I won't be able to pay it back.
Step #3: Determine whether you can *consistently* will this to be a universal law (have it apply to everyone)
Example: We cannot consistently will the maxim *it is okay for everyone to promise to pay back a loan even if they know they can't* to be a universal law because accepting it would make the practice of loan-making impossible. That is, people make loans on the assumption that you are under some obligation to pay it back. But, if the above maxim were true, you would not be under any obligation to pay it back.

Notice that the categorical imperative requires that we are able to apply our various moral rules universally. Thus, if there are categorical moral imperatives, then there are rules that hold in all circumstances, i.e. there are absolute moral rules.

3. Lying

According to the consequentialist, lying is morally permissible if and only if doing so would increase the total amount of happiness. However, some people think that lying is always morally wrong. For example, the ninth commandment "thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" is sometimes interpreted to mean "thou shall not lie". In addition, Kant thought that it was morally wrong to lie.

Argument #1: You should never lie
P1: You ought only to do something that you can willingly universalize.
P2: Your action of lying would follow the maxim: it is acceptable for me to lie.
P3: The universalized form of this maxim is *it is acceptable for everyone to lie* AND you cannot will this consistently. Lying depends upon the assuming that people are under an obligation to say what they believe is true. But, if there is no reason to assume what anyone says is true, then lying is impossible.
P4: Therefore, you should never lie.

Objection #1: P2 is false.
P2 says the maxim guiding an act of lying is *it is acceptable for me to lie*. But, consider a case where lying would prevent the death of someone. If this is the case, then P2 would be false since the maxim would be *it is acceptable for me to lie when it is to save someone's life*. But, it seems that it is possible to will that this maxim be universalized. And so, there is no absolute moral rule not to lie.

Argument #2: Argument from the Ignorance of Consequences
P1: For any given action, we can never be absolutely certain of its consequences.
P2: However, we can be absolute certain of the goodness and badness of an action independent of its consequences.
P3: In the case of lying, we cannot know whether a lie will yield good consequences or bad consequences but we can know (independent of the consequences) that *not lying* is good.
P4: It is our duty to do what we know to be good and to not do what we know to be wrong.

C: Therefore, if we want to do our duty, we ought never to lie because (independent of the consequences), we know that lying is wrong and telling the truth is good.

Objection #1: P3 is false.
P3 is false. We can know if certain lies will yield good consequences. The requirement that we are be *absolute certain* is unreasonably high.

3. Conflicts between Absolute Moral Rules

A further problem for saying that there are absolute moral rules arises when we are faced with moral dilemmas. A **moral dilemma** is a situation where moral rules conflict. A **genuine moral dilemma** is a situation where X and Y are absolute moral rules, and we are in a situation where we must choose between doing X and Y, and doing X violates Y and doing Y. A **false moral dilemma** is a situation where X and Y are absolute moral rules, and it only *seems* as though we are in a situation where we must choose between doing X and Y and where doing X violates Y and doing Y violates X. In the case of false moral dilemmas, it might be that we can decide to do neither X nor Y *or* doing X does not violate Y (or vice versa).

> **Argument #1: Against Absolute Moral Rules**
> P1: If an ethical theory permits absolute moral rules, then it should not allow for genuine moral dilemmas.
> P2: There are genuine moral dilemmas.
> C: Therefore, ethical theories should not involve absolute moral rules.

While P2 is intuitive, P1 is a little unclear. P1 assumes that no ethical theory should imply that you *ought* to do something where it is *impossible* for you to do that. In other words, *an ought implies a can*. Thus, P1 says that any ethical theory that makes use of absolute moral rules should never imply a position where we *ought to not violate some moral rule* but *where we cannot help doing so*.

> **Reply #1 to Argument #1: P2 is false**
> P1: We cannot, at this moment in time, distinguish genuine moral dilemmas from false moral dilemmas.
> P2: A perfect knower (e.g. God) would see all of the things that we see as genuine moral dilemmas as false moral dilemmas.
> C: Therefore, there are no genuine moral dilemmas.

There are two problems with this reply.

First, P2 is speculative and contrary to common sense. Generally, we assume that there are genuine moral dilemmas, e.g. choosing between lying and hurting someone's feelings. Furthermore, even if a perfect knower knows all things, there seems to be no reason why that perfect knower might conclude differently than stated above. Namely, that knower would say that there are genuine moral dilemmas.

Second, the argument is one from ignorance. It argues that since we can't prove that p is not true, it must be that p is true. That is, since we can't prove that that all moral dilemmas are *not-genuine*, it

follows that they are genuine. But this style of argumentation is fallacious since I could argue (analogously): you don't know that Bigfoot doesn't exist, therefore it follows that he does.

Reply #2 to Argument #1: P2 is false because there is only one moral rule.
Perhaps a second way to respond is to respond by arguing as follows:

> P1: There are genuine moral dilemmas if and only if there are at least two absolute moral rules.
> P2: There are not at least two absolute moral rules. There is only one: be moral!
> C: Therefore, there are no genuine moral dilemmas.

While this is a nifty argument, it removes the practical component of absolute moral laws since the absolute moral law to *be moral* does not tell us what *being moral* involves.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What is a hypothetical imperative?
2. Does the hypothetical imperative *if I want to win the lottery, I ought to buy a ticket* apply to some people or everyone?
3. What is a categorical imperative?
4. What is an absolute moral rule?
5. Name at least one problem with saying that there are absolute moral rules.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FURTHER READING