

10

Critical Thinking about Moral Matters

Can we think critically about moral matters? Noncognitivism vs. cognitivism

Particular moral statements and moral principles

Arguments for particular moral statements

Arguments for moral principles

On the face of things, it seems that many of the important arguments we are called upon to assess, from a critical thinking point of view, have moral statements as conclusions. Moral statements concern the moral status of actions, institutions, or individuals. (And when we talk about moral status, we mean the sort of evaluative status that we regard as more fundamental and important than legal, professional, prudential, etc. evaluative status.) For example:

- statements about certain actions (such as preventing unnecessary harm, stealing) being such that we morally ought or ought not to do them
- statements about certain institutions (such as marriage, capitalism) being morally right or wrong
- statements about certain individuals (such as generous people, sexists) being morally good or bad
- etc.

It is sometimes suggested, however, that this appearance is misleading: According to some philosophers, no arguments really have moral statements as conclusions--and hence we can't really ever think critically about moral matters--because there really aren't any moral statements. To be a moral statement, something would have to be a statement, which means it would have to be capable of having a truth value, i.e., capable of being true or false. And according to some philosophers, what appear to be moral statements are not really the sorts of things that can have a truth value. They are really, despite appearances, just expressions of attitudes or emotions, likes or dislikes.

Thus, consider the following expressions:

"Yuck!" (said by a child about the broccoli she's been given)

"Boo!" (said by a spectator of an athletic team's performance)

"Wow!" (said by someone looking at a certain painting)

"Yea!" (said by a student who's just been told that class has been cancelled)

These expressions, one might suppose, aren't really statements: they're not the sort of linguistic items that can be true or false. (Compare how strange it would be to respond to one of them by saying "That's false!" or "Very true.") Rather, they're just expressions of certain attitudes (some positive, some negative) about certain things.

The view that putative moral statements are really just disguised expressions of attitudes, and hence not the sorts of linguistic items that can be true or false, is known as **noncognitivism** about moral matters. The philosophers who hold this view, noncognitivists, thus maintain that putative statements like

"We ought morally to prevent unnecessary harm"
 "You ought morally not to have stolen that"
 "Marriage is morally right"
 "Capitalism is morally wrong"
 "It's morally good to be a generous person"
 "It's morally bad to be a sexist"

are really just disguised forms of attitude-expression like

"Yea!" (said by someone about the prevention of unnecessary harm)
 "Boo!" (said by someone about an act of stealing)
 "Wow!" (said by someone of marriage)
 "Yuck!" (said by someone of capitalism)
 "Yea!" (said by someone of generous people)
 "Boo!" (said by someone of sexists)

By contrast, the view that _____

putative moral statements are expressions of attitudes, and hence are the sorts of linguistic items that can be true or false

_____, is called **cognitivism** about moral matters.

The upshot is that if we think it's really possible to think critically about moral matters--to apply the critical thinking tools we've so far learned in the course to arguments with putative moral statements as their conclusions--we should have some reason for thinking that noncognitivism is false and cognitivism is true.

Consider, for example, the following three reasons, each of which might be developed into an argument against noncognitivism: (1) Sometimes we can have attitudes about something that conflict with the sincere putative moral statements we make about that thing. For example, I might sincerely claim that capitalism is morally wrong, but I might nonetheless be inclined to like capitalism. (2) When we express our attitudes linguistically, we're generally aware that we're not uttering things with truth values; but when we make putative moral statements, we're not generally aware of this. (3) We are committed to the generalizability of our putative moral statements. When we say that something is morally wrong for one individual in certain circumstances, for example, we are committed to it's being wrong for everyone in similar circumstances. But we are not similarly committed to

the generalizability of our linguistic expressions of attitudes. When we say "Boo!" of a particular performance, for example, we are not committed to everyone saying "Boo!" of that performance.

In any case, it's worth bearing in mind that in our discussion to follow we will be assuming a cognitivist view about moral matters, and that it's not clear we could even talk sensibly about thinking critically about moral matters unless we were to adopt the cognitivist view.

Most commonly, when we encounter moral arguments they have **particular moral statements** as their conclusions. Particular moral statements are statements about the moral status of particular actions, institutions, or individuals. The contrast to particular moral statements are **moral principles**, which are statements about the moral status of *all* actions, institutions, or individuals *of a certain sort*. We'll see examples of each kind of moral statement in a moment.

Sometimes, arguments for particular moral claims invoke only other particular moral claims as their premises. For example:

- P1. It's morally wrong for Fred to lie to his Mom about the tuition.
- P2. If it's morally wrong for Fred to lie to his Mom about the tuition, it's morally wrong for you to lie to your Mom about the tuition.
- C. It's morally wrong for you to lie to your Mom about the tuition.

These sorts of moral arguments, however, tend to leave us less than satisfied, because we're typically unlikely to be convinced of the truth of the particular moral claims that serve as their premises unless we're already convinced of the truth of the particular moral claims that stand as their conclusions.

And so we might consider another sort of moral argument for particular moral claims: arguments that include moral principles among their premises. For example:

- P1. For you to lie to your Mom about the tuition is for you to treat her merely as a means to your own ends.
- P2. All actions that treat another person merely as a means to an end are morally wrong.
- C. It's morally wrong for you to lie to your Mom about the tuition.

Here, P2 is a moral principle: It's a claim about the moral status of all actions of a certain sort, viz., of the treating-another-merely-as-a-means sort.

Philosophers who study moral matters (ethicists), have helpfully distinguished two main kinds of moral principle to which we might appeal in our moral arguments-- consequentialist principles, on the one hand, and deontological principles, on the other:

Consequentialist principles: _____

A moral principle that connects the moral status of actions, institutions or individual to their consequences (or to consequences of their action).

Deontological principles: moral principles that connect the moral status of actions, institutions, or individuals to their intrinsic character (i.e., to the kind of action, institution, or individual they are, regardless of their consequences).

(The term "deontological," by the way, comes from a Greek term for absolute duties that bind or constrain us.)

Examples of consequentialist principles would be "All actions that result in the greatest amount of happiness for those affected are morally right," and "If an individual's actions typically result in unnecessary suffering for others, then s/he is morally bad." Examples of deontological principles would include "All actions that treat another human being merely as a means to an end are morally wrong," and "If an individual's actions respect divine commandments, s/he is morally good."

Exercise 10.1: Assume that the evaluative language in each of the following examples is moral. For each example, say whether it's a particular moral statement or a moral principle. If it's a moral principle, say whether it's a consequentialist principle or a deontological principle.

That labor union is good.

By standing up for women in the way that he did, and by dealing with all the hateful, slanderous backlash that ensued, Dr. Morgentaler proved himself an exceptionally good person.

That credit card company is evil.

Every action that treats others as the person performing the action would like to be treated is right.

You ought to return the diary.

If an action is intended to alleviate unnecessary suffering, it is right.

Democracy is good.

It was wrong of you to make that remark.

If an action alleviates unnecessary suffering, it is right.

Exercise 10.1 Solutions.

That labor union is good. **Particular moral statement.**

By standing up for women in the way that he did, and by dealing with all the hateful, slanderous backlash that ensued, Dr. Morgentaler proved himself an exceptionally good person. **Particular moral statement.**

That credit card company is evil. **Particular moral statement.**

Every action that treats others as the person performing the action would like to be treated is right. **Moral principle; deontological.**

You ought to return the diary. **Particular moral statement.**

If an action is intended to alleviate unnecessary suffering, it is right. **Moral principle; deontological.**

Democracy is good. **Particular moral statement.**

It was wrong of you to make that remark. **Particular moral statement.**

If an action alleviates unnecessary suffering, it is right. **Moral principle; consequentialist.**

But, as you might expect, moral principles can clash. This is especially so when we are comparing deontological principles and consequentialists ones: Deontological principles can provide a reason for particular moral statements that conflict with the particular moral statements for which consequentialist principles provide a reason, and vice versa.

Consider, for example, the following argument:

- P1. For you to lie to your Mom about the tuition is for you to treat her merely as a means to your own ends.
- P2. All actions that treat another person merely as a means to an end are morally wrong.
- C. It's morally wrong for you to lie to your Mom about the tuition.

Here, P2 is a deontological principle that (together with P1) provides a reason for a particular moral statement. But now consider the following argument:

- P1. For you to lie to your Mom about the tuition is for you to do something that results in the greatest amount of happiness for those affected.
- P2. All actions that result in the greatest amount of happiness for those affected are morally right.
- C. It's morally right for you to lie to your Mom about the tuition.

In this argument, P2 is now a consequentialist principle, and it serves (together with P1) as a reason to accept a different, conflicting particular moral statement. The second premise of the first argument is a deontological principle that clashes with the second premise of the second argument, which is a consequentialist principle; and this clash can be easily seen by comparing the conflicting moral statements that stand, respectively, as the arguments' conclusions.

Our assessment of moral arguments, then, will often require us to think about which moral principles we should accept. And this raises the question of the sorts of reasons we might have for accepting one moral principle over another. What sorts of arguments can give us reasonable beliefs in moral principles?

Conceivably, many different sorts of arguments can do this, but I will close with a suggestion as to one of the most useful kinds of argument for getting reasonable beliefs in moral principles: Inference to the Best Explanation. Recall the form that nondeductive inferences of this sort have:

Facts $f_1...f_n$ obtain
 The best available explanation of $f_1...f_n$ is E
 Therefore, E

You can treat moral principles, be they consequentialist or deontological, as proposed explanations of moral data. And you can treat particular moral statements that we would more or less all agree are true as the moral data. In other words, a moral principle can stand as the E in an instance of the form Inference to the Best Explanation, and uncontroversially true particular moral statements as the $f_1...f_n$ in such an instance.

Suppose, for example, that we all accepted the following particular moral statements as true (indeed, so obviously true that we're willing to call them moral facts):

- Moral Fact 1: It's morally right for you to tell the truth to your Mom about the tuition.
- Moral Fact 2: It's morally wrong for Fred to lie to his Mom about the tuition.
- Moral Fact 3: It's morally wrong to blame that stranger for something you know she didn't do, in order to prevent great social unrest.
- Moral Fact 4: It's morally right to break that unjust law even though you know it would be much more pleasant for everyone simply to go along with the law.

We could then reason our way to a moral principle, in accordance with Inference to the Best Explanation, as follows:

- P1. Moral Fact 1, Moral Fact 2, Moral Fact 3, and Moral Fact 4.
- P2. The best available explanation of Moral Fact 1, Moral Fact 2, Moral Fact 3, and Moral Fact 4 is that all actions that treat another person merely as a means to an end are morally wrong.
- C. All actions that treat another person merely as a means to an end are morally wrong.

Exercise 10.2: Articulate what you consider to be a plausible moral principle. (The principle can be either consequentialist or deontological.) Then provide a novel argument, in the form of an Inference to the Best Explanation, for your principle.