

PART I

Moral Inquiry

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1 Reflection

CHAPTER 1

Moral Theories

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Moral Life and Moral Theory

Every religious tradition offers guidance for living a moral life. At the most basic level, this guidance is simply woven into the fabric of observances, beliefs, and expectations that shape a way of life we identify as Hindu, or Christian, or Ibo, or Confucian. In most cases, traditions also give rise to teachers, prophets, and philosophers who provide a critical assessment of these everyday expectations. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) gave a systematic account of the virtues that were honored in Greek culture. The Hebrew prophets identified principles of justice and mercy that explained the requirements of the Law (Torah) and sometimes criticized the ways the Law was generally observed. Confucius (551–479 BCE), Lao Tzu (sixth or fourth century BCE), and Chuang Tzu (399–295 BCE) showed the right way to observe Chinese traditional virtues by relating them to the demands of social harmony or to the patterns of an underlying natural order. Such reflections may be called “moral philosophy.” By identifying principles on which practices rest, these reflections systematize prevailing expectations, and they also provide a basis for criticizing and revising them. Most religions have had moral philosophy, in this general sense, for a very long time (Donagan 1977).

Modern moral theory, however, has a more comprehensive critical purpose. Moral theory is less about how to live a particular way and more about why we ought to be moral and what it means to say that a rule, an action, or an ideal is moral. Western philosophers, beginning in the seventeenth century with Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke, attempted to answer these critical questions by establishing the rational requirements for any sort of morality. A moral theory in this modern sense may also give rational arguments for specific moral commands and prohibitions. Some moral theorists begin with this normative task. Others concentrate first on the questions of moral authority and moral meaning. In either case, the theorist develops a comprehensive basis for explaining, comparing, and criticizing existing ways of life or systems of moral philosophy, including religious moralities. On the basis of the moral theory,

the theorist can make judgments about whether the requirements a religion or a way of life imposes are morally justifiable. The theorist also appears to have in principle a powerful tool for comparative study by assessing diverse systems of belief and practice in light of the structure of morality that the theory provides. At the beginning of the modern period in Western thought, these theoretical tools were believed to hold great promise for adjudicating religious conflicts and settling disputes about morality (see chapter 16).

Moral Theory and Religion

The earliest use of moral theory in religious ethics, then, was by Western philosophers who used their theories for a critical evaluation of traditional Christian ethics. This theoretical assessment of prevailing moral traditions has been repeated, with important variations, by other philosophers in relation to other traditions around the world (Cho 1998). Extensive use of moral theory as a tool in the comparative study of religious ethics is a more recent development (Little and Twiss 1978).

The way that a modern moral theory can relate to a religious tradition is well illustrated by the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant based his moral theory on a *categorical imperative*, an exceptionless moral rule that requires us to act only on those reasons that we can also make into universal laws, governing the choices of others as well as our own. Thus, lying is morally wrong because we cannot rationally formulate a rule that would require it as a universal practice. We choose to tell a lie only by allowing ourselves an exception to a rule that we acknowledge in the very act of breaking it (Kant 1964).

Kant's moral theory overturned several understandings of the moral life that have been common in Western Christianity. A Kantian could not argue that God has implanted certain ends and purposes in human beings by nature, so that all people share certain moral aims. Desire for a goal, even if it is universally shared, does not explain why we are morally required to pursue it. Kant's theory thus disposes of a pattern of argument, based on the universal human desire for peace, or happiness, or blessedness, that Catholic Christian writers had learned early from Greek philosophy and built over the centuries into an elaborate theory of natural law, given special prominence in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1125–1274). Likewise, Kant calls into question the claim, more common among Protestant theologians, that we are obliged to obey God's commandments simply and solely because it is God who commands us. Even when God is the lawgiver, the rational person cannot accept the command as a *moral* law unless it meets the test Kant sets out in the categorical imperative (see chapter 21).

While there is little left of some religious ways of thinking about morality in Kant's moral theory, Kant preserved what many people regarded as central to the practice of Christian ethics. Other theories raised more radical questions about conventional moral expectations. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) devised a moral theory in which the basic principle is the development of a person's capacities for creativity and control over the circumstances of life, so that when we ask what we are required to do, the answer must be closely tied to the possibilities inherent in our individual personalities. When

viewed from this theoretical perspective, many prevailing moral expectations and the religious beliefs that support them have no moral justification (Nietzsche 1998). In this case, the theory does not provide a rational basis for traditional moral requirements, but offers instead a moral justification for setting traditional morality aside. Nietzsche understood his task to be the destruction of traditional Christian morality, so that something new might arise in its place.

Varieties of Moral Theory

Kant and Nietzsche are two of the most important moral theorists in terms of their impact on religious thought, but they hardly exhaust the possibilities for moral theory. The study of moral theory in the West since the seventeenth century has produced a variety of competing accounts of the basic principle of morality, rather than a single, dominant theory. While all of the theories aim to provide a basis for ethics that is independent of existing moral beliefs and particular religious traditions, they establish that starting point for morality in different ways, and their assessments of religious beliefs and practices vary accordingly. In this section, we will briefly survey the main types of moral theory and consider the general implications of each for our thinking about religious ethics.

There is no universally accepted taxonomy of ethical theories, nor even any strict conventions about how to name them. Nevertheless, the main types of moral theory are generally recognized, and we can follow an outline that allows us to consider the implications of each for thinking about religious ethics. The terminology used here appears, with some modifications, elsewhere in this volume and more widely in the contemporary literature of philosophy and religious ethics.

We have already noted that moral theory has two basic tasks. The first is to make sense of the multitude of rules, proverbs, parables, tales of moral heroes, lists of virtues, and descriptions of moral ideals that guide the moral life as we are supposed to be living it. "Normative ethics" develops theories that systematize moral expectations and explain how a living moral tradition can be understood as a consistent system of moral requirements. The second task of moral theory is to explain why a certain kind of discourse is, or appears to be, uniquely authoritative for conduct. Why is it that when we use moral language, we make a claim on someone's behavior that is more demanding than when we recommend a restaurant or a movie? Why should we expect other people to concur in our moral judgments and act in ways that support the moral claim? Philosophers have given the study of these questions about the meaning and authority of moral language the name "metaethics." (The term is coined by analogy to "metaphysics," which inquires into the nature of reality, while physics systematizes the laws that govern how reality behaves.)

Metaethics and normative ethics, then, are two main divisions of ethical theory which answer rather different questions about the nature of moral claims in general and about the norms that guide specific moral choices. Each of these questions, in turn, has elicited a variety of answers that become the main types of ethical theory.

Normative Ethics

Religious traditions usually offer a variety of guides for specific moral choices. They teach moral rules. They use stories and parables to show how the moral life is lived in specific situations. They identify saints and heroes or produce lists of virtues to explain the goals of the moral life. Normative theories generally try to establish one type of guide as primary. The rule or the goal becomes the key to understanding the varieties of traditional moral advice. A theory may try to show, for example, that a large body of cautionary tales, commandments, and proverbs all express a small number of basic rules. Alternatively, a theory may argue that rules, laws, and virtues a tradition teaches all point to a single goal, or perhaps to a small number of primary goals.

Deontology presents normative ethics as a system of rules. (The term derives from the Greek *deon*, meaning that which is necessary or obligatory.) A deontological theory might, for example, give an account of Jewish ethics that emphasizes the centrality of obedience to the Law. A deontological theory of Confucian ethics would stress the rules governing relationships to parents, rulers, patrons, or teachers that are essential to the Confucian way of life. A comparison of two different religious traditions based on deontological theory would identify the key moral rules in each tradition and compare the patterns of action expected from believers who follow these rules. Deontological theories give less attention to consequences and focus more on choices and actions when deciding the right thing to do.

Teleology, from the Greek *telos*, or goal, focuses the decision about whether an act is right or wrong on the results which it is intended to achieve. A teleological theory of religious ethics evaluates actions in terms of how they contribute to a goal, rather than how they conform to a rule or commandment. The goal might be a characteristic of a community of believers, such as being organized to welcome strangers and provide hospitality for their needs. It might be a state of affairs in society, such as having a system of justice that treats rich and poor equally. Or the goal might be a virtue of persons, valued habits they acquire by repeated patterns of choice and action. A teleological theory may include a number of important goals, or it may propose that the variety of our goals can be understood in terms of a single goal – “happiness,” “blessedness,” or “love,” for example – to which all the rest are subordinate. In any case, a teleological theory evaluates choices and actions in terms of whether they sincerely intend and effectively achieve the goal.

Because every religious tradition probably includes both rules and goals, devising a deontological or teleological theory that accounts for how a tradition guides moral choice inevitably involves a decision about which parts of that guidance are most basic and most important. This can be controversial. Christian ethics, for instance, regularly sees new versions of the argument between deontological thinkers, who insist on doing what the rules require, and teleological thinkers, who are prepared to ignore familiar moral rules to achieve the most loving results. Hindu ethics can be interpreted either as a set of rules governing an elaborate hierarchy of specific relationships, or as a set of virtues that characterize the person who knows how to order life well within those relationships.

Metaethics

Religious traditions do more than provide normative guidance. They also explain why we are required to do what the moral norms prescribe. Moral theories provide several types of frameworks for understanding these explanations. We will focus here on three of them: rationalism, naturalism, and non-cognitivism.

Rationalism

Kant's ethical theory is an example of ethical rationalism. Failure to follow the requirements of morality always involves us in the contradiction of willing to do something that we are unwilling to make into a general rule that human beings ought to follow. What ethical rationalism shows us is that moral requirements are not imposed on us by outside authorities to test our obedience. We impose moral requirements on ourselves, if we think rationally about our conduct. We are required to act morally because acting against the basic principle of morality is self-contradictory (Gewirth 1978).

Rationalist moral theories can develop in close connection with traditional religious ethics. Rationalist moral theories often offer as the basic principle of morality some version of the requirement that we treat others consistently with the ways we would expect to be treated ourselves (Green 1988). The same principle appears in more traditional form in many religions, including the "Golden Rule" of Christianity (Matthew 7:12). On the other hand, the close resemblance between the basic principle of morality and a traditional religious precept that requires us to "do to others as you would have them do to you" does not imply that the moral theorist will find every requirement of traditional morality logically consistent with this basic principle. Ample opportunity remains for philosophical critique of conventional moral expectations that are not obviously consistent with the basic moral principle. Also, even with respect to central moral principles, the moral theorist may conclude that treasured religious language about persons as children of God or as individuals with a sacred dignity is superfluous once the logical point is clearly understood.

Naturalism

Where rationalism grounds moral requirements in reason, naturalism seeks that ground in the regularities of nature and human experience. While these would seem to be more difficult to state precisely than the requirements of reason, there is no doubt that nature imposes some constraints on all of us. We all have basic physical needs. Physical security requires that we live in society, and although societies vary greatly in the ways they are organized, they must all restrain and support us in some of the same ways, or their promises of security will be in vain. Every moral system offers some account of what we have to do to live a good human life within these constraints of nature and society.

Ethical naturalism makes understanding of the human good the key to ethical theory. What we are required to do, morally speaking, is the thing that allows us to flourish as human beings under the particular constraints with which we live. The set of requirements we develop may vary considerably as individuals with different talents and needs seek to make their way in societies that differ a great deal in the resources and opportunities they offer. The classical philosophers who first gave us versions of ethical naturalism did not always experience or appreciate that variety, but the task of building a moral theory calls our attention to the common project that underlies many quite different ways of talking about the things that make a life worth living. A great variety of moral and religious traditions share the thought that claims about what we ought to do are based on the persons we want to be, and on what it takes to become that sort of person. The proof that we have it right, for this kind of moral theory, is not that our rules do not contradict themselves, but that they point us toward becoming recognizably good people.

Naturalism provides a moral theory that is well suited to religious traditions that speak about ethics in stories of saints, heroes, and other exemplary lives, or that recount the natural constraints on human life in myths about the creation of the cosmic order (Lovin and Reynolds 1985). In Western religion and philosophy, it provides a way to link contemporary philosophical ethics to the discussions of virtue and human excellence that run from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas to modern Roman Catholic moral theology (Porter 1999).

However, a naturalistic moral theory may also suggest that the traditional language of religious morality is superfluous or misleading. If we learn by careful observation what human flourishing requires, what sense does it make for a religious tradition to tell us that the requirements of morality are God's commands? Moral theorists who adopt a thoroughgoing naturalism often regard religious language with suspicion, suggesting that the supposed commands of God are really expressions of the self-interest of the preachers, and proposing that we might all see that more clearly if we insisted that the case for a moral requirement be made only in naturalistic terms.

Non-cognitivism

For all the differences between them, rationalism and naturalism agree that sound moral judgments rest on knowing something that is universally true, whether that knowledge is about moral reason or about human nature. Each type of theory struggles to make this claim to universality credible in spite of obvious human diversity, and to accommodate diversity in spite of the claim that moral truths are universal. Some moral theorists, however, have sought to resolve this tension by abandoning the claim to universality. Indeed, they deny that our claims about what morality requires rest on any knowledge at all.

For the non-cognitivist, moral language is a way to praise the sorts of action we call moral and a way to express our commitment to acting morally, even if we find it difficult to do so. We can avoid arguments about whether the world really is the way our moral language says it is by recognizing that moral language does not make claims

about facts (Hare 1952). Moral language expresses the commitments of persons and groups to ways of acting. It does not make sense to ask whether such a commitment is "true."

Non-cognitivist moral theories have proved most useful in thinking about ways of life that are radically separated by time and distance. It is not altogether plausible to say that two persons locked in a face-to-face moral dispute are not really making any claims about what is the case. By contrast, attempts to settle the differences between, say, the Aztec culture of warrior virtues and the European bourgeois values of individualism and moderation by assessing their views of human flourishing from some supposedly neutral standpoint often leave us with a sense of irrelevance (Williams 1985). The differences are just too great to think that they can be reduced to right or wrong ideas about some set of facts. We will understand them better, the non-cognitivist suggests, if we recognize that these alternative moral worlds are not built on views of the facts at all.

Non-cognitivism may seem an unpromising moral theory for religious ethics, useful primarily to those who reject religious claims to moral knowledge. Non-cognitivism does, however, offer a strong alternative to all forms of naturalism and rationalism for theologians who seek to build their moral systems directly on divine revelation. A religious thinker who finds no secure basis for morality in human experience and believes that obedience to God's command is what makes an action right or wrong will find an interesting ally in the non-cognitivist, who will at least join in demonstrating that none of the languages of morality actually make the universal claims about the world and our knowledge of it that they appear to be making at the outset.

Criticism of Moral Theories

Recent developments in philosophy have called into question the construction of moral theories. Critics suggest that a principle of morality cannot be isolated from the way of life in which it is embedded. Normative theories at their best are accounts of the central convictions that shape a particular way of life. Metaethics, however, is largely useless. The effort to build a general theory of morality, critics charge, distorts the religious and cultural systems to which the theory is applied, and the accounts which emerge reflect more of the theorist's own ideas than of real moral life.

In religious ethics, the criticism of moral theory has often been received as good news, freeing religious thinkers to explore a multitude of relationships between religious beliefs and moral practice, unconstrained by a rigid philosophical system that seeks a logic of morality independent of its practices (Stout 1981). Use of moral theory as a tool for comparative religious ethics has also been criticized for privileging a set of Western philosophical questions and then making these the basis for comparison (Cho 1998).

These criticisms are important, but they suggest caution in the use of moral theory, rather than an entire rejection of it. Several centuries of effort have failed to produce a general theory of morality that could function in the way that theory functions in the natural sciences. It would be a mistake to use a moral theory as a standard against

which religious ethics could be measured, or as a system by which all religious ethics might be organized. The questions of moral theory do reflect the modern, Western philosophical context in which they emerged, and there are no doubt other questions in traditional religious thinking which are important to those traditions, and which the moral theory may miss entirely.

Nevertheless, the questions of moral theory are important, if only to those who have been trained by Western philosophy to ask them. To give up on the creation of an authoritative standpoint from which to view all possible traditions does not invalidate the more modest project of asking how different traditions look when we try to examine them carefully from our own partial point of view. Precisely because the moral life as lived does not come with a theory attached to it, the possibility of systematic comparisons between lived traditions will often depend on having some theory to guide the study (see chapter “on Religious Ethics”). The task, especially in comparative religious ethics, is to determine which theory least distorts the experience of persons in the tradition, while best enabling the investigator – from his or her own distinctive standpoint – to make meaningful connections between the traditions.

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