Thinking about Ethics

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Aims

Introduction to ethics and ethical reasoning

Framework, structure
- Not answers about right and wrong – but a start at how we reason about right and wrong
- For understanding what you hear from speakers and in approaching your discussions in the coming weeks

Strategy:
- The ordinariness of ethics – ordinariness of ethical reasoning
- Trying to ‘slowing’ down what we ordinarily do and laying it out
What should I do?

The kinds of things that we consider:
- What our options are
- The people involved
- We normally have a general sense of the things that matter to us

With all of this considered:
- We weigh-up or we judge
- We consider the consequences of our various options, we consider what matters

We make a decision about what to do
- about what we ought to do, about what is best
A very ordinary example

I have agreed to meet a friend for coffee after work but as I leave the office a junior co-worker stops to ask my advice about a task that she is finding difficult and needs to finish that night before she can leave. I don’t have time to get in touch with my friend and in any case I cancelled the previous coffee meeting and was very late to the one before that. My co-worker is worried about completing this task and depends on me for advice on things like this. Stopping to provide proper help will make me very late.

What should I do?
What should I do?

Two key points

i. I want to get it right
   ◦ It matters that what I do is justified and appropriate
   ◦ This makes a difference to how I see the situation

ii. How would I go about deciding what to do?
   ◦ (As we saw above)
     ◦ Alternatives, courses of action, promises, commitments Expectations and relationships
     ◦ Systematic, piece by piece
     ◦ Then step back to see the whole again
What should he/she do?

A different kind of question

◦ Similarities: options available to the other person, commitments etc.
◦ Differences: we don’t know what the other person is thinking or the elements of the situation that matter to them

◦ Example – my friend, my friend’s friend, another co-worker, an outsider…This makes a difference to how I see the situation
What should he/she do?

Two key points

i. Uncertainty – we aren’t very good at knowing what others are thinking and feeling

ii. Protecting against uncertainty – by imagining how others would respond to our reasoning we can check perspectives and try to ensure that we have included other ways of thinking
Ethics and law

What should the policy be? What should the law be?
- A different set of considerations
- A population level question
- The content does not involve a specific case but all effected
- The role of policy: expressive not just preventative
- Exceptions?

Example: What should the doctor do when the patient wants the doctor to end the suffering?
Ethics and law

What should the policy be? What should the law be?

- The law and individual ethics decisions can pull in different ways
- This might be partly about their different functions
- There is definitely ethical questions associated with making laws
- But they operate at the level of society
Reasons and reason-giving

How do we go about reasoning?

- We consider each reason on its own merits
- Looking for the ‘best’, ‘strongest’ or the ‘right’ one
- We try out justifications – justifying each course of action

- How might I reason in the earlier example?
A very ordinary example

One the one hand, I did promise my friend, and I haven’t treated him very well of late. He is likely to be at the café on time – he’s a punctual kind of person. I value our friendship very highly – it is a long standing one and has always been an important part of my life. On the other hand, my co-worker is quite stressed and does feel under pressure. She is an important member of the team and relies on my advice to help get her over these little bumps. Her dependence on my help is not ideal but it is part of my role and I can make a difference here.
A very ordinary example

So I decide that I should stay and help my co-worker. I think this because I think that I owe her the support and encouragement that she needs here and now. Her position is uncertain – she feels vulnerable and under pressure – and these are things that I can help to manage. When I think about my friend, I am aware that he might think that I no longer value our friendship but I do think that I can explain it to him and make it up to him. I think that friendship, our friendship, is the kind of thing that is both resilient and forgiving. I think that he will understand.
Reasons and reason-giving

- These are sketches of a set of reasons that can help justify my action

Whether someone agrees will depend on:

i. Their accepting my reasons and my justification

ii. How they interpret the situation

iii. Their counter-reasons

iv. Their criticisms of my reasons and the significance of them

- My justification is the beginnings of an argument
Reasons and reason-giving

How does reason-giving work?

◦ Reasons justify my decision, they provide an argument for it
◦ The standards of justification come from the activity of reasoning with others
◦ They are public standards in a sense – giving an account involves making reference (perhaps imagined) to the responses and reasoning of others

◦ We are not aiming at something that is just good enough for us when we reason
◦ We are aiming at a justification that applies generally (universally?), to all those who are interested in finding answer
Concluding points

Four final points:

- Reasons and justification – the standards are ‘public’ in an important sense
- Policy and law – the context is societal but the reasons function in the same way
- Disagreement – people will disagree even when genuinely trying to find an answer to an ethical problem
- Reason-giving and argument – are our way through disagreement, they give us the best chance of getting it right when a decision must be made