Why Be Moral?

The “Ultimate Question” of Ethics

What Does the Question Mean?

• NOT doubting that reason can determine what is moral and what is immoral.
• After granting that some things are moral and others self-interested, why be moral?
• Maybe ethical egoism is not an ethical theory, but why shouldn’t I ignore ethics?
• Tempted to cheat on Law Boards: not tempted to think it is ethical but tempted to ignore ethics.

Why Be Moral? Some Possible Answers

• “Because it’s right”: the question doesn’t make sense.
• God commands it
• Common good: If everyone is moral, we’ll all be better off than if everyone is immoral
• I should be moral because it’s in my self-interest. Ultimately no conflict.
Why be moral?

**“Because It’s Right”**

- If you know you should do x, it’s nonsense to ask “why should I do what I should do?”
- *Not so quick.* There may be two senses of “should” here.
- I know what “moral should” dictates and I know what “self-interested” should dictates.

**Which **should** I follow?**

- Morality
- Self-interest

**God Commands It**

- Why should I follow God’s command?
- If it’s because God has power (e.g., to reward and punish in afterlife), that would be a reason to follow a powerful, immoral God too.
- If it’s because God is moral, then being moral alone should be sufficient reason.
Why be moral?

The Common Good

• Common good: if everyone were moral, we’d all be better off than if everyone were immoral.
• But why shouldn’t I cheat? Let everyone else be moral and I’ll take advantage of it.
• Doesn’t answer original question: why should I be moral?

Being Moral Is In My Self-Interest: Plato

• If you are immoral, you cannot be happy. (Morality is a necessary condition for happiness.)
• If you are moral, you will be happy. (Morality is a sufficient condition for happiness)

Distinguish Decision to Live Immorally vs Decision to ACT Immorally

• May be good psychological reasons not to adopt a plan of life that is immoral
  – We are not on desert island
  – We feel the “sting” of immorality in our conscience and disapproval of others
  – We need community of people and close friends and loved ones
Why be moral?

Still: Why not ACT immorally?

• The unusual, isolated case where self-interest and morality conflict
• I can get away with it
• I won’t feel guilt (or will be outweighed by all the benefits)
• “Big”: adultery, embezzling, Law Boards, etc.
• Small: cheat on a test in school

Might Morality Be Need for a Meaningful Life?

• Psychopath may say he/she is happy, but can they be wrong about that?
• Difference between contentment and happiness?
• Perhaps true fulfillment requires meaning in life, something psychopath lacks.

Does ANY Life Have Meaning?

• Perhaps connected with belief in God
• Without God, is life meaningless?
• Distinguish two senses
  – Life meaningless because human life as a whole lacks meaning
  – Life meaningless because no worthwhile goals with reasonable chance to achieve them
Why be moral?

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**Morality and Meaning in Life**

- Psychopaths lack meaning in life because they cannot look beyond the moment
- Life is a narrative, we hope:
  "Life is many days, day after day. But it is not, we hope, a mere succession of days. We long that these days shall somehow add up to a meaning or a drama that we can call a life."
  - William Barrett

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**Morality and Meaning**

- Singer: meaning requires not only going beyond the moment but going beyond the self
- Pure self-interest reaches a dead end ("What now?")
- The ethical point of view offers a long-term meaning and purpose for life.