Barbara MacKinnon – Ethics and Ethical Reasoning

• What is Ethics?
  – MacKinnon distinguishes three senses of ‘ethics’:
    * Ethics as a person’s own individual values and moral codes
    * Ethics as a society’s particular values and moral codes
    * Ethics as the critical evaluation of values and moral codes
  – Ethics, as we will be concerned with it in this course, is the third sense of ethics. To practice ethics, in this sense, is not to ask what individuals and societies do value, and what they do consider immoral. Rather, it is to ask what individuals and societies ought to value, and what they ought to consider immoral.

• Ethics and Religion
  – Many people derive their ethics – especially their sexual ethics – from their religion.
  – MacKinnon argues, however, that religion is not necessary for having a moral code. Rather, we need only reason and experience in order to discover what is right and wrong.
    * Consider Divine Command Theory. According to this view, what makes something right is that it is commanded by God.
    * MacKinnon thinks that Divine Command Theory is false. She uses Plato’s so-called Euthyphro Dilemma to make her case.
    * The Euthyphro Dilemma is this: are good things (like not stealing and not murdering) good because God commanded them, or are they God-commanded because they are good?
    * MacKinnon argues as follows:
      
      P1. If good things were good because God commanded them, then that would make morality arbitrary.
      
      P2. Morality is not arbitrary.
      
      C. Good things are not good because God commanded them.

    * This, MacKinnon says, shows us that ethics is independent of what God has commanded. Thus, ethics can be investigated using reason and experience, and need not appeal to any particular religious beliefs.
This is good, she says, since there are three reasons that it would be nice for ethics to be investigable without the aid of any particular religious beliefs:

1) We should be able to critically evaluate our own ethical beliefs, including those founded on religious teachings.
2) We should be able to discuss ethical matters with people who have different religious views than we do.
3) If we are to live in pluralistic societies with the freedom of religion, we must be able to debate serious ethical questions without appeal to religious doctrines.

- Ethical and Other Types of Evaluation
  
  - **Descriptive** judgments are judgments about the properties of material objects, the causes of phenomena, and the like.
  
  - **Normative** judgments are judgments about the goodness, badness, justness, unjustness, permissibility, impermissibility, excusability, etc. of various descriptive states of affairs. Judgments about what one **should or shouldn’t** do are normative judgments.
    
    * You and I can both agree about all the descriptive facts about (say) capital punishment, while still disagreeing about the normative fact of whether or not capital punishment is justifiable. Moreover, it doesn’t seem that either of us is contradicting ourselves by holding the particular normative view we do.
    
    * According to the philosopher David Hume, this shows that normative judgments are to some extent autonomous of descriptive judgments – that, in Hume’s words, you can’t derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’.
  
  - MacKinnon notes that not all normative judgments are moral judgments. I could judge that this is a good knife. However, this isn’t a moral judgment.
  
  - There are also:
    
    * legal judgments – e.g., “You shouldn’t jaywalk.”
    
    * aesthetic judgments – e.g. “You shouldn’t wear stripes with polka dots.”
    
    * religious judgments – e.g. “You ought to pray five times a day.”
    
    * judgments of custom – e.g. “You ought not put your elbows on the table.”
  
  - However, these should not be confused with ethical judgments.
  
  - Ethical arguments cannot merely be asserted. We must give **reasons** for holding the ethical judgments that we do.
    
    - MacKinnon notes that this doesn’t necessarily mean that, in order to make good ethical judgments, you must turn off your emotions. For, even though emotions can sometimes cloud ethical judgments – if, e.g., you are too angry or sad to think clearly about a question – it could still be that, in other circumstances, emotion is crucial to coming to a correct ethical judgment.
    
    - In any case, though, you still must provide reasons for holding the ethical judgments you do. Merely saying “I feel that homosexuality, sadomasochism, prostitution, etc is wrong” is not sufficient.