

3. MORAL OBJECTIVISM

1) Introduction

- i) Example of enslaved girl from Mali
- ii) Moral objectivism: there are universal moral principles, valid for all people and social environments
- iii) Moral absolutism: there are nonoverridable moral principles that one ought never violate

2) Aquinas's Objectivism and Absolutism

i) Natural law theory

- (a) Natural law: morality is a function of human nature, and reason can discover valid moral principles by looking at the nature of humanity and society
- (b) Three features of natural law theory
 - 1. Human beings have an essential rational nature established by God, who designed us to live and flourish in prescribed ways (from Aristotle and the Stoics)
 - 2. Even without knowledge of God, reason, as the essence of our nature, can discover the laws necessary for human flourishing (from Aristotle; developed by Aquinas)
 - 3. The natural laws are universal and unchangeable, and one should use them to judge individual societies and their positive laws. Positive (or actual) laws of societies that are not in line with the natural law are not truly laws but counterfeits (from the Stoics)

ii) Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE)

- (a) Moral laws are absolute, but the DDE allows for the resolution of some moral dilemmas under strict conditions
- (b) Four conditions for an act to be moral
 - 1. The nature-of-the-act condition. The action must be either morally good or indifferent. Lying or intentionally killing an innocent person is never permissible
 - 2. The means-end condition. The bad effect must not be the means by which one achieves the good effect
 - 3. The right-intention condition. The intention must be the achieving of only the good effect, with the bad effect being only an unintended side effect. If the bad effect is a means of obtaining the good effect, then the act is immoral. The bad effect may be foreseen but must not be intended
 - 4. The proportionality condition. The good effect must be at least equivalent in importance to the bad effect

(c) Examples

- 1. Abortion: abortion is not permissible but if the mother has cervical cancer and her life is at risk, she can have a hysterectomy which will kill the fetus as the unintended effect
- 2. Also used to condemn contraception use and defend strategic bombing

(d) Problems with the DDE

- 1. Some of the prescriptions implied by the DDE are counterintuitive
- 2. Trolley car example

- 3. Different ways of describing an act
 - 4. DDE tied too closely with human purposes ordained by God, which runs counter to evolution
- (e) Conclusion about absolutism
 - 1. Alternative to DDE and absolutism: prima facie duties: valid rules of action that one should generally adhere to but that, in cases of moral conflict, may be overridable by another moral principle
 - 2. Absolutism is not necessary for objectivism
- 3) Moderate objectivism
 - i) Argument against moral relativism
 - (a) Acceptance of at least one objective moral principle
 - (b) "It is morally wrong to torture people for the fun of it"
 - ii) Core morality
 - (a) Do not kill innocent people
 - (b) Do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering
 - (c) Do not lie or deceive
 - (d) Do not steal or cheat
 - (e) Keep your promises and honor your contracts
 - (f) Do not deprive another person of his or her freedom
 - (g) Do justice, treating people as they deserve to be treated
 - (h) Reciprocate: Show gratitude for services rendered
 - (i) Help other people, especially when the cost to oneself is minimal
 - (j) Obey just laws
 - iii) Argument for core morality from our common human nature
 - (a) Human nature is relatively similar in essential respects, having a common set of basic needs and interests
 - (b) Moral principles are functions of human needs and interests, instituted by reason to meet the needs and promote the most significant interests of human (or rational) beings
 - (c) Some moral principles will meet needs and promote human interests better than other principles
 - (d) Principles that will meet essential human needs and promote the most significant interests in optimal ways are objectively valid moral principles
 - (e) Therefore, since there is a common human nature, there is an objectively valid set of moral principles, applicable to all humanity (or rational beings)
- 4) Ethical situationalism
 - i) Ethical situationalism: objective moral principles are to be applied differently in different contexts