

Arguments, Ethical Theories and Traps

As we have seen in our previous work with arguments, in moral reasoning there are two different sorts of premises: evaluative claims and factual claims. The conclusions for moral arguments follow from both sorts of claims. In the evaluation of moral arguments, then, one must use different strategies for handling each type of evidence. To remind ourselves, with factual claims, we want to know about the sample of data used, how current is the information presented, and, in essence, use all of the tools that scientific reasoning would enable us in evaluating the relevance of the factual data. The next problem is how do we handle the evaluative claims. If there were such a test as with the factual claims that we could use, then the trouble of handling moral arguments would be greatly decreased. Fortunately there are some tools that we may borrow from ethical theories that will put us in a better position for evaluating moral arguments.

First, there are a number of positions that appear to be “quick fixes” that try to diminish the trouble of evaluative claims. I call these “quick fixes” traps, because they appear to answer some of the troubles here, but in fact, then beg more questions than they solve. For convenience sake, I shall limit our discussion to only four of these. Arguably, there are a number of variations on these four, but in essence, these four are the worse offenders. The list is scepticism, egoism, relativism, and dogmatism. The sceptic is someone who believes that there are reasons to doubt any evaluative claim. Notice the definition of a sceptic. Sure, there may be reasons to doubt any claim, but the real test is whether there are compelling reasons to doubt the evaluative claim.

Take the moral argument:

- P1. Killing humans is morally wrong.
- P2. War involves killing humans.
3. So, war is morally wrong.

Notice that the first premise is an evaluative claim. Were scepticism true, then there must be a reason to doubt the truth of the first premise. But, is there a compelling reason to doubt this claim? One thing that you will want to arm yourself against is the knee jerk reaction that if there is some doubt about an evaluative claim then that is sufficient reason to reject that claim. Often, that doubt is not sufficient.

With egoism, the notion here is that the content of the term “the good” is identified with whatever is in the agent’s self-interest. Egoism is often a feature of intentions that an agent has that motivate action. One might observe someone helping someone else across a busy street. If the person being helped gives the helper a reward, and we ask the helper why he helped the other person, the answer we were given will enable us to determine whether the motivation were egoistic. If the helper said that he helped in order to have the money, then the “good” here is the money, and it was in the agent’s self-interest to get the money. If the agent said something like “I like helping people” it is not clear, on the face of things, that this is egoistic. One thing is certain. The motivation here is different than the receipt of some reward. We could get far more sophisticated concerning what counts as egoistic and what does not count. For now, let us at least acknowledge this, in order for some bit of moral reasoning to be not egoistic, it must include, in the deliberation of an action, some immediate concern for the welfare of another agent. This minimal threshold we can call ‘altruistic’.

With relativism and dogmatism, we find a more complicated problem. This time is has to

do with the evaluation and application of evidence, whether factual or evaluative. Consider the following arguments:

Relativism

- P1. Everyone has an opinion
- P2. All opinions are equally true.
- 3. So, there is no solution to moral disputes.

Dogmatism

- P1. There is the truth.
- P2. I know the truth.
- 3. So, whenever someone disagrees with me, they are wrong.

Each of these arguments illustrates what is at the heart of each of these positions. Let us handle the relativist problem first, then return to dogmatism. If relativism were true, then notice the following problem. You wake up in the morning to discover that you have a slight fever and your throat is sore. You make an appointment to see a doctor, and on the way to your car, you encounter your weird aunt Mary Lou. Aunt Mary Lou is into all new and different things. You tell her about your throat, and she says that going to the doctor is a waste of time. Just eat a clove of garlic and that will take care of you. Since you have already set the appointment, you go to the doctor anyway. The doctor takes a throat swab, and informs you that you have strep throat. Here is a prescription for penicillin, and that will take care of your throat problem. Hence, here are two opinions.

- A. Eat a clove of garlic, and that will take care of your throat problem.
- B. Take penicillin, and that will take care of your throat problem.

If the relativist were correct, then there would be no way to decide between these two opinions. Both are equally true in this case. But, notice what lies at the heart of the dilemma. That is, how do we handle the data? It is not as simple as it may appear. But what supports each of these opinions? The doctor has medical knowledge and experience to support her claim concerning the penicillin, and Aunt Mary Lou, well, has the idea of the day. What relativism fails to appreciate is the web of beliefs that support or undermine each individual belief, and takes the factual claim that we have opinions as if they were evaluative claims or takes evaluative claims as if they were factual ones.

Now, for the dogmatist, the mistake is similar. Sure, it is reasonable to assume that there is the truth, and that one may know the truth, but does that suggest that someone could be infallible? Consider the following: You know your basic math skills (addition and subtraction). Have you ever made a mistake in simple math? Calculating how much something will cost on the way to the register or in balancing your checkbook? Sure, we all have made such mistakes. Does that imply that we do not know our basic math skills and need to retake the second grade? Of course not. Human beings are fallible. But that is the problem with dogmatism. Simply knowing the truth does not entail correct application of the data. So, in that case, if someone disagrees, the dogmatist treats what facts she knows as if they were all of the facts or all of the relevant facts in the case. Also the dogmatist does not appreciate that there may be different evaluations of the facts, and that may lie at the heart of the dispute.

What I hope you grasp from this is that there is a reason that people eventually pass through both dogmatist thinking as well as relativist thinking. And, in spite of the fact that they are traps, they are compelling traps. The dogmatist notices that there are standards of behavior

that enable her to prescribe or predict. The relativist notices that there may be legitimate differences in the evaluation of some action and is sensitive to that. What I hope you can recognize is that both positions are “quick kills” and really beg more questions than either answer. Consider the following: Suppose two people meet each other for the first time. One person is from a tribe where extending one’s hand and shaking the other person’s hand is a sign of respect. Failure to do so is indicative of an insult. The other person comes from a tribe where bashing the other person on the head with a bat is a sign of respect. Failure to do so is indicative of an insult. Once they meet, there will be a dispute over who insulted whom. Now, who is right? Notice here that the dogmatist will consider that one of these people is wrong and the other is right. The relativist will consider that both are right and both are wrong. Now, here is the problem, who is really right here? If we ask the relativist why are both right and both wrong, and nothing more is said except that everyone has an opinion, and all opinions are equally true, then we really do not get an answer here. We have something that pretends to answer the question, but disguises the fact that there is a real problem here. Now I do not mean that the world is going to fall apart if we do not know how to properly greet one another, but if this were a meeting of politicians, this could start some conflict between the countries. On the other hand, we could appeal to the conventions of the country in which these people are meeting. If the conventions dictate the “bashing the head” form of greeting, then that might trump. But notice, there might be a possible answer in looking at the conventions of the country in which you are in, and, “doing in Rome what the Romans do” approach might lessen the number of odd incidents.

What I hope you are able to grasp from these notes is that ethical reasoning and ethical theories must at the bare minimum address these problems and offer some solutions to the conundrums people find themselves in *other than* what any of these traps do.