

140: Matters of life and death – 1

A course in secular ethics

- we live in an officially secular society
- even the religious need to know how to offer secular arguments for their views
- a course on religious ethics would require quite different texts and methods

And arguably secular ethical beliefs can place constraints on the interpretation of sacred texts – e.g. St Paul's strictures on homosexuality

Compare the way in which secular geological beliefs place constraints on the interpretation of the Old Testament creation stories

⇒ In a certain sense secular ethics may be *prior to* theistic ethics

An example

Anthony the author – in his 70s, facing a debilitating terminal illness

Suzie the suicide – his wife, in her 40s and healthy.

They have no children or living relatives.

Both commit suicide together – he to avoid pain and loss of mental function, she because she thinks she cannot live without him

Focus on Suzie's case. Suppose you have known her a long time. She is a woman of intense enthusiasms. After a period of deep mourning she *would* recover to lead a worthwhile life

⇒ Suzie is making a mistake.

She *thinks* she cannot have a life after Anthony's death, but she can.

- Is what Suzie does *morally wrong*?
- If we could, are we *morally obliged to prevent her*?

1st approach

- Every human life is *sacred*.
 - It is wrong to destroy something sacred.
- ⇒ What Suzie does is morally wrong.
- We are obliged to try to preserve what is sacred.
- ⇒ We are morally obliged to prevent her suicide if we can.

This approach is *theistic*, and therefore falls outside of the scope of this course.

It is mentioned here for purposes of contrast with the next approach, *Intuitionism*.

2nd approach

- Every human life is *intrinsically valuable*.
 - It is wrong to destroy something of intrinsic value.
- ⇒ What Suzie does is morally wrong.
- We are obliged to try to preserve what is of intrinsic value.
- ⇒ We are morally obliged to prevent her suicide if we can.

This approach maintains that some things have intrinsic value (really and objectively), irrespective of circumstances.

It generally also maintains that we come to know of the intrinsic values of things by a process of *intellectual intuition* – hence the name ‘Intuitionism’.

This sort of view is mentioned here to be set aside as implausible.

Intuitionism maintains that moral properties and moral facts are *given* independently of us. We obtain knowledge of these facts by a special sort of intellectual intuition, a kind of "seeing with the mind's eye".

One problem for Intuitionism is that it is wholly unbelievable! For moral facts are obviously not part of the *natural* order of the world.

Moreover, the *process* of intellectual intuition is equally unbelievable.

We would have to accept that some non-natural fact – such as the fact *that life is valuable* – can somehow cause a belief to occur in our minds, presumably by means of some sort of causal process hitherto unknown to natural science.

⇒ Intuitionism should be rejected.

3rd approach

- The world would contain more happiness (a greater balance of happiness over unhappiness) if Suzie doesn't commit suicide than if she does.

- We are obliged to act in such a way as to create the greatest happiness ('utility principle').

⇒ What Suzie does is morally wrong.

⇒ If the total outcome in case we prevent Suzie's act contains more happiness than the total outcome if we don't, then we are morally obliged to intervene.

Those who take this approach are *utilitarians*.

In its simplest form, they think that in all circumstances the right action is the one that creates the greatest total balance of happiness over unhappiness. More anon.

4th approach

- Suzie's decision is freely taken.
- Suzie's decision violates no one else's rights.

⇒ What she does may be foolish, but it isn't wrong – it is *her business*.

- It is wrong to interfere with other people's free decisions, unless to prevent violations of right.

⇒ It would be morally wrong of us to prevent Suzie's suicide.

Those taking this approach endorse a principle of *respect for autonomy*.

They are also most likely to think that moral rules result from a sort of *implicit contract* between rational agents – they are likely to be moral *contractualists*.

More anon.