

Final Exam Questions

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PHIL 251: Ethics

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June 13, 2000

1 Section A

1.1 Question 2

Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Social Contract theory. How is morality a solution to the prisoner's dilemma? How is the Social Contract Theory ideally suited to dealing with the problem of civil disobedience? How can breaking the law sometimes express the highest respect for the law (RTD, 285)?

The Social Contract Theory is pretty straight forward. It consists, put simply, of the concept of being able to survive together. In order to survive we must be able to get along, we have an obligation to certain *rules* in order that we may then pursue our self-interests. These so-called *rules* is the crux of the Social Contract Theory. Hobbes argued that we evolved from the state of nature into a totally different being, a civilised one. That, in fact, we would be in a state of war without a social contract, or state of nature.

So what must we do? We must be able to escape the state of nature (this state of war) and set some basic ground rules. These basic ground rules set the stage for the Social Contract Theory. The two basic rules are: a) we must not harm one another, and b) we must be able to rely on one another (which means that we must be able to keep our promises.) In order for (b) we will then specialize and have roles. Each of us will do his duty in society and exchange eachother's contributions.

Establishment of a governing body to enforce, and map the proper conduct of eachother's contribution to society is important. The protection offered by eachother's obedience of the Social Contract comes at a cost, however. This cost is your obedience to the social contract too.

The prisoner dilemma is another way of looking at the Social Contract theory. It is a situation that comes up all the time in every day life as we are pursuing our own interests. Morality is a solution to the prisoner dilemma

because it focuses in keeping promises and duty to others. It demonstrates a situation in which people's interests are affected not only by their actions but by other's actions too. Additionally, the prisoner dilemma demonstrates a situation where people are better off keeping their promises and their duty to others versus their own interests.

Another example is one in which you live with a roommate. You have several options in living with someone. You can have your roommate respect your interests, while you follow your own self-interests. This is the best situation. Another situation is one where both of you can look after eachother's interests. A bad situation is one where both you and your roommate would look after your own self-interests. And finally, you would look after your roommate's interests and your roommate will ignore your own interests.

Whichever way you *reason* the situation, you can guarantee that your roommate would do the same reasoning, and arrive at the same conclusion. So as it turns out, you and your roommate would end up in a bad situation where both of you are both egotistical. In order to avoid this, you would have to have a third party enforceable agreement. In this way, even though each individual doesn't end up in the *best* situation, each person would end up in a *much* better situation than in an egotistical relationship.

Some of the advantages of this theory is that it provides a simple way to explain very complex things. Remember the appeal to the theories of *psychological egoism* and *ethical egoism*. It basically says that the only rules that we must follow are those to foster social survival. We follow these moral rules because we rely on *others* to follow them too; in this way all benefit from and can exist in social living. Furthurmore, for those whom cannot keep their end of the deal, we also, have no obligation to keep our end of the deal. We can eschew all obligations to infractors of the law by various methods, for example, imprisonment. Lastly, there are no third party 'moral facts' to obey. There is no decision to be made really. All that there is, is an obligation to follow the golden rule!

Some of the weaknesses of the Social Contract theory is the fact that some might say that it is based on historical fiction. Critics argue that there was no state of nature conversion such that we all sat down and drew up an agreement and all signed it. And even if we did, it would have been our ancestors; why are we morally bound to this contract for *our* generation. This is resolved by stating that it's a descriptive theory of how things *are*. As one analogy was put, if someone's playing a game, and I join in I am not entitled to change the rules. It was an implicit agreement when I started playing the game that I would follow the rules set.

However, what if the rules of the game are stacked such that I can never score against the other team, but i must still defend my side? Here is where the so-called problem of civil disobedience comes in. As to this problem one may say that there is a breach of contract from the other side. Since the I am upholding my part of the contract and the other side isn't, i have no obligation to continue to uphold my side.

The second weakness of the social contract theory (which seems more dam-

aging) is the inability to include, or rather explain, our moral obligations to non-human, and physically or mentally impaired human members of the world. Why should we feel that it is immoral to cause undue injury to animals. Or even to extend moral obligations to mentally impaired humans. In both cases, they cannot return the obligations required by the Social Contract Theory.

2 Section B

2.1 Question 3

George Sher argues that “reverse discrimination would only be convincing if it were backed by a further argument showing that groups can indeed be wronged and have deserts of the relevant sort”(RTD, 307). Do you think is is ever justifiable to compensate for past discrimination by hiring a member of that group who is less than that best qualified applicant for the job? Why or why not? How did the points raised about sexism and/or racism in the readings by Frye and Appiah affect how you think about this issue?

The so-called reverse discrimination is no better than blatant discrimination in today’s world. There are some issues that must be considered, however, when evaluating the subject. There was a time and place for this action to take place, for example, in the days soon after segregation was made illegal. The argument put forth and analysed by Sher is, “since this group in the past has in the past received less than its fair share of the employment in question, it now deserves more by way of compensation.”

Sher states that there is a difference between groups that have been wronged and members (or individuals) that have been wronged. He states that since we are looking at recompensating the group, then we ought to consider that the some of the members of the group that have been wronged in the past may not be members of the current group. Herein, is where the issue lies. The second argument that he analyses is that even though members of one group have not (yet) been deprived of employment, that they would still be denied of other goods, just because they are in that other group. But the counter argument for that is to give preferential treatment in so far as availability of the actual goods to compensate. Still no case for preferential treatment as far as employment is concerned. Additionally we have to consider its fairness regarding the selection of individuals whom might not be as well qualified for the job. In fact those responsible for the reverse discrimination against, will be no better off than the original offenders.

3 Section C

3.1 Question 1

What do you think an adequate moral theory should be (or might be) like? In your answer, be sure to examine at least two moral theories discussed this term (this could be any combination of readings from our two course books).

An adequate moral theory would probably be one very close to a combination of Social Contract Theory and Cultural Relativism. In social contract theory one assumes the following four conditions (put forth by Hobbes) might exist without it:

1. *equality of need* - Each of us needs the same basic things in life, in order to survive; and that we are all very much alike!
2. *scarcity* - Each of the basic needs are in short supply. We have to work hard to get them, even if there aren't enough to get around.
3. *the essential equality of human power* - Since there aren't enough *needs* to go around, and we want to live as good as possible, then we must decide who gets them! The problem is that we are all too alike in order for anyone of us to be controlling *all* of the time.
4. *limited altruism* - Whenever there is a conflict of *vital* interests, people would surely think of themselves before anyone else.

Because of the previous four reasons we would all be in a state of war. In fact this, indeed, is what happens when a country's government falls, and we are in a state of anarchy. Noting to the points outlined previously, one may surely see that Social Contract Theory works well to keep each other in check. In this way we may make sure that everyone is doing his "duty" for society, and in return others would also do their duty in society.

Now this works very well for essential living conditions (e.g.: murder, assault, &c.) but what of the more fringe conditions. These *fringe conditions* may be issues like abortion, homosexuality &c. On these issues, one may adopt the Cultural Relativist Light view. By cultural relativist light view, I mean one which takes the essential good point of cultural relativism but allows for change. For example, if we were to take a strict cultural relativist view on slavery, then we could never progress, and change would never come.

First let me highlight some of the aspects of cultural relativism. With cultural relativism, we have the fact that different societies have different moral codes. As such, there can be no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another. On the other hand, the moral code of our own society has no special weight (for or against.) Each society determines what is right in their society. In other words, *what is, is right*. And finally, we cannot be haughty enough to assume that we, as a society, can judge another society's conduct as "immoral." The key in that last statement is *tolerance*.

Now, it might be apparent what some of the pitfalls of this strict cultural relativism view might be. For one, we could no longer say that certain conduct of other societies are morally inferior to ours, *even in the light of overwhelming evidence to the contrary*. Consider, for example, the issue of anti-semitism. Suppose a country decided to destroy Jews? Cultural relativism would make it difficult for us to say that the action of anti-semitism and violence toward people of Jewish descent is wrong. Additionally, we could (mistakenly) decide whether or not our actions are wrong based on the current standards of society. For example, if I were a wealthy landowner in the South around early 1800's then i would say that it's *right* for me to own slaves based on the current standards of society. I am sure that most of us would now-a-days agree that slavery is immoral.

It is in cases as those above where the Social Contract theory would help to fight against the pitfalls of cultural relativism, while still keeping many of the good points of cultural relativism (being open minded, avoidance of the mindset of the existance of completely objective morals.) Social Contract theory would note that these people are keeping their bargain (contributing to society) while receiving none of the benefits! This is one of the basic arguments to the so-called problem of Civil Disobedience.

4 Section D

4.1 Question 1

The most interesting part of the course were the in-class discussions. Unfortunately, the biggest problem was the amount of time that such discussions were limited to. Fifty minutes really is not enough time to discuss the relevant material, and offer feedback. A nicer timeframe for the course would have been a one and a half hour course twice each week. Also, the bit at the end felt a bit rushed; or maybe that was just me stressing out, heh.