Ethics in Three Easy Levels of Abstraction

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Description

A short guide to thinking about ethics in three levels of abstraction, including laws and rules, foundational ethical precepts, and ethical principals.

Body

1. Laws, Rules, etc.

- •The Ten Commandments (and the other 600-plus rules in the Hebrew Bible, a.k.a., the Old Testament)

- The U.S. Federal Register (63,496 pages as of October 23, 2014)

- Legal left turn on red

2. Foundational Ethical Precepts

The Golden Rule

- Christianity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." – Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31

- Judaism: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." — Talmud, Shabbat 31a (attributed to Hillel)

- Islam: "None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." — An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith 13 (p. 56)[54]

- Confucianism: "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others." – Confucius

- Taoism: "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss." – Laozi • Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." — Udanavarga 5:18

- Hinduism: "Treat others as you treat yourself." – Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva 167:9

The Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- • "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

- "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means."

The Greatest Happiness Principle

Jeremy Bentham (1749-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

- "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" [Bentham 1891 (1776):93, italics in original]

3. Ethical Principles

Prima facie duties and actual duties
W.D. Ross (1877–1971)

- Ross held "that there is a plurality of first principles that may conflict, and that no explicit priority rules for resolving such conflicts can be provided. This means that principles of duty cannot ultimately be grounded in a single foundational principle as consequentialists and Kantians believe" (Stratton-Lake 2002: xii).

- fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non maleficence (Ross 2002 [1930]: 21)

The Belmont Report

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979)

- Respect for persons (contrasts with paternalism) • Beneficence (with non-maleficence implied)

- Justice (fair distribution of risks and benefits)

My candidates for foundational ethical principles

1. Non-maleficence (do not harm)

2. Beneficence (do good; be kind; be generous)

3. Purity (honesty; integrity; promise keeping; honor)

4. Fairness (treat like alike; give what is due; justice; gratitude; reparation)

5. Loyalty (fidelity; faithfulness; solidarity)

6. Respect for authority

Sources

Bentham, Jeremy. 1891 [1776]. A Fragment on Government. Ed. F. C. Montague.Clarendon Press.

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. 1979. *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*. Washington, D.C: United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Ross, David. 2002 [1930]. The Right and the Good. Ed. Philip Stratton-Lake. Clarendon Press.

Stratton-Lake, Philip. 2002. "Introduction." In Ross 2002 [1930], pp. ix–lviii.

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