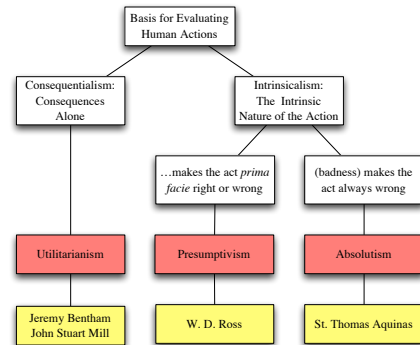


Lecture #5: Absolutism

Theories of Goodness & Rightness in Human Actions: A Taxonomy



Absolutism I:

a. The Existence of Absolute Moral Prohibitions

- Thesis: Some kinds of acts are intrinsically bad and should never be done, regardless of any consequences or other circumstantial features they might have and regardless of any other duties one might have.
 - This theory says that there are absolute moral *prohibitions*, i.e., that there are some kinds of action that are always wrong to *do*.
 - It is *not* that there are some absolute *positive obligations*, i.e., kinds of action that one is always obliged to *perform*.
- St. Thomas Aquinas' version of intrinsicism:
 - Some acts are bad by their very nature (i.e., are "intrinsically bad").
 - Acts that are bad by their very nature are never permissible.
 - In this, it is distinguished from presumptivism
 - since presumptivism says only that the intrinsic badness of such acts counts against doing them, but is not dispositive of the matter
 - » In some cases performing such acts is the morally right thing to do.

Two Things an Absolutist Must Do

- Show that acts bad by their very nature may never be done.
- Identify what kinds of act are bad by their very nature.

Absolutism I:

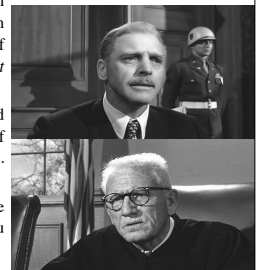
The Theological Argument for their Existence

- A *theological* argument based on authority: The existence of absolute moral prohibitions is the clear teaching of the Church:
 - "No one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being. ... The law forbidding it [sc. the deliberate murder of an innocent person] is universally valid: it obliges each and everyone, always and everywhere." — *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2258 & 2261
 - "In the case of the positive moral precepts, prudence always has the task of verifying that they apply in a specific situation, for example, in view of other duties which may be more important or urgent. But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. ... Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids." — John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* 67.
- A different kind of *theological* argument could try to show how existence of absolute moral prohibitions is grounded in a proper theological understanding of human nature.
 - Perhaps violating these prohibitions would render us incapable of enjoying happiness with God in Heaven.

Absolutism I:

Non-Theological Assertion of their Existence

- When the act becomes specific enough, it seems to many people that there are things that it would always be wrong to do:
 - *Could* there really be circumstances in which torturing babies is morally good?
 - Consider the (fictional) final exchange between an American judge (Dan Haywood) and a German judge (Ernst Janning) he has just convicted of complicity in Nazi era crimes (in the film *Judgment at Nuremberg*):
 - Janning: "Judge Haywood, ... the reason I asked you to come: Those people, those millions of people... I never knew it would come to that. You *must* believe it, *You must* believe it!"
 - Haywood: "Herr Janning, it 'came to that' the first time you sentenced to death a man you knew to be innocent."



Absolutism I:
A Non-Theological Argument for their Existence

- Utilitarians (& presumptivists) might say that the specificity of the action merely makes it harder to *imagine* goods (for utilitarians) or duties (for presumptivists) that would override the duty not to torture babies (or whatever).
 - Absolutists would reply that the wrongness of such actions is absolute, not circumstantial or presumptive.
- Is there a *philosophical* argument for their existence?
 - Jeffrey Murphy (in “Killing the Innocent”) relies on the absolute character of some moral prohibitions.
 - The *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas contains a moral *philosophical* doctrine from which absolute moral prohibitions can be derived.
 - We will look at that argument later in the course.

Absolutism II:
The Content of the Absolute Moral Prohibitions

- The answer (for intrinsicist versions of absolutism, at least) will always be a list of particular *kinds* of action.
 - The consequences of the action are not relevant here.
 - Nor is the motive.
- Different absolutists give different answers to this question. So, though some form of homicide is typically on the list ...
 - Pacifism is an absolutist theory that says any killing of another human being (or, on another version, any killing in war) is morally wrong.
 - The Just-War Theory is an absolutist theory that rejects pacifism but says (among other things) that any killing of innocent human beings is morally wrong.

Absolutism II:
The Content of the Prohibitions (cont'd.)

- Absolutists tend not to offer comprehensive lists, but a list can be compiled from Catholic moral theology to give an idea of the range:
 - killing innocent human beings
 - area bombing in warfare, abortion, & euthanasia
 - but not war or capital punishment (about which reservations are based on other concerns)
 - certain sexual actions
 - adultery
 - fornication, contraceptive & homosexual acts
 - stealing
 - though property rights do not hold in extreme cases
 - lying
 - but not all acts of deception
- Note that one has to be careful to understand the exact content of the prohibition. Distinctions may be subtle, but they are crucial to the application of the doctrine.