

The Science of the Good and the Business of Ethics

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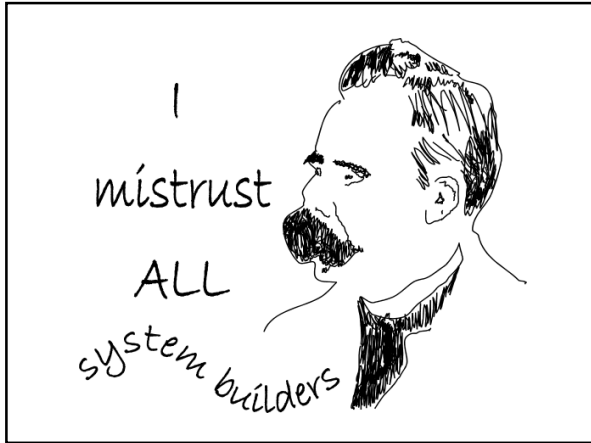
Overview

1. Background to the paper
2. Cunning pleaders for their prejudices
3. The science of the good
4. The business of ethics
 - Theory, case and domain based approaches

Background

- The Ethical Business 2e
- Currently under review
- Outline of new approach and justification for that approach
- Discussion of the introductory theory chapter – basis for this paper

What makes one regard philosophers half mistrustfully and half mockingly is not that one again and again detects how innocent they are - how often and how easily they fall into error and go astray, in short their childishness and child likeness - but that they display altogether insufficient honesty, while making a mighty and virtuous noise as soon as the problem of truthfulness is even remotely touched on. They pose as having discovered and attained their real opinions through the self evolution of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic... while what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration', generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event - they are one and all advocates who do not want to be regarded as such, and for the most part no better than cunning pleaders for their prejudices, which they baptise 'truths'

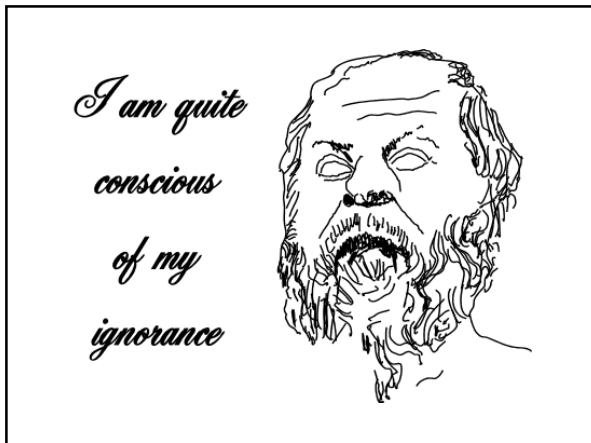


Cunning Pleadings

a, 'profoundly erroneous moral doctrine that is celebrated especially in England'

'this term tickles my ear and makes me laugh'

a decadent,
a buffoon,
a criminal,
a monster,
and even "a misunderstanding"



"science of the good" 1

- science is "loaded" term.
- Idealised picture of scientist as seeker after truth notions of innocence and impartiality, but - as BGE extract suggests - this picture conceals self interest and other sorts of bias.
- Scientific research, like any social practice, is influenced by, indeed at times totally governed by, issues of politics and power.
- claim to science – as objective standard is ideological rather than independent or objective or value free, the claim to be pursuing science is based on particular values (Thorpe, 2001).

“science of the good” 2

- 1 who says what counts as science?
- 2 who says what counts as good?
- These each highlight some of the baggage that science (and by extension, science of the good) comes loaded with.
- underlying issues of power and authority. These simple questions not only suggest potential problems with our brief definition - of ethics as science of the good - they trace fault lines between different justifications for people's behaviour.
- “problem of truthfulness” can be seen as a fundamental scepticism that is a powerful rejection of any claims to certainty. Claims to certainty often sanction the use and abuse of political power.

“science of the good” 3

- Aristotle, close to contemporary understanding of scientific method - systematisation and development of lessons from experience “science” of ethics goes a little further
- ...start with why people are unique (eg how different from animals) & develop an account of excellent character, *virtue*.
- Rooted in accounts of behaviour /practical activity “the good”, needs to be studied in context. More than applying pure reason, but judgement in the face of experience.
- Aristotle believed in principle in 1 perfect way of attaining virtue, the good life, it was impossible in practice to have definitive rules for good (virtuous), or bad (vicious) actions.

“science of the good” 4

- Using example of when it is appropriate to be angry, a definitive rule is not possible:
- ... this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry; for we too sometimes praise those who fall short [i.e. stay calm] and call them good-tempered, but sometimes we praise those who get angry... up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate [from a normal mood] before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception. *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 9.

“science of the good”

- the study of what it means to behave ethically, where this is informed by analysing activity in a given context

The 'Business' of ethics

- Ethics not a separate discipline, but integrated with other theories
- examine specific contexts, 'arenas of action', where we look at ethical issues. Rather than business ethics - the subject - interested in the business of ethics – the activity.
- Playing with "business" in this way is helpful because it is provocative and perhaps helps to shake off some of the prejudices and assumptions that Nietzsche suggests we all struggle with when thinking of baptised "truths".
- Also moves further from the established and narrow senses of "business" that can lead to a narrow or shrunken account of the ethical (Jones, Parker and ten Bos, 2005: 5).

Theory based approaches

- more on theory, then seeing how it can be applied
- definite starting point > comfort or security?
- originating frameworks or theories are also constraining and can close off rich and sophisticated accounts of an ethical problem.
- BGE we should, "recognize untruths as a condition of life... to resist customary value sentiments in a dangerous fashion... a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that fact alone, beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche 1886 / 1973).
- N's vision the sacred tablets of western morality were shattered and our very concepts of good and evil reinvented. A more modest interpretation of this sentiment could be that the business of ethics is one where we, "recognize untruths as a condition of life".

Case based approaches

- start with a problem or context and by studying that see what it tells us about other problems
- get a richer sense of the complexity and intractability of a problem > deprived of false comfort of a particular theory
- problems comparing – any 2 social situations are alike in some respects and different in others
- explanations and discussions that start with examples can be shiftless and rooted in the sand
- immediately beginning with someone's representation of a particular scenario at a particular point in time

Domain based / situated approach

- arenas of action - places where we locate different cases
- opportunity for greater coherence; rather than begin with the security or comfort of a particular ethical theory, advocate understanding the contextual backdrop that throws ethical problems into relief
- is it even sensible to break up the social world into domains / categories? choice of categories will be contested, and limitless
- attention to context, an emphasis on human activity and experience, and an opportunity for coherence within a given arena for action

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