

ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

Argument & Justification in Ethics

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- James Rachels & Stuart Rachels, "What is Morality?" & "Are There Proofs in Ethics?"
- Shelly Kagan, "Defending Normative Theories".

Background

Recall that according to **ethical subjectivism** there are no objective and universal moral values, norms, and principles that apply to all people everywhere. Morality is a matter of emotion and not of reason. For various reasons already seen, this is not a popular position (and those philosophers who do endorse subjectivism typically adopt extremely sophisticated versions that are beyond the scope of this class). Instead, many philosophers accept something like "**ethical cognitivism**", the idea that morality is objective and universal insofar as whether it is morally right or wrong for an individual to act in a certain way depends on the weight of reasons for that person to act or not act in that way. According to "moral cognitivism", morality is a matter of reasoned argumentation and justification. (I put quotes around this term because I use it loosely and not in the exact, technical way that other philosophers might.)

While James Rachels and Stuart Rachels do not give their position a name, it is consistent with what I am calling "moral cognitivism". In this reading, they suggest that morality itself ought to be understood in this way and they then provide a general overview of how arguments and "proofs" work in ethics. The reading from Shelly Kagan goes on to provide more specific details along these lines for how justification works in ethics.

Questions

1. What do Rachels and Rachels mean by the "minimum conception of morality"? Why does this conception seem to endorse "ethical cognitivism"? How do they believe "proofs" in ethics work? Why is ethical argumentation similar to, and yet different from, proofs in math or science?
2. Kagan discusses roughly four ways in which one can go about defending a position in ethics. What are these ways and how does each help to justify or warrant the acceptance of a particular position in ethics?
3. Putting all this together, how does justification in ethics work according to "ethical cognitivism"? Why might a leader have to appeal to such a method of proof as opposed to the alternative method suggested by ethical subjectivism? (In answering these questions, you might recall the *Gorgias* and how Socrates defended his philosophical method of persuasion against the method of persuasion embodied by rhetoric.)