Ethical Theory

Understanding Normative 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

• Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, chapter 1.

Questions

1. Define "normative ethics" and explain its relation to applied ethics and meta-ethics. How is morality distinct from how people actually behave, from customs and other beliefs about morality, from the law, and even from rationality?

2. How can one go about defending a theory in normative ethics? What are the four different ways that Kagan discusses and how does each of them help justify or warrant the acceptance of a particular moral theory?

3. What is meant by a "normative factor"? Give some examples and then explain the relationship between normative factors and the overall moral status of an action.

4. What is a "foundational theory" in normative ethics and what are its three primary functions?