Moral Reasoning & Arguments

Is There A Correct Method For Answering Moral Questions?  (Adapted from Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy, edited by Tom Regan)

How Not to Answer Moral Questions
Ideal Moral Judgments

A. Some Ways Not To Answer Moral Questions

1. Moral Judgments and Personal Preferences

Some people like rock music while others do not. Some people prefer the sport of ice hockey to any other sport. Some people like to drink beer and eat pizza while others could think of nothing worse. Many individuals like to bake themselves in the hot sun and others think such preferences are idiotic. In each of these cases a disagreement in preference exists. We may ask, are moral disagreements about the rightness or wrongness of some action or policy the same as disagreements in preference?

The answer is NO for the following reasons.

a. When Fred says he likes rock-and-roll he is not denying that Ginger does not like rock music (suppose she prefers classical music and detests rock music and says as much). For Fred to deny what Ginger says, he would have to say that Ginger likes rock music and prefers it to classical music. When two people express conflicting personal preferences, the one does not (necessarily) deny what the other affirms.

b. Moral disagreements are importantly different. When Fred says that abortion is always wrong while Ginger says that abortion is permitted, Fred is denying what Ginger affirms (and vice versa). Fred is not merely reporting a fact about himself, he is saying something much more general — abortion is wrong independent of personal preferences.

Also, when someone says that something is morally right or wrong it is always appropriate to ask them to give reasons to support their view — for most personal preferences a request for reasons would be inappropriate. "I like chocolate cake better than strawberry cake" what reason could I give to support my preference?

c. This difference between "conflicting" preferences and conflicting moral judgments points to one way not to answer moral questions. Given that moral judgments are not just expressions of personal preference, it follows that moral right and wrong cannot be determined by finding out the personal preferences of some particular person — say Fred. Our personal preferences are important, but we do not answer moral questions by saying what we like or dislike.
2. Moral Judgments and Feelings

Closely connected with personal preferences are person's feelings. On this view, when Ginger says that abortion is morally permitted, what she conveys are her positive feelings toward allowing abortions, whereas Fred conveys his feelings of disapproval. This way of answering moral questions falls prey to the same problems mentioned for the personal preference model.

3. Why Thinking It Is So Does Not Make It So

The same is true about what someone thinks. Quite aside from his feelings, Fred, if he is sincere, does think that abortion is always wrong. Nevertheless, if his judgment about abortion is a moral judgment, then what he means cannot be "I think that abortion is wrong." Stating what he thinks does not make an action right or wrong — the action, whatever it is, is right or wrong, independent of what Fred thinks. What Fred prefers, feels, or thinks, has nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of abortion or any other action.

4. The Irrelevance of Statistics

Some people claim that what one person prefers, thinks, or feels about moral questions does not settle anything, but what all or most people prefer, think, or feel, does. A single individual is only one voice — what most people think, feel, or prefer, is a great deal more. There is strength in numbers.

This approach to moral questions is also deficient.

a. Why think that just because a bunch of individuals believe that X is wrong that their believing is what makes X wrong? Suppose every individual in a certain culture thought that causing pain to others was the right thing to do. How/why would their beliefs, preferences, or feelings, make not causing harm immoral? This is the equivalent to "X is right because everyone is doing X." Well suppose X = surviving by consuming one's own body.

b. Surely this type of reasoning does not work for other areas of study. Most people think that in a vacuum a feather will fall slower than a rock — but their thinking does not make it true (or false). The rock and the feather will fall at the same rate independent of what anyone thinks. This is true for any field of study, why should moral theory be different?
5. The Appeal to a Moral Authority

Suppose it is conceded that we cannot answer moral questions by finding out what someone thinks, feels, or prefers; or by finding out what all or most people think, feel, or prefer. Imagine that there is a moral authority who is never mistaken when it comes to moral questions: if this being judges something morally right then it is morally right — if it is judged wrong then it is morally wrong. Most people think that God is a moral authority and all we have to do is listen to God to answer moral questions.

This view is deficient for a number of reasons.

a. First, while many will find this troublesome, it is very difficult to justify a belief in God. Appeal to God as a moral authority would first require an argument that justified a belief in God — but this is no easy task (some say it will never be done).

b. Even if God exists we must determine what he commands, wills, or forbids, before we can know how to proceed. Can we trust religious texts? Which ones? What about "false" prophets? Are the rules commanded by God absolute (exceptionless)? Suppose that you could save twenty people from a painful death by stealing the property of another (Suppose God commanded "Thou shall not steal"). What if you enjoy pain? Should you do unto others as you would have them do unto you?

c. The euthyphro problem: Is X right because God commands X or does God command X because it is right. (see theological ethics handout)

B. Ideal Moral Judgment

. . . . or a description of an approach to answering moral questions that is not open to the objections already raised. What requirements would someone have to meet to make an ideal moral judgment?

1. Conceptual Clarity

If someone claims that euthanasia is wrong, before we can rationally appraise their reasons and arguments we must first understand what euthanasia is. For example, in the case of abortion, many think that the moral issue depends on whether or not the fetus is a person. The notion of "personhood" thus becomes a battleground.

2. Empirical Information

We cannot answer moral questions without marshaling knowledge about the real world. For example, in the debate over the morality of capital punishment, some people argue that convicted murderers ought to be executed because, if they are not, they may be paroled — and if they are paroled they will likely kill again. Is this (empirical) claim true? Do studies of
what paroled killers do after they have been set free support this claim? Moral questions do not arise in a vacuum — they arise in the real world, and the real world is full of facts and information that may be brought to bear on these questions.

3. **Rationality**

Rationality involves the ability to recognize the connection between different ideas — to understand that if some statements are true, then some other statements must be false. To be rational one must obey the rules of logic (see tools of the trade handout).

4. **Impartiality**

Partiality involves favoring someone or something above others. For example, parents are usually partial toward their children rather than the children of others. In striving to reach the correct answer to moral questions we must guard against extreme partiality — our moral judgments should be free from bigotry, prejudice, and favoritism.

5. **Reflective Endorsement**

Our moral judgments should stand the test of cool and calm reflective endorsement. Sometimes anger and other emotions cloud our moral judgments when they should not. To pass the test of reflective endorsement a moral judgment must be made in a non-emotionally charge situation.

6. **Correct Moral Principles**

Correct moral principles provide guidance to beings faced with choices among various alternatives (beings like us). In ideal moral judgment, it is not enough that the judgment be based on complete information, complete impartiality, complete conceptual clarity, and so on. It is also essential that the judgment be based on the correct or most reasonable moral principle(s). (see consequentialism and deontology handouts)