

Handout for
Moral Arrogance and Moral Theories

Moral arrogance involves holding that your moral decision or judgment is the only correct decision or judgment on a controversial issue when there are conflicting moral decisions or judgments that are also morally acceptable.

The two sources of unresolvable moral disagreement I shall discuss in this paper are: (1) differences in the rational rankings of the basic goods or benefits (consciousness, abilities, freedom, and pleasure) and evils or harms (death, pain, disability, loss of freedom, or loss of pleasure) and (2) differences about who is included in the group that is impartially protected, or protected at all, by the moral rules, e.g., infants, fetuses, and non-human mammals such as chimpanzees and dolphins.

Consequentialist theories all assume that equally informed impartial rational persons rank the good consequences and the bad consequences in the same way. However, consequentialists disagree about whether it is preferable to have more intense pleasures or greater goods for a smaller number or less intense pleasures or lesser goods for a larger number, or more important, whether it is preferable to have a less intense pain or lesser evils for many people or a more intense pain or greater evils for fewer people.

When talking about the greatest balance of good over evil, or pleasure over pain, or satisfaction of desires, consequentialists differ about what beings morality requires us to be concerned with.

Kant has an account of rational persons such that no rational person has any characteristic that distinguishes him from any other rational person. Thus, for Kant, all rational persons, who are necessarily impartial, would always will the same maxims to be universal laws of nature.

Rawls considered it a virtue of consequentialism that it provided a complete decision procedure and wanted his alternative moral system to provide an equally complete decision procedure.

Although Rawls criticizes consequentialists for not appreciating the importance of individuals, he removes all traces of individuality from persons in the original position.

The method of reflective equilibrium does not merely recommend being complete and consistent; it seems to suggest that a moral theory yields a unique answer to every moral question. It also seems to presuppose that particular moral decisions (judgments) are appropriately derived from a theory.

A moral theory should explain why most moral questions have unique correct answers, but it should also explain why some moral questions do not. It should distinguish between those cases in which impartial rational persons can disagree because they differ in their rational ranking of the goods and evils or because they have different rational views about who is fully protected, or protected at all by morality, and those cases where impartial rational persons cannot disagree.