The journey of modern moral philosophy

Introduction

Key Philosophers and works

Zygmunt Bauman Postmodern Ethics (Blackwell, 1993) and Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Moralities (Blackwell, 1995)

Key Terms

Modern moral philosophy, autonomy, public morality

What you will learn by the end of this chapter

You will examine Schneewind’s theory of the three stages of development in modern moral philosophy
You will examine an example of the modern debates surrounding the role of individual autonomy in moral thinking and the community

Key Questions

1. How can we have some kind of public morality which both respects individual autonomy, society and communities?
2. How should we go about enforcing such a public morality?

The journey of modern moral philosophy

In the ancient times of Socrates and Plato discussion about how we should live came out of discussions about the highest good. In his chapter Schneewind “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in Singer P (editor) — A Companion to Ethics (Blackwell, 2001) pages 147–156, explored the growth of a distinct Western philosophical conversation about morality and ethics and how we should live and how we should be. This conversation began by linking moral behaviour to a set of divine commands but over time it became more difficult to agree upon. This has been further complicated by the proliferation of tolerated religions each with distinct approaches to morality as well. In other words, as uncertainty grew, as it became no longer the case that people accepted a single tradition of thinking, so the modern philosophical conversation about morality emerged. Of course that is not to say that those early ideas linking morality to religion are not still held by some, rather that those ideas are one voice in a cacophony of voices that must try to be heard in the same, expanded moral ballpark. That ballpark is no longer the preserve of a single religious tradition, but what we call modern moral philosophy. There is one final twist in this development, and that is the interest shown ethics and morality by schools of thinking outside philosophy, notably sociology, politics, psychology and anthropology.

Schneewind sees this as happening in three stages. Stage one is the movement from a position that assumes that morality must have an external source, be that a divine source or rational source, towards the idea that morality is about autonomous self control. This sort of thinking development can be seen in the idea of Natural moral Law, a moral code which can be perceived rationally or through revelation and which guides individual moral actions and informs a moral social order. Another example can be found in the writing of Thomas Hobbes and his recognition of human self interest, and fear of being murdered in our beds at night, as being a major moral driver for an ordered society. This first
stage also includes the thinking about the need for there to be a principle concern about the good of others and that there is a concern for justice which, as Bishop Butler noted, does not always lead to a moral conclusion. Schneewind illustrates this with the example of the starving peasant returning the lost money to the miserly millionaire. Kant’s conclusion that the key issue is human freedom, thereby placing morality inside human nature, is a radical part of this stage of development. Free actions are not about following natural goods or obeying divine laws because they are external to the human individual. Our moral obligations come from a law we legislate on ourselves, guided by the requirement to act in a way in which we would rationally agree everyone else should act. While Kant and Bentham have different theories, a common element is the fact that a person can rationally determine the correct moral decision through a logical process.

Stage two is the elaboration and defence of the view that we are individually self-governing. The utilitarians (Bentham and Mill) extend this line of thinking into the second stage, where they conclude that a person could logically decide the best moral action by the outcome it had. However, the intuitionists identified an issue; that the moral system rested on the decision of what was good for people and what people thought was good, was not always moral. It can be claimed that utilitarianism has an intuitionist foundation (people intuit what is good for them), but ultimately intuitionism has no rational basis as it relies on peoples’ insights. At the latter part of this stage there exists scepticism about the existence of an external universal morality with Nietzsche attacking societies and theorists who claim their principles are binding on everyone.

In his work *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Nietzsche explored the thinking of moral philosophers in terms of a psychological reason of wanting power over others. By deciding what is right and wrong, and having the power to enforce this, you can tell me what to do, judge me for my actions and punish me accordingly.

In his first essay he tells a story of how the words 'good' and 'bad' got their meaning. In the beginning there were two kinds of people. Those that were, "the noble, the powerful, the superior, and the high-minded" and those that were "low, low-minded, and plebeian." The former had an unquestioning hold over the latter, an instinctive feeling of ruling and superiority which was justified by the fact that they were ruling and they were superior. Nietzsche calls this feeling of the superior over the inferior the *pathos of distance*. He argues that it is through this *pathos of distance* that 'good' and 'bad' first acquired meaning. 'Good' was associated with the superior, noble and privileged people while 'bad' was associated with the common, plebeian, and low people. This is a moral psychology, rather than moral philosophy. A similar development can be seen in modern anthropology with its examination of different cultures with different moral orders. This has challenged the idea of a common universal moral knowledge.

Stage three moves from the concern with individuals to concerns about public morality. The revelations of modern anthropology and psychology has been exasperated by the increasingly diverse liberal society with very different lifestyle and different religious and non-religious beliefs systems. In the post colonial era, with populations of people moving across old boundaries, and much more freedom for people in established community traditions to break out of those community structures, it is no longer the case that a single religious order defines moral codes and organises the people accordingly. The advent of secular, or more secular societies in which many ethical systems are expressed through different religious and social commitments, characterises the modern age. There is a lot more uncertainty. John Rawls and his work, “A Theory of Justice” has challenged utilitarian thinking, arguing that our common sense, and commonly held agreed values are more important than the good done by the act, in guiding our sense of right and wrong. The issue of justice means that moral decision making in the public sphere must get beyond the issue of individuals acting on their own. There is a need for common agreements, but they must come with respect for individual thinking and that is a difficult balance to achieve.

**A problem of our time**

Schneewind proposes that these stages are predominantly concerned with these distinct arguments but this is not to say that those arguments can't be found in other stages. In the modern era, for instance, the debates surrounding individual autonomy in moral action and public morality are both very lively.
This complexity is illustrated in the debate about the extent to which moral behaviour can be based on the norms found in society. The writers Zigmund Bauman, Hannah Arendt and Jonathan Glover touch on this issue in modern writing. Zigmund Bauman, writing in Modernity and the Holocaust (Polity Press, Oxford, 1989) having examined the large scale moral failings of humanity in the holocaust, and drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt considers the idea of a moral responsibility of resistance to socialisation. He writes,

“In the aftermath of the Holocaust, legal practice, and thus also moral theory faced the possibility that morality may manifest itself in insubordination towards socially upheld principles, and in an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus.” P.177.

Arendt herself in Eichmann in Jerusalem, a report on the banality of evil, demanded that,

“....human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own moral judgment, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all these around them ....”(p.294-296, Penguin 1994, first published Viking 1963)

The following quotes are cited in Jonathan Golvers book Humanity, a moral history of the twentieth century (Jonathan Cape, London 1999) on page 405: "If you have no God the your moral code is that of society. If society is turned upside down, so is your moral code. The communists made a virtue of being beastly to each other." (Jung Chang, Independent on Sunday, 10 Sept 1995) and, "We have seen the triumph of evil after the values of humanism have been vilified and trampled on. The reason these values succumbed was probably that they were based on nothing except boundless confidence in the human intellect. I think we may now find a better foundation to them, if only because of the lessons we have drawn form our experience” (Nadezhda Mandelstam, Hope against Hope)

Glover argues that in the absence of a religious moral law a humanized version of ethics needs to be developed to prevent the tendency to accept as normal, amoralism and Bauman states that "there is no contradiction between a rejection of (or scepticism towards) the ethics of socially conventionalized and rationally 'founded' norms, and the insistence that it does matter, and matter morally, what we do and from what we desist.” (p.250 Postmodern ethics) The two must go together.

Add to this debate Alasdair MacIntyre's views that situate morality in a community tradition. As noted elsewhere in Ethical Studies, his views about the virtues and the virtuous person, come from a tradition of thinking that must be expressed by a community. These sorts of debates about the role of community in defining morality in the public sphere are found, very strongly, in the writings of a political lobby calling themselves the communitarians as well illustrated by the thinking of Amitai Etzioni in his book The Spirit of Community: the reinvention of American Society (Touchstone, 1993) in which he argues that young people must be educated in their rights and responsibilities and brought up with respect for the shared values of the community.

**Task**

1. Consider the theories you have studied and try to situate them and their arguments along Schneewind's proposed three stages. Does his suggested model fit the arguments in the theories you have explored?
2. To what extent do the theories you have studied satisfactorily address the issue of individual autonomy, on the one hand and the need for a public morality, on the other?
3. Consider how the theories and issues you have explored can be arranged in relation to the modern sociological and political debate between the individual-oriented thinking of Bauman and Arendt, and that of MacIntyre and Etzioni.