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Learning outcomes

- Basic understanding of research ethics and why is it important
- Knowledge about the norms in research (and their justification)
- Knowledge about the notion of research (mis)conduct
- Being able to identify and critically engage with ethical issues in your own field of study
- Being able to critically discuss the value of the humanities
Today

- The nature of ethics
- Relativism about ethics
- Brief intro to ethical theory
Next session

- Research norms
  - their meaning and justification – and possible conflicts
- Value of research
- Ethical theories continued
- What is an ethical problem?
- Examples of ethical problems related to (your) research?
How come ethics?

- Our behavior affects others
- We have choices
What is this thing called ethics?

- Ethics: arises from *choices*
- *Why do A rather than B?*
- Values, priorities, duties, restrictions
- Doing ethics is reasoning in a thoughtful way around such matters (as opposed to automatically defending status quo or your individual interest).
When do ethical issues arise?

- All. The. Time.
- We tend to focus on some “hot topics”, gay rights, abortion, euthanasia, genetics etc.
- Every situation where an agent (individual or some more complex body) faces a choice between two or more options.

(possible qualifier: where someone else besides the agent is affected.)
Stipulations and clarifications; various uses

- Ethics: relating to a professional code
- Morals: relating to all humans
- Morals: descriptive
- Ethics: prescriptive
- Ethics = moral philosophy
- Ethics = morals; ethical problem = moral problem
Ethics and its neighbors

- Law
- Religion
- Science
Ethics and the law

- Legal requirements are based on human decisions through political processes.
- Legal requirements can be changed.
- What the law says is often straightforward.
- We assess laws from an ethical point of view.
- Status of ethical requirements much less obvious than status of legal requirements.
Ethics & religion: Socrates’ challenge

- Is sharing good because God commands it?
  - or
- Does God command sharing because it is good?
- If the former, *anything* could be good. If the latter, what is good is independent of God.
- God and religion irrelevant for ethics.
Scientific ways of studying ethics

- **Sociology, anthropology, history:**
  - “A majority of Swedes are opposed to the death penalty”.
  - “A majority of Americans support the death penalty”.
  - “In culture X, it is considered morally right to ostracize a daughter if she has sex before marriage”.
  - “As the ideas of the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe, acceptance of slavery weakened”.
Psychology:

“Children tend to go through different stages of moral development, starting with fear of punishment and ending up with reflective ideals of universally binding principles”.

“The mechanism of cognitive dissonance makes it likely that if an individual engages in a certain behavior she will be inclined to accept values in defense of that behavior”.
Ethics: normative

- What are the best arguments for and against the death penalty?
- In such a debate, is one position right and the other wrong?
- Is it possible to establish by rational methods the reasonableness of some moral judgment or principle over others?
The is-ought gap

- Scientific knowledge is factual, it tells us how the world is.
- Moral principles tell us how things ought to be.
- Because of this dichotomy, no scientific theory or fact could directly imply or be incompatible with moral principles.
- Moral philosophy not a science.
What was said in previous slide is compatible with the fact that

- researchers may be *motivated* (both in the good and the bad way) by their ethical convictions, and
- The results of science may be (mis-)used to defend certain ethical positions over others
- Disagreements in ethics are often muddled by disagreement on other matters.
What is this thing called ethics?

- Is ethics “cognitive” or “emotive”?
- Is ethics “subjective” or “relative”?
- Is ethics “objective”?
Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least, it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide never to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other.
"It’s just wrong!"

THE WISDOM OF REPUGANCE

By Leon R. Kass

Our habit of delighting in news of scientific and technological breakthroughs has been sorely challenged by the birth announcement of a sheep named Dolly. Though Dolly shares with previous sheep the “softest clothing, woolly, bright.” William Blake’s question eral public. It is now deliberating about what it should recommend, both as a matter of ethics and as a matter of public policy.

Congress is awaiting the commission’s report, and is poised to act. Bills to prohibit the use of federal funds for human cloning research have been introduced series of questions and objections, culminating in the suggestion that “the programmed reproduction of man will, in fact, dehumanize him.”

Much has happened in the intervening years. It has become harder, not easier, to discern the true meaning of human cloning. We have in some sense
Fragility of moral judgment

- Rationality
  - or
- Rationalization
Doing a bit of ethics philosophizing amounts to, minimally, becoming aware of these and other types of psychological phenomena and using reasoned argument as ways of dispassionately assess the merits of moral principles; going beyond automatic acceptance of status quo or self-interest.
Challenge of cultural relativism

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
4. There is no "universal truth" in ethics; that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
6. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures. diversity; no single true morality.
The Appeal of Relativism

- Tolerance and lack of arrogance.
- Pervasive disagreement is suggestive of lack of objective truth.
- Impossibility of “proving” ethical beliefs to be true or superior to others.
The Drawbacks of Moral Relativism

- Moral criticism is made impossible: external, and maybe even internal.
- Can’t a culture change for the better?
- According to relativism cultures are beyond critique; now *that’s* arrogance.
Assessing relativism

- Denying moral relativism is not saying we’re right and the others are wrong; it’s saying anyone could be wrong.
- Criticizing a practice on the grounds that it harms the basic interests of the people living with the practice is fair game.
Methodological suggestion: moderate objectivism

- Ethical views are open to criticism and revision in light of criticism.
- Some ethical positions are mutually inconsistent; hence disagreement is real.
- It is not rational to accept inconsistent positions; we should iron those out.
- We should evaluate ethical positions by their scope, intuitive appeal, consistency with other justified beliefs etc.