

7. "Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics" (Emrys Westacott). To what extent should our actions be guided by our theories in ethics and elsewhere?
Aditya Thakur, Trinity Grammar School

Theory of Knowledge Essay

Question 7:

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"Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics" (Emrys Westacott). To what extent should our actions be guided by our theories in ethics and elsewhere?

The association between moral wisdom and ethical theory, argues Westacott, can be likened to playing tennis and its relation to knowledge of physics. The statement correctly emphasises the difference between 'knowing about something' and 'knowing how to apply knowledge effectively'. With the use of analogical reasoning, Westacott implies that moral wisdom comes over time from everyday living as opposed to ethical theory. While moral wisdom is to clearly perceive what is moral and to act accordingly, ethical theory provides us with definitive principles on how to conduct ourselves in a righteous manner. I shall attempt to explore under what circumstances our actions should be guided by theories, and by focusing on ethics, I will endeavour to show that it is inadequate to trust theory alone, rather combine experience with what we know.

Westacott's statement acknowledges experience and its influence on ethics and other areas of knowledge. In order to succeed in any activity, for example juggling, practice is essential. One could begin with two balls then introduce another, and so on. Practice leads to perfection, as the old saying goes. Knowing the theory, which is merely an abstract idea about some phenomenon, is by itself ineffective. *Theory* can only provide us with a set of principles, applying these in everyday situations is considered *practice*. For example, in French I learnt that there are often 'partitive articles' that indicate an indeterminate number or amount of the noun, words like *de la*, *de l'* or *du* correspond to 'some' or 'any' in English. This theory was repeatedly applied in my French assignments, enabling it to become a part of my knowledge.

Knowledge is more or less irrelevant if we do not know how to apply it. Thus, I believe the definition of knowledge should include the ability to know how to apply what we know in the real world. Although Westacott's statement reflects this concept, it is important to examine it in the context of various areas of knowledge.

Physical science, a branch of natural science, investigates systems such as Newtonian mechanics (comprising of Newton's basic 'Laws of Motion'). We often overlook the limitations of the theories in physical sciences, assuming them to be absolute. Every theory is based on assumptions, which, together with the 'Problem of Induction', restrict physical theories from providing *absolute* truth. Newtonian mechanics applies to most of the world as we perceive it. However, it cannot correctly predict what one can observe at the sub-atomic level or at conditions where the speeds approach the speed of light. A well-supported theory provides explanation of certain aspects of the natural world and circumstances for *specific* events. There is no universal scientific theory. Theories may apply to certain observations, but

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may not apply to phenomena we are still unaware of. These fundamental problems of knowledge, present in the physical sciences, impair our ability to reach conclusions solely on the basis of theories. We account for such limitations by overcompensating for possible errors in experiments by replicating observations, collecting multiple samples and experimenting under controlled environments.

Another area of knowledge, *the arts*, is "the production of something intended to be an object of aesthetic attention, by human skill and workmanship" (Smith, 1999). This dawned on me during my art class, when we were asked to draw something dangerous. I immediately had the idea of drawing a gun on a tabletop. Using various theories of art (how to control shadows, how to illustrate with different colours, etc.), I drew a gun. Although the end product was realistic, it did not look dangerous. In order to obtain the result I wanted, I had to employ some notion of creativity. Using my perception of how to portray danger, I drew three bullets irregularly placed around the gun. The gun now looked frightening. Creativity (an alteration during application) helped produce the effect, not theory alone. The final product is always the composite of an initial idea, along with images and patterns born out of the artist's experiential learning. Although I made some modifications, I was restricted in this by my original plan. In the field of arts we usually begin with a concrete idea of what we want to create (which may be a result of creativity itself), but as we apply this idea (put theory into practice) there are certain variations (creativity) we make along the way.

The next area of knowledge, *ethics*, is a vast and complicated field, with ethical theory providing possible answers to ethical questions. For example, is it right to get an abortion or sell addictive products like tobacco? The answer depends on what we understand to be 'good' or what leads to the flourishing of the human race. Thus, the idea of knowing how to apply knowledge effectively in everyday life is influenced by a moral disposition to act honestly and righteously. To lead an ethical life is to have a concern for human well being. Ethical theory can help us in achieving these goals. Let me discuss two forms of ethical theory, *consequentialism* and *non-consequentialism*.

Utilitarianism, the most widely-known consequentialist ethical theory, is centred on the assumption that the fundamental goal of all human activity is *happiness*, popularly summarised as 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. In some situations, like when one is required to lie because telling the truth may cause distress, the application of utilitarianism may be beneficial. However, because it must deal with probable causes, it has one considerable weakness. For example, you may decide to not be truthful to a friend because you could insult him, making him feel unhappy. But this person may turn out to be a masochist who takes pleasure from being insulted. Although an unusual circumstance, it aptly illustrates that it is almost impossible to identify, know and foresee all the consequences of

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one's actions and thus, impossible to always provide the greatest good for the greatest number. Another limitation of utilitarianism is exemplified in the common exclusion of mentally disabled children from mainstream schooling. The practice to exclude such children is often based on the understanding that it is harmful to the majority of students. This demonstrates how utilitarianism can work against the interests of minorities and, in this case, justifies the violation of human rights.

Debates about justice and human rights are more applicable to society when considered from a 'non-consequentialist' perspective. Non-consequentialist ethical theory asserts that duties must be followed *regardless* of the consequences. An example of a non-consequentialist law would be 'Do not break promises'. However, this law is based on the assumption of universality, consistency and reversibility (Preston, 2001). Being honest and upfront about everything is the implication, which may not be reciprocated by the other side, ruining the relationship. Moreover, there could be conflict with another law. Consider two basic tenets of morality: 'Don't break promises' and 'Don't kill'. What if the consequence of someone not breaking a promise, costs a life? The inflexibility of non-consequentialist theory is detrimental in this case.

Ethical theory provides a range of justifications, which can be offered for various moral questions like those concerned with abortion. On one side, consequentialist theory would provide an ethical justification for abortion depending on the outcomes of the particular case. Conversely, non-consequentialist theory would invoke an absolute right to human life. Regardless of the consequences, it would maintain the decision that an abortion cannot be ethically justified (unless there is a complication endangering the mother's life). Exceptions like these can cause a great deal of vagueness and is an apparent limitation of non-consequentialism. Thus, it would seem more reasonable to consider the outcomes before aborting, that is, to take a consequentialist approach. Moreover, cultural values can impend over the decision. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, considers abortion tantamount to murder, even when the mother's life is in jeopardy (Seper & Hamer, 1974).

There is a strong argument for moral wisdom to be the basis of our actions, since ethical theory does not come without its limitations. Let us consider school students. They become accomplished and rather skilled in subjects such as mathematics. Yet, it is difficult to find large numbers of 'prudent' school students, as prudence encompasses universals as well as particulars, learnt only through experience (Nichomachean Ethics, 1142). Moral wisdom involves moving between the particular and the general (or universal) with dexterity. As there is constant interplay between ends and means, one may alter the process depending on the situation, which involves "interpretation, understanding and application in one unified process" (Smith, 1999). Moral wisdom encompasses the knowledge of how to apply what we

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know, and this comes from formal learning, familiarity and experience. The shortcomings of ethical theory demonstrate how one cannot act morally on the sole basis of sense perception or one's reasoning of what might happen. In various cases, some form of irrational motivation, such as emotion, may lead us to a desirable outcome. Consider the scenario mentioned earlier: 'what if the consequence of someone not breaking a promise, costs a life?' In this case, by relying on one's emotions (here it is 'concern for a fellow human being') rather than non-consequentialist theory, might save a life. This exemplifies combined application of reason, perception *and* emotion. Each way of knowing will contribute in some way, whilst simultaneously offsetting each other's limitations.

Westacott makes a valuable observation about the importance of one's experience over knowledge. His contention is that it is fallacious to trust theory alone and base our actions only on theory. A knower must use theory, reason, perception, emotion and experience to formulate one's course of action because any theory, with its own strengths and weaknesses, can only get us so far. In the context of ethics, we cannot expect theory to provide precise advice to solve ethical dilemmas. Although ethical theory may throw some light towards resolving such problems, moral wisdom is more pertinent in providing answers.

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