Complaints About Moral Philosophy

Vincent Luizzi
Southwest Texas State University

Philosophers are the heroes of the time as they ask those provocative questions that seem so right to ask and that seem so absent from daily routines. Just what is knowledge, the ultimate nature of reality, the moral thing to do; what of art, mind; what are their essences? Philosophers then show their wares and are transfigured into the greatest wasters of time as they proffer hopelessly conflicting theories as answers to their queries. The source of knowledge is the mind; no, it is the senses; no, it is both. Art gives us knowledge; it is a communication of human feeling; no, art communicates a knowledge of human feeling. Mind can be explained solely interms of matter in motion and is no special substance; no, mind is a phenomenon that cannot be explained in terms of the normal laws of physics, chemistry, and biology; it is a substance fundamentally different from physical matter. The morally correct thing to do is to produce good for the self; no, for society; no, to act consistently. Mostly interested in moral philosophy, I am mostly interested in this last phenomenon that is an instance of the general criticism of philosophy that we get a multitude of answers for each major question asked.

On the one hand philosophers can quickly respond that different philosophers are putting forth the theories that conflict; no one philosopher advocates them at the same time. But is that true? Consider comtemporary moral theorizing, for example, where, it seems that a variety of conflicting theories seems to be subscribed to at once. Let us explore this further.

Contemporary moral theorizing seems to eschew any attempt to posit some primary guiding principle of ethics as we find in works in the Kantian, utilitarian, and egoist traditions. Kantian and utilitarian "considerations" are mentioned as we find the theorizing now pointing to some act's being a transgression on one's autonomy or worth as a human or to some act's being justified because of the great good it brings. Nonetheless, it does not seem fashionable to do anything that hints of one's committing himself to some single approach to morals. There seems to be an interest sometimes in turning to customary morals for guidance along with Kantian and utilitarian concerns, all of which usually are thought of as embracing quiet discretely different and incompatible ethical theories. Yet it seems there is no reflective awareness of what is being done, no commitment to exploring just what it is that we want to use as ingredients of a moral analysis, nor of what sort of a thing might even allow for the possibility of this kind of an analysis.

The complaint, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, it runs that there are too

many answers to a single question in philosophy, and further that sometimes, conflicting theories are endorsed at the same time as in contemporary moral theorizing. As pointed out, I am particularly interested in this complaint for moral philosophy but I consider what its resolution may suggest for revising moral philosophy.

An insistance on a single answer to a question draws on a mathematical model, but that obviously is not the only model we have to work with in the area of inquiry. I am not expert in the field of medicine but I think we are all aware that one can draw on a number of fields of medicine to treat a single problem; consider treatment of an ulcer. Surgery is possible, the use of drugs is possible, psychiatric treatment is possible. We do not insist that the medical community decide, once and for all, what the one method will be. Moreover, we recognize that each of these approaches has deficiences and strengths yet we turn to them as basically reliable. Each is a reasonable way of dealing with a problem as against, say, administering a lethal dose of potassium cyanide to the patient, incinerating the person, or pulling his hair out by the roots.

What I am getting at is that we might look at ethical theories in such a fashion rather than thinking that only one is allowable or that once we have discovered deficiencies in one or another, that it is silly to turn from it as if its being sullied amounts to its being six feet under. Further, we can ask what are reasonable approaches and why. My first claim is that may be seen as the analogues of those alternative approaches just mentioned for medicine.

Consider first what major variables we have to work with in evaluating some act as right or wrong. There is the act itself, what precedes it -- motive or intention, and what follows -- its consequences, and here we would be interested in such consequences for ourselves and others. Kant's moral system, I think, can be seen as representing one primarily concerned with intention, whether we have acted strictly out of a sense of duty for his moral rule. If consistency of thought is a mark of being reasonable, then so too is the content of Kant's first formulation of his moral rule that requires consistency in action--acting in accord with a rule we would be willing for anyone to follow. And the Golden Rule can be seen as offering comparable advice regarding consistency of action. The Utilitarian credo predicates corrections of action on the production of good consequences for others; the egoist, for the self. Other systems, like Lewis', look to consistency and the production of good for others. Again, the gloss I would like to place on these is that they represent reasonable alternatives to acting morally. Arguably one may be better than another; each may have deficiencies, some more than another; but the existence of more than one theory need not suggest some deficiency within the domain of ethics or philosophy.

Related to this quibble about these being too many answers to a single question

is the allegation that philosophers never finish their inquiries; they continue to work on the same questions for hundreds of years at a time. It takes only a moment's reflection to recognize that we do not hold other disciplines to such a strict standard. We do not complain that the medical profession, after all these years, is still inquiring into how to relieve suffering and to prolong life; nor is the legal profession criticized for drafting and revising laws in its pursuit of what is for the public good, and in its quest for justice.

What can be said of the second part of the complaint concerning the seemingly erratic practice of dipping into the pots of a variety of ethical theories as one brews his own analysis? It seems that the main objection would follow an assumption that even if there is more than one cogent ethical theory, it can only be employed to the exclusion of all others. Once again we can ask whether we embrace such a rigid view in other areas of learning and practice. Do we ever appeal, at the same time, to more than one theory or approach. Here too I think the answer is yes. The settlement of my estate may require turning to principles beyond those of probate law. Principles and rules from the body of tax law undoubtedly would be applicable as may tort, contract, and property principles each coming from varying domains of the law, each with its own justifying principles and each with its own purposes. Basic underlying principles of contract law, for example, are geared towards insuring freedom of contracting among willing, self-interested, rational agents for their mutual benefit whereas in tort, the idea is to allow means for redressing unwanted interferences in one's self or property.

Why are these, now evidently groundless complaints about moral philosophy make? I think I know why. As with other areas of philosophy, people turn to us for help in dealing with troublesome problems and come away frustrated, tying the frustration to the sorts of complaints we considered. But even if I have exonerated philosophers from these complaints, I am quite sure that the student of philosophy will be still less than happy; philosophers, they have just learned, are not criticizable on these counts; as usual, the philosopher wins the argument, and, more likely than not, as usual, the student of philosophy, in his good faith attempt to express his concerns about just what he wanted from philosophy but was not getting, becomes surer yet that he will not get it with this dismissal of his complaints.

So here I take up his cause for a few moments and see if I cannot detect what he may have as the source of legitimate concern and what we as moral philosophers can do to address this.

It is my estimation that students' difficulties with ethical theories is that they want to be moral agents but are not sure what to do to be that and ultimately what is needed is a cogent conception of oneself as a moral agent. Too often, I think, one has too limited a conception of himself as a moral agent. The limitations run in a number of directions-the inability to see oneself as a moral agent at all times as

opposed to when faced with a difficult moral issue, perceiving one's sense of uncertainties and lack of fixity in moral matters as symptomatic of arbitrariness in morals and in one's moral life, and a readiness to assume that one's self-governed activity in the moral realm is fundamentally different from his activities in all other areas of self-governance. In short the sort of complaints just dealt with. Moreover, I think students of ethics are very much concerned with the sort of person they are or will become and that ethical theory either addresses the matter indirectly or in an unsatisfactory manner.

This too is a perfectly reasonable consideration in many areas of our practical experience and it seems quite arbitrary to think that suddenly, in our just dealings with others, this should suddenly disappear as a relevant concern. As a matter of fact it seems that here the question or concern becomes even more important for us, since part of my conception of myself will be a function of how I understand myself in relation to others, how they react to my efforts, whether their reaction confirm how I thought I could cogently see myself and my actions.

Along these lines, what I find to be a difficulty with traditional Kantian and utilitarian morality, and I think other systems are subject to this criticism, is that we are not given, to our disappointment, any clear idea of what the moral agent qua utilitarian or Kantian is like as a person other than the fact that he is a good calculator of good and ill consequences of acts, on the one hand, or a duty-bound, consistent person, on the other. I think that what we want from a moral theory is more about the type of person we will be if we subscribe to the view. People are very much concerned with what some activity compelled by a moral theory says about them as persons. Utilitarianism, on that count, is objectionable in some forms not simply because of the theoretical imperfection of its possibly compelling the act we perceive clearly to be immoral but, more important, because this theory compels us in that instance to be the sort of person we would not want to be. And the Kantian directive of setting aside all inclination--even the desire to do good--and act out of a sense of duty for the universalizable maxim portrays an aspect of a personality that would be perceived by most, I would guess, as overly rigid and hardly the sort of person most would want to be like.

Obviously in this short essay some fast moves will have to be made to cure the difficulties I have pointed to. Conceding this, I offer some thoughts on the matter.

In part, a useful model to use for the moral decision maker is that of the judge in our legal system. Here we have a decision maker who is not always making legal decisions yet we expect him to be a responsible agent when he is required to make these decisions. More often than not, when a case goes to trial it is a "hard case," one where there exists a reasonable dispute between the parties, one where there may well be good reasons for finding for or against some party. We do not think of the judge as being a pitiable person or as being in some absurd situation because there

are a variety of reasonable alternatives open to him at some moment, because his decision is subject to criticism by others, or because he may agree in part with one side of a dispute and in part with the other. We do expect him to have reasons for his decision but we do not think there is some fatal flaw in him or the legal system because he decides without certainty in his conviction. We allow him a variety of standards for his decision that fall short of certainty being convinced by the preponderance of the evidence one such standard. What can be said of his job is that it is a difficult one; if decisions came ready made and all answers to legal problems were simple, we would need no judges.

Much is the same, I suggest, for the moral decision maker. We are faced with hard problems; there are reasonable alternatives open, some conflicting; we find no certain answers to most of these problems; it is our responsibility to decide; we may be criticized for our decision. Our task is a difficult one but that is its nature.

Futhermore, as pointed out we need not simply a conception of ourselves as moral agents that is sophisticated enough to steel us to the difficulty of our task but also one that provides for our interest in the sort of person we are. To this end, I can do little better than to incorporate into some of the adages urging consistency in our actions this interest in our persons--Act as would a person whom you would be willing to use, and whom you would want others to use, as a (role) model. Here the issue of the sort of person I am as a moral agent is addressed; it is consistent with a rational interest in consistency; it allows us to turn to different ethical approaches in resolving issues; it locates the burden of decisions on the individual moral agent; it suggests that no simple, single, certain answers are what should be expected from moral theorizing; and it is compatible with this notion of seeing ourselves as moral agents much like judges.

So I end up positing another theory and in one sense confirming common notions about philosophers wasting time. Yet this theory breaks through common and even philosophically erudite beliefs that something has gone wrong when we cannot make up our minds about what is correct once and for all or when a variety of approaches is turned to at some particular time. As we saw, there are not always single answers, and, sometimes, a number of cogent approaches may be justifiably invoked or called for at one time. The model I ultimately suggest for the moral agent is one that helps him become aware of this while responding to his interests in turning to moral philosophy to begin with.