Final Essay: The Rationality of Morality

Write a seven page essay on one of the following topics. The questions I pose are intended to fix a topic: you may alter them somewhat if you think the same topic might be approached in a somewhat different way. It is also legitimate to compose a question of your own, but you should run it by me first at practical.wisdom.ethics@gmail.com. The papers will be due in my mailbox in the Philosophy Department (Cathedral of Learning 1001) by 3 pm on the Friday of exam week.

The following texts pertain to questions 1 and 2:

H. A. Prichard sums up his argument as follows (page 16):

The sense that we ought to do certain things arises in our unreflective consciousness, being an activity of moral thinking occasioned by the various situations in which we find ourselves. At this stage our attitude to these obligations is one of unquestioning confidence. But inevitably the degree to which the execution of these obligations is contrary to our interests raises the doubt whether after all these obligations are really obligatory, i.e. whether our sense that we ought to do certain things is not illusion. We then want to have it proved to us that we ought to do so, i.e. to be convinced of this by a process which as an argument is different in kind from our original and unreflective appreciation of it. This demand is, as I have argued, illegitimate.

Philippa Foot, in “Moral Beliefs,” begins her concluding paragraphs with the words:

We will be asked how, on our theory, justice can be a virtue and injustice a vice since it will surely be difficult to show that any man whatsoever must need to be just as he needs the use of his hands and eyes, or needs prudence courage and temperance?

Before answering this question I shall argue that if it cannot be answered, then justice can no longer be recommended as a virtue.”

Essay topics

1. These two passages are clearly incompatible. Who is right? Foot or Prichard? Neither?

2. Consider the Parody of Prichard that follows these questions. Does the possibility of a parody like this show that the last sentence in the Prichard passage quoted above must be wrong? Is the demand for a defense of moral obligation – which really means a defense of the rationality of justice and the like – really “illegitimate”? If it is right for philosophers to look for a defense of requirements of justice, for example, then what would its requirements be legitimate – as the requirements of “traditional femininity,” say, might be thought not to be?

3. In “Reason and Maximization” Gauthier argues that reflection on the Prisoner’s Dilemma and such examples, shows that the ‘straightforward maximization’ recommended by the usual ‘economic conception of rationality’ is somehow incoherent and should be replaced by a conception of rationality (‘constrained maximization’) which would involve keeping agreements and acting ‘interdependently’. The main points are made on pp. 429-30 beginning with the remark:

Suppose a person is to choose his conception of rationality. In such a situation of choice, the several possible actions have, as their outcomes, different possible conceptions of rationality. Hence his action, in choosing, is open to rational assessment. What conception of rationality is it rational for him to choose?

Does Gauthier successfully show that there is something wrong with the idea that it is always rational to do whatever will maximize one’s advantage?
4. Reversing her opinion, Foot argues in “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” (1972) that philosophers should not bother trying to show that Immoral people are necessarily irrational, or that People with immoral desires, passions and inclinations must all nevertheless have reason to be moral, or, in the fancy language of Kantian philosophers, that Moral requirements are “categorical imperatives.” All such attempts, she thinks, are fraudulent. It is enough, she thinks, if philosophers can show that Moral people are rational or can be rational.

How do these philosophical aims differ? Her thought may also be expressed by saying: we are not conscripts in the army of duty; but volunteers (as she puts it elsewhere, echoing the last paragraph here). – Just as the citizens of Leningrad were volunteers in the defense of their city against the Nazis during “the terrible years of the siege” (315). Is she right? Are we volunteers in the army of duty? Foot says “This conclusion may, as I said, appear dangerous and subversive of morality” (315). Is it?

Parody of Prichard 1912

Friends, listen to me. There is something called the sense of femininity. This is admittedly not available generally to “developed moral beings” (note, p. 9). It’s a much deeper and rarer thing, available only to properly developed or cultivated women. The fully inwardly developed woman has this sense of fembligation, as we might call it. When her husband drops dirty clothes on the floor, she rushes pick them up, for example. We ask her “why are you picking up those clothes?” and she says “Because HE dropped them”. She acts from her immediate recognition that she is fembliged to pick up what her husband has dropped. She doesn't have a PURPOSE in doing that. What would that purpose be? Her own good? Her advantage? That’s absurd! Of course, some women don’t pick up after their husbands. Or if they do, it’s only because they figure they’ll get in big trouble if they don’t. They do the feminine thing, but not for the feminine reason. But even if they don’t do it, still the fact is they have a reason, a feminine reason, to do so ... when there’s something to be picked up.

Of course, no woman is really perfect. “Owing to a lack of thoughtfulness, even the best [wo]men are blind to [some of] their [fem]bligations, and ... in the end our [fem]bligations are seen to be coextensive with almost the whole of our life.” (note, p. 9 (continuation on p. 10)). The fembligations don’t form any one master type. For example, if your husband tells you to do something, you have reason to do that too — even though he hasn’t dropped any clothes! — Just as, if he’s dropped clothes, you have reason to pick them up, even if he hasn’t told you to do anything! There’s no reason to think that some one feminine reason operates in both cases: “Why should not [fem]bligations differ qua their [fem]bligatoriness? Moreover, if this were not so there could in the end be only one [fem]bligation, which is palpably contrary to fact” (9).

Friends, philosophers from Plato on down have practiced something we might call feminist philosophy. They asked, as we might put it: “Why be feminine?” They wanted to know: “What’s the point?” “What’s the good of it?”. They preyed on weak women in weak moments, women who happened to find it irksome, now and again, to do what’s fembligatory. Some of these philosophers actually were such weak inwardly underdeveloped women. They asked themselves, Is this fembligatory action stuff any good for me? Does it make the world better? ... better for women generally, maybe? (Femlitarians) Does fembligatory action realize an intrinsic feminine goodness in action? None of it worked. Let’s face it: it can’t work. Let us now recognize that all this feminist philosophy rests on a mistake!