Questions for 621/929 discussion

Josua McAuliffe

In regards to the moral principles you outlined today, in the community and solidarity principle, you write "that people ought to cooperate with each other". I am wondering, does that entail a general 'sense of duty'? The reason I ask is because the moral principles remind me of citizenship theory in general, particularly the pivot on rights versus duties. It seems like we could say "it ought be the right of individuals to have equal access and it ought be the duty of individuals to cooperate". Perhaps it is wrong to even consider citizenship given its often times exclusionary grasp - e.g., jus soli or jus sanguinis citizenship principles in France and Germany - or perhaps it’s necessary to consider a global citizenry when considering the moral principles? Anyways, I am interested in the 'sense of duty' and, in that vein, the 'sense of imposition of duty'.

Comment: You are basically draw a contrast here between altruism as a motivation for solidarity and some moral obligation to cooperate regardless of the extent to which one cares about other people as such. I think both are relevant: Kantian principles against being a free rider do foster cooperation as does fellow feeling. I would not at all object to adding this to the communitarian value:

*Community/solidarity expresses the principle that people ought to cooperate with each other not simply because what they personally get out of it, but also out of a real commitment to the wellbeing of others and out of reciprocity obligations (i.e. anti-free riding obligations).*

Kris Arsalesson

1. I'm interested in hearing more on the connections and interactions between the concepts of "interests" and "morals." It seems to me that there is a complex relation between them and that interests (whether social or material) can shape moral norms as well as the opposite direction. And in your argument it seemed to me as though by introducing a moral dimension would help (and create problems/dilemmas/contradictions) to decide, from an emancipatory perspective, between competing positions of interests. But the two criteria you mentioned for having a moral dimension as a basis for your theoretical framework were 1. that moral principles motivate and 2. that moral principles can aid in the process of building bridges. These criteria both seem to me as instrumental rather than analytic. Because I think the former argument, that morals help solve problems of rank ordering positions of interests, is stronger than the instrumental one; in part on the basis of the importance of a reflexive sociology (which you've already mentioned and I think Bourdieu outlines pretty well in his Science of Science and Reflexivity) - not being a mindless cog in the wheels of...and all that. I’m also interested in hearing more on the motivation function of moral principles, because it seems to me to be an open empirical question what the precise level of motivation and opportunity for building alliances on the grounds of specific moral principles would be dependent upon topics, social groups and structure of a given social system.

Some comments: (1) The idea that moral arguments can bind together people with otherwise conflicting class interests is very close to your point about moral arguments helping to decide between competing interests. When a wealthy person joins forces with workers in struggles on the grounds of moral principles of fairness, justice, etc., what this means in effect is that the interests of workers are ranked above those of the wealthy when they come into conflict. (2) It is of course an open empirical question exactly how motivating moral arguments and commitments are, and clearly this varies a lot across time and place and context. There are also other motivational mechanisms that may be linked to moral concerns but are not themselves moral – like identity-based motivations.

2. The question came to mind regarding the foundations of your Real Utopias framework whether a moral-normative foundation is sufficient for the framework. What about utility, efficiency, improvement, legitimacy and evolution? The issue of raising and/or the standard of living is, leaving aside the relative importance, a recurring
and persistent factor of public debate, policy and opinion. One could have an equal and democratic society where the opportunities for human flourishing in general were declining. Such a society could meet the four moral principles of equality, democracy, community and sustainability. (In a full blown version of such a society that might nor be probable but in various on-the-way versions it is perfectly conceivable that some institutional models in some way decrease the efficiency of producing and/or distributing goods and services either needed or in the interests of the given people to acquire/have available.) Legitimacy is, I think, a different kind of animal. You might have high levels of equality but low levels of legitimacy. More democratic processes might (at least in the short-term) have lower levels of legitimacy than traditional (and less democratic) ones. And in general the probabilities decline for the survival/reproduction of a social institution/structure that lacks legitimacy. Legitimacy in that sense is an important factor of achievability but also viability in the sense of long term stability/survival of an institutional model.

comment: (1). I agree that human flourishing is itself a value, so equal access to the material and social conditions to live a flourishing life does not address the question of variability in the extent to which those conditions are present. Marx talks about the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, in which flourishing really belongs to the latter, and thus overall social productivity, which reduces the time devoted to the realm of necessity, is pivotal to broad-based human flourishing. This is also, m in a sense, the Rawlsian intuition in maximin: unequal access to the material means to live a flourishing life would be justified if it increased the availability of such means to the least well off. (2) I’m not sure what to make of the legitimacy problem, since I generally see increasing real democracy (not nominal democracy) as implying that people hold themselves more responsible for political actions, and this intrinsically is legitimacy-enhancing. I can see cases in a context of rapid social change towards democracy and equality in which people see both equality and democracy as illegitimate – if their identities are bound up with patriarchal, authoritarian traditional forms of rule – and this can certainly hamper in practice social change, but I am not sure that it constitutes as a stand-alone moral consideration.

3. I’m also struggling a bit with having only self-determination as an underlying value for democracy. It might not be a special problem, in the sense that the demarcation between private and public is sorted out democratically, but it in a sense gives primacy to individualism rather than community and cooperation.

comment: I think one needs to distinguish individualism from the primacy of the flourishing of human persons and importance of self-determination for that. Individualism tends to be associated with the idea that selfishness is fine, me-first is a legitimate orientation towards social life, obligations to others are minimal, etc. But I am not sure why we should care about community as a value or cooperation as a social practice except in so far as this contributes to the flourishing of human persons, to their lives going well in meaningful ways. Our connectivity and caring for others is a dimension of flourishing, but it is still individual flourishing that matters.

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Javier Rodriguez

1. The proposition that all varieties of emancipatory social science have and need a moral foundation presupposes that the fundamental moral values resonate with both the practitioners and the audiences of this kind of social science. However, it seems like there is a certain predisposition that is required (on the part of both practitioners and audiences) in order to be persuaded by moral arguments. The universality of moral principles doesn’t seem to me like a point of departure to embark in an emancipatory social scientific endeavor, but rather an empirical question: for instance, to what extent moral principles are necessary and/or sufficient to engage in this particular type of science? And importantly, can one practice emancipatory social science without necessarily thinking that it ultimately advances the ideals of equality, democracy and sustainability, but rather out of the conviction that different institutional and structural arrangements in the world might yield more efficient social outcomes?
Comment: But doesn’t this imply, in a sense, that “efficiency” is being treated as some foundational value? Why would want to transform the foundations of society in order to improve efficiency unless one valued efficiency for some reason. And is it plausible that “social efficiency” by itself – not in the service of flourishing, for example – could have that kind of value?

2. This one has to do with the "ontological status" of democracy as a fundamental moral principle. Democracy seems to be different than equality and sustainability at least in one respect: it is actually procedure for making decisions and orienting courses of action, but it does not guarantee particular outcomes in itself. Equality and sustainability are certainly "outcomes" and therefore "principles" to strive for, but democracy seems to be the procedural aspect of the production of an outcome and not necessarily a principle in itself.

Comment: Would you say the same thing about “freedom” – that this is just a procedure for allowing people to act on their own initiative? Freedom seems intrinsically desirable – people having autonomy to shape their own lives as they wish is something people value even if the kind of life they wish was the same as one that they would be forced to do. I think democracy is basically the same value only involving joint destinies rather than just individual separate destinies.

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**Luke Gangler**

1. In regards to the sustainability principle: Why should we only preserve the means to live a flourishing life for future generations at present levels? The "present levels" being the piece which I'm struggling with as it seems arbitrary to me.

Comment: I guess my point here is that we are not under any moral obligation to make things better for future generations than they are for us. This is fine if we want to, and it is nice for them if we do, but I don’t see why living people today need to make sacrifices to make things better for the future. What is your intuition here?

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**Post seminar question:**

**Michael Billeaux**

Hi Erik, I had a question about our discussion on Wednesday. It occurred to me after class yesterday that most of your discussion of the principle of community was put in terms of the establishment of altruistic norms -- treating others as ends in themselves, contributing to others out of a sense of caring rather than an expectation of reciprocal exchange, etc. Community obviously could act as one basis for this but altruism doesn’t require community necessarily. Why not introduce altruism as the moral principle, rather than community, and avoid the latter’s "dark side?"

Interesting issue to think about. I think the pivot is the problem of solidarity and collective action rather than merely interpersonal altruism. On the community dimension is the issue is living in a milieu of more altruistic cooperative ongoing interactions, rather than this being simply a personal ethic. That may be a bit vague, but the word "community" is invoked to describe the social setting in which these values are lived rather than just the ethnical orientation of the persons as such. Being part of a community is being part of a social setting in which these other-regarding forms of cooperation are prominent.
Issues produced by students in the class

1. **Moral obligations and duties.** Erik specifies community and solidarity in terms of reciprocity that comes out of genuine concern for the welfare of others rather than cooperation that comes from duty or obligation. How would duty or obligation fit into moral foundations for an emancipatory social theory?

2. **Morals and Interests.** How should we think about the relation between morals and interests? Erik treats moral issues as important because (a) they motivate people, and (b) they can enlarge the coalitions engaged in common struggle. Both of these seem to be an instrumental use of morals. But can morals be treated as having an autonomous, non-instrumental value for emancipatory theory?

3. **Why moral foundations?** It isn’t entirely clear why emancipatory theory needs moral foundations. Doesn’t this presuppose some kind of consensus on the part of activists and people in general about what are the appropriate moral concerns? Why can’t emancipatory theory just be grounded in the conviction that different institutional and structural arrangements in the world might yield more efficient social outcomes?

4. **Legitimacy.** Is legitimacy a separate concern from equality, democracy, community and sustainability? One can imagine a situation in which a democratic process reduces legitimacy compared to traditional authority, at least in a transition period.

5. **Self-determination.** The definition of the root value in democracy as “self-determination” sounds very individualistic. Does this formulation give some kind of primacy to individualism over community and democracy?

6. **Democracy as a procedural value.** Isn’t democracy fundamentally different from equality and sustainability as a value because it is not concerned with a specific outcome, but with a procedure?

Other issues/themes for discussion:

7. **Science.** Erik’s treatment of science treats social science, including emancipatory social science, as very similar to the natural sciences. He rejects there being any special epistemological foundations of emancipatory social science relative to conventional social science. And he gives science a privileged status (even if he qualifies this by insisting on non-arrogance) over other ways of knowing. Is all of this convincing? What objections are there?

8. **Priority of values.** Are there any principles that could give us some way of prioritizing these values? How should we think about the trade-offs and contradictions among them?

9. **Flourishing.** To what extent can we really escape from the relativism problem of different cultural views on flourishing? Is there a tension between general liberal concerns with tolerance and not imposing on others conceptions of the “good life” and still arguing for equal access to the social and material conditions necessary to live a flourishing life?