

**Review: Prof. William K. Frankena, *Thinking About Morality*,
University of Michigan Press, 1980**

Pages: 95

The Morally Confused

Frankena gives three lectures on his beliefs, which for a secular philosopher are interesting and show some parallels to Christianity (a “Deontological” system).

At the start however, moral philosophers like him claim the impossible; they research “independently of authority, tradition, and revelation”. Yet he says the moral tradition of the West (in which he grew up and absorbed) is Judeo-Christian.

Lecture two is especially helpful in clarifying one’s own position, given that morality requires three specific things: right character; right intention; and free action.

Lecture three highlights the dilemma of trying to “rationalise” morality, which quickly descends into self-defeating egoism, a whole-of-life point scoring game.

He points out the trouble all secularist have in not knowing what the true standard of morality is (Christ), nor how to correctly judge those of others (“Just how we should draw the line I am not sure” [p62]).

About the Author (pp. vii-xii)

Absolute idealism holds experience and thought alone are real.

Frankena held that good and right are defined by realisation of “one’s true self”.

D. Parker said good is what satisfies desire.

Moore and Broad: good doesn't refer to an observable property so is not obtained via observation, rather reflective intuition.

Every naturalistic definition of good is fallacious, since it holds good is observational, yet doesn't refer to any observable property.

I) What Is Morality? (pp. 1-40)

Moral philosophers claim to do their research independently of authority, tradition, and revelation.

“Morality as we now understand it is, in large part, a historical product of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” [p7]

Aristophanes was the ringleader who got Socrates tried and sentenced to death.

The Greeks saw *ethike* (ethics), *kalos* (beautiful), and *agathos* (good) all as interrelated concepts.

Greek egoism is contrary to the altruism of modern ethics.

For morality to be rational, it must be in one's own interest.

Good is often defined as that which increases happiness or diminishes pain, from which grows utilitarianism.

Deontologists instead argue from divine law, that morality is not good only as a means.

The egoist has no value system and thus no morality, acting only to fulfil desire.

Morality is, “that value system for which there is no greater.”

David Hume: “The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind.”

Aristotle held morality was doing rather than making.

Harry Truman: “ In those days ... if a man wasn't honest, he wouldn't stay long in the neighbourhood. They would run him out.”

W. D. Walsh: “ Morality is necessary ... for checking personal greed for the benefit of the common interest.”

“Ethics of duty” are certain obligatory actions.

“Ethics of virtue” are not of acts, rather, a person's character: “don't just do something, stand there.” [!]

II) What Is being Moral? (pp. 43-71)

Virtue (*arete*) is whatever disposition (*hexis*) that enables a thing to function well (*ergon*).

A group or society can only be moral if a high enough proportion of its members are.

A person is moral by true standards of morality, *whatever these are!* [p48]

Goodness of action depends on motive, since evil can result from good intention and vice versa. This raises the question of whether the right-doer or well-intentioned is better.

A sincere moral agent will never have to choose between doing good and evil due to his right motive.

Plato held there are those with full knowledge of the Idea of the Good and act accordingly, the Philosopher King, and others who attain *arete* only via luck or divine gift.

The moral man must: act with knowledge, freely chose his acts; and act from a permanently moral character.

One must ask what a perfectly good person would do *if* he knew all relevant facts [i.e., “What Would Jesus Do?”].

Formal and subjective rightness can't be equated since someone may act rightly only out of fear or selfishness.

A naturally virtuous person is *nice*, a morally virtuous one is *good*.

“Ordinary” morality is within reach of the common man, but supererogatory morality is the realm of saints and heroes.

A Utilitarian can never go against that which he thinks will increase “Universal Happiness”. It must sanction the killing of innocents if such acts are necessary for the greater good.

What Gens (principles) should be: subscribed in personal morality?; incorporated in societal morality?; enforced by law?

III) Why Be Moral (pp. 75-93)

“Immoralizers” see no good reason for having any morality.

Attempting to rationalise morality is problematic since there is not always a nexus between *arete* and happiness.

It is claimed all would choose the moral action if they were omniscient.

Egoism makes rational morality *immoral* by defining it in terms of some maximum possible score to be gained over a lifetime.