

Moral Philosophy as Capstone

SCL Livestream Conference

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Workshop Overview

- The idea of a moral philosophy course centered on *disputatio*
- An example of *disputatio*
- Reflections on capstone quality



Moral Philosophy

- Moral philosophy is a part of the pursuit of wisdom, focused on questions about how we should live.
- Contrast theoretical philosophy: highfalutin vs. down to earth.
- The subject: norms for judging human conduct right or wrong, human affairs good or bad, and human character virtuous or vicious
 - What are the most basic norms? Where do they come from?
 - How do they relate to one another?
 - How do they apply in specific circumstances?

Approaches to Moral Philosophy

- Listening-in to the Great Conversation:
 - Textual-historical: The goal is to read central texts and understand what they contribute to the Great Conversation.
 - Systematic: The goal is understand the main -isms that have emerged from the Great Conversation.
- Entering the Great Conversation: Articulate a well-reasoned stand in the Great Conversation, in one's own voice.
 - What does a well-reasoned answer to wisdom questions looks like?
 - How can a student produce one?

Components of a Disputed Question

- The article: Statement of a yes-or-no wisdom question [with brief explication of terms, and brief reference to related questions].
- *Videtur quod*: The contrary appearances. Reasons (two or more) to favor the answer the author will reject. Drawn from reading the greats. Formulated in logically valid arguments.
- *Sed Contra*: Brief statement of a creditable opinion in favor of the answer the author will defend and opposed to the contrary appearances.
- *Respondeo*: Exposition and justification of the author's own answer, preserving as much of both sides as possible.
- *Ad Primum/Secundum*: Author's response to the contrary appearances.

Sample Disputatio

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Sample Disputatio

Article: Whether defenestration is morally permissible. This article concerns the limits of morally acceptable speech, the nature of harm, and the use of force to protect from harm. For the purposes of the discussion that follows, defenestration means: the use of force to silence a speaker whose opinions are seen as insufficiently sensitive to a disadvantaged population.

Videtur Quod: It would seem that defenestration is morally permissible.

For, firstly, John Rawls explains that inequality in the distribution of goods and privileges in a society are just only if the distribution is in the interest of the least advantaged members of society. It is in the interest of the poor to give more education to doctors, for example; and hence just for doctors to receive more of this social privilege. Platforming speakers unequally distributes privileges in a society, but, in the circumstances in question, the distribution is not in the interest of the least advantaged members of society. So the platforming is not just. It is permissible to use force to prevent injustice. Hence, it is permissible to de-platform.

Again, it would seem permissible. For, as J. S. Mill says, if I can prevent a harm without thereby causing something equally bad or worse, I ought to do so. De-platforming prevents harm in the form of hurt feelings and insecurity, and does not cause anything equally bad or worse. After all, having a platform for one's opinions is a privilege not an entitlement. So no one is harmed by not receiving a privilege. Now it is always permissible to do what one ought to do. So it is permissible to de-platform.

Sed Contra: But against this, the Constitution of the United States recognizes the right to free speech by saying that government shall not infringe upon the freedom of speech.

Respondeo: I say it is not permissible to defenestrate. Offensive utterances are of two sorts, true and false. But neither merits defenestration. For no one ought ever use force to disrupt the dissemination of the truth, even when the truth is offensive. But the Christian virtue of humility counsels caution when opposing falsehoods. For humility requires one to take account of the possibility of error on one's own part; and error in one's own opinions can only be corrected by hearing what may be said against one's opinions—even when what is said against them is both hurtful and untrue. Therefore, defenestration is morally prohibited, since offensive utterances are either true or false and in neither case is it permitted to silence them. Though, by no means, is the truth to be uttered and tested without regard to offense. Love of neighbor requires the truth to be pursued and disseminated without unnecessary offense. Needless offense is neither in the interest of the truth or of one's neighbor.

Ad Primum: Against the first objection, it must be said that it is not in the interest of the least advantaged to have truths suppressed, or to be denied the opportunity to test their opinions for falsehoods. It is disorder in affection to fear offense more than ignorance of the truth or error.

Ad Secundum: Similarly, it must be said against the first objection: it is not true that de-platforming causes nothing equally bad or worse than the hearing of offensive truths. Ignorance and error are also harms, and these harms are at least as bad, and very likely worse, than negative emotions.

Whether defenestration is morally permissible.

This question concerns the limits of morally acceptable speech and the use of force to protect from harm. For the purposes of the discussion that follows, defenestration shall mean: the use of force to de-platform or silence a speaker whose opinions are seen as insufficiently sensitive to a disadvantaged population.

It would seem that defenestration is morally permissible.

For, firstly, John Rawls explains that inequality in the distribution of goods and privileges in a society are just only if the distribution is in the interest of the least advantaged members of society. It is in the interest of the poor to give more education to doctors, for example; and hence just for doctors to receive more of this social privilege. Platforming speakers unequally distributes privileges in a society, but, in the circumstances in question, the distribution is not in the interest of the least advantaged members of society. So the platforming is not just. It is permissible to use force to prevent injustice. Hence, it is permissible to de-platform.

Secondly, [cut for time.]

But against this, the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States recognizes the right to free speech by saying that government shall not infringe upon the freedom of speech.

I respond: it is not permissible to defenestrate. Offensive utterances are of two sorts, true and false. But neither merits defenestration. For no one ought ever use force to disrupt the dissemination of the truth, even when the truth is offensive. But the Christian virtue of humility counsels caution when opposing falsehoods. For humility requires one to take account of the possibility of error on one's own part; and error in one's own opinions can only be corrected by hearing what may be said against one's opinions—even when what is said against them is both hurtful and untrue. Therefore, defenestration is morally prohibited, since offensive utterances are either true or false and in neither case is it permitted to silence them. Though, by no means, is the truth to be uttered and tested without regard to offense. Love of neighbor requires the truth to be pursued and disseminated without unnecessary offense. Needless offense is neither in the interest of the truth or of one's neighbor.

Against the first objection, it must be said: it is not in the interest of the least advantaged in society to have truths suppressed, or to be denied the opportunity to test opinions for falsehood. No one's circumstances are improved by false belief. It is disorder in affection to fear offense more than ignorance of the truth or error.

Similarly, it must be said against the second objection: [cut for time.]

Capstone Qualities

- Grammar: requires careful attention to differences in definitions, distinctions.
- Logic: requires formally valid reasoning
- Rhetoric: 1. Marshals the means of persuasion to discern the truth; 2. Prepares for context (like thesis) where this is the primary objective.
- Literary/historical/scientific learning: 1. Draws on a wide range of reading and the ability to understand what others have contributed. 2. Draws on historical and scientific learning to establish the descriptive premises of moral arguments.
- Biblical literacy: Christian responses must take account of and draw on what the Bible teaches about moral norms.
- Virtue ed.: Draws on and cultivates virtues like courage, justice, and charity.

A photograph of a large, textured stone wall, possibly part of an ancient structure. The wall is made of large, rectangular blocks of light-colored stone with a rough, weathered surface. To the right, a wooden staircase with several steps is visible, leading up towards the wall. The background shows a clear blue sky and some distant structures.

Moral Philosophy as Capstone Experience

Q & A

Thoughts? Comments? Questions?