Moral Theorizing

Theorizing in morality works the same way as in any other field. When we see a regularity of any sort, we attempt to describe the regularity in a generalization. Sometimes, such generalizations only help us to understand the issue, but often we use them to predict that the regularity will continue.

In the box to the right we can see particular instances of objects which, when allowed to move freely, will fall to the ground. We see a regularity, and we make a generalization: “All objects fall to the ground when unsupported.”

This generalization, which we might call “The Theory of Gravity,” was reasonable at first, but then someone noticed that some objects, like helium or hot air balloons, will actually rise away from the Earth. Instead of throwing out the theory, scientists realized that the gravitational force was not the only force acting on the balloon. The balloon is attracted to the Earth, but with a force which is actually smaller than the force due to buoyancy from the pressure of the atmosphere. So, the theory became: All objects will fall to the Earth unless a greater force is pushing them upwards.

Another problem with the theory is that as it is phrased, it does not account for the motions of the planets, and it took the brilliance of Isaac Newton to realize that gravity extended into the heavens. The theory was revised to this: “Any two objects are attracted to each other with a force proportionate to their masses and in inverse proportion to the square of their distance from each other.”

Moral theorizing also attempts to generalize over regularities. These regularities are not in physical events, but in our concepts about acceptable or unacceptable actions. So, someone steals your bike, and you think “that’s wrong.” Then, you hear on the news that someone’s car was taken. Your intuition tells you “that’s bad.” Then, you grab a pair of jeans from a store, and later you feel guilt and regret. You think that you shouldn’t have done it.

You begin to think about all these cases, and you use your intuition in each case to form the basis of a generalization. You decide that:

“It is wrong for one person to take the property of another person.”

Notice that in ethics, another word for theory is principle. We form these theories (principles) to help us understand ethics and to help us guide our actions.

As with all theories, we might come across a situation which we think does not fit the principle. When we do, we either have to reject the principle as a universal generalization, or we have to modify it. Perhaps the issue of child support is a case in point. The government will take some of a father’s property (money) to ensure his children’s welfare. So, we might have to modify our theory. Can you think of a principle which will work?

Just as some physicists are looking for a grand unified theory to explain all of physics, some philosophers are looking for a grand unified theory of ethics which will explain all of ethics. Some versions of grand unified theories in ethics are Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Ethical Egoism, and Hedonism. Do you think these philosophers will be successful?