The Principle of Goodness and Other Ethical Systems

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How can it be that within living memory of the present time, governments of 'enlightened' countries such as Britain and the United States ordered their own soldiers to stand in exposed positions while they detonated a nuclear weapon, in order to observe the effects upon these soldiers' health? This is one amongst thousands of revealing questions one might ask of modern western societies, and it demonstrates as well as any other that there are things seriously wrong in the world's understanding of good and evil. Yet this action and many others like it is perfectly understandable according to the ethics by which western societies usually make decisions.

Utilitarianism is the claim that our ethical objective should be to maximise happiness or some other desirable quality. For example, a new freeway will eliminate road congestion and therefore reduce pollution, helping millions, so, the argument goes, it only makes sense that a handful of people should be evicted from their homes so we can build that freeway. (If you don't approve of freeways in principle, imagine a new railway, taking millions of vehicles off the roads.) Listen to almost any politician and you will hear utilitarianism. Political candidates typically claim that their policies would make "most people better off" — as if that clinched the argument. That sacred cow of the modern world, the Economy, is nothing more than a statistical total of measures that supposedly reflect well-being. If the economy 'improves' and jobs are created, that's good. But in reality, any change involves both creation and loss of jobs, and the jobs created often don't go to the people who lost the jobs that were destroyed. Yet many planners are content if the number of jobs created is bigger than the number lost — a utilitarian measure. Radiation experiments on humans after World War 2 were justified because the benefit (being able to defend against the Russians) 'outweighed' the harm to the victims. Even popular culture accepts the utilitarian criterion: Mr Spock in Star Trek can say, as a matter of pure 'logic' (so called) that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few". So total is the victory of utilitarianism that in the popular mind it is now thought of as simply a matter of logic.

This was not always the case. Calvinism was founded on the concept that God is so omnipotent that he creates some people with the express intention of damning them to hell, and nothing they do can change the fact. To most modern minds, this sounds like evil personified, yet to millions in past times it was a startling vindication of God's greatness: what God did was, by definition, good; anything else was evil. There are still some backward people who believe such ideas, but nowadays, even they will most likely, if pressed, defend their beliefs with a utilitarian argument: Yes, God's decrees must be obeyed, no matter what our opinion of them, but they will be decrees calculated to cause maximum overall happiness; the ones doomed to hell, for example, provide an object lesson that saves many millions more. Thus has utilitarianism spread beyond its origins in the salons of the 'thinking' classes, and like osmosis, slowly but surely seeped into every nook and cranny of thought in the west.

Our purpose now is to briefly look at utilitarianism and some other major ethical theories and to contrast them with true Goodness. In the process, we shall, in a very condensed fashion, take an overview of ethical thought throughout human history. It is not our intention to write a philosophy treatise, with every last nuance and objection noted and dealt with. We must, however, provide some brief discussion and comparisons and highlight the main features of the development of moral understanding by our species.

Basic Questions about Ethical Theories

There are some basic questions we can ask about good and evil; each of these will discriminate classes of ethical theories.

a)   Are good and evil universals, or purely personal qualities? Another question similar in nature, but with a different categorisation, is: Are they universals, or are they products of particular cultures, not to be compared with each other? Denial of the universal nature of Goodness is called relativism.

b)   If wrong happens, does it matter whether we are the agent that causes it? In other words, is it simply the outcome that makes something good or evil, or is it our intentions and chosen actions that determine the ethical valuation of a situation? For example, if ten people die, does it matter whether they were killed by an unpredictable earthquake, or were murdered, or if murdered, whether we or another committed the crime?

c)   What is the nature of the good that is to be pursued by acting ethically? Is it happiness, as posited by basic utilitarian theory, or some other, deeper quality?

d)   Is it the case "that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not"? This is the question of Caiaphas (John 11:50) regarding Jesus. So sure does the answer seem to some that the question is not even asked and it is stated as a plain fact; this is central to the ethical morass into which humanity has fallen. But along with many sensitive and thoughtful souls, including the writer of the Gospel, true Goodness denies this answer – and then goes on to show how to turn this denial into a practical guide for adult life in an imperfect world.

Let us briefly review Goodness in the light of these questions:

Question (a): Goodness is universal and not relative; indeed, relativism in all its forms is profoundly irrational, because the relativist claim itself is a universal claim. ("It is a universal truth about ethics that there are no universal truths about ethics.") Unfortunately this irrational relativism is one of the major corrosive factors destroying our civilised world. If 'good' and 'evil' are purely personal, or, at most, societal constructs, then what is 'good' for me might not be 'good' for you; what our society calls 'evil' might be 'good' in another society, and we have no right — indeed, no valid basis — for criticism. The defenders of ethical relativism write large tomes showing how we can still behave humanely even though there is no absolute meaning to any ethical term. But the least educated street person can see what ethical relativist philosophers can not: if ethics is personal or societal, then in reality it is a mere preference; if the basis of it depends on how I happen to like it, then, by changing my way of thinking, I can make something else 'ethical' — at whim. Ultimately, therefore, nothing really is ethical and we might as well do as we please for ourselves without the hypocritical self-justification of interposing an appeal to a self-constructed ethics between the wish and the action. The dispirited nihilism thus engendered in millions of modern youth is obvious for all to see.

Question (b): It does matter whether evil happens because of ourselves, for good and evil are precisely descriptions of our own willed intentions and volitional actions, and are not descriptions of the outcomes in themselves. This is subtle, because our intentions are always with regard to some outcome. It is, in essence, the affirmation that we cannot justify an end by the means used to obtain it. Balancing the end with the means is not morally permissible, no matter how much greater the end may be than the means.

Question (c): The natures of the benefit that is pursued by the good and the harm that is pursued by the evil are not a part of the principle of Goodness itself. One may legitimately ask how one can plan to benefit all and harm no one if one does not know what benefit and harm really are. However, benefit and harm are not in themselves necessarily moral qualities. For example, one can agree that to murder someone (barring extraordinary circumstances) is to harm them, and so one can see that one should avoid murder. In other words, goodness can be practised and evil avoided without formal philosophic definitions of these terms. That is, the description of the principle of Goodness, which we provide, makes real progress even with an untutored understanding of benefit and harm. The simple might think that benefit is to merely have enjoyable experiences; the wise might see that it also involves gaining moral attributes, knowledge, wisdom, care, justice, love, and so on. But both the simple and the wise can see, each with their own understanding, that it is wrong to cause suffering to an innocent one, and it is good to bring food to the hungry, or consolation to the discouraged. Of course the wiser the view of benefit and harm in the world, the better; but that is a matter for future evolution of human understanding through centuries and millennia.

Question (d): The belief of Caiaphas and the billions who followed him over the millennia constitutes the greatest tragedy to befall the human race, and is the central plank of utilitarian ethics. We are convinced that we need not follow Caiaphas in order to live a practical and sensible life. True Goodness is practical as well as right.

It is now time to compare Goodness with some of the ethical philosophies that have a major influence on the world. There is no attempt below to mention every ethical system ever devised.

Some Ethical Philosophies Compared

Relativism

This, as mentioned above, is the ethic of no ethics. It is considered good in educational circles to make studies, especially of controversial topics, "value-free". This is the reason, for example, that schools in the state where this is being written cannot recommend to children to abstain from sex, at least until they understand what they are getting into. Children need guidance from adults, but don't get it, as no specific proposal can ever pass the 'value-free' test; for all particular policies, if they are not to be merely capricious, must necessarily have a reason, and that reason will depend on priorities and assessments of situations – in other words, values.

One common way to make relativism sound plausible is to talk about the "Other". Relativism is applied in this case to groups rather than individuals, but the same problems will arise. The idea is that those who do not belong to our "group" have minds that are absolutely incommensurable with our own; we cannot say anything meaningful about them, nor they about us. This idea suffers at least three problems:

First, it is certainly false. Not only can a sensitive observer make a great deal of sense of the attitudes and behaviours of others, but also one can do likewise even with animals. As for other humans, one need only think of some of the great myths and legends from many different cultures to see that a common humanity pervades them all. Cultural differences may abound, but the hauntingly beautiful stories of the Aboriginal dreamtime, the Greek plays and epic poems, the Indian epics, Native American legends and myths, the vast western literature, and other examples from any and every culture, all speak to the heart and tell their story to any sensitive listener, of whatever culture.

Second, it disables not only disapproval of other cultures, but also appreciation and bridge-building; for if each culture is a self-contained monoid that cannot relate to anything else, then it is as meaningless to say anything good or pleasant about others as it is to criticise them.

Third, it evacuates the world of morality. The (cultural) relativists insist that no criticism of another culture can possibly be valid; therefore criticism of Stalinism or Nazism cannot be valid, for these "Other" cultures cannot be judged by our principles.

This is not the place to belabour the deficiencies of ethical or other relativisms. Being incurably irrational, it is inevitable they will have bad consequences. The only sensible question, then, is, what should the alternative be?

Kant and the Categorical Imperative

Kant's categorical imperative says that to behave ethically, you must act so as to be happy for your actions to be examples of general laws. For example, if I rob someone, I should be happy if the law gave everyone permission to rob anyone — including giving others the right to rob me. As I presumably would not be happy with that, then I should not myself commit robbery. Kant's ethic is not as universally accepted as utilitarianism or relativism, but it arises from time to time in popular thought when people say things like "If I let you do that, I'd have to let everybody do it." (For example, you might be appealing to a policeman to let you off a speeding ticket.) Another example is the saying "What if everyone did that?"

It may well be that Goodness is compatible with Kant's imperative, because reasoning about the general effect of our decisions is a good way to understand their effects on others than ourselves. That is a necessary thing if we are to have extensive success in our attempts to benefit everyone and to harm no one. But Kant's idea doesn't seem strong enough to serve as a reliable guide to our action in general. After all, someone might say "I wish to rob and murder others, and if others wish to rob or murder me, just let them try!" In other words, nothing in the idea of universality of a decision necessarily forces us to accept only 'reasonable' choices! In fact, we are led to choose only the reasonable ones by some other motive quite apart from mere universality. For example, in the case of the speeding ticket, the answer to the policeman might be "Yes, let everyone do it! I am willing to take my chance with road accidents for the pleasure of seeing spectacular collisions happening to someone else." That is a grossly immoral attitude, but nothing in the notion of merely being consistent as a general law rules out such extreme ideas. On the other hand, if we ask "What sound guiding principle will help us choose general laws?", then we must consider the principle of Goodness as the leading candidate, for our general laws must be designed for the well-being of everyone who does not cut themselves off from the unity of all by their own malicious and selfish actions.

In other words, the categorical imperative is a genuine moral principle that can aid our understanding and wise choice of individual acts, systems, laws, and policies; but it must, of course, be subsidiary to the principle of Goodness.

Utilitarianism

We use "utilitarianism" to represent all ethical theories where the goal is maximisation of some measure of goodness; these are outcome-oriented ethics: goodness is measured by its results. Other names for such theories are proportionalism and consequentialism.

Utilitarianism is radically incompatible with Goodness, yet no other kind of ethical theory is as popular, with the possible exception of the equally disastrous relativist

group. Its defective nature as a moral guide makes it a serious threat to the world's well-being, and this threat is exacerbated by its superficial believability and attractiveness. What, after all, could be better than trying to create as much happiness (or some other desirable quality - wisdom, love, care, knowledge - you name it) as possible? One has to ask some hard questions to cut through this shell of plausibility.

A case often discussed is that of a sheriff who is faced with a choice: frame and hang an innocent person, or else a riotous mob will bring about the deaths of many innocent people. The simple utilitarian answer is: frame and hang the innocent one, as that results in less death and misery than the alternative. Some utilitarians seriously advance that as the correct answer. Others rationalise their way out of this unpleasant problem by calling upon future long-term consequences (collapse of law and order, failure of confidence in the police, etc.) to argue that in reality the choice to frame the innocent one is not the choice that maximises happiness.

For a searching analysis of these arguments, see **Finnis**. Finnis shows that not only are such arguments defective, they are ultimately incoherent. There is no space here to go over all the many reasons why this is so. It is clear, though, that utilitarian theories cannot offer guidance in even such a clear situation as this. This failure is not because this is a "particularly hard case", but because the entire project of weighing comparative benefits is logically incoherent. A second fatal defect is that the target of the injustice, even when the utilitarian makes the right choice (don't frame the innocent) is misidentified. The utilitarian claims one should not frame the innocent one because of the distant effects upon the world at large. But the real reason is that it is a crime against the innocent one himself!

Goodness tells us that we must never intentionally harm the innocent, so the sheriff must refuse to frame the innocent one. Then, after that choice is made (for there is really no choice at all), the sheriff should follow the other guidance Goodness offers, to try to benefit everyone. Thus, he can put his energies into trying to save the other innocents from the mob (whether he succeeds or not), and he can try to save the mob's own souls by dissuading them from carrying through their rampage. He can take reasonable care of his own person, of course, for he is himself a member of the 'everyone' whom he is trying to benefit. Depending on circumstances, he might or might not be successful in any or all of this. But even in the most hopeless case, he cannot frame the innocent one.

The implications of choosing which moral understanding guides our behaviour is not limited to such theoretical improbabilities as the above. Personal acts, laws and systems, are influenced by philosophical assumptions. This is so even when the actors are consciously unaware of such an influence. Utilitarianism, once a radical idea, is now part of the background. A politician saying in an election speech "Under my proposal, most people will be better off" is appealing to the digested effects of a two-hundred-year-old philosophy.

At a Press Club luncheon in Australia a few years ago, a highly respected and widely loved government-appointed Commissioner said about a certain decision "We knew this would send a lot of people broke, but we felt that the overall effects were the best for the whole community." It is easy to see that this is an appeal to pop utilitarianism, and is quite incompatible with the Principle of Goodness, unless combined with rescue policies for those who trusted the existing structure and built their lives around its features. The horrifying thing about this example is that, at the luncheon, not one single listener took the Commissioner to task during question time. There is a lot of work to do before the world operates in accordance with genuine Goodness!

Such discussions inevitably raise the question "But what if the cost of doing things right is just too expensive?" Well, perhaps the community has no cheap options. The

Principle doesn't guarantee that things will work out better; moral Goodness is a property of our intentions, which are related to, but not the same as, whether things work out better or worse in the end. There are many reasons for this. There are intangibles that cannot be accounted for in any utilitarian computation of relative benefits. Under true Goodness, every single person knows that they will never be sacrificed by a utilitarian (with sad regrets, to be sure, but sacrificed nonetheless) for some perceived benefit for someone else. How such a sense of security, held since childhood, would affect the choices and behaviour of people for the better cannot be foreseen or measured, but it is certainly real. Fear is a powerful cause of cruel and unjust behaviour, whereas security promotes kindness and benevolence. These are the kinds of things that would have to be allowed for in judging this question rightly.

Commandments of God

These are ethical theories that accept some higher power as their source. It is self-evident that a major weakness of these theories is disagreement about just what it is that God has commanded. There are two main variants:

a.   The claim that things are good or bad because God said so and for no other reason: good and evil are defined to be agreement or disagreement with God's will. A central weakness here is that we may ask why God's say-so makes something good. If there is no reason beyond the say-so itself, then this boils down to a might-makes-right argument: God is the ruler, so he can punish anyone who disagrees with him. And to the truly insightful, an even greater problem is that it makes it impossible to say, meaningfully, that "God is good", for that claim is a mere tautology under this theory.

b.   The claim that what God orders is good, but God has some reason beyond mere whim for choosing some things over others. If we persevere and ask what that reason might be, we will have to seek an answer that does not involve God's will. That leads us right back to the need to understand good and evil on their own terms.

The Children's Ethics

This is the ethical theory we teach our little children and hope they will grow out of: universal benevolence. We give toddlers cuddly little baa-lamb toys to pet and snuggle up with in bed, and save for later the horrible knowledge that the nice piece of meat on the dinner plate came from a baa-lamb killed in terror in a building whose real nature we scrupulously hide from the child. The only thing wrong with this picture is the adult half of it. Hoping and striving for the benefit of all is a practical ethic for adults, not (merely) a nice story to tell toddlers. Goodness is indeed the children's ethic, in a practical form, for adults and children alike.

Darwinian Ethics

All of the ethics in the previous section are prescriptive ethics: they attempt to tell us what we should or shouldn't do. However, there is another kind of ethical theory: one that tells us why we have ethical thoughts in the first place, in other words an explanatory theory. Darwinian ethics is such a theory.

Robert **Wright**, in his book, The Moral Animal (pp4-5), writes:

> *Between 1963 and 1974, four biologists — William Hamilton, George Williams, Robert Trivers, and John Maynard Smith — laid down a series of ideas that, taken together, refine and extend the theory of natural selection. These ideas have radically deepened the insight of evolutionary biologists into the social behaviour of animals, including us. ...*

> *The new Darwinian synthesis is, like quantum physics or molecular biology, a body of scientific theory and fact; but, unlike them, it is also a way of seeing everyday life. Once truly grasped (and it is much easier to grasp than either of them) it can entirely alter one's perception of social reality.*
>
> *The questions addressed by the new view range from the mundane to the spiritual and touch on just about everything that matters: romance, love, sex (Are men and/or women really built for monogamy? What circumstances can make them more or less so?); friendship and enmity (What is the evolutionary logic behind office politics — or, for that matter, politics in general?); selfishness, self-sacrifice, guilt...; social status and climbing...;the differing inclinations of men and women in areas such as friendship and ambition (Are we prisoners of our gender?); racism, xenophobia, war (Why do we so easily exclude large groups of people from our sympathy?) deception, self-deception...; and so on.*

It is important to understand that Darwinian ethics is *not* social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was the view that evolutionary theory told us, not only why we have ethics, but also what ethics we should have. If "nature is red in tooth and claw", then, so a social Darwinist would argue, we should be also: the strongest should oppress the weak, and so on. But Wright (p31) correctly dismisses this view:

> *... to say that something is "natural" is not to say that it is good. There is no reason to adopt natural selection's "values" as our own.*

Darwinian ethics is important, NOT as a guide to what our morality should be, but instead because an understanding of how evolutionary pressures affect ethical feeling helps us to understand the forces shaping our own natures. That, in turn, then allows us to make choices most likely to lead to happiness and flourishing. We see, therefore, that modern studies of evolutionary effects upon our ethical feelings can be used, if we choose to do so, as important sources of knowledge to help us make plans and policies most likely to benefit everyone and harm no one. In other words, they are an important ally in the project of creating a world imbued with genuine Goodness. In thinking upon this subject, the two dangers to avoid are, firstly, the mistaken belief that the reality of how nature works somehow dictates our moral direction (the mistake that 'is' determines 'ought'); and secondly, to take these ideas as the sole influence upon our moral thinking.

The Paralysis of the Will

Finally in this chapter, we take a look at ethics that are not ethics: the 'ideal' of the 'will', or of 'transcending good and evil'. Rousseau and Nietzsche are two typical figures attracted to this line of thought. It is hard to discuss this topic impartially because these ideas are really not thoughts at all, but instead feelings (savage, primitive ones) disguised as thought.

Rousseau's 'general will' was acted out in its full horror in the savageries of the French revolution. In this theory, the individual must be completely subjugated to the 'general will'. As a source of what is right, it is hard to find anything more disastrous. The massed crowd, shouting "Death!" as the victim is led away to the guillotine, must surely be the paradigmatic case of the rule of the 'general will'. Arguments to the contrary, that a properly educated 'general will' will be sensitive and caring, suffer from the more general problem that they appeal to some other (unstated) principle of ethics. For example, someone saying such a thing will have in mind that it is good to be caring and bad to shout "Death!" to someone for no reason other than their accident of birth, and will therefore conclude that the general will must in the end recommend caring rather than malice. But such an intuition doesn't deduce caring from the general will, but imputes qualities to the general will because of a prior belief in caring. Therefore the 'general will' is a vacuous source of ethical guidance; and a highly dangerous one as well.

In a similar fashion, Nietzsche's 'superman', the ultimate inflation of the ego the weak, found its full expression in the Nazi exterminations. This is not at all to say that Nietzsche himself would have approved, but as an unapologetic celebration of the right of the powerful, Nietzsche's ethic sees nothing wrong in the suffering of millions of it produces a 'great man'. This is the fatal flaw; without some other source of ethics, the celebration of 'greatness' cannot distinguish between Jesus and Hitler. The human will and ego cannot inflate without killing morality; this is a limit upon the human condition.

Nietzsche's 'superman' and Rousseau's 'general will' both, therefore, exhibit the phenomenon of the will unguided by moral principle. It is simply amazing how many modern people fall prey to these writers and their bad ideas, especially those who believe in one or other of the relativist moralities discussed above. Contrast this with the development of the will in the presence of genuine Goodness. Here, the principle stands before all else: "You now choose whether to work for the good of all, or not; choose whether to harm an innocent, or not. CHOOSE." Here is the genuine act of will that eluded Rousseau and Nietzsche, the act whose outcome, when taken rightly, makes the chooser truly great.

References

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