



Morality and Ethics: A Brief Review

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ABSTRACT: Morality, originated from the Latin word *moralitas* (which means manner, character, and proper behavior), is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper. Morality is the moral beliefs, views, and attitudes of given individuals, societies, and groups. Ethics is systematic reflections on moral views and standards (values and norms) and how one should assess actions, institutions, and character traits. Ethics (also known as moral philosophy) is the branch of philosophy which addresses questions of morality. The word "ethics" is "commonly used interchangeably with 'morality,' and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual. This review is a comprehensive introduction to the theories of ethics. These are egoism, Kantianism, hedonism, utilitarianism, naturalism and virtue theory, contractualism, existentialism, and religion. Throughout the review, the exposition draws on examples from great moral philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. Many of the greatest figures in Western philosophy from Plato to Wittgenstein have wondered what the good life for a human being consists in, what makes it good and whether it is being so has any cosmic significance. A critical view of the subject is presented at the end of this review.

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INTRODUCTION

Morality and Ethics

Morality, originated from the Latin word *moralitas* (which means manner, character, and proper behavior), is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper [1]. Morality is the moral beliefs, views, and attitudes of given individuals, societies, and groups. Ethics is systematic reflections on moral views and standards (values and norms) and how one should assess actions, institutions, and character traits [2].

Ethics has four branches: 1. Descriptive ethics: It is the factual investigation of moral standards. It describes moral praxis (moral opinions, attitudes, and actions). 2. Normative ethics: It deals with the systematic investigation of moral standards (norms and values) with the purpose of clarifying how they are to be understood, justified, interpreted, and applied on moral issues. What actions and decisions are right or wrong from an ethical point of view? What makes an action or a decision morally right or wrong or good or bad? How should we organize basic social institutions (political, legal economic), and how should such institutions distribute benefits and burdens (rights, duties, opportunities and resources) among affected parties? 3. Meta-ethics: It is the study of ethical terms, statements, and judgments. It is concerned with the analysis of the language, concepts, and methods of reasoning in ethics. It addresses the meaning of ethical terms such as right, duty, obligation, justification, morality, and responsibility. Moral epistemology (how is moral knowledge possible?) investigates whether morality is subjective or objective, relative or nonrelative, and whether it has a rational or an emotional basis. 4. Applied ethics: Applied ethics is a part of normative ethics that focuses on particular fields. "The philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life that are matters of moral judgment." Bioethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics, intergenerational ethics, climate ethics, business ethics, and computer ethics [2].

Ethical Theories

What is an ethical theory? The aim of ethical theories is, among other things, to present and defend systematic answers to the two following questions:

1. What moral standards (norms and values) should we take into account when assessing actions, decisions, and institutions?

2. How should such moral standards be justified?

The role of moral theory: Moral philosophy is primarily a matter of thinking about the attractions of various ethical theories. Moral theorizing is the result of a perfectly natural process of thinking [2].

Ethical theories: Two types of ethical theories:

(i) Teleological theories:

(a) Consequentialism (and utilitarianism).

(ii) Deontological theories:

(a) Kantian deontology (monistic and absolutistic).

(b) Rossian deontology (pluralistic and pro tanto).

Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion, or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal [3]. Moral philosophy includes moral ontology, or the origin of morals, as well as moral epistemology, or knowledge about morals. Different systems of expressing morality have been proposed, including deontological ethical systems which adhere to a set of established rules, and normative ethical systems which consider the merits of actions themselves. An example of normative ethical philosophy is the Golden Rule, which states that: "One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself [4].

Immanuel Kant [5] introduced the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law". Ethics (also known as moral philosophy) is the branch of philosophy which addresses questions of morality. The word ethics is commonly used interchangeably with 'morality,' and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual [6]. Likewise, certain types of ethical theories, especially deontological ethics, sometimes distinguish between ethics and morals: Although the morality of people and their ethics amounts to the same thing, there is a usage that restricts morality to systems such as that of Immanuel Kant [5], based on notions such as duty, obligation, and principles of conduct, reserving ethics for the more Aristotelian approach to practical reasoning, based on the notion of a virtue, and generally avoiding the separation of 'moral' considerations from other practical considerations [7].

In modern moral psychology, morality is considered to change through personal development. A number of psychologists have produced theories on the development of morals, usually going through stages of different morals. Lawrence Kohlberg [8, 9], Jean Piaget [10], and Elliot Turiel [11, 12] have cognitive-developmental approaches to moral development; to these theorists' morality forms in a series of constructive stages or domains. Social psychologists such as Martin Hoffman [13] and Jonathan Haidt [14] emphasize social and emotional development based on biology, such as empathy. Moral identity theorists, such as William Damon [15, 16] and Mordechai Nisan [17], see moral commitment as arising from the development of a self-identity that is defined by moral purposes; this moral self-identity leads to a sense of responsibility to pursue such purposes. Of historical interest in psychology are the theories of psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, who believe that moral development is the product of aspects of the super-ego as guilt-shame avoidance [18].

Moral self-licensing attempts to explain this phenomenon and proposes that self-image security increases our likelihood to engage in immoral behavior. When our moral self-image is threatened, we can gain confidence from our past moral behavior. The more confident we are, the less we will worry about our future behavior which actually increases the likelihood that we will engage in immoral behaviors [18, 19, 20]. Monin and Miller [19] examined the moral self-licensing effect and found that when participants established credentials as non-prejudiced persons, they were more willing to express politically incorrect opinions despite the fact that the audience was unaware of their credentials.

Theories of Ethics

This review is a comprehensive introduction to the theories of ethics. These are egoism, Kantianism, hedonism, utilitarianism, naturalism and virtue theory, contractualism, existentialism, and religion. Throughout the review, the exposition draws on examples from great moral philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. Many of the greatest figures in Western philosophy from Plato to Wittgenstein have wondered what the good life for a human being consists in, what makes it good and whether it is being so has any cosmic significance [21].

Ethics, Truth, and Reason

The question of the subjectivity or objectivity of morality provides the focus for the earliest complete works

of philosophy – Plato’s dialogues. In several of these dialogues, Plato constructs dramatic conversations between his teacher Socrates and various figures well known in ancient Athens. Many of these people were called ‘Sophists’, a group of thinkers who held that there is a radical difference between the world of facts and the world of values, between *physis* (nature) and *nomos* (law or custom) to use the Greek words, the difference being that when it comes to matters of value, the concepts of true and false have no meaningful application. By implication, then, in ethics there is no scope for proof and demonstration as there is in science and mathematics; ethical ‘argument’ is a matter of rhetoric, which is to say, of persuading people to believe what you believe rather than proving to them that the beliefs you hold are true.

Egoism

What is the best sort of life to aim for? There is a familiar, almost commonplace answer to this question – to be rich and famous. This is a conception of the best life to have that is echoed in, and reinforced by media coverage of the life of the stars.

- Yet, as an answer to the philosopher’s question, the idea that the best life is a rich
- And famous one does not take us very far, not so much because it is an unworthy
- Ambition (though it may be) but because it is logically incomplete, and necessarily so.

Hedonism

Egoism, defined as getting what you want, is not an adequate conception of the best sort of life for a human being. Its strength is supposed to be that it locates the motive for the good life. In subjective desire and not in any abstract conception of ‘the good’. In other words, we cannot avoid asking what we ought to want, and it is this question that a desire based egoism fails to answer. In order to overcome this and other difficulties we considered a redefinition of egoism in terms of interests – the good life is one in which you successfully promote your own interests. We now need to know what is in our best interests. What are the best things to want? In the history of philosophy an answer to this question is provided by a doctrine closely associated with the egoism. This is hedonism – the belief that the point of living is to enjoy life and that accordingly the best life is the most pleasurable one. So close is the association between egoism and hedonism that it is not always easy to distinguish the two views.

Existentialism

Kierkegaard and the origins of existentialism: Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was a very curious man as well as a prolific writer, but his fame is chiefly as a religious thinker rather than a philosopher in the normal sense.

Kantianism

We have been thinking of the idea of the good life as the life it would be most desirable for a human being to lead. But it is time now to consider an important distinction that may be made between two senses of the expression ‘the good life’. In one sense ‘the good life’ means the most desirable or happiest life. In another it means the worthiest or most virtuous human life.

Virtue and happiness: This is a distinction that plays no significant part in Greek philosophical thinking. It came to real prominence first in eighteenth-century Europe.

Utilitarianism

It was concluded that Kant’s conception of the best human life as one lived in accordance with moral duty pursued for its own sake encounters serious difficulties. Three of these are specially important. First, it seems impossible to disregard the successfulness of our actions in deciding how well or badly we are spending our lives. Second, Kant’s categorical imperative, by means of which we are supposed to determine what our duty actually is, is purely formal, with the result that contradictory prescriptions can be made to square with it. Third, the divorce between a morally virtuous life and a personally happy and fulfilling life, and the emphasis upon deserving to be happy rather than actually being happy, leaves us with a problem about motivation. In order to understand the importance of utilitarianism properly, something needs to be said about its origins. We can then consider its merits as a way of thinking about good and bad, right and wrong.

Contractualism

How to bridge the gap between what is the case and what ought to be the case. Philosophical egoists think

that in the case of the first person no problem exists; if I want or need something, then I have a reason to try to get it, and so, rationally I ought to. The altruist, by contrast, does seem to have a problem. How could it follow from the fact that you want or need something that I ought to try and get it for you? How can the needs of others provide a compelling reason for me to act?

‘On what could the demands of morality be based?’ and this question raises just the same issue. Kantians and utilitarians both assemble evidence and argument to show that impartial reason and/or the general good point towards an individual’s taking a certain course of action. But what reason is there for that individual to follow their prescription, especially if it implies some measure of self-sacrifice?

Ethics, Religion and the Meaning of Life

A general summary of the argument that has brought us to this point may be useful. One way of approaching some central questions of ethics is to ask: ‘What is the best sort of life a human being can live?’ The first answer considered was that given by the egoist: the best life is one in which you get what you want. There are a variety of objections to this answer, but the most important is this. Egoism supposes that our wants and desires are in some sense ‘there’ waiting to be satisfied, whereas the truth is that we are often uncertain about what to want. We can intelligibly ask not merely about what we do want out of life, but about what we ought to want. This question, however, egoism cannot answer. It follows that egoism is inadequate as a guide to good living. Though it tells us what to do, given preexistent desires, it cannot help us critically form those desires. The second was hedonism, the view that the good life is the life of pleasure. Hedonism goes one stage further than egoism since it recommends not merely the pursuit of desires in general, but a certain specific desire – the desire for pleasure. Consequently, hedonism cannot be charged with the sort of emptiness that egoism can. Moreover, it appears to enjoy an advantage in arguments about good and bad, because pleasure is a value with natural appeal, and hence a promising value upon which to build a philosophy of the good life. But hedonism is not without its own difficulties.

Morality and Cultures

Peterson and Seligman [22] approached the anthropological view looking across cultures, geo-cultural areas, and across millennia. They concluded that certain virtues have prevailed in all cultures they examined. The major virtues they identified include wisdom / knowledge; courage; humanity; justice; temperance; and transcendence. John Newton, the author of complete conduct principles for the 21st century [23] compared the Eastern and the Western cultures about morality. As stated in his book, "One of the important objectives of this book is to blend harmoniously the fine souls regarding conduct in the Eastern and the Western cultures, to take the result as the source and then to create newer and better conduct principles to suit the human society of the new century". It is hoped that this helps solve lots of problems the human society of the 21st century faces.

The Authority of Morality

The problem faced by either the Kantian or the utilitarian conception of the moral life may be termed a problem about the authority of morality – the claims of morality in the competition between personal desire and social obligation. It is this problem that contractualism in many of its forms is intended to address. Suppose we think of moral rules not as personal ideals but as the rules that people agree to live by. This suggestion is attractive because, by putting agreement at the heart of morality, it bridges the gap between egoism and altruism, a gap that appears to dog many of the most influential ethical theories. Contractualism aims to make promising or contracting the foundation of social obligation, but closer examination shows that the most successful version of this maneuver subsumes morality under politics and thus in effect eliminates it. Hobbes’s argument, if it works, uncovers the basis of political authority, but it still leaves us with a problem about the authority of morality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Review of the two most important moral theories leads to the following conclusions:

First; it is probably impossible to unite all of our moral beliefs into a single coherent theory. Utilitarianism requires us to maximize the total amount of preference satisfaction, even if it means doing an injustice to individuals. RP morality requires us to respect the rights of individuals, even if it means promoting something less than the total amount of preference satisfaction.

Second; given this fundamental divergence between the two theories, it is often best to analyze a complex moral problem from the standpoint of both moral theories. If the two theories converge on the same conclusion,

we can have some assurance about the proper course of action. If the two theories do not converge, a decision must be made as to which conclusion has priority. In general, moral philosophers have adopted the view that RP considerations should take priority over utilitarian considerations, except in those instances where the violation of rights is relatively minor.

Third; in addition to conflicts between the two theories, many problems that arise within a given theory are not adequately treated by the theories as they have been presented. These problems fall into two broad categories which can be called relevance problems and conflict problems.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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