

Why Be Moral?

The question in the title is, in the opinion of this author, a highly subjective one. Philosophers throughout history have advocated different approaches to the difficult ethical questions posed in everyday life. Some have even been tempted to doubt that any rational approach to this subject can be made, as Nietzsche quotes in his *Beyond Good and Evil* that such attempts merely originate from:

'a desire in the heart that has been filtered and made abstract'

namely, philosophers will justify their own emotive decisions through logical arguments. The ancient Greeks were more practical however, and in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle outlines the arguments for leading a virtuous life, and argues that it alone will lead to greater satisfaction in the individual. *Eudaimonia*, or happiness (through flourishing) will be the reward in itself. This fact cannot be dismissed, and it does resonate with current self help literature. It does not cover the greyer areas in cases of moral ambiguity however. We all want to lead a good life, make the right decisions, but will occasionally be confronted with decisions which run contrary to our own self interest. Are we then right to make exceptions? This is where the difficulty lies.

There is an assumption that our instinct should tell us what is right and wrong; only an irrational and delusion person would do the wrong thing believing they are in the right. In the course short story, *A Moral Tale* Bill only behaves as he does, because he has mental health problems, most likely brought on by the stress of financial hardship. Once he is cured, he behaves morally again. However one is tempted to wish he turned to some form of crime to cover the rent before the strain got to him. In this way he may be behaving rationally, but alas, not morally.

It is stories such as the aforementioned which evoke the desire to arrive at a set of ground rules to guide us. How should we approach the status of morality and such difficult ethical dilemmas in a more logical, even handed and fairer manner? We can divide this into areas such as objectivism, relativism and emotivism and then decide on some defined approaches in making good moral decisions. Objectivism tells us in black and white terms if something is right or wrong. For instance, the Ten Commandments, with the commandment *Though Shalt not kill* being the most prevalent, is the best example of this, and everybody agrees with it. Another one may prove more contentious though, namely *Remember to keep Sabbath day holy*. What day is this exactly? I attend mass every Sunday as a Catholic, but my neighbour is Jewish, so his day is Saturday. My other neighbour is an atheist, so there is no defined day for her. It is cases like this where we get into the idea of relativism, i.e. we have to appropriate different rules for different cultures. In confronting other moral dilemmas, we may not be logical or rational about them, but merely be expressing an emotional reaction. This is the emotivist view. What set of rules can we impose on such views of morality to arrive at a suitable outcome for a better world? Utilitarianism and Duty based ethics pose contrasting approaches in this respect. Utilitarianism will guide us to the solution which befits the comfort of the majority. In this respect most people will be satisfied with the outcome, but the individual's case may be discarded. Duty based theories are governed by Christian and Kantian ethics. Either of these will demand that the individual act in the best moral interest, as it is their duty to do so, not for reasons of self fulfilment (*Nicomachean Ethics*), self-interested altruism or that it provides the most comfortable solution for the majority (Utilitarianism).

Such normative theories are broad brush strokes when we consider exceptions in the form of thought experiments and other counter arguments. The short story *The Cold Equations* covers a scenario where there is only enough fuel in a rescue spaceship to carry one person who will deliver a cure for a fatal disease to six others. However a stowaway is found and so this endangers all parties involved. This argues the case for sacrificing one innocent life in order to save seven more, and in light of there being no other possible outcome, this is easy to agree with. What if some part of the story were to differ though? What if there was some doubt on how much fuel would be needed for a successful arrival at destination? Or there was only one person to deliver the cure to? Then the consequentialist aims of the Utilitarian may not justify the means. For duty based theories why should we accept Christian ethics if we do not believe in God, or question the fact that he has the last word in morality? To counter Kantian ethics we can use the thought experiment of the axe murderer arriving at your door, looking to kill someone who is hiding at the back of your home. If you do not tell the axe murderer the truth, you are not acting morally, but condemning someone else to death. This is because Kantian ethics, unlike Utilitarianism, does not consider the consequences as it considers such matters out of our control. Therefore it can be similar to Utilitarianism in not always considering the needs of the individual, or is a theory which has leeway for exceptional cases.

In such cases it is tempting not to be moral if that is what the rules entail. Maybe there is no logical answer to some moral questions. One can only trust ones own instinct of what is right according to each situation. In navigating the moral maze, what good is it having free will if one cannot trust ones own intuitions? This argument may appear reductive if one completely discounts the normative theories previously discussed however.

It seems that each method of arriving at moral decisions has its own merits and uses. Utilitarianism, in trying to maximise happiness for the most people, will usually work in the interests of the majority, although this is not guaranteed. Duty based ethics, both Christian and Kantian, acknowledges we need to treat others as we would treat ourselves. It is this consideration towards others, and a willingness for self sacrifice in following ones duty that may help Nietzsche's philosopher arrive at a more balanced, rational decision. Nevertheless this cannot be always guaranteed if either method is slavishly followed through. Only when we are able to make such difficult decisions can one then follow any worthwhile path to a more virtuous life, which in turn will have its own rewards. In conclusion, why should we be moral? Why not? One has to try.

References

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