

ETHICS FUNDAMENTALS AND APPROACHES TO ETHICS

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Summary

As traditional moral values have been challenged by contemporary thought, the moral consciousness of people today has been degraded. But morality has a function in human society, and its role is irreplaceable by any other item of human culture. One way to get out of the predicament is to use the moral theories of the past to reflect anew upon the meaning and the end of morality, and reinvestigate the principles to guide actions and moral judgments. This article introduces some ethical theories that represent the most fundamental thinking of the solution of moral problems. The moral theories introduced and discussed in this article can be divided into two types. The first takes morals as instruments for the satisfaction of desires, while the second theory takes morals as manifestations of the real self. Both types of thinking have the support of human experience. They are, therefore, not necessarily to be regarded as contradictory or incompatible, as they appear to be, but can be seen as complementary. Both reflect the functions of morals on different levels of human experience. This is true not only in comparing these two types of theories, but also in comparing the theories of these two types. Some enlightenment can be obtained by rethinking each of these theories.

1. Introduction

This is an era in which the significance of morality is degraded. What people are concerned about is not morality, but benefits to themselves. There are, of course, many causes that lie behind this phenomenon. One is that human society underwent a rapid and

substantial change over the twentieth century. The relationships between individual people, between people and society, and between human beings and the natural environment are very different from those of a hundred years ago. The moral system that solved the problems of the past may be unable to solve the complicated problems of today. Another reason is that societies of the past were typically monistic with uniform value systems, and today's societies are typically pluralistic ones in which different value systems operate together. No particular value system is believed to be able to give an absolute standard of what is right or wrong. At the same time, anthropologists say that different cultural patterns have different value systems and moral systems. There are no objective standards to judge which system is better or higher than the others. This gives an impression that value or moral systems are merely artificial products of human beings and have no independent authority.

This does not mean that our society no longer needs morality and that one can appeal to desires in judging what one should do or should not do. Everyone has numerous desires or wishes that are very often in conflict. One has to make decisions about which desire to satisfy and which to give up or postpone. How to make a right or correct decision and by what standard that one decision is right and another wrong is always a puzzle. One of the functions of morality is to give guidance in dealing with these puzzles.

On the other hand, there are always conflicts among people. It is always a problem for a society to maintain order and to prevent or solve the conflicts among people reasonably. Another function of morality is to provide principles and rules that are acceptable to everyone and encourage people to live together peacefully and cooperatively.

Traditional moral standards and moral rules that played a very important role in the lives of people of the past have somewhat lost their power today. If the moral standards or moral rules of the past are taken as the only guidance for action and moral judgment, and these moral standards and moral rules are in fact not entirely suitable to our society, people will take this as evidence that morality is no longer significant, and the function of morality as described above will vanish. Many problems will then arise in people's lives and in society. It is therefore not appropriate to appeal blindly or dogmatically to the moral rules of the past whenever morality is mentioned as if they are the only moral standards humans have. Instead, it may be better to go back to the ethical theories to reflect upon the meaning and the end of morality and see what kind of principles can be a guide in taking action or in making moral judgments. The purpose of this article is to introduce some fundamental ethical theories that have had a great influence on the moral thinking of the past and, I believe, still give a great deal of enlightenment in dealing with the problems of morality today.

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle pointed out that moral education consists of two parts. One is to establish good habits of conduct. The reason is that it is a preliminary and necessary condition for being a moral person to develop good dispositions, and disposition is a matter of habit. Thus one has to develop a habit of pursuing justice or a disposition to be just if one wants to be a just person. What Aristotle means by saying this is that moral practice is a very important factor in being a moral person. One cannot have a moral character or become a moral person if one does not constantly practice to be moral, even though one might have correct moral ideas. This is just like a pianist who

would not be a good pianist if she did not practice regularly even though she knows in her mind how to play the piano.

The other part of moral education, according to Aristotle, is to know why one should be moral. One often has to give up some benefits for morality and one would not do so or at least would not be willing to do so if one did not know why one should be moral or why it is good to be moral. This is like taking medicine. Nobody is willing to take medicine not knowing what is good about it. But one would if one knew that it would promote health. What Aristotle wishes to bring out is the importance of moral theory that shows the significance or the good of morality.

Developing a moral habit is a matter of educational psychology and will not be discussed in this article. Instead, the focus is on why one should be moral and what are the moral principles that one should observe. The discussion will be pursued through the introduction and analysis of some fundamental ethical theories.

2. Ethical Egoism

The first ethical theory to be introduced and discussed is egoism. What egoism advocates is that the benefit of oneself is the end or goal of all actions, including that of moral actions, and thus is the only standard of what is right and what is wrong, or what is moral and what is immoral. It looks as if egoists are advocating that people ought to be selfish and ought therefore to resist any moral rules or principles, since selfishness is, in common sense terms, incompatible with morality. This is not true. The philosophers who advocate egoism note that a selfish person will very often not secure benefit but suffer harm instead. Overtly selfish people are very often distrusted, isolated, excluded, or made to suffer.

The egoist suggests that in order to secure long-term benefits and to promote long-term self-interest one should do well to observe moral rules or principles. In the history of ethics, Aristippus and Epicurus are both known for their egoistic ethics. They advocate that the end and meaning of life is one's own pleasure, because, they said, everyone, without exception, is pursuing their own pleasure as the end of their actions. They urge, though, that one of the conditions of securing pleasure is to be unselfish, just, honest, etc. Anybody who is selfish, unjust, dishonest, and in fear of their evil behavior being found out and punished would at least have no peace of mind, and so would be unhappy. Morality, in this sense, is an instrument. It is a means to happiness. It is not good in itself, but promotes one's long-term benefits. That is to say, humans are moral not for the sake of being moral but for the sake of happiness. Morality would have no value at all if it could not help to obtain happiness.

The "ego" that egoism talks about is an individual person. Egoism may be broadened, though. For example, nationalism can have the same basic structure as egoism. Thus the leaders of most countries realize that no country can isolate itself from others, and that all countries are interdependent economically, politically, militarily, and culturally. The bankruptcy of one country can cause an economic decline in another country. So a desire to promote the interests of one's own country will usually require the fair treatment of others.

A similar point can be made concerning the view that only humans are of any moral concern. So, human beings use the natural world as a slave or an instrument merely for the satisfaction of their ever-growing desires. Many species in the world have been exterminated; the natural environment has been polluted; and the ecological order of the earth has been disturbed. In recent years, many people have begun to be aware of the seriousness of the problems and that human beings and the natural world are interdependent. They have come to understand that if the natural world is damaged humankind will not flourish in the long term.

To conclude, the message of ethical egoism and its variants is that humans have to respect others if they want to be respected; they cannot do harm to others if they do not want to be harmed. Morality is typically required for happiness. One weakness of egoism, though, is that it is not the case that good is always rewarded and evil always punished. Egoism does not provide a sufficiently solid foundation for morality.

3. The Contract Theory of Hobbes

The second theory to be discussed is contract theory, which was developed by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century. Like egoism, it holds that the end of morality is individual benefit. However, egoism appeals directly to the consequences of the action concerned as the standard of moral judgments, while contract theory appeals to the contract made between the two or more parties concerned. The reason why one should be moral, according to contract theory, is not because one can directly gain more in consequence, but because the contract, which one explicitly or implicitly agrees to observe, is the foundation of moral rules.

According to Hobbes, morality does not come direct from human nature. Rather, it is an artifact designed by humans to escape the predicament of the state of nature. In the state of nature there is no overarching authority, and so everybody can do whatever they want to satisfy their desires. There is no right or wrong, no justice or injustice. There would be no need of morality if, in the state of nature, each could get what they wanted peacefully. However, this is not the case. Since the desires of humans are ever growing and natural resources are limited, one person's satisfaction is often at the expense of another's dissatisfaction. This competition between people encourages a disposition "to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other." This is a state of war in which every other human being is, at least potentially, one's enemy, and no one has security against others. In such a state, there cannot be cooperation among people, who remain in a solitary, poor, nasty, brutish state. The only way to escape the state of nature is to design rules for people to observe so that they can live together peacefully and cooperatively. Hobbes calls these rules "the laws of nature."

The laws of nature are the foundation of morality. They are designed for the sake of the satisfaction of every individual's desires. They are not good in themselves, only as instruments. The first natural law says that "every man ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it." In order to seek peace, people have to give up the right to do everything they want to do, since there will be no peace if everyone attacks others when they think it necessary for the satisfaction of their desires. Thus the second law of nature says that a person must "be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth as for peace, and

defense of himself he think necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.” This mutual waiving of rights, implied in the second law, requires that both parties undertake to limit their freedom and to trust each other to do so. This waiving of rights is in vain if the contract regarding mutual restraint is not expected to be kept, and so Hobbes’s third law of nature is “that men perform their covenants made: without which, covenants are in vain, and but empty words; and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war.”

According to Hobbes, the covenant is the foundation of morality. An action is immoral only when a covenant has been made and the action violates this covenant. For Hobbes, morality is founded on a kind of contract or agreement that is made for the purpose of obtaining peace, which is crucial in order for people to be able to live together cooperatively and to improve their chances of satisfaction of their desires. Morality, in other words, is not an end in itself but an instrument designed to satisfy the desires of each individual.

Contract theory is a popular ethical theory today. It is actually a kind of egoism, because the basic motivation is the satisfaction of the desires of each individual. Thus many sociologists believe morality is designed for the purpose of maintaining good relationships among people and maintaining a social order that is important for the safety, security, and happiness of each individual. Moral rules, as Hobbes said, play a crucial role in developing an implicit agreement between people that they refrain from doing one another harm. People perhaps do not observe the moral rules for their own sake but because they will benefit in the long run from so doing.

This theory, however, has a significant weakness. The purpose of designing and observing moral rules for individuals is, according to the theory, to prevent others from doing harm to people and the better to satisfy their desires. This interpretation of morality cannot, however, explain morally motivated self-sacrifice. Morality does not seem to be merely a contract.

4. Utilitarianism

The third moral theory to be introduced is utilitarianism, which holds that the end of morality and the standard of the distinction of right and wrong are not one’s own benefit or happiness, but that of the whole community. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, said that it is the happiness of the party whose interest is considered that determines whether behavior is right or wrong: “if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community; if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.” What Bentham means by this is that every action has some effect on the interests of some party. Sometimes the party concerned is a particular individual, sometimes a family, and sometimes the whole community. It is the happiness of the whole party, whose interests are affected by the action, that determines whether the action is right or wrong. Thus, any action that tends to increase the happiness of the party concerned is approved, and any action that tends to diminish the happiness of the party concerned is disapproved. Bentham called this principle “the principle of utility” and

regarded it as the highest principle of morality, from which all moral rules such as “Thou shall not kill” and “Thou shall not steal” are derived.

Why is the principle of utility the highest principle of morality? Why should the happiness of the whole community be pursued as the end of individual actions? Why is the happiness of the community, rather than of individuals, the standard of judging what is right and what is wrong? The foundation of the principle of utility, according to Bentham, is that individuals all by nature pursue pleasure and avoid pain in all actions, and so they alone determine what they shall do and at the same time point out what they ought to do. This foundation is the same as that of egoism. Granting, though, that it is a fact that everyone by nature pursues their own pleasure does not yield the conclusion that the happiness of the whole community, rather than of oneself, is the end of actions and the standard of judging what is right and what is wrong. Thus, there must be some other reason for advocating that the principle of utility is the highest moral principle.

Bentham later says that the principle of utility is the highest principle of morality because it is the most reasonable principle to be the ground of moral rules. For instance, if one asks what is the reason that individuals should not steal or should not lie, the only reason given is that it is against the principle of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. All the other reasons given by other theories are not as satisfactory as the principle of utility. Sympathy, for instance, is too subjective to be the universal and impartial principle of what is right and what is wrong. God’s will, on the other hand, is too ambiguous, needs to be interpreted, and can be reduced to the principle of utility.

John Stuart Mill, the most outstanding disciple of Bentham, when talking about the sanctions that explain the motives of people to observe the principle of utility says that everyone has social feelings that are the desires to be in unity with others. It is these social feelings that are the foundation of our conscience and that support the principle of utility. If this is true then humans are not as egoistic by nature as the egoists believe. Our nature is to pursue happiness, not only our own, but also that of our fellow humans. This explains why the happiness of the whole community, rather than just of oneself, is the standard of right and wrong.

Given that individuals all have social feelings by which they desire the good of the whole community and selfish feelings by which merely their own good is pursued, the question can be asked why the former and not the latter should be followed when these two feelings are in conflict with each other? Mill has a ready answer to this question. He says that the happiness deriving from social feelings is qualitatively higher than that deriving from selfish feelings. What he means is that of two pleasures one of them is, “by those who are completely acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a great amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure.” Individuals are then justified to conclude that the one preferred is qualitatively higher than the other even though it is quantitatively smaller. For instance, Mill believed that the pleasure of being an actively intelligent person is higher than that of being a happy fool: “It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

Utilitarianism has been a popular ethical theory in Britain and the United States since the end of the eighteenth century when Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* was published. It has had a tremendous influence upon the moral ideas and the legal systems of both countries. There are reasons why this theory is so appealing. First, it has offered an objective standard for moral judgments. The happiness of the people is observable, and so moral judgments become verifiable. Second, happiness, or pleasure plus absence of pain, has been taken as an end and good in itself since the time of Socrates, and most people would say that happiness is the end or at least one of the ends of life. Third, the theory is in line with our moral common sense that moral actions are beneficial and immoral actions are harmful to the community.

Utilitarianism, however, has weaknesses. First, it is difficult to calculate the amount of the happiness produced by an action. It is also not easy to judge whether the pleasure is greater than the pain produced by an action. Nor is it easy to compare one person's happiness with that of another. If the happiness of the people concerned is the standard of moral judgments, this difficulty weakens the power of this moral standard. Second, is it true that moral actions necessarily bring about benefit to the people concerned and immoral actions do them harm? Judges who stick to the law when handling legal cases are good judges from a legal point of view even though the consequence of their handling some cases may not benefit the people. On the other hand, judges who take the benefit of the community, instead of the law, to be the standard for handling cases are definitely not good judges. In other words, there is often a mismatch between what utilitarianism requires and what our deep-seated feelings believe is appropriate.

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Biographical Sketch

Te Chen is a retired professor in philosophy from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Professor Chen had been the chairman of the Department of Philosophy of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Dean of Students at Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, before retiring in 1999. He is now a senior college tutor of Chung Chi College. His area of expertise is ethics, including both Chinese and Western ethical theories. He also has interests in existentialism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His teaching expertise includes ethics, existentialism, the ethical theories of Kant, Confucianism, philosophy, and the history of Chinese philosophy. As well as teaching at undergraduate and graduate levels, he has supervised master's and Ph.D. students.

After graduating from Chu Hai College, Hong Kong, in 1954, Professor Te Chen's M.Phil. was conferred by the New Asia Research Institute, Hong Kong, in 1968 and his Ph.D. by the Southern Illinois University, USA, in 1969.

Professor Te Chen has written several articles on ethics, comparative philosophy, and neo-Confucianism, and a book on ethical theories that was published in 1994 and has been popular reading in this field.