

### Are there any objective moral principles?

As humans in a society, we are, however involuntarily, bound to the ideas of right and wrong. They are at the core of many aspects of our behaviour; our laws, our decisions, our attitude towards each other, all are affected by the moral principles we live by. Even those who deviate from the traditional ethical code, by opposing it, accept its existence. Yet despite all the importance we attach to these values, we cannot definitively determine their source, or their legitimacy, though we stand by them fiercely when they are contested.

The words “good” and “bad” are imprinted on our minds, from the small child who files them in her vocabulary alongside “apple” or “bird,” to the world leader who starts a war in their name. Without these fundamental binary opposites we are lost, unable to maintain the sense of both internal and universal order we so depend on. This is why it is convenient for us to believe that there are objective moral principles, as opposed to Hamlet's view:

*“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”*

It is necessary then to disprove this declaration, purely for the sake of our own comfort. It would be ideal if we could accept a Universalist theory, and view ethics as concrete facts that exist independently of us. However, while this does make the nature of morality simpler, it requires some external force with the power to decide its rules. An easy way out is to claim they are defined by God (or any other deity). Yet, as Socrates asks in Plato's “Euthypro”;

*“Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?”*

This means that even if a god were to provide us with an adequate set of commandments, they would still not have sufficient authority to impose ethics on us. If the first alternative is true, it implies God has nothing to do with the source of ethics, he obeys and believes in them just as ignorantly as we do. The second is no better, since it suggests God's ethics are a matter of his opinion, which only supports Shakespeare's theory. Even if the thinker in question is God, it doesn't change the fact that his principles are a mere product of his mentality, making them no more valid than anyone else's.

Since we cannot explain morality through divine command, perhaps it is necessary to take a scientific approach. Could ethics be purely a matter of Biology, programmed into our genes, evolved from a natural survival instinct? This is the theory Richard Dawkins would advocate. A firm believer in Darwinism, he states that it is in our nature to be good since we care for the well-being of those who are related to us, so as to promote the survival of our genes. He broadens this theory by claiming altruism directed towards anyone to whom one is not related is the result of our biological intuitions “misfiring,” in the same way those of a reed warbler might cause it to mistakenly bring up a cuckoo.

In general I believe Dawkins overestimates the capacity of genetics to overcome logic, emotions and circumstances. It seems illogical that any emotional attachment to someone results only from their genetic make-up, since we can't directly perceive it. As a society, we wouldn't even be aware of DNA were it not for modern science. Another flaw in his argument is that, were it true, we would behave kindly only to physically similar individuals who statistically could be related to us, and never to those of markedly different skin colour and back-ground.

If our moral principles don't stem from such universal sources as God and Biology, the only alternative left is that they come from us; they are an invention of the human mind. Although this means that we can never receive confirmation of their truth from any external, entirely credible source, there are still theories that do not conform to Shakespeare's relativist view. We can, for example, take a teleological approach and say it is possible to ascertain whether actions are right or wrong by examining their consequences. This is also the principle on which the theory of utilitarianism is based. Developed by Bentham and Mill, it operates on the idea that;

*“actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”*

There is one major flaw in this argument, however, in that it assumes happiness is always a good thing. There are no universal rules for what brings about happiness, it can be inspired by just about anything. Pleasure can be derived by some from many acts that would usually be deemed immoral. Simply because an action brings about happiness doesn't immediately make it right as it depends on the nature of the person who is made happy. For example, if a group of deranged individuals decided to torture someone in secret, this would be perfectly moral according to utilitarianism. The torturers would

enjoy their activities, and this enjoyment of the majority would be deemed sufficient to outweigh the suffering of their victim. One could argue against this by saying that, if their abusive behaviour was found out by the authorities, broadcast on the news, it would make many people unhappy due to the disturbing nature of the crime. Yet this suggests that their only immorality would lie in being found out. This idea hints at nihilism and suggests that everyone can do as they please so long as they don't get caught, a system that teleological principles don't support. As the American critic, H.L. Mencken, once said; "*Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that someone might be looking,*" a view that strips ethics of any integrity. Thankfully, this idea seems unfounded, as both anonymous acts of kindness and overt cruelty are not too uncommon in our society.

In suggesting some of the same values as nihilism, utilitarianism demonstrates just one of its paradoxical consequences. It condones, for example, the conviction of an innocent person to satisfy the general public's desire for an arrest. Also, any teleological argument doesn't allow for random misfortune. According to their rules, unwittingly giving an almond cake to someone with a nut allergy should be treated in the same way as murder, while a criminal who intended but failed to kill someone shouldn't even be prosecuted. While utilitarianism may provide happiness for the majority, it is an unjust system, which wouldn't have sufficient stability if implemented in real life. There would always be the possibility of being chosen to act as a martyr for the happiness of others, and surely knowing this would make everyone perpetually unhappy.

The main problem with consequentialism in general is that there is not one simple consequence to an action. As Leon Trotsky said;

*"The end may justify the means so long as there is something that justifies the end."*

Yet there rarely is a definitive end. Consequences occur in chains, so if we pick out one action and claim it is wrong, then we must also condemn everything that has led to it. In convicting a murderer it becomes necessary also to convict their parents, their friends, the actors in the television series they watch. Everyone and everything that has had an influence on them may be deemed culpable. If previously, someone acted altruistically and saved the life of said murderer, although at the time it was a moral deed, it becomes suddenly immoral due to some unforeseeable consequence further down the line. This begs the question; are all acts of immorality mere links in an ineluctable chain reaction? Is there such a thing as a bad person, or are they all products of previous wrongdoings and mistakes. Take, for example one of the most infamous child abuse cases in modern history, that of the girl named "Genie"; reared in abusive captivity, she was unable to speak as her father only communicated by barking, causing her to be considered a feral child. Her confinement and inhumane treatment goes against every moral intuition, and is wrong according to all the systems of ethics discussed so far. However, though we may not be able to justify it, it is important to try and find the source of the father's twisted ethical values. We can see how his actions may have been influenced by previous events in his own past. The girl's family were themselves victims of immorality when the grandmother with whom they lived was killed in a hit-and-run-crime which proved scarring for the father, as her body was dragged down the street. Having always been of an unstable nature, this incident caused the father to become even more unhinged as his mother was no longer around to keep an eye on him. Another contributing factor was that around the time of the grandmother's death, Genie was misdiagnosed as being severely mentally-disabled, a human error that catalysed an atrocity. We cannot tell how the circumstances would have worked out otherwise, but while nothing can make the crime "right", seeing how it resulted from an unfortunate sequence of events makes it difficult to lay the blame solely on the father, despite his obvious moral deficiency in relation to the norm. Apparently he believed he was treating his child for her "condition", an attitude described as "punishing protectiveness, vindictive care," in Michael Newton's "Savage Boys and Wild Girls." Another tragic event was added to the chain when the father committed suicide, leaving behind a note that proclaimed "*the world will never understand*"; a poignant defence of his ethics. He was correct; we can't even begin to understand.

All we can do is label it as wrong. Immorality is a device that allows us to dismiss what we can't and don't want to comprehend. We know that "*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner,*" and there are some crimes we simply don't want to forgive. We want to feel safe in the knowledge that there are objective moral principles that make us good, and that as long as we follow them, we will never be like the murderers and psychopaths in the news. That is a different world. *They* don't think like us. *Their* morals are distorted. Although we may never understand, we feel we don't need to because we are right. Why? We just are.

It is a response I often find myself giving when I can think of no better argument; an unfounded conviction that, as we have eliminated all other possibilities, must be subjective, a result of experience and upbringing. My ethics are the ideas I have developed through my environment, or as Simon Blackburn calls it, my "*ethical climate*". Specific events and external influences may also have an effect, which is what gives different individuals contrasting views, even in the same ethical climate.

It seems then that Shakespeare gives the most satisfactory interpretation of morality, even though it demotes ethics to a matter of opinion. Pragmatically though, it changes little. No amount of logical argument is going to make those who are thoroughly convinced of their moral values believe otherwise. Different ideas of good and bad co-exist as a result of pure human dogmatism. Still, as a dogmatic human myself, I want to disagree. However, this only shows that, like the rest of the population, I have acquired a set of ethics, believe them, stubbornly and against all logic or sense. Although I may recognise their subjectivity, I cannot help the fact that they are a key feature of my species and personality, drummed too deeply into my consciousness to be erased now. It seems then that all I can do is agree with Bertrand Russell and say:

*“I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it”.*