Reassessing Morality

By Bill Meacham, Ph. D.
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Part I: The Ontology of Morality

One of the most intractable sources of conflict in human affairs is clashes of morality. No doubt there are plenty of other sources of conflict, such as resource scarcity, tribal animosity, sexual jealousy, emotional restimulation and more. But a great deal of conflict is based on differing moral intuitions. Here are a few examples:

- A Taliban tribesman kills his daughter for taking an unsupervised walk with a young man. He thinks he was obliged to do so. We in the West consider this an appalling murder.

- Some people want to ban all abortions, claiming that abortion is morally wrong because it is murder. Others claim that not only is abortion not murder but a woman's right to determine the fate of her own body outweighs any other moral claim.

- Political protesters think it is our moral duty to disobey laws that we find unjust. Their opponents think patriotism, loyalty to one's nation and obedience to its laws, is supremely obligatory.

- Animal rights advocates praise "no-kill" animal shelters that minimize euthanasia of unclaimed pets even as costs mount drastically. They think we have a moral obligation to avoid harm to animals. Others lament the diversion of resources that could—and, they say, should—be used to provide health and public safety services to human beings.

All these examples of moral conflict (and there are many more) show certain common features. Researcher Michelle Maiese (2003) lists five: misunderstanding, mistrust, strained and hostile communication, negative stereotyping, and non-negotiability. Philosopher Joel Marks (2013, pp. 40-48) describes the defects of our typical sense of morality: it makes us angry; it promotes hypocrisy; it encourages arrogance; it is imprudent, leading us to do things that have obviously bad consequences; and it makes us intransigent, fueling endless strife.

Of these features, the worst is intransigence or non-negotiability, the refusal to entertain the possibility of coming to some reconciliation, compromise or

agreement. Conflicts based on differing moral intuitions are notoriously difficult to resolve.

Why is this so? To find out, we need to take a close look at what morality is and what moral judgments are about. In this essay I discuss the ontology of morality; that is, how its manner of being is like and unlike that of other kinds of things we experience. I note a sort of impasse one can find oneself in once the ontological status of morality is recognized. Then I suggest a way out of the impasse: to think in terms of goodness rather than rightness.

According to psychologist Stephen Pinker (2008), the moral judgment has specific cognitive, behavioral and emotional characteristics. Cognitively, the rules it evokes are taken to apply without exception. Prohibitions against rape and murder are believed to be universal and objective, not matters of local custom; and people who violate the rules are deemed to deserve condemnation. Behaviorally, we do in fact condemn moral offenders and praise those who obey the moral law in ways that do not apply to, for instance, people who merely wear unstylish clothes. Emotionally, when our sense of morality is triggered, we feel a glow of righteousness when we abide by the rules, guilt when we don't, a sense of anger or resentment at those who violate the rules and a desire to recruit others to allegiance to them. (This account of moral judgment, by the way, is just a description. It does not itself make any moral claims.)

What is philosophically interesting is the nature of the moral rules. What sorts of things are they, and how do we know them? These are questions of ontology, the study of what exists, and epistemology, the study of how we come to know things. The two questions are closely related, of course, as the way we know things determines what we believe about what they are. My epistemological approach is loosely phenomenological in the Continental sense. In what follows I examine everyday experience of various kinds of entities without prejudging the status of their existence in order to find out how they appear to us. Metaphorically, at the risk of attributing agency where there is none, I investigate how they make themselves known to us. From the results of that inquiry I make judgments about their ontology. I follow Hans Jonas (1996, p. 88) in thinking of ontology as the "manner of being" characteristic of various kinds of entities.

Most people, I suspect, especially those who intransigently insist that their morality is the right one, are moral realists. *Moral realism* is the doctrine that there are moral facts, expressible in propositions like "Murder is wrong," that exist whether or not anyone believes they do. They are taken to be objective and independent of our perception of them and of our beliefs, feelings and attitudes towards them. In this view, if someone asks "Is murder wrong?" there is a correct answer because there really is, out there in the world, a fact of the matter.

But is there? The opposing view, with the somewhat unintuitive name "moral anti-realism," says there is not. To see why someone might suspect that there are actually no moral facts out there in the world, we can contrast the manners of being of three different kinds of things, physical entities, mathematical/logical entities and moral entities.

We take physical entities to exist independently of us because of how they appear to us and how they behave when we interact with them. (I speak here of physical things of middling size in the everyday world, not the very tiny things of the quantum scale, nor those that are astronomically large.) Things in our ordinary experience appear in perspective. We see one side of an object, a tree, say, but not the other side. We fully expect that if we walk around the tree we will see its other side, and in fact when we walk around it, we do see its other side. If we try to occupy the same space as the tree by walking through it, we find that we can't. A physical object occupies space and has a certain mass. If moving, it has a certain velocity (with respect to our frame of reference) and perhaps a certain acceleration. Physical objects appear in color, or at least in shades of dark and light. They persist. If we turn our back to the tree or close our eyes, we fully expect to be able to see it if we turn around or open our eyes, and our expectations are fulfilled. Physical objects change over time, and we can predict the changes well enough to take advantage of them, knowing, for instance, the best time to pick fruit from the tree. Physical objects are knowable by more than one person. We can measure the tree's height and the circumference of its trunk, and anyone else using the same instruments will come up with the same measurements. For all these reasons it makes abundant sense to believe that physical objects exist in their own right, independently of us.

Mathematical/logical entities seem to exist independently of us as well, although they do so differently from physical objects. In contrast to physical objects, they have no perspective, no front and back. They have no mass, do not occupy space and have no velocity, acceleration or color. Unlike physical objects, which change over time, mathematical/logical objects do not. The number three is now, was always and always will be a prime number. But, like physical objects, mathematical/logical objects persist. Whenever we think of them they appear to us just as they did before, somewhat as a tree does when we open our eyes after closing them. And there are established procedures for investigating them, just as there are for physical objects. If someone proves a mathematical theorem, anyone with the requisite knowledge can verify that the proof is correct.

There is quite a philosophical controversy over the exact ontological status of mathematical and logical entities. Do they exist independently of us, or do they depend on us for their existence? Do we discover them, or do we in some sense construct them? I am very much simplifying the debate between Platonism and

Nominalism here; the arguments can get very technical and arcane. But it is evident that some things certainly seem like facts: that two plus two equals four, that true premises of a valid argument yield a true conclusion, that an equilateral triangle is also equiangular, and so forth. The reality of these things does not depend on whether we believe in them or not, nor on how we feel about them. If we somehow construct them, we do so within very rigid logical constraints; there is only one possible way for each of them to be. And where does that logical constraint come from? Do we construct it? I find it more reasonable to believe that, like physical objects, mathematical/logical objects exist independently of us.

Moral entities such as the wrongness of murder or the obligation to tell the truth are different. They are neither physical nor mathematical/logical, but have characteristics of both. Like mathematical/logical entities and unlike physical objects, they lack perspective, mass, extension in space, velocity, acceleration and color. Like both mathematical and physical objects, they persist in time. If someone thinks murder is wrong today, he or she will most likely think it wrong tomorrow. Like physical objects, moral entities seem to change over time. Slavery was common and accepted in ancient Greece and Rome; today we find it morally wrong. But does that mean that the moral status of slavery has actually changed over the years, or was it always wrong and it has taken us some time to recognize its wrongness?

The fact that we can ask this question should alert us that there is something a bit strange about moral entities. Physical objects change over time in accordance with well-known natural laws. Mathematical/logical entities don't. But we don't have an easy and obvious answer as to whether moral entities do or don't. Not only that, we don't have an agreed-upon way to find out. We use the scientific method of experimentation to learn about the physical world. We use formal methods to prove mathematical and logical theorems. In both cases, any competent practitioner can use the method to find the result, a result that is objective in that it is agreed upon by all those who use the method. Objective results can be evaluated in the same way independently of who the evaluator is. In contrast, there is no accepted procedure that enables us to settle moral debate. There is no experiment to determine, for example, whether abortion is or is not morally acceptable. This leads one to suspect that moral entities do not exist objectively and independently of us as physical objects do.

There are other reasons to question the independent existence of moral entities. The late J.L. Mackie (1977) calls one of them the *argument from relativity*. It is an obvious fact that moral codes vary among societies and even among various classes and groups within a single society, as illustrated by the examples given above. Mackie takes these differences as evidence that different moral codes reflect different ways of life, not different apprehensions, "most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted," of an objective realm of moral entities (Mackie, 1977, p. 37).

Mackie also offers the *argument from queerness* (by which term he means being odd or unusual, not sexual orientation). The argument from queerness, Mackie says,

> has two parts, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else (Mackie, 1977, p. 38).

Ontologically, moral entities as we experience them do in fact seem to be different from physical and mathematical/logical entities. In addition to the points made above, there is another way they differ: they intrinsically motivate us to act. This assertion, technically known as "motivational internalism," is not uncontroversial. Internalists believe that there is a logically necessary connection between one's conviction that something ought to be done and one's motivation to do it. Externalists deny this assertion and say that an independent desire, such as the desire to do the right thing, is required to motivate us. Rather than argue about concepts, I just want to point out that, empirically, moral judgments do in fact motivate the vast majority of us most of the time.[1] We find a wallet with money in it and some papers identifying its owner. We know that morally we ought to return the money to the owner and feel some inclination to do so. Even if we keep the money, we feel the obligation, the impulse to do the right thing, and have to make some effort to overcome it.[2]

In contrast, physical objects and mathematical/logical entities do not motivate us. A tree may be ripe with apples, but we are motivated to pick them not because they are there but because we feel hungry or think it would be nice to make an apple pie or in order to sell them or for some other reason that is intrinsic to us, not to the apples. We may enjoy the beauty of an elegant logical proof, but it does not motivate us to do anything about it unless we have, for instance, some curiosity about its further implications. The curiosity is ours, not the proof's.

So moral entities do indeed seem to be queer in Mackie's sense. They are not real in the familiar way that physical objects are, nor in the way that mathematical/logical entities are. They have some characteristics of both and one characteristic, that they inherently motivate us, shared by neither. If moral

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[1] For an account of why this is so based on empirical research see Prinz (2006).
[2] This example is specific to a certain culture and a socioeconomic class within that culture, but similar examples obtain *mutatis mutandis* in other cultures and classes.

realism means to be real in the manner of physical objects or of mathematical/logical entities, then moral realism is false and moral anti-realism, true.

But that's not the whole story. There is another way to be real.

As a way of approaching this other way to be real, consider the epistemological aspect of Mackie's argument from queerness. He says that to apprehend moral entities that exist independently of us, we would need some special faculty of moral perception or intuition; and he thinks we have no such faculty. But actually, we do.

Philosophers have long debated the rational basis for moral judgments, but in fact most of our moral judgments are not made rationally. They are not carefully thought out; instead, they are the result of intuition. Jonathan Haidt and other researchers in social psychology have found that we humans are equipped, presumably from evolutionary adaptation to living in groups, with instincts for morals, a moral sense that is built into all of us except, perhaps, psychopaths (Haidt, 2012, pp. 123–127 and 170–176; Haidt and Joseph, 2007; Haidt and Joseph, 2004; Pinker, 2008). Most moral judgments are not the result of conscious deliberation. Instead, they are snap judgments made instantly and automatically. People rely on gut reactions to tell right from wrong and then employ reason afterwards to justify their intuitions. Intuitions, say Haidt and Joseph (2004, p. 56), are "the judgments, solutions, and ideas that pop into consciousness without our being aware of the mental processes that led to them." Moral intuitions are a subset: "Feelings of approval or disapproval pop into awareness as we see or hear about something someone did, or as we consider choices for ourselves." Feelings of approval and disapproval are cloaked in emotions such as delight, esteem and admiration or anger, contempt and disgust, and each of these motivates us to actions such as praise or blame. The moral sense is analogous to our capacity for language. All humans are able to learn and use language, but different cultures have different languages. Similarly, all humans have a sense of morality that manifests itself in moral intuitions. The details of what is morally approved and disapproved, however, vary from culture to culture, and that is where we find moral conflicts.

Let's look carefully at an example of making such an intuitive moral judgment. Suppose you came across a person beating a dog. You would, if you are like many people in relatively affluent and polite Western societies, feel revulsion and disapproval. You would feel some impulse to try to get the person to stop; you would feel justified in telling the person to stop, perhaps even obligated to do so; and if asked about it, you would say that beating the dog is wrong. If asked about it further, you would cite a rule to the effect that inflicting needless harm on sentient creatures is morally forbidden.

There is a certain structure to this scenario, a way of describing it that Aristotle would call an explanation in terms of form. The structure is this:

- There is an action going on out in the public world, an action that anyone can see: the person beating the dog.

- You have your reaction of moral disgust, with its cognitive, affective and behavioral components. Cognitively you ascribe wrongness to the action. In your view, beating a dog counts as something wrong, something one should not do.

- Your ascription of wrongness is an instance of a more generalized rule or system of rules to which you can refer in cooler moments, such as "Harming sentient beings needlessly is wrong," a rule that is shared among others of your society and social class. (But it might not be shared among people of a different society or social class.)

More succinctly, beating a dog counts as wrong in the context of a generally accepted rule constituting it as wrong. Abstracting from the particulars, we can describe the structure of this scenario as "X counts as Y in context C." Here X stands for the beating of the dog, Y stands for being wrong, and C stands for the general rule, accepted by members of your social class, to avoid needless harm.

That structure, "X counts as Y in context C," is exactly the structure that philosopher John Searle identifies as the structure of *institutional facts*, facts that exist only by virtue of collective agreement or acceptance (Searle, 1995, pp. 2, 28, 43-45). Institutional facts are socially constructed, and there are quite a number of them. Searle mentions money, property, marriages, governments, tools, restaurants, schools and many others. They exist only because we believe them to exist, and Searle's aim is to account for their ontology. To exist only because we believe in them sounds paradoxical. Are they like Tinker Bell? If we quit believing, would they stop existing? If so, why do we believe in them in the first place? But actually, their ontology can be rationally accounted for.

An institutional fact can be described in physical terms, but to describe only the physical aspect misses its essence. Take, for example, money. We take bits of paper with certain markings on them to be media of exchange and stores of value. Historically people have taken many different kinds of things to be money: shells, beads, coins, pieces of paper, bits of data in computer systems. But these things are not money by virtue of their physical properties. Their physical properties alone do not enable them to be used as money, even in the case of precious metals. They are money only because human beings use them as money, accept their use as money and have rules that govern their use as money (Searle, 1995, pp. 41-45). The rules actually *constitute* money. They do not regulate some preexisting use of bits of material; the use of certain bits of material as money is possible only in the context of the rules. The rules

governing money are more like the rules of chess than rules regulating which side of the road to drive on. They create the very possibility of using money to buy and sell things (Searle, 1995, pp. 27-28).

Searle goes into a great deal of detail about the logical structure of socially constructed facts (logical because language is an essential element in their construction and logic is a feature of language), which need not concern us here. I want only to point out the similarities between his account of such facts and morality.

- Socially constructed facts are not physical. The markings on a US five-dollar bill are physical, but the fact that it is money is not. Similarly, moral rules are not physical.

- Socially constructed facts are not mathematical or logical. It is not logically necessary that the piece of paper with five-dollar markings on it be money. It could without contradiction fail to be regarded as money. Similarly, moral rules are not mathematical/logical entities.

- Socially constructed facts persist in time. The five-dollar bill has been used as money for some time, and we expect its use to continue. Similarly, moral entities persist in time.

- Socially constructed facts can change over time and space. An 11th-century Chinese bank note is not money today, although we can recognize that it used to be money. A US five-dollar bill is not legal tender in most other countries today, even if it is known to be money in the US. Similarly, moral rules change over time and vary from place to place.

- Socially constructed facts have normative implications. Searle (1995, p. 70) notes that social institutions such as marriages, property and money entail institutional forms of powers, rights, obligations and duties. These are things that give us reason to act that are independent of whether we are inclined to do so or not. Similarly, moral entities do in fact motivate us to action regardless of our inclination otherwise.

- Socially constructed facts have functions that the underlying physical facts do not. These functions are part of the definition of the social facts. The status of bits of paper as money implies their function as media of exchange. That's what it means to be money (Searle, 1995, p. 114). Similarly, moral norms have functions. Among members of a society they promote and regulate social cooperation. Within each person they promote order among potentially conflicting motivations, thereby encouraging that person to be a constructive participant in the cooperative life (Wong, 2011, p. 13).

- Socially constructed facts have the structure "X counts as Y in context C." So do moral evaluations of particular actions and of types of action.

Based on these considerations it seems reasonable to say that the manner of being of moral entities is to be socially constructed. They exist independently of any particular person, but they are not independent of conscious agents altogether as physical and (arguably) mathematical/logical entities are. Moral entities are socially constructed within a community of practice, a social group, a culture or a society. Within such a community or society, everybody agrees (more or less) on what they are, everybody treats them the same way and everybody acts as if they are real. Just as there are consequences for the way we deal with physical objects, there are real consequences for the way we abide by moral rules or not, namely the reactions of others in the community. So, for members of such a community they *are* real. The ontological status of morality is that it is a socially constructed reality.

Is this conclusion morally realist or anti-realist? As with many conceptual issues, it depends on definitions of terms. If "realism" means to be real as physical entities are, then it is anti-realist. If "realism" means to be real in any fashion at all, then it is realist. More important is what it tells us about the source of moral conflict. Moral systems vary among societies, but each society takes its morality to apply to all people universally. Hence, nobody wants to compromise. What our conclusion does not tell us is what to do about such conflict. For that, we need some more consideration.

Part II: The Practice of Morality

When we recognize the socially constructed status of moral rules, responsibilities, obligations, prohibitions and the like we may find ourselves in a bit of a quandary: what to do with our new understanding. We understand that these things do not, in fact, apply universally. Now we have a choice: shall we take them to apply to us? We could, it seems, just ignore them, or ignore the ones we don't like. But on what basis would it be rational to ignore them, and which ones?

Morality of some sort is necessary for human existence, for we cannot live without others of our kind. Zoologists classify the human species as "obligatorily gregarious" (de Waal, 2006, p. 4). We must have ongoing and extensive contact with our fellows in order to survive and thrive, and morality governs those interactions. Suppose we wanted to devise a moral system for universal use. On what rational basis could we choose the rules of that system?

It is theoretically possible to opt out of socially constructed reality in a way that we cannot opt out of physical and mathematical/logical reality. If everybody by

some magical trick stopped believing in physical reality, it would assert itself anyway. Even if we believed we could, we could not in fact walk through a tree. The same goes for mathematical/logical reality. The square root of nine would still be three even if nobody believed it. But if everyone stopped believing in money, we would have no money. We would have only bits of paper and metal. Similarly, it seems that we could opt out of morality, although doing so would be quite difficult.

It would be difficult because socially constructed reality is not merely fictional; it is, in its own way, real. Powerful evolutionary forces have instilled in us a sense of morality; we can't just wish it away. Moral entities, and institutional facts in general, have a peculiar nature: they compel our behavior even though we, in a sense, just make them up. They compel our behavior because they seem really to be there. Approaching the issue not analytically but from the point of view of a member of society, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) observe that institutional facts are "experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (p. 76). The social world appears to each of us "in a manner analogous to the reality of the natural world … as an objective world" (p. 77). The socially constructed entities may exist only because we believe they do, but we believe they exist because they seem really to be there. And, for most of us, they continue to seem really to be there even after we recognize their socially constructed nature, much as an optical illusion still fools us even when we know that it is only an illusion.

It is no small thing to be an institutional fact. To minimize the importance of morality by saying that it is "just" socially constructed is to overlook its emotional and motivational force on us. You can remove yourself from some institutions, e.g. marriage, but to do so you generally need to do it with other people. In other words, you create an alternative social institution. Some communes may try to do away with money, but most of them have to interact with the outside world, which forces them to deal with money anyway. And yet, recognizing the socially constructed nature of morality opens a possibility that was not apparent to us before.

Before we think about it much, we treat moral rules as constraining our conduct because we take them for granted. Their socially constructed character is invisible to us, largely because our acceptance of them is not something we do deliberately. We are taught the moral rules by parents, elders and educators in our society. Just as we take money, marriage, government, property and the myriad other institutional facts as real, so we take moral rules as objectively real. We question them only when cracks in the structure of our social reality confront us, as illustrated by moral conflicts such as those mentioned in Part I. And many of us don't even question them then.

But for those who do, a sort of spell is broken. Intellectually, we do not see our world the same way as before; we are no longer taken in by moral reality. Once we understand that morality is socially constructed, we have the freedom to buy into it or not. We are able to choose, within the constraints of our emotional and social conditioning, which duties to obey. This freedom can seem like a burden because emotionally we still feel the force of these moral intuitions. We may know intellectually that it is not always wrong to steal things, but we still cringe a bit at the thought of doing so.

Philosophically, the question of whether to obey certain moral rules and not others or to include certain ones but not others in a deliberately constructed moral system cannot be answered in the context of the moral rules in question, because to do so would be already to assume the answer. We need some other way to resolve the issue. The resolution can come by recognizing a further fact about rules for behavior: they are not all socially constructed.

Moral rules are socially constructed, but other rules are not: prudential or practical rules variously called "maxims," "policies," "rules of thumb" and the like. We do not have to evaluate our actions in terms of moral rightness and wrongness; we can instead evaluate them in terms of the benefits or harms of their consequences. Moral rightness is socially constructed. The effects of our actions are not.

Morality and Prudence: Rightness and Goodness

Morality and prudence are two ways of thinking about ethics. (By 'ethics' I mean the evaluation of conduct generally. Morality and prudence are subsets of ethics.) Prudence is the exercise of rationality to promote one's own interests. To act prudently is to act wisely and rationally in order to achieve one's goals. I want to use the term 'prudence' is a slightly more extended sense, as one's chosen goals might not always be in one's actual interest.

To approach understanding the difference between morality and prudence, we can put the matter in linguistic terms. They are manifested as two clusters of concepts and language used to command or recommend specific actions or habits of character. We can call them rightness and goodness. The rightness paradigm recognizes that people live in groups that require organization and regulations, and frames values in terms of duty and conformance to rules. The goodness paradigm recognizes that people have desires and aspirations. It frames values in terms of what enables a being to achieve its ends. The right has to do with laws and rules; the good, with achievement of goals. Rightness and goodness are two alternative ways of organizing the whole field of ethics to carry out the tasks of evaluating conduct, both in particular cases and in general types (Edel, 1974). Both judgments of rightness and wrongness and

judgments of goodness and badness can apply to particular actions, to types of actions, and to the habits of conduct that make up a person's character.

Morality exemplifies the rightness paradigm, which uses the terms 'right' and 'wrong' to evaluate conduct. Some synonyms for 'right' are 'proper,' 'moral' and 'permissible.' Some synonyms for 'wrong' are 'improper,' 'immoral' and 'impermissible.' Morality is not the only kind of rightness. Others are law, which consists of legal rules enforced by the threat of physical coercion, and etiquette, social rules enforced solely by praise and blame. It is obvious that law and etiquette are socially constructed. As we have seen, it is reasonable to believe that morality is too.

Prudence exemplifies the goodness paradigm. That paradigm uses the terms 'good' and 'bad' to evaluate not only conduct but also things, people, states of affairs, etc., as well as maxims or guidelines for conduct. Some synonyms for 'good' are 'helpful,' 'nourishing,' 'beneficial,' 'useful' and 'effective.' Some synonyms for 'bad' are their opposites: 'unhelpful,' 'unhealthy,' 'damaging,' 'useless' and 'ineffective.'

Something that benefits something or someone we call good for that thing or person. Such goodness may be instrumental or biological. Instrumentally, a hammer is good for pounding nails, and what is good for the hammer is what enables it to do so well. Biologically, air, water, and food are good for living beings.

To make sense, an instrumental usage requires reference to someone's purpose or intention. Thus, a hammer is good for pounding nails, and you pound nails in order to build things such as furniture or housing. Your intention is to acquire the comfort and utility these things afford you. That is your goal, or end, and the good is what helps bring it about.

The biological usage does not require reference to purpose or intention. It is expressed in terms of health and well-being. That which nourishes a living thing is good for it. The good, in this sense, is that which enables a thing to function well, that is, to survive, thrive and reproduce. (The function of a living thing is, intrinsically, to survive and reproduce (Foot, 2001, pp. 31-32). Living things also have functions external to themselves in their habitat or biosphere, such as to provide shelter or nutrients or other goods to other living things. Here I mean function in the intrinsic sense.)

The instrumental usage intersects the biological when we consider what is good for something that is itself good for a purpose or intention. For instance, keeping a hammer clean and sheltered from the elements is good for the hammer and enables the hammer to fulfil its instrumental function. In the instrumental sense as well, the good is that which enables a thing to function well.

If someone says something is good, you can always ask "Good for whom? Good for what and under what circumstances?" If someone says something is right, you can always ask "According to what rule?" The two domains of discourse really are separate, and it is not useful to mix them. Mixing them is a form of category error. That something has good effects does not make it right. That something is in accordance with a moral rule does not make it good.

(As a caveat, let me say that the advice to pay attention to language in this way is useful for the most part, but not universally. I am proposing a heuristic rule of thumb, a tactic for getting clarity, not an infallible recipe. Sometimes the term 'good' is used in a moralistic way, and there are other meanings of the term 'right,' as in the right answer to a question. We have to pay attention to what is being asserted, not just to the specific words. But by and large, the language used to assess conduct provides a good clue to the nature of the assessment.)

Rightness and goodness differ in social usage. Both moral rules and consideration of consequences are ways to say 'should,' that is, ways to tell someone what he or she should do (or refrain from doing) or should have done, or to tell ourselves the same. Moral rules are called 'deontic,' after a Greek word meaning duty. But the deontic is not the only type of 'should.' Another type, expressed in terms of goodness, is prudential or practical. In deontic cases the 'should' is a prescription or even a command. In the prudential/practical case it is a recommendation. The force of our prescription or recommendation depends on the category in which the 'should' is presented.

In the case of a deontic moral 'should' such as "Thou shalt not steal" ('should' being stated in its strongest form, 'shall'), we feel justified in demanding that people obey the moral rule and blaming them if they don't. The imperative has a sense of universality, that it applies to everyone.

(In the case of a legal 'should' we may not only demand and blame, we may also punish the offender. In the case of a 'should' of social etiquette, we may only blame, but generally not demand. Neither of these is universal; they apply only within a certain legal framework or in a certain segment of society.)

An example of a prudential/practical 'should' is that for good health you should eat lots of vegetables. In this case we may not demand but may certainly advise adherence to such a 'should.' And we may not blame or punish failure to comply but may say the choice is foolish. Unlike moral rules, prudential/practical advice is not always universal. In practice, it depends on context. Perhaps for a malnourished vegan eating lots of vegetables would not be good, and instead he or she should try some meat.

The importance of the distinction is this: Unlike moral rules, which are not subject to objective verification, the good is a feature of the natural world; it has to do with benefits, which are publicly observable. Prudential/practical judgments are objectively verifiable. We can do studies of the effects of diet on health, for instance, studies that provide factual evidence, so the recommendation to eat vegetables is not just someone's opinion.

Recognizing the difference between goodness and rightness shows us a way out of the quandaries and discomfort that arise from recognizing that morality is socially constructed. And recognizing the difference also shows us a way out of intractable moral conflict. Instead of framing the issues in terms of rightness, we can frame them in terms of goodness. In other words, instead of commanding one to do the right thing, we can advise one to do what is good.

Two Questions

The advice to promote goodness raises two obvious questions: Goodness for whom? And why should we do what is good anyway? A full discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, but in general the answer to the first question is, goodness for as many people as possible, including the person acting, within the bounds of what is doable. The answer to the second question is that promoting goodness in this way benefits oneself.

The underlying principle, taken from the study of systems theory applied to ecosystems, is that an element of a system thrives when the system as a whole is healthy, and a system as a whole is healthy when its constituent elements thrive. Human beings are elements in a variety of systems, most notably systems of other people, or communities. If, in situations of conflict, we can find ways to benefit all concerned, then we ourselves will be benefited. If everyone is satisfied, then the solution will be likely to last, leading to further benefit for ourselves. Short-sighted egotistical selfishness is self-defeating. The advice to seek goodness for as many concerned as possible is a strategy based on enlightened self-interest.

By the way, the injunction to work for the greater good is not utilitarian. Utilitarianism is just another morality, defining what is right in a certain way, as the greatest good for the greatest number of people. We are not obliged to maximize the good in this way. Rather, doing so is just good advice for maximizing our own welfare.

I suppose one could ask why we should maximize our own welfare. Again, a full answer is beyond the scope of this essay, but in short we have no absolute obligation to do so. In fact, however, most people do want their own welfare. The imperative is hypothetical, not categorical: If you want to enhance your welfare, work for the good of all concerned. In the absence of a rationally

compelling reason to obey any given moral rule, this principle is well suited to serve as ethical guidance.

Summary and Conclusion

We started this inquiry by noting that some conflicts, those based on differing moral intuitions, resist easy solution. People entrenched in their morality have no inclination to compromise with what they see as evil. Along the way we identified a quandary felt by thoughtful people who want to be rational: we do not recognize an obligation to act on moral intuitions when we perceive them as the social constructions that they are. But which moral intuitions shall we abide by, and which shall we discard? On what basis shall we make the decision? And we feel a further discomfort when we contemplate opting out of morality but find ourselves emotionally locked in.

The way out of these issues is to recognize that there is another whole set of criteria by which to judge actions, people, policies and so forth, a set variously called "prudential" or "practical" and referred to by the language of goodness, not rightness. We can decide to focus on goodness, on what works to promote welfare, instead of on what rigid rules insist.

To apply this advice to conflicts such as those listed above, we can ask the combatants to think about what would be beneficial for both parties. This requires some tact and diplomacy, of course, but it is worth a try. If both parties receive some benefit, a lasting peace is more likely than if one party wins and the other loses.

To apply this advice to personal moral quandaries, when we are trying to figure out what to do we can ask what good can come out of each choice, not what the right choice is.

To apply this to an approach to our conduct in general, to our character as persons, we can focus on what is beneficial as a general rule. We might want to be honest, for instance, not because of a commandment to avoid bearing false witness, but because doing so promotes harmony and good relations with others, which in turns benefit us.

Morality is certainly useful for maintaining social cohesion. Universality has its appeal, but to get a cross-cultural or universal set of moral values we would have to design it. We could more readily do so on the basis of what is good for people than on sectarian moral codes.

This essay began by listing some of the ill effects of moral conflict. Focusing on benefits for all concerned instead of on rigid morality ameliorates them. Working for the common good promotes flexibility, understanding, trust and

honest communication. The first step is to frame issues in terms of goodness, not rightness. The second step is to seek the good for all concerned, not because it is our duty, but because doing so will benefit each of us in the long run.

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