

# ***Morality***

## **Where does morality come from?**

Deciding the difference between right and wrong is an issue that is fundamental to the human condition. For those who believe in god, the issue is much simplified. For these people, morality is determined by one's interpretation of "God's will" as laid down in the relevant religious text. Indeed, it is a cause for concern for the religious that atheists are not guided by god's will, since in their eyes there is nothing to stop them behaving immorally. I find it a cause for concern that a believer in god only behaves morally because he fears the retribution of this imaginary being. The suggestion is that without such a guiding force, we would all behave immorally; an atheist, therefore, is not to be trusted. Atheism should not be confused with nihilism, however; the absence of belief in god does not mean the absence of belief or values in general, nor does it mean the absence of morality, just that morality comes from another source. Without divine provenance then, where does our morality come from?

In [The God Delusion](#), Richard Dawkins suggests that moral values are generated by natural selection, and the fact that many seem to be universal, despite our inability to explain our reasons for these moral values, is evidence of this. This is a strong argument but it feels like it is missing something. I believe that moral judgements are a natural consequence of the human intellect applied to our social nature (and so a side-effect of natural selection). As social creatures we rely on empathy – the projection of ourselves onto others and vice versa – to live with other humans and to predict their behaviour and ours. Consequentially, we start to value human life and wellbeing, and morality is a natural consequence of this. Morality, therefore, comes from seeing ourselves in others. This means that moral decisions are judgement calls based on determination of value according to principles, rather than absolutes. Specifically, as we value human life and wellbeing, we make decisions in order to try to preserve these.

## **Morality and society**

Evolution has determined that, for humans, living together in social groups is more efficient than a solitary life of pure short-sighted self-interest. Furthermore, it has given us the ability to reason in these terms – 'ethical' reasoning that sees our own goals and those of society as inextricably interwoven. We have achieved the ability to think, not in terms of our own immediate goals alone, but in terms of the society that provides the context for these goals. Ethical thinking is in effect our ability to think in evolutionary terms; to see the wider context of our survival and wellbeing as incorporating the survival and wellbeing of others. Seeing ethics in these terms does not help us determine what is good or bad, but it might help us understand how and why we make these decisions.

Thinking of our own interests is what one might call “basic evolutionary thinking” – survival of the fittest – selfish competition. This type of ‘primitive’ reasoning is as far as most animals get. Our ethical reasoning, a consequence of the evolutionary advantage of social groups, gives us a second level of evolutionary thinking, allowing us to advance beyond competition and to embrace the advantages of cooperation, which is the key to the success of the human race. A person must find balance between the more immediately apparent drive for individual survival and wellbeing, and the harder to define (and justify to oneself) interests of society at large (which are also in the individual’s best interests as we are social creatures who rely on society). Moral behaviour could be seen as the preference of the second drive over the first (the more basic, animal survival instinct). Thus moral behaviour is an individual’s *reaction* to society, so although it could be seen as society’s effect on an individual, the individual is still morally responsible for his ethical decisions. A person could be seen as making a moral decision when they value the interests of others over their own immediate interests – when they consider society more valuable. This is in essence their determination of the value of society of other people in optimising their chances for survival and wellbeing. In the absence of society, a person would only have their own survival and wellbeing to consider, so they could be interpreted as savage and bestial, but would not necessarily appear so. They could not be determined as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in these circumstances, so could not really be seen as intrinsically either.

So as a part of this moral behaviour, living within a society of many people, we must factor the interests of others as well as our own into our decisions. This does not mean we must value each individual’s interests equally. Interests are ‘weighted’ (given a different significance or ‘weight’) according to their proximity (in terms of influence) to ourselves. Our own interests are weighted highest, those of our close friends and family slightly less so, and so on outwards until we consider the interests of the human race at large. Utilitarianism weighs everyone equally, rather than weighting the interests of some individuals more than others. This is appropriate as a general ethos for society, but an individual must value his own interests highly when compared with those of others in order to survive and progress.

Furthermore, these interests are not simply bidirectional, but spread out in an intricate network of associations, since something that tends to benefit those close to us will also tend to benefit us. This is also true of those further from us, but to a lesser degree. The interests of humanity at large are, to a degree, our own. Unlike in a more regimented hierarchical societal structure such as those of other social animals, our web of benevolence is vastly complex, containing feedback loops. We have evolved to estimate and evaluate the many factors involved in this web, and so we find ourselves with an instinctive benevolence to those around us. We have learnt that it benefits ourselves to help others – this is the key to our society. It is a kind of *conditional* reciprocal altruism.

In general terms, living in the society of others requires the acceptance of an implied contract of expected behaviour towards each other. Acting morally is a matter of fulfilling this contract to the best of our ability. The contract is not an absolute and cannot be defined precisely as it is an implied contract, not an explicit one. So acting morally is acting according to what might reasonably be assumed to be a social contract to enable harmonious human society.

There are those who tend to undervalue the interests of others – the weighting of interests drops off steeply as those interests are influentially removed from themselves. These people will appear selfish and immoral – prone to crime (since crime requires taking unfair advantage of others), viewing one's own interests as paramount, and those of others as insignificant. These people have failed to learn what evolution has taught the rest of us – that society requires an individual to respect and value the other members of the society. Decision-making of this kind is damaging to society, and people who behave like this take more out of society than they contribute.

## **Morality and decision-making**

Earlier I suggested that morality is a natural consequence of the human mind applied to the human condition. This, however, might suggest that we should be able to explain our moral judgements in a clear, logical fashion, which is not the case. We have strong feelings about the right and wrong of certain situations, but when we come to define our reasons it is surprisingly difficult. Why would this be the case?

I believe that personal morality is intuition about making decisions relating to others. When judging what to do in a situation where other people are involved, there is an inherent uncertainty and complexity. There are frequently too many factors to evaluate them all and calculate the appropriate probabilities to make a decision. In these cases we are conscious only of the result of vast amounts of preliminary processing involving mental models of ourselves and others. By necessity, this is fast and simplified. We make many ethical judgements effortlessly, and yet, as the detail is hidden from our conscious minds, it is often very difficult to break down our justification for ethical decisions – define our criteria for 'right' and 'wrong'. It is this unavailability of detail and resultant ineffable quality to the 'feel' of our own personal morality that leads to the irony that whilst we can make moral judgements easily, we find it hard to define morality, as individuals or in general terms.

This would lead to the conclusion that morality is simply a reflection of the human decision-making process; how an individual human being decides what to do on a day-to-day basis, and that 'morality' is a natural consequence of human decision-making applied to the world. This might seem counter-intuitive; one might assume an individual's decisions would naturally be self-serving unless morality had some external source, as personal morality tends to determine when our interests should take second place to someone else's. I believe that moral values are indeed those which may be considered in our own best interests. As social animals, our world is defined by others as well as ourselves, and it is only in learning to live with others that we survive and find happiness. This is the result of a combination of (or a compromise between) our own immediate interests and those of others. Thus, whilst an individual may be able to find a balance between these constraints almost effortlessly (through the aforementioned mechanism whereby the details of the decision are not available to our conscious mind and the result is available to us as a feeling akin to emotion) it is extremely difficult to determine this balance from facts upwards; the issues are too complex, the probabilities too unpredictable, and the factors are too numerous to evaluate, especially if a general rather than a personal solution is required. The solution may appear simple to us as our brain has done most of the work before we are

aware of it, yet in reality the solution is vastly complex, even to apparently simple moral issues. Even though a solution is vastly complex, that is not to say that it does not exist. It would, perhaps, be wise to use our considerable 'intuitive' moral reasoning to inform what solutions we would hope to construct consciously.

As a reflection of our own minds, moral reasoning is learned from our own experiences, both consciously and subconsciously, as well as being passed on from other people. The dissemination of this 'morality' takes place in a distributed manner, person-to-person, geographically and generationally, and as such it is not rooted in the interests of any individual, but of a community of people who have to live together and to a much lesser degree, of humanity at large. Morality, therefore, is about finding a harmonious way to live in a human community, whilst simultaneously protecting ourselves and our happiness.

### **Moral responsibility and reductionism**

If our mental activity is determined by chemical and electrical activity (this being governed and dictated by purely physical laws) can we be said to have freedom of choice, and thus be morally responsible for any of our actions?

It could be considered that all our actions are predetermined since they are based on (to a large degree) predictable physical laws, and so the 'choices' we are presented with are not choices at all, as their outcome is inevitable. However, the question of moral choice relates to the behaviour of conscious minds, not of physical processes; no-one could blame a piano for falling on someone, or indeed blame gravity. It is a mistake to separate neuronal activity and the physical laws that govern it from ourselves – we *are* neuronal activity, we *are* chemical and electrical activity; it is simply a matter of level of representation, and the question of choice and moral responsibility belongs to the level of consciousness, not to the level of physical processes. As a choice exists for a conscious mind (in that it perceives a choice) and the mind is not conscious of the physical processes that determine its activity, it could reasonably be said that the conscious mind does have freedom of choice and thus can be held morally responsible.

This rationale also applies when a mind can be seen as a product of its genetic heritage, its social background and its environment. Although the outcome of a choice made by such a mind could be considered predetermined – out of the control of the mind, the choice still exists for the mind – it is still aware of the choice and it is not aware of any predetermined path.

Similarly, the idea that someone cannot be blamed for doing something it is in their nature to do. As long as a mind is aware of a choice (whether they are aware of their 'nature' or not) they are able to *make* a choice. The 'nature' of a person is, after all, in flux, and subject to change both conscious and unconscious. Furthermore, one's nature is not external but part of one's conscious choices. Just because a person is habitually cruel does not absolve them of cruel decisions as they are aware that they are making choices and could do otherwise, no matter how many times before they have made the cruel choice.

## **Selfishness and benevolence**

If we believe other people are likely to act selfishly, we are more likely to act selfishly ourselves. We are less likely to feel benevolent to people we think will take advantage of us. Our benevolence or selfishness is based on our expectations of the behaviour of others. Both benevolence and selfishness are self-reinforcing (selfishness in an individual promotes selfishness in others, which promotes selfishness in others again). Our expectations are set by many factors, a major one in my opinion being the general competitive nature of society actively promoted by capitalism. This leads people to assume a competitive nature in others and to see others as our competition – to promote self-interest.

It is a mistake, I think, to assert that humans are inherently selfish (or indeed that they are inherently benevolent). *Humans are inherently pragmatic*. If they believe others will behave selfishly, benevolence would put them in a disadvantaged position, and so selfishness is the safe position. If they believe others will behave benevolently, selfishness may give short-term benefit, but it is likely to be counter-productive in the long term, benevolence is the best course. We have learnt, as a race (even if we are not consciously aware of it), that everyone acting benevolently will lead to a better situation for everyone than everyone acting selfishly, although both are stable positions. The problem is that the selfishness solution is more resilient than the benevolence solution. This is because a benevolent person may be led to behave selfishly by observing selfish behaviour, but it is less likely that a selfish person will be led to behave benevolently by observing benevolent behaviour in others (as the optimal solution for individual return is to act selfishly in a world of benevolent people).

I believe we need to fight the pragmatic urge to behave selfishly and instead listen to our benevolent instinct taught to us by millennia of social evolution. Only in this way will we break the cycle of expectation of self-interest that our current culture encourages.

## **Morality and the law**

A legal system is intended to mete out justice, and as such it is an attempt to encapsulate the morality of a culture. The system amounts to a set of rules that can be written down, so that the same rules can always be applied, so one situation is not judged differently from another. The system works by applying these rules and discouraging or punishing actions that are deemed to be wrong.

This raises two problems for me. Firstly, it seems to me that justice is not about assigning punishment or reward to give people what they deserve, rather to redress the balance when an inequality has been actively introduced – when something has been denied to someone who has every right to it, or someone has taken more than they have the right to, depriving others.

The second problem is that the world is very complex, and it is very difficult to encapsulate our concepts of right and wrong. It is hard to translate our moral decision-making apparatus

into a series of written rules. We strive to describe every conceivable moral choice so that every decision is fair; the result is an impenetrable morass of clauses and conditions.

This has reached a point where the interpretation of these rules in itself is a matter of opinion. No longer do we simply have to decide who is lying and who is telling the truth, we have to decide whose interpretation of the law is correct. This is a mockery of the very idea of written laws. Furthermore, the final decision is not left to experts on these written laws. They do not get around a table and decide the correct interpretation of the law. The final decision is left to a handful of random people with no expertise in the field, no background knowledge of the situation in question, and no experience in making these decisions – the jury.

The more effort (and effort in this case often, regrettably, translates to money) one can spend on researching the case, the laws involved and the backgrounds of the people involved, the more likely you are to get a legal decision in your favour. You hire the most skilled interpreters of the law, the most skilled psychologists to ask the right emotive questions to sway the jury, and you get the result you want. This, again, makes a mockery of the written laws.

The problem lies at the root of the legal system; the idea that rules can be written down to determine what is right and what is wrong. Laws as we know them certainly do not seem to do that in a clear and repeatable fashion, yet everyone can make decisions of this sort. The key is that some people are better at it than others. I believe that we should not try to write down what we know about moral truth; it will never be as useful, adaptable and accurate as the versions we learn for ourselves throughout life. Earlier I described how the process of moral decision-making is largely inaccessible to our conscious minds, as the process is the result of countless evaluations of probability and weighing of countless factors using a lifetime of experience before it enters the realm of conscious thought. This is why we can make moral decisions almost effortlessly, whilst providing a logical explanation of our reasoning is extremely difficult.

If we abandon the use of written rules, how then do we maintain the consistency required for fairness in our legal system? Consistency in justice is important to ensure equality of judgement. This consistency could, however, simply be consistency of process rather than fixed rules and laws, since each situation is unique, and laws would always amount to an approximation of a just judgement given all the facts (no matter how complex, laws are rules of thumb based on the broad strokes of the situation). Surely consistency is secondary to fairness. If a decision, considered at the time to be just, is subsequently seen to be unjust, similar situations in the future should not be assigned the same decision on the basis of maintaining consistency. Surely a better course of action would be for the justice system to admit a mistake (or accept a better judgement) and give its best decision for each unique situation. Thus in both situations justice would have been done, but without consistency (except in consistency of process).

I believe that moral decisions of the kind faced by a legal system should be made by groups of individuals best equipped to make them; people who have a proven record of making good and just decisions, and who have experience of making these decisions. This is a skill

that can be taught, practised, and recognised in those who have an aptitude for it. These decisions can be made in intelligent debate between a group of experienced individuals, informed by external experts when necessary. Neither should there be two sides – a prosecution and a defence – there should simply be one group of people who seek to find the truth and make the right decision. All the people involved will have their say, weighed equally by the decision-makers. All the contextual information will be taken into account. All the information needed to make the right decision will be made available. This provides the consistency of process required for fairness, using human beings making moral decisions rather than using multiple interpretations of an overly complex set of rules that approximate but never quite capture true morality.