

A note on alternative conceptions of ethics (i.e. an essay in metaethics)

The approach to ethics presented on this website focuses, on the one hand, on an analysis of the role of rules, and indeed on the necessity but also the shortcomings of rules, while, on the other hand, an understanding is given of the proper place of the virtues and character, these being analysed as much neglected and misunderstood elements which have, properly, an essential bearing on the desirable variety and ultimate harmony of humanity. There is a dynamic relationship between these realms. Virtues and character are developed by the learning of rules. Eventually the rules get overruled by their own multitudinous complexity, and we need resort to a different plane of thinking, namely virtues and character. For reasons given below, I prefer these notions to that of a good will.

That is, there are, needless to say, other approaches to ethics. In particular, there is recourse to the principle of respect for persons, and, often (though perhaps not necessarily) connected with this, an adherence to the Golden Rule. These ideas found, if not always their most eloquent, at least their most coherent and

sophisticated formulation in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. But they are also found in other cultures, including many outside the Western tradition.

In the greater scheme of things, what matters is how individuals generally behave and how a society manages to keep in check those elements, found within any population, who (would) otherwise overstep the mark. To this extent, any clash of dogma must be kept in perspective. Rather have dealings with an upright Kantian, a Golden Rule fetishist, or a Confucian, than a scoundrel. Rather common decency coupled with critical faculty, irrespective of ideology, than any of the many who abuse the language of morality to surreptitiously impose their own power plots on others.

(Amartya Sen has recently made a similar point about the nature of justice, the distinctions between different conceptions of justice being less important than seeing that justice on any count is improved.)

This said, after a brief early enthusiasm for a broadly Kantian approach, I have over the decades grown increasingly uncomfortable with the notions

of respect and dignity as, too, with the easy recourse to grand rules. (The Golden Rule itself has various formulations, and exploring these can be revealing about the limits of all such generalising approaches.)

To some extent my discomfort is about a method. The Golden Rule is wide open to abuse. Thinking one's way through the abuse and exposing it is intellectually more challenging than meets the eye, and consequently clever people can override those who are less quick-witted.

Similarly, demands for "respect" are sometimes just disguised attempts to assert, or at least protect, the egos of the claimants. An emphasis on dignity can degenerate into an insistence on honour, and honour, infamously, comes often at the cost of humanity. There is too much idealism, too little realism contained in such abstract terms. As I have suggested in a sister essay ("A note on medical ethics"), these and similar concepts are religious in nature, and, without taking sides in the secularist (atheist) contra religious (theological) dispute, it is as well to be clear about this aspect.

Even the much quoted maxim about treating people as ends, rather than as means, is frequently

misquoted. On Kant's account, it is perfectly alright to treat people as means, and indeed it is scarcely possible not to do so. The injunction is that they should not be treated merely as means. Treating others as ends in themselves, always and unremittingly, would surely exceed the meditative capacity of even the most focussed mystic (though maybe this is why most mystics live solitary). Indeed, the very language of means and ends, in this connection, has always struck me as misplaced if not mysterious. I suppose it is one way of saying things that are right but could be said differently. Then it is a mere metaphor, a clumsy shorthand to remind us to regularly and imaginatively place ourselves in the shoes or souls of others.

A premature appeal to notions such as respect, dignity, and indeed to worth and, worst of all, the omnipresent "values" does humanity a disservice because, although there is lip service to our all being unique individuals, no account is given of how this might be the case in any meaningful sense. Nor is there any convincing account of why, when no-one is looking, we should take a blind bit of notice of all this moral rhetoric. This is not to say that these ideas are useless; we do need them on occasion, but when we do resort to them, we should do so in awareness of their limitations, and

also, I contend, their quasi-religious – or, if you prefer, their metaphysical – nature.

Rather than see these notions as set in stone, or deified as lodestars, we might see them as metaphors, useful on occasion, but to be taken with a pinch of salt. Which brings us to return to the Golden Rule, and the time in northern Africa when gold was traded weight for weight for salt. Gold is not actually a lot of use in life.

It is not exactly that the Golden Rule is useless, it is just that it does not get us very far. It is the equivalent in morality of simple syllogisms in epistemology. If I praise behaviour B when done by person P (who I like), then I must also do so when done by person Q (who I dislike). Similarly, I cannot (consistently, logically, fairly, morally) condemn your behaviour B if I myself indulge likewise. Of course, there are get-out clauses, such that the context of the behaviour is different.

Excessive indulgence in these discussions may be seen more as avoidance strategies on the part of academic ethicists (or logicians) than as substantial contributions to ethics. (I have defined ethics at length, or rather canvassed for a

consensual definition thereof, elsewhere on the website.)

A brief note on the good will. Fine, but how do we ever recognise a good will? In ourselves, by introspection, hardly, where the capacity for self-deception is infinite. In others, over a lifetime, perhaps, in retrospect. (The contemporary French philosopher Onfray quotes an old Catholic priest who divulged this much from the countless confessions he had heard: There are no great men!)

I do not wish to be unduly disparaging of the recourse to the notion of a good will, and Kant will long remain a lodestar in a category of his own. The good man had the dream of discovering a grand principle, perhaps not unlike that of Newton's gravity, which would guide us inexorably where we should go.

My contention – my conviction – is that there is no one single principle, nor indeed a trinity of principles, that will serve us sufficiently well in matters of morality. We have to be agile, and change from one way of thinking to another, depending on the context and the task in hand. This leaves us wide open to the charge of

inconsistency. At first sight, this charge seems grave because much reasoning as to why we should bother to be moral takes the desirability of consistency as its starting point. Here we are landed again with the Golden Rule or, strictly, a derivative thereof. When commenting thereupon above, I deliberately chose the less common scenario (that is, less common in the literature, not in life) where judgements are passed rather than reflections engaged in as to how one is to behave oneself. The error is to focus on consistency, i.e. on the grand generalisation. Morality is de facto compartmentalised because of the way it is imbibed and works at the psychological level much of the time. (For example, rule utilitarianism beats act consequentialism. That is how we get to think fast instinctively.) Elsewhere I have argued for an alternative conceptualisation and indeed *praxis* with regard to the motivations for broadly moral conduct. The appeal to consistency is misguided.

It is as misguided as the idea that all grammatical sentences are logically (conceptually) alike, or can, at least, be neatly placed in a small definite number of categories. Could it be that a philosopher who spent his later life lecturing and writing about language was, covertly, talking about ethics?