
What it is to be Good

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If someone says ‘I’m good thank you!’, usually in response to a polite ‘how are you,’ I am tempted, and often do, reply: ‘That’s an interesting claim or hypothesis – how are we going to test it?’ This paper is about testing that hypothesis, taken literally; the hypothesis that someone is good, how such a claim might be tested and what thinking about the exercise tells us about goodness and hence of course about how to increase goodness in the world and in people.

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Now we might try to test the hypothesis by asking the individual making the claim exactly what she had done that was so good and furthermore, how she knew she was good or that what she had done or achieved was good and what entitled her to be so sure? She might of course claim to be existentially good, good in herself, perhaps because she was full of good intentions, replete with virtues or whatever.

The list of good things she might have done would probably be uncontroversial because there is significant consensus about the generic nature of good and bad deeds (preventing harm, ameliorating pain or suffering, saving lives, curing the sick or their opposites) but just as ‘good reasons must of force give place to better’,¹ so likewise with good deeds. Even a good deed done might displace a better one that might have been done. So even deeds that might seem ‘good in themselves’, might not be ‘good, all things considered’, because something better may have been (should have been) considered and done instead.

In order to be as confident as we can be of the moral success of our deeds we need to believe that these actions are more than well-motivated or that they express pro-social attitudes or human sympathy.² We need to know they are for the best, all things considered.

Why do we Need to Appeal to Something Independent?

Someone who cares about doing the right thing, someone for whom the difference between right and wrong is important, will always want to ask himself if what feels right

is right. He will want to assure himself that in so far as it is in his power, he really is acting well or for the best all things considered, that what seems right *is* right. He will, in short, be interested in a crucial distinction, emphasised by Hamlet, in this riposte to his mother: ‘Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not “seems”’.³ The difference between what *seems* and what *is* in ethics can only be delivered by reasoning.

There is a rather different argument, familiar to philosophers and indeed to theologians.⁴ It derives from Plato⁵ and has been used by Kant and many others. It sets out a different way of thinking about one of the central points of my argument, that morality properly so-called, and hence the ability to understand what it is to be good, requires understanding of the independent, essentially analytic, nature of morality. This argument of Plato shows that the claim that something is right or wrong must meet three criteria.

1. *Significance*: such a claim must be justified in ways that show the claim to be significant; that it says something meaningful.
2. *Content*: it must have content, that is the claim requires analysis, which reveals its content. To say that something is wrong because it feels wrong or makes me uncomfortable is never enough.
3. *Morality*: finally, that content must be demonstrably moral; it must refer to those things that make the world a better or worse place and which make life more or less worth living.

In Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates is educating Euthyphro about holiness:

But, friend Euthyphro, if that which is holy were the same with that which is dear to the gods, and were loved because it is holy, then that which is dear to the gods would be loved as being dear to them; but if that which is dear to them were dear to them because loved by them, then that which is holy would be holy because loved by them. But now you see that the reverse is the case, and that the two things are quite different from one another. For one... is of a kind to be loved because it is loved, and the other... is loved because it is of a kind to be loved.⁵

Bertrand Russell puts this argument rather more clearly to a modern ear.

[I]f you are quite sure that there is a difference between right and wrong then you are in this situation: is that difference due to God’s fiat or is it not? If it is due to God’s fiat, then for God Himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning, which is independent of God’s fiat. Because God’s fiat’s are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that He made them. If you are going to say that then you will have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God.⁶

This argument does not of course say anything about the existence of God, nor does it deny his or her goodness. It points out that the statements ‘God is good’ and ‘God is God’ must have different meanings, if ‘good’ is to have any meaning at all. One of God’s defining characteristics is that he or she wills the good. As Tony Kenny⁷ puts it: ‘even if ... being loved by the gods is only something that happens to what is holy: it does not tell us the essential nature of holiness itself’. Knowing that the gods love something does not

tell us why they love it, or why it ought to be loved. Being aware of the objects of our sympathetic attention tells us nothing about whether or not our sympathy or pro-sociality is appropriate or misplaced.

It is our ability to reason about the nature of the good independently of God's 'fiat' as Russell calls it, or of knowledge about what the gods love, that partially accounts for theology and indeed enables us to say non-vacuously that God is, or that the gods are, good. For if we believe that gods only will the good, then if we can establish what is good, we have reason to choose between rival interpretations of the will of the gods. This is the problem we have when asking ourselves the question: 'is what I seem drawn to do, is what my sympathies or my "fellow feeling" prompts me to do, really what I should be doing, is it what's best?'

Nothing that today can pass for morality or moral principles or precepts can be isolated from reason and reflection on their adequacy, success and effect. Moreover, as I have argued in brief above, no one who claims to be acting morally or out of moral conviction or principle can resist accountability for what they claim to believe or do in the name of morality. And this means they must always be prepared to offer a reasoned defence and justification of their morality or elements of it. It would never be enough or indeed even respectable for the reply to be 'I just felt like it'. Ronald Dworkin elaborated this requirement for a detailed and theory-based justification for moral claims in a way that requires no further gloss.⁸

Because 'even deeds acknowledged to be good, deeds that might seem "good in themselves", might not be good all things considered', it would always be necessary for moral impulses to be subjected to reason and reflection (time and opportunity, of course, permitting). A moral agent will always want to consider all things, or at least (as the phrase implicitly means) all things that can reasonably be considered in the time and with the resources available. Moreover, in proportion to the importance of the decision, moral agents will also want to think retrospectively about how well they have responded to moral imperatives, or confronted moral dilemmas; not least so that they can refine, improve and better understand what they value and believe.

There are those who, rather more literally than David Hume, think that 'morality is better felt than judged of'. For them, morality consists of taking steps to ensure that people have the right feelings, in our own times by using chemical or molecular interventions to by-pass thought and reflection, in short to by-pass reason and to make unreflective but 'sympathetic' responses the cornerstone of morality.

Moral Agents and Moral Actions

There is an important distinction that is often overlooked and that is the distinction between doing good and acting morally, between judgements about things that are ethically significant and ethical judgements. Not all judgements about things that are ethically important are ethical judgements. To be an ethical judgement rather than simply a judgement about something of ethical importance, that judgement first has actually to be a *judgement*, not simply a pronouncement. A judgement moreover is a conclusion arrived at by a deliberative process, a process that involves the exercise of judgement.

To count as a moral judgement, that deliberative process of which it is part has to weigh alternatives from some justifiably moral perspective. For example, it has to consider alternatives from the perspective of the amount and quality of the good that might thereby be achieved, or the rights that might thereby be protected or the justice that might thereby be done or the suffering that might be mitigated or avoided or by the number of lives saved or lost.

Eyam, 1665

When the plague claimed its first victim in the Derbyshire village of Eyam on 7 September 1665 the villagers were faced with a terrible dilemma.⁹ This dilemma continues to haunt us over 300 years later because it is one that presents itself to all those with a communicable disease, particularly a lethal one such as the plague or indeed HIV or H5N1. The dilemma is simply stated but often agonizingly difficult to resolve. It is the dilemma of how those who have the disease or are at acute risk are to understand and discharge their responsibility to limit its spread. But understanding this problem helps us to understand another, namely the duties of those such as health professionals to discharge related duties to meet medical need and protect life and health even at some personal cost.

Eyam is close to my thoughts because the village is near where I live and work in Manchester. It presents one celebrated and terrible solution to this dilemma. As the infection spread, the rector William Mompesson and his non-conformist colleague Thomas Stanley persuaded the villagers to impose on themselves a voluntary quarantine, remaining in the village and so reducing the chances of the plague spreading throughout Derbyshire. In accepting this responsibility the villagers must have known that they would probably contract the plague and so die. As the plague took hold, Mompesson arranged for supplies of food and other necessities to be left at the boundary stone of the village and the payment was disinfected by placing the coins in running water or vinegar.

All in all more than 260 villagers were claimed by the plague, out of a population of around 350, leaving just 83 survivors. The plague was a terrible killer: in London an estimated 100,000 people, some 20% of the population, were lost – compared that with the 43,000 lost to the Blitz in 1940.¹⁰

This was a heroic shouldering of civic and moral responsibility by a community, and one felt and acted upon by all the individuals involved, in the absence of any social welfare provision or reciprocal care for the diseased or for those who took on the burdens and dangers of voluntary quarantine.

If the people of Eyam had been chemically conditioned to prioritise a sympathetic response to those in front of them, their fellow villagers, rather than consider their wider responsibilities, it is doubtful they would have behaved as they did. Consider another example.

Coventry, 1940

In 1939, British Intelligence obtained, through the Polish Secret Service, an example of the German cipher machine 'Enigma'. A team of cryptanalysts working at Bletchley Park succeeded in breaking the German Codes and were thus able to supply the Allies with much information about Axis plans. As a result, at 3pm on 14 November 1940 the team

at Bletchley intercepted a German signal which gave Churchill at least 5 hours warning of the Coventry raid (a planned saturation bombing of that city). F.W. Winterbotham, the man responsible for passing information from what was dubbed ‘the most secret source’ to Churchill, saw the Prime Minister’s dilemma like this:

If Churchill decided to evacuate Coventry, the press, indeed everybody, would know we had pre-knowledge of the raid and some counter-measure might be necessary to protect the source which would obviously become suspect. It also seemed to me ... that there would be chaos if everyone tried to get out of the city in the few hours available and that if, for any reason, the raid was postponed ... we should have put the source of our information at risk to no purpose.¹¹

As I noted in my book, *Violence & Responsibility*,¹² ‘Churchill had to balance the lives that might be saved by evacuating Coventry against the lives that might be lost by endangering the source and this cutting the Allies off from other information that might well shorten the war and save lives.’ Probably many tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands more lives than were lost in Coventry.

Just as a moral judgement is more than a statement that has some moral relevance, an argument is more than a series of contradictory statements. I am reminded of the Monty Python Argument Sketch, about whether an argument consists of more than just contradiction. Here is a fragment; the man responds to a notice offering arguments at a price:

Man: I came here for a good argument!
 Arguer: Ah no you didn’t, you came here for an argument.
 M: An argument isn’t just contradiction.
 A: Well! It *can* be!
 M: No it can’t.
 M: An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.
 A: No it isn’t.
 M: Yes it is! ‘tishn’t just contradiction.
 A: Look if I ‘argue’ with you, I must take up a contrary position!
 M: Yes but it isn’t just saying ‘no it isn’t’.
 A: Yes it is!
 M: No it isn’t!¹³

One can do Good Accidentally but One cannot be Moral Accidentally

One can accidentally discover something of scientific importance but one cannot be scientific, one cannot do science, accidentally. Doing science is a deliberative and disciplined process, it involves, for example, doing things such as formulating and testing a hypothesis, looking for disconfirmatory evidence as well as for confirmatory evidence; it is not simply finding white swans but looking for black ones. And looking for black ones for the purpose of testing the hypothesis. Simply finding a black swan is not ‘scientific behaviour’ any more than finding a black swan necessarily tests the hypothesis that all swans are white, it is not necessarily even proto-scientific behaviour. The same goes analogously for moral behaviour.

It should now be clear that not all behaviour, and not even all behaviour that affects moral outcomes, is moral behaviour any more than all behaviour that affects political

outcomes is political behaviour. The riots and looting seen in some British cities in the summer of 2011 clearly exhibit behaviour with profound moral and political consequences, but to call it moral or political behaviour is quite another thing. It could be both, but only if a particular, and a particularly complex and interesting, story accompanies the claim.

Moral Behaviour and Good People

There is a long standing distinction in moral philosophy between judging persons and judging actions. This is necessary, not least because good people can do bad things and bad people can do good things. This distinction has penetrated to the United Kingdom Secret Intelligence Service. Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, former Director General of M15, said in her 2011 Reith Lecture: ‘Not all terrorists are evil though, their acts are’.¹⁴

We thus need a moral sensibility capable of evaluating both the goodness of deeds and of their effects, in short of actions (consequentialism) and the goodness of people and their states of mind and dispositions (virtue ethics). If we are interested in the individual’s biography, we are interested, morally speaking, in their virtues and vices. If we are interested in making the world a better place, we are interested in outcomes – consequences. Since most of us are more interested in what happens to us than the state of the soul of those who influence what happens to us, we tend to be, for all practical purposes, consequentialists. This is because even if we are not consequentialists and are interested in virtues and our state of mind (or of grace) we need to be confident we will have the freedom to develop our virtues according to our own values and this requires that others leave us that free space. Hence, whatever the state of their souls we need them to leave us free to cultivate our own in ways that we find virtuous.

To put this point another way, it is easier and safer (for what both want) for consequentialists to neglect virtues than for virtue ethicists to neglect consequences. This is why moral behaviour cannot simply be a matter of moral emotions, or states of mind, or intentions. Good intentions or emotions without the careful and realistic calculation of consequence, without, in short, considering if not all things, then at least as many possible consequences of conduct as time allows and appear relevant, is a recipe not only for disaster but for the triumph of evil. To be good, ‘thank you very much!’ is then to act for the best all things considered. To prioritise the avoidance of so-called direct harms is neither the action of a good conscience, nor of a good consequentialist.

The Huxlean or the Orwellian Road to Totalitarianism¹⁵

I have been an advocate for all forms of human enhancement for more than 30 years, and to avoid any misunderstanding it is important to emphasise that I see nothing wrong in principle with adding moral enhancement to all the other forms of human enhancement. If it could be achieved it would clearly be a very good thing. This is one important reason why I am in favour of cognitive enhancement, including chemical and biological methods, because they enhance the thinking and reflection that makes moral judgement and moral behaviour possible.

The techniques of moral enhancement advocated thus far in the literature involve chemical and biological interventions, and I am dubious about their effects, which I hope does not make me a ‘bioconservative’ – although doubtless those who disagree with me will have great fun in suggesting the contrary. To be clear, I have no objections to chemical moral enhancements if they do actually enhance people morally, but I believe there to be no plausible evidence for this to date. I strongly endorse the only methods of moral enhancement so far proven effective, namely cognitive enhancement through education, parental example and peer pressure, an effective and fair legal system, responsible policing, social welfare provision, good diet, exercise and many other things. I am even open to chemical and biological moral enhancement when and if it can be achieved without deleterious effects and without compromising freedom.¹⁶

My point is that enhancements that make us better thinkers (more able to reason) are welcome, but ones that would make us better doers yet worse thinkers (less able to reason, for example by foreclosing access to thoughts about using violence)¹⁷ are not strictly moral enhancements in the first place; rather, they are *incapacitators*, disabling strategies that give the appearance of morally enhancing whilst destroying or inhibiting both an understanding of good and bad, and more importantly the ability to choose to do good over bad. The molecular moral enhancements of which we speak make it more probable that those who use them will act impulsively rather than thoughtfully and hence lose the ability to choose their course of conduct ‘all things considered’.

I fear that inhibiting the power to think, the power to reason, the ability to ask oneself whether what feels or seems right actually is right, is on the path to totalitarianism. Whether that agenda is realised by what might be thought of as Huxlean methods – manipulating feelings and motives through drugs, or other ‘direct’ methods (for example behavioural conditioning)¹⁸ – or by Orwellian¹⁹ total observation, and intimidation, the watching and bullying of Big Brother, is a minor consideration compared with the effect on the ability of whole populations to question and to reason and ultimately to resist.

In this paper I have argued that morality is a reasonable and reasoned activity. Contrary to many claims to the effect that sympathy, intuition, so-called ‘pro-sociality’ or emotional responses are the more reliable and effective ways to improve moral behaviour, I have attempted to show that only reason can be best calculated to deliver ‘right’ answers or even ‘better’ solutions to moral dilemmas.

As I argued at the beginning of this essay: ‘Someone who cares about doing the right thing, someone for whom the difference between right and wrong is important, will always want to ask himself if what feels right *is* right. He will want to assure himself that in so far as it is in his power, he really is acting well or for the best all things considered, that what seems right is right.’ The only way of arriving at this assurance is by reason. In the battle between reason and unreason, or perhaps in a more conciliatory tone, between reason and non-rational strategies for improving human behaviour, rationality is the only way we can test hypotheses or answer our own doubts about the rectitude of conduct.

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