Real Utilitarianism:

Moral Goodness as Causal Efficacy

Where is evil? In the rat, whose nature it is to steal grain, or in the cat, whose nature it is to kill the rat?

--Master Po, from the television series *Kung Fu*

Overview of this Treatise

The Main Thesis

The main thesis of this treatise can be stated tersely: Nothing is good in and of itself. Rather, the good of anything can be judged only by its power to bring about a state of affairs. The power to bring about a state of affairs, to accomplish something, to cause something to happen I call *causal efficacy*. I believe that any statement about moral goodness can be translated in terms of causal efficacy. I believe that when people say that something is good, they really mean--whether they realize it or not--that this something has causal efficacy: the power to make something happen. I submit this is true even for people who believe (incorrectly) that some things are good in and of themselves.

One consequence of accepting this view of goodness is that when someone says, "Such-and-such is good," my immediate response is, "Good for accomplishing what?" Or if the person uses the interrogative form, "Is such-and-such good?" I must again ask, "Good for accomplishing what?" before I can answer the the querant. In my opinion, to state that "something is good, period" or to ask whether "something is good" is to present only half a thought. These half-thoughts are meaningless until the "good for accomplishing what" question is answered.

I call my thesis, that moral goodness is equivalent to causal efficacy, *Real Utilitarianism* (in contrast to the Utilitarianism inspired by the writings of J. S. Mill). Real Utilitarianism holds that the goodness of something be judged in its utility for accomplishing something specific, that is, its causal efficacy for bringing about a specific effect. Nothing is good for accomplishing everything, so goodness is relative. A good hammer can not accomplish the things a good screwdriver can. Real Utilitarianism differs from Mill's thinking in that he used a single criterion outcome for judging the goodness of human actions: the "common good," or the most happiness for the largest number of people. I reject Mill's version of utilitarianism for two reasons. First, I see no point in limiting utilitarian definitions of goodness to the ability to bring about just a single, absolute effect--the common good. Second, I find the concept of "the common good" to be vacuous upon close examination.

The way that our thoughts about goodness attain utility is through the formulation of moral statements. Moral statements advise us how we ought to think, feel, or behave. In other words, moral statements are prescriptions for living. The popularity of advice columns in magazines and newspapers, of several best-selling books on moral rules, and of discussions about moral values attest to the people's eagerness to give and receive advice about how to live life. This essay explores the motives underlying our attempts to formulate, express, and follow moral prescriptions. In essence, this essay argues that formulating, expressing, and following statements about what is "good" or "moral" or "right" inherently involve attempts to make our environment conform to our personal desires.

Summary of Argument for the Main Thesis

Suggesting that morality may be a source of personal power and influence may strike many as anti-intuitive, because "doing what is right" is usually contrasted with "doing what I want." Promoting "the common good" (i.e., what is good for people other than yourself) is moral; seeking personal gain is either amoral or immoral.

This overlooks the fact that a person who is exhorting others to follow a moral principle is obviously attempting to influence them. Even merely stating a moral principle in public is, implicitly, asking others to follow the principle. A person who manages to convice another to follow a moral principles has succeeded in fulfilling a personal desire to influence the follower.

Less obvious is how formulating moral principles that I, myself, intend to follow involves power and influence. In fact, some people think moral principles **detract** from personal power and influence. Moral principles and rules are regarded as constraints on, or impediments to, personal power and freedom because they dictate what we should and should not do. Yet I strongly suspect that the proclivity to develop and follow a personal moral code can provide us with power to influence the world to conform to our personal desires.

The mechanism by which moral rules provide personal power derives from natural laws of cause and effect. To use a simple example, looking for food in a forest at night subjects a person to a greater risk of being attacked by wild animals than looking for food in the forest with a group during the day. If a person desires to eat without being injured or killed, then the moral prescription "Search for food only in groups during the day" is causally efficacious in bringing about desired effects. Individuals predisposed to follow codes of conduct that exploit natural laws by anticipating probable cause-effect relationships will have an advantage in achieving desired ends over individuals unable to anticipate the consequences of their actions.

I suspect that the disposition to develop and follow a personal moral code is historically more primitive than any disposition to follow another's moral code. I hypothesize that, over time, our tendency to follow personal moral codes made us susceptible to being exploited by others who could benefit from our disposition to follow rules. This is not to say that following others' moral demands necessarily benefits *only* the person telling us how to behave. In any given instance where one person follows another's moral demands, there are three possible outcomes: one person may benefit, both may benefit, or neither may benefit. The outcome depends upon the causal efficacy of the prescribed behavior in bringing about desirable results for the individuals.

Relationship to Other Views about Morality

To my knowledge, the thesis of this treatise--that moral goodness is equivalent to power or causal efficacy--is uncommon, if not completely novel. There may be points of agreement between my thesis and Nietzsche's ideas about power, William James's and John Dewey's concerns with the pragmatic consequences of action, and with modern psychological hedonism's emphasis on motivation. Yet I believe that this new view penetrates closer to the true nature of morality. I am proposing that no other viewpoint describes more accurately the historical origin and evolution of morality nor what people really mean when they say something is morally *good*.

The Origins and Evolution of Morality

Origins of Moral Choice

I would like to suggest that that the original "moral codes" prescribing behaviors were present in the earliest living organisms that had to **choose** between competing impulses. Choice is typically regarded as a necessary prerequisite for acting morally. A response to a situation that is completely, mechanically determined by the structure of the actor and the situation is neither moral nor immoral. Robots are not considered to be responsible for their behavior and are therefore amoral.

The dividing line between amoral, mechanical robots and living organisms capable of moral choice is difficult to discern. By my definition, all creatures who experience the "fight-or-flight" reaction in the autonomic nervous system are faced with a moral decision about goodness: "Is it a good idea to engage in combat or to run away?" By my definition, chickens make moral decisions. This may seem ludicrous, but why should we deny morality in any creature with a brain capable of choosing between impulses?

I suppose some would argue that the chicken doesn't really have a choice: The situation (a threatening chicken) triggers the attacked chicken's fight-flight neural mechanisms, and the specific features of the particular encounter (size of the attacking chicken, hormonal state of the attacked chicken, etc.) mechanically, causally determine the "chosen" response: fight or flight. One impulse eventually outweighs the other, the prevailing impulse overwhelms the chicken, and it mechanically (amorally) is swept away by the stronger impulse.

I have a question, however, about this line of thinking: How do human beings differ from chickens when we make decisions? When our brains mull over competing impulses to different courses of action and eventually give in to one, how does that differ from chicken decision-making? Does the difference lie within how long we wait before acting? Our court system reflects the importance of contemplation in determining legal (moral) culpability. Premeditated crimes, wherein people spend time planning their actions, are punished more severely than crimes of passion, wherein persons are regarded as robots overwhelmed by impulses. Likewise, Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development, because it defines moral maturity in terms of deliberate reasoning, defines automatic, reflexive, or habitual acts as amoral.

Exactly how much time must be consumed in contemplation before a "truly" moral choice is made seems to me a perfectly arbitrary matter of definiton. As far as I am concerned, when two courses of actions are considered for any length of time and the outcome is uncertain to the organism (whether or not the outcome is deterministically certain to an omniscient observer), a moral choice is involved.

Evolution of Moral Rules

Genetically-Based Moral Codes

If moral codes were embodied in the nervous systems of early organisms millions of years ago, they would be, like any psychophysical structure, subject to natural selection. This means that over time we would expect an increase within a population in the frequency of neural structures embodying moral codes that prescribed behaviors that promoted physical survival and reproduction. From the perspective of the genes that give rise to neural structures, self-perpetuation is the Ultimate Good. The goodness of any act would be measured, from the genes' viewpoint, by whether the behavior is causally efficacious in helping the genes survive and perpetuate themselves.

Although it appears that our bodies' systems (circulatory system, digestive system, nervous system) were intentionally designed by an intelligent being for the purpose of the survival and perpetuation of life, we know this is illusory. Our bodies's systems are determined by the interaction between the structure of our genes and the environment in which the genes find themselves. Because genes direct the development of our bodies' physical structures and their behaviors mechanically rather than consciously and intentionally, the degree to which our bodies and behavior protect and perpetuate our genes is accidental. Natural selection creates the illusion that our bodies were intentionally designed to perpetuate life.

Natural selection will quickly decrease the frequencies of genes that produce severe physical deformities and dysfunctional behaviors. But in the absence of absolute selection (where reproductive fitness = 0), genetic mutation and recombination will create an array of different structures and behaviors. The variability of individuals' nervous systems are bound to give rise to a variety of moral rule systems. Some rule systems will perpetuate life better than others. Within a population of individuals, the moral codes of some individuals will prescribe really "good" (in the sense of perpetuating genes) behavior, while the moral codes of others will prescribe behaviors that are only moderately successful in perpetuating genes. In still other individuals, we might observe "random drift," wherein chance genetic mutation or recombination leads to a new moral code that is neither better or worse at perpetuating genes--it is just different.

Culturally-Based Moral Codes

Biological evolution can account for a proliferation of instinctive (built-in) moral codes. One of the distinctive products of human evolution, however, is a brain capable of acquiring new moral codes from personal experience, from others' instruction, and from creative imagination. New moral codes arising from learning or creative imagination would proliferate much more rapidly than new instinctive moral codes, which require physical evolution of the nervous system. This would explain the wide range of current opinions about what is "good."

Historically, some thinkers have compartmentalized "instinctive" and "learned" behaviors as categorically different, and probably suggest a similar gulf between instinctive and learned moral codes. I agree that one can attempt such a distinction, but I also see the boundary as very blurry. For one thing, I think the capacity for learning moral codes is possible only because the brain has been shaped by natural evolution for instinctive, rule-following behavior. Second, although transmitted culturally, noninstinctive moral codes--just like instinctive moralities--are still subject to natural selection.

The biological approach to morality denies the existence of timeless, abstract rules existing before human beings appeared on this planet. Whether instinctive or learned, moral codes represent adaptations for survival in particular, historical environments. Relatively wide-spread, long-standing, near-universal moral codes (e.g., incest taboos) represent principles that have promoted survival for large numbers of persons across history and cultures. More idiosyncratic--but still long-standing--moral codes represent principles that have benefited only certain people living in particular environments, or--through random drift--principles that are neither particularly beneficial nor harmful to survival.

To return to the aphoristic question at the beginning of the essay, Po's answer is that neither rat nor cat is evil: The rat does not steal, the cat does not murder. Each acts according to its own nature, that is, each does what it needs to do to survive. What is good for the rat is not necessarily good for the farmer, and what is good for the cat is not good for the rat. For human beings, the moral rules and behaviors may be more complex, but the principles are the same: what is good for one person (or group of people) is not necessarily good for another.

Is *Causally Efficacious* What People Mean by *Good*?

I claimed at the outset of this essay that what people **really** mean when they say an act is *good*. is that the act is *causally efficacious in bringing about a desired result*. I reaffirm that assertion, even for people who endorse deontological views of morality. Deontological views, for the uninitiated, claim that we have a duty to follow certain external standards of right action, even if the consequences bring us neither personal gain nor satisfaction of our personal desires.

I submit that that deontologists are, despite their claims, seeking courses of action that are causally efficacious in bringing about desired results. I can easily think of several different types of desires that deontologists might be attempting to satisfy with their ethical approach. Religious deontologists dutifully follow what they perceive to be their god's will either to satisfy their desire for eternal life or simply their desire to please their god. They hope their acts are causally efficacious in bringing about either eternal bliss or a happy god. Nonreligious deontologists are attempting to satisfy their desire to live apodictically good lives. They hope their strivings are causally efficacious in bringing about the satisfaction of obtaining certain knowledge of what is eternally good.

There is yet another way in which deontologists benefit personally when they assert we must follow certain moral principles regardless of the personal consequences. When assserted persuasively, such exhortations can convince others to follow principles that result in personal gain. For example, if I, as a minister for a particular god, assert that god's will is to give ten percent of your income to the god's ministers, the possibility of personal gain is obvious. More subtle are arguments like, "We must make sacrifices for the 'common good'. The "common good," of course, is not some abstract entity existing beyond particular human beings. Specific individuals--not everyone--will benefit from sacrifices for the common good. Those who urge us to make sacrifices for the common good either

- are members of the group of individuals who benefit

- get personal satisfaction from seeing the group of individuals benefit, or
- receive praise, political power, money, or other rewards for their "good works"

As Malcolm X once said, "Doing good is a hustle, too."

A final way in which deontological arguments are used for personal gain is when people appeal to "absolute rights" to what they desire. If, for example, I claim that all human beings have an absolute right to a certain standard of living, this claim can be used to place moral pressure on my employer to pay me a higher salary--whether he or she wants to or not.

Lessons from Realizing *Good* means *Causally Efficacious*

As a treatise on morality, this essay must have prescriptive implications for its readers. What am I prescribing here, what am I saying you ought to do if you agree that *good* really means *causally efficacious*? What causal effects to I hope to achieve with this essay? I hope this essay will achieve two major effects.

My first effect I hope to achieve is liberation through knowledge. One of the reasons I chose teaching as a profession is that I find it intrinsically enjoyable to help remove shackles of ignorance from my audience. I feel good when I can see it dawning on people that they need not be slaves to moral codes that bring them little or no personal gain.

I expect, as a secondary effect of liberation, that increasing freedom for others will increase my own freedom. I want others to understand that exhortations for me to follow their moral rules are a waste of time. To paraphrase a 60s poem: I do my thing, and you do your thing. If we find each other, it is beautiful. If not, do your thing with someone else.

And if you ask me, "is that good?" I will answer with the question, "Good for what or whom?"

John A. Johnson

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