

## WHY BE MORAL?

By G Hackett, for Geoffrey Klempner.

It is useful to begin this enquiry into the question of moral compulsion by examining some issues in meta-ethics. Where do our ethical systems come from in the first place?

Some believe that morals are objective. The most famous expression of objectivity is (arguably) that of Plato. To Plato, morals are actually things, which can be known through the application of reason. Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism also take the view that morals are objective, and can be known through a mixture of revelation through the word of God and reason. In the case of Plato, once morals have become known through reason, then man, who naturally wishes to be virtuous, must apply them. In the case of religions, then morals become God's invariant eternal laws, and must be obeyed if we wish to avoid damnation, punishment or being made an outcast.

However, many believe that ethical systems are relative. If so then reasons for being moral are less clear cut. If we had been born somewhere else or sometime else, we might find ourselves adopting a different moral code. The very title of Berger and Luckmann's seminal book "The Social Construction of Reality" suggests that morals can be socially determined. If this is the case, why should we be moral? Why bother? Some might even take an extreme view, like Nietzsche – why follow the slave morality of society?

There are also many thinkers who deny that ethics is a matter of rationality. Morals are based on emotion, and we would be behaving morally if we followed our instincts. AJ Ayer is a famous advocate of the emotional basis of morals. Others sarcastically refer to this idea as the "boo-hurrah" theory of morality. If we can say "hurrah" to one action, we should perform that action, whereas the response of "boo" to another course would mean that we should avoid that act.

Even in the case of an argument for the objectivity, or rationality of morals, there is still the necessity to try to answer the question, "Why Be Moral". What arguments can be given?

Deontological arguments say that we should be moral because it is our duty to be so. In one of the most famous of these arguments, Kant uses the expression "categorical moral imperative" to describe duties which should always be undertaken, whatever the consequences, eg; always tell the truth. There are many objections to duty-based theories, mostly from consequentialists, which suggest that adherence to duty tells us nothing about how we should deal with clashes between different duties. For example, if we know that a person is innocent of a crime, yet we are in possession of some evidence which would lead to his wrong conviction, how do we balance our duty to tell the truth with our duty to avoid doing others harm?

Consequentialist arguments say we should act in such a way as to achieve the best consequences. Utilitarianism is the most well known of consequentialist theories. However, we immediately confront the question; best consequences for whom? It may be that we are egoists and believe that best means best for ourselves. Or we may be altruists, and believe that best means best for others. Utilitarianism tells us that it is moral to act so as to achieve maximum utility for society as a whole.

There are reasons for the desirability of being moral which are not based upon either consequences or duties. These are virtue based theories. It is good in itself to be virtuous and if we strive to be virtuous then we act morally. The most famous of the believers in this approach to morality were the ancient Greeks,

especially Aristotle, who argued that we should seek, not to concentrate on learning rules, but developing good behavioural and emotional characteristics. Education would play a great part in the development of the virtuous person. However, the question of “why be moral” now becomes one of “why be virtuous”.

In all of the above, it is clear that these rules for being moral are normative only. They accept that it is implicitly good to be moral, and try to lay down specific ways in which we might achieve this. Even if we were convinced that we should be moral, it would still be difficult to say what we should do in order to achieve this. The Samaritan would become good according to the ethical egoist if he decided to cross on the other side of the road, whilst he would be good, according to ethical altruists only if he helped the stricken traveller. If the Samaritan were a utilitarian, he might have to make a cost-benefit analysis of the consequences before acting.

However, even if the Samaritan had decided what needed to be done to become a “good” Samaritan, It would still be legitimate to ask the question “why should I be moral at all”. Or to phrase the question in different ways, “why should I be virtuous”, or “why should I do my duty”, or “why should I try to maximise utility”.

It is difficult to say how this question could be answered in a way which would satisfy every person Perhaps a reasonable stab at an answer might use the social contract theory of Hobbes. If most of us are psychological egoists, then in order to prevent our lives being “poor, nasty, brutish and short”, we might reluctantly agree to an arrangement whereby an ethical system is made objective and enforceable by law. In order to soften unpalatable elements of coercion in such an arrangement, it would be helpful if there were an emotional majority in favour of the legal system – we all say “boo” and “hurrah” to the same things. We would, I believe, find it easier to be moral if we could also be persuaded that the system was in favour of caring for the victims of non-moral behaviour, and careful itself not to act in a way which unnecessarily created victims. It seems intuitive to human beings that activity which creates victims is wrong and should be avoided. If necessary, for certain kinds of this behaviour, compulsion should be used. Also, we are uneasy when activities which are victimless become proscribed. Eg; we might feel that punishing homosexuals and blasphemers is wrong, because there is no connection between the deed and a victim. The believers in a separate feminine morality argue that including care and concern for victims in an ethical-legal system greatly increases its chances of persuading people to be moral. Of course, it is difficult to draw a dividing line between the immoral activities which we think should be subject to an external compulsion, and which should be left to be resolved privately.

In one sense, the above attempts to answer the question “why be moral” have failed to provide a single definitive answer. However, it may not be possible to get such an answer. Even if we juggle with a system cleverly enough to recognise both the importance of egoism and what we intuitively believe is right, yet also to allow the system to strike a balance between allowing as many moral questions as possible to be dealt with privately, whilst acting so as to protect and care for potential victims of some human acts, we would still have an incomplete answer. Many will still be able to say “why should I bother to be moral”.