The Ethical Dimension of Human Nature

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The Ethical Dimension of Human Nature
A New Realist Theory
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Abstract: The interaction amongst individuals and their emergence in larger human organisations such as a community or a state are intimately bound to the reality of the human being. Thus, individuals do not exist simply as servants of a collective, but on the other hand, one cannot delude oneself into thinking that one lives in a private reality. To take the most basic point, all sentient beings feel pleasure and pain. This is not optional or negotiable and is not just a social construction or a product of an ideology. It follows from the simple fact that sentient beings must take action to avoid harm or promote benefit. The further particular properties of the nature of any particular species of sentient being such as humans are similarly mandated by the situation of that species within the total bio-sphere. Again, this is not optional. However, the human species has a flexible mind and a language capable of communicating subtle or abstract thoughts. As a consequence, humans can ask that basic question of how to promote benefit and avoid harm on a level and with a depth that is revolutionary in terms of existence on this planet. This is the genesis of ethics and morality and it follows from the fundamental nature of our reality. This revolutionary new capacity must not be squandered by denying the objective and universal nature of the ethical discussion undertaken by individuals, groups and societies. To a unique extent, human goods are frequently intangible; this is the primary source of all human studies: economics, history, literature, law, ethics, and so on. Their intangibility should not mislead us into thinking that they are infinitely malleable according to our whims and preferences. A theory of economics or a law may be workable or otherwise in just the same way as a tangible good such as an electric motor. For this reason, the humanities have legitimate claims as fields of science and engineering. But they must not betray the responsibility that comes with this realisation by departing from the spirit of the scientific enterprise, which has as its foundation accountability to the truths about universal reality. In this analysis, ethics is the realm that connects individual human nature to societal realities such as laws. It does so in various conceptual dimensions. In the domain of willed action it recognises that human beings are neither infallible nor omniscient, and therefore cannot give effect to all their plans; and so, there must be a realm of unenforced obligation between what is compulsory (law) and what is completely free (personal preferences). In the realm of planning and understanding, ethics is the connective between the realities of individual human nature and those of social organisation. These are processes of mutual influence and feedback determined by reality, whether we understand that reality or not. But if it is understood, or understood better than before, new possibilities are opened for positively influencing human social and individual evolution. The Principle of Goodness is a new realist ethical theory which acknowledges these truths about human nature and the vast web of interactions within which humans live and exercise their wills. It has a great deal to say about how people should act, and in turn be treated by others. It shows that contemporary socio-political theory is wholly inadequate as a suitable basis for human flourishing: in particular, the fashionable compulsion to reduce the variegated uniqueness of each of the six billion human individuals to generalised properties based upon categories within which they are placed, such as race, class, and gender. Not one of these categories stands up to a critical analysis of its usefulness as a means of dividing people from each other. The result is that many people are treated unjustly, the consequences to their lives disregarded; and yet the ideal society eludes us - as it must because these categories are not grounded in reality. In this paper we focus on the human individual. We investigate how the trust and sense of security that follows from treating every single one ethically as individuals will be conducive to the development of positive feedback cycles of care, concern, friendship, and compassion throughout the matrix of human interaction. The challenge, then, for those who desire a world free of inequity, conflict and insecurity is to re-examine every social field informed by this ethics, which is grounded in the inescapable reality of the human condition.

Keywords: Principle of Goodness, Ethics, Science and Humanity, Origin of Ethics

Introduction

We explore some basic properties of the Principle of Goodness, an ethical theory discovered by the authors. (We say “discovered”, as its insights long predate our notice of them, and underlie many major religious and ethical schools of thought; but they have been assumed, or “intuited”, rather than put into an explicit formula. See [House 2005].) The theory may be termed ‘process-realist’, meaning that the terms “Good” and “evil” in the statement of the theory are claimed to be realities: not of matter or other substance, but of consistent patterns within processes involving moral actors. This conception is not unsus-
al; for example, the reality of money is not found in any physical property of a particular note or coin, but in the way in which money participates in processes such as buying or selling. We expect that investigations of processes will yield fruit in understanding ethics. A good deed is not an object, but a characterisation of properties of a story, a history, a process, in which moral actors operate.

The problem of ethics is to understand this reality better, not to somehow persuade people to “be good”. Surveys of how people would like the world to be typically find that altruistic answers dominate the rest, such as: a world at peace; equity and justice; no prejudice; no more hungry, sick, illiterate or poor; safety; the opportunity to lead happy lives; freedom to pursue opportunities for creativity and prosperity; opportunities to assist others in fields such as health, education, economics, arts, music, human understanding, etc. (Example: [MORI 1999].) Nevertheless, opinion has sometimes been strongly in favour of destructive policies, such as war (for example, at the time for the crusades). Clearly, two tendencies are operative in human beings, and it is reasonable to posit that either of these could be enhanced in a cycle of positive reinforcement. To take the destructive example, had victory and prosperity followed from the crusades, we might reasonably expect that even greater public support for those policies would have followed. Can sound ethics improve our choices? Although here we can do little more than investigate likelihoods and show some connections, we can advance the Principle of Goodness in the sense of a scientific hypotheses, making particular predictions about interactions of ethical and practical processes.

Ethical investigations of such nature are not new, so it makes sense to draw some parallels with other major ethical philosophies and theories.

**Situation of Personal Ethics**

Personal ethics structures the realm between complete freedom and laws. Not everything that is permissible is admirable or wise. Individuals reasonably ask for greater guidance than the content of the nation’s statute books, whether as unspoken social mores or as explicit principles. Much disagreement exists as to how, or even if, this should be done (for example political and religious ideologies, group opinion, other ethical systems such as utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, practical reasonableness, virtue ethics, and so on). By highlighting some likely consequences of widespread choice of the Principle of Goodness as a social and personal guide, we hope to provide reasons for its practicability. However, the choice of an ethics to live by is not necessarily an either-or proposition, and interconnections amongst ethical theories can strengthen the justification for ‘believing in’ ethics itself as a genuine subject for investigation rather than as a widespread (“Nietzschean”) mistake.

**The Principle of Goodness**

A brief statement of this principle is that:

*Goodness* is to attempt to benefit everyone; *evil* is to attempt to harm any innocent one.

This does not refer to non-ethical meanings of these words, such as profit, welfare, or fortune, although connections with these other meanings are obvious. Indeed, non-ethical meanings provide content for the terms “benefit” and “harm” in the above. We might say that (moral) good is to try to provide (practical) good to everyone. Nevertheless, the meanings are distinct, and the Principle is not a statement about outcomes, but refers to mental states, that is, not merely wishing, or even intending, but actually attempting, to promote the welfare of all (in the case of goodness) or to harm any innocent (in the case of evil). Attempts might not be actions: refraining from a harmful course might be part of an intention to promote benefit, or refraining from a saving action might be part of an attempt to cause harm.

Although we do not evaluate an ethical act by its outcome, nevertheless the actor’s knowledge and capacities that led to a given outcome are themselves the products of other, prior acts, such as whether the person bothered to collect relevant information, or obtain equipment that was clearly needed for performing a certain task. In this sense, practical failure to achieve benefit or avoid harm might indeed be regarded as ethical failure, but only because other, enabling, attempts were not themselves conducted to the best of the actor’s abilities. This is why, for example, we often excuse children for some acts that are held culpable in adults, even though in both cases the right action might have been impossible due to lack of knowledge. ([Hursthouse])

This is not a consequentialist theory such as utilitarianism. But when we talk of mental states rather than outcomes, a utilitarian might respond that he, too, accepts that in a real situation, one can do nothing else than attempt to produce the overall maximum happiness, and should not be condemned for factors outside one’s control. An example might clarify the distinction. Suppose a villain threatens that, unless I murder Jane, he will murder all of Jane’s family, Jane included; and suppose that there is no ‘way out’ of our dilemma by foiling the villain somehow, and there are no ‘long term’ counterbalancing consequences such as are often posited by utilitarian analyses to change the obvious ‘right choice’ under that theory. A consequentialist would probably have to agree that I should kill Jane, as that leads to
the least damaging overall outcome. (Utilitarian counter-arguments to such scenarios are considered by [Finnis], and disposed of successfully, in our opinion.)

Under the Principle of Goodness, however, no such conclusion follows, even though not doing as the villain demands results in a worse or equally bad outcome for every single person involved. I might or might not believe that to kill Jane in these circumstances is to attempt to harm Jane. (I might not believe it if I regard my actions as being completely determined by the greater threat.) And if I do not kill Jane, then, knowing what I do about the villain’s intentions, I might or might not believe that refraining from killing Jane is to attempt to kill her entire family. Jane included. If I believe the former but not the latter, then I must not kill Jane! - even if I know full well that all Jane’s family will die. On the other hand, if I believe that both actions will harm, but that neither is an attempt by me to harm, then I have no choice available that does no harm. I have failed to find a non-harming behaviour. Something will happen based on what I do next, and I might even resort to counting numbers to decide what that something is. If I kill Jane to avoid her family’s deaths, I have failed, but have not deliberately chosen evil. But I still cannot argue that killing Jane was the ‘right’ thing to do; it is failing ethically, even if that failure might be excusable. There is another similar scenario that makes the difference more stark. Suppose that, instead of threatening to kill Jane’s family, the villain threatens to kill Bill’s family. Now the numbers do not count; Jane’s death, if I accede to the villain, will be of my choosing, whereas Bill’s family’s deaths will not be. Choosing Jane’s death is to do evil, and I should not attempt to rationalise anything else. Now Socrates’ point is unavoidable: evil might be done, but it should not be done through me! Of course, in reality, where we can’t assume that the villain will certainly carry out any threat, no one’s death is certain and that reinforces the reason to refuse to kill Jane in either scenario. This key difference between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories is discussed at length by [Finnis].

Finally, in large measure we have been trained in our society to measure things by their effects, so we must beware of judging an ethic by outcome alone, which is the definition of one particular ethical family (consequentialism) and is almost to grant the victory to some ethic from that group at the outset. When choosing an ethic, therefore, we must be prepared to allow even our method of judgement to be informed by considerations from all contending theories.

**Relationships amongst Ethical Theories**

Based on what an ethical theory is trying to achieve, we might distinguish at least three kinds of theories (not intending to be exhaustive):

1. theories that define one or more key ethical terms and deduce ethical behaviours from them, or claim to have found the basis for ethics somewhere (Hume’s ‘passions’, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics), or alternatively deny the possibility of doing so (Nietzschean denial of ethics);

2. scientific theories (areas in cognitive science, neuroscience, behavioural genetics, evolutionary biology, and evolutionary psychology), which explain the causes of ethical behaviour, such as being selected for by evolution as the behaviour of beings most likely to reproduce and pass on tendencies for similar behaviour to offspring;

3. theories that do not necessarily advance some foundational source of ethics, but rather appeal for credence to the suitability of the entire system to achieve its goals, such as ‘the good life’ (Confucianism; Aristotelian ethics, and in particular [MacIntyre]’s modern redevelopment and adaptation of it).

Each category contains divergent ethical theories, so this does not classify theories by similarity of their recommendations. Indeed, category (b) refers to theories without recommendations (in the theories themselves, although some scholars might write moral commentary on such a basis).

At first sight, the Principle of Goodness seems to fall in category (a), as it sets out a statement of ethical terms, and promises to derive other things such as rules of behaviour from these. However, it is a realist theory. It asserts that the statements of the theory are chosen in the hope that they accord with certain realities, consistencies and patterns, that can be understood as moral, such as kindness, care, love, and compassion, in human individuals, and justice, fraternity, friendship, and social concern in societies. That is, the hypothesis is that following the Principle produces or tends to produce, individuals and societies of such natures. In other words, it is also a theory related to those in category (b). But can we argue every decision from the basics for every judgement we, or society might make? Derivation of secondary ethical principles, such as honesty and other virtues, seems to be necessary, implying that activity belonging in category (c) will need to be undertaken as part of elaborating a practical moral understanding.

We thus see that these categories are not mutually exclusive: more than one ethical theory can be “in the right” in some sense, for reasons other than those considered by [Smith], who addresses only the nature
of virtue and the contents of praiseworthy character (Part VI section I). It may even be that some theories in different categories might be closely related or lend each other support, but this might not be obvious due to the different ways in which theories in these different categories are explicated. For example, consider theories in categories (b) and (c): if human behaviour is moulded to some degree by instinctive determinants, then we would expect that a well-developed ethical system might knowingly or unknowingly take these into account somehow.

Category (a) seems to be the odd one out. The reason is that it appears to favour a deductivist approach, establishing core principle(s), then deducing everything from there. Since Hume, it has been hard to argue for any but a deductive approach to any question. (Witness the wide belief in [Popper]’s theory of scientific falsifiability, an explicit acceptance of Hume’s idea.) But this need not imply deductivism: for example, utilitarianism is often argued from an appeal to judge the intuitive rightness of its foundational principle, not from any necessary reason that it should be true. Further, we have [Frederick L. Will]’s two books that lay a solid groundwork for justifying and understanding truth in other than strict deductivist terms. So, even with a foundational principle, we can look at the totality of a theory and evaluate it as a whole, including its assumptions, consequences, internal logic, and external evidence. Now category (a) is starting to resemble (b) and (c).

A grounding assumption such as our Principle might act as the starting point for deduction without implying a belief in solely deductive reasons for accepting conclusions, or, indeed, the entire enterprise. As powerful confirmation (the word is used advisedly) of this, we may point to [Stove]’s meticulous analysis and criticism of Hume’s inductive scepticism.

Composing a Synthesis

At the start of his book on a revised Aristotelian virtue ethics, [MacIntyre] claims that there has been a degeneration in understanding ethics; over the past few centuries, broken theories have replaced an earlier, sounder, ethics. (“We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have - very largely, if not entirely - lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.” (p2)) Certainly the case for current theories being disordered is plausible: MacIntyre argues that the combination of Kant (denying non-rational bases for morality), Hume (denying reasons not based on the passions), and Kierkegaard (insisting on criterionless fundamental choice) effectively removes any reasonable way to defend morality as understood in modernity (p49). He holds that the only rational alternatives are either the Nietzschean diagnosis or relinquishing the entire “Enlightenment project” (p118). Be that as it may, MacIntyre clearly fails in establishing the other part of his thesis, that Aristotelian ethics is the forgotten sounder theory that the modern world retains only in fragmentary, semi-understood forms. He is affronted that Aristotle took what he regards as the clearly mistaken course of “writing off” “non-Greeks, barbarians, and slaves” (pp 158,159). But in what sense can Aristotle’s ethics be better than that of even the most untutored modern, if his system cannot warn him of the wrongness of excluding members of these groups?

Perhaps Aristotle overlooked some aspect of his own system that should have warned him, but if so, MacIntyre doesn’t tell us, apart from an inconclusive mention of Aristotle’s failure to appreciate the importance of historical factors. MacIntyre has made important clarifications to Aristotelian ethics with his explication of “practices” and the distinction between reasons that are internal and external to these practices, and understanding virtues in this context. (“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevent us from achieving any such goods.”) From this basis, he is able to show that the system does indeed ‘hang together’. But even so, MacIntyre does not, and apparently can not, tell us what Aristotle could have or should have understood about virtue to be warned about the evils of slavery. If we need to appeal to our existing intuitive feelings to recognise such a huge evil, it is hard to see why such theories should be regarded as complete ethical systems. ([Miller] raises one possibility, Aristotle’s distinction between unjust and just governments, the latter aiming at the common advantage. But the facility with which he introduces distinctions that reduce or remove consideration from slaves, women, etc., shows that nothing in his ethics protects this principle from undermining.)

We propose that the Principle of Goodness provides the ‘bottom layer’ underlying any sound ethical system. Starting with the Principle, we may deduce or infer other ethical rules, such as principles of honesty, fair dealing, generosity, kindness, and so on. Or we could start at the other end, performing an analysis of virtue in MacIntyre’s style and developing a system. These projects can meet when the Principle is used to inform the system, to give it pegs to hang upon, and thus prevent it lapsing into ethically bad judgements, such as permitting slavery. The reason the Principle prohibits slavery is so obvious we can dispense with wasting words on it here, but more subtle questions can be addressed. For example, we may employ such considerations to analyse Aris-
totle’s discussion (Nichomachean Ethics Book III, 1.) of particular kinds of ignorance (universal and particular) and their culpability. That is, when Aristotle says we are excused for ignorance of particulars but not universals, we may argue that the reason is that in dealing with particulars, the chain of moral attempts that led to the situation under discussion was short, or consisted of only the moral act in question. But in the case of universals, ignorance of them was the product of morally faulty attempts during much of one’s life, leading eventually to one’s ignorance and incapability to act for the best at the crucial time.

We thus see virtues in general as summaries of ethical complexities that could in principle be ‘taken apart’ and explained in terms of ‘moral building blocks’, the myriad occasions, great and small, during a lifetime, in which one had to choose how to act, whether for goodness, for evil, or for neither (noting that our statements of good and evil do not together cover all possible willed attempts). In this sense the Principle of Goodness is a different kind of rationale for the virtues than that employed by Aristotle, which is essentially utilitarian (enlightened happiness). This fact is two-sided. On the one hand, it holds out the hope that the Principle of Goodness (if it is a good ethical theory) is more consistently reliable than principles identified by an operational theory, these in the ethical case being qualities (virtues) supposedly possessing inherent merit. To take Aristotle’s above-mentioned claim, one might construct a scenario in which knowledge of a universal was truly beyond a person’s capacity and therefore ignorance of it should be blameless, or where knowledge of a particular should have been obtainable had the actor behaved morally at earlier occasions throughout life.

If, then, one suspects that a virtue theory is unsound on some point, one can do a more complete analysis using the Principle of Goodness. This is likely to be much easier than it would be for a utilitarian, as far-flung consequences, under the Principle, cannot affect the evil of an act that is known to harm the innocent here and now, whereas under utilitarian theories, all kinds of remote consequences have to be considered. ([Finnis])

Next we ask if a a virtue theory based on the Principle accords with the requirement that it be lived by human beings, restricted in some ways by instinctive human nature; that is, we allow evolutionary psychology and other scientific fields to inform our theory and refine it further. Evolutionary psychology sees ethical behaviour as one among many outcomes of evolutionary processes, positing, for example, that just as fitness for reproduction selected for excellent hearing in insectivorous bats, so too it selected for feelings and loyalties that are commonly called “ethical” in humans and perhaps other higher animals. Evolutionary theories are inherently explanatory rather than prescriptive ([Wright] Ch 16), in common with the rest of the scientific enterprise. But when such investigations show us, for example, that human beings desire to excel, to possess social status, to see their children prosper, we can take such findings into account and find ways in which they can do so in many different ways (arts, sciences, athletics, politics, business, and so on).

**Commencing the Ethical Program**

From evolutionary biology, one finding is pivotal: adaptations are adaptive for individuals, not for populations. (See [Williams].) And the Principle of Goodness concerns individuals: a moral obligation attaches to every individual and concerns every individual. The Principle thus leads us to identify a major moral mistake, which might as well have a name, so we call it *categorism*. This is the lumping of individuals into categories and treating them, not as individuals, but as representatives of their category. By this we do not mean the making of relevant distinctions. The set of people who do not intend to pay for merchandise is a category, but it is one to the members of which a shopkeeper is entitled to deny the supply of goods. However, categories such as a sex, a race, a nation, and so on, are often or usually irrelevant to moral concern. Tokenism, the filling of committees and so on, with members of selected categories, is profoundly futile once one remembers the huge diversity within categories, a diversity that has a deep, scientifically established basis.

Note that we are not here trying to take ‘moral lessons’ from science; rather, we are using science to gain knowledge about ourselves and other organisms. The ethical content comes from the Principle of Goodness. Indeed, as many have observed, natural processes contain a great deal that can be considered evil, if viewed morally. Nevertheless, including facts about our nature in ethical theories must surely make them more effective. Beginning with the most fundamental results, that we are sentient beings, and our pleasure/pain faculties evolved in making our ancestors reproductively effective, proceeding to complex and unexpected findings, we note that this has immediate connection to the Principle of Goodness, as these help provide content for the terms “benefit” and “harm”.

The adoption of the Principle, even by a single individual, has immediate consequences for all who interact with them: they have nothing to fear from those individuals, unless they themselves commence hostilities of some sort. Indeed, the adopter of the Principle will try to inculcate a feeling of beneficence towards all, and will naturally attempt to understand
Despite the apparent altruism in being asked to try to benefit everyone, the Principle is not in conflict with human psychology.

Much more analysis needs to be done to firmly establish this conclusion, but it must surely be clear that explanatory theories do not inherently detract from ethical philosophies that attempt to persuade us of rules as to how we should act. On the contrary, the latter are given an extra resource (the findings of evolutionary investigations of behaviour) to use to test ethical rules and practices. Evolutionary studies of ethics buttress our assumption that realities in patterns of cause and effect underlie moral language and give meaning to words such as “good” and “evil”, and that it is therefore quite reasonable to ask (and not merely in a private sense) “What do these words mean?” Although such patterns are perhaps too complex to ever recognise in full, we might hope that careful statistical work within the evolutionary psychology framework can show the existence of some of them.

Where to from Here?

We may now proceed to develop the Principle according to either a category (a) or (c) plan. The (a) plan would develop ethical understanding afresh from the Principle, and see where the effort leads us. Ethical concepts such as virtues would be developed anew. For example, Is honesty always the best policy? Clearly not, because an honest action can quite feasibly be part of a plan to harm someone; a person uninterested in truth for any moral reason might need a fact to more effectively cause harm; honestly giving them the recipe for an atomic bomb might be an attempt to further such harm. We do not recognise that virtues possess any inherent merit that isolates them from moral scrutiny. Any value a virtue has is in consequence of its use in avoiding harm or attempting benefit.

The other program would be to take existing category (c) systems (such as Aristotelian, Confucian, etc. philosophies) and re-examine them to see whether they are justified in whole or part according to the Principle of Goodness, and to see what additional guidance or improvement can be had by informing the analysis at suitable points.

Whichever way one might proceed, the Principle of Goodness is a realist theory, and reality sometimes surprises or even disappoints us. Any of our cherished beliefs or traditions might turn out to need change or even abandonment. Reality is a hard master, and its condition upon us all if we wish to make progress in ethics is that we have that special intellectual virtue, humility.
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Gitie House B.Sc Hons (Physics) has worked in the field of Information Systems over twenty years with extensive experience as manager of Information Systems development projects and services. Gitie is a co-developer of the ethical theory described in this paper and has pursued life-long interests in philosophy, religion and ethics. The theory arose after a journey of spiritual and metaphysical exploration that she undertook with her husband Ron House. Gitie and Ron have jointly developed this principle.

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