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ALL ABOUT PEOPLE: INTERDISCIPLINARITY,
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MORAL OUGHTS AND PRAGMATIC BESTS: HOW RIGHT ACTIONS ARE COMPOSITES

Abstract

Normative theories of ethics are many, yet none seem to be broad enough so as to provide a maxim by which one can act and always do so rightly. However, at the same time, each seems to be too broad such that they allow for problems and do not hold up in individual cases. This paper proposes a new distinction that allows us to account for individual situations as well as general maxims and principles which one might and/or should hold – the distinction between moral 'oughts' and pragmatic 'bests'. The former references the normative claims on what one should do, the latter, the things which are most appropriate for the given situation and the particular individual. The foundation for this distinction rests in a moral fact regarding the connectedness of all things and established the moral principle that we should act so as to promote the general understanding of this most crucial moral fact.

Introduction

“οὐ γὰρ περὶ τοῦ ἐπιτυχόντος ὁ λόγος, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ ὄντινα τρόπον χρὴ ζῆν” writes Plato in section 352d of the Republic.⁹ Such is the case when dealing in ethics and moral conduct. There are many ethical views which have been promoted in the course of the history of philosophic inquiry. Every moral theory has at its roots, an ontological view. Out of this ontological position one can derive moral facts about the world. It is then by using those facts to develop a moral principle that a theory can prescribe to one what actions are moral or immoral in accordance with those moral facts. However, this is backwards. Instead, I argue, the action which one should do, the right action in a given situation, is based on a principle that is derived from the particular ontology, not from the specific moral facts. To show how this is the case I will set up an ontological view, trace out the moral facts and the moral principle, and finally I will return to the ontology to work out the ontological principle which determines the right action. In short, this paper will argue that the right action is a composite that is drawn out from between the moral 'ought' (which is derived from the moral principle) and pragmatic 'bests' (which are reasons for action driven by rational self-interest).

Ontological Foundations and moral facts

To begin then, a brief description of an ontological perspective by which we can discover such facts and principles is required. There are two actual worlds in which we exist simultaneously. The first is one that is relational – it is a system of relations, in which we get caught up. The second, is a non-relational; it is one in which we abstract away from relations and through which we come to know moral facts. It is in this second kind, that one can find similarities with Sidgwick's point of view of the universe. According to Sidgwick, we can take the point of view of the universe in order to derive axioms of action which form basic moral values (De Lazari-Radek and Singer p. 133-4).

Thus, if we take this point of view of the universe, we are able to determine moral facts which can then inform our moral principles. What then is the moral fact that we can derive from this ontological position? It is simply this: there is a connectedness among all things. While this se-

⁹ Trans: “it is no ordinary matter that we are discussing, but the right conduct of life.”

ems vague and strange, it is no different in application than is Sidgwick's axiom of benevolence. For, in both, what results is a respect for all things. Sidgwick' argues that through this axiom one respects all interests as equal to one's own interests. This is, in practice, the same result. So such a moral fact is nothing which has not been articulated previously and is not undefined.

Consider further Sidgwick's axiom of rational benevolence, which states that we must consider other's good as equal to ours; that is, we must give the good for each individual equal weight in our judgement (De Lazari-Radek and Singer p. 134). In addition, it is clear that, as Singer argues elsewhere, this rational benevolence applies to all rational beings and therefore we must consider the good of all rational beings, not just human animals. If we recognize the connectedness of all beings, or as Sidgwick puts it, take the point of view of the universe, then we can see how all other moral facts stem from this.

The ontological moral principle

If we assert a moral fact that all things are connected, to what principle does this lead? All we must do is consider how other moral theories derive such principles from moral facts. Utilitarianism, for example, argues that one morally ought to do whatever action produces the most utility. Therefore the moral fact must be that utility production is good. In the same vein, if the moral fact is that all things are connected, the moral principle which we arrive at is this: one ought act in such a way that their action is a reflection of the connectedness of all things.

However this is only half of the ontological distinction made at the onset of this essay. In addition to the moral 'ought' as iterated above, there is a principle which is derived from the conditional, pragmatic fact of the first world. This is the fact of rational self-interest. In particular, it is a fact about the way in which we relate to the world of relations; we relate in so far as we are concerned for our own well-being. Again then, the task is upon us to determine the principle which we are led to through this fact. Following the same pattern, it must be this: the best action in a given situation is always the act which produces the most happiness for the agent. However, we see the connection here again, with Sidgwick; this time in regards to what he calls the axiom of prudence which states we must be concerned with our 'self' across the parameters of time (De Lazari-Radek and Singer p. 126). This pragmatic principle supports both egoism and utilitarianism, since often that is best for us is to produce utility, even if in the current instance we suffer a minor loss. Ultimately, it is best for us to suffer the minor loss and produce the greater utility, as we will benefit from this in the future. Thus, this principle collapses from egoism into utilitarianism as they are not all that distinct.

We thus have these two basic principles which make up the ontic aspect of our being. It is now up to us to determine the original ontological principle. As no other moral theory relates the ontic considerations of that theory back to ontological in order to derive the ontological principle which underlies our being, we have no basis to go off. However, there is a clear dialectic between the two ontic principles such that we may derive the ontological principle by understanding what it is that breaks apart and into the principles which we have already set down.

With the moral 'ought' on the one hand and the pragmatic 'best' on the other, we arrive at an ontological principle that synthesizes the two. Namely, this principle is that one should act, only in such a way, so as to promote the understanding of the connectedness of all things. We may note the difference between such a principle and the moral principle, as the one is concerned with understanding, and the other the mere fact. Also, we may note the similarity between the ontological principle and the ontic-pragmatic principle since the former promotes the individual's understanding of the ontological foundations of their being – something which is in a being's own self-interest, and which will result in the individual's happiness. Let us continue this discussion by laying out further explication of these concepts as well as some examples and implications of such a position.

First notice how this distinction between a moral ought and a pragmatic best entails the further distinction between various categories of actions: you can have morally correct and morally incorrect actions (that is, what one morally ought or ought not to do), as well as best actions. Based on the action which an agent performs then, that action can be further categorized as right or wrong. Notice, right or wrong applies to an action regardless of its moral status.

Trollies, goats, and moral choices

Through using some examples to outline the implication of this view, we can identify the right action, as per the ontological principle. Consider first, the classic trolley problem, where one can leave the switch and let five die, or flip the switch and kill one. What we must do is use the moral ought principle and the pragmatic best principle to determine what actions in such a scenario are moral and best for the agent. We will begin with the former.

In order to do so we must first, evaluate whether or not such an action is morally correct or morally incorrect, or is in accordance with what one morally ought to do or what one morally ought not to do. If as stated above we consider morality in terms of objective fact, then most likely we might agree that the act of killing another individual is an act that we ought not to do, morally speaking. In terms of the moral ought principle, we indeed can note that this is in fact the case. For, by considering the pure fact that all things are connected, we may draw out that one ought to not cause suffering at the expense of another, nor allow one to suffer. One can now easily see that the act of flipping the switch leading to the death of, even a few, is morally incorrect, or is an action which we morally ought to perform. This must be true since the only act which the agent can perform that would cease the suffering of some individuals would be to flip the switch, but this goes against the caveat, "at the expense of another," or, in Sedgewick's terms, it values some over others, which goes directly against the moral fact itself.

Next let us consider the pragmatic principle. The 'best' act is always going to be the most pragmatic act. This simply collapses into utilitarianism. Consider again the pragmatic best principle: one must act in such a way so as to produce the most utility. This however, does come with a stipulation: an act for which you can be blamed for performing, is never the best option. In the Point of View of the Universe, De Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer argue, in reference to blameworthiness, in favor of a distinction between actions performed despite that we ought not to do them and failing to do what we ought; that is, between not doing what were supposed to and doing what we should not do (De Lazari-Radek and Singer p. 331-2).

In situations in which one act the agent can be blamed for doing and another for which he would not be blamed for doing, regardless of the morality of such act, the best act is the latter. In the example of the trolley, the agent would not be blamed for leaving nor for flipping the switch. As such, it is an example which we can use to illustrate the exact requirements of the pragmatic best principle. In this scenario, it is clear – and I think most maximizing act utilitarians would agree – that the action which is most 'pragmatic' or produces the most utility, is to flip the switch and save the five over the one.

Let us assume that the agent in our example decides to flip the switch. We have determined that this is not the act which he ought to do, however that it may be the best action. Is it, however, the 'right' action in this circumstance? Is it the action which one should do? We see now that it is not the 'right' action to flip the switch; instead the right action is to leave the switch. Let us consider this briefly. In such a scenario, no choice is one which the agent morally ought to do – that is, no option is morally correct – and the best option for the agent is in fact to flip the switch. However, it is not 'right' action because one should act in a way that promotes the understanding of connectedness of all things to the agent. to understand this further, let us consider a second example, more briefly.

Imagine a scenario between sacrificing a goat and finding a cure for a disease, or saving the goat and forfeiting the cure. According to the pragmatic best principle, sacrificing the goat for the cure is by far the best action available. We may be want to say the same for the outcome of the moral ought principle as in the trolley example, since if all things are connected, then we should respect the goat as well, since we cannot cease suffering at the expense of another. However such a thought process is misguided; in fact, such is the thought process in relation to the ontological principle, and acting in such a way is in fact what one should do, as it is the right action. However, it is not in line with the moral ought principle.

To illustrate this, we must reconsider the distinction made at the onset of this essay between ontic and ontological. The moral ought is an ontic principle, which means that although it is discovered objectively due to a particular ontological perspective, it applies in relation to the particularities of a being. Therefore, when we consider the moral ought principle, about the connectedness of things, one acts in accordance with this principle by reflecting the particulars of beings that are most like them. Ontologically the goat is just as connected as other humans, but ontically, this is not the case. Therefore, the moral ought principle demands that we, as in the pragmatic best principle, sacrifice the goat for the cure.

So then, the question becomes why act in accordance with the ontological and not the ontical principle? The answer to this is two-fold. First, the ontological principle states what it means to be a being, and if one is to be authentically a being, acting in accordance with the ontological principle is the only way to do so. Second, this is not a requirement, and in fact, it may not be possible to act in an authentic way the majority of the time. Thus, to reiterate, one is not blameworthy if their action corresponds to any of the stated principles, even if the action is ontologically wrong.

Criticisms and objections

While there are many ways in which such a theory as outlined above may be subject to criticism, I shall here address what I believe will be the strongest case against my claim, even if it is a small accusation. I believe that the most damaging critique of my argument above is the same critique Singer and De Lazari-Radek gave against Norcross in defense of Sidgwick. Notably, this was that the notions of 'right' and 'ought' cannot be separated, and further, the notions of 'right' and 'best' are synonymous (De Lazari-Radek and Singer p. 335). Although I recognize this as a valid critique, I find it to come out of a philosophical trap. By that I simply mean this: when deciding how to act, the 'best' action has so long been tied to the action that is 'right' or which one 'ought' to perform, that this has been only faintly questioned, with most simply accepting it to be the case. This, I believe is misguided and that if confronted with possibility otherwise, there is no actual reason to confuse these notions.

Most who would argue against the distinction which I have set out here, are those who oppose that there is a relevant distinction between what is the best action and what one ought to do. I will outline the basic argument and then critique it to show why the distinction I have made is still valid. If an action is the best of alternative possibilities, then it is what one ought to do. If it is what one ought to do, then it is also the right action. The mistake in this argument is in thinking that morality occurs within the present world which one encounters – that is to say, it is believed that morality is a pragmatic entity. Unfortunately, however, we often see that morality, and morally correct actions, run contrary to practical considerations, as evidenced by such problems like the trolley problem, and therefore is not useful in such considerations. Doubtless, morality is important, but so too are practical concerns which, although may have a moral component, do not necessarily always find themselves in agreement with the moral 'ought.'

Concluding remarks

It is not always possible, then, if one wants to perform the right action, to act morally. In fact, many struggle to act rightly, not because they are immoral, but because the moral action, does not seem to be the best action in a particular situation, even if it is the right action. We must then rank priority of actions. Undoubtedly, the right action is the action which deserves to be acted upon most. However, what of moral and best actions? Often, moral considerations are given preference over practical concerns since moral considerations have since been viewed as being right actions in themselves. Unfortunately, as has been shown, morally correct actions are not necessarily the right actions in all situations. We cannot therefore preference moral actions on such a basis.

Instead we must preference pragmatic best actions, as although they do not necessarily lead to right actions either, they do promote a practicality which lends itself to matters of this world, of this present situation. This is not to say that we should dispel morality, since one cannot act rightly without concern for morality, where the right action is the morally correct action or not. What this means is that, as right actions are not by necessity, morally correct actions, or actions which one morally ought to do, they are actions which should be acted upon over the consideration for acting upon moral actions, or pragmatic best actions.

In this essay, I have attempted to argue for an objective understanding of morality, that also enables one to think pragmatically about various ethical dilemmas. This essay has presented a new approach to categorizing actions as follows: moral ought actions, pragmatic best actions, and right actions. It is an all-encompassing moral guide with which we can understand ethics as it pertains to our daily life. For what else are we to do in ethics, but determine how one ought to live?

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