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Moral Judgements: The Pursuit of Comfort and its Justification

The three most common theories of morality are utilitarianism, deontology (specifically Kantianism), and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Which are all attempts to explain our moral decision-making process, while offering a method for determining what makes one’s moral actions correct. However, when these theories are applied to real life situations, or altered for the sake of practicality, they all collapse into a single theory of how and why one should act. Which is taking whatever action makes an individual comfortable, meaning that they can both live with their actions as well as justify these actions to themselves. Thus, these three moral theories all explain the same reason that moral judgements exist, and why they are sufficiently motivating, but they each justify this through different methods in order to ensure one the most comfort when acting.

The goal of utilitarianism is the promotion of the most overall happiness in an impartial manner. In Joshua Greene’s Moral Tribes, he explains this as the promotion of the most “common currency,” which is the title he gives to overall happiness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Utilitarian action, however, often requires the sacrifice of one’s individual aims in order to promote the most overall happiness. This sacrifice is criticized by Bernard Williams as being unfair as it requires the loss of consideration for the individual, such as goals and desires, which Williams claims is a great loss of integrity on the individual level. Williams states, “It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In this, Williams criticizes utilitarianism, or as he puts it eudemonistic consequentialism, as taking away one's connection to their desires in the decision-making process in favor of the calculation that comes with utilitarian action. However, this sacrifice, or at least the apparent sacrifice of one's desires may be no sacrifice to many – especially those who consider themselves utilitarian. This is because they feel that they are obligated, whether by internal or external forces, that their actions should appear to promote the most overall happiness. The question, then, becomes what exactly is this obligation, and what makes it obligating in the first place? Greene argues that this obligation to sacrifice one’s personal desires is the only rational decision when one switches into “manual mode,” which is what he calls the evaluative level of moral consideration.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, this rational sacrifice sounds eerily similar to the form of Kantianism Christine Korsgaard argues in favor of.

In Kantianism, the “ought,” or obligation to act, is the primary consideration of whether an action is morally correct. Obligations, then, are central to this concept of rationality, because the obligation to act towards the good arises from the rationality that is imposed on the world by humans.[[4]](#footnote-4) Korsgaard further argues that this form of ethics is the only form of ethics that is “consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world, and the ethics of autonomy is an ethics of obligation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This emphasis of obligation to act out of one’s autonomy is the essence of Kantianism, which basically is the argument that, due to our autonomy, our moral judgements obligate us to act because they arise from our rationality, which is – as Korsgaard claims – what a person really is at a fundamental level.[[6]](#footnote-6) Meaning our obligations stem from our existence as rational beings.

Both of these moral theories rest on obligations to act, but they differ on why one is obligated to act, or at least where this sense of obligation comes from. Utilitarian’s, such as Greene, argue that these obligations arise from one's duty to promote the most overall happiness, while Kantians, such as Korsgaard, argue that the obligations come from one's rationality, as one's rationality tells them that the correct way to act. Both of these obligations require their own different sacrifice. The obligation in utilitarianism obviously requires sacrifice but, the sacrifice of Kantianism is not as obvious as it arises from the full commitment to what one determines to be rational, rather than how one wishes to act. But both sacrifices are not really sacrifices at all but, instead, are manifestations of how one thinks they should act, or specifically what action makes them the most comfortable – in the sense of whether an individual can live with their actions. The utilitarian is someone who finds comfort in the fact that their actions, allegedly, promote the most overall happiness. Thus, their actions are the ones that they are comfortable living with. This same idea of comfort rings true for the Kantian, who claims to act out of pure rationality and reason. However, this focus on reason for reason’s sake alone is a self-serving, and self-reassuring concept for rationalizing how one acts, so that one can justify their actions to themselves. From this, it appears that the obligations of both utilitarianism and Kantianism arise from the pursuit of one's comfort, or at least the pursuit of an individual’s ability to live with their actions.

Aristotelian virtue ethicists however do not ascribe to the same sense of obligation as utilitarians and Kantians. This is explained by Phillipa Foot, who argues that moral judgements are not obligating in any sense and are not the categorical imperatives that Kant claims they are, but instead they are hypothetical imperatives. She does this through a comparison of moral judgements to other non-obligating practices such as etiquette, which are good to follow but still, they are not obligating.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moral judgements in this tradition are, then, combinations of the particulars of a situation with the possession of virtues, which allegedly guide one towards correct action. The particulars of these situations still take priority as Martha Nussbaum argues by claiming that particulars are more morally relevant than the seemingly objective virtues, as they better explain moral judgements than their objective counterparts.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nussbaum further argues that virtues are objective in that they come from a connection to “spheres of experience.” The goal of these “spheres of experience,” “is to isolate a sphere of human experience that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others and act in *some* way rather than some other.”[[9]](#footnote-9) From this, it is clear that moral judgments in this tradition are objective in the sense that there is a correct way to act within the particulars of any situation, and one is aided in acting correctly when they possess the virtues. However, the attainment of these virtues is a lifelong journey of learning with the goal that one will be able to act morally correctly without thinking about how they should act. Meaning, it can be said that acting morally correctly is a state of possessing and learning the virtues. Thus, acting rightly is acting as a virtuous person would. The comfort in this, is that one can still act based on the particulars of their situation, such as their emotions or other specific parts of their lives, that universal moral theories ignore, while also having a semi-universal justification for acting, which is the alleged existence of objective virtues. This again relates to the pursuit of comfort in acting because in Aristotelian virtue ethics, one can act in a way that they are comfortable living with as they are supposedly guided by “virtue,” which allegedly means that every action they take is either excellent or in the pursuit of excellence.

These three moral theories all collapse into the same concept of comfort – or, more specifically, the ability for one to live with and justify their actions. Each theory justifies this comfort in a different way, but they all are in pursuit of this comfort. The question, then, arises, why do people only act in pursuit of their own comfort and search for a justification for this pursuit of comfort?

It feels wrong for one to only act out of care for themselves, or value things only based on their own situation, but this is the condition that all humans find themselves in. This is because as humans, we possess an inescapable and individualistic perspective on the world that is not only held by us, but also forces us to believe that we deserve premium treatment. In his phenomenological naturalization of The Fall, Mark Johnston labels this human condition as the “arena of presence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This “arena of presence” can be understood as separating the world into two locations: the HERE and the THERE. The HERE is our consciousness and who humans are as individuals, while the THERE is everything else. Because we, as individual humans, are the HERE, we possess the inescapable concept that we deserve premium treatment compared to the THERE, from a deity in the case of Johnston, or in a more general sense, regarding morality, which takes the form of extreme self-love.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, an anxiety arises in us due to the existence of the THERE, which is because the THERE generates its own sense of the good. So, when one acts in their own, inescapable, self-interest they feel guilty for not conforming to the concept of the good that is present within the THERE.[[12]](#footnote-12) Following this, another potential source of obligation is revealed, but rather than being from utility or reason, it arises from one's obligation to the THERE, the wider world and specifically the culture in which one lives, as well as the wider culture of humanity.

This obligation to the THERE seems initially to be similar to the value of humanity – or more specifically, rational beings – that appears in the form of Kantianism Korsgaard argues for, or from utilitarians who wish to promote the most general happiness.[[13]](#footnote-13) The care for others in these theories, however, does not arise exclusively from simply caring about other people, but instead, concerns one's fear of being ostracized for not conforming to societal norms, such as the standards for how one is expected to live, that arise from the THERE. Thus, these anxieties again arise from the inescapable self-love that one possesses, as it is difficult to garner premium treatment if one is ostracized from society. In Aristotelian virtue ethics, this same concern for conformality arises, but one’s relentless self-love is justified by the concept that there are virtues that make one excellent, meaning that one possessing the virtues, allegedly, can act wholly excellently, even if they are solely acting on account of their self-love.

This inescapability of self-love appears to parallel Simon Blackburn’s projectionism, which is the idea that moral judgments are the projection of one’s emotions and other internal sentiments onto the world. Blackburn claims that the reason these projections exist is because they promote collaboration amongst humans, thus making this system of projecting one's internal sentiments onto the world evolutionarily useful.[[14]](#footnote-14) This parallels the unapologetic and inescapable pursuit of comfort, or livability with one's actions, because both this pursuit of comfort and projectionism come from one's internal consciousness. But pursuing comfort in one’s actions differs significantly from projecting one’s emotions onto the world because even though both come from internal reflection, projecting one’s emotions does not require that emotions be part of one’s rational faculty, while comfort does. So, because the difference between the two concerns whether one's emotions are part of their rational faculty, if emotions are not part of one’s rational faculty, projectionism must be the accepted theory for where moral judgements arise – and not from self-love. But if one’s emotions are part of their rational faculty, this pursuit of comfort –stemming from unrelenting self-love and the livability with one’s actions – must be accepted.

Emotions are mechanisms by which one values something, or interpretations of how something is valued. Aristotelian virtue ethicists, such as Rosalind Hursthouse claim that these emotions are part of one’s moral judgements in that they are part of one’s rational faculty and can be correct or incorrect in how they value things. This is because emotions are necessarily tied to one’s conceptions of good and evil, which are two of the primary factors that one is concerned with when faced with a moral judgement.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, emotions must be part of our rational faculty, even if they are incorrect.

An Aristotelian would further explain these emotions as being trainable, or educated, so that they can value things more correctly. However, this process of learning emotions can be corrupted, or one can be taught how to value things incorrectly, and these incorrect evaluations continue to persist even if one is doing everything within their capacity to escape these incorrect evaluations. Hursthouse uses the example of racism to communicate this concept as she claims that one who has been inculcated with racism can never fully escape the racism they possess, but they nonetheless should strive towards eliminating this racism from their rational, and emotional, faculty so that they can become a better person.[[16]](#footnote-16) From this, however, it can be concluded that one’s emotions, which are part of their rational evaluative process will always be partially incorrect in evaluating situations if one is not trained from birth to have correctly evaluative emotions. From this, it is fair to assume that all people's emotions are trained incorrectly in some capacity. Meaning that, one’s emotions will always be at least partially incorrect, thus making the evaluative nature of their rationality partially incorrect. It appears that the most obvious thing that would cause one’s emotions to be incorrectly trained would be one’s bias towards their own individual comfort that persists from the inescapable self-love that is present in humanity. This expectation is something that would need to be remedied if one were to be able to possess unbiased, and correct, emotions. But again, this expectation of premium treatment has no remedy as it is part of the structure of how humans perceive the world. Thus, one’s moral judgements, and the emotions that are tied to these judgements will always be biased by one’s worldview concerning their comfort. So, one’s moral judgments are the manifestations of the actions that one believes that they can live with, especially regarding what makes one comfortable with how they present themselves to the world.

This theory, thus, sidesteps John McDowell’s criticism of projectionism. McDowell argues that projectionism does not account for the existence of intersubjective agreement, nor does it account for why some people agree that moral judgements are objective if they are merely projections of one’s emotions and internal sentiments. He expresses these objections by arguing that if one can learn what acting morally correctly means, morality cannot be merely an expression of one’s emotions.[[17]](#footnote-17) This ability to learn, is a concern that Blackburn does not directly address, and applies to the three major theories previously stated, because they all fail to account for, or sidestep, the importance of obligations that come from the culture in which one lives, which is where this learning arises from. Greene claims that this is a fault in the human condition that utilitarianism allegedly solves, Korsgaard and Kant fully ignore this, and Nussbaum and other Aristotelian virtue ethicists attempt to address this through the existence of objective virtues that are tied to universal human experiences but because one does not learn the virtues is not from their given culture, virtue ethicists ignore the obligations that arise from one’s particular culture. However, the pursuit of comfort and livability with one’s own actions is the only moral theory that accounts for this societal obligation. It accounts for this obligation because if one were to be ostracized by their culture for not acting in accordance with the societal expectations of that culture, they would experience great discomfort and it would be difficult for them to live with their actions. So, conforming to one’s culture is part of this expectance of premium treatment because one will only have the capacity to experience this premium treatment if they conform to the moral standards of their culture so that they can live comfortably within that given culture.

Thus, moral judgements are the balancing act done by one’s consciousness so that one can garner the premium treatment that they believe they deserve through their inescapable self-love as well as conform to the cultural obligations that are created by those who hold the most power or who project their wishes the loudest. Moral judgements, then, concern two things: self-love, in that one’s premium treatment forces them to act in a way that promotes their comfort, and obligation of conformity to commonly held moral judgements, to reassure one that they will be able to continue to receive premium treatment, and not be ostracized from their culture. Thus, these moral judgements must be objective on a personal and psychological level in that they are correct if they promote one’s self-interest, and comfort, while also conforming to a wider culture.

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