Philosophy *Now*
a magazine of ideas

Why Should I Be Good?

The following readers' answers to this central philosophical question each win a random book.

The term 'good' has many uses. We might say: "Kevin is a good footballer"; "This is a good pen"; "It's a good thing my train arrived on time." But in none of these cases does 'good' have any *moral* implications. Kevin's being a good footballer does not in itself make Kevin a good *person*. Yet when I ask why I should be good, I take this to be equivalent to my asking why I should be a good person. This is a question that underlies moral action.

When I say that Phyllis is a good person, I do not mean that she performs some particular function well. Persons can perform various functions or roles, and can perform these better or worse, but it is not these capacities that we are interested in when we ask whether some person is good. If Phyllis is a good person, this is not because she functions well, but because she *acts rightly*.

So why should I act rightly? Acting rightly is a matter of doing the right thing. But why should I do the right thing? Some might respond that that's a silly question, because doing the right thing is simply doing what it is right to do – and if something is the right thing to do, it is simply what one *ought* to do, and there is no more to be said.

I think there is some sense in this point. To ask why I should act rightly is to invite a tautological response: I should act rightly because that's the right way to act. And, similarly, I should be good because it is good to be good. This shows that concepts such as 'goodness' and 'rightness' cannot readily be analysed into more basic constituents.

So I am confident that I should indeed be good, and that this means doing the right thing. But I now need to determine *what* the right thing to do is. And *there*, as Shakespeare says, is the rub.

Dr Mikel Burley, University of Leeds

Why be good? Because the consequences of doing good are more favorable than those of not being good. This can be seen no matter how we interpret the meaning of 'being good'. For children, being good means obeying one's parents. By being good we gain parental approval and avoid punishment.

Extending this to the social norms of one's community, being good means being a good citizen. As such we gain the approval and avoid the scorn of those whose opinions matter to us, not to mention avoiding fines and jail sentences.

To a more mature mind, being good might mean obeying the dictates of one's conscience, an internal voice which judges our actions as right or wrong, as worthy of one's own approval or disapproval. By being good we gain a sense of uprightness, of rectitude, and we avoid feeling guilt and shame.

Further reflection leads us to wonder where the voice of conscience comes from and what the justification is for what that voice tells us. We find ourselves with a sense of duty and wonder who or what imposes that duty. Many believe that God defines the moral rules and imposes the sense of duty. God is thus a surrogate parent, and by being good we gain divine reward and (we hope) avoid divine punishment.

Kant alleged that the dictates of pure reason impose the duty to act so that the principles on which we act could be universalized without contradiction. For a rational being, contradiction is certainly unfavorable.

Others postulate an unseen world of moral values not unlike Plato's world of Forms, which the moral sense somehow apprehends. The consequences of doing one's duty on this view are a sense of being in harmony with moral reality, of being virtuous and worthy of approval, whether or not anyone actually approves.

All these meanings of 'being good' involve obeying moral rules. In another sense, to be good means to be of *benefit* to someone or something. By being of benefit to other people and to our environment we can create a *milieu* in which everyone flourishes, including ourselves. Whether we succeed depends on our skill in choosing actions that have good consequences. In any sense of 'being good', consequences are of utmost importance.

Bill Meacham, Austin TX

The question is ill-framed: there are no objective moral facts. As Hume was aware, to state that murder is wrong is not to offer any objective fact about murder. Rather, morality is species-specific: as human beings we are predisposed to see the world in terms of good and bad, just as we also see it as ugly or beautiful. These are qualities we *impose* upon the world, not ones intrinsic to it. The question to ask is why human beings have evolved morality. We must identify what survival value it has. For Dawkins we are 'gene machines': we have developed a moral sense because this gives our genes a better chance of perpetuating themselves.

To survive and reproduce, human beings must enlist the aid of others. Hence the system of reciprocal altruism – better known as tit for tat. We help others so that others think we are good and reliable. They are predisposed to help us when we in turn have need of help. It is thus an advantage to be good – or at least to *seem* to be good: just as it is to cheat when we think we can get away with it. (Indeed, evolutionary biologists tell us that we are most likely to experience pangs of conscience, and are thus predisposed to confess, when we are most likely to be found out.)

If morality is gene-driven this means we will naturally aid those who share our genes. Altruism extends to our immediate family (as Hume also noted) but not to strangers. If morality was a product of the Stone Age, then our biological make-up has not caught up with modern life. Dawkins advises us to abjure our selfish-gene-driven morality – to go against nature – for a wider rationality if we are to live together harmoniously. Similarly, Schopenhauer, whose Will may be seen as an alternative to genetic determinism, likewise advises renunciation. It is not easy to see how renunciation is possible if we are the victims of our genes in the one case and of the Will in the other. In any event, surely the most self-beneficial course is to try to convince others of one's goodness and to cheat when no one's looking. It may not do much for the human race, but, in the short term at least, you might bring happiness to yourself.

Roger Caldwell, Wivenhoe, Essex

Without appealing to controversial metaphysics, one might find it beneficial to be good simply based on pragmatism. This decision to be good is ultimately an application of the Prisoner's Dilemma. If everyone valued others' welfare inasmuch as they value their own, then everyone would share the greatest total benefit.