

The Curse of Plato

In this uncertain world, we crave security. Perhaps that is why we place so much value and hope in the utopian ideal, superlative instances of things, the best they could be, leaving no room for doubt: a perpetual fascination with, and quest for, the Absolute. The appeal of Paradise is not the pleasures it promises, but the security it offers. But we know it isn't real don't we?

The Moral Maze

And we all know what we mean by morality too, even if we can't always agree on those irritating little details of just how it applies to real life situations. I mean, if I asked you to recite examples of moral maxims then I'm sure you could do so with practised ease.

But what if I asked you a different question - not "what morality is", but rather "why should I be moral?"

Tablets of Stone

Some time ago I read a paper on ethics. It begins with the observation that as humans we are aware of and thus curious about other people's minds, and proceeds, via some intermediate steps, to the conclusion of an absolute morality to be adhered to entirely for its own sake:-

"One of the defining characteristics of human beings is their interest and concern about what is going on in other people's minds. This obliges each of us to consider what it is like to be another person and to recognise that others have feelings and concerns, pleasure and pain just like we do. I am therefore not the only person to be considered. Others have an equal right to this. I consider this to be a moral fact in the world, at least in the world of humanity. This sets a firm limit on the scope for moral relativity and, since I must put other's welfare on a par with my own, obliges me to act in accordance with the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is a unilateral moral commitment to the well-being of others without the expectation of anything in return. It is to be followed regardless of the possibility, hope or the condition of reciprocation."

As it stands, the argument presented is not valid. Neither my awareness of nor my curiosity about other minds necessitates my moral position with regard to them, nor does it force any moral position I take to be any more than relative or subjective. But let that pass. Instead, let us consider its claims. The argument does not specifically assert the nature of morality to be prescriptive and absolute, but it is difficult to see that it leaves much if any room for it to be anything else. It sets "a firm limit on the scope of moral relativity", "obliges me to act in accordance with the Golden Rule", and to do so "without the expectation of anything in return". It is by no means alone in this. The majority of moral systems assert that what is "right" and "good", and for that matter what is "wrong" and "bad", is to be defined solely by reference to forces independent of ourselves, the poor mortals who have to act accordingly and/or suffer the consequences.

Whether we are convinced by arguments for absolute morality or not, it is perfectly reasonable to take the existence of morality in general, and the Golden Rule in particular, as simple facts in the world. They are endemic in one form or another across cultures and, as far as we can tell, have their origin in pre-history. But, that something is the case neither implies that necessarily it is the case nor, as the philosopher David Hume famously observed, that it ought to be the case. The questions which therefore arise are what is the source of this, or any, moral authority, and what justifies the claim for it to be in some way absolute in character and mandatory in application? Why should I be moral?

The Gold Standard

The Golden Rule is a well-known maxim in the realm of ethics. "Do as you would be done by" is as good an expression of the rule as any, but the philosopher Immanuel Kant sought to clarify it more precisely. In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) he defends what he calls his "categorical imperative", the "supreme principle of morality" of which he gives three formulations, one of which will suffice to stand for all:

"Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."

This too would seem to shrink from declaring the "supreme principle of morality" to be absolute, having us merely "will that it become a universal law". However, Kant declares "that if a law is to have moral force, to be the basis of an obligation, it must carry with it absolute necessity."

Such prescriptions are designed to control our actions and make them predictable. But they go too far when used to deny moral relativity and to be proscriptive of personal advantage. Furthermore, in denying moral relativity they are forced into a claim of “moral law” – and indeed, the legend on Kant’s tombstone quotes his “awe [at] the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me”. This, I will argue, weakens rather than strengthens their case.

Getting into Trouble with the Law

One of the problems of philosophy is that it seeks the universal as a measure of truth. The absolute is taken to be the holy grail while the relative is at best impoverished if not fatally flawed. I think this is a misunderstanding and a misapplication of what it implies for something to be absolute. It is indeed the case, both in our experience and scientific analysis, that gravity works the way that it does. However, this is not a requirement that it should or must, but rather a simple observation of the nature of matter and space – in other words a description of fact. Now, by extension of language, you could perfectly reasonably refer both to the “laws of nature” and the “laws of morality” without committing any major fallacy. However, they are not the same thing. The laws of nature are absolute as a matter of fact and, given the same parameters, are not optional, relative or conditional; the laws of morality may be freely “broken” regardless of any parameter whatever. At the very least this transfer of meaning commits the sin of equivocation.

Kant’s Conundrum

To be fair to Kant he does go to great lengths to construct a case for reconciling the concept of a universal morality the authority for which derives from our individual (free) will. However, while doing so he undermines the foundations of his theory by insisting that any action which implies personal advantage is unable to qualify as a moral action. His presumption is that our rationality, expressed through our will, inevitably supplies the conclusion of universally “correct” moral action irrespective of personal consequence, and for that matter irrespective of circumstance or any other consequence. But rationality does not operate in a vacuum and such matters are relevant. What really underpins Kant’s categorical imperative is a presumption of duty – but that niggling question still remains, “why should I be dutiful?”

The Squaring of Circles

The difficulty faced by rules of behaviour is not I think hard to spot. If we are to live in society with others then we must find a way of reconciling competitive instinct, an instinct which would appear to be incompatible with concern for or living in co-operation with others. You might think that in a hypothetical world where there were enough for everyone there would cease to be any need for competition, but that spirit has evolved in geological time as a response to limited resources and will not be easily denied. Morality as a code of conduct helps to moderate the excesses of competition so that we can hope to live together in co-operative venture and overall succeed rather than fail. But it does not follow from this observation that such a code of conduct is therefore an absolute or indeed has any authority in terms of mandate whatsoever. However, it is obvious that for any such code of conduct to operate effectively it has to be, if not universally respected and applied, then at least adhered to by the great majority. How is that circle to be squared?

Might makes Right (*Argumentum ad Baculum*)

The answer so often resorted to is a simple one: the appeal to force. How many parents, faced by rebellious and questioning offspring, have crushed them with the logic of “because I say so!”. For those of a religious or superstitious persuasion we have the claim that the authority for the code of conduct is external to mankind and from a superhuman source with the clout to back up the command with unanswerable force. For those inclined to the more secular world of post so-called Victorian doubt, then the solution is more ingenious: this extra-human authority can be re-invented and invested in the rule itself. In a remarkable feat of self-levitation it is claimed that the authority for the rule is the rule itself: it is right because it is right, because the rule says so. This is a neat trick, and very effective, but its logic is woefully inadequate. As philosophers, we should insist on better arguments.

You might say so, but why should I say so?

However, not everyone claims to be a philosopher. Ordinary people require a different sort of logic before signing up to such a thing as the Golden Rule. Evolution itself has shown that things rarely survive by acting against their own interest – quite the reverse. There has to be an incentive, and ultimately it is clear that overall people do better by co-operating than not. This is not an immutable rule – there are many circumstances in which individuals, even whole (maybe even very large) groups, nations or civilisations, may do better by not co-operating (or only co-operating with selected people). But there has nevertheless been shown to be a measurable advantage to co-operation, and this is something that we are all aware of in the transactions of our daily lives, both informing our behavioural choices and underpinning the validity and authority of the Golden Rule.

A puzzling discrepancy

But there is a mismatch between the common view of morality on the one hand and co-operation on the other. Morality is typically taken as thinking and acting for others rather than yourself; but co-operation is accepted as being a matter of mutual advantage. It seems that co-operation can involve self-interest, but morality cannot – but both are to do with our relations with others. Something here isn't adding up – what is it?

The spectre of anarchy

However, before addressing that question, there is another worry here which must be addressed. If morality is not absolute, then the fear is that it becomes optional. And if everybody makes up their own rules of behaviour then we have anarchy and descend into barbarism. However, those who resort to this line of argument overlook that anarchy is not a good outcome for anybody, so why should people choose behaviour which sustains it? That would not be rational. That something is relative does not make it chaotic or insensitive to rational thought. It just means that circumstances are relevant in making decisions. The absolute stricture "thou shalt not kill" doesn't help me defend myself against a mad axeman or aid me in merciful euthanasia. The convolutions that apologists of absolute morality are driven to so as to preserve their claims are indicative of the point. Such moral theories are unable to account for the very many departures from the prescribed moral course, not only throughout different times and cultures but also within contemporary culture and depending on particular circumstances. It's what drives Christians for example to resort to the concepts of sin and free will to safeguard both the moral prescriptions that they claim to be on the authority of their God while asserting that entity to be not responsible despite being our omnipotent and omnibenevolent creator. However, at least the Christians have an answer to the question of how these absolute moral prescriptions are communicated to us, which their secular cousins do not even attempt to explain.

What's so bad about self-interest?

There is a pervading view that it is wrong to be concerned for yourself. The moral person it seems can only be concerned for others. However, it is difficult to see how it is possible to exclude self-interest and for the action to remain voluntary (and, of course, if it isn't voluntary then it isn't a moral action). But in any case, what is so bad about considering yourself in matters? If all I did was to act only for others then I would have to rely on others to act for me – but what would be the point of that, why not just cut out the middle man? And in any case, what of other ethical concerns, like personal choice, freedoms and responsibility. There is no advantage in pressing one ethical concern to such an extreme as to impinge on others.

If co-operation with others involves self-interest, and morality involves co-operating with others, why is it such heresy to conclude that the root of morality is self-interest? In effect, Kant has the right approach, but it's not duty which is driving morality, but self-interest, the primal need for security.

Back to the Source

So what is the source of morality and what grants its authority? If the absolute nature of the Golden Rule is to be refuted, and a fully relative or subjective understanding is unpalatable and feared to be ineffective or even chaotic, then how is its continued appeal to be explained? Well, I might be tempted to say that I have already explained it – it is justified by the appeal to self-interest, a sort of Hobbesian argument that relies on an understanding of human nature accepted for what it is rather than a utopian version of what we would like to pretend it to be. However, I would like to deal more fully with the philosophical conundrum of the appeal to the absolute.

Absolute versus Relative

Very few things in nature or in life are absolute: the vast majority are relative. It would seem odd therefore to put the Absolute in a position of such high regard. But in any case the Absolute is less effective. There is a weakness at the heart of the absolute. Fixed things are not flexible and cannot adapt. They either succeed or fail. Well, effects like gravity simply are, they neither succeed nor fail. But strategies have to succeed in a world of shifting and even unpredictable circumstances. In such conditions absolutes are a poor choice. It therefore seems to me that the stubborn preoccupation of many philosophers with the universal rather than the particular is at best misguided, and the implication that only universal truths carry merit and may therefore be relied upon does not match our everyday experience, is not the way we run our ordinary lives, and is not even a valid conclusion. Certainty is not required prior to action, or we would never cross the road for fear of getting run over. Why should the Golden Rule be any different? We don't need it to be backed by an irrefutable divinity, or by the tautology of ethics itself, for it to carry all the necessary weight and authority for it to be sufficiently accepted and applied. The relative has in practice quite as much authority as the universal, and its underpinning justification is that it is on the whole more advantageous. It simply works better.

What about the optics of self-interest?

But doesn't it look bad if I have motives for my actions, won't people dismiss me as selfish? I quite understand that most people are unwilling to acknowledge that they are motivated by self-interest. One of the attractions of codes of conduct is the status people gain from being seen to act in accordance with them. This is true whether that status is selection for heaven in the afterlife, for religious people, or being well thought of by others in this world, for the secular (and the religious). Therefore admitting "secret" considerations of personal advantage would not fit very well. However, how many of us manage to fulfil Kant's idea of the truly moral act, being one which is completely to our disadvantage in every conceivable way? And just because there is some advantage to ourselves, in what way does that invalidate or prevent advantage to others? And what exactly is wrong with a choice being motivated by a calculation of mutual advantage? When I take a job, I expect to get paid and would not do the work otherwise. If I do something without payment, I expect to gain some satisfaction from doing it, even if it is only the satisfaction of knowing I have helped someone, and might not otherwise do it, without any pangs of conscience. Subscribing to an accepted code of conduct is a shortcut way of being acceptable to others, being welcomed and supported where necessary by them rather than being rejected and perhaps threatened by them. The personal advantages of such an outcome are obvious. While ever the subscription cost of adhering to the codes of Society is less than the advantages of membership, there will be a tendency to comply with the rule; otherwise there will be a tendency to rebel. When more and more people rebel, the rules have a tendency to adapt and change. An absolute morality could not do that.

The carrot and stick nature of appeals to particular declarations of morality are indicative. The Bible is full of consequences for moral choice – heaven, eternal bliss and blessings for the compliant; exclusion and perhaps eternal torture for the recalcitrant. This acceptance or rejection is the same in secular society – if you want to be accepted, then you have to be acceptable and subscribe to the moral code of the time. Likewise with the formulation of the criminal law run by states on behalf of societies. The personal nature of these consequences speaks of nothing but self-interest. They are a clear and transparent appeal to self-interest. Why should this be in any way relevant if morality, whether Golden Rule or otherwise, were not fundamentally rooted in self-interest? When the veil is drawn from these abstract concepts what is revealed is the reality masked by the euphemism.

A Copernican Revolution in Morality

These are not cynical observations and are not intended to in any way devalue the worth of morality or subscription to it. Everything is just as it was. We do follow the Golden Rule with the expectation of return, but that is ok – because it is what we all do and it is why we do it. The Golden Rule is not a unilateral commitment, rather it is a mutually unilateral commitment. That may sound like an oxymoron, like Milton's "darkness visible", but I hope carries a real rather than simply a poetic meaning. Crucially, it allows the squaring of that circle – how do you mandate a subjective response, and allow the possibility of Society where all can hope to flourish (better than they otherwise might), while still aiming to maximise their personal advantage. And there is no need to worry: self-interest does not mean selfish.

But there is another advantage. If a moral code were absolute it could not adapt. But the world and circumstances change. An absolute morality has no choice but to fail in circumstances unfavourable to it – so Kant must allow the mad axeman to murder his guest or fail the categorical imperative. Utilitarian chickens must vote for Christmas. The Sun must continue orbiting the Earth. But as Wittgenstein is said to have remarked, "what would it look like if it were the other way round?". The world is and continues to feel the same, but the truth is no longer obscured. An analysis of morality which remains valid in unfavourable circumstances is more worthy of the recognition of philosophy than one which is forced to plead special circumstances to get itself out of trouble. And recognition of its relative rather than absolute nature allows for adaptability without itself failing on ethical grounds or charge of simple convenience.

In a nutshell

Morality, like most things in life, is relative, not absolute; and, contrary to those who consider that self-interest is an impediment to morality, rather it represents its source and motivation.