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Morality is the system of ideas about how people ought to live. It is the set of standards that ought to be followed in order to live a good life.

Morality does not obligate us to an unrealistic standard. Immanuel Kant reminded us that “ought implies can.” Whatever we ought to do, we also are able to do: it is possible to tell the truth, to be loyal, and to care for those in need. These behaviors are not always easy; but they are not impossible.

Of course, people often fail to live up to the standards of morality. If we were each already good, we would not worry much about morality: being good would be what we always do, not what we “ought” to do. But human beings make mistakes, succumb to temptation, and give in to laziness. Some are seriously morally impaired: criminals, psychopaths, and the like. In normal people, moral failure leads to feelings of guilt, recrimination, regret, and remorse. The presence of these feelings implies that there is a moral standard, which we acknowledge as making demands upon us.

Where do such standards come from? It is possible that they are entirely constructed by society – rules foisted upon us by society and incorporated into the conscience or the Freudian superego. Acknowledging this can lead us toward relativism and the idea that morality is simply a cultural artifact. Relativists maintain that normative structures are dependent upon or limited by culture, context, perspective, etc. Relativism is a sort of skepticism, either holding that we cannot know any culturally transcendent norms or maintaining that such transcendent norms do not exist. The problem with relativism is that it provides no way to ground a conversation about morality across cultures or between persons with divergent perspectives. Relativism slips toward subjectivism, which is the solipsistic dead-end of morality.

Since Socrates, moral philosophers have wondered whether there is something objective or real about morality that can help us to avoid such skeptical dead-ends. I am inclined to accept three related ideas of how we might establish some objective content for morality. First, we could look at all of the world’s human cultures and attempt to see if there is some norm or set of norms that is common in these diverse contexts. Second, we could look at human life in its biological, social, and psychological aspects in order to see

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if there are some natural bases, which give transcultural content to morality. Third, we could consider the structure of moral concepts and language.

This last approach is the most philosophical. It is part of the Kantian approach, which holds that moral maxims ought to be understood as postulating universal norms. Since Hegel, however, it is obvious that the formal logic of morality must be filled in with content from society or nature, which drives us back to the previous two approaches.

One worry about these two ideas is they each may fallaciously derive an “ought” from an “is.” However, such a derivation is not always fallacious. The is/ought gap is bridged in discussions of health, for example. A healthy individual behaves and functions like a “normal” individual of the species functions – in light of the ecological niche and physiology of that species. Living beings flourish when they function well as biological, social, and psychological systems. Such a naturalistic account of morality has roots that extend back to Aristotle. The idea has been developed more recently by sociobiology, psychology, and anthropology.

What we learn from these natural sciences is that some basic form of altruism is central to normal human flourishing. Individuals flourish when they take the perspective of other individuals into account. Healthy human individuals behave this way – in widely divergent cultures. We even find altruistic behavior in other species of social animals. A sign of proper brain function and of cognitive and emotional development is the empathetic attunement of the brain/mind along with a more deliberate form of altruistic concern. Social animals ought to be in touch with the feelings of others and take these feelings into account. Those who lack empathy and who fail to develop altruistic concern are deficient, unhealthy, and abnormal.

Here the “ought” of altruism is grounded in the normal function of human societies and social animals in general. Societies and cultures thrive when individual members are empathetic and altruistic. And individuals flourish when they are able to commune with other individuals in cooperative social endeavors. We ought to develop our altruistic and empathetic capacities since these help us to live well – both as individuals and as a species.

Furthermore, the circle of our concern ought to gradually widen, as Peter Singer has argued. We begin by caring about our own friends and family members and aim toward concern for humanity writ large, possibly even moving beyond this toward Buddhist compassion for all sentient beings. This very general account of moral development can be subject to the same criticism that Hegel gave of Kantian morality: it remains vague in terms of content. The mere principle of concern for humanity does not tell us anything concrete about contentious issues such as abortion, euthanasia, or

capital punishment. Different individuals and diverse cultures may have different ways of thinking about these topics. But any moral approach to thinking about these issues would have to begin with some principle of altruistic concern.

Morality is often connected with religion. Religions do command us to observe the Golden Rule, which is an altruistic principle. But religious exhortation is not especially helpful at improving the moral capacities of humankind. We also need to find concrete ways to provide for the material conditions for moral development. Morally healthy individuals develop within thriving moral communities in which there are resources that help people to become physically, emotionally, and psychologically healthy. The key to moral improvement is thus to provide resources that allow for better physical and mental health, which in turn helps us develop empathy and altruistic concern. Unfortunately, poverty – in a variety of senses – plagues humankind: financial, intellectual, and even emotional poverty. Current social conditions often point us in the wrong direction – toward self-interest, greed, and isolation. The result is a growing number of unhappy, unhealthy, and immoral individuals.

Altruistic concern is the key to morality. This is true across cultures and even across species. But scarcity of resources and competition can warp the basic altruism of social animals. The study of morality reminds us to take care to organize our individual and social lives in such a way as to encourage empathy and concern for the well-being of others.

Эндрю Фиала¹

Мораль – это система идей о том, как люди должны жить. Это комплекс стандартов, которым должно следовать для того, чтобы вести достойную (good) жизнь.

Мораль не обязывает нас следовать нереалистичному стандарту. И Кант напоминал нам, что «должен» предполагает «можешь». Что бы мы ни должны были совершать, мы также должны быть в состоянии это совершить: существует возможность говорить истину, быть верным, заботиться о нуждающихся. Такое поведение не всегда легко осуществить, но оно не является невозможным.

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РОССИЙСКАЯ АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК

ИНСТИТУТ ФИЛОСОФИИ

MORALITY

DIVERSITY OF CONCEPTS AND MEANINGS

К 75-летию

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