Philosophia (2006) 34:85–93
DOI 10.1007/s11406-006-9002-3

Morality, Self-Interest, and Two Kinds of Prudential Practical Rationality

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Published online: 12 July 2006

Abstract: In this article it is assumed that human goodness is to be judged with respect to how well one does at practical reasoning. It is acknowledged that (1) there is a difference between moral practical reasoning (MPR) and prudential practical reasoning (PPR) and (2) what these would recommend sometimes conflict. A distinction is then made between absolute PPR and relative PPR and it is argued that doing well at absolute PPR is always consistent with MPR. It is also argued that since it is more reasonable to assess prudential practical rationality in terms of the absolute standard than the relative standard, there is no conflict between the demands of MPR (morality) and PPR (self-interest).

Keywords morality · self-interest · practical reason · Aristotle · virtue ethics

In Bk. I, Ch. 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the characteristic activity of human beings is determinative of their function and that the goodness of human beings, like other things, is to be determined with respect to how well they perform their function. He goes on to maintain that the characteristic activity of human beings, and consequently their function, is rational activity. Thus, according to Aristotle, the goodness of human beings is to be judged with respect to how well they do at reasoning. He goes on to distinguish between theoretical reason, reason employed in the pursuit of knowledge as in the arts and sciences, and practical reason, reason employed in decision-making leading to choice and action. It is a source of some controversy as to what role Aristotle believes these two types of reasoning play in living a good life. Does one need to do well at both of these or one of these? If the latter, then which, theoretical or practical reasoning, is needed? One common interpretation takes it that Aristotle believes the very best kind of life requires doing well at both but one can have a good, though less than the best, life without doing well at theoretical reasoning.[1] In what follows I will assume that this interpretation of Aristotle is

[1] For a defense of this reading of Aristotle, see Kraut (1989).

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correct. I will also assume Aristotle is correct in maintaining that the goodness of human beings is to be judged with respect to how well they do at practical reasoning.[2]

In this essay I will distinguish between two kinds of practical reasoning, prudential practical reasoning (PPR) and moral practical reasoning (MPR), and I will consider a certain sort of puzzle which challenges the idea of judging the merits of people in terms of the quality of their practical reasoning. This puzzle is ultimately related to the ancient problem of morality and self-interest, a problem that Plato wrestles with at length in the *Republic*. Ultimately, I want to recognize another distinction within the domain of PPR, namely the distinction between *absolute* and *relative* PPR. I will argue that from the perspective of absolute PPR there really is no conflict between the demands of morality and self-interest, and consequently the puzzle raised about judging the merit of human beings in terms of their practical rationality will also be solved.[3]

Two Kinds of Practical Reasoning and Their Goals

Practical reason is reason employed in the context of decision-making. It is the reasoning we use in choosing what is to be done. As noted above, I want to distinguish between two kinds of practical reasoning – prudential and moral. Prudential practical reasoning (PPR) is the kind of reasoning employed by human beings when their decisions are based purely on considerations of self-interest. Moral practical reasoning (MPR) involves, among other things, treating the interests of others as equally important as one's own, if not more so. I define MPR in this way because there is a kind of decision-making, practical reasoning, that involves taking the interests of others into account but doing so only because of the way their interests might effect one's own interests. To reason in this way is not to engage in moral thinking, for it is simply taking into account the interests of others for one's own benefit. Thus, this kind of concern for others is purely prudential. One does not engage in MPR unless one treats the interests of others as equally, if not more, important as one's own.

Insofar as there are two kinds of practical reasoning one might wonder which kind, if either, is more important. Is doing well at PPR sufficient for doing well at practical reasoning? Or must one also be good at MPR? Additionally, it might be wondered whether doing well at MPR is sufficient. Also, must one be good at both to be good at practical reasoning? If so, how should we prioritize them? That is, when should decisions be based solely on self-interest and when not? These kinds of questions need to be addressed when dealing with the issue of the criteria of good practical reasoning.

Now, as noted above, if we are to determine what the criteria of good practical reasoning are, then we must get clear about the end or purpose of practical reasoning. In PPR the end or purpose is to promote one's own happiness. That is, when we engage in PPR we are using our reason so as to make decisions which best serve the attainment of our own happiness. In MPR the promotion of the agent's own happiness is not the only consideration, for in MPR the agent's interests are given equal, or less, consideration than the

[2] Certainly this assumption that the goodness of human lives is to be judged with respect to how well they do at practical reasoning is controversial. The very idea that the distinctive activity of human beings is rational activity and that we can use this as some foundation for normative judgments about human being has been challenged in the literature. See, for instance, Suits (1974) and Kitcher (1999). For recent defenses of this view see Hurka (1993) and Byron (2000).

[3] For different approaches to the topic of morality and self-interest, see Plato (1993); Gauthier (1967); Kavka (1984); and Singer (1993).

interests of others. The goal of MPR is to make ethically acceptable decisions. As such the goal of MPR is to arrive at decisions that are all things considered (ATC) best while giving equal consideration to the interests of others and respecting the rights of others. I include this point about respecting the rights of others, because if moral reasoning simply involved determining what was best while giving equal consideration to the interests of others it might boil down to nothing other than crude utilitarian calculations in which the rights of individuals might be given little or no consideration. But certainly moral reasoning involves more than this. For it is obvious that even if the greater happiness could be served by randomly selecting one person from the community to be fed to the lions for our entertainment, doing so would be wrong because it would violate the rights of that individual and rights cannot be justifiably overridden on the grounds of entertainment value.

Assuming that I am right about all of this, it would then follow that one does well at PPR when one reasons in a way that is likely to promote one's own happiness, and one does well at MPR when one reasons in a way that is likely to lead to decisions that are ATC best while taking into account the rights of others and giving equal consideration to their interests. Before going further I want to make a clarification about pursuing interests, or happiness, whether one's own or that of others. When promoting the interests of oneself or others through either PPR or MPR the goal is long-term interests or happiness. The point is not to simply make decisions that will lead to great joy tonight but misery forever after. Rather, the point is to reason such that one's decisions are most likely to promote the happiest life or lives.

The Issue of Conflict between PPR and MPR and Two Kinds of PPR

Given the distinction I have drawn between prudential and moral practical reasoning, one problem that arises is the potential for conflict between these. For sometimes it certainly seems as though what is best for one to do from the prudential perspective may not be what is best from the moral perspective. For instance, suppose a man of little conscience who very much wants to have a motorcycle but cannot afford one sees that he can easily steal one and almost certainly not get caught. It may well be that from the moral point of view he should not do this, but from the prudential point of view, especially if he is not troubled by his conscience, he might really be happier by stealing the motorcycle. Here it certainly looks as though the demands of PPR and MPR pull in opposite directions. Thus, it might be wondered what rationality requires of us in such cases. What is the good person, the person who does well at practical reasoning, going to do in this case if he acts in a manner consistent with his nature? Or is it the case that as long as his decision is well-made in accordance with one or the other of these two conceptions of practical reason he will do well with respect to rationality and consequently act in a manner consistent with the good human being?

It could be argued that any conflict between the demands of MPR and PPR is only apparent and not real. For instance, it could be said that it is always prudent to do what morality requires of us so as not to suffer the negative consequences that might arise from wrongdoing, such as a pained conscience, social ostracism, and/or punishment. However, at least when the point is made in this way, it simply doesn't seem plausible. For there are some people who are not especially troubled by doing what is morally wrong and who can foresee that the likelihood of being caught in a particular wrong deed is so slim that engagement in wrongdoing will sometimes be justified from the perspective of PPR. Going back to the example above, recall that he is not troubled by his conscience and suppose he knows, or at least has very good reason to believe, he won't suffer punishment or ostracism.

A more plausible approach to confronting the problem of conflicts between the demands of PPR and MPR might have us focus more on issues of moral education. It could be pointed out that not only are we rational animals, but we are also social animals, meaning that we are the sorts of creatures that typically live in community with one another. Typically within these communities we are involved in familial, friendship, romantic, and work relations with others and these relationships help us satisfy a number of basic needs, such as the needs for food, clothing, shelter, respect, love, recognition, etc. Unless these needs are met, living a happy or fulfilling life will be rather difficult. Thus, it is typically the case that the health of one's relation to the communities to which one belongs plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which the basic needs required for a happy life are met. Generally speaking, people do not want to befriend, love, work with the unjust, the dishonest, the cowardly, etc. Since failure to exhibit moral virtue often leads to being shunned within one's community, such failure poses a serious threat to one's future happiness.

Given that such is the case if you were raising a child then you would want that child to possess the moral virtues. For in possessing the moral virtues the child is most likely to lead a happy life. It is in the best interest of the child to be raised in such a way that he/she ends up with a full complement of the virtues, because anything short of this increases his/her chances of being socially ostracized and/or punished, thereby threatening his/her chances at happiness.

What I am suggesting here is that it is in each of our interests to possess the virtues because having them makes us valued members of the communities in which we live. When we lack these virtues we are more likely to be shunned from such communities, thereby losing the valuable benefits they confer upon us and threatening our prospects for happiness. Insofar as this is the case there is a very real sense in which the man in our example cannot be acting rationally in doing what is morally wrong. Looking at things from the perspective of a rational person starting out in life and concerned with his own happiness, we would want to possess the virtues. In this sense the possession of the virtues is prudentially rational. But possession of the virtues demands that they be exhibited under the right circumstances. Thus, assuming for the moment that justice and/or some other virtue(s) requires that the man resist stealing the motorcycle, there is a very real sense in which PPR and MPR require the same thing. Similar things could be said for any of a myriad array of other examples in which MPR and PPR seem to conflict.

I do not intend to suggest that the man in our example would pose a significant threat to his own happiness if he stole the motorcycle. To the contrary, since I'm having us suppose he has little conscience and he very much wants a motorcycle, he probably will be happier by violating the norms of MPR. But he can only be seen as being happier in this choice if we first recognize that he has already fallen short of the demands of PPR. Only someone who lacks certain virtues, such as justice, could be happy in this choice or perhaps even give the choice of stealing any serious consideration. There is a certain sense in which the person who would seriously consider stealing the motorcycle already exhibits a certain lack of virtue. But someone who lacks virtues in this way already fails to live up to the demands of PPR in the sense that any rational self-interested person starting out in life would want a full complement of the virtues. Let us call looking at the situation from this perspective looking at it from the perspective of 'absolute PPR.' This perspective may be contrasted with the perspective of *relative* PPR. To look at things from the latter perspective is to look at what it would be in an agent's interest to do given the sort of person he is, given the sort of character traits he has, now. In contrast looking at things from the former perspective, the perspective of *absolute* PPR, is looking at what it would be in an agent's interest to do if he had begun his

life in a manner consistent with the rational pursuit of self-interest, in a manner which involves the inculcation of virtue as the most reasonable means to a happy life.

What I am suggesting is that looked at from the perspective of relative PPR, where we take into account who he is now – the sort who lacks a conscience and who would seriously consider stealing – it is prudentially rational for him to choose to steal the motorcycle. But from the perspective of absolute PPR – the perspective in which we consider what it would be reasonable to do had the person started life with a prudentially wise full complement of the virtues – it would not be prudentially rational for him to choose to steal it, for such a choice would not be consistent with his values and would consequently result in a pained conscience. Indeed, there is a very real sense in which if he had a full complement of the virtues he wouldn't even give any serious or real consideration to stealing the motorcycle.

Having said all of this, the question naturally arises as to which perspective is more important in assessing the rationality of the agent. Can we say that an agent falls short of the demands of PPR if she falls short of *absolute* PPR, but not *relative* PPR? Or is living up to the demands of relative PPR always sufficient for meeting the demands of prudential rationality?

In answer to these questions I would have to say that the prudential practical rationality of persons should be judged from the perspective of absolute PPR. To see why this is the correct perspective from which to judge we should consider other areas in which we pass judgment and/or give honors to people. For instance consider athletics. Suppose someone was a leading contender to win the gold medal in Olympic figure skating, and suppose that for one reason or another she failed to train adequately during the six months leading up to the Olympic games. Consequently, she doesn't do well in the Olympic figure skating competition. We don't care that she failed to train adequately. We don't give her a prize for having done well relative to her poor training. No, what we do is award and recognize competitors for their accomplishment and this is not judged relative to their preparation. Rather, it is judged relative to the ideals of good figure skating. Those skaters who come closest to these ideals are the ones who win. Analogously, when a student waits until the night before the final exam to study and she does poorly on it, we don't grade her relative to how she prepared. Rather we judge her in terms of what she knows. Indeed, in both of these examples we might say that "So and so did well relative to her preparation," but this is clearly different from saying she did well.

Judgments concerning the quality of one's PPR should be similar. When I ask how someone does at PPR I don't want to know how he does relative to who he is now, rather I want to know whether he makes decisions in a manner that is most likely to lead a human being towards a fulfilling/happy life. While it might make someone happier today to engage in certain immoral behaviors because he has over time become the sort to be made happy through these means, it does not mean that he makes decisions in a manner that is most likely to lead a person towards a happy life. Such a person only reasons well relative to the kind of person he is today, but the kind of person he is today simply may not be capable of doing well at PPR. Just as the skater who is poorly prepared simply may not be capable of skating well.

If I am right about all of this, it suggests that to do well at PPR involves doing well at MPR. When one realizes that to do well at PPR is not to make decisions relative to who or what one has become but to decide in accordance with the standards of absolute PPR, and when one sees that to make decisions in this way is to decide in the manner of the virtuous person, then it becomes apparent that there is no conflict between the demands of PPR and MPR.

This, of course, is not to say that doing what morality requires never involves sacrificing one's own happiness. My view allows that this will be a common phenomenon, especially among those who have failed to become virtuous. Desiring what morality prohibits is a sign that one falls short of virtue, but people can have such desires and still act rightly, exhibiting what Aristotle calls 'enkrasia' or strength of will.[4]

Is it Better to Look Virtuous or Be Virtuous?

I have argued that doing well at PPR involves doing well at MPR. In support of this I maintained that possessing the virtues and making decisions in accordance with them is the best way to improve one's chances at living a happy life, since failure to live in this way increases one's chance of losing the support of the communities of which one is a member and which provide various things essential to a happy or fulfilling life. At this point a critical reader might wonder whether it is true that the best means of attaining a happy life really does involve possessing the virtues. It might be argued that it is better to look virtuous but to be well trained in getting what one wants while looking like this.

Here we are faced with essentially the same challenge that Socrates faces in Plato's *Republic*. In reply to this problem Socrates argues that virtue is its own reward. He says the virtue of justice demands the harmonious functioning of one's soul, such that each of its elements – reason, spirit, and desire – does its proper work, not interfering in the proper work of the other elements. Since this harmonious state of the soul presents a situation of contentment or inner peace, Socrates sees virtue as the key to a happy life and believes it is its own reward. Implicit in Socrates' argument is that any state of character short of virtue involves some malfunction of the soul and/or its elements. Such malfunctioning is felt as a state of discord, breeding unhappiness in the soul of the person who lacks virtue.

I don't find this solution to the problem very plausible. In the end there are just too many bad people that sleep well at night, i.e., it is all too common to find people who lack virtue but are nonetheless happy. Think of the many people who are ignorant of what it is right to do and thus act wrongly, believing all the while that they act rightly. Surely, many of these people sleep well at night.

The more reasonable solution to the central problem of the *Republic* is to note that the cunning, self-serving egoist who appears virtuous is always more likely to suffer as a consequence of his being such than is the man of virtue. Usually such selfish types acting under the guise of virtue are found out, and when this happens they are just as open to the misfortunes of anyone else who is caught in wrongdoing. Given that such is the case, a loving parent contemplating whether to raise his child as the cunning egoist or a person of virtue would reasonably opt to make his child virtuous. Thus, in reply to the objection I argue that it is in each of our self-interests to possess the virtues and consequently to reason in accordance with them. Like Socrates, I believe it is in our self-interest to be virtuous, but the rationale I provide for this claim is different.

Is it Better to Be Truly Virtuous or to Possess the Virtues of the Community?

Another possible objection to my position might involve reflection on the fact that not all communities agree on the nature of right and wrong. If one is raised to be truly virtuous in a society with a misguided morality, then one might be led to suffer on account of one's virtue.

[4] For Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia*, weakness of will, and *enkrasia*, strength of will, see his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VII.

For instance, consider a white man being raised to be truly virtuous in a society in which black people are enslaved. Since slavery is unjust, such a virtuous person may well be obligated to speak out and protest against this slavery, and such protests might well result in his suffering in various ways.

The preceding example lists just one of the many ways in which being truly virtuous might lead to one's suffering because of the conflicting moral attitudes of one's society. Given this possibility it could be argued that a loving parent should raise his child not to be truly virtuous but to possess the recognized virtues of his society. Correspondingly, it could be argued that our self-interest would best be served not by becoming truly virtuous but by possessing the virtues/moral values of our society.

Contrary to what I maintain, here it is being argued that it is not consistent with prudential practical rationality to be virtuous, rather one should possess the virtues of one's culture even if the morality of one's culture is bad in some or many respects. The principle point made in support of this criticism is that when one is truly virtuous and living in a society with a misguided morality then one is likely to suffer on account of this.

It *is* true that a truly virtuous person living in a society with a misguided morality can be led to suffer as a consequence of this. But I would note that there is some vagueness in this point. Is the point that true virtue in such circumstances would lead to (A) a lifetime of suffering or to (B) some suffering? (A) is very unlikely. Most virtuous people living in societies with a bad morality, such as a racist or sexist community, lead lives that are for the most part happy and/or fulfilling. If they are led to suffer for their virtue, these are usually just temporary periods of ostracism and/or persecution in lives that are on the whole happy.

In pressing the criticism, it could be argued that given that possessing true virtue in a society with a misguided morality will lead to these moments of ostracism and/or persecution and given that some of the truly virtuous may suffer a *lot* of ostracism and/or persecution, it is still more prudentially rational not to be truly virtuous but to simply possess the virtues of one's community.

In reply to this a couple of points are in order. First, it is important to note that true virtue requires taking pleasure in doing what is right. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle rightly notes that virtues are *settled* states of character. As such, in exhibiting the virtues one must not find it difficult to do the right thing. One must not struggle to overcome the temptation to do what is wrong. This, of course, leads him to draw a distinction between the strong willed person and the temperate person in Bk. VII, Ch. 7. The strong willed person is able to resist sensual temptation but he finds it difficult to do so. Thus, according to Aristotle, he falls short of virtue. In contrast the temperate person does not find it difficult to resist sensual temptations. Thus, his resistance proceeds from a settled state of character, meaning that his resistance proceeds from the *virtue* of temperance.[5] The significance of this for our present purposes is that the pleasure derived from the virtuous performance of right action should go some way to countering the discomfort and/or disappointment derived from any social ostracism or persecution one receives for doing what is right.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is crucial to consider what else is required by prudential rationality. It is important to note that prudential rationality would have us develop our intellectual skills, our knowledge, and critical thinking capacities. These need to be developed in a person as the best means to his becoming a productive and self-sufficient member of society and to empower him to deal with the changing social, economic, environmental, etc. conditions of life. As such the development of a person's knowledge and

[5] Julia Annas does a very nice job of explicating the Aristotelian idea that virtue requires taking pleasure in right action. See Annas (1999).

intellectual capacities is needed to increase one's chance at living a happy and fulfilling life. However, what is important to note here is that once one develops such knowledge and intellectual and critical thinking skills a likely consequence of this is that one will come to recognize the bad morality of his society for what it is. Consequently, if one was raised in accordance with this bad morality *and* given the kinds of knowledge and intellectual capacities that prudential rationality requires, then one will likely be led to the conclusion that he has bad character. Such a disturbing realization would force a decision upon this person. He must either continue on living with bad moral character, perhaps engaging in some kind of self-deception to ease the pain of the knowledge of his badness, *or* he can decide to change, making improvements upon his character.

My second point here is that since prudential rationality demands the development of one's intellect and knowledge, this means the person who is being prudentially rational is not at all likely to lead a happy life unless he develops truly good moral character. For unless he does this, he will likely be forced into a life of self-deceptions intended to mask the fact that he is bad. Such self-deceptions are likely to breed unhappiness for him in the long run. In contrast to this the person who is truly virtuous in a culture with a misguided morality is likely to lead a happy life, even though he does run the risk of facing some ostracism and/or persecution at the hands of others. But again facing some persecution and/or ostracism does not mean that one's life is likely to be bad on the whole. Further, as noted above, virtue involves taking pleasure in right action and this too should provide some solace to those subjected to any persecution or ostracism.

For all of these reasons, it is more consistent with prudential rationality to be truly virtuous as opposed to adopting the virtues of a morally misguided society. For, as I have argued here, the prospects for happiness when embracing a bad morality are lower than the prospects when living a truly virtuous life.

Conclusion

I have tried to answer a certain kind of objection that might be posed to the idea of determining the merit of people in terms of the quality of their reasoning. It could be argued that since there are two kinds of practical reasoning, PPR and MPR, and since they do not demand the same things of us in every situation, it follows that very different kinds of behavior would be endorsed by this idea. Indeed, the objection could even be made that not only this, but given that PPR supports doing immoral deeds when it is very likely that one can get away with it, this theory of human goodness endorses immoral conduct. In reply to this kind of objection I drew a distinction between absolute PPR and relative PPR, and I argued that while looking at things from the perspective of relative PPR would lead one to endorse immoral conduct as consistent with human goodness, looking at things from the perspective of absolute PPR would not. I also argued that since judgments of the merits of an agent's PPR should be made from the perspective of absolute PPR, which demands that we attain and act in accordance with the virtues, it follows that there really is no conflict between the demands of PPR and MPR nor does excellent PPR allow for immoral conduct.

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