Ethics as Rational Reasoning With Granular Judgements About the World

by Sven Nilsen, 2018

In this paper I argue that ethics is a kind of higher order abstract path semantical logic using granular judgements about the world, and therefore a form of language subject to rational reasoning.

The word "judgement" is here used as a distinctive concept from "statement". They are not the same.

A statement is a kind of functional relationship used to determines some variable from something:

$$x : [g] \ b$$

This is the path semantical notation for a sub-type. The syntax of path semantics is used to highlight what objects are thought about in contrast to what is said about them. In equation form this is written:

$$g(x) = b$$

Here, one uses a function `g` to say something about `x` that when used as input to `g` it returns `b`.

For example:

$$(x, y) : [\text{number\_of\_people\_with\_skin\_cancer}] \ n$$

$$\text{number\_of\_people\_with\_skin\_cancer} : \text{country} \times \text{year} \rightarrow \text{nat}$$

As a statement, the concept above is just used to establish some semantics which automatically gets attached additional meanings as a formalized concept in path semantics. Path semantics is a theory of how to build up concepts and reason with them. Abstract path semantics uses context-overloading.

However, one can not say that a statement leads automatically to some kind of judgement. In one way, one can say that a statements determines some value, so it is a judgement of that value being determined. This is using the word "judgement" as identical to "determine some value". The other way to think about judgements is as something distinctive from statements. With other words, there is something to be said about judgements that is not true for statements in general.

The idea is that when showing people statements, they can make judgements that are not directly derivable from the information presented, but yet has very useful content for rational reasoning in a larger context.

Hence, people use statements as ways to organize their ethical worldview, by supplying additional information to statements that is derived from higher order learning about the world.

My argument is that ethics builds on principles as the following example:

(x, y) : [number_of_people_with_skin_cancer] 1000
(x, y) : [number_of_people_with_skin_cancer] 1000000

Without any knowledge of the country of the year, one would prefer there to be `1000` (a thousand) people with skin cancer compared to `1000000` (a million) people with skin cancer.

Ideally, one would prefer:

(x, y) : [number_of_people_with_skin_cancer] 0

People do not need to know a lot about the state of the world, how it is governed, or how the physics work in details, in order to make the judgement that roughly says "I want less skin cancer for people".

One does not make the claim that this is a judgement that never changes when adding more information. On the other hand, it is precisely the lack of information that that makes judgements useful. In a world with a lot of information available, a person has to make good use of the information that it is within the capacity of being extracting from the world. This makes a person targeting specific information and easily becomes biased, but considering that people need to act while having insufficient time to think and learn there is no better alternative.

A granular judgement is a judgement about a statement that "contains more than one thing". People do not usually think about a single theft or robbery as a necessary very bad thing, if it happens in isolation, infrequently, no one got hurt and the victim did not felt the loss. When considering large amounts of theft happening frequently, many people got hurt, the victim depended on the property stolen, one gets this feeling "something is very bad" without needing to know specifically what kind of situation one is talking about, which place or which time. When such statements are said about larger quantities (the granular form of the statement) then people get more confident in either positive or negative direction.

It is not even necessary to be able to predict the future in great detail. People can predict that when something feels wrong, they expect some bad things to happen, even if they can not express what precisely will happen. They are also aware that they could be wrong, the future could turn out to be better, or it could turn out to be worse. At the same time, it depends on how one looks at the world, so even if the future turned out to be bad in some sense, a person might get more positive judgements from other sources or from training themselves to think in a different way about the environment.

On the other hand, the number `2` can itself not be rationally judged in the same way. People have their favorite numbers, but might be considered just having some fun or some kind of superstitious beliefs about certain numbers being magical. This is part of "ethical common sense", a field worth studying.

In order for a granular judgement to be used rationally, it must "say something about the world".

A country and year is a way to locate something happening in some place at some time that takes place in the world. The world can be imaginary or hypothetical, but it has to relate to the form of existence that people have in order to be considered useful from an ethical perspective. People training themselves to make better ethical judgements using hypothetical worlds could be considered ethical behavior, but abstract worlds or concepts can not in themselves relate to ethics: It has to be about the world. This concludes my argument about how one can view ethics as a form of rational reasoning.