

Happiness and Morality

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UWC2101L Conditions of Happiness

November 2018

Introduction

The relationship between happiness and morality has been heavily debated since ancient times. In the modern era, this debate can be exemplified by a series of academic exchanges in response to *The Happy Immoralist*. In this article, Cahn (2004a) portrays a fictitious character, Fred, who craves wealth, fame and a reputation for probity. Despite utilising unscrupulous means to achieve them, Fred lives his life as he wants without being discovered as an immoral person. Cahn argues that an immoral individual, like Fred, is well able to experience happiness as our judgement of morality has no impact on his personal happiness. Several other academics, however, have expressed their vehement objections to Cahn's supposition of a "happy immoralist". For instance, Jeffrie Murphy (2004) wrote *The Unhappy Immoralist* in an attempt to reason why we cannot divorce morality from the equation of happiness. However, in the exchange between different sides of the debate, the terms "morality" and "happiness" do not have commonly accepted and unambiguous definitions. Scholars on both sides seem fixated on taking an absolute position, either claiming morality has no bearing on happiness or rejecting outright the possibility of an immoral person being happy. In addition, many seem to have neglected the intrinsic impact of moral actions on an individual's happiness.

I believe that it would be too absolute to claim that morality has no influence on happiness, or that an immoral person, as judged by prevailing moral norms, cannot possibly be happy. In this paper, I would contend that, while the pursuit of happiness is not in conflict with morality in general, it is also not necessarily aligned with morality. Moreover, moral actions are more likely to result in happiness whereas immoral ones are often to the detriment of one's happiness. To set the basis of our discussion, I shall first propose a flexible conception of morality, so as to allow

for diversity yet facilitate meaningful discussions. Also, to better characterise happiness, I will refer to Martin Seligman's concept of positive psychology, as propounded in his book *Flourish*, to allow for a broader definition of well-being. Then, I will examine in closer detail the mutual influence or the lack thereof between morality and individual happiness, both intrinsically and extrinsically. I hope that by shedding light on how moral actions can intrinsically boost one's happiness, this paper will provide the reader with more motivation to choose the moral path in the pursuit of happiness.

Section I: What is morality?

To set the basis for subsequent discussion on the relationship between morality and happiness, I shall define morality as certain codes of conduct accepted by a community, comprising a set of universal moral values with each society having an extended set of varying values. I would first elaborate on the notion of universal morality in this definition. Many philosophers favour the idea that there are objective, universal moral values which can adequately apply to all human beings regardless of individual and cultural differences. Moral universalism claims that "moral statements follow from general moral principles that apply to everyone and apply everywhere" (Quintelier, Smet & Fessler, 2013, p. 211). There is certainly some truth to it, as there are some values, such as kindness and respect, which most human beings will instinctively agree are desirable. In fact, despite substantial diversity among various cultures, there are a few universal moral values that have been promoted by all major civilisations and religions across human history. A group of psychology researchers, Kinnier, Kernes and Dautheribes (2000), generated *A Short List of Universal Moral Values* from searching and comparing well-known literature and documents representing different cultures and religions,

such as the Bible, Analects and so on. If a value is found to exist in all cultures, it is considered to be universal. According to this list, responsibility, caring for others and respect for life are among some of the moral values applicable to the entire human community. Indeed, considering that *Homo sapiens* is a highly social species, our moral norms seem to stem from the need to cooperate with others in order to survive. Moral norms serve as common cooperative strategies to facilitate reciprocity, preventing us from participating in activities that inflict harm and jeopardise cooperation. Furthermore, all societies across time periods and cultures punish offenders of these moral norms (e.g. through law enforcement) at significant costs (e.g. spending huge sums of money building prisons) even though inflicting punishment does not bring about any immediate benefit¹. This seemingly irrational behaviour is a manifestation of the societal need to uphold moral norms, exemplified by universal values such as respect for life, as safeguards against attempts to undermine interpersonal cooperation. Therefore, it is unreasonable to deny that universal morality does exist and is binding on most members of humanity.

In addition, this definition allows for universality and diversity to coexist. On one hand, it is evident that certain traits are considered desirable in almost all communities. On the other hand, to claim that all human beings share the same morality blatantly disregards inter-cultural variations in moral norms that have been empirically observed. Thus, my definition of morality encompasses extended values which differ amongst different societies. For instance, arranged marriage is a norm in parts of Ethiopia (Prinz, 2011, pp. 1-2) whereas it is considered a gross violation of personal autonomy by most modern societies. Also, various cultures may interpret a

¹ Dr. Bart Van Wassenhove raised this point during the writing conference.

“universal value” differently. The value of respect for life, for example, prohibits any deliberate killing in many cultures. However, it used to be commonplace for Inuits to practice selective infanticide due to resource scarcity in the tundra (ibid.) as they did not want infants to suffer from starvation. Hence, a flexible definition that incorporates some elements of moral universalism grounded in our common human roots while allowing for variations arising from sociocultural factors will be more adequately applicable to most individuals in the world.

I believe that this definition adequately captures what morality entails and is useful for a meaningful discussion to be established for the following reasons. Firstly, it is imperative to acknowledge some form of objective morality. This is because a totally subjective conception of morality would mean that everyone’s actions are justifiable by one’s own standards of morality. Consequently, the discussion on whether an immoral person can be happy is rendered meaningless, since it can always be argued that one is moral by one’s own standards. Thus, certain objective metrics of morality agreed by most people are needed. Secondly, I grant that even within cultures, different groups of individuals have disparate moral norms. For example, the members of a cult may completely disregard any “universal moral value” and take joy in taking the lives of innocent people. However, rare cases of exception like this do not render my incorporation of universal moral values useless, since we are concerned only with what the majority of people, living under well-functioning value systems in their own societies, view as moral norms and how these norms in turn influence people’s happiness. Hence, after establishing what morality means using a broad, flexible definition, we are now able to move on to the next section on whether the pursuit of happiness aligns with morality.

Section II: Is an individual's pursuit of happiness aligned with morality?

I would like to first present the reasons why, when one partakes in actions that increase one's happiness or well-being, these actions are generally in tandem with morality. This is because the process of increasing one's individual happiness or well-being often involves building positive relationships, finding meaning in life and engaging in fulfilling activities. Seligman (2011, p. 16) proposes that well-being comprises five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement². Each element contributes to individual well-being and is pursued by people for its own sake. In pursuing greater well-being, one's actions are likely to be for the sake of some of these elements. This generally requires one to be moral, or at least conform to desirable social norms. Building positive relationships, for instance, requires one to be respectful and caring towards others, and reciprocate goodwill with kindness. The notion of meaning, albeit largely personal, involves some element of morality as it demands commitment to something greater than oneself and responsibility to sustain projects of worth, both of which are universally considered as moral values (Kinnier, et al., 2000, pp. 9-10). For example, an activist may find meaning in advocating for environment conservation, which she finds worthwhile and is determined to pursue for its own sake despite occasional setbacks. Meaning, in this case, contributes to her well-being. Also, in pursuing meaning, she recognises the existence of purpose in life which transcends the self, and willingly undertakes responsibility for the betterment of the community. These conform to the descriptions of universal moral values put forward by Kinnier et al. In addition, engagement, positive emotions and achievement do not necessarily elicit either moral or immoral actions in general (exceptions will be discussed later). Thus, they can be

² Positive emotion refers to pleasant feelings and general life satisfaction. Engagement is attained when one passionately participates in an activity such that thought and feeling seem absent. Relationships entail connecting with people such as families and friends. Meaning is defined as belonging to and serving something that one believes is bigger than the self. Lastly, achievement or accomplishment is when people pursue success, winning, mastery and excellence in a domain of their lives. (Seligman, 2011, pp. 16-24)

considered morally neutral in this regard. Nevertheless, a rational person would be unlikely to cross the boundary of morality to pursue these elements of well-being, for this action may have greater repercussions that jeopardise other aspects of well-being. These may include strained relationships with other members of the community, resulting in stress, anxiety or even loss of freedom in cases where laws are breached. Thus, the pursuit of happiness by an individual is generally aligned with morality.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that the pursuit of happiness and the adherence to morality are ultimately different aspects of human life. It is definitely possible that the pursuit of happiness contradicts morality in some circumstances where one's self-interest clashes with prevailing moral principles. While human beings are equipped with the remarkable capacity for social cooperation, the norm of self-interest prescribes that people pursue their self-interest to maximise positive wellbeing (Miller, 1999, p. 1053). Morality serves as the collective attempt of a well-functioning society at curbing the unbridled expression of self-interest by individuals so as to preserve the collective basic interests of every member of the community. However, under the circumstances where the cooperative mode fails to address the needs and desires of an individual, immoral actions may be adopted to further one's self-interest for the sake of well-being. A prime example is the physician³ depicted by Cahn (2004b) in *The Happy Immoralist: A Sequel*. Since the physician's life will be effectively shattered if he does not murder the stewardess, murdering her will be the only rational choice to maximise his well-being given his

³ In *The Happy Immoralist: A Sequel*, Cahn (2004b) portrays a highly respected physician who makes the mistake of embarking on an affair with an unmarried airline stewardess. When he tries to break off this relationship, she threatens to expose his adultery, thus wrecking his marriage and career. His brother offers to help him by arranging for the stewardess to be murdered without any danger that the crime will be traced to either the physician or his brother.

current circumstances. Thus, human nature may lead one to commit immoral acts especially when there is a conflict of interests. However, it should be noted here that the attempt to pursue happiness does not equate actually attaining happiness. In the case of the physician, considering that he upholds moral principles in all his actions except for this incident, he will most likely feel a sense of guilt for taking the life of a human being. Compounded with the apprehension that this incident may get discovered, the act of killing will not boost his current happiness level. All we can say is that he may be comparatively happier than he would have been if he had chosen not to murder her. Thus, the fact that people's pursuit of happiness is at times in conflict with adhering to moral standards does not mean that they will truly achieve and sustain happiness in the future. The impact of doing immoral actions on one's happiness will be discussed in more details in the following section.

Section III: The impact of moral and immoral actions on happiness

Generally, moral actions most likely result in happiness. Morality forms the basic rules for interactions between human beings that allow for constructive cooperation. Moral values, especially those accepted universally, mostly involve promoting and protecting others' interests. Values like honesty, compassion and gratitude center around the idea of *caring for others*, as they directly benefit those at the receiving end of such actions. In fact, respect and caring for others has been shown to be a core universal moral value (Kinnier, et al., 2000, p. 10). So, how does doing moral actions link to happiness? Empirical evidence from research indicates that people who care more about others tend to be happier (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 126). Psychologist Michael Argyle (1999, p. 365) reports that among leisure activities, only dancing generates higher "levels of joy" than volunteer and charity work. In addition, scientists have found that

“doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise” (Seligman, 2011, p. 20). Indeed, millions of years of evolution have written cooperation into our genes, such that cooperation is intrinsically rewarding (Tabibnia & Lieberman, 2007, p. 91). To extend this idea to morality, people naturally experience contentment and fulfilment when exhibiting values of compassion, gratitude and caring for others, engendering positive emotions. All these contribute to individual well-being. Therefore, on the whole, conforming to moral standards generally augments one’s happiness or well-being.

The reasoning so far concerns the case when an individual intrinsically identifies with the prevailing moral values. However, some may argue that one does not necessarily need to be intrinsically moral (in other words, identify with morality and believe that it is right to act morally) in order to achieve well-being. In fact, one just needs to appear moral⁴ in the eyes of other members of the community in order to reap the extrinsic benefits of being accepted by society, avoiding ostracism and punishment, and building positive relationships with others in order to achieve well-being. In response to this view, on one hand, I would argue that it is extremely difficult and risky to consistently pretend to be moral for an extended duration of time. In the event that one’s true nature eventually gets revealed, one will have to suffer undesirable consequences and one’s past seemingly “moral” acts will be nullified. For example, if a celebrity appears sincere and charitable in helping the underprivileged by frequently participating in volunteer activities, he will likely acquire a reputation for compassion. However, he does so in order to boost his influence and fame without actually caring about the needy. If his true attitude towards charity is discovered, for example, through a leaked conversation with his friend in which he expresses contempt towards people whom he has “helped”, his true intention of

⁴ Dr. Bart Van Wassenhove raised this point during the writing conference.

engaging in charitable acts will certainly be questioned by the public. His social relationships, as well as his career, will most likely be devastated by this revelation. As a result, the act of faking morality in the pursuit of well-being involves substantial risks, accompanied by a constant feeling of anxiety which is also a significant bane to one's well-being. On the other hand, if individuals partake in moral actions without fail, even if they initially do not identify with such values at all, there will be no way for an observer to judge whether they are "genuinely moral" or just trying to appear moral since all their actions are aligned with moral norms. In this case, why can we not say that they are in accordance with morality? This echoes Aristotle's view in *Nicomachean Ethics* that moral virtues occur because of habits, and humans acquire moral virtues through habituation over time (Book II, 1102b). Therefore, committing oneself to moral acts, even when one is not "genuinely moral" initially, will eventually inculcate morality into this individual, making him or her a truly moral person over time.

Nevertheless, I grant that it is never guaranteed that moral actions always result in happiness. Simply adhering to moral standards may lead one to unhappiness or even suffering. For example, Nelson Mandela is widely regarded as a virtuous man who strived unwaveringly to end Apartheid in South Africa and bring justice to all members of his community. In following his ideal for the greater good of those in his community, he was unfortunately imprisoned for 27 years. In this case, actions in accordance with morality resulted in him having to undergo greater suffering. Admittedly, whether he had led a "happy" life with well-being is arguable, according to different theories of happiness. But his experience surely deviates from what most people have in mind when they pursue happiness. In fact, it *should* be that morality sometimes deviates from happiness. Otherwise, if people pursue morality just for the sake of happiness, this would reduce

morality from a set of guiding principles for desirable personal conduct to a happiness-generating algorithm, which is both unrealistic and troubling. This is because the ultimate aim of morality is to promote collective interests, rather than one's self-interest to increase individual well-being. Thus, moral actions may reduce a person's happiness or well-being in some cases, though this is not a common occurrence.

Having discussed the impact of moral actions on happiness, I would now like to contend that immoral actions are more likely to bring people unhappiness. This can be separated into two cases. Firstly, when one does not intrinsically identify with certain moral values, i.e. his own personal morality does not align with the prevailing societal morality, his supposed "immoral" acts have no immediately direct bearing on his personal happiness. However, it is too soon to conclude that morality has no impact on him at all. Every human being has more or less been exposed to and influenced by one's education and other members of the community to accept certain moral norms. Consequently, this individual must be aware of them, and the undesirability of violating them as viewed by one's community. When an individual commits an immoral act, one will likely be worried about being discovered by other people and this feeling of trepidation severely impedes one's happiness. In the event that one's immoral acts get found out, one will risk damaging one's social relationships, diminishing one's well-being even more since relationships constitute a significant aspect of individual well-being (Seligman, 2011, p. 20). This also applies to someone who has been acting morally all the time except for one major immoral act, such as the above-mentioned unusual example of the physician⁵. This is because his

⁵ In *The Happy Immoralist: A Sequel*, Cahn (2004b) portrays a highly respected physician who makes the mistake of embarking on an affair with an unmarried airline stewardess. When he tries to break off this relationship, she threatens to expose his adultery, thus wrecking his marriage and career. His brother offers to help him by arranging

past moral actions cannot simply cancel out any immoral action committed. Secondly, when one intrinsically identifies with certain moral values yet violates them, in addition to the consequences described above, one will also be plagued by the feeling of guilt, which is a negative feeling that runs counter to happiness and may even have a profound impact on one's well-being. Here we should note that, in the above-mentioned example, although the alternative (i.e. not murdering the stewardess) will result in greater unhappiness, the physician will still have to suffer the consequences of committing an immoral act if he chooses to murder her, such as apprehension and guilt. Thus, immoral actions lead to unhappiness in most cases.

Nevertheless, in unusual cases, it is possible that immoral actions do not lead to unhappiness. This happens only when an individual does not identify with a particular value, so it has no bearing on him or her at all. For example, Fred in Cahn's *The Happy Immoralist* seems to not care about friendships and truth at all. If he really does not identify with such values, morality as determined by others would not impact his inner well-being. However, it should be noted that if his dishonest behaviours get found out, he will still have to suffer the consequences. The rare occasions where immoral actions do not result in unhappiness only hold when all the unscrupulous acts (as judged by social norms, not by his own standards) go unnoticed, just as in Fred's case. In such cases, we have to admit that it is possible for such an "immoralist" to attain happiness under rare circumstances.

for the stewardess to be murdered without any danger that the crime will be traced to either the physician or his brother.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the pursuit of happiness is not necessarily aligned with morality, moral actions are more likely to result in happiness whereas immoral ones are often to the detriment of one's happiness. In general, an individual's happiness and morality are more likely to positively influence one another. In particular, people feel intrinsically happier when engaging in moral acts that promote the interests of others. Nevertheless, this generality has to be complemented with some tolerance for exceptions, as in the not-as-common cases where moral actions result in suffering and immoral actions generate happiness. As Cahn (2004b, p. 1) points out, "the greater the divergence between morality and happiness, the greater the loss of motivation to choose the moral path". By showing how acting morally increases one's well-being intrinsically in addition to the instrumental benefits it confers, this paper has illustrated that the divergence between happiness and morality is not as great and we have more reason to act in accordance with morality. Moving on, I would like to further explore the impact of moral values on happiness, such as whether having too many moral values, and as a result struggling to live by them, curtails one's happiness.

Word count: 3483 words

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