A Short Course in Ethics

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How are we to live? Most people seem to agree that there are "right" things and "wrong" things and we should try to do the right ones, but they're less clear on how to figure out what the right ones are.

Some say there are certain moral rules (don't murder, don't steal) that we must follow to be right. But how do you decide what those rules are? Many such rules have been proposed; how do we pick the good ones?

If you ask someone to justify a rule, they usually do it by listing its *consequences*: if we don't steal, God will reward us; everyone will be happier if we stop killing. In the end, it seems like everything boils down to consequences: good acts are those which accomplish good things.

So how do we decide what good things are? Doesn't everyone have their own idea of what's good? Instead of trying to promote one particular person's notion of what's good, it seems like we should balance everyone's good. In most cases, it's impossible for us to know what's actually good for a person, so this usually means taking their word for it and trying to give them what they *want*.

(Cases where people don't seem to want what's good for them are usually cases where people are confused about what they want. I may think I really want to eat this whole box of cookies but later I'll realize I really wish I hadn't.)

But everyone wants different things — how do we balance their desires? It seems like the only fair thing to do is to treat everyone equally. Of course, this doesn't mean treating every want equally: if one person wants a yacht and another person wants a dry place to sleep tonight, the second want seems much stronger than the first; filling it will accomplish more overall good.

Here's another way to look at this. Imagine that before we were born, we all sat up in the heavens and talked about how to design the world. None of us yet know which bodies we would be born into or which parents we'd have, so none of us can possibly be biased. Aren't we all going to want to promote the greatest good overall? We'll make sure the worst-off aren't particularly worse-off in case we're one of them, and we'll make sure the rest aren't especially handicapped in case we're one of them.[1] If we have to choose between a world with one more yacht for Larry Ellison and one with one more dry place to sleep for a woman in poverty, we'll probably pick the dry place.

So we have our simple moral principle: when faced with a question, pick the answer that will accomplish the most overall good. Two friends both want to borrow my TV tonight, but one already has a TV and just wants it so he can

watch two channels at once, while the other can't afford even a single television. Our principle suggests the TV goes to the second.

But our principle doesn't just apply to the questions we're obviously faced with. Surely there are many other people who want a TV and have even less than my friend. By our logic, they would seem to deserve the TV even more, even though they didn't happen to be asking me for it and thus forcing me to confront the question.

It seems like we need to think more carefully about the implicit question of each moment: what do I do now — with my time, my money, my possessions? And it seems like we need to apply the same moral rule.

The conclusion is inescapable: we must live our lives to promote the most overall good. And that would seem to mean helping those most in want — the world's poorest people.

Our rule demands one do everything they can to help the poorest — not just spending one's wealth and selling one's possessions, but breaking the law if that will help. I have friends who, to save money, break into buildings on the MIT campus to steal food and drink and naps and showers. They use the money they save to promote the public good. It seems like these criminals, not the average workaday law-abiding citizen, should be our moral exemplars.

Such a thorough-going conception of ethics seems incredibly difficult. Surely it requires severe changes in our life. The traditional notion of ethics is much easier — there are some bad things (stealing, lying, cheating) and we need to try our best not to do them. But, as in any field, it's important to separate the truth from what's convenient. People are often criticized for not doing what they think is right (hypocrisy), but not believing in what's right because it's hard to do is far worse!

I am convinced that the account here is largely correct, but I certainly don't live up to its demanding standards. And that's OK. One of the conclusions of this argument is that it's impossible to be perfectly moral. By accepting that, and keeping it in the back of my mind, I do a little better each day.

For a long time, people told me eating meat was wrong and I refused to believe them, because I thought it would be impossible for me not to eat meat. Then one day, I accepted that they were right and I was doing the wrong thing and I decided I could live with that. I wasn't perfect. But shortly after I decided that, meat started seeming less and less attractive, and I started eating less and less, and now I don't eat it at all anymore.

Accepting you're immoral is the first step to being a more moral person.

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1. This thought experiment comes from philosopher John Rawls, although its conclusion has been modified by Peter Singer.