Authority of Morality Reading

Foot, 1972

Foot, P. (1972) "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," The Philosophical Review, 81(3), pp. 305-316.

- "We may therefore think of Kant's imperatives as statements to the effect that something ought to be done or that it would be good to do it."
- A hypothetical imperative is a statement that something ought to be done (by some person) or that it would be good (for that person) to do it on the ground of some interest or desire of that person.
- In contrast, a categorical imperative is some such statement that is not contingent on some interest or desire of the person to whom it applies. A categorical imperative is necessary and unconditional in the sense that the person to whom it applies necessarily and unconditionally should do something, or that it would be necessarily and unconditionally good for that person to do something.
- We find evidence for the claim that moral judgements are categorical and not hypothetical in natural language.
    - We use the words "should" and "ought" each sometimes in a categorical sense and sometimes in a hypothetical sense.
    - We use "should" in a hypothetical sense when, for example, in offering directions to a lost traveller, when we say that he should head west to reach his hotel. This use of "should" is hypothetical in the sense that it is conditional on the traveller's desire to return to his hotel. If we find that the traveller has decided to go elsewhere, we would revise our statement.
    - We use "should" in a categorical sense when, for example, we say that one should not torture innocent persons for fun. This use of "should" is categorical in the sense that it is not conditional on any person's interests or desires. We would not revise our statement if we find out that some person has a strong desire to torture innocent persons for fun.
    - It seems that "should" in the (linguistic) categorical sense is reserved for moral imperatives that are categorical in the sense of being necessary and unconditional
- This evidence is insufficient. In natural language, "should" in the categorical sense is also used to describe such hypothetical imperatives as rules of etiquette or club rules.
    - For example, when it is said that one should respond in the third person to an invitation in the third person, "should" is used in the (linguistic) categorical sense. We would not revise this statement if we were to find out that some person has good reason to disregard this rule of etiquette. Similarly, when a council chairperson informs a delegate at the United Nations that he should refer to himself in the third person, this statement would not be withdrawn even if the delegate declared that he intended to resign, and did not care for the rules of decorum.
    - But such imperatives are not categorical in the sense that we think moral imperatives are, they do not necessarily and unconditionally bind.
    - What the different uses of the (linguistic) categorical "should" have in common is that they require rather than merely recommend some behaviour. But the requirements of etiquette or decorum do not necessarily supply reasons. So the fact that moral imperatives are requirements rather than recommendations is not sufficient to think that moral imperatives necessarily supply reasons.
    - "Both are inescapable in that behaviour does not cease to offend against either morality or etiquette because the agent is indifferent to their purposes and the disapproval he will incur by flouting them."
- Then, it is not clear what reason there is to think that moral imperatives are indeed categorical in this necessary and unconditional sense. If moral imperatives are not categorical in this sense, then we do not necessarily have reasons to act morally. An immoral person is villainous but not (necessarily) irrational.
- The difficulty in finding evidence for moral imperatives' being categorical rather than hypothetical suggests that the apparent authority of morality is a reflection of our feelings. But such feelings are unreliable and do not rationally require a corresponding belief. A person can feel like he is falling while perfectly stationary, and believing that he is perfectly stationary.
- "The conclusion we should draw is that moral judgements have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette."
- One objection to this conclusion is that if moral imperatives are not necessarily reason-giving, then it is not possible to act from duty, which is necessary for acting morally. Foot disputes that acting from duty is necessary for acting morally.
- One worry about Foot's conclusion is that it implies that rational agents are not necessarily bound by morality, we do not necessarily have reason to act morally. We might “panic at the thought that we ourselves, or other people, might stop

caring about the things we do care about".

- On Foot's account, it is merely a contingent fact that moral imperatives constitute reasons for us to act morally.
- But that we are moved by moral imperatives is a source of tremendous value in our lives, we might otherwise find ourselves in a Hobbesian war of all against all.
- Then, that we are only contingently so moved seems to leave this value in a precarious position.

McDowell, 1978

McDowell, J. (1978) "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes, 52, pp. 13-29.

Plato, 2004

Plato (2004) Republic. Translated by Reeve, C. D. C. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing. 357a-367e.

- Glaucon and Adeimantus in Plato's Republic argue that we seem to have reason to be moral only because being moral is instrumental to our well-being. Glaucon and Adeimantus consider the wielder of the Ring of Gyges, which enables him to turn invisible, thereby evading detection if and when he does wrong. Quite plausibly, this wielder, regardless of the strength of his initial disposition to be moral, would eventually succumb to the temptation to wrongfully secure himself advantages and comforts. This suggests that if not for the penalties we would ordinarily suffer when we do wrong, we have greater reason to do wrong than to be moral. It seems then that our reason for being moral is that this is necessary to avoid punishment and to maintain a good reputation.
  - But this seems to be the wrong kind of reason to be moral. We think that the requirements of morality bind us in a robust way that does not come undone if and merely because we are able to escape punishment. In other words, we think that the ring wielder still has good reason to be moral.

Hooker, 1998

Hooker, B. (1998) "Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent?," in Crisp, R. (ed.) How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, pp. 141-156.

- On the hedonist theory of well-being, what ultimately (non-instrumentally) makes a person's life go well for him, i.e. the thing(s) that constitute(s) his well-being, is the balance of pleasure over pain, hence "although being morally virtuous may be instrumentally beneficial to you in that it brings you pleasure, being morally virtuous is not in itself a self-interested good." "Being moral is not what constitutes the benefit to you; instead, the benefit to you is constituted by whatever pleasure you get as a result of your moral behaviour."
- On the desire-fulfilment theory of welfare, what ultimately makes a person's life go well for him is the fulfilment of his desires (of a certain sort). "Such a theory takes into account the number of desires that get fulfilled, the relative importance to [the person whose welfare it is] of [his] various desires, and how long they last." On such a theory, only the fulfilment of desires for something in itself, and not the fulfilment of desires for something as a means to some further thing, constitutes a prudential benefit to the person whose desires they are. In other words, a person's life going better for him consists in his fulfilling a large number of strong desires for things in themselves. Different versions of the desire-fulfilment theory of welfare impose different further restrictions on the sort of desire-fulfilment which is constitutive of a person's welfare. For example, some versions exclude desires "based on illogical reasoning or false empirical beliefs" and other versions exclude desires that do not "involve the agent in some way". So it seems being moral constitutes a prudential benefit to the agent since moral desires such as the desire to be kind, it seems, will not be excluded by any plausible such restriction.
  - On the desire-fulfilment theory of welfare, being moral only contingently constitutes a prudential benefit to the agent in the sense that it constitutes such a benefit only if the agent has the relevant moral desires.
  - Further, if being moral frustrates an agent's other (unexcluded) desires, this frustration of desires constitutes a prudential cost to the agent, hence being moral may be, on balance, detrimental to the agent's welfare.
- On the list theory of welfare, what ultimately makes a person's life go well for him is some list of goods such as knowledge, achievement, and friendship which are constitutive of his well-being not merely in virtue of their pleasurableness or their fulfilling his desires.
  - Hooker briefly considers and responds to the objection that list theories of welfare have "outrageously paternalistic implications".
- On some version of the list theory of welfare, it seems that because knowledge of important matters is plausibly a prudential good, i.e. it is on the list, what is right and what is wrong are important matters, and knowledge of what is right

and what is wrong necessarily moves agents to act rightly, being moral necessarily accompanies a prudential good.
    - Hooker refers to this as the argument from knowledge.
    - Many premises of this argument are controversial. It is controversial (1) that there is moral knowledge, (2) that moral knowledge, moral knowledge necessarily moves agents to act rightly, and (3) that being moved to act rightly is sufficient to be moral (in the full sense of to count as a virtuous person).
- On some version of the list theory of welfare, it seems that because being moral is some sort of achievement and achievement is plausibly a prudential good, being moral is a prudential good.
    - Hooker refers to this as the argument from achievement.
    - On this argument, being moral constitutes a prudential good only in a "subordinated" and "attenuated" way since being moral is only one sort of achievement and achievement is only one "fundamental categor[y] of prudential value".
- Hooker argues that the degree of sympathy we feel for a person is in large part influenced by how poorly we think that person's life has gone for him. For example, we would feel more sorry for the person suffering tremendous pain than for the person not so suffering, all else being equal. If this "sympathy test" is effective in bringing out our intuitions about well-being, then we could apply it to the question of whether being moral constitutes a prudential good to the agent (in the sense of being a fundamental category of prudential value). "Consider two people who lead sad and wretched lives. Suppose that one of these two is morally virtuous, and that the other is not." It seems we would feel no more sympathy for the morally virtuous Upright than for the morally vicious Unscrupulous. This suggests that we do not think being moral constitutes a prudential good to the agent.
    - Hooker refers to this as the argument from lack of sympathy.
- One objection to the argument from lack of sympathy is that the explanation for our feeling no more sympathy for Unscrupulous than for Upright is that feeling sympathy for a person "essentially involves sharing in or taking on (in some sense) that other person's unpleasant feelings or mental states". Then, our feeling no more sympathy for Unscrupulous than for Upright is explained by the fact that Unscrupulous and Upright experience equal unpleasantness (by supposition).
    - Hooker argues that this account of what is involved in our feeling sympathy for a person is too narrow. For example, we would feel greater sympathy for someone who is deceived about a central aspect of his life than someone who is not so deceived, all else (including their experience of unpleasantness) being equal.
- Another objection to the argument from lack of sympathy is that the explanation of our feeling no more sympathy for Unscrupulous than for Upright is that while Unscrupulous's life goes worse for him because he fails to be moral, we feel greater sympathy for Upright (than if we considered only how poorly his life has gone for him) because it is unfair that Upright's life has gone no better than Unscrupulous's despite the former's being more moral.
    - Hooker responds that it seems we would feel no more sympathy for Unscrupulous than Upright even if we supposed that both have lead, not equally sad and wretched lives, but equally maximally full lives (in terms of each other plausible fundamental category of prudential value), and under such a supposition Upright seems to suffer no injustice, because he hardly suffers at all.
    - But in such a case, our feeling no more sorry for Unscrupulous could be because we would have no sympathy at all for a person whose life goes as well for him as Unscrupulous's life goes for him. Plausibly, we would have no sympathy for such persons because there are many others much more deserving of our sympathy.
    - Hooker responds that we could suppose further that the life of each other person in Unscrupulous's world goes at least as well for this other person as Unscrupulous's life goes for him, then there is no better candidate for our sympathy. It seems even then, we feel no more sympathy for Unscrupulous than for Upright.
- Another objection to the argument from lack of sympathy is that we feel no sympathy for persons whose lives go poorly for them if their lives going so poorly is their fault.
    - But even if we suppose that Unscrupulous's failure to be moral is not his fault but, for example, the product of his upbringing, it seems we would still feel no more sorry for Unscrupulous than for Upright.
- Another objection to the argument from lack of sympathy is that the sympathy that we would otherwise feel for Unscrupulous is tempered if not entirely blocked by the contempt or indignation that we feel towards him.
    - Hooker responds that contempt or indignation do not seem sufficient to block sympathy. We can think of cases where we feel both contempt towards someone and sympathy towards him.
- "The other possible conclusion is that the argument from lack of sympathy breaks down. I have had to stipulate many conditions, some quite far-fetched, in order to prevent explanations other than the explanation that we do not really believe Unscrupulous's life has been worse in self-interested terms. As these stipulations mount up, so wanes our ability to decide whether we feel sorry for Unscrupulous. It may wane so far that our thinking about whether we would feel sorry for him fails to deliver any result."

Raz, 2002

Raz, J. (2002) "The Central Conflict: Morality and Self-Interest," in Raz, J. (ed.) Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action. London, England: Oxford University Press, pp. 303-332.

Williams, 1993

Williams, B. (1993) "The Amoralist," in Williams, B. (ed.) Morality: An Introduction to Ethics. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. pp. 3-13.

- Williams argues that it is futile to attempt to reason psychopath with no concern for others into acting morally, but that this futility does not undermine the normative force of moral considerations.
    - "The activity of justifying morality must surely get any point it has from the existence of an alternative - there being something to justify it against. The amoralist seemed important because he seemed to provide an alternative; his life, after all, seemed to have its attractions. The psychopath is, in a certain way, important to moral thought; but his importance lies in the fact that he appals us".

Mackie, 1991

Mackie, J. L. (1991) Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong. Harlow, England: Penguin Books, pp. 107-120, 189-192.

- Mackie argues that we have prudential reason to be bound by a moral system. We have such reason because our (collectively) being so bound is (prudentially) good for each of us. This is because of "certain general and persistent features of the human predicament, which is 'inherently such that things are liable to go very badly' - badly in the natural, non-moral sense that human wants, needs, and interests are likely to be frustrated in large measure". Humans are in such a predicament because of limitations on such things as our resources, information, and sympathies. So we find it difficult to meet the threats posed by the natural world, and by each other.
- Mackie, in earlier sections, argues that we have prudential reasons to embrace a system of morality. But this solution does not seem entirely satisfactory since we think that we have good reason not to free-ride on the moral system even when the opportunity arises. "Why should I not at the same time profit from the moral system but evade it? Why should I not encourage others to be moral and take advantage of the fact that they are, but myself avoid fulfilling moral requirements if I can in so far as they go beyond rational egoism and conflict with it?"
- Socrates' response to this difficulty in Plato's Republic is that "the just man is happy because his soul is harmoniously ordered [...] whereas the unjust man's personality is disintegrated, and the man who represents the extreme of injustice is psychotic, his soul is a chaos of internal strife."
- Mackie argues that "nearly all of us do have moral feelings and do tend to think in characteristically moral ways, and that these help to determine our real interests and well-being", then "If someone, from whatever causes, has at least fairly strong moral tendencies, the prudential course, for him, will almost certainly coincide with what he sees as the moral one, simply because he will have to live with his conscience".
    - Mackie argues further that we have prudential reason to such conscientious characters.

Hills, 2010

Hills, A. (2010) The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism. London, England: Oxford University Press.

Korsgaard, 2010

Korsgaard, C. M. (2010) The Sources of Normativity. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, pp. 7-89.