

Grounding values (Function, virtue and value expanded and retitled) Peter Gibson

1. The problem

I will begin with a swift survey of the four main theories of normative ethics, in order to highlight the problem which I wish to discuss. Forty years ago there were two main theories (utilitarianism and deontology). Subsequently virtue theory has been added, to make three. Contractarianism is often treated scornfully by students of ethics, but I consider it a serious contender, and will include it as the fourth.

No philosophical theory is more famous for the counterexamples it gives rise to than **utilitarianism**. If you say you want to maximise happiness, I will propose to get the whole human race high on marijuana. If you then find a harmless pleasure for everyone, I will propose an unlimited increase in human population simply to multiply the harmless pleasure. If you say there is more to life than pleasure, I will propose to lobotomise people, so that the experience of pleasure is all that remains. If you say everyone's right to pleasure is equal, I will propose to enhance the lives of total strangers at the expense of your family. Utilitarians work around these cases by proposing to maximise benefit or welfare, or proposing general rules in order to avoid the uncomfortable particular examples. However, the thought which turned me away from utilitarianism was even simpler than such problem cases. When I played cricket I was a tail end batsman, and rather nervous at the prospect of facing seriously fast bowlers. What bothered me was not the prospect of swift dismissal (which seemed secretly attractive), but the prospect of physical pain. A turning point came when talking generally about the matter with the club captain (a countryman unimpressed by city commuters who turned out for his team), whose attitude to the great physical pain experienced if hit by a fast cricket ball could be summarised as 'So what?'. Utilitarianism seems to be founded on the unquestioned assumption that pain and unhappiness are bad, but if you ask why pain is bad, no deeper answer seems to be forthcoming than the observation that it hurts. But my cricket experience revealed to me that once I had been painfully struck by a cricket ball, there then arose the question of my attitude to the experience, and it is clear that I can either react by regarding it as a major life catastrophe, or I can be utterly phlegmatic, quote the question 'so what?', and wait for the pain to subside. We then see that it is not too difficult to find cases where pain is a good thing. My friend broke his arm and severed the nerves, leading to loss of feeling for over two years; imagine his delight when the first experience of recovery was a sharp pain in his left elbow. The metaethical question of the value of pleasure and utility always lurks behind the thesis of utilitarianism. An attempt to identify the main ingredients of the theory produced this:

Theory: impartially maximise pleasure (or welfare, or preferences)

The Good: collective desire satisfactions

Slogan: '*maximise satisfactions*'

Focus: feelings

Merits: fair, inclusive, plausible target, practical, altruistic

Best practitioners: compassionate, altruistic people who know the world

Beneficiaries: the weak, suffering and needy; slaves, animals

Politics: paternalistic socialism

Some problems: absurd extreme pleasure; motivation; ignores other values; value of death

Optimists who believe that to achieve the good life we merely need to lead the rational life tend to be drawn to **deontology** – the idea that the perception of duty is a matter of

impersonal reasoning. The canonical statement of this approach is Kant's proposal that we should identify the universal rule appropriate to each situation, and then follow it, which can be summarised in the slogan 'What if everybody did that?'. Again there are well known simple difficulties for this approach, such as the suggestion that if medicine is the most worthy profession, then everybody should train to be a medic. The theory seems to admire the coldly dutiful person above someone who is warm-hearted. Also, if we couched the main slogan as 'do your duty, whatever the consequences' we might all hesitate before committing to deontology. Again, though, there is one particular objection to the theory which struck me as decisive. John Stuart Mill expressed the point when he wrote that 'Kant fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any logical or physical impossibility in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct'. That is, in Kant's system I seem to be at liberty to smash and kill everything in sight, provided only that I will it as a universal rule. 'I want to smash everything' sounds wicked, but 'we ought to smash everything' seems like a possible law. Consistency is the only obligation enjoined on us, because that is a hallmark of rationality. The deontological approach, however, has told us nothing about what is wrong with smashing and killing. Kant gives some examples, but in each case he appeals to an underlying consensus of conventional values to generate his required contradiction.

Analysis:

Theory: duty to follow appropriate law, usually taken as what can be universal and consistent

The Good: willing the ultimate moral law

Slogan: '*what if everybody did that?*'

Focus: reason

Merits: altruistic, generalised, cross-cultural

Best practitioners: disinterested, rational and powerful people

Beneficiaries: all rational beings

Politics: liberal democracy

Some problems: coldly rational, poorly motivated, too uniform, obedient, well-meaning fools

Contractarianism is attractive if the main virtue of a moral theory is its power to persuade the wicked to be good, because the theory takes universal selfishness as its first premise, and wicked people find that view congenial. The simpler forms of contractarian ethics (early in the 'Republic', and in Hobbes) seem to be very unintuitive to anyone with a smattering of idealism about morality, but it was the introduction of game theory that gave this approach its serious appeal. In that account, high moral ideals are unmasked as clever strategies in the game, and the highest achievement of morality is expressed in the Groucho Marx proposal that 'if you can fake goodness and virtue, you've got it made'. There are, again, well known problems with the theory, such as the exclusion of the weak from making contracts, because they have nothing to bargain with, and the apparent moral praiseworthiness of the 'free rider', who achieves the desired selfish ends while secretly failing to keep the contracts. My own rejection of the theory rests on a fairly obvious thought. The theory seems to fall at the first hurdle if it can't see anything wrong with axiomatic selfishness. The objection to Kant was that universalising your maxims and principles seemed to be guided by a presumption of conventional values, and we can similarly say of contractarianism that it gives an account in terms of selfishness of why people are usually well behaved, but it gives no guidance as to what a selfish person should aim at. If we all make contracts that successfully lead to greatly desired smashing and killing, this theory has no objection. Analysis:

Theory: being nice gets you what you want; co-operate, but play tit-for-tat; educate the others

The Good: individual desire satisfaction

Slogan: '*mutual back-scratching*'

Focus: co-operation

Merits: motivated; realistic, persuasive, fits evolution

Best practitioners: strong but sociable people; good teachers

Beneficiaries: the best practitioners, who are tough but popular people

Politics: free market liberalism overseen by a judiciary

Some problems: defends free riders and last round betrayal; the weak can't negotiate

The obvious solution to these problems is to opt for **virtue theory**, and (on the whole) that is where my normative moral thinking finds its resting place. Consequentialist theories like utilitarianism only concern outcomes, which means a successful robot is preferable to a poorly performing person, but morality seems to be about persons, and not about efficient robots. We also need some explanation of why we all prefer human warmth and concern to people who are coldly dutiful, and that seems to focus more on character, and less on rules. Contractarianism's central role for selfishness seems to offer a winning strategy for people whose motivation we all actually despise. Virtue theory says that morality concerns the type of person you are, and you can be virtuous while causing pain, or while being inconsistent, or while losing the game of life, and you can exhibit vice while increasing others' happiness, or performing a remorseless duty, or coming out on top every day. Rosalind Hursthouse offers a superb primer for virtue theory, especially in her account of moral dilemmas, which are supposedly the theory's weak point.

I am a fan of virtue theory, but it needs some sort of underpinning. Some say pleasure is good, others say rationality is good, and yet others say that achieving your ends is good. Virtue theory says that 'flourishing' is good, which seems to cash out in the slogan 'be a good citizen'. The most attractive backing for this view I take to be in Aristotle's unfashionably teleological account of the matter – that you look at the function of a person, and identify virtue in the success of that function. Humans are rational and social beings, so flourishing in those contexts should be our target.

Hence this theory rests on a concept of human nature, and morality is the best expression of that nature. At this point I could rest with what strikes me as by far the best moral theory, except that here I encounter a difficulty to which I cannot give a simple reply. The awkward question is: what if we were to change human nature? A human being should be a good specimen in the same way that a rose should be a good specimen of its breed, but what criteria should be applied by those who breed new species of rose? I know a good rose when I see one, but can I imagine an improvement on the rose species – or a better form for human nature? At this point my virtue theory gives out, and my head spins because some greater standard is needed. Analysis:

Theory: develop the virtues of character appropriate to your humanity and your society

The Good: individual flourishing

Slogan: *'be a good citizen'*

Focus: character

Merits: focus on children, role models, particularist

Best practitioners: the well-brought-up people, involved in society

Beneficiaries: fully involved citizens benefit from others' virtues

Politics: paternalistic communitarianism

Some problems: too conservative, Nazi virtues, not practical, relative to culture, undervalues consequences

Hence, to summarise, none of the four theories of normative ethics is able to offer as motivation an intrinsic fundamental value which is recognisably moral. All four theories take certain values for granted, and hence trying to give some independent account of

value is the first duty of the moral philosopher.

2. Generating Values

The question of foundational values is not independent from normative ethics. If you decide that there is one ultimate value, such as reason, or pleasure, or desire satisfaction, or excellence of character, then this is bound to determine your preference among the four theories. If you see a plurality of roughly equal values underpinning our approach to living, then the distinctions between the theories may blur, perhaps ending in the loosely flexible ethics which Bernard Williams seemed to advocate. There is certainly a compromise position in which our central moral focus is character, our actions aspire to be rational and consistent, their ends are mainly focused on the happiness of others, and the strategy aims at co-operation, thus uniting the four theories into one package. To conclude that all sides of the debate are correct is always appealing in philosophy, but the ecumenical approach nearly always succeeds by turning a blind eye to real differences. If we focus on underlying values, rather than on our theories, it looks unlikely that all of our normal values will have equal weight. It will depend on what we think gives rise to those values, and so that must be our main focus.

In the 1980s an idea was developed, with the aim of connecting thought more securely to the world, and avoiding the wilder regions of anti-realism. The simple proposal was that for every truth, there is a 'truth-maker'. Anyone attracted to a realist view of the physical world must find such an idea appealing. The sentence 'I am sitting' is true right now, and if we ask what *makes* it true, my current sedentary position has to be the answer. If I stand up, my physical action falsifies the sentence, and so the link between my posture and the truth-value of the sentence seems inescapable.

It would be nice if the theory were irreproachable, and solved heaps of problems, but we should be so lucky. Critics have soon spotted a range of anomalies. Claims about non-existence ('there are no mice/cats here') have the same truthmaker. There aren't enough truthmakers for universal generalisations. Necessary truths seem to be independent of truth-makers, or are made true by everything. Acknowledged truths about fiction seem to reject their own truth-makers. Ignoring that debate, we will stand by the strong appeal of a simple truth-maker for 'I am sitting', because it seems to anchor philosophy in the same world where common sense is found, and that is a good thing.

More recently the idea has been developed that necessary truths do not hang in the middle of nowhere, advertising their veracity only to intuitively acute philosophers, but actually arise out of the nature of our world. Thus 'once an event happens it cannot unhappen' seems to be a necessity that does not arise out of the concept of 'event' or of 'happen', but is rather a universal consequence of how things are. Similar claims would be made about the necessities of logic or arithmetic, and analytic truths would arise out of the natures of words or concepts (so that 'all bachelors are unmarried men' is a necessity arising from the concept 'bachelor'). This line of thought, when compared to the truth-maker idea, invites the thought that there are 'necessity-makers'. Hence the necessities of logic might arise from the 'natures' of the various rules of deduction, and the necessities of arithmetic or geometry might arise from the axioms of those subjects. This would leave open the question of whether those axioms were conventional truths, or arose from some deeper nature, of pure number, or of physical reality, or of space.

The train of thought from truth-makers, to necessity-makers, to logic- and arithmetic-makers, leads me to a proposal for the present context. Instead of invoking our intuition, or our pure powers of a priori reasoning, or even the power of prayer, to elicit the values we need for a decent account of morality, let us consider the possibility of 'value-makers'.

The dream of platonism about values is best expressed, in my view, by the proposal that if nature suddenly ceased to exist in its entirety, values would nevertheless survive. Platonist eternal values are hypothetical values. If we agree that a rich sunset over the Bay of Naples is especially beautiful, then the destruction of planet Earth could not alter the truth that if there were a Bay of Naples, endowed with sunsets, then it would be beautiful. Hence before the creation of our planet, it was a truth that, should the Bay of Naples come into existence, sunsets over it would be beautiful. This is an eternal truth, even if the the creation of the Bay of Naples is forever thwarted.

I take this platonist view to be untenable. It seems to me that the truth ‘sunsets over the Bay of Naples are beautiful’ has both a truth-maker and a value-maker, namely the topography of southern Italy. To me the sentence ‘the sunsets over the Bay of Naples are not beautiful, because there is no Bay of Naples and there are no sunsets’ makes good sense. The value involved is grounded in the facts, in the same way that the truth is grounded. If I design a beautiful building (as yet unbuilt), the beauty is in my thoughts, not in the platonic existence of the potential structure. The idea that the whole cosmos vanishes, but an infinity of ungrounded hypothetical values (most of them never realised) all somehow survive, strikes me as incoherent. If you agree with me in rejecting this platonist view, then the notion of ‘value-makers’ looks like a good alternative.

We will assume that if nothing exists, then no values exist either. This is not to deny that there may still be hypothetical truths which lack a truthmaker, such as the necessities which constrain all possible universes, but it is hard to conceive of values among those constraints. If we start from nothing, and envisage a minimal universe, consisting (say) of one lump of iron, the notion of a ‘value’ can get no purchase on such a scenario. One possible entry point for values as we scale up these scenarios is the step that introduces lives, where the cosmos contains plants but no animals. Scepticism is the normal response to that proposal, but the candidate for a value here would be health. The concept of a value which no one could ever appreciate seems counterintuitive, but it is an Aristotelian thought that lives introduce functions into the system, and functions bring with them success and failure, and that in turn offers a glimmer of what we call value. A key debate here is whether the human eye can be said to have an ‘intrinsic’ function, making clear vision an ‘intrinsic’ success, as opposed to our eyes merely satisfying our desire to see. We will note that question, and move on to the introduction of minds into the cosmos.

If there are any values, it seems obvious that minds offer much more fertile ground for their emergence. But we promptly face a dilemma for the story – do minds enable an appreciation of value, or is value produced by minds? If we thought that health in plants was an intrinsic value, and the setting sun over the Bay of Naples had intrinsic value, then the advent of minds might just be the icing on the cake, because it is nice to have an audience for the performance. Alternatively, we can say that health and sunsets are only endowed with value because we like them.

We are now in familiar territory, and it would be absurd to offer definitive solutions or knock-down arguments to settle whether values are discovered or invented. It is obvious that minds can endow things with value. Personally I love an old silver teaspoon, because my father won it in a competition. The spoon has a value which it will forever lack if I am no longer around. Because it is made of silver it also has a financial value, because people seem to like silver. In the first case the value-maker is an individual mind, and in the second it is a community of minds, and no one believes that silver is intrinsically more ‘valuable’ than iron, in a mind-free universe. Communities have a variety of ways in which they memorialise their collective values. The simplest means is monetary, but the subtlest may be in a spoken language. English is crammed full of

value-laden words. Compare the words ‘kill’ and ‘murder’, or ‘walk’ and ‘trudge’. If we think that a large segment of our language is value-free, we are probably deluded. (My own favourite is the word ‘gun’, which the NRA would love to be a value-free word).

In the case of the teaspoon, the value-maker is clearly my own mind, but I can enquire more deeply as to what it is in my mind that produces the value, and I may discover, if I am being honest, that the value arose in me because of some cultural attitudes I have acquired about fathers, competitions and souvenirs. That thought suggests that we should pay far more attention to cultural and linguistic traditions in our account of value-makers, rather than to the supposed free choices of individuals. A philosophical enquiry should never be content with easy answers, and so we now push on, and ask where the value-makers are to be found within a culture.

Probably the only philosopher to have addressed that question is both the greatest and most misunderstood writer in the field of foundational ethics – Nietzsche. The writings of Nietzsche became embroiled in the squalor of early twentieth century thought, and his wilder moments attracted followers who were racist, violent, elitist and wilfully irrational. No philosopher, however, has thought more deeply about what I am calling ‘value-makers’ than Nietzsche. His key thought is a simple one – that the values embedded in our culture were created by individuals, or small groups of individuals. This is the idea of the ‘superman’ (*übermensch*). There is a cartoon reading of Nietzsche which makes this idea seem absurd, but an example of the sort of thing he is describing is the wonderful eighteenth century thinkers who decided that slavery was unacceptable, and set out to abolish it. It is a truism of our society that slavery is a wicked institution, but that value did not come from nowhere – it is the result of the vision of a small group of people (and most notably an impassioned individual, the great Thomas Clarkson). On this view, the most important task of historians is to identify the value-makers of the past, and cultural commentators should focus (critically!) on the aspiring value-makers of today.

At this point our discussion can spread in many directions, so I will call a halt, but I hope it seems persuasive that values are in some way ‘made’, and that the rather woolly discussions of metaethical questions can become a more focused and persuasive if we try to become more explicit about what it is that gives rise to our values. Our normative ethics would certainly be clearer if we asked what it is that gives value to reason, pleasure, success or character.

Readings

Axelrod, George (1990) *The Evolution of Co-operation*. Basic Books

- discovery of the tit-for-tat strategy, which made contractarianism a more plausible theory

Hochschild, Adam (2006) *Bury the Chains*. Mariner Books

- history of the origins of the anti-slavery movement in Britain

Hursthouse, Rosalind (2002) *On Virtue Ethics*. OUP

- greatly admired modern account of virtue ethics

Kant, Immanuel (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, in ‘The Moral Law’ by H. J. Paton. Routledge

- much the most articulate account of the deontological approach to ethics

Lowe, E.J. and Rami, A. (eds) (2009) *Truth and Truth-Making*. Acumen

- contains the origins of the truth-maker idea, and some critical discussions

Murdoch, Iris (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge

- nice attempt to articulate the platonic idea that ‘the good’ has an absolute and direct appeal for us

Mill, John Stuart (1861) *Utilitarianism*. OUP

- still the best account of this approach to normative ethics

Merricks, Trenton (2007) *Truth and Ontology*. OUP

- illuminating and very critical discussion of the idea of truth-makers

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1885) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Penguin

- perhaps the best text for exploring his views

Williams, Williams (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Routledge

influential book which steps back from the simplistic confrontations between normative theories