

Ethic and moral - A philosophical and evolutionary perspective

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In this text I will discuss the purpose behind ethical reasoning by looking at typical ethical dilemmas with an evolutionary perspective. I will also look into the nature of human decision-making and compare it to some common ethical theories.

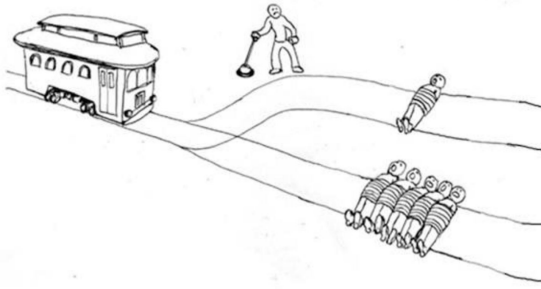
Knowing what is right and what is not

To think of why we make our decisions, I believe it is important to look at the entire human history. There are many tools and perspectives that we can use when discussing ethics, in this text I have chosen to look at ethics from an evolutionary standpoint.

Let's go back 70 000 years and look at the typical human. The average human at this time lives in a society consisting of roughly 150 people (Hansen, 2016). Most died before they turned five and the risk of being eaten by wild animals was always present. In these societies, we made decisions primarily to survive, then reproduce. Those who made bad decisions died quicker and therefore did not pass on their genes to the next generation, and those who made the right choices survived. We recognize this as a consequence of the theory of evolution. But how does this help us understand our modern day wants and consequently, our decisions?

The moral implications of the theory of evolution are similar to the rationale of the anthropic principle (Massimi, 2014), which makes assumptions based on the fact that we are alive and observing the universe. A way to state a moral implication from the theory of evolution could be “Because we are alive, humans before us must have decisions leading to the survival of their group”

What does this imply? It tells us that prehistoric humans are (according to the assumption) overwhelmingly utilitarianists. This makes sense, those societies with individuals who care for the greater good prevail and out-survive other groups. This stays true today, a study on the Trolley problem (shown in picture), where the participant gets to decide if he should flip the switch to kill 1, or leave it and kill 5. The results of the study are in line with the utilitarian assumption, around 90% of participants chose to flip the switch.



So what place do the other moral theories have? If we're evolved to be utilitarianists, what purpose does deontology, virtue theory and Moral sense theory serve? Below I will explain these theories and discuss the question: **Is there a universal ethical theory, or is there more to how we make choices?**

Deontology (kantian)

Deontology values an act not by its consequences, but by the moral obligation that caused it. This means that achieving the maximum amount of good isn't always desirable. Deontologists believe that the best way to reach the maximum amount of good is to do only those things which you also would want everyone else to do, especially if it is done to you. This means that lying on your resume to get a job that you probably are qualified for is not correct, because this would, in deontology, imply that you think that the universal phenomenon of lying is acceptable. Written shortly, deontology poses 2 criteria for action:

Reversibility: You would like to be on the receiving end of the act

Consistency: You rationally think that it would be beneficial if everyone acts the same way

It seems like pure utilitarianism is susceptible to individuals using their perceived good as an excuse to reject common law, deontology neatly circumvents that issue by endorsing ethical acts, not results. It does however not come without downsides, deontology is not always applicable. For example, if you were in a situation where breaking a promise would save a life, the test of consistency would be hard to apply.

Virtue theory (Aristotelianism)

Having recently gained popularity, originating from the teachings of ancient greek philosopher Aristotle, the Virtue theory of ethics does not put value in good deeds or good rules, but in good

character. Aristotle made a list which might now be considered outdated with 14 virtues to live after. When we think of what someone we look up to would have done in our situation we are using Virtue theory. You think of this person's qualities and translate it into action.

For example, a virtuous person does not refrain from lying because he or she is afraid of the consequences of lying, but from a reluctance to lie. Additionally, a virtuous person solves problems with reason, not emotion.

Moral sense theory

In contrast to the virtue theory, the moral sense theory puts trust in our instinctual and emotional reaction for judging an act as good or bad. This means that we do not have to specify or categorize any act we deem to be either desirable or undesirable.

To explain what sets the theory apart from the others I will go back to the trolley problem as an example. This time with the fat man variation. In this scenario, instead of pulling a switch to redirect the train, you have the option to push a fat man onto the track. This will kill the man, but stop the train, saving the 5 people laying on it.

Many feel a stronger reluctance to push the man compared to pulling a switch. The difference is also seen in brain scans of participants while they are taking the test. When they think about pushing a man, regions in the brain associated with emotion and empathy have a greater activation compared to the switch-scenario.

The moral sense theory is often criticised for accounting for morally irrelevant factors, like the difference in answers between the original trolley problem and the fat man version. Critics argue that the moral dilemma is identical in both situations, and it should be reflected in the answers.

Most used ethical theory

Having looked at a couple of ethical theories, we can now see that our assumption made earlier must be corrected. All the theories stated above could, when used, give the same result as the utilitarian view. We currently do not have the data on *why* the participant chose what he/she chose in a particular scenario. It could be for the greatest benefit of all (utilitarianism), or because you would want someone else to kill 1 to save 5 in the same situation (deontology) or because you associate pulling the lever with a virtue, such as humility or bravery (virtue ethics). It is therefore difficult to understand which of the theories is most widely used. Even if we knew what model someone was using to make a decision, we would still be unable to, with certainty, predict their choices in different scenarios. This is due to our way of valuing outcomes of other

people, our understanding of how other value options are not complete and will likely never be. This issue is discussed below.

Objectivity ethics

We have now explored some different ways that humans decide what is right and what is wrong. There are many perspectives and solutions to each difficult situation we face, but how can we value one evaluation from another from an objective point of view?

This is a crucial problem of ethics, we can make models that encourage some actions over others. But because of our human nature we can never prove one act better than another, we can only agree or disagree. We like to consider psychopaths incapable of understanding morals, but the psychopath believes the very same thing about everyone else. To claim that a murderer deserves a sentence for their crime may be correct, but are we allowed to claim that we know morals, and the murderer doesn't?

It is often overlooked that everyone does everything for a reason, maybe not a reason we agree with, but a murder has never happened for no reason at all. We must not forget that the murderer (most times) thinks that did the right thing. To be able to say that someone made an error in judgement would demand that we could quantify our experience with how positive or negative it is and compare it to theirs. If we were faced with shooting one or two people in the hand, many would choose to only shoot one. But what if that one person, about to get shot, claims that his hand could do more good than the others hands combined, that it would cause greater pain if we shot his hand. We could not know what would cause the most damage and consequentially, know the "best" decision. I do not mean to disprove or attack any ethical theories, i simply mean to lift up the fact that everyone only has access to their own experience, and can only ever act from it.

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