

Does moral action depend on reasoning?



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Yes, by nature.

At the foundation of our moral thinking is our understanding that some things are worth doing or pursuing for their own sake. It makes sense to act on them even when we expect no further benefit from doing so. When we see the point of performing a friendly act, for example, or when we see the point of someone's studying Shakespeare or the structure of distant galaxies, we understand the intrinsic value of such activities. We grasp the worth of friendship and knowledge not merely as means to other ends but as ends in themselves. Unlike money or insurance coverage, these goods are not valuable only because they facilitate or protect other goods. They are themselves constitutive aspects of our own and others' fulfillment as human persons.

Of course, feelings and emotions can and do motivate our actions. But the point here is that certain intrinsically worthwhile ends or purposes appeal not merely to our emotions but also to our understanding (what Aristotle called our "practical reason"). A complete account of human action cannot leave out the motivating role of reasons provided by these ends or purposes, which are sometimes called "basic human goods."

It is this truth that the brilliant 18th-century philosopher David Hume spectacularly missed in proclaiming that "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and may pretend to no office other than to serve and obey them." For Hume, our brute desires specify our ultimate goals (like survival), and the most that reason can do is to tell us how to achieve those goals (eat this, refrain from eating that). But human deliberation and action are a great deal more complex (and interesting) than Hume allows in his reduction of reason to the role of emotion's ingenious servant.

If someone performs a friendly act just for the sake of friendship itself, and not solely for some ulterior motive, we are not left baffled by it, as we would be left baffled by, for example, someone who for no reason beyond the act itself spent time repeatedly

opening and closing a closet door. Indeed, we grasp the intelligible point of an act of friendship even if we judge the particular act, though motivated by friendship, to be morally forbidden. (Consider, for example, someone's telling a lie to protect the reputation of a friend who has done something disgraceful.) We understand friendship as an irreducible aspect of our own and other people's well-being and fulfillment.

But friendship and knowledge are just two aspects of our well-being and fulfillment. We human beings are complex creatures. We can flourish (or decline) in relation to various aspects of our nature: our physical health, our intellectual vigor, our character. Although we are individuals, relationships with others in a variety of forms are also intrinsic aspects of our flourishing and not merely means to the fuller or more efficient realization of common individual goals. The list could go on. My point is that there are many basic human goods, many irreducible (and irreducibly different) aspects of human well-being and fulfillment.

The variegated nature of human flourishing and the fact that basic human goods can be instantiated in an unlimited number of ways means that we must make choices. Of course, many of our choices, including some serious and even tragic ones, are choices between or among morally acceptable options. No moral norm narrows the possibilities to a single uniquely correct option. But moral norms often do exclude some possible options, sometimes even narrowing them to one. How can that be?

Among those who share the view that morality is, in a deep sense, about human flourishing, there are two main schools of thought. The first, known as utilitarianism (or, more broadly, as consequentialism), proposes that people ought always to adopt whichever option offers the best proportion of benefit to harm overall and in the long run. There are many problems with this idea, but the most fundamental is that it presupposes, quite implausibly, that different human goods (this human life, that friendship, this part of someone's knowledge, those aesthetic or religious experiences) can be aggregated in such a way as to render the idea of "the net best proportion of benefit to harm" coherent and workable.

This is a mistake. To say, for example, that friendship and knowledge are both basic human goods is *not* to say that friendship and knowledge are constituted by the same substance (“goodness”) manifested in different (but fully replaceable) ways or to different degrees. They are, rather, two different things, reducible neither to each other nor to some common factor. To say that friendship and knowledge are basic human goods is merely to say that they have this, and only this, in common: Each can provide us with a reason for acting whose intelligibility is dependent neither on some further or deeper reason nor on some subrational motivating factor to which it is a means.

The alternative to utilitarianism, at least for those who believe that ethical thinking proceeds from a concern for human well-being and fulfillment, is what is sometimes called “natural law” ethics. Its first principle of moral judgment is that one ought to choose those options, and only those options, that are compatible with the human good considered integrally—that is to say, with an open-hearted love of the good of human persons considered in all of its variegated dimensions.

The specifications of this abstract master principle are the familiar moral precepts that most people, even today, seek to live by and to teach their children to respect, such as the Golden Rule (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”), the Pauline Principle (“never do evil that good may come of it”), and Kant’s categorical imperative (stated most vividly in the maxim that one ought to “treat humanity, whether in the person of yourself or others, always as an end, and never as a means only”). However one formulates these precepts and the more concrete norms of conduct that derive from them, they are alike in depending fundamentally, and decisively, on the work of reason.

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