Theories of the Basis of Morality

Description

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Here is the next part of *Are You Minding What Matters?*. This isn't all of Lesson Two, just the part dealing with the popular theories regarding the basis of morality.

Lesson Two: The Reality of Morality

While most would grant that some questions have their answers in the material world, it is still common to think that some things are just beyond what materialism can help with. Most important among these is the foundation of morality. Understanding the foundation of morality is essential for choosing the right paths in life. If we care about doing what is right, we need to know what makes something right or wrong. Let's consider a few common theories on the foundation of morality.

I. Theories of God-Based Morality

For centuries, the most popular theory for moral foundations is that God is the originator of morality. But this has long been recognized to be problematic. If God decides what is moral, could not God have decided upon different moral values? For example, could God have decided for stealing to be moral? Or for racism to be moral? How about murder? … genocide? … infanticide? … sex trafficking? … torture? If "Yes," then morality is arbitrary and the fact that God would be the arbiter of morality would be nothing more than a case of "might makes right." But if the answer is "no" – if for even one of these examples God could <u>not</u> have decided for it to be moral – then that shows that morality is beyond God and has its foundation in something else.

And for those who say that God didn't *decide* what is moral, but that morality still has its foundation in God in that it stems from God's inherent character, that still leaves other problems. If morality is defined as that which is concordant with God's inherent character, then how do we know his character is actually good? We can't compare it to itself since that would be circular reasoning, but we also can't compare it to something else under this view because that would mean something else sets the moral standard. One would have to just take for granted as an unsubstantiated assumption that God's character is good and then use that to judge everything else. And this is also fraught with another difficulty; that is, which God are we talking about? If different religions each claim their own God to be the foundation of morality and the moral systems ascribed to these Gods do not agree with each other, how would one arbitrate between the possibilities? One couldn't argue that a particular God's moral system is wrong because one would have to assume the moral system of a different God to make that judgment. But then, upon what basis did one accept the moral system of that different God? Ultimately, one could choose any God and use that God as the foundation of morality and judge all other Gods to be immoral on that basis. As you can see, trying to use God as the foundation for morality just doesn't work.

II. Theories of Society-Based Morality

Another popular theory for the basis of morality is that morality is determined by societies. While no one can deny that societies make systems of what they consider to be right and wrong, theories of society-based morality go beyond that simple description to say that what a society considers morally good and bad <u>actually is</u> morally good and bad for that society. In other words, there is no external morality by which the morality of a society can be judged; morality is what it is within a society, and nothing more. But in reality, most societies don't live in moral isolation from each other, and members of one society often do judge other societies as part of their own moral systems, and sometimes societies even form their own moral positions in response to the morals of other societies. And, of course, there are inner-societal debates over moral issues as well. All this is to say that things just aren't that simple. We can't divide societies up into separate bubbles and say, "What's right and wrong for society A is right and wrong for them and what's right and wrong for society B is right and wrong for them."

If we say that morality is defined by societal moral systems and that each society gets to define its own morality, but the actual moral systems of those societies make moral claims for societies beyond themselves, the theory collapses. You would either have to deny the part of each moral system that makes moral claims regarding the actions of other societies, or you would have to grant that different societies actually do get to play a role in deciding what is morally right and wrong for other societies, in which case we would have to deal with the conflicting moral claims of different societies upon each other. Doing so would require some sort of moral standard beyond any society by which to arbitrate between the different moral ideas. Thus, morality could not be ultimately based on society. Alternatively, one could just let the various societies fight it out and say whoever wins gets to decide what is moral for everyone. This would be another case of "might makes right," and I don't think any rational person would seriously think such a bullying mentality is "moral."

The situation is complicated even more when we include in our considerations the fact the boundaries of a given society are sometimes disputed. Some portion of a population may consider their society to include all the members of that population and thus their moral system should apply to the whole population. But another portion of this population might consider the population

to consist of two societies, neither of which should impose moral standards on the other. Alternatively, a group may consider themselves part of a broader population while members of that broader population regard the group as outsiders, or members of the broader population may be split as to whether to consider the group as part of their society. Here you have three sections of the population: 1) the group, 2) non-group population members who exclude the group, and 3) non-group population members who include the group. Let's say each of these three sections of the population have different moral systems. Even if every member of the population believed that their moral system only applied to their own society, they disagree as to who is included in their society. In such a case, whose moral system applies to whom? There is simply no answer that could be given that doesn't conflict with at least one of the moral systems. No matter how you slice it, basing morality on society only ends in contradiction and bad principles.

III. Theories of Morality Based on Human Nature

Another view is that morality is based on human nature. We can point to certain features that seem to be built in to human psychology, such as a desire for freedom, a sense of fairness, or a degree of in-group loyalty, and given that these traits are generally considered moral, they might seem like good candidates as foundations for morality. But explaining the origins and operations of our moral intuitions is not the same as providing a basis for why we should consider these intuitions to be moral. Furthermore, there are plenty of other built-in features of human psychology that no one would point to as a foundation for morality; these include (but are not limited to) jealousy, selfishness, confirmation bias, tendencies toward violence, etc. If we don't accept the whole suite of traits included in human nature as determining what is moral, then we are obviously deciding between them to determine which is moral and which is not. But if that is so, then we are using something outside of human nature as our standard by which to judge which aspects of human nature are moral and which are immoral.

It may also be argued that science has made a lot of progress in illuminating human nature and that we can use this scientific understanding to structure society in such a way that will reduce the expression of immoral traits while increasing the expression of moral traits. However true that may be, it doesn't say anything about the foundation of morality; it doesn't explain the basis upon which we can judge what is moral and what is not. In using an understanding of human nature to morally improve society, one still has to make judgments about which aspects of human nature they consider moral and immoral and only then can an understanding of human nature be used to shape society in the direction of the desired outcome. Understanding human nature is doubtless relevant for dealing with numerous moral issues, but human nature cannot itself be the basis for morality.

Instead of looking to human traits and psychological features, some look to human well-being as the basis for morality: whatever increases well-being is morally good, and whatever decreases well-being is morally bad. The problem here lies barely beneath the surface. What exactly is "well-being"? Obviously, the word is a compound of "well" and "being" – the "well" part meaning basically the same thing as the word "good." But words like "good" and "well" are expressions of value. And this raises the question, "Who is the valuer?" "Well-being" is a famously ill-defined term, there being many different types of well-being, and the measure of an individual's well-being is often determined by self-reporting, which is ultimately subjective. Happiness and pleasure are usually taken to be large parts of what constitutes well-being, but different things make different people happy and experience pleasure. And the conditions necessary to make some people happy are sometimes precisely the conditions that would make others unhappy. Ultimately, since well-being is interlaced with a great deal of subjective value, it runs into the same dilemmas and

difficulties as the other potential moral foundations we have discussed. And, of course, starting with what one subjectively values as "good" as a basis for determining what is morally good and bad is circular and fails to justify why the initial thing being valued is good.