
WHY SHOULD I BE MORAL?

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ABSTRACT

In this write up I will attempt to justify my opinion and on why should I be moral. I will conclude that there is no reason as to why I *should* be moral. I will also tell you about my thoughts on how to make a person to be obliged to be moral. The material will be self-contained and is elucidated to the extent that it might offend some of the purists. Hence, this article is not meant for the purists.

Keywords Immanuel Kant · Lawrence Kohlberg · Morality · Religion

1 Introduction

Why is studying morality important? There are many reasons for it. Personally, I believe that studying morality/ethics is now more important than ever with the growth of autonomous systems taking over jobs typically done by humans. Consider the famous Heinz's dilemma: Heinz's wife was dying from a particular type of cancer. Doctors said a new drug might save her. The drug had been discovered by a local chemist and the Heinz tried desperately to buy some, but the chemist was charging ten times the money it cost to make the drug and this was much more than the Heinz could afford. Heinz could only raise half the money, even after help from family and friends. He explained to the chemist that his wife was dying and asked if he could have the drug cheaper or pay the rest of the money later. The chemist refused, saying that he had discovered the drug and was going to make money from it. The husband was desperate to save his wife, so later that night he broke into the chemist's and stole the drug. Here are the following questions: 1. Should Heinz have stolen the drug? 2. Would it change anything if Heinz did not love his wife? 3. What if the person dying was a stranger, would it make any difference?

Consider the famous trolley problem which I have modified for the current days. You are programming an autonomous car. You are faced with a situation that the car brakes fail and it is moving toward five people lying on the main road. If

you change the direction of the steering, the car will be redirected onto a side road, and the five people on the main road will be saved. However, there is a single person lying on the side road. You have two options: Do nothing and allow the car to kill the five people on the main track. Change the steering direction, diverting the car onto the side road where it will kill one person. Which is the more ethical option? Or, more simply: What is the right thing to do?

The basic structure of these kind of moral dilemma occurs in everyday life as managers, parents, students, etc. Studying morality lets us deal with situation with more maturity and avoids common pitfalls. It is also fun to see the definitions of morality vis-à-vis the socio-economic conditions of the those times. However, that is outside the scope of this essay. We shall not discuss answers to any of these questions, because the aim was to motivate the study of ethics.

2 Morality Review

In this section we will cover the basics of Morality from the point of view of Immanuel Kant and Lawrence Kohlberg. For the sake of brevity we shall take a hit in discussing the nuances of their work.

2.1 Lawrence Kohlberg

Kohlberg was a psychologist, and he linked the stages of morality (up to some point) roughly with age. Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development, and divided them into three levels: 1. Pre-Conventional, 2. Conventional, and 3. Post-Conventional.

Pre-Conventional Morality: An infant and small children's moral notions are pre-conventional. Children are self centered, and do not have any conception of good of others, or of values of family or society.

Stage 1: Punishment driven. I act rightly due to fear of punishment. Example: If I eat dirt, father will get angry at me, so I don't eat dirt.

Stage 2: Self-gain driven. I act rightly for selfish gain which may also be beneficial to someone else. Example: I share my toys with my cousin because mother will then give me a chocolate.

Conventional Morality: This would include children, teenagers, and some (most?) class of adults.

Stage 3: Interpersonal approval based. Children are conscious and sensitive of approval and disapproval of people around them (parents, teachers, peers, etc.). They do good things to obtain approval, or praise. Example: I noticed a wallet fall down from someone's pocket. I returned it to him so that he will tell me that I was a good girl.

Stage 4: Law and social order. Obeying laws and following social conventions are good, because this is necessary for maintaining social order in society (even though this may require me to sacrifice my individual freedoms). Deviation from laws would lead to chaos. Fear from punishment is often the reason for moral behaviour in Stage 4 also. But this fear is different from the Stage 1 fear, because here there is an awareness of the reason for the law. Example: following traffic rules even if it means a sacrifice on my part.

Post-Conventional Morality: This is the stage we aspire the educated people to be at, but alas! These days, even the "qualified" ones don't think through their arguments. This is especially apparent in political discussions.

Stage 5: Social Contract. Realization that laws and social norms are not always moral. They can sometimes cause harm, and in such cases should be changed. Good, or Right, is that which prevents hurt or harm to individuals in a society and which preserves their fundamental rights. Example: Untouchability is unethical because it denies the rights of dignity and equality.

Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles. Right is defined by the decision of one's conscience in accord with self chosen ethical principles which are logical, universal and consistent. The principles are abstract and ethical, and not rules. The principles are based on universal ideals such as justice, equality, respect for all human beings, as justice, equality, respect for all human beings, etc. Example: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a principle. "Do not steal" is a rule that is derived from this principle.

Kohlberg insisted that Stage 6 exists, but he had difficulty finding participants who operated at this Stage.

Kohlberg said that when one encounters a moral dilemma and finds one's current level of moral reasoning unsatisfactory, one will look to the next level. Here is one more reason to study ethics, if you want to climb the ladder of morality. Knowledge and learning contribute to moral development.

2.2 Immanuel Kant

Kant re-defined what 'moral' meant. He rejected the idea that true morality came from outside (parents, society, etc.), from God, or from nature. For Kant, the only source of true morality was the moral agent himself. 'Each man is his own moralist,' he said (stage 6 of Kohlberg). For Kant, an act may be good, or right, and yet not moral: When I act in a good way because (i) I will obtain a selfish gain, or (ii) it is my natural inclination (arising out of my upbringing), or (iii) it is a rule of society that I am expected to follow. Then, according to Kant, such an act is not 'moral'.

Example: Suppose a customer inadvertently, and unknowingly, overpays a shopkeeper. The shopkeeper runs after him and returns the money. She does so because she thinks that honesty will pay dividends: that the customer is more likely to return to the shop, and that his friends may well come too. For Kant, that is not a moral act. It is not just acting in self-interest, however, that conflicts with morality. Acting altruistically may do so too. Suppose the shopkeeper had returned the money not because she calculated that it would be profitable to do so, but simply because she happened to have an honest and generous nature. In that case the shopkeeper was following her inclinations. This too, for Kant, does not count as a moral deed.

Inclinations, he argues, are built into our nature. They are absolutely determined. We cannot choose them. Kant says that an act is moral only when we have chosen to do it of our own free will. To Kant, one's action has moral worth only when one does his moral duty for its own sake, and when the act arises out of a good will. Thus according to Kant, an act is moral only when its motive is **duty**, not happiness.

A 'duty', Kant says, is a categorical imperative. Categorical means unconditional, absolute. An imperative is a directive, a command, a necessity. So a Categorical Imperative is an absolute, unconditional command: 'Do not lie.' 'Do not murder.' 'No matter what your desires are, or what you wish to achieve, you must do this and only this'. So the next natural question is what defines a categorical imperative?

Kant gives several formulas for determining this. The two most important formulas are:

1. It can be made universal (Universal Law formula).
2. It does not treat humans as means, only as ends (Humanity formula).

We shall now explain this below.

2.2.1 UNIVERSAL LAW FORMULA

A 'maxim' is the underlying principle of an act. To test if any maxim is moral, we:

1. State the maxim,
2. Universalize the maxim,
3. See if universalizing leads to a contradiction or to coherence.

If it leads to coherence, we say that the maxim is moral, a categorical imperative, a duty.

Example: Suppose I cannot pay my rent and I am about to be evicted. I borrow some money from a friend, promising to pay her back, but knowing that I will be unable to. I reason, however, that it is not immoral to do this because otherwise I will be homeless. In the above example,

1. The maxim is 'It is okay to make a promise that I know I will not keep'.
2. If we universalize this maxim, we say: 'It is okay for everyone to make a promise they know they will not keep'.
3. If everyone makes promises they do not keep, then no one will believe promises, and then no one will make promises, which contradicts the original maxim.

Thus this maxim fails the Universalizability test.

2.2.2 HUMANITY FORMULA

Humans possess an intrinsic worth, or dignity, by virtue of being human. Every human, including one's own self, must be treated as an end, and never merely as means. "To use someone as a mere means is to involve them in a scheme of action to which they would not consent". Example: In the borrowing money example: I am using my friend to get money from her. Slavery was a stark example of using other humans for one's own ends.

Once we determine that a maxim is moral (using the above two formulas), it becomes a **Categorical Imperative** (an absolute command). Then, this becomes our duty, and 'no matter what your desires are, or what you wish to achieve, you must do this and only this.

Kant's ethics is not very practical all the time. Someone posed the following question to him: *You are at home and a man with an axe rings the bell. He asks where your children are so that he can kill them.* It is, according to Kant, not allowed to lie to the man. The reason Kant gave was as follows:

"...if you have by a lie prevented someone just now bent on murder from committing the deed, then you are legally accountable for all the consequences that might arise from it. But if you have kept strictly to the truth, then public justice can hold nothing against you, whatever the unforeseen consequences might be. It is still possible that, after you have honestly answered "yes" to the murderer's question as to whether his enemy is at home, the latter has nevertheless gone out unnoticed, so that he would not meet the murderer and the deed would not be done; but if you had lied and said that he is not at home, and he has actually gone out (though you are not aware of it), so that the murderer encounters him while going away and perpetrates his deed on him, then you can by right be prosecuted as the author of his death. For if you had told the truth to the best of your knowledge, then neighbors might have come and apprehended the murderer while he was searching the house for his enemy and the deed would have been prevented. Thus one who tells a lie, however well disposed he may be, must be responsible for its consequences even before a civil court and must pay the penalty for them, however unforeseen they may have been; for truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties to be grounded on contract, the laws of which is made uncertain and useless if even the least exception to it is admitted. To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally, one not to be restricted by any conveniences."

3 Why Should I be Moral?

In the previous sections I covered the definitions of morality by Kohlberg and Kant. Kant's ethics is duty-based. Kant has defined the perfect (a bit too perfect) definition of morality, so we shall use it when we talk about morality. It is at times "impractical" and "inconvenient". So why should one face these "inconveniences"? Before we try to answer the title of this section, let us define a few terms.

Inclination: person's natural tendency or urge to act or feel in a particular way; a disposition.

Duty: a moral or legal obligation; a responsibility.

There are a lot of reasons to be inclined to be moral, but that doesn't explain why one *should* be moral, i.e., why should morality be one's duty as opposed to one's inclination (or convenience in the long term). I personally could not think of a reason for a person to treat it as their duty/obligation to be moral, in general (as promised in the abstract). So the next natural question which arises is that how to make it a person's duty to be moral (as an individual in a society). For this, I feel that one way to answer this would be by appealing to Kohlberg's stages of morality. Actually, only the first stage would suffice.

The crux of the matter in this section is *how to make people do "inconvenient" things as part of their duty?* We have seen many things like this happen in our past. For instance, in the colonial India, the Indian army was forced to kill the Indian rebels. If it were for them, they wouldn't kill the Indian rebels. It was inconvenient for them, but they did it anyway, because it was their "duty". The next question to ask is that why is it their "duty"/ what makes it their duty/ what happens if they don't do it? The answer was that they would get punished for it. Hence, their duty was punishment driven.

So, the idea here is, what if we make morality, as defined by Kant, punishment driven (stage 1 of Kohlberg). Morality, as defined by Kant, is on stage 6 of Kohlberg's stages of morality. To enforce Stage 6, we are using the Stage 1, i.e., punishment driven stage 6 morality. I call this theory as Kohlberg-ception. Now, one wonders how to go about the fear driven stage 6 morality? This is where we would invoke the concept of God.

I must devote a line or two about my appreciation for Kant's framework to determine the morality. He has given an algorithm to determine if something is ethical or not. One can be almost definite in determining if their act is moral or not. Now once we have the question of morality out of the way, we need to search for the obligation. As said in the last paragraph, I would invoke the concept of God. From my experience, when one wants to do something tough, an assurance from an expert/trusted person helps. For instance, assurance from friends or parents when you have to go against the wind. Therefore, I believe that we need that kind of assurance. If history has taught us anything, relying on others often results in a disaster. Therefore, one needs to rely on themselves for the assurance. This is where one could

find God. One must have heard of people saying that that “God is within you”. As an adult a few years back, my honest reaction was “what a load of horse-shit”. However, now it makes sense. If one could find God within themselves, who would be their morality monitor, then this way one has to be obliged to be moral. The morality would be punishment driven in the sense that if one is immoral at certain instances, then the God would punish them in terms of guilt. It is contradictory to Kant’s ethics, but it is a way to achieve duty based ethics. Determining if an act is ethical can be done by Kant’s “algorithm”, and then the God you create in your mind enforces it, hence essentially make it duty based, with punishment being the absolute guilt. The concept of God arises in religion as well, and it is also in some sense trying to achieve punishment-driven ethics, but we seemed to have missed the bigger picture confusing customs and traditions with the founding philosophy. One needs to go slow in life to observe these nuances to deal with them.

So why should I be moral? I don’t know, I probably don’t *need* to be moral. I haven’t found my God yet!

References

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