The Ethical Dimension Of Human Nature: A New Realist Theory

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Gitie House B.Sc Hons (Physics) has worked in the field of Information Systems over twenty years with extensive experience as manager of Information Systems development projects and services. Gitie is a co-developer of the ethical theory described in this paper and has pursued life-long interests in philosophy, religion and ethics.

Abstract

The interaction amongst individuals and their emergence in larger human organisations such as a community or a state are intimately bound to the reality of the human being. Thus, individuals do not exist simply as servants of a collective, but on the other hand, one cannot delude oneself into thinking that one lives in a private reality. To take the most basic point, all sentient beings feel pleasure and pain. This is not optional or negotiable and is not just a social construction or a product of an ideology. It follows from the simple fact that sentient beings must take action to avoid harm or promote benefit. The further particular properties of the nature of any particular species of sentient being such as humans are similarly mandated by the situation of that species within the total bio-sphere. Again, this is not optional. However, the human species has a flexible mind and a language capable of communicating subtle or abstract thoughts. As a consequence, humans can ask that basic question of how to promote benefit and avoid harm on a level and with a depth that is revolutionary in terms of existence on this planet. This is the genesis of ethics and morality and it follows from the fundamental nature of our reality. This revolutionary new capacity must not be squandered by denying the objective and universal nature of the ethical discussion

undertaken by individuals, groups and societies.

To a unique extent, human goods are frequently intangible; this is the primary source of all human studies: economics, history, literature, law, ethics, and so on. Their intangibility should not mislead us into thinking that they are infinitely malleable according to our whims and preferences. A theory of economics or a law may be workable or otherwise in just the same way as a tangible good such as an electric motor. For this reason, the humanities have legitimate claims as fields of science and engineering. But they must not betray the responsibility that comes with this realisation by departing from the spirit of the scientific enterprise, which has as its foundation accountability to the truths about universal reality.

In this analysis, ethics is the realm that connects individual human nature to societal realities such as laws. It does so in various conceptual dimensions. In the domain of willed action it recognises that human beings are neither infallible nor omniscient, and therefore cannot give effect to all their plans; and so, there must be a realm of unenforced obligation between what is compulsory (law) and what is completely free (personal preferences). In the realm of planning and understanding, ethics is the connective between the realities of individual human nature and those of social organisation. These are processes of mutual influence and feedback determined by reality, whether we understand that reality or not. But if it is understood, or understood better than before, new possibilities are opened for positively influencing human social and individual evolution.

The Principle of Goodness is a new realist ethical theory which acknowledges these truths about human nature and the vast web of interactions within which humans live and exercise their wills. It has a great deal to say about how people should act, and in turn be treated by others. It shows that contemporary socio-political theory is wholly inadequate as a suitable basis for human flourishing: in particular, the fashionable compulsion to reduce the variegated uniqueness of each of the six billion human individuals to generalised properties based upon categories within which they are placed, such as race, class, and gender. Not one of these categories stands up to a critical analysis of its usefulness as a means of dividing people from each other. The result is that many people are treated unjustly, the consequences to their lives disregarded; and yet the ideal society eludes us - as it must because these categories are not grounded in reality. In this paper we focus on the human individual. We investigate how the trust and sense of security that follows from treating every single one ethically as individuals will be conducive to the development of positive feedback cycles of care, concern, friendship, and compassion throughout the matrix of human interaction. The challenge, then, for those who desire a world free of inequity, conflict and insecurity is to re-examine every social field informed by this ethics, which is grounded in the inescapable reality of the human condition.

Introduction

Our main task in this paper is to explore some basic properties of an ethical theory discovered by the authors, and tentatively called the Principle of Goodness. (We use the term “discovered”, as we feel it is arguable that the insights of this theory long predate our notice of them, and underlie many of the major religious and ethical schools of thought; but they have been assumed, or ‘intuited’, rather than put into an explicit word formula. This is explored in [House 2005].) The theory might conveniently be termed ‘process-realist’, meaning that the terms “Good” and “evil” occurring in the statement of the theory are claimed to be realities, not of matter or other

substance, but of consistent patterns within processes involving moral actors and other sentient beings. This 'process nature' is explored in the other paper to be presented at this conference, [House & House 2005].

If one surveys how people would like the world to be, one typically finds that altruistic answers dominate the rest, answers such as: a world at peace; equity and justice; no discrimination or prejudice; no more hungry, sick, illiterate or poor; safety; the opportunity to lead happy lives; freedom to pursue opportunities for creativity and prosperity; opportunities to assist others in fields such as health, education, economics, arts, music, human understanding, etc.; and other similarly benevolent ideals. (Example: [MORI 1999].) On the other hand, general opinion has sometimes been strongly in favour of destructive policies, such as war (for example, at the time for the crusades). Clearly, two tendencies are operative in human beings, and it is reasonable to posit that either of these could be enhanced in a cycle of positive reinforcement. To take the destructive example, had continuous victory and prosperity followed from the crusades, we might reasonably expect that even greater public support for those policies would have followed. We are concerned here with the other, positive example, specifically in the context of the Principle of Goodness. Although here we can do little more than investigate likelihoods and show some connections, we can advance the Principle of Goodness in the sense of a scientific hypotheses, in that, should its recommendations be followed, we would see how well they worked. (But see the very important proviso at the end of our other paper.)

One naturally questions whether such deserves the appellation "scientific". It is perhaps fundamental of the humanities that at their core are intangibles: the nature of human beings and the outworking of that nature in human societies. Other intellectual fields have greater access to 'concretes', measurables that can be used to judge success or failure of theory. For example, economics has numerical measures of the behaviour of the economy, and physical science has the referent of clear-cut results of experiments upon the physical world. This difference is unfortunate, for the importance of the knowledge of the humanities is equally great, but is too often overlooked in 'real world' decisions in areas such as law, government policy, development, and so on, due to its relative uncertainty. We would assert in general, and also in defence of the procedure recommended here, that theories in the humanities can indeed be called scientific, provided that the scientific method of hypothesis and testing is followed, and provided the inherently greater uncertainty is acknowledged. In this understanding, we would see that there is a real meaning to the "hard" in "hard sciences", but that "soft sciences" fully deserve to be called sciences. We try to make a start at building some connections in the ethical field that one hopes would be useful in this connection.

Situation of Personal Ethics.

One function of personal ethics is to structure the realm between complete freedom and laws. Not everything that is permissible is admirable, or even acceptable (to one's social groups or to one's own better judgement). Individuals reasonably ask for greater guidance than the content of the nation's statute books, whether as unspoken social mores or as explicit moral or ethical principles. Much disagreement exists as to how, or even if, this should be done (for example political and religious ideologies, group opinion, other ethical systems such as utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, practical reasonableness, virtue ethics, and so on). By pointing to some likely consequences of widespread choice of the Principle of Goodness as a social and personal guide, we hope to provide

reasons for its practicability as a good ethical philosophy. However, the choice of an ethics to live by is not necessarily an either-or proposition, and connections amongst ethical theories can strengthen the justification for 'believing in' ethics itself as a genuine subject for investigation rather than as a widespread ("Nietzschean") mistake.

We can elucidate these points after introducing the Principle for which we are arguing.

The Principle of Goodness

A brief statement of this principle is that:

Goodness is to attempt to benefit everyone;
evil is to attempt to harm any innocent one.

The Principle does not refer to non-ethical meanings of these two words, such as profit, welfare, fortune, and so on, although connections amongst these various meanings are obvious. Indeed, many of the non-ethical meanings provide content for the terms "benefit" and "harm" in the statement above. Thus we might say that (moral) good is to try to provide (practical) good to everyone. Nevertheless, the meanings are distinct, and the Principle does not concern (or say anything about) outcomes, but instead refers to mental states, that is, the state of not merely wishing, or even intending, but actually attempting, to promote the welfare of all (in the case of goodness) or to harm any innocent (in the case of evil). The attempt might not be action, however. Refraining from a harmful course might be part of an intention to promote benefit, or refraining from a possible saving action might be part of an attempt to cause harm.

This has consequences for how this theory is assessed. Evaluation of practical success depends on practical questions, such as whether a certain act really did benefit or harm certain people, or was the best or worst choice. But evaluating an ethical act, according to the theory, is not assessed by the actual outcome, but by the beliefs and intentions of the moral actor. Of course, the actor's knowledge and capacities are themselves the products of other, prior, attempts, such as whether the person bothered to collect relevant information, or obtain equipment that was clearly needed for performing a certain task; in this sense, practical failure to achieve benefit or avoid harm might indeed be regarded as ethical failure, but only because other, enabling, attempts were not themselves conducted to the best of the actor's abilities. This is why, for example, we often excuse children for some acts that are held culpable in adults, even though in both cases the right action might have been impossible due to lack of knowledge. ([Hursthouse])

We can understand the theory better by considering a possible misunderstanding. Because the theory refers to an end result (either benefiting all or not harming an innocent), it may be mistaken for a consequentialist theory such as utilitarianism. When we say that our theory refers to mental states involved in attempts, rather than to outcomes, the utilitarian might respond that so, too, he believes that a person in a real situation can do nothing else than attempt to produce the overall maximum happiness, and should not be condemned for factors outside their control that change the outcome. An example might clarify the distinction. Suppose a villain threatens me that, unless I murder Jane, he will murder all of Jane's family, Jane included; and let us suppose that there is no 'way out' of our dilemma by foiling the villain somehow, and there are no 'long term' counterbalancing consequences such as are often posited by utilitarian analyses to change the

obvious 'right choice' under that theory. A consequentialist would probably have to agree that I should kill Jane, as that leads to the least damaging overall outcome. (Utilitarian counter-arguments to such scenarios are considered by [Finnis], and disposed of successfully, in our opinion.)

Under the Principle of Goodness, however, no such conclusion follows, even though not doing as the villain demands results in a worse or equally bad outcome for every single person involved. I might or might not believe that to kill Jane in these circumstances is to attempt to harm Jane. (I might not believe it if I regard my actions as being completely determined by the greater threat.) And if I do not kill Jane, then, knowing what I do about the villain's intentions, I might or might not believe that refraining from killing Jane is to attempt to kill her entire family, Jane included. If I believe the former but not the latter, then I must not kill Jane! - even if I know full well that all Jane's family will die. On the other hand, if I believe that both actions will harm, but that neither is an attempt by me to harm, then I have no action or non-action available that does no harm. I have failed to find a non-harming behaviour. Something will happen based on what I do next, and I might even resort to counting numbers to decide what that something is. If I kill Jane to avoid her family's deaths, I have failed, but have not deliberately chosen evil. But I still cannot argue that killing Jane was the 'right' thing to do; it is failing ethically, even if that failure might be excusable. There is another similar scenario that makes the difference more stark. Suppose that, instead of threatening to kill Jane's family, the villain threatens to kill Bill's family. Now the numbers do not count; Jane's death, if I accede to the villain, will be of my choosing, whereas Bill's family's deaths will not be. Choosing Jane's death is to do evil, and I should not attempt to rationalise anything else. Now Socrates' point is unavoidable: evil might be done, but it should not be done through *me!* Of course, in reality, where we can't assume that the villain will certainly carry out any threat, no one's death is certain and that reinforces the reason to refuse to kill Jane in either scenario. Again, this key difference between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories is discussed at length by [Finnis].

Just one more clarification is needed. The above is not a question of action versus inaction. If the villain threatened an air controller to not warn a plane of a conflicting movement (thus allowing the plane to crash) or else the villain would do some much greater harm, the controller cannot use the fact that his choice is an *in*action as a relevant factor. The relevant factor is what one understands as an attempt.

The above concerns extreme cases. In large measure we have been trained in our 'bottom-line' society to measure things by their effects, and we must beware of judging an ethic by outcome alone, which is the definition of one particular ethic and is almost to grant the victory to that ethic at the outset. We now turn to other matters that promise to show matters in a very different light.

Relationships amongst Ethical Theories.

We mentioned that the Principle only concerns ethical meanings of words such as "good". Other meanings of these words have a valid place in ethical theories, for obvious reasons; nevertheless, invalid conflation of these two senses has occurred; consequentialism might be interpreted as asserting that the conflation is always valid. Another, perhaps more subtle, distinction (creating the possibility of making a subtle mistake) is between kinds of ethical theories themselves, based on what the theory is trying to achieve. We might distinguish at least these three kinds of theories

(not intending to be exhaustive):

a) theories that define one or more key ethical terms and deduce ethical behaviours from them, or claim to have found the basis for ethics somewhere (Hume's 'passions', utilitarianism, Kantian ethics), or alternatively deny the possibility of doing so (Nietzschean denial of ethics);

b) scientific theories (areas in cognitive science, neuroscience, behavioural genetics, evolutionary biology, and evolutionary psychology), which explain the causes of ethical behaviour, such as being selected for by evolution as the behaviour of beings most likely to reproduce and pass on tendencies for similar behaviour to offspring;

c) theories that recommend an ethical system for some reason(s), perhaps a purpose or goal, whilst not advancing some foundational source of ethics, but rather appealing for credence to the suitability of the entire system to achieve its goals (Confucianism; Aristotelian ethics, and in particular [MacIntyre]'s modern redevelopment and adaptation of it).

It is clear that each category can contain divergent ethical theories, and so the above does not classify theories by the similarity of their recommendations. Indeed, category (b) refers to theories without recommendations (in the theories themselves, although some scholars might write moral commentary on such a basis).

Where does the Principle of Goodness fit in? At first sight, it seems to fall in category (a), as it sets out a statement of two key ethical terms and promises to derive other things such as rules of behaviour from these. However, it is a realist theory. It asserts that the statements of the theory are chosen in the hope that they accord with certain realities, consistencies and patterns, that can be understood as moral, such as kindness, care, love, and compassion, in human individuals, and justice, fraternity, friendship, and social concern in societies. That is, the hypothesis is that following the Principle produces or tends to produce, individuals and societies of such natures. In other words, it is also a theory related to those in category (b). But can we argue every decision from the basics for every judgement we, or society might make? Derivation of secondary ethical principles, such as honesty and other virtues, seems to be necessary, implying that activity belonging in category (c) will need to be undertaken as part of elaborating a practical moral understanding.

We thus see that in fact, these categories are not mutually exclusive: more than one ethical theory can be "in the right" in some sense, for reasons other than those considered by [Smith], who addresses only the nature of virtue and the contents of praiseworthy character (Part VI section I). It may even be that some theories in different categories might in fact be closely related or lend each other support, but that this not be obvious due to the very different ways in which theories in these different categories are explicated. We can easily see this with theories in categories (b) and (c): if human behaviour is moulded to some degree by instinctive determinants, then we would expect that a well-developed ethical system might knowingly or unknowingly take these into account somehow.

Category (a) seems to be the odd one out. The reason is that it appears to favour a deductivist approach, first establishing the core principle(s) and then deducing everything from there. Since

Hume, it has been hard to argue for any but a deductive approach to any question. (Witness [Popper]'s theory of scientific falsifiability, an explicit acceptance of Hume's idea.) But we need not take this category to imply deductivism. Utilitarianism seems to gain its justification from an appeal to judge the intuitive rightness of its foundational principle, not from any necessary reason that it should be true. Further, we have [Frederick L. Will]'s two books that lay a solid groundwork for justifying and understanding truth in other than strict deductivist terms. Rather than accept supposedly-inviolate foundational principles and whatever we can deduce from them, we can instead look at the totality of a logical pattern (an argument, or a complete system of thought, such as an ethical theory) and evaluate it in its totality, including everything from its assumptions, internal logic, and external evidence. *Now* category (a) is starting to resemble (b) and (c). The important point here is that a grounding assumption (such as our Principle) might act as the starting point for deduction without implying a belief in solely deductive reasons for accepting conclusions, or, indeed, the entire enterprise. As powerful confirmation (the word is used advisedly) of this, we may point to [Stove]'s meticulous analysis and criticism of Hume's inductive scepticism.

Composing a Synthesis

At the start of his book on a revised Aristotelian virtue ethics, [MacIntyre] poses for us the claim that there has been a degeneration in the understanding of ethics; over the past few hundred years, broken theories have replaced an earlier, sounder, Aristotelian ethics. ("We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have - very largely, if not entirely - lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." (p2)) Certainly the case for current theories being disordered is at the least plausible: MacIntyre argues that the combination of Kant (denying non-rational bases for morality), Hume (denying reasons not based on the passions), and Kierkegaard (insisting on criterionless fundamental choice) effectively removes any reasonable way to defend morality as understood in modernity. (p49) He holds that the only rational alternatives are either the Nietzschean diagnosis or relinquishing the entire "Enlightenment project". (p118) Be that as it may, MacIntyre clearly fails in establishing the other part of his thesis, that Aristotelian ethics is the forgotten sounder theory that the modern world retains only in fragmentary, semi-understood forms. He is affronted that Aristotle took what he regards as the clearly mistaken course of "writing off" "non-Greeks, barbarians, and slaves" (pp 158,159). But in what sense can Aristotle's ethics be better than that of even the most untutored modern, if his system cannot warn him of the wrongness of excluding members of these groups?

Perhaps Aristotle overlooked some aspect of his own system that should have warned him, but if so, MacIntyre doesn't tell us, apart from an inconclusive mention of Aristotle's failure to appreciate the importance of historical factors. MacIntyre has made important clarifications to Aristotelian ethics with his explication of "practices" and the distinction between reasons that are internal and external to these practices, and understanding virtues in this context. ("*A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevent us from achieving any such goods.*") From this basis, he is able to show that the system does indeed 'hang together'. But even so, MacIntyre does not, and apparently can not, tell us what Aristotle could have or should have understood about virtue to be warned about the evils of slavery. If we need to appeal to our existing intuitive feelings to recognise such a huge evil, it is hard to see why such theories should be regarded as complete ethical systems. ([Miller] raises one possibility, Aristotle's

distinction between unjust and just governments, the latter aiming at the common advantage. But the facility with which he introduces distinctions that reduce or remove consideration from slaves, women, etc., shows that nothing in his ethics protects this principle from undermining.)

We propose that the Principle of Goodness provides the 'bottom layer' underlying any sound ethical system. Starting with the Principle, we may deduce or infer other ethical rules, such as principles of honesty, fair dealing, generosity, kindness, and so on. Or we could start at the other end, performing an analysis of virtue in MacIntyre's style and developing a system. These projects can meet when the Principle is used to inform the system, to give it pegs to hang upon, and thus prevent it drooping into ethically bad judgements, such as permitting slavery. Indeed, the reason the Principle prohibits slavery is so obvious we can dispense with wasting words on it here. But more subtle questions can be addressed. For example, we may employ such considerations to analyse Aristotle's discussion (*Nichomachean Ethics* Book III, 1.) of particular kinds of ignorance (universal and particular) and their culpability. That is, when Aristotle says we are excused for ignorance of particulars but not of universals, we may argue that the reason is that in dealing with particulars, the chain of moral attempts that led to the situation under discussion was short, or consisted of only the moral act in question. But in the case of universals, ignorance of them was the product of morally faulty attempts during much of one's life history, leading eventually to one's ignorance and incapability to act for the best at the crucial time.

We would see virtues in general to partake of this nature, that is, summaries of ethical complexities that could in principle be 'taken apart' and explained in terms of 'moral building blocks', the myriad occasions, great and small, during a lifetime, in which one had to choose how to act, whether for goodness, for evil, or for neither (noting that our statements of good and evil do not together cover all possible attempts). In this sense the Principle of Goodness is a different kind of rationale for the virtues than that employed by Aristotle, which is essentially utilitarian (enlightened happiness). This fact is two-sided. On the one hand, it holds out the hope that the Principle of Goodness (if it is a good ethical theory) is more consistently reliable than principles identified by an operational theory, these in the ethical case being qualities (virtues) supposedly possessing inherent merit (as, for example, in "Honesty is the best policy."). To take Aristotle's above-mentioned claim, one might construct a scenario in which knowledge of a universal was truly beyond a person's capacity and therefore ignorance of it should be blameless, or where knowledge of a particular should have been obtainable had the actor behaved morally at earlier occasions throughout life. A legal system could be imagined that used Aristotle's rule as a basis for assigning culpability in criminal cases, with real consequences for an accused; and yet the Principle of Goodness shows that this rule is only 'usually sound'. Recognition of the Principle in such a court would allow the rule to be employed when, and only when, it succeeds in making the distinction Aristotle discussed.

We agree that pre-analysing virtue and forming theories about it (without suggesting that any particular existing theory is a good or a bad one) might provide a 'ready guide' for quick action in complicated cases where one doesn't have time to consider every relevant fact. But having said that, in the case of the Principle of Goodness, doing a sufficient, if not a full, analysis is likely to be much easier than it would be for a utilitarian, as far-flung consequences, under the Principle, cannot affect the evil of an act that is known to harm the innocent here and now, whereas under utilitarian theories, all kinds of remote consequences have to be considered. ([Finnis])

There is every prospect, then, that a virtue theory can be based on the Principle of Goodness. Then we may ask of such a system whether it accords with the requirement that it be lived by human beings, restricted in some ways by instinctive human nature; that is, we allow evolutionary psychology and other scientific fields to inform our theory and refine it further. Evolutionary psychology sees ethical behaviour as one among many outcomes of evolutionary processes, positing, for example, that just as fitness for reproduction selected for excellent hearing in insectivorous bats, so too it selected for feelings and loyalties that are commonly called "ethical" in humans and perhaps other higher animals. Evolutionary theories of ethics are inherently explanatory rather than prescriptive ([Wright] Ch 16), as a necessary consequence of the empirical nature of the scientific enterprise. But when such investigations show us such things as that human beings desire to excel, to possess social status, to see their children prosper, we can take such findings into account and find ways in which they can do so in many different ways (arts, sciences, athletics, politics, business, and so on).

Commencing the Ethical Program

Bearing all the above in mind, we want to look at some immediate consequences of the Principle for the individual. From evolutionary biology, one finding is pivotal: adaptations are adaptive for individuals, not for populations. (See [Williams].) And the Principle of Goodness concerns individuals: a moral obligation attaches to every individual and concerns every individual. The Principle thus leads us to identify a major moral mistake, which might as well have a name, so we call it *categorism*. This is the lumping of individuals into categories and treating them, not as individuals, but as representatives of their category. By this we do not mean the making of relevant distinctions. The set of people who do not intend to pay for merchandise is a category, but it is one to the members of which a shopkeeper is entitled to deny the supply of goods. However, categories such as a sex, a race, a nation, and so on, are often or usually irrelevant to moral concern. Tokenism, the filling of committees and so on, with members of selected categories, is profoundly futile once one remembers the huge diversity within categories, a diversity that has a deep, scientifically established basis.

Note that we are not here trying to take 'moral lessons' from science; rather, we are using science to gain knowledge about ourselves and other organisms on our planet. The ethical content comes from the Principle of Goodness. Indeed, as many have observed, natural processes contain a great deal that can be considered evil, if viewed morally. Nevertheless, being able to include facts about our nature in ethical theories must surely make the latter more effective. Beginning with the most fundamental results, that we are sentient beings, and our pleasure/pain faculties evolved in making our ancestors reproductively effective, proceeding to complex and unexpected findings, we note that this has immediate connection to the Principle of Goodness, as these help provide content for the terms "benefit" and "harm".

The adoption of the Principle, even by a single individual, has immediate consequences from this perspective for all those who interact with them: they have nothing to fear from those individuals, unless they themselves commence hostilities of some sort. Indeed, the adopter of the Principle will try to inculcate a feeling of beneficence towards all, and will naturally attempt to understand the causes of others' troubles. As [Smith] put it (Sect I Chap II): "But whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the

appearance of the contrary. ... How are the unfortunate relieved when they have found our a person to whom they can communicate the cause of their sorrow?"

All aspects of our investigation can now be seen to converge. The Principle is actually a twin directive, one of universal beneficence, namely that the most praiseworthy state is none other than to work for the benefit of everyone, and one of non-harm, that is, never attempt to harm anyone who has not by their own actions in some way forced a contrary course upon one. One who practices these, or a society that practices them, must inculcate a sense of safety and value in the recipient of this concern. This is a fact testified to from scientific findings and from inspection of one's own moral sentiments, much as Smith did in the above passage.

But we need science as a reality check. If we desire a world of peace and friendship, flourishing, care, compatibility with the environment and non-human life, then we need to also be warned about the things within our own natures that might interfere with our program. The elephant in the room, the obvious question about the Principle, arising from evolutionary considerations, is that the latter show why we naturally have greater concern and tend to be more altruistic towards those more closely related to us; yet the Principle tells us to try to benefit everyone. Can these be reconciled?

Firstly, we note that "everyone" includes ourselves and our close relatives. We are not being asked to be altruistic (at least, not in general, although, like every other ethical theory, the Principle encounters situations where altruism is called for). Secondly, it is strictly rational in ethical terms for us to be most concerned about ourselves, less so about those close to us (often our biological relations) and so on. This is because we are usually in the best position to know how to and be able to benefit ourselves, then our closest, and so on decreasingly. To see the reason, suppose someone decides to starve in order to give everything they have to the poor. Others who follow the Principle must be concerned about this foolish but innocent person, and will then feel obliged to divert effort from their other beneficial projects in order to stop the foolish one from dying of starvation. Such pointless self-neglect in fact causes trouble and loss for others. Therefore one should have concern for one's self and one's near ones, as that is usually the way to cause the least trouble for others who also act morally. Finally, we may note that being most concerned for one's self is not the same as being selfish. For example, one might enter a business deal primarily for reasons of personal advancement, and yet still ensure that everyone else (partners, clients, customers, employees, the community, the environment) also benefit generously. To put it another way, in evolutionary terms, all that is required for us to reproduce is that we effectively help ourselves and our nearest and dearest. But caring for others in distant places is an option open to us by virtue of our flexible minds, and so adopting an ethics that asks us to do so is perfectly feasible, and in fact is not even onerous. Despite the apparent altruism in being asked to try to benefit *everyone*, the Principle is not in conflict with human psychology.

Much more analysis needs to be done to firmly establish this conclusion, but it must surely be clear that explanatory theories do not inherently detract from any ethical philosophy that attempts to persuade us of rules as to how we should act. On the contrary, the latter are given an extra resource (the findings of evolutionary investigations of behaviour) to use to test ethical rules and practices according to chosen criteria. Indeed, from the perspective of process reality as discussed in our other paper, evolutionary studies of ethics buttress our assumption that realities in patterns of cause and effect underlie moral language and give meaning to words such as "good" and "evil",

and that it is therefore quite reasonable to ask (and not merely in a private sense) "What do these words *mean*?" Although such patterns are likely unrecognised and perhaps too complex to ever recognise in full (and this is part of the unique challenge and difficulty of the humanities), we might hope that careful statistical work within the evolutionary psychology framework can show the existence of some of them.

Where to from Here?

We have identified three kinds of ethical theories, two that attempt to develop ethical systems, and one that is purely explanatory of the existence and nature of ethical tendencies. In our category (a), (loosely) theories positing a source for ethical truth, we can consider the Principle of Goodness as another competing candidate. In category (c) (loosely) attempts to set up coherent systems of ethical practice, we can consider it to be an underlying source of ethical guidance to correct and adjust such theories, to 'keep them on track' (such as by pointing out the evil of slavery). Whichever way we view the Principle, category (b), scientific investigations, provides warnings of limitations and notice of opportunities that are open to our species.

We may now proceed by developing the Principle according to either a category (a) or (c) plan. The (a) plan would develop ethical understanding afresh from the Principle, and see where the effort leads us. Ethical concepts such as virtues would be developed anew under this plan. To see the kind of thing this implies, take our previous example: *Is* honesty really, always, the best policy? Clearly *not*, because an honest action can quite feasibly be part of a plan to harm someone; a person uninterested in truth for any moral reason might need it to more effectively plan harm and destruction, and honestly giving them the recipe for an atomic bomb might be nothing more than an attempt to further such a plan. The Principle does not recognise that virtues possess any inherent merit that isolates them from moral scrutiny, that makes them somehow the 'right thing to do' despite their damage in particular cases. Any value a virtue has, it has in consequence of its use in furtherance of avoiding harm or attempting benefit. Our other paper at this conference is a first step in following through this program.

The other useful program would be to take existing category (c) systems (such as Aristotelian, Confucian, etc. philosophies) and re-examine them to see whether they are justified in whole or part according to the Principle of Goodness, and to see what additional guidance or improvement can be had by informing the analysis at suitable points.

Whichever way one might proceed, the Principle of Goodness claims to be a realist theory, and reality sometimes surprises or even disappoints us. Any of our cherished beliefs or traditions might turn out to need change or even abandonment. Reality is a hard master, and its condition upon us all if we wish to make progress in ethics is that we have that special intellectual virtue, humility.

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