



Morality: Concept and Development

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Abstract

The system of values, standards, and precepts that direct human behavior in determining what is right and wrong is referred to as morality. The essay *Morality: Concept and Development* examines the concept of morality and charts its philosophical and historical development in various countries. It looks at how moral concepts develop through social interaction, cultural traditions, and material circumstances rather than in a vacuum, reflecting shifting social structures and human needs.

The article explores early moral frameworks that were based on custom, religion, and community living, where moral duties were intimately related to social peace and collective survival. As philosophical ideas evolved, morality became a topic of logical investigation as scholars looked for universal rules controlling human behavior. The article illustrates how moral reasoning changed from character-based norms to rule-based and outcome-oriented approaches by highlighting significant contributions from ethical traditions like consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.

The essay also highlights how morality is dynamic and influenced by political, economic, and historical shifts. As a reflection of the complexity of modern life, contemporary moral discourse increasingly tackles questions of social justice, human rights, and individual autonomy. The article highlights the philosophical conflict between culturally localized moral practices and universal moral principles. It contends that a balanced viewpoint that takes into account both historical variation and common human values are necessary to comprehend the evolution of morality. In the end, the essay portrays morality as a dynamic and ever-evolving phenomenon that is crucial to ethical contemplation and human social life.

Keywords: Morality, ethical development, social interaction, cultural traditions, human behavior

Introduction

The Concept of Morality

As we normally understand the concept of morality it may conveniently be divided into descriptive and normative senses. In the first sense, morality is the prevailing rule of conduct in our society held to be the guiding principles in differentiating right and wrong. In the second sense, no specific group, society, or person has ever claimed morality. A rule of behaviour is referred to as the best option in this normative meaning of morality. The two senses have rendered the concept of morality somewhat ambiguous.

The commonality between descriptive and normative senses of 'morality' is that in both the senses morality refers to the guiding principles of behaviour that entail the liberal value of avoiding harm to others. Gert defines morality as, "...a[n] [informal] public system applying to all rational persons governing behaviour which affects others and which has the minimisation of evils [or harm] as its end [or goal], and which includes what are commonly known as moral rules as its core" [1].

Gert is asserting that morality is a 'public system' guiding conduct, which is equally applicable to all persons and is part of the judgment of behaviour of others. It should be realised, therefore, that morality as a public system does not necessitate universal agreement on all moral judgements. The disagreements cannot be denied but that disagreements occur within the framework of an agreement present as guiding principles. Gert is better understood by an example, in any game, let us say, 'football' there is at work a publicly observable and agreed system. The fundamental tenet of agreement is that players must abide by the referees or officials decisions, even if they differ within predetermined bounds, such as when it comes to calling fouls. Gert's discourse on morality presents an 'informal' public system

of rules guiding behaviour, which draws its authority from its own intrinsic value. Morality is accepted without any formal decision or procedure while its champions claim it to be rationally acceptable. The assertion of rationality can only be supported by the presumption that every reasonable individual would propose a moral code.

However, when talking of system of morality the discourse is not only with regard to governing behavior affecting others but also to govern behaviour that affects the agent herself/himself, for example, a supposedly immoral behaviour like taking drugs, not developing ones talent, etc. This view is contrary to the Utilitarian notion that morality is to be a guide to behaviour that directly or indirectly affects others and the individual with respect to himself is free not to accept the prevailing morality.

According to utilitarians, morality should be viewed as having the objective of reducing evil or harm in order to increase happiness for a larger number of people. The fundamental concept of utilitarianism is that maximising happiness requires minimising harm. Everyone who uses morality in its normative sense agrees that morality is concerned with behaviours that either directly or indirectly cause harm to others, as well as actions that prevent harm. Rules that forbid doing direct or indirect harm, such as those that forbid murdering, inflicting pain, lying, and breaking commitments, are part of the moral principle paradigm. The goal of morality, according to utilitarians, should be to lessen evil or injury in order to increase happiness for a greater number of people. The core tenet of utilitarianism is that reducing damage is necessary to maximise enjoyment. Everyone who applies morality in its normative form acknowledges that morality encompasses both actions that prevent harm and behaviours that either directly or indirectly cause harm to others. The moral

principle paradigm includes laws that prohibit causing direct or indirect harm, such as those that prohibit murder, causing pain, lying, and violating promises.

The assumption of rationality in morality can be under challenge in the normative concept of morality. Unlike the descriptive definition, the normative definition gives significance to the frequently asked question, "Why should I be moral?" The idea that immorality is not necessarily unreasonable is also consistent with the question. Rather than imposing the framework of rationality on morality, the normative definition ensures that being moral is never irrational. Next, the normative definition explains why we want others to behave properly and why they want us to do the same. "Why should I be moral?" is the question can be rephrased to say that everyone should act and think morally, claiming that morality is generally effective as a means of settling societal conflicts. Once more, if someone who has embraced the moral perspective of impartiality and empathy for others asks why they should follow the moral guideline all that is required is to mention that impartial people would prefer to do so. However, it is very challenging to respond to the question of why one should initially embrace the moral point of view. This is particularly true when acting morally results in significant loss for the individual agent, such as when one puts another's interests ahead of one's own [2].

While the majority of philosophers do not employ morality in a descriptive sense, nevertheless, ethical relativists and post-modernists claim the validity of different described moralities. The ethical relativists deny the possibility of universal normative morality and do not treat morality as being merely linguistic and used merely in the descriptive sense. They assert that the consideration of morality as universal code of conduct as being approved by all rational persons under any reasonable and possible conditions is untenable. This does not in any sense deny that there are relative rules that if adopted bring about and maintain harmonious relations between men in a society, which change with time and are ever evolving, however, it is difficult to pin point its origin.

Development of Morality

Sidgwick and other philosophers believe that explanations of the origins of morality are unnecessary. His contention is that, "...the principle in man that governs or ought to govern is regarded merely as the faculty of knowing our true good, together with its main causes or conditions, it hardly seems important to inquire how this faculty originated, any more than it is important for a geometer to investigate the origin of the spatial faculty...investigating into the moral condition of children and savages, and even animals, and more or less conjectural theories of the soul's growth and development, have been commonly regarded as necessary appendages or introductions to modern – ethical discussion" [3].

On the contrary, Ferm not only outlines an origin of morality but insists it cannot be equated with the rise in philosophical speculation, "One should not suppose that philosophic speculation created the moral problem as a historical event...the moral situation is as old as man. Prior to the rise of philosophic reflection morals existed in a natural state and their expression in literature was in some such form as myth, poetry or legal procedure" [4].

A reading of the above shows, however, reveals a contradiction because it is asserted that morality originated with the creation of moral problems reflected in myths, poetry or legal procedures, which obviously arise out of human realisation. The realisation leading to its expression in whatever form cannot be denied to be philosophic, however rudimentary. But then it is also claimed that morality is as old as man leaving no room for the creation of the moral problem leading to the origin of morality and makes it appear as if morality has descended from the heavens.

The emphasis on the concept of morality and its development has emerged mainly but not exclusively out of the Western Philosophy. Western morality is dominated by individualism and Protestantism. Western philosophers have argued that the original source of morality is the growth of moral consciousness, either social or individual, which is depend upon the degree of cognitive or intellectual development. This has led many philosophers, like Mayers, to argue, "...this mental advance constitutes merely the condition precedent of real civilization, the distinctive characteristic of which must be a true morality" [5]. This development finds, according to them, objective expression of 'good' or 'bad' or 'right' or 'wrong' leading to religious ideas and customs. Mayers argues, "One of the most important facts of the moral history of the race is the gradual moralisation of man's at first unethical conceptions of the gods, and the rise out of the unethical religions of primitive times of the great ethical world religions" [6].

Hardly anyone will disagree that clearer perception of morality either modified the prevalent religious practices or brought about new religion. Necessarily, the advent of a new religion brings with it a clearer conception of the expected human conduct. Barnes rightly points out that from the twenty-fourth century B.C. onward, "...most popular impressions of Mesopotamian culture held by western peoples were drawn from their enemies especially the Hebrews, a legend arose of the shocking immorality and debauchery of these people of ancient Near Orient. Babylon has commonly become a proverb of sexual abandon and degeneracy on a large scale" [7].

The created moral problem saw ancient religions cluster around the biological necessity of survival and corollary laid stress on fertility and the reproduction rites, to the extent that institution of young women as sacred harlots of gods developed. These institutions naturally lend themselves to sex orgies in the name of gods. However, Barnes points out, "Family morality seems to have been about as high among the people of ancient Mesopotamia as it was elsewhere in the age. The code of Hammurabi prescribes severe punishment for adultery, especially for the woman. In a patriarchal society, fidelity on the part of the wife was especially demanded so as to insure legitimate off-spring who could carry on the appropriate patriarchal rites" [8].

This eventually necessitated the development of morality regulating small insular societies, but with the increase in interaction between these insular isolated societies the moral code started to get a more universalised form, increasing the generality with time and advancement of human society. A discussion of the stages of this development will be a digression for this thesis. However, the earliest attempts to universalise are easily detectible with the Greeks, as Tufts points out, "...[The Greek] poets, philosophers, and moralists of the fifth century are directed for the most part

against the unbridled license of men, their lack of discipline and of obedience to law” [9]. The dominant concern was unearthing the origin and regularities of physical world and the place of human soul in it. Tufts has argued, “Greek ethics began thus with a problem which was completely parallel to the initial problem of physics” [10].

The demands of maintaining city-states are the fundamental source of the Greek morality. The debate that resulted from this in turn necessitated an analysis of two self-evident presuppositions for the Greeks: the legitimacy of the law and compliance with it. The parallel was that, regardless of time or location, immutable nature demonstrates universal moral laws that govern human behaviour. Tufts points out, “[for Protagoras]...the gods gave to all men in equal measure a sense of justice, and of ethical respect or reverence, in order that in the struggle of life they might be able to form permanent unions for mutual preservation. The nature of practical life in primary ethical feelings is which impel man to union in society and in the state” [11].

The later sophists too concentrated on moral issues as part of the training they imparted for political and social success. For the Sophists whatever was held good for an individual was regarded as justice or as law and therefore good for the state. Since the state laws are relative, therefore, customs and convention vary from state to state. The sophists argued that even in the same state the laws change in the hands of the ruling elite. The later Greeks, as mentioned above required universalisation of values, took the state to be the measure of morality, which may be conventions but are liable to be changed if so required by the state and not the individual. This view is echoed by Plato when he says, “...the ethical end of an individual has to be measured by the perfection of the State and the perfection of the State determines the moral excellence of each individual” [12].

Socrates changed the emphasis by arguing that true morality entails having insight into the good and that morality entail "knowledge of the good." According to Plato's Republic, morality was created by the powerful, who spread moral guidelines for their subjects in order to more easily control them. MacIntyre summarises Plato's perspective, “...moral concepts are only intelligible against the background of a certain sort of social order; he then tries to delineate it, providing or attempting to provide at the same time a justification in terms of the order of the universe” [13].

According to Plato, moral behaviour benefits the doer while immoral behaviour harms them. He was interested in justifying activities as either moral or immoral. He made an effort to demonstrate how moral behaviour benefits everyone and society as a whole. According to Aristotle, morality entails acting in a way that will move us closer to "the good for man" rather than because we believe it to be right in and of itself. So, like Aristotle, Democritus also regarded morality to be its own reward. However, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle contend that virtue is the foundation of morality and that virtue is primarily or entirely its own reward. The Greek concept of morality is important for while rejecting the mystic doctrine of good life leading to immortal existence in a world-to-come and to apprehend the real good life as providing surety on the greatest amount of happiness here and now and to show how this happiness could be guaranteed and acquired. Therefore, the Greeks generally thought of morality in terms of harmonious character.

There is a pause following the Greek perspective, and moral dilemmas reappear during the medieval period when philosophers ventured into theological rather than merely intellectual pursuits. According to the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, morality is defined as following the commandments. Religious moralists might accept secular morality, which is logically distinct from religion and necessitates a separate interpretation of moral concepts. In this regard, Nielson points out, “Secular morality starts with the assumption that happiness and self-awareness is fundamental human goods and that pain and suffering are never desirable in themselves...[and] tried to show that a man with secular knowledge alone can bind clear and permanent sources of happiness...” [14].

Hobbes maintained in early modern philosophy that since morality is predicated on a social compact intended for self-preservation, the contract does not renounce an individual's inherent right to self-defence. The concept of morality and religion are socialised and become intertwined singular aspect of life. The intertwining takes place primarily because of the care for societal matters, the basis of secular morality, is also involved in all religions and their practices. However, the two terms refer conceptually to different phenomena and are treated separately.

While morality has typically been considered of as a means of controlling individual behaviour in groups, religion involves and occupies beliefs, attitudes, and practices that relate humans to supernatural agency or sacred truths. Secular morality seeks to resolve conflicts that may occur in social settings and is a response to the issue of cooperation among rival individuals or groups. The fact that, appealing to common ideas about the supernatural or the sacred can occasionally be used to justify morality serves as an example of the intricate interaction between religion and morality [15].

Some thinkers and philosophers doubt the usefulness of religion in today's context. Marx did not present a thesis or justify his views on religion but understood it to be an effort to maintain dominance of advantaged layer or ruling groups of the society through moral norms and codes. Marx opposes the development of complete human freedom and moral responsibility and rejects religion [16]. The history of philosophy shows an intertwining between religion and morality, thinker; however, Marx believed that the connection between morality and religion was a regrettable continuation that had outlived its usefulness.

In the past, morality has been classified into two main groups: deontological and teleological. Nowell-Smith separates the two schools while arguing for the teleological, “Teleologists regard moral rules as rules for producing what is good...and avoiding what is bad...They are to be judged empirically on the basis of their tendency to promote what is good and prevent what is bad...[and] deontologists regard rule as fundamental. Moral rules are not rules for achieving ideal ends, dependent for their validity on their success or failure in bringing about these ends, but are worthy of obedience in their own right; and a moral system is a system of rules in which some rules are regarded as depending on others...” [17].

From a deontological standpoint, Roth argues that deeds are inherently good or bad, independent of the results they yield. However, this theoretical approach to morality emphasises what is required and what one should do without making any mention of values or notions of goodness [18].

On the other hand teleological moral theory is based on the intuition that an action cannot be right if it brings about a bad state of affairs.

Hume, following Protagoras and Hobbes, felt that morality is a system of constraints on conduct with the central purpose to protect the interests of others. The moral system then presents itself to an agent as a check on his natural inclinations or spontaneous tendencies to act ^[19]. Hume asserts that morality is needed to solve basic problems in life. Mackie, however, feels the issue to rest elsewhere. He feels that limited resources and sympathies together generate both competition leading to conflict and absence of what would be mutual beneficial co-operation ^[20].

As a deontologist, Kant believed that morality was something that all people wanted to unite via reason. According to him, moral philosophy aims to achieve the highest good, which is for people to obey moral laws in order to complete their obligations and realise their free will. Because they are unconditional and serve simply the fulfilment of moral law, such acts represent the highest good. For Kant the moral law is: "Always act in such a way that the principle of your action can serve as a universal law" ^[21].

Kant asserts that we may act according to maxims that we can universalise. The formulation of these universal laws is logically prior to experience and not impressed by experience. Morality, according to him, is rules ascertained through reason. He emphasised the significance of adopting only a concept that must be a desirable and universal law, which is thus a "categorical imperative" and a measure of all conduct. According to Kant, deeds are morally acceptable as long as they uphold people's autonomy, freedom, and dignity.

Fagothey argues that morality is the quality of human acts which helps to identify right or wrong, good or bad. He therefore distinguishes human acts as belonging to subjective and objective morality. Subjective morality looks at the act as conditioned by the individual agents knowledge and consent, by his background, training, emotional stability, and other personal behaviour. It asks whether the act agrees or disagrees with the agents own sense of right and wrong. Objective morality looks at the act simply as a deed done, independently of any modifications or voluntariness on the part of the doer ^[22].

Kantian ethics is subjective morality since it requires that the moral agent exercises his own awareness of right and wrong. However, for Hegel, morality is reversion of the will to itself, which is purely spiritual and is therefore simply objective and assumes no binding duty towards family, society and state. Hegel shifted the focus of morality from subjective to objective morality ^[23].

The utilitarian Bentham moves the discussion away from the subjective/objective divide and towards utility. He contends that usefulness is the essential tenet or standard of morality. For him, the goal of moral behaviour is utility and argues, "...the art of maximizing happiness: it gives the code of laws by which that conduct is suggested whose result will, the whole human existence, being taken into account, leave the greatest quantity of felicity" ^[24].

Bentham tries to demonstrate that morality is about creating outcomes that advance the common good and that motivations are irrelevant unless they happen to have an impact on the outcomes. As a result, he listed the moral principle of "the greatest good of the greatest number" and

the conduct that results from it. Morality as utility has three different sub-approaches, *viz.* hedonistic, eudemonistic and ideal. The first treats pleasure as the essentiality; the second argues that the value of an act is denoted by the extent of happiness, and value can be consistently understood in terms of delight and pain; and the third, presumes an altruistic view and talks in terms of the greater good. Bentham's utilitarianism is hedonistic, while Mill adheres to the ideal sense to assert that utilitarianism is associated with rational choice and the purposes of action.

Kant, Mill, and Bentham did not establish a novel moral framework; rather, they merely substantiate the prevailing or accepted morality, as Hobbes did. Nevertheless, Nietzsche approaches morality in a distinct manner from Jaspers's interpretation, "...[Nietzsche's] attack on morality is not an attack on morality in general, but an attack of one morality through another morality where we put an unconditional value on something, there we speak morally and vice versa, where we speak morally; there we are talking something as unconditional..." ^[25].

Nietzsche challenged the prevailing European morality by portraying it as 'slave morality', composed by the vulnerable in order to improve their capacity to endure the anguish inflicted by their superiors. Nietzsche founded his theory on freedom or self-creation, departing from the conventional explanations of morality. However, Nietzsche's contemporaries the pragmatist philosophers, like Dewey point out, "All morality is social...our conduct is socially conditioned whether we perceive the fact or not...it is consistent to say that morality ought to be social for...morals are social. The question of ought...is a question of better and worse in social affairs" [*Italics in the original*] ^[26]. For the pragmatists morality is not the product as is made out of an inner intuitive faculty, but is the product of the society.

Among the contemporary philosophers, Habermas's approach is centered on morality and political philosophy. He changes the emphasis of the critique of reason from transcendental subjectivity to communication or the concept of practical reason in terms of communicative reason. Similar to Kant, Habermas makes a distinction between different kinds of practical reasoning and the related kinds of "ought" appropriate to enquiries about what is morally correct, ethically prudent, or pragmatically expedient. His Discourse Ethics' only goal is to restore the moral perspective that allows for the first and unbiased determination of moral issues. Here, Roth argues, "The basic principle of his discourse ethics of Jurgen Habermas is a clear modification of the categorical imperative. The principle is that for a norm to be valid it must be accepted in a practical discussion by all those who are affected by the norm. The participants in the practical discourse must then also foresee the consequences of the general observance of the norm for the realization of the particular interests of each of them. This view that moral norms must be constructed by communities engaged in free practical discourse implies that the good society must be fundamentally democratic" ^[27].

According to American contemporary philosopher John Rawls, the idea of justice as fairness comes before the idea of virtue and must also constrain it. According to him, equality in the performance of fundamental rights and obligations is a prerequisite for a just society. The true moral force of social norms and regulations comes from

their fairness rather than their outcomes. In his Theory of Justice, Rawls contends that a state of reflective equilibrium is the outcome of a dynamic interplay between moral common sense and critical reasoning. From this mental and emotional perspective, everyone is viewed as having unique worth and dignity. Therefore, Rawls contends that it is precisely because of this that we adopt the stance that morality has nothing to do with spirituality per se, but rather has everything to do with human goodness and nothing that can be deemed mysterious.

However, contemporary consequentialist like Peter Singer agrees that everyone should be aware of their moral obligation to act in a way that will result in the best outcomes; however, they do not believe that moral blame should be applied to someone who is really unaware of what course of action will result in the best outcomes.

Conclusion

Therefore, historically speaking, morality has been a part of Greek philosophy rather than existing in a vacuum. The concept of morality itself is combined with religion for a considerable amount of time following the enlightened period of Greek philosophy. The idea of morality was theoretically separated during the modern era, while it was still entwined with religion. But in the postmodern era, morality and religion have become relative, returning to the ideas of the Sophists and Heraclitus.

On the other hand, Marxist philosophers established the idea of human morality and sharply critiqued the idea of morality and its evolution. Despite their best efforts, philosophers have not been able to provide an acceptable definition of morality. The underlying feature of a constantly evolving social reality is the cause of that shift. History demonstrates how beliefs and societal structures have changed throughout time, from nomadic to agricultural, from agricultural to feudal, and now from feudal to capitalism. The capitalist system will need to evolve, and it might give way to a socialist one that upholds human morality, equality in all areas of life, and social equality for all. Marxists contend that morality is a form of ideology that contains the concept of dominance and is illusory in content with class character. However, the history of morality shows a process of concretisation of moral ideals leading to a less abstract notion of it because there appears to be some foundation of the perspective moving away from the transcendental, which generally ties it to politics.

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