

Everyone receives relevant reasons for moral action: and why valid amoral reasons are indeed amoral

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1 Introduction

In this essay we will be looking at whether we have reasons to act morally, and at the related question of whether we can have amoral reasons for forming moral intentions. The first question is also known as Hume's 'is – ought' problem: The problem of how to get from 'is', the state of affairs, to discussing 'ought', what morally speaking should be done, in a way that can be seen as argumentatively sound.¹

If we speak to non-philosophers, the 'is – ought' problem hardly seems to be an issue. The answers commonly given range from 'one should be moral, because it is wrong to do otherwise', to 'it would be bad for society if everyone started murdering each other, so being moral is important'. Morality here is either taken for granted, or unproblematically seen in terms of its relationship with other ends. Yet many philosophers hold that there is no way from 'is' to 'ought', while much depends on this, such as whether we can convince morally ignorant people to act otherwise, assuming they are open to reason.

What we are going to argue is that there is a way from 'is' to 'ought'. However this way is not direct. We are not going to prove that one can derive moral statements directly from factual statements, as Searle tried to do.² It will rather be a detour that shows how we, assuming both our human condition and our rationality, necessarily receive (as in being given) moral reasons: and this in the minimalistic sense of pro tanto, prima facie reasons for being considerate of others. Thus they will be

reasons as far as they go, and until rebutted. They will, however, not be calling upon self-interest or something similar, but be proper moral reasons that need to be responded to in moral terms. Also, the given path will only apply for normal human beings, not for neuropathological cases, nor for all possible rational agents, as Kant tried to do.³ In addition morality here will be defined in Scanlon's narrow sense of 'what we owe to each other'; what obligations we have to others.⁴

Now in order to do this we have to address two separate problems. The first is that of 'why to act at all?', as opposed to merely observe all the time. Thus we start by going from what 'is', to intentions and actions. The second is 'why to be considerate of others?', as in why to consider their reasons at all. For this we go from having rational intentions to the consideration of others in the formation of ones own intentions.

Then I am going to argue that, whether this is enough to establish that we have moral reasons, or whether it is impossible by definition to find amoral reasons for forming moral intentions, depends on how we approach morality, and whether we take a moral view on amoral reasons. More precisely it depends on whether we recognize the distinction between the reasons to be moral, and the moral reasons that can be considered valid once we are speaking in moral terms. Reasons for performing morally praiseworthy actions can, after all, be separated from reasons for forming moral intentions. And thus it is incorrect to

¹D. Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 334.

²J. R Searle. "How to Derive "Ought" from" Is"". In: *The Philosophical Review* 73.1 (1964), pp. 43–58.

³M. Gregor and C. Korsgaard. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 165-170.

⁴T. Scanlon. *What we owe to each other*. Belknap Press, 1998, p. 79.

demand of the latter that they be moral, or even morally acceptable, in order to be valid reasons for being moral.

2 From 'is' to the amoral 'ought'

Morality applies to either intentions or actions, not to knowledge. Thus we need to go from facts to actions. Our first step from 'is' to the amoral 'ought' consists of acknowledging that, borrowing Anscombe's example, it is possible to give a factual description of what some being - say a plant - needs in order to fulfil some condition, such as to flourish.⁵ It is a separate question whether we want the plant to flourish or not, so we have not established anything about intentions or wanting to act yet. And even if a human were described here, it would not entail reasons to act for an amoral being only recording the facts. But we can go from 'is' to 'it needs' without any objections.

The next step, from 'it needs' to 'I need', consists in not repeating the 'observer fallacy' that is common in philosophy. And that is that we, as philosophers, are mortals, and at the very least cannot ignore the description of one human being or cause: ourselves. We are in the hot seat, we have needs, and assuming a (selfish) will to live, these needs cannot leave us totally cold, not all of the time. In the existentialist tradition this is described as humans not being *in-itself*, like passive things, but *for-itself*, always engaged with their surroundings.

Thus our needs mean that we have to have at least some intentions, and intentions that result in actions. Presuming one is psychologically normal, not totally apathetic, or in a vegetative state, this move from 'I need' to 'I intend', and from there to 'I act', holds and is trivial. Now of course we will intend widely different things, and are only compelled to act in our own interest at this stage of the argument. And while this may look bleak from a moral point of view, we are at least done

establishing that we can go from 'is' to an amoral 'ought', assuming our human condition: 'we act because we have needs'.

3 From the amoral ought to reasons for being considerate of others

Now that we know we are going to act one way or another, we will make the transition from intentions, to moral intentions. The first step consists in acknowledging the fact that, as humans, we make choices: not all of our needs can be fulfilled, and certainly not all at the same time. Now in order to decide between various options, and to establish our intentions, we reason, insofar as we are reasonable beings. We do this not just in an instrumental sense, but also to establish our aims. Optionally this use of reasons can be assumed for the sake of argument, as this essay is about the reasons for morality, and thus presupposes us being reasonable beings. In either case we can now go from 'I intend' to 'I reason'.

Next, if I establish my intentions through reasoning, this means that I am sensitive to reasons. Reasons however, even when we only use them as part of our own deliberations, are expressed in language. And this provides our second step. Because, as Korsgaard already famously noted, we are fundamentally open towards others through language.⁶ And thus we are open to reasons expressed by others, not just our own. This makes us sensitive to rational critique. Therefore, thanks to the use of reasons for establishing intentions, we can go from 'I reason' to 'I am open to rational critique'. Now of course this critique can still be practical and moral, for good and for bad, and is heteronomous in Kant's sense, but we are nevertheless fundamentally open to it.

And now that we have established this, we can go from 'I am open to rational critique' to 'I receive moral reasons'. This because given the former, and assuming at least some social interactions, we receive at minimum some *primo facie* reasons that call for the consideration of others. And us being reason-

⁵G. E. M. Anscombe. "Modern moral philosophy". In: *Philosophy* 33.124 (1958), pp. 1-19, p. 7.

⁶C. M. Korsgaard, O. O'Neill, and G. A. Cohen. *The sources of normativity*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 138.

able, we cannot simply, or immediately ignore them. We have to (privately) rebut or bracket (Scanlon's term) them in a reasonable way. And this means reasoning in moral terms, even if the only moral decision we are going to make is to always bracket or disregard the interests of others. Not responding in moral terms, but say in aesthetic or economic terms is as unreasonable as making an argument about the aesthetic qualities of a bill, instead of paying it (or arguing over doing so), when presented with one.

Now bringing in Scanlon's contractualism shows that this is all that is needed to arrive at an 'ought'. As according to him, morality should be seen in terms of whether we are able to justify our actions to others. And this covers all morally relevant intentions (in the sense of 'what we owe to others'), as they are those for which we are judgement-sensitive: i.e. those intentions that we can be made to think differently about through reasoning.⁷ Accepting this, we can be said to be considerate of others in the morally relevant sense.

It could be objected that, while this might require us to consider the moral reasons of people within earshot, it does not require us to consider all humans, violating most respectable moral theories. However just like the question of what interests of others to regard, which entities to consider as moral patients is a moral question itself. And having only set the aim of showing that we at least receive some reasons for being moral, reasons for including all beings of type X, should be derived from these, or from the universality of reason. Better arguments about these are expressed elsewhere. And lastly the question of whether something does or does not feel morally compelling to us, is an irrelevant one, as in this essay we look at reasons, and thus assume a rational, or communicative view of morality.

Of course there can be other compelling reasons, benefits, and even brute force applied in situations in which reasoned critique is ex-

pressed or imagined (when other peoples' critique is internalized). But in the minimalistic sense of receiving pro tanto, prima facie reasons to be moral (e.g. to engage with moral arguments) our journey from 'is' to 'ought' is complete: 'we receive at least some moral reasons from others'. Thus making it impossible for a person to be completely amoral (as opposed to a subset of his reasons).

4 What amoral reasons are (and not what they should be)

Most readers versed in morality would be quick to object that the reasons given above for everyone necessarily engaging with moral reasons, seem irrelevant. Either they are descriptive and depend on morally irrelevant properties of humans, such as their neediness, and their responsiveness to reasons (a friend even mentioned it being on par with an amygdala hack). Or the exact opposite, which those thinking along Neo-Kantian lines might put forward: The assumed properties, such as that of being reasonable (being rational and responsive to reasons) are already moral ones. Those would then do the real work of introducing morality into the argument. In response to both objections, we can take a step back to examine how we envisage morality, moral reasons, and their relationship to other kinds of reasons. This will show us that, in at least one view, responsiveness to reasons is an amoral property, but not an irrelevant one for this. Because it also allows us to have amoral reasons for being moral.

One way to see morality — let us call it the *internal view of morality* (not to be confused with a 1st person perspective) — is Kant's pure practical reason: a system that is pure, strictly separated, and internally consistent. In it the only valid starting-point for morality is the 'good will'. And it takes moral reasons — through the Categorical Imperative — to function as steps in a 'moral proof' that allows one to find out what is permitted and what one is obliged to do. In this view trying to find other/amoral reasons to be moral lands one at Prichard's dilemma: moral good-

⁷Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, pp. 20-22.

ness would either be taken for granted, and thus finding amoral reasons for moral intentions would be impossible, or they could be found, but then would not be of the kind that we expect a moral person to have. Applying such reasons would dilute moral reasoning.⁸ It would distract from the moral – immoral axis, and thus prevent one from building a morally pure system.

Nevertheless another view is possible. Let us call it the *external view of morality*. According to it the method of reason is applicable across a wide variety of systems and their axes such as: true – false, legal – illegal, wasteful – profitable, and moral – immoral. Now, while the method of reason is the same, reasons are different kinds of steps in the proofs of each of these systems. Therefore it is not surprising to find that amoral reasons are very different from moral ones: for example, they don't seem to carry any trace of an obligatory force. But if this is the case, and amoral reasons (say those relating to what 'is') are thus categorically different from moral reasons, is it then correct to require them to be morally relevant? We would say not.

Demanding that amoral reasons be morally relevant is duplicating the 'is - ought' distinction. If one does this, instead of asking whether we receive reasons for acting morally, or whether we are responsive to reasons (both 'is'-es in the *external view*), it is asked whether amoral reasons for acting morally are morally compelling ('ought is ought'). And this need not be the case. Going in one direction from 'is' to 'ought' is enough to have amoral reasons for forming moral intentions. Neo-Kantian moral philosophers did not see this because, while they rightly require that reasons for performing morally praiseworthy actions have moral properties, such as that they be 'of the right kind', or that they originate from a good will, they wrongly demanded such properties from amoral reasons for forming moral intentions too (confounded

by the fact that they both are called reasons). The comparison with mathematics (in which this never happened) makes the situation even clearer: do reasons to engage in mathematics need to be mathematically proven? No. The same distinction exists between the amoral reasons to engage in morality, and morality's moral reasons.

And it should be noted that from the *external view* amoral reasons are not all of the same kind. In the *internal view* they are often lumped together as the advisable kind, as from it, only moral reasons hold and entail obligations, while all amoral reasons seem 'optional', or merely advisable. By contrast, in the *external view* the 'is' – 'ought' gap is different from both the 'is' – 'is legal', and the 'is' – 'is profitable' gap. Thus this view also allows for economic, or even selfish reasons for being moral ('is profitable' – 'ought'). This case was not made in sections 2 and 3, as while what is categorically human is (often) merely considered morally irrelevant (morally neutral), economic incentive and selfish motivations have a bigger potential to give rise to immoral intentions. And allowing amoral reasons with immoral potential for engaging with moral reasons seems paradoxical.

However, this is only an illusion, as, while amoral reasons for being moral (e.g. for receiving and dealing with moral reasons) might be immoral, the test of the moral reasoning, and the reasons that follow, is still along the moral – immoral axis. Therefore the latter are compatible with, and subjected to, the criteria of the *internal view of morality*, and consequently congruent with most of moral philosophy.

5 Conclusion

Thus in a non-trivial sense, both common answers mentioned in the introduction: that of taking morality for granted, and that of arguing for being moral in terms of other ends, present sensible ways of seeing the relationship between reasons and morality. But instead of them being the two horns of Prichard's dilemma, or the distinction be-

⁸H. A. Prichard. "Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?" In: *Mind* 21.81 (1912), pp. 21–37.

tween Kant's pure and 'impure' practical reason, they can be seen as the *internal view* of demanding moral standards for all reasons, versus the *external view* of acknowledging different standards for different kinds of reasons. Then it becomes obvious that, because there is an 'is – ought' gap, valid amoral reasons for being moral are indeed amoral, and that it thus is incorrect to demand that they be morally relevant, or even morally acceptable.

Therefore we have shown that there is a basis for 'ought' in 'is', even if their reasons are of different kinds when seen from the *external view*. We did this by first going from 'is' to 'I ought' in the amoral sense, and then from this 'I ought', to 'I am considerate of others'. Major steps in this are the assumption of the human condition: e.g. that we are no detached observers, but have to act anyway; and the assumption of reason, and that, through language, we are open to the rational critique of others. This leaves us with a categorically human way of receiving moral reasons. Albeit in the very minimalistic sense of pro tanto, prima facie reasons for regarding at least some others. Admittedly, whether this is true is an 'is' question, and thus might be argued to be, in the end, better established by empirical means.

And of course establishing that we receive moral reasons in the minimalistic sense of pro tanto, prima facie reasons, is not enough to convince people to behave morally. This is because people easily can, and do, discard moral reasons. The way in which moral reasons — presumably — most often are discarded is by bracketing: things are not considered ones job or role, not regarded 'professional', or seen as for others to decide. Therefore the question of responsibility, especially in the sense of attributability, is an important issue to look at next. But qua rational beings, all humans should have moral reasons, and — pending empirical study — they do. Therefore the harmful views that we can have no amoral reasons to be moral, and that many even have no moral reasons at all, are shown to be wrong, at least in one reasonable view.

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