

The view that morality is based on self-interest

Experience, Human Nature



Thomas Jefferson said that " self-interest, or rather self-love, or egoism, has been more plausibly substituted as the basis of morality" suggesting that morality is indeed based on self-interest. However, it must first be made clear what morality is. Morality is the distinction between what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what is immoral. It is the distinction between infanticide (immoral, bad) and Mother Teresa's work (moral, good). It is noteworthy to keep in mind that there are also amoral acts - acts which have no moral weight attached to them.

The fathers of philosophy, Aristotle and Plato put forward a theory of morality in which they determined that it was the case that morality is based on self-interest. Although not in the way that the contractarian Hobbes suggested. Hobbes suggested that we all have a subjective view of our self-interest and this is best fulfilled by obeying the terms of the contract. Plato and Aristotle used an objective view of what was 'good' and in our self-interest meaning that it was independently defined as being as good from one's own judgement.

For example, although spending a lot of time on the internet may bring pleasure to me, it does nothing for my education. The former is Hobbes definition at work and the latter is what is objectively good (meaning the Greeks' theory). It comes as no surprise that the Ancient Greeks had very different concepts which they saw as fundamental to ethics. Eudemonia (the ultimate goal in life) translates as 'happiness' but it has several distinctions from what we conceive as 'happiness'. Firstly, it is a reference to all of life and not a single please which occurs as one moment in time.

It is also not a reference to one component of the good life and it is not something which we can seek or find rather it arises out of what we do. The definition differs so vastly, that perhaps the word 'flourishing' may be a better translation of 'eudemonia'. Another term 'ergon' is also a common used concept amongst the philosophy which we are about to discuss. It means 'function' - it is linked to eudemonia in that for something to be 'good' it must fulfil its function. A good pen is one that allows me to write on paper, for instance.

The last fundamental concept is 'arete' which means 'virtue' however it refers to excelling in particular area of life. It's very much like a habit or a quality. These concepts are all linked, to reach happiness; we must ask ourselves of our function and then excel at it. Once this is achieved behaving morally and just flows from the position that is gained. Thus self-interest is the motivator in being moral. Hedonism, the view that one should seek what one pleasures (no matter the bearing in morality) was staunchly rejected by Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's Gorgias, Aristotle confronts Callicles' hedonistic behaviour.

Aristotle says that the argument put forward is nothing more than sophistry for although it is in Callicles best interest to run away from a battle it shows nothing but cowardice. Callicles at this moment accepts - most certainly down to the zeitgeist of the time which shunned those who didn't fight however this does not negate his argument. Indeed, Plato reinforces is by explaining that man who has to constantly fill his barrel with water because

of a hole (the water being an analogy for pleasure and barrel for life) is less happy than a man who does not.

Thus 'eudemonia' trumps simplistic hedonism and it is rejected by Plato and Aristotle. As aforementioned it must be known what our function is. Plato and Aristotle both said that we must look inside our soul to find out our function as it is determined by it. However the way they both define soul is different. Plato claims that there are three parts; reason, desire and spirit. To reach eudemonia, reason must be in control (like a chariot rider) of the two impulses desire and spirit (like horses).

Once this is done we can reach the perfect Form of the Good (which all good things relate to). This form is present, like all forms, in the realm of the forms and not this one. Once this achieved, then we will be moral and just - but it is vital that the balance between desire and spirit is controlled by reason.

Aristotle disagree with the single Good Form saying that there is more than one good. Indeed this seems to conform to our view, there isn't one good which every good thing relates to in metaphysical realm. This wasn't the only thing Aristotle and Plato differ on.

Aristotle claims that a beast or a god was he who did not need or want a single person thus we must consider how our emotions, we and desires fit in living with other people. He did somewhat agree with Plato in the he said that the rational needs to be in control but for Aristotle there is a rational and non-rational side to each emotion and desire. Once the rational is in control of the emotions, then we can become virtuous. An example of this is 'courage', it would be irrational of me to run against the whole British Army

but it would be rational for me to gather a resistance for the right reason against the British Army.

This leads to the 'Doctrine of the Mean' (mean as in average - the 'middle') which applies to someone who has lived their life in balance (on average), with the rational being in control of most of the emotions if you look at their life in its entirety. As has been already mentioned it does not appear rational to suggest that there is one good which all things relates to. It is inconceivable to suggest that a good doctor and a good Easter egg have anything substantive in common - even within their function!

The implications of this mean that Plato's moral theory fails for if there is Form of Good, then one cannot have knowledge of it meaning that one can not seek the virtue or understand all the ultimate just moral decisions that it brings. This would push Plato in seeking a moral theory elsewhere away from his forms. Aristotle's theory is also not free from criticism; he suggests that each being and each thing has a function. However this does not seem to hold for atheists for it does seem plausible that everything be given a function without a designer or God (which they do not believe in).

The attack launched on both of them is that they do not understand morality. For when we do something good we are doing it for self-interest but this seems to fly in the face of facts. People like Mother Teresa can not be said to act just for self-interest. Even if it seems that the person is given a reward for doing such things, it does not follow that the person did those things because they were self-interested - indeed, it could just be a consequence of what they have done and not the cause.

Thus to conclude, to say that we are moral because of self-interest is both pessimistic and untenable in face of altruism (acts which are done selflessly). Not only this, but both Plato and Aristotle's metaphysical aspects of their theories have led to their downfalls and although they are highly respected and influential, the concept of 'forms' and the concept that everything has a function would not stand strong in a scientific peer-reviewed journal.