

The Limitation of Philosophy: Ethics

Mako A. Nagasawa

Introduction: Can science tell us all we need to really know about morality? Popular atheist writers Sam Harris and Mark Hauser think so. If not science, what about moral philosophy? Can we just build a system of right and wrong from our own experiences, using reason, without using religion, and without receiving a 'revealed morality'? The following is a correspondence between a friend and me on those questions.

FROM A FRIEND

Mako,

The philosophy stuff at the end our meeting today just activated another part of my brain. This email is just sort of a free-flow of thoughts.

As I mentioned, it is very difficult to philosophically arrive at an ethical system that achieves 'desirable' rules when it comes to animals, the retarded, infants, and the comatose, without racist or sexist implications. That is why Peter Singer arrives at such crazy doctrines. I challenge you to try to create a sound system as an intellectual challenge. To give you an idea of some of the troubles that might come your way...

A: 'We can eat pigs but not humans because pigs have a lower cognitive ability.'

B: 'But, surely, not worse than some retarded humans?!'

A: 'Oh...well, there may be individual exceptions, but humans ON AVERAGE have a higher cognitive ability.'

B: 'On average? Well, I have here a set of 100 organisms: 1 human and 99 ants. I have here another set of 100 organisms: all pigs. I think the latter has a higher cognitive ability on average. Does that mean that because I can kill the animals in the second set, I can also kill the animals of the first set? To use an 'on average' argument, you need to justify your choice of sets.'

A: 'Oh...well...you know, species are defined biological by the ability to produce offspring.'

B: 'OK...You're going to have to have to justify why you can make an ethical distinction on the basis of procreative ability...but even granting that – How about an infertile, retarded human?'

A: 'Well...'

You can see how hairy the issues can get. It is very fun to try to work them out.

For our purposes, I believe this ethical problem can translate to a theological one. For the Christian, the above issues are somewhat easier, since we are given a divine authority to rule over the animals of the field.

Why can we eat pigs? Well, simply because God says we can. (err...maybe I should use an animal besides pigs as my example...smile)

But then, I have to ask, on what basis can God create that rule? It seems that if it simply by His divine authority, then, God could command ANYTHING and it would be good. 'Humans, you can rule over animals as you please. Oh, and white men, you can rule over black men as you please.' Of course, God does not make that second statement, but after dabbling with some philosophical ideas similar to the ones sketched out above, I start to wonder whether the two statements are much different. That is, IF the rule is simply by virtue of divine authority.

On the other hand, if it is NOT simply by virtue of divine authority, then there is some reason why God makes the command. What is that reason? See how this just shifts the ethical problem up one level to a theological one?

Was this commanded arbitrarily by virtue of divine authority? By arbitrary, I mean a reason that cannot be comprehended by human logic. If the answer is yes, I don't know what it means to call God good. How is the command for males to have authority over females in household matters any different from the command for whites to have authority over blacks in labor matters?

If the answer is no (i.e., there is some reason why authority is given to the husband and not the wife, instead of, say, vice versa), I want to know: WHAT IS THE REASON? Lots of answers are close ('men have higher emotional stability than woman'), but are suspect to the same types of problems that creep up in the dialogue between A and B above ('maybe on average they do, but there are individual exceptions').

A related idea in philosophy is the idea of 'operational distinctions'. We would like to make a decision based on characteristic X. However, X is difficult to measure. On the other hand, X is closely correlated with characteristic Y, which IS easy to measure. To use Y as the basis for our decisions is called an operational distinction. As an example, consider alcoholic consumption. There are a variety of factors (X) that determine whether or not someone should be allowed to drink, such as emotional maturity. Emotional maturity is difficult to measure. It is, however, closely correlated with age (Y), which is easy to measure. Thus, we have a legal drinking AGE, rather than a legal drinking maturity level.

I've sometimes wondered, is God making an operational distinction with the whole women thing? Of course, nothing is difficult for God to measure, but maybe the operational distinction is in place because there are things that are difficult for us humans to measure? Well, there are still ethical questions to be battled...for example, even if a correlation between race and intelligence could be statistically demonstrated, it would not be ethical for universities to only hire white professors.

Am I willing to just throw my hands in the air and say, 'I don't know! God's ways are higher than mine!?' I'm not sure I am. I feel like I need to know that IF I had access to all the same data that God had access to (like the facts concerning emotional stability of women), and IF I had the cognitive ability to calculate what was right given the data, and IF I had the will-power to do what was right, then I WOULD HAVE MADE THE EXACT SAME DECISION. I'm willing to admit that I might be deficient in one of those three IF's, and that those deficiencies may lead to ethical differences between me and God, but I at least need some plausible explanation of what those deficiencies are. Otherwise, God's morality is so different from mine as to be ALIEN. It's not 'good' or 'bad' - it's just 'other'.

Yours,
X

MY RESPONSE

Dear X,

Thank you for your questions. The philosophical issues of ethics and the biblical issues of men/women are quite involved and, I think, interrelated, at a deep level. I'm eager to discuss the biblical texts on women because I suspect that we are not interpreting them in the same way. For instance, it is not true that men simply have 'authority' over women in the home, or elsewhere.

A preliminary comment: The hypothetical situation of, 'What if the Christian God told white people to rule over other people' is unnecessary to evaluate from a philosophical standpoint, precisely because it is not a biblical ethic. While certainly some people claiming to be Christians did/do claim that, the biblical texts do not. To argue with them is therefore possible and required, then, but not on the basis of philosophy but from within the fields of biblical and theological studies. You can see my notes on slavery for more information.

Ethics and Philosophies

But let me start with the philosophical issues. I'll begin by referring to a comment about Kant and Mill we made in passing. Kant and Mill reflect two different types of ethical reasoning. Kant, as I understand him, argued for deontological ethics (e.g. categorical imperatives): an action is good simply because it is defined as such, no matter what. While I am not a fan of Kant, I think the deontological category he illustrates is helpful to point out. Mill, however, argued for utilitarian ethics: an action is good because of the good that it will produce.

You've expressed hesitations about deontological ethics in general, and biblical ethics in particular, because of their unquestionable nature. If one claims that an action is good to do by its very nature, either because God commanded it, or for some other such reason, then one cannot question it. This is, after all, the nature of deontological ethics. I reiterate, though, that while biblical ethics are structured in such a way as to be epistemologically unquestionable ('one does this simply because God commanded it'), the structure of the larger belief system itself can be evaluated epistemologically by other means. Ethics is only one aspect of biblical faith.

You seem to favor utilitarian ethics and consequentialist forms of reasoning, presumably because such a framework offers a more independently rational approach. However, that rationality breaks down at various points. It exposes any utilitarian framework as hanging on assumptions about the value and worth of people, or people's experiences, which cannot be evaluated. They are either simply givens or actually dependent on larger metaphysical assumptions. For instance, how do you weigh people's subjective assessments against each other? In an independently rational framework, where does true value, as opposed to mere personal preference, come from? How do you compare political freedom for some versus economic equality for others? Utilitarian ethics are largely a phenomenon of European Modernist culture, which takes the individual as the primary unit of value and worth. But this elevation of the individual is arbitrary, and rather mythological. It is no more arbitrary as elevating 'the community' above 'the individual,' as non-Western cultures do, and certainly utilitarian ethics can function from that starting point as well, but it is most emphatically still arbitrary.

Another limitation of utilitarian ethics can be seen when applied to issues of abortion, infanticide, the retarded and the comatose. At various points in the analyses, human beings are regarded both as an economic means and an economic end, or at times, an economic means to an emotional end (e.g. that outcome doesn't make me happy, so we can't do that). The tensions are seen in the tendency to treat human beings as worthy of life based on their cognitive ability, potential productivity, emotional attachment to another human being, etc. There are various dilemmas associated with this. Can we really treat human beings as both means and ends? Is a human life really reducible to one of these other ends or is an individual human life an end in itself? These are significant problems that have never been overcome by utilitarian philosophy. That is, I suspect, one major reason why Western civilization has become so individualistic – since it has lost the rational ability to call for anything greater than the individual, even though the idea that the individual is the repository of ultimate value is itself a myth – and consumeristic – since it has lost the rational ability to call for any 'good' higher than comfort maximization.

To make a contrast straightaway, then: In biblical Christianity, ethics are not epistemologically open to evaluation because they are received, but the internal coherence of Christianity and its historical anchor points are. By comparison, in utilitarian philosophy, while ethics are epistemologically open to evaluation, its presuppositions and framework are not – they must either be assumed or received. Now in reality, between the two systems, there is some blending possible, and perhaps some that is even required. Suffice to say without going into great depth regarding that overlap, that I am in favor of deontological ethics as a primary system and utilitarian ethic as secondary, and firmly so.

But let me cut to the chase: Mill's utilitarian ethics is, in reality, impossible to implement because once you start talking about more than one person, which really is all the time, you have to ask the question that Mill's disciple Jeremy Bentham asked: 'What is the greatest good for the greatest number?' The main problem, according to my understanding of mathematical economics, is that you actually cannot maximize two (or more) variables at once. This was clearly stated by J. von Neumann and O. Morgenstern (*Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1947, p. 11), but the principle is implicit in the theory of partial differential equations, dating back at least to D'Alembert (1717 – 1783). Attempts to calculate the greatest good for the greatest number founder not only on the fact that 'higher good' and 'personal preference' are indistinguishable in a framework of independent rationality; they also founder on the fact that one must either start from the greatest number (everyone in the community) or the greatest good (however one makes that calculation) but you cannot try to start from both at once.

Utilitarianism, in some situations, also instructs you to kill a healthy person when you can use his organs to save five dying patients. Only one person dies, and five people are saved, so this maximizes utility. It may

also instruct you to punish an innocent person for a crime he didn't commit, as long as doing so will deter enough other people from committing crimes. Again, this is a brute utility calculation: only one person is punished, but if that means thousands of criminals are deterred, you maximize utility overall. These are crazy conclusions; their craziness gives us good reason to doubt utilitarianism in general. There are ways to patch up utilitarianism so it doesn't give us these crazy conclusions. But those moves also seem tenuous and impact the ethical structure in negative ways.

Hence the supreme limitation of utilitarian ethics is how this ethical system frequently leads to choices where the preservation of *some* human life with absolute certainty takes precedence over a collective act of heroism whose outcome is uncertain (e.g. portrayed in the movie *The Matrix Reloaded* but enacted in reality in situations of genocide, where people refuse to get involved or stop a massacre). This leads people to collaborate with forces that most people under most circumstances would regard as 'evil.' This can be the result not only of a flaw in people's calculations of utility maximization; it can actually be the result of knowing (or at least predicting with a high level of accuracy) outcomes with certainty.

Very few people have explored this theme with such vigor as J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. The traitorous wizard Saruman, who is depicted in the movie version as being much more originally evil than he is in the book, was convinced by *probabilities* to side with the Dark Lord Sauron. He did not see any hope for victory against Sauron himself. He thought that Middle Earth and humanity could still survive, albeit under sorry circumstances, if Sauron were master of Middle Earth. Significantly, he owned one of the seeing stones, the palantiri, and his calculations were affected by Sauron's use of another palantir. What Saruman 'saw' influenced him.

But Saruman is not the only example of the attempt to see future probabilities and make decisions by such criteria. Denethor, steward of Gondor, also made decisions using the palantir, and was driven insane. In the palantir, Sauron showed Denethor the black ships sailing northward to join the battle at Minas Tirith, Gondor's capital. Denethor interpreted this vision as the corsairs from the South reinforcing Sauron, and thus the doom of Minas Tirith. He did not know that the black ships had been taken over by Aragorn, who was coming to attack Sauron's forces. So he despaired of life and tried to take the life of his son Faramir as well as his own.

Sauron himself is led to wrong conclusions by the use of the palantir. After Pippin looks into the palantir acquired from Saruman, Sauron incorrectly thinks that Saruman has apprehended the hobbits and now has the Ring of Power. But when Aragorn immediately afterwards shows himself to Sauron through the same palantir, Sauron correctly assumes that the heir of Isildur has defeated Saruman, but incorrectly assumes that this heir now has the Ring of Power and will move to Minas Tirith to launch an offensive against Mordor. Sauron then launches his forces prematurely at Minas Tirith, which is what allows Frodo and Sam to venture into Mordor.

Contrary again to the movie version, in the book, the plan to destroy the Ring of Power in the cracks of Mount Doom was not certain to bring ultimate success. Elrond, Gandalf, and Aragorn felt it was necessary to destroy the Ring, for if Sauron got his Ring back, he would certainly be invincible, and if anyone else grasped the Ring of Power, he or she would be overtaken by the power of the Ring and become another Dark Lord. Notice that Gandalf, Galadriel and Aragorn were all tempted to take the Ring because they wanted to use it for good purposes; they all refused because they knew the Ring itself would subvert their minds. Destroying the Ring was not certain to lead to Sauron's immediate downfall (this is discussed in the Council of Elrond in Rivendell). Perhaps it would and perhaps it wouldn't. To some degree, it was a guess. But regardless of the outcome, it was nevertheless a duty.

Even the elevation of the duty of 'pity' or 'compassion' as a guiding principle, even when it seems nonsensical, is shown to be significant. In the story, it is possible to say that Frodo was not victorious, for at the end, he became a victim of the Ring as well. It is Gollum, the one on whom Bilbo Baggins had 'pity,' who bites the Ring off Frodo's finger and falls into the fires of Mount Doom to destroy the Ring. But Frodo too had 'pity' on Gollum. Gandalf had poignantly instructed Frodo about Bilbo's pity on Gollum; Frodo therefore took pity on the poor creature, too. So perhaps we can say that Frodo's act of pity saved him at the last after all? Yes, we can, in a way that Frodo himself could not have calculated in

advance. In this story, as with many great stories of old, moral duty responding to a higher call, not utilitarian motivations responding to calculation, wins in the end.

Hence the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* revolves around conceptions of 'duty' (deontological ethics) based on a sense of hope against hope (in providence) over against conceptions of information-gathering (sight) and decision-making based on that information (utilitarian ethics). Saruman is a utilitarian, Gandalf is a Kantian, so to speak. For Gandalf as well as the characters of the Fellowship, what matters is their sacred duty is to resist evil even to the point of death, and to never give up. In this, I hear overtures, for example, of Corrie Ten Boom and her family in the Netherlands housing a few Jews from Hitler's forces – not because they felt it would succeed, but rather because they understood their Christian duty.

Sauron, however, never suspected that the forces against him would try to destroy the Ring. This is because he assumed that if such a power as the Ring were ever found, it would be used immediately. This failure on Sauron's part is telling and notable. Because Sauron was committed *a priori* to the use of power if one has it, it never entered his mind that someone, when given the ability to 'do good' in the short run, would seek to destroy that power rather than use it. This teaches us a key lesson: One's ethics influences or perhaps even *determines* one's epistemology. If we assume *a priori* that we must use, develop or seize power in order to accomplish something 'good' based on outward calculations (e.g. democracy in the Middle East; enhanced health and intelligence by genetic manipulation, etc), I think we are prone to two errors (1) It is extremely likely that that we will misinterpret information or underestimate other variables (e.g. an upsurge in radical Islam and Al-Qaeda retaliation; an increasingly class-biased system of health and intelligence; etc.). But not only that, (2) then we will also become increasingly closed to other ethical frameworks and possibilities that involve renouncing that power. I think this is one reason why biblical ethics often have an 'alien' quality. Biblical ethics very much involves a radical critique of human power and its 'potential'; more on this later.

The struggle between good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, is not just located in a struggle between freedom and tyranny. It is also located in the struggle between two different ethical systems and the results they produce.

This has some bearing on your inquiry into the ethics God gives His people, and God's own decisions affecting the world outside of handing down ethics to His people. Do these ethics and these acts of God make sense? You asked for three IF's. (1) If you had access to the same data that God has access to, (2) if you had the cognitive ability to calculate what was right given the data, and (3) if you had the will-power to do what was right, then you would make the same decisions in every case that God did. I enjoy thought exercises like that. After all, God does claim to want life and not death for His creatures. Given the complexity of human free will and God's desire to save as many as possible, this would be a calculation of overwhelming magnitude. God *might* use a 'consequentialist' reasoning process when He makes decisions to act in history – that is certainly possible, although how we would *know* that is uncertain.

Having said that, though, it is very questionable whether God uses a 'consequentialist' approach when He formulates ethics for His people to obey. That is a bold claim, and it ties in directly with the question, 'What kind of 'god' is the Christian God?'

If God commands us to 'do good' because 'it is good,' then that means that God subscribes to 'the good' because it is higher than Himself. In this case, God would not truly be God, because there would be some higher kind of 'good' than God; God is merely the spokesperson for the 'good' that is higher than Himself. If, on the other hand, God can command anything and call it 'good' simply because he is God, then this means that God can be completely arbitrary. When critics claim that God was completely arbitrary in the Old Testament because of His acts of destruction, this appears to add fuel to the fire of a major problem in ethics and theology.

But the way I and others resolve this as Christians lies in treating God as a Trinity, not as a Singularity. If God is a Trinity, as Christians conceive of Him, then He is fundamentally and unchangeably loving. Love flows from Father to Son to Holy Spirit and all around. Thus, God is loving within His own nature, and He can never do anything that violates His nature. Thus, God is in fact 'bound' but not by any standard higher

than Himself, but by *Himself and His own nature and character*. This God known as Father-Son-Holy Spirit cannot be unloving and this creates the logical foundation for a continuity between God's character and His commands for us. And when we study carefully what this God is doing in the Old Testament, we do find better explanations and better corroboration with this character of love, particularly in passages like 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. However, if He is a Singularity, then He can do whatever He wants, because He is not bound by anything, including His own inner nature because He has no inner nature or character to speak of. This kind of 'god as Singularity' can be both good and evil, or, quite simply, evil. So the philosophical objection that God is arbitrary applies to a different god, the 'god as Singularity,' which is not the Christian God. It does not apply to the Trinity.

Biblical Ethics: Its Sources and Limitations

Biblical ethics, being deontological within its own conceptual scheme, have two main sources within that framework: our nature as humans and our purpose/mission relative to other humans. In other words, there is a thought structure in Christian ethics.

Jesus claimed to inaugurate a new humanity that would be freshly united with the Triune God, so all our human relationships are informed by the love within the Trinity. For example, Jesus used humanity in creation as the foundation for his ethic of marriage (Mk.10:1 – 12, Mt.19:1 – 10); he affirmed the original creational design of marriage as being between one man and one woman for a lifetime. He thus categorically overturned the divorce clause in Dt.24. Key to this shift was Jesus' claim to be reversing 'hardness of heart' at long last – the 'hardness of heart' that had set in after the fall. Now that Jesus was uniting human nature with the divine nature in his own person, he also taught about what it would mean in human relationships to be joined to him, and through him, be united with a Triune God who is relational to the core. Another example: Jesus also instructed his people to accept persecution and sit loose to all possessions, radically expanding Mosaic Israel's definitions of generosity, sacrifice, and community. This is in the context of the worldwide purpose/mission of his people, to witness all over the world and be a trans-national reconciliation movement centered around his lordship. This posture, too, is related to the nature of the Triune God: other-oriented, self-sacrificing, invitational, etc.

Christian ethics do not provide a comprehensive solution to all human problems. The purpose of Christian ethics is to bear witness to the reality of Jesus, not to provide a foundation of a legal system for civil society. This is consistent within the biblical storyline – the church is a pilgrim people awaiting their true home and calling people to join that pilgrimage. It is from this point that I will place the New Testament teaching regarding men and women, or the idea of race and the accompanying issue of slavery that has been such a problem.