



FULFILLING OUR PROMISES
TO THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED

NONPROFIT ADVISOR

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BUSINESS ETHICS

Part 4 of 4

What Makes a Decision Moral?

Having seen that the typical candidates for “ultimate moral standard” seem to fall short of the mark, some people despair of ever understanding ethics. A fair number lapse into relativism. An earlier newsletter has explained why that may be the worst position of all.

The fact of the matter is that people do routinely make correct moral decisions, both for themselves and when acting on behalf of organizations. Another undeniable fact is that we – and most other people – are almost always able to identify which moral decisions are right and which are wrong.

One problem that the “consequentialist” theories described in the previous edition cannot handle is that there are two features of moral decisions that all moral agents experience. The first is the “intuitive” character of ethical judgments. Although utilitarianism, for example, would paint moral decision-making to be virtually a mathematical calculation (“greatest good for the greatest number”), the fact is that our moral judgments are usually spontaneous and nearly reflexive.

Consequentialism suffers from another defect as well. If the morality of decisions is to be judged by the outcomes of those decisions, it does seem that we must either wait a long time to find out if a decision was/is moral, and that such a judgment is always subject to

revision. For example, consider the case of the administration of a scarce vaccine to a large population. If the decision is made to “stretch” the supply by administering half a dose to each person, it will take months, even years, to see if the maximum number of persons have received a benefit. If so, the long-ago decision will *then* be adjudged moral. But, suppose that fifty years later, the offspring of the recipients all develop a latent, fatal disease traceable to their parents’ exposure to the vaccine. Does this catastrophic outcome retroactively make the decision to vaccinate immoral? Consequentialism, at least in some of its forms, seems to require that inference.

Clearly, morality-by-the-consequences is unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete. One obvious failing or omission of all results-dependent theories of ethics is that they omit the very important element of the relevance of the moral actor to the moral character of a decision. If I strive valiantly and put my own life in danger in my unsuccessful attempt to rescue a baby being carried away in the river rapids, have I not acted morally, even though the outcome could hardly have been worse? On the other hand, in the same situation, if I am using a life preserver to fish my briefcase out of the rapids (ignoring the baby) and accidentally snare and save the child instead, does that make me a moral hero? Hardly.



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What the last example shows is that the character and intent of the moral actor plays a major – perhaps the most important – role in imparting morality to an action. This position is known as “virtue ethics.” It was prominent in the ancient world, especially in the Middle Ages, and lately has been enjoying a comeback.

In short, virtue ethics takes the position that an action is moral if it happens as the result of the exercise of a virtue by a moral actor. Of course, one may quibble as to what the virtues are, but there is general agreement on such character traits as courage, honesty, generosity, loyalty and the like. These virtues, when exercised with *prudence* generally lead to moral actions. The element of prudence is quite important. For example, honesty is a virtue that generally leads to a good outcome. However, in some situations, honesty would be idiotic (such as honestly telling a madman where to find a child that he has sworn to murder).

The implication of all this is that the way to become a better moral actor is to become a better *you*, to become the best possible version of yourself. The considerations of utilitarianism, deontology and others that we have mentioned become not ultimate moral ends but, rather, strategies and methods for prudent action in accordance with virtue. To go back to the vaccine example, if science supports the idea that a half-dose may be effective and if, in an exercise of prudence, considering all available information, I decide to give such a dose in the hope of assisting as many people as possible, I have acted morally, regardless of the actual and ultimate consequences. Indeed, perhaps the ultimate moral formula could be summed up like this:

VIRTUE + PRUDENCE + GENUINE CONCERN FOR ALL
AFFECTED PERSONS = MORALLY GOOD ACTION

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