

14. CHAPTER 14: WHAT WOULD A SATISFACTORY MORAL THEORY BE LIKE?

14.1. Morality Without Hubris

Almost all the classical theories contain plausible elements, yet the various theories are not consistent with one another, and most are vulnerable to crippling objections.

No sooner had our ancestors arrived on the Earth than they began to think of themselves as the most important things in all creation. Some of them even imagined that the whole universe had been made for their benefit. Thus, when they began to develop the theories of right and wrong, they held that the projection of their own interests had a kind of ultimate and objective value. The rest of creation, they reasoned, was intended for their use. We now know better. We know that we exist by evolutionary accident, as one species among many, on a small and insignificant world in one little corner of the cosmos.

Hume indicated that "the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster."

Human *hubris* leads us to take the fact that an action would help satisfy our desires, needs, and so on -- in short, the fact that an action would promote our interests -- as a reason in favor of doing it.

Reason requires impartially: we ought to act as to promote the interests of everyone alike.

If psychological egoism were true, this would mean that the reason demands more of us than we can manage. But psychological egoism is not true; it gives an altogether false picture of human nature and the human condition. We have evolved as social creatures, living together in groups, wanting one another's company, meeting one another's cooperation, and capable of caring about one another's welfare. So there is a pleasing theoretical "fit" between (a) what reason requires, namely impartially; (b) the requirements of social living, namely adherence to a set of rules that, if fairly applied, would serve everyone's interests; and (c) our natural inclination to care about others, at least to a modest degree. All three work together to make morality not only possible, but in an important sense, natural for us.

Rational beings, however, are responsible for what they freely choose to do, and those who choose to behave decently toward others deserve to be treated well in return, while those who treat others badly deserve to be treated badly in return. Respecting people's right to choose their own conduct, and then adjusting our treatment of them according to how they choose, is ultimately a matter of "respect for persons" in a sense somewhat like Kant's.

Only a philosophical idiot would propose to eliminate love, loyalty, and the like from our understanding of the moral life. If such motives were eliminated, and instead people simply calculated what was for the best, we would all be much worse off. And in any case, who would want to live in a world without love and friendship? We would all be much worse off if the acknowledgement of desserts was not part of our moral scheme. What is important is that people be as well off as possible.

14.2. The Moral Community

If the moral community is not limited to people in one *place*, neither is it limited to people at any one *time*. Whether people will be affected by our actions now or in the distant future makes no difference.

We do not have to think that the environment is important "in itself" to see that its destruction is a moral horror; it is sufficient to consider what will become of people if the rain forests, sea algae, and ozone layer are ruined.

As Bentham pointed out, excluding creatures from moral consideration because of their species is no more justified than excluding them because of race, nationality, or sex.

Impartiality requires the expansion of the moral community not only across space and time but across the boundaries of species as well.

14.3. Justice and Fairness

The earth will remain habitable for another billion years, and civilization is now only a few thousand years old. If we do not destroy ourselves, moral philosophy, along with all other human inquiries, may yet have a long way to go.