Do Our Moral Judgments Need to Be Guided by Principles?

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Introduction

"At Home" is a short story by Anton Chekhov about a lawyer, Eugene Bikovsky, who tries to explain to his seven-year-old son, Seriozha, why he did wrong by taking a cigarette from his father's desk and by smoking it.[1] The story begins with Bikovsky coming home from a session at the court, and with the governess telling him about his son's wrongdoing. Seriozha is a frail and innocent child; he admires and loves his father, and he had been entrusted to the care of a governess since the loss of his mother.

Bikovsky wonders what to tell his son, but before he has time to think of anything to say, Seriozha has already entered the study. "'Good evening, papa,' he says in a gentle voice, climbing on to his father's knee and swiftly kissing his neck. 'Did you send for me?'" When they began to talk, Bikovsky finds that his son is not at all aware that he has committed any fault. The lawyer first appeals to pure rationality; he tries to explain to the child the conceptual distinction between *meum* and *tuum* in property law, and why it is wrong to take things that belong to others. But Seriozha has a world of his own in his mind and pays little attention to his father's abstract explanations.

Next Bikovsky tries to convey his disapproval of his son's behavior by arguing that smoking itself is wrong, because "tobacco is very bad for the health, and men who smoke die sooner than they should." But the result is equally fruitless, not least because the father is unable to justify why he smokes himself. The lawyer is now frustrated by his inability to get through to Seriozha, but then he suddenly realizes that to communicate effectively with his son, he must appeal to another strategy. Instead of using a purely *objective* logic, he has to enter the *subjective* world of his son in a manner that will enable him to convey the message about the perils of smoking for a child. Bikovsky improvises a story of a king who had a long, grey beard and lived in a palace of crystal surrounded by a wonderful garden with oranges and bergamot pears and wild cherry trees.

> The old king had only one son, who was heir to the kingdom, a little boy, just as little as you are. He was a good boy; he was never capricious, and he went to bed early, and never touched anything on his father's table. . . . He had only one failing—he smoked. . . . Because he smoked, the king's son fell ill of consumption and died when he was twenty years old. The old man, decrepit and ill, was left without anyone to take care of him, and

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> there was no one to govern the kingdom or to protect the palace. Foes came
> and killed the old man and destroyed the palace, and now there are no
> wild cherry trees left in the garden, and no birds and no bells.

The tale makes a deep impression on Seriozha. His eyes become full of sadness, and, after a minute of reflection, he says in a low voice: "I won't smoke any more." Chekhov's story concludes with the father wondering why is it so hard to present morality as the result of purely abstract logic, and why it always becomes more acceptable when it is accompanied by examples, parables, or stories that directly relate to the listener's (or the reader's) personal experience, interests, and concerns.

This article's purpose is neither to discuss the value of narrative ethics nor to evaluate the role that stories might have in moral education. Rather, it intends to focus on another issue conveyed by Chekhov's story: do our moral decisions need to be guided by principles? My intention here is to argue that, although principles play a key role in our moral judgments, these latter cannot be reduced to a result of purely deductive reasoning, because they previously require another kind of rationality. Instead of being purely deductive, our moral decisions appear to be the result of a combined inductive-deductive process. This claim is developed in two parts. The first part briefly presents some of the criticisms leveled in recent decades against purely deductive moral theories. The second part argues, appealing to Aristotle's account of the knowledge's process, that an inductive-deductive model provides a more realistic account of how sound moral judgments are actually made.

The Criticism of Deductive Moral Theories

During the last decades there has been extensive criticism of the dominance and adequacy of purely abstract principles to guide ethical decisions. Some scholars even speak of an "empirical turn" in this field and suggest that we are entering into a new phase in the history of ethics, which is characterized by an increasing emphasis on context sensitivity.[2] This discussion was especially intense in the field of medical ethics, in which critics of the so-called principlism as developed by Beauchamp and Childress[3] have faulted this theory for being "too abstract, too rationalistic, and too far removed from the psychological milieu in which moral choices are actually made."[4] But this debate is obviously not limited to the field of medical ethics. Rather, it takes place in the broader philosophical context of dissatisfaction with the very idea of appealing to abstract principles for making moral decisions. The doubts take various forms but include, among others, the question of whether moral judgments can be codified or captured by any theoretical structure, and therefore whether our moral lives can be reduced to the legalistic application of a set of principles.[5]

One of the first key essays to raise doubts about deductive ethical theories was Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," originally published in 1958.[6] In this paper, the British philosopher criticized what she characterized as a "law conception of ethics." Appealing to Aristotle, she called for a return to concepts such as character, virtue, and human flourishing, that is, for relying on *persons* rather than on *norms.* From this perspective, the key question of ethics is not so much "what I should do," as Kant claimed, but rather "how can I become a good person?" The point is that morality does not merely consist in doing certain kinds of actions; instead it is about being a particular kind of person. Of course, to move

toward this latter objective, the moral agent needs to do (or to abstain from) certain actions, and this inevitably means to comply with some moral norms that command (or disapprove) them. But in this approach, formalized moral principles are not regarded as an end in themselves; they are rather means that aim to contribute to the flourishing of oneself, of others, and of society at large. In addition, virtue ethicists emphasize that equally or even more important than *externally* doing certain things is to *internally* adhere to the goods that are pursued with those particular actions, and this latter condition is impossible to meet without personal virtues.

Another seminal paper in this line was Michael Stocker's ''The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theory,'' published in 1976.[7] Stocker argues that deontological and utilitarian moral theories create a serious dichotomy between the principles they advocate and the motives that inspire moral agents in real life. This situation leads practitioners of such theories to suffer from a ''moral schizophrenia'' because they will necessarily have a gap between their values and their real motives for action. Stocker calls such a gap a ''malady of spirit'' and suggests that, because these theories result in this malady, they are seriously flawed. To illustrate this, he gives several examples of persons who are possible candidates for morally schizophrenic utilitarians and deontologists. In one of them, the fictitious Smith, who is committed to Kantianism, comes to visit a sick friend at the hospital and cannot admit to himself that he is doing so because he enjoys his friend's company or wants to cheer him up (these would constitute ''heteronomous'' motives). He feels obliged to think that he is visiting his friend solely out of a sense of duty. Therefore, he will experience an internal conflict between his theoretical principles and his real motives, which makes his moral life schizophrenic. According to Stocker, this and other similar examples show well that what, in the end, is lacking in deductive moral theories is simply love for the other person, which is an essential feature of the most significant human relationships and constitutive of a human life worth living.

In this same line of thinking, MacIntyre has advocated for a radical change in the way we think about morality and for a return to a virtue-centered ethics. His hypothesis is that modern moral theories (namely, deontology and utilitarianism) have failed because they have rejected Aristotle's claim that human beings have an intrinsic good or end (*telos*) to aim for, and have ignored the fact that we cannot reach this natural end without proper preparation, which consists in an adequate education and in personal effort in the practice of virtues.[8]

Thus, the key point raised by the above-mentioned scholars is that moral life does not consist in merely learning some rules and then making sure that each of our actions lives up to those rules. The idea that knowing moral theories is enough for making sound moral decisions is as naïve as expecting that just by reading a book about how to swim one will be able to swim. As an Aristotelian would say, moral life only becomes possible by the effort aimed at developing good habits of character, and never by normative argument as such. In reality, when the individual is shaped by certain habits of virtuous conduct, recourse to strict arguments is rather superfluous. This means not that the adequacy of one's judgments is measured by pure inner conviction, but only that one's capacity to distinguish between good and bad judgments cannot be reduced to pure science.[9]

From a different philosophical standpoint, Bernard Williams has addressed similar criticisms to both utilitarianism and deontology. In his view, both theories have represented a flight from reality and have failed to understand the complexity of moral choices.[10] Williams insisted on the need for what he called ''internal

reasons for action," which relate to our genuine reasons to act and are connected with things that we really care about. In his view, mere "external" arguments—for example, the proposition that X is morally good—cannot really move us to act. We will only have a reason to act if there is something contingently about us (our personal education, our psychological states, our feelings, etc.) that motivates us to behave in a particular way.[11] In addition, Williams has stressed the crucial importance of the historical context for any account of morality. On the ground that it is impossible to provide "a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles,"[12] he rejected both Rawls's contractualism and Hare's utilitarianism, as they erroneously assume a reflective agent capable of distancing himself from the life and character he is examining.[13] In contrast to both philosophers, Williams envisions a nontheoretical process beginning and ending with socially and historically conditioned ethical intuitions.

Also, the proponents of casuistry and moral particularism are severe critics of principle-based approaches in ethics. Advocates of casuistry claim that absolute moral principles are "tyrannical" and do not play any substantial role in justifying particular moral judgments. In their view, we start from particular cases in which we are confident of our judgments and then reason by analogy by comparing each new situation with others and with paradigm cases.[14] But casuists accept, at least, the generalization that cases can be sufficiently similar so that we should judge them similarly.[15] In this respect, moral particularists are even more radical in their rejection of generalizations. For instance, Jonathan Dancy maintains that what is a reason in one case may be no reason at all in another, or even a reason on the other side. In his view, a feature that makes one action better can make another one worse, and can make no difference at all to a third. Therefore, moral reasons are necessarily *holistic*, or context specific.[16]

Inductive-Deductive Reasoning

This article argues that some of the above-mentioned shortcomings of purely deductive ethical theories could be better addressed by appealing to a more comprehensive, inductive-deductive understanding of moral reasoning. This model includes a first *inductive* step in which we abstract from our experience the specific normative criteria relevant to the case at hand and a second step in which we *deduce* what to do by applying those criteria to that particular situation. Actually, this seems to be the way in which we make our moral judgments in everyday life, often without being aware of it.

Induction: Moving from Experience to General Principles

One of the first philosophers, if not the first, to develop a careful explanation of the inductive-deductive model of thinking was Aristotle. His understanding of the cognition process is considered as one of his most influential contributions to the philosophy of science. In this regard, it has been said that "current explanations of the scientific method feature Aristotle's iterative process as the central core."[17] From specific observations, inductive reasoning provides general principles (bottom-up movement), and, with those principles serving as premises, deduction attempts to explain observed phenomena (top-down movement). This leads to successive cycles of observations and generalizations, back up again to observations to verify concepts and to obtain more accurate generalizations.

Aristotle's understanding of the cognition process, which can be found in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*, is especially developed in the *Posterior Analytics*, in which he argues that our intellect (*nous*) grasps first principles through induction (*epagoge*).[18] He distinguishes five stages in this process: (1) Perception (*aisthesis*) discriminates among particulars. (2) Memory retains these perceptions. (3) Repeated memories develop experience of a universal (*katholou*). (4) Higher universals are inferred. (5) First principles are inferred.[19]

Interestingly, Aristotle claims that the inductive-deductive process applies not only to theoretical knowledge but also to practical reasoning. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he maintains that the first principles (*archai*) of both science and morality find their source in inductive reasoning and that those principles inferred from experience constitute the starting point of deductive reasoning. One of the relevant passages is the following: "Induction supplies a first principle or universal, deduction works *from* universals; therefore, there are first principles from which deduction starts, which cannot be proved by deduction (*syllogismos*); therefore, they are reached by induction (*epagoge*)."[20]

Because Aristotle assigns a foundational role to perception in his account of knowledge and concept acquisition, it is not surprising that he is often thought of as the first empiricist. Even the well-known axiom *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* (Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses), which is often associated with the philosophical position of British empiricists, notably John Locke, has in reality its roots in Aristotle's thinking,[21] which later inspired Thomas Aquinas.[22] It is noteworthy that Locke used this argument in order to criticize Descartes's theory of innate ideas and to make the case that all our ideas have their origin in experience. But Aristotle's and Locke's views are in this regard radically different. For Aristotle, empirical data are just the starting point of knowledge, but knowledge is much more than a mere association of simple ideas, as Locke claims.[23] For the Greek philosopher, our minds are so constituted as to be able to transcend the material realm and reach universal concepts by abstraction, and this is precisely what empiricists deny. Induction entails, according to Aristotle, a real process of abstraction. It is indeed a kind of rationality, and not a mere feeling, even if reason operates here in an implicit or informal way. How is the passage made from sensitive cognition to an intellective one? The Aristotelian explanation is that, once exposed to the power of our intellect, sensible objects lose their individualizing matter, and that what remains in our minds is the concept of each of them, which assumes the character of universality. As a matter of fact, without this first abstraction step, intellectual knowledge would be impossible.

In any case, experiences play a crucial role in this process. We cannot come to know the first premises of knowledge without such experience of particulars, in the same way that we cannot see colors without the presence of colored objects.[24] In other words, induction is the transformation of sense perception into knowledge that goes beyond the limited data of experience. This is why induction involves a kind of "creation from nothing," because human experience is inevitably individual, whereas concepts are universal.[25] Thus, for Aristotle, the first principles of moral reasoning are obtained by induction and cannot be demonstrated but only assumed. Contrary to what is often believed, he does not claim that we derive those principles from the concept of "nature" or "natural" (this is why he does not commit any "naturalistic fallacy"). In his view, only noninferentially justified first principles make moral knowledge possible without facing an

infinite regress or a vicious circle; this is for him the only alternative to skepticism.

This recourse to first principles is often seen in contemporary discussions as a weak point of Aristotelian philosophy, because "nothing is more generally unacceptable in recent philosophy than any conception of a first principle."[26] However the fact is that no philosophical system attempting to bring some substantive account of truth can avoid relying, at least implicitly, on some first, nondemonstrable principles. As Richard Hare writes, "many of the ethical theories which have been proposed in the past may without injustice be called 'Cartesian' in character: that is to say, they try to deduce particular duties from some self-evident first principle."[27] These principles mark a starting point of these theories (for instance, the categorical imperative in Kantian ethics or the principle of utility in Mill and Bentham). The advantage of Aristotelian ethics in this respect lies in its attempt to stay as close as possible to common sense, and in its effort to reflect the complexity of moral decisions in real life. This puts in evidence what a scholar calls the "tremendous modesty" that characterizes Aristotelian ethics.[28]

But there is an additional clue supporting the Aristotelian claim that the basic moral principles are obtained by induction from experience, and that philosophical explanations come along afterward to explain what was already implicitly known: the fact, well documented by anthropological studies, that basic moral standards are remarkably similar in all cultures, in spite of them having very different traditions and social and religious backgrounds. The best-known example of this is the Golden Rule, which embodies an ethics of reciprocity ("Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you") and can be found in virtually the same wording in all major cultures and religions. But there are many examples of other more substantive norms that are strikingly similar among cultures, although expressed in different conceptual terms or with different emphasis.[29] How can this phenomenon be explained? My hypothesis is that we all, as humans, share the use of practical reason (i.e., the use of reason concerning action) and are therefore able to identify from our experience the most basic human goods or interests for us and for the society in which we live. On this basis, we infer the principles that command (or forbid) certain behaviors, depending on whether or not they contribute to those basic goods, or interests, or needs.

Deduction: Moving from General Principles to Particular Conclusions

According to Aristotle, the underlying structure of practical reasoning is always the same. We move up from individual experiences to a general moral principle and then down to a concrete application of the principle to the particular situation in which we are placed. For instance, as we are growing up, we come to understand that generosity is a good thing. As an adult I am confronted with somebody in need (e.g., an aged and lonely neighbor who is ill in bed and has called me up to tell me that he needs to get a medicine from the pharmacy). After having induced from the circumstances of the case the morally relevant factors, and having (implicitly) in mind the first principle of morality (good is to be done and evil avoided), I reason as follows: Generosity is a good thing; helping this person is generosity; so I go to the pharmacy and buy the drug for him.

In this top-down movement from universal knowledge to a set of particulars, the central role is played by practical wisdom (*phronesis*, or *prudentia*). *Phronesis* is

the "right reason in matters of conduct."[30] It is concerned with how to act in particular situations; it makes us choose the right means to achieve good ends; it enables us to act in the right way, for the right reasons, and at the right time; it is the ability to determine what ought to be done in the concrete case. From this it is not difficult to see that practical wisdom cannot be achieved by a mere mechanical rule following. As MacIntyre writes, "knowing which rule to apply in which situation and being able to apply that rule relevantly are not themselves rule-governed activities."[31] In other words, the application of rules itself requires an exercise of judgment. This is why *phronesis* is, in Aristotle's terms, an intellectual, not a moral, virtue. However, it still entails practical, not speculative reasoning: it is exercised not in order to *know* something but in order to *do* something.

An important point to stress here is that, for Aristotle, practical reasoning is an approximate form of reasoning. It is not exact theory, as mathematics or physics are. In his view we must be content if, in dealing with ethical subjects, we succeed in "presenting a broad outline of the truth."[32] Because practical wisdom deals with contingent matters (i.e., with things that can be other than they are), it cannot be codified in advance in a very detailed fashion. The problem is not that there is no definite right and wrong but rather that reliable standards of right and wrong have to be applied to the variable conditions of human life.

But, of course, we also reason theoretically about morality matters. If a colleague asks me my view on, say, human cloning, the moral judgment that I make aims not to do something, or to apply the general principles to a particular case, but simply to develop an argument on a specific topic. Here I engage in reasoning that is directed at the resolution of questions that are theoretical rather than practical. Knowledge is here pursued for its own sake, and without ulterior purpose or practical application. One is tempted to say that in such situations we use a purely deductive reasoning to come to a conclusion. But the fact is that induction is also here present, although in a less immediate way. When we are confronted with purely theoretical issues, the principles that we apply to come to a conclusion are not inferred from a concrete case but have been induced from our experience of the world all throughout our lives.

Conclusion

In sum, do our moral judgments need to be guided by principles? The answer is yes. Because how could it be otherwise? If morality is not a merely descriptive undertaking but has, at its core, a normative dimension, how could it avoid the recourse to some guiding standards? But they should not be simply imposed a priori; this is an excessively artificial, counterfactual, and inoperative way of conceiving them. Principles should be "empirically informed and less reductionistic than in current conceptions."[33] They must be the result of a process of induction by moral agents themselves and must only afterwards be conceptually structured in their own minds to help them decide what to do in a particular situation (practical reasoning), or what to think in moral terms about some general topic (theoretical reasoning).

The crucial point is that moral agents should, as far as possible, gain access to moral norms from the inside, and not have them imposed from the outside. This is not a merely academic debate but has very practical consequences, also in the specific field of medical ethics. For instance, in recent years a number of scholars have stressed the importance of promoting dialogue, deliberation, and storytelling

as starting points for a more fruitful decisionmaking process in clinical practice.[34] The use of inductive-deductive reasoning is also encouraged today as the best way for adequately teaching medical ethics: rather than setting out a range of disparate and often conflicting theories at the beginning, it is recommended to start by examining particular moral problems and to seek to build up to a unified theory from the answers given to the cases.[35] Similarly, it has been suggested that the promotion of empathy among medical students by confronting them with concrete cases should become a priority of ethics education.[36]

Notes

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