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## Utility of Morality: Asymmetry between Helping and Harming

### 0. Introduction

This paper will argue that a (quasi-)teleological explanation can be a good candidate for the best explanation of the utility which morality has, and will also suggest that such an explanation of morality in turn can generate or confirm hypotheses about morality. For these purposes, I will focus on an aspect of morality: asymmetry between helping and harming. The following argument consists of three parts. First, I will review Gilbert Harman's explanation of the asymmetry and what he considers as the "evidence" for his explanation. Second, I will consider another completely different explanation of this asymmetry proposed by Adam Smith. As we will see, his explanation is teleological. Third, I will pursue the way to retain Smith's explanation without invoking his theological assumptions. It will be turned out that not only is the teleological viewpoint useful for explaining morality, but also it provides a promising methodology for moral philosophy.

### 1. Asymmetry between Helping and Harming: Gilbert Harman's Explanation and Its "Evidence"

When considering the nature of morality, Gilbert Harman refers to a certain aspect of morality several times. He says, "[i]n our morality, harming someone is thought to be much worse than not helping someone" (Harman 1977, p. 110), and in another place, he also says, "[m]any people assign greater weight to the duty not to harm others than to the duty to help others" (Harman 2000, p. 11). Here what Harman points out is very clear: there is the difference (or asymmetry) between helping and harming, and we usually give higher priority to the duty of not harming than that of helping. To clarify this, citing a famous example proposed by Philippa Foot, Harman writes, "we suppose that a doctor cannot cut up one patient in order to save five other patients by distributing the patient's organs according to need" (Foot 2002, p. 24; Harman 1977, p. 110; 2000, p. 11). He also comes up with his original examples and says, "most people

suppose that it is worse to kill several people (for example, by sending them poisoned chocolates) than to fail to save several people from death (for example, by not sending them food that would keep them from starving)" (Harman 1996, p. 24).

Assuming most people admit the validity of this asymmetry, he considers it as "evidence" of *moral conventionalism*, of which David Hume is one of the greatest proponents (Harman 1977, p. 111). Moral conventionalism is a position that explains morality as customary conventions which are reached through a process of bargaining and adjustment. Thus according to conventionalism, the asymmetry between helping and harming is explained as a result of bargaining and adjustment between the rich and the poor, or the strong and the weak. But, how can the bargaining and adjustment explain the asymmetry? Harman's explanation is like this: First, both the rich and the poor (or the strong and the weak) can benefit from refraining from harming each other, because anyone regardless of their status prefers to avoid being harmed. Secondly, however, those who mainly benefit from helping are the poor (or the weak), because those who need help are the poor (or the weak) and the resources of helping are provided by the rich (or the strong). In this sense, everyone can agree to hold back from harming one another, but when it comes to helping, there is a conflict of interests between the rich and the poor. Then, as a result of bargaining and adjustment between both sides, there is a compromise, i.e. the strong duty not to harm and the weaker duty to help others are accepted by society and become its convention (Harman 1977, pp. 110–112; 1996, pp. 24–25; 2000, p. 11).

Perhaps we may find this conventionalistic explanation for the asymmetry between helping and harming persuasive. Why, however, is the fact that moral conventionalism can explain the asymmetry its "evidence?" Harman says (Harman 1977, p. 111):

If our moral principles were not in this way a result of bargaining and adjustment, it would be hard to see why we would suppose that there is this moral difference between harming and not helping; and it would be hard to understand how our moral principles could be the result of bargaining and adjustment in this way unless they were derived from some sort of convention in Hume's sense.

Without conventionalistic explanation, we could not understand how our morality is derived from bargaining and adjustment, and therefore we could not see why there is the asymmetry between harming and helping. In other words, according to Harman, the conventionalistic explanation is the *best explanation* for morality, because no other theories or hypotheses about morality can explain this aspect of morality, the asymmetry between helping and harming, as well as conventionalism. For example, simplistic utilitarianism can not explain this. According to such utilitarianism, we should cut up one patient to save lives of five patients, because the utility of five lives is clearly larger than that of one.

But, is it true that any other theories can not explain the asymmetry as well as conventionalism? Are there no theories which can explain the fact well? In the next section, we will see Adam Smith's explanation of the asymmetry between helping and harming as a candidate for the best explanation for morality.

## **2. Beneficence and Justice: Adam Smith's teleological explanation of morality**

The second section of Part II of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is titled "Of Justice and Beneficence," and there he compares these two kinds of virtue. According to him, beneficence is a virtue of being the proper object of gratitude, while justice is a virtue of *not* being the proper object of resentment.<sup>1</sup> Since justice is characterized by *not*, it is called a "negative virtue", and we can achieve this virtue without doing anything, or in Smith's own words, "by sitting still" (Smith 1976, II.ii.1.9, p. 82). But what is the proper object of beneficence or justice? He says, "[a]ctions of a *beneficent* tendency, which proceed from proper motives," are the proper objects of gratitude, and in the same vein, "[a]ctions of a *hurtful* tendency, which proceed from proper motives," are the proper objects of resentment (ibid., II.ii.1.1-2, p. 78, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Thus, we can safely say that beneficence is a virtue of helping and justice is a

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, the property of being the proper object of gratitude is called "merit," and that of being the proper object of resentment is called "demerit" (Smith 1976, II.i). "Proper" is also a technical term, which means that those sentiments are sympathized with and approved by a spectator (ibid., I.i.3.1, p. 16). Although "sympathy" is at the core of Smith's moral theory, since it is not directly related to the subject of this paper, I eschew delving into it.

<sup>2</sup> With regard to Smith's use of the word "proper," see footnote 1.

virtue of not harming.

Then, does Smith see the asymmetry between helping and harming, or beneficence and justice? The answer is, of course, yes. Smith says, "[b]eneficence is always free, it cannot be extorted by force, the mere want of it exposes to no punishment," and on the other hand, justice is a virtue "of which the observance is not left to freedom of our own wills, which may be extorted by force, and of which the violation exposes to resentment, and consequently to punishment" (ibid., II.ii.1.3 & 5, pp. 78 & 79). In this way, Smith clearly sees the asymmetry the strong duty not to harm someone (justice) and the weaker duty to help someone (beneficence), and furthermore, he thinks that this asymmetry exists because justice is forced by punishment but beneficence is not. But to explain the asymmetry completely, we must take the question a step further: why is only justice forced by punishment?

Smith's answer to this question is completely *teleological*. Justice is forced by punishment but beneficence is not, because "[s]ociety may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it" (ibid., II.ii.3.3, p. 86). To put it simply, Smith thinks that not beneficence but justice is forced *for the purpose* of preservation of society. This seems fairly utilitarian. So, is Smith a utilitarian? The answer is yes and no, we might say. The answer is yes in that he *recognizes* the utility of justice forced by punishment. The answer is no, however, in that Smith thinks that this utility is attained not through "the wisdom of man," but through "the wisdom of God" (ibid., II.ii.3.5, p. 87). He emphasizes that "it is not a regard to the preservation of society, which originally interests us in the punishment of crimes committed against individuals," but "[i]n order to enforce the observation of justice...Nature has implanted in the human breast that consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation, as the great safe-guards of the association of mankind, to protect the weak, to curb the violent, and to chastise the guilty" (ibid., II.ii.3.4 & 10, pp. 86 & 89). He believes that the purpose of preservation of society (and therefore, utilitarian thinking) found in morality is attributed not to humans, but to God.

In fact, under the strong influences of Francis Hutcheson, Smith's predecessor of the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, and especially of the deism of the ancient Stoics, Smith believes in natural theology, and thinks that human

nature, including resentment by which punishment is motivated, is constituted by “the Author of nature” (i.e. God), who has the purposes of “the support of the individual” and “the propagation of species” in mind (*ibid.*, II.ii.3.5, p. 87). For Smith, the asymmetry of morality between helping and harming (or beneficence and justice) is a consequence of human nature which is teleologically designed by God.

For most of us today, however, such theological statements are not persuasive, and therefore Smith's explanation may not seem so intriguing. But if we could replace his theological assumptions with some more persuasive ones, his explanation should appear tenable even to us, and I will pursue this possibility in the next section.

### 3. Utility of Morality: Design or Apparent Design?

We, including Harman, can agree that morality has certain utility (or end-directedness, purposefulness). In fact, it is one of the selling points of moral conventionalism to give a specific account of the social utility morality has. Harman says, “certain rules are conventionally adopted because each person benefits from everyone else acting in accordance with those rules. We therefore expect rules to be adopted if they promote social utility in the sense that they are beneficial to all” (Harman 1977, p. 105). If our moral conventions were formed through bargaining and adjustment among us, we should agree with those conventions that are beneficial to all of us. The utility of morality is explained this way as a consequence of bargaining and adjustment by moral conventionalism.

On the other hand, as we have seen in the last section, Smith explains this utility as a direct consequence of teleologically designed human nature. To be a good alternative hypothesis to moral conventionalism to explain morality, however, Smith's explanation needs some modification in its theological (and teleological) part, which seems untenable now. Harman himself suggests a clue to the modification of Smith's explanation. As we have just seen, the social utility of morality can be explained by moral conventionalism. But it can not be explained when “morality is simply a reflection of individual choices” (Harman 1977, p. 94). Harman, however, admits an exceptional case where the social utility could be explained even when morality is a matter of personal choice. He says, “we might offer an *evolutionary* explanation in that case—the tendency to develop social values promotes the survival of people who are

born with that tendency" (ibid., emphasis added).

Charles Darwin is the founder of the theory of evolution by natural selection, which provides an alternative explanation to natural theology with regard to design-like features organisms have. As shown in Smith's belief, natural theology considers the design-like (or end-directed) features (e.g. human nature) as literally designed by God. In contrast, the theory of evolution explains those features as a result of natural selection. The features are not designed, but *appear* to be designed to maximize the fitness of organisms because of natural selection. In this sense, even if we cannot see human nature as teleologically designed by God, we can see it as quasi-design, and keep seeing it as if there were some purpose in it. Replacing design with quasi-design, we can maintain Smith's explanation about the utility of morality, which is now *quasi-teleological*.

Darwin himself also explains the reason why morality has the social utility as a result of natural selection (Barrett et al. 1987, p. 609):

What *has* produced the greatest good or rather what was necessary for good at all *is* the instinctive moral senses: (& this alone explains why our moral sense points to revenge)...Society could not go on except for the moral sense, any more than a hive of Bees without their instincts.

Darwin's use of the word "good" is a bit confusing, because we apply the word not only to what we think is *morally* good, but also to what contributes to some purpose (i.e. a thing with some utility) but is not necessarily considered morally good (remember Foot's example of cutting up one patient for five). Here, what Darwin means by "good" is not the former moral sense, but the latter utilitarian sense, i.e. good for society.<sup>1</sup> What Darwin wants to emphasize with his italics is that we acquired our morality *because* it had had social utility, and *because of this* now it has social utility.

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<sup>1</sup> Since Darwin uses the term "good" in the utilitarian sense, some might wonder if Darwin thinks of group selection. Indeed, Darwin invokes group selection especially when it comes to the evolution of morality. He says, "[i]t must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another" (Darwin 1871, Vol. 1, p. 166).

This is precisely the same point as Smith makes, although they break away from each other regarding *how* it was acquired: natural selection or God's design.

#### 4. Conclusion

As we have seen above, Harman explains the asymmetry between helping and harming as customary conventions reached through bargaining and adjustment. He thinks that this aspect of morality is evidence for moral conventionalism, because other hypotheses cannot explain it. Smith, however, can explain the asymmetry and its social utility as a consequence of human nature teleologically designed by God, and if we modify Smith's explanation from a teleological explanation to a quasi-teleological one like Darwin's, his explanation is still tenable.

At this point, I can not decide which of these, Harman's conventionalistic explanation or Smith-Darwin's quasi-teleological one, explains our morality better.<sup>1</sup> But we can say, at least, the quasi-teleological explanation for morality is worth considering as an alternative to moral conventionalism, and can be a good candidate for the best explanation for morality.

In addition, I suggest that the quasi-teleological explanation has an advantage from the methodological viewpoint. By methodologically supposing that there were some purpose in morality (e.g. by seeing it as an adaptation formed by natural selection), there would be some possibilities that we can generate or confirm some new hypotheses about morality. This methodological point of view cannot be taken by conventionalism, because although it does explain the utility (or end-directedness) of morality, it never presupposes the utility.

We can find examples of this kind of methodology at work in the past and in our time. In the past, Adam Smith himself uses his teleological viewpoint of the "invisible hand" to support his arguments. For example, he argues for the reality of the love of praise-worthiness by saying that God endowed man with it "*in order to render him anxious to be really fit*" for society (Smith 1976, III.2.7, p. 117, emphasis added). Today, Sober & Wilson (1998) argues for psychological altruism opposed to

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<sup>1</sup> There is a further possibility going the middle road between them that our abilities related to conventions or culture were formed with biases to learn a particular set of norms (norms to promote social utility, for example) by natural selection (cf. Ruse & Wilson 1986; Richerson & Boyd 2006; Henrich & Henrich 2007).

psychological egoism from the evolutionary standpoint of methodological adaptationism (see esp. pp. 11-12). Whether the quasi-teleological explanation is the best explanation may be controversial, but at the same time, we can appreciate its methodological usefulness for moral philosophy, i.e. seeing our morality as if it had some purpose.

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