

How to Make Good Decisions... a 62 Point Summary

“How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time” – a 62 Point Summary

1 Uncertainty about Right and Wrong is Common and Bad

- Most people face difficult decisions every day. Some are trivial; some are very important.
- Tackling these decisions with intuition is unreliable. Moral intuitions often generate advice which clashes with other moral intuitions – should you help a stranger in need, or put family first? Intuitions alone don't help much.
- Because moral intuitions lead to inconsistent advice, philosophers have tried to develop systems for making decisions. Many of these systems try to offer a clear and consistent account of 'right' and 'wrong'.
- Different philosophers have presented different systems. Some (like Kant) suggest 'right' and 'wrong' are about our actions, and have developed a system based on rules. Others (eg Aristotle) have said right and wrong are about virtues – good or bad characteristics within each of us.
- Today's dominant system for right and wrong – dominant because it is still at the centre of economics – is 'Do whatever has the best consequences' (utilitarianism).

2 So What's Wrong with 'Do Whatever has the Best Consequences'?

- 'Do whatever has the best consequences' has some attractive features. Several criticisms of it are unfounded. But it does have seven important flaws. Each is explained more in, *How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time*; here is a summary:
 1. 'Do whatever has the best consequences' can be self-defeating;
 2. It only considers future events and ignores the past;
 3. It places decision-making authority in questionable hands;
 4. It doesn't discriminate fairly between people;
 5. It sacrifices individual concerns to the group interest;
 6. It down-grades promises, fairness and truth-telling; and
 7. It doesn't offer any clear rules.

- Most important of all, the argument usually presented for following ‘do whatever has the best consequences’ doesn’t work. This is the argument:
 1. Everyone naturally tries to maximise their own happiness.
 2. Doing right involves common interests, not selfish ones. *Therefore*
 3. Everyone should maximise the total happiness of everyone.
- 1 and 2 don’t quite lead to 3. It’s like saying ‘Everyone shops for themselves’ (in place of 1, above); ‘Therefore everyone should shop for everybody’ (in place of 3). The main argument for ‘do whatever has the best consequences’ is invalid.
- So we need to rethink ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ from scratch.

3 Establishing a Viable Basis for Right and Wrong (Meta-Ethics)

- Rethinking ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ from scratch makes us wonder what ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ actually refer to. Studying this is called ‘meta-ethics’, which means ‘beyond’ or ‘above’ ethics.
- Different philosophers have come to different conclusions on meta-ethics. Some say ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are absolute qualities in the world – perhaps as real as numbers; others say they are little more than personal tastes, or expressions of ‘boo’ and ‘hurray’ in response to what we witness.
- Many of the disagreements about what right and wrong refer to are smaller than they seem. This is because the philosophers are sometimes talking about different things.
- The real trick is to find an explanation of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ which also provides useful advice – the most important question is not ‘What do right and wrong refer to?’, it’s ‘What should we do?’
- *‘How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time’* sets out four routes for establishing a basis for right and wrong, which also answer ‘What should we do?’ All four routes converge on the same conclusion – the Help Principle. Here are the four routes:

Route One: Reconstructing Utilitarianism

- Reconsider the common argument for ‘do whatever has the best consequences’ (utilitarianism):
 1. Everyone naturally tries to maximise their own happiness.
 2. Doing right involves common interests, not selfish ones. *Therefore*
 3. Everyone should maximise the total happiness of everyone.

- This argument is invalid because 1 and 2 don't quite lead to 3.
- But if a psychological transformation could take place, so we really could imagine the interests of everybody else as our own, then this argument could become valid.
- We can only empathise with one person at a time – we cannot imagine being more than one person.
- So the argument can work when there are just two people, and it leads to the Help Principle: 'Help someone if your help is worth more to them than it is to you.'
- This also means that, with more than two people, 'Help someone if your help is worth more to them than it is to you' doesn't become 'do whatever has the best consequences'. Instead, it leads to two adaptations of it – one for when people reciprocate, one for when they don't. More on this below (see 'Refining the Help Principle'), and in the book.

Route Two: 'Correcting' John Rawls' approach

- This route adapts John Rawls' method for establishing a basis for right and wrong (from 'A Theory of Justice', 1971).
- Rawls believed people could agree fair rules if they were prevented from being self-interested. He asked what rules people would adopt if information they could use to set selfish rules was kept secret, so they couldn't know who in society they might be.
- Rawls said people would agree to the rule 'do whatever benefits the least well-off person the most' (Maximin). This is because Rawls allowed them set rules based on an exaggerated fear that the least well-off person would be them.
- But if people aren't cautious, or if pandering to cautious people is considered self-interested so it isn't allowed, then Rawls' method leads to the Help Principle: 'Help someone if your help is worth more to them than it is to you.'

Route Three: The Argument from Evolution

- Evolution has instilled moral instincts in us.
- Evolution is arbitrary – a chain of our ancestors adapted to their environments, which were arbitrary.
- This means the genes, and the moral instincts that go with them, which have survived to now are arbitrary too.
- Nevertheless, we regard these instincts as profound, and they provide our basis for right and wrong. (It's fine to accept evolution is arbitrary AND our instincts are profound – otherwise you

have to be indifferent to really bad things like punching babies and genocide; or deny evolution).

- One of the most profound instincts evolution has instilled in us is one-to-one empathy.
- One-to-one empathy leads to the Help Principle, 'Help someone if your help is worth more to them than it is to you'.
- Evolution has also bequeathed instincts in us which contradict the Help Principle, such as selfishness and xenophobia.
- But one of our deepest instincts is that our principles should be compatible with each other: if one act of murder is wrong, then other acts of murder must be wrong, and so on.
- The Help Principle allows a system of right and wrong to be generated which has maximum compatibility with itself (that is, it contradicts itself the least).
- The system which emerges from the Help Principle complements the instincts of some 99% of the world's population (the non-psychopaths, those who experience empathy) to the maximum extent possible.

Route Four: The 'Sherlock Holmes' method

- There may or may not be something of value, or meaning in life.
- If there is, it makes sense to seek it; and if there isn't any meaning in life it doesn't matter what we do, since there is nothing of value to be lost.
- So we should seek value/meaning in life, whether or not it is there to be found.
- For someone who is alone, 'seek value' is usually straightforward.
- But seeking value usually involves interacting with others. Good interaction requires a set of rules or agreed behaviour. Which rules? We need to choose rules which:
 1. Are better than other sets of rules; and
 2. Provide a 'compulsive kick' so most people follow them, which in turn means they:
 1. Motivate;
 2. Do not contradict themselves;
 3. Are reasonably close to our natural instincts and intuitions.
- Also, we can deduce that sentiments of right and wrong, such as our revulsion at murder:
 1. Seem to us as though they're directly connected to events outside us, such as the murder;

2. Are really more like personal tastes projected onto those events (in the jargon, called 'projectivism');
 3. But are not just personal tastes – because we have to take them more seriously, and because we can't change them on a whim (sometimes called 'quasi-realism').
- This allows us to establish criteria for virtues which can underpin rules.
 - Several virtues match these criteria. But the only virtues which match the criteria while their opposites do not are empathy and obligation.
 - Acting on empathy to one other person leads towards the Help Principle: 'Help someone if your help is worth more to them than it is to you'.
 - The Help Principle also arises if you use obligation to establish a basic one-to-one contract between people (see Route Two, above).

All four routes engage our natural capacity for empathy and obligation. These are virtues; the Help Principle is a guide to action; and the Help Principle involves comparing outcomes. Hence, this approach establishes right and wrong in not one place but three: virtues, acts and consequences.

4 Refining the Help Principle

The basic Help Principle needs to be refined (that is, defined carefully) so it is not vulnerable to the seven problems which affect 'do whatever has the best consequences'. *'How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time'* contains more detail on why these refinements are justified. In summary, the main refinements are:

- We need to let people choose for themselves, unless we know their interests better than they *can* ('can' is important – not just 'do').
- To avoid double-counting, we need to exclude certain person-to-person wants when deciding which forms of benefits to deliver. (Person-to-person wants include deriving pleasure from someone else's preferential treatment or from someone suffering). This excludes racist preferences etc.
- When choosing in small groups of three or more, we empathise with each person individually, so the Help Principle does not lead to 'maximise total help/benefit to others'. Instead it generates: 'Choose whichever option benefits any individual the most', which in turn justifies human rights.

- We need to consider the consequences of our actions independently of when we make our decisions – right and wrong should not depend on ‘when’. So we need to value the hypothetical impact of our choices on the past as well as the future. This is important for promises etc.
- The Help Principle is reciprocal – to be applied to people only as much as they would apply it themselves.
- When group members don’t reciprocate help they receive, the Help Principle generates: ‘Choose whichever option brings about the greatest all-time direct benefit’ (close to Utilitarianism, but excluding person-to-person wants and including hypothetical impact on the past happiness).

With these refinements, the Help Principle answers all seven problems listed in section one.

5 Applying the Help Principle to the Real World

- To make the Help Principle a practical guide to action, it needs to adapt for the real world. Problems of incomplete information, uncertainty, complexity, inertia, and the impact of previous commitments mean we can rarely make perfect calculations.
- To cope with uncertainty, complexity etc, we can adopt conventions. Conventions include social norms, ‘rules of thumb’, traditions of expected behaviour and some institutions. Conventions can provide useful approximations when the best course of action is unclear.
- Conventions need to evolve and adapt; we should be ready to challenge conventions from time to time. We should change conventions when they are based on out-of-date patterns about what happens in the world, or diverge substantially from the Help Principles.
- This ‘convention on conventions’ means some flawed conventions are worth keeping, and it’s OK for two incompatible conventions to co-exist, which allows for what’s called ethical pluralism. It means most cultural differences should be welcomed or tolerated.
- An example of a convention to emerge this way concerns personal integrity: we should do bad things only when being good is worse because of the way our actions influence others. (More on this in Chapter 34 of *How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time*)
- When the consequences of our actions are unclear, we can rely more on rules; when rules offer conflicting advice, we can resolve disputes by referring to virtues; and when these detach us from the world, we can go back to consequences. We need a full arsenal of ethical tools (acts, virtue and consequence-based ethics) to navigate the real world, so we can respond to uncertainty, complexity etc, and the rules which already exist.

6 Deriving a Full Set of Advice

- Using this approach can generate rules for all sorts of behaviour and situations – when to make and break promises, rules for romance, laws, economics, tackling poverty, responding to aggression, how much to punish people etc. For example, regarding lies, we should ‘Deceive only if we can change behaviour in a way worth more than the trust we would lose, were the deception discovered (whether the deception actually is exposed or not).’ In theory, the rules which emerge through this process are not culturally specific.
- This method generates credible answers for many problem cases which stump other systems for making decisions (eg Kant, Utilitarianism, Virtue ethics etc). *How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time* sets them out.
- The riddle of right and wrong is solved. We now know what is right and wrong, and we can eliminate uncertainty about them.
- But we cannot eliminate uncertainty about the world itself. This means we cannot be right *all the time* (in case you hadn’t guessed, the title of my 2008 book was satire). We still need some judgement and intuition – although now their role is confined to wisdom about how the world interacts, not right and wrong itself.

7 Responding to Critiques

Critique 1: How do you know your system of right and wrong is better than any other? It’s just another opinion (Relativism).

Answer: No. You cannot be indifferent about everything – your own survival, the worst atrocity, and so on. Even someone who says ‘it’s-all-just-a-matter-of-opinion’ (a relativist) must hold something dear. If you build on those ‘somethings’ to try to make a system of right and wrong which is compatible with itself, you should end up with the system set out in my book.

Critique 2: If right and wrong can be solved so easily, how come nobody else has realised it yet? (Critique made by Geoff Crocker in his 2010 book)

Answer: Most ethics tries to locate right and wrong in just one place. It fails because ethical labels can belong in lots of places – anywhere along the chain which runs from our virtues, through our motives, and our actions, to the consequences we make happen. Also, most systems try to define ethics as just one sort of thing, when really there are several different things which engage ‘ethics’ – our subjective moral reactions, the ethical mathematics (moral grammar) which allows us to deduce what our moral

reactions should be from similar cases, the conventions we develop to cope with real world complexity, and some social norms. Like light, which can behave as a wave or a particle depending on the situation, ethics can be different things at the same time. Or perhaps I'm wrong, too.

Critique 3: You can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is' (Hume, naturalistic fallacy)

Answer: We haven't. We've looked at all the 'oughts' people use, and decided which 'oughts' we 'ought' to prefer – so we've gone from one set of 'oughts' to another, which is fine.

Also, remember that evolution is an arbitrary 'is', and has instilled deep intuitive 'oughts' in us. Can you jettison all your moral instincts? Can you be agnostic about genocide, murder and punching babies? No. So we already allow some 'oughts' which are derived from an 'is' anyway.

Critique 4: You accept our morals were implanted by evolution. So shouldn't we do whatever maximises the chances of propagating our genes?

Answer: No. There are lots of things which could maximise the chances of our genes propagating – perhaps genocide of other peoples, forced sterilisations, or rape. But all of them are still very wrong. Evolution gave us the riddle of right and wrong, not the answer.

Critique 5: Right and wrong are an empty fiction – they can't refer to anything, so whenever you use them you automatically make an error (Mackie, fictionalism, error theory).

Answer: Although right and wrong don't refer to anything tangible, they are still useful labels.

Also, saying 'right and wrong are an empty fiction' cannot lead to 'so you shouldn't follow them' because that advice would itself be an empty fiction. We cannot escape taking right and wrong seriously. We *should* take them seriously.

Critique 6: Are empathy and obligation really the best virtues? If this is a reasonable query – an 'open question' – then empathy and obligation don't define 'good' (GE Moore's 'Open Question' argument).

Answer: This 'Open Question' argument leads to an endless circle of assessing virtues by other virtues, which is unreasonable. So we must allow virtues to be assessed by criteria which aren't virtues. This is what we have done (in Route One), and empathy and obligation were what emerged. The 'Open Question' is answered.

Critique 7: If right and wrong are really arbitrary preferences within us which we project onto things, then how can you deduce something is wrong because another thing is wrong? Surely allowing the deduction is an arbitrary preference too (Frege-Geach).

Answer: Our sense of right and wrong works at two levels. Even though our sentiments of right or wrong are like personal tastes – a bit like our reactions to art – we have a more objective sense of how these notions interact – more like mathematics. This ‘ethical mathematics’, sometimes called ‘moral grammar’, allows us to make deductions: to say one murder is better than another I need to pinpoint a morally-significant difference between the two acts. So it’s OK to say ‘murder is wrong’ (moral taste); ‘if one murder is wrong, then all murders are wrong’ (ethical mathematics); ‘therefore Joey shouldn’t murder’.

Critique 8: Your system says we should push a fat man onto railway tracks if it would save four others from certain death. So really you’re just someone who decides right and wrong from consequences. (Trolley problem)

Answer: No. Even though a fat man should be pushed onto the tracks if it would definitely save four innocent others, that doesn’t mean only consequences matter. Rules and instincts against killing are still very important – it’s just that they’re over-ridden in this very peculiar case. Many examples like this one are like optical illusions, creating the false impression that ethics is ‘either/or’. In fact, it is possible to find middle ground between judging actions, judging virtues and judging consequences – and that’s exactly what my quasi-utilitarian system does.

Critique 9: Can ethics *really* be explained in bullet points?

Answer: Too much philosophical writing is verbose. Jargon confines it to academia, and the idea nuggets become mush in a slurry of confusing words. That’s why I tried to avoid jargon in my book, although I did succumb to a long-winded title. The title was meant to be funny, though.

Critique 10: You still haven’t given clear advice about right and wrong! What should I do?

Answer: Buy *How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time*, and find out.

