The Morally Noble

What makes something morally good or evil? This is a complex question.

Actually, we need a definition before we get going.

The term *moral* is about something *real*... where the term *real* means *part of how the world is*. The term "moral" carries this weight because we all have a strong intuition that things like (for instance) rape and murder really are *real*ly wrong. (That is as opposed to the idea that (for instance) rape or murder would be morally okay under some particular set of beliefs, or in some particular kind of society, or for some kinds of people (that exist in the real world), or what-have-you... and as opposed to the idea that the concept exists in some sense, but only within people's *beliefs about the world* — that is, "in people's heads"... and as opposed to the idea that — in spite of widespread belief otherwise — (for instance) rape and murder just are not actually wrong.)

Of course, this is not to deny anyone the opportunity of stating that (real) moral truth does not exist. Rather, the point is that that very statement would not be meaningful unless words have meanings — fixed, shared, known meanings.

Indeed, there are people who believe that (for instance) what people call moral truth is actually just societal convention. However, again, to be meaningful — to work — this statement still requires the fixed, normal meaning of the term *moral truth*. (It would accord with accepted practice to stipulatively redefine the term, within (say) a paper.)

To discuss the concept of something that is like *moral truth*, but does not have, or does not *necessarily* have, moral force grounded in reality, I shall use the expression *putative moral truth* (or *putative moral laws* or the like).

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We were considering the complex issue of moral truth.

One aspect of it is famously expressed by Plato as follows.

> For consider: is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy? Or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?[1]

This is the question of whether or not moral good and evil are *intrinsic*. If moral good ("the holy") is intrinsic, then the gods will love morally good things for the very

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[1] Plato, in *Euthyphro*, p10, downloaded on 20.03.2012 from http://www.indiana.edu/ p374/Euthyphro.pdf, translated by unknown.

reason that they are good (assuming that the gods know good and evil, and are themselves good). Conversely, if moral good is not intrinsic, then there is nothing for the gods to love (or not), and — provided that some particular gods love what is morally good — then the fact that it is good must reduce to the fact that those gods love it. (Of course, if it is the **good** gods who play this role, the thing becomes (viciously) circular.)

Another foundational moral question is that of whether or not moral truth is arbitrary.

If moral truth is arbitrary then — whatever else might be true about where it comes from, or how it works, or whatever — this means that the rules could just as well have been different. Thus... it would be all the same, except for the actual rules themselves, if rape were amoral and hopping were a seriously bad thing to do.

Now, the idea of rape not being morally wrong is strongly contrary to our *intuition* about moral truth. Thus, for instance, we do not expect to meet people, periodically, who think about rape the same way as we think about hopping... and we ourselves could not think that way.

Consider, however: the idea of murder being perfectly fine, and hopping being gravely bad... if we *were* to meet someone who appeared to believe that, we would not merely be surprised at finally meeting someone with different intuitions; we would consider this person to be irrational... as opposed to just weird and unusual. However, that is no longer just an appeal to intuition; the idea is that there are *reasons why* rape and hopping are morally different.

Consider gravity. If I had an intuition that gravity might or might not happen, in any given case, then — provided that my brain was functioning minimally well — I would eventually come to question my intuition — I would begin to notice that it seemed to be illogical to maintain that **this** time, I might well float up rather than crashing on the lawn yet again.

I suggest that the same is true of moral rules, as follows.

There are people who argue that, whereas societies have rules, and they work better that way... that the idea is false that this reduces to moral principles (since moral principles do not exist).

Consider, then, an imaginary society — Arbitropolis — that had rules that were arbitrary. Its rules included, "No hopping!", and, "You must appreciate pineapple cordial." I venture that it is obvious that this society would rapidly disintegrate — not so much because of the rules that it *did* have, but because of the rules that it *did not* have (since *ex hypothesi* it would (mostly) *not* have ostensibly useful rules like, "No stealing.").

The point is that, it is true not only that the rules that societies have are systematically based on... something, but indeed that the people making the rules **know this**, and **know what it is**... since otherwise they would not be able to make rules that worked.

In other words: there is *something about* stealing, rape and murder that makes it that they are wrong, and that does not obtain in the case of (for instance) hopping and liking Bach.

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Finally, then, there is the question of *what* it is that these rules are non-arbitrary *to*.

I said that explicating morality is a complex exercise. We are going to briefly dip into the madness, but I think we can get away with just a dip.

I have argued that moral rules must be non-arbitrary. There must thus be some other thing — something other than the actual rule itself — that it is a function of. (By this, (of course) I mean that we can not just say (for instance) that murder is wrong because murder is wrong... but rather that there is something about murder that serves to makes it wrong.)

Now, this second-level thing can not be itself morally arbitrary. If, for instance, it was the character of God — where by this we mean all aspects of His personality, including such things as <... likes pineapple cordial.>, <... appreciates Bach.> and <... favourite colour is emerald green.> — then we would have moral rules of the sort that we were calling "arbitrary" a minute ago.

If we try to fix this by making the same move again and again — "no, we mean those aspects of God's character that are *moral*", and so on — we get the same problem again and again; there must be something, at some point, about the thing of which morality is a function, that is morally non-arbitrary — whatever that might mean particularly. (The alternative is an *infinite regress* — which is always bad.)

I suggest, then, (skipping the bulk of the argument) that it is misguided to go and find some other thing, of which a given moral rule is a function, that is not **itself the final moral reason** for the rule being a moral rule. In other words: murder is wrong because of something about murder, and about what it is for something to be wrong, such that it is immediately obvious that murder is an instance of something that is morally wrong. (Of course, if we were actually constructing the pertinent philosophical argument for the first time, it might well take 20,000 words to describe and argue that simple predicate or set-membership relation.)

Here, I have coined the term *normative force*. (A *normative* is a *should*.) The idea is that a rule can not qualify as a (proper) moral rule unless the thing it is (immediately) *about* (for instance, murder) *is (itself) wrong* — that is, unless *the*

normative force is the normative force of the rule. If the normative force is not the normative force of the rule, then — **regardless of** *where* **the normative force** comes from — **the rule itself is** *morally* **arbitrary**.

Note that I do *not* mean that the idea is that murder is a *thing* that immediately (somehow) possesses the attribute *moral wrongness*.

One more point of clarification. Consider the examples, "Thou shalt not hop.", and, "Thou shalt not kill." The idea is that we know whether or not murder is wrong by thinking about murder — its meaning and implications — and we know whether or not hopping is wrong by thinking about hopping — its meaning and implications.

The idea is that — given an understanding of what it is for something to be wrong — we note the presence of that something in the meaning and implications that we are considering. For instance — hypothetically: it might be that something is morally wrong if and when it harms someone; we note that murder implies harming someone, and thus we can see that it is morally wrong.

Conversely, the idea is *not* that this tells us *nothing moral*, in and of itself, until we go on to note that murder invokes some external (and hopping does not), in which, in turn, we can see whether or not moral wrong applies.

I note also that our intuition is that moral rules exist (and have normative force) even when no one (nor thing) is enforcing them.

To me, all this is an argument that (real) moral truth does exist. Nonetheless, the point remains even if one denies that (real) moral truth exists; societies have rules, and these must either line up with what would otherwise be called morality, or fail.

Hereinafter, then, I shall use the terms *moral rule*, *morality* and the like, as though moral truth did exist — but allowing that it might not — on the grounds that the difference is merely academic.

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Arguing philosophically through to the explication of what it is about murder, and what it is about being morally wrong, that makes the former an instance of the latter... would take an awfully long time. Fortunately, there is a short-cut.

If the content of a moral rule must have normative force for it to be a (real) moral rule at all... then we can see what sorts of things have moral force by noting what things we have moral rules about. That is: whatever moral rules there are... the things they are about are the things that bear normative force.

Although there is argument about whether or not various putative rules pertinent to these *actually are right*... the candidate categories are: • hurting other people,

• hurting oneself, and • things related to sex — that is, not just intercourse, but all (related) interactions between maleness and femaleness. I suggest also that people we know generally have stronger moral claims on us than do people we do not know... as a generalisation, at least.

(I suggest that we also have an intuition that other living things are important, and even that preserving natural beauty (independently of the issue of living things) has a claim on us. That is getting off topic, though.)

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I venture that modern thought on morality is built on the tenet that moral truth reduces to the concept of *harm*. On the one hand, this is extremely sensible; since moral truth is grounded in the real world, moral wrong implies harm (or, more particularly, something bad) by definition (at least in principle; one can rely on philosophers to come up with some weird exception). On the other hand, however, there are two major systematic problems. The first of these is as follows. [We shall come to the second in due course.]

Within my knowledge, this view has its nexus in a particular (obviously seminal) paper — alas!, I can not reasonably find the reference for it. [I you must have it, contact me, and I shall try even harder.] In this paper, the author argues as above, and then that harm, in turn, is undesirable. The outcome of this line of thought is that anything that causes harm is morally wrong — judged by whether or not the object... er, objects.

At face value, the paper is an account of morality... or, more specifically, an account of how to identify whether or not *a particular act* is morally evil. Actually, however, it begins with the above moral tenet that moral evil causes harm, and diverges radically from standard moral thought in two ways.

One point of divergence is the change in the definition of moral evil, from *laws*, to *instances of harm* as judged by someone involved — emphasising again that this is a radical change; it allows the possibility that, whereas something is actually morally wrong (according to a moral principle), it is deemed acceptable (by the subjective judgement of someone involved).

This paves the way for the second point of divergence, which is to exclude *self*-harm; the paper argues that a (sane) adult should be allowed to hurt or harm themself if they so choose; there are no third party objections because there are no third parties... and (*ex hypothesi*) the person themself does not object.

Behind this thought process is a classic philosophical trap in the context of normative ethics, as follows. One foundational tool in philosophy is appealing to something that (can be taken, in the particular context, as what) everyone believes

or knows. For instance, in ethical philosophy, it is a safe bet that one's opponent will accept that rape is wrong.

The trap is the fact that, when a person does something wrong, he or she **wants** to. (For example, a utilitarian argument about rape might appeal to the fact that the victim *does not* want it, and forget that the perpetrator *does*.) The general way the error works is that one is arguing on the basis of what a representative person would do — since people *have moral intuitions that we consider reliable* — and one forgets that any person (representative or not) can be *inclined to do evil*.

The relevance to the argument in question is that it means absolutely nothing, morally, that someone might want to do something; this fails absolutely to exclude the possibility that it is evil. (In more technical terms: the paper would have to *also* establish the *prior* point that it was systematically not possible for someone to want to do evil (at least against themself).)

The relevance of all this, to us here and now, is that the thinking in the above seminal paper has led to the modern belief that consensual sexual relations *can not be* morally wrong, **regardless of any moral laws**, *because they are consensual*.

I must mention another relevant trap. Typically, when it comes to arguing over some ethical question or other... this has happened because an *ethical dilemma* has arisen. This means that some peculiar situation or circumstance has arisen, in which two moral rules clash. The issue, in such situations, is not about whether or not something is moral wrong, but about weighing moral rules *against each other*.

The trap is the inference that moral thought is *always* about *particular situations*.

The point is that I am going to assume — as indeed I have argued — that there *are moral rules* — as opposed to the idea, that is the focus of the above paper, that moral questions are (always) questions about *particular situations*.

We must dismiss the ideas that I have mentioned that appeal as classic philosophical traps — being • that moral questions are about particular situations, and • that whether or not someone wants to do something has anything at all to do with whether or not it is morally wrong.

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My second-last pivotal point to about moral philosophy... .

(To the best of my knowledge, this is original with me. Regardless, I had to figure it out for myself.)

It is pretty much already well-known that there are three categories of moral principle — morally evil, amoral, and morally good. I have called the morally good, "morally noble".

What is new is the idea of arguing moral philosophy in terms of the three categories, rather than just the classic two — morally wrong and not morally wrong.

Of course, it does not sound especially clever, when put as above. The point, though, is that there are systematic differences between morally evil and morally noble (over and above their being opposites). The core difference is that the morally noble is not *pre*scribed, in a way that *mirrors* the morally evil being *pro*scribed.

> Another definition, before we proceed. The positive effect of the things that are good for one, and that constitute the morally noble, is called *flourishing*. I am not sure that there is a standard term for what is the opposite, but I shall use *withering*.

Consider the example of working for a living. I suggest that this is a moral issue — that not working for one's living is bad for one in a way that counts as moral — that causes *withering*. The foregoing point, in terms of this example, is that... on the one hand, not working for one's living *definitely is bad*, and on the other hand, that this failure does *not demand punishment* in the way that morally evil things do.

It is similar with giving to charities, which involves third parties. (It is arguable that the moral failure of not giving to charities is distributed over all the pertinent people — that is, that it is a failing of the pertinent society. That is one of the many things we are glossing over here.)

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This brings us to the second of the two (alleged) systematic problems with the seminal paper we were discussing earlier. This relates to the philosophical trap I noted earlier, that pertains to ethical thought.

The point this time is that: it is *not* true that, if something is morally *good*, it will *not* cause harm. That is: something can be morally good, but cause harm nonetheless. (This obtains because the environment is full of evil.)

(Actually, it is fairly easy to generate imaginary scenarios — and indeed these are not uncommon in real life — in which doing the right thing just makes it worse for one, unless the majority of other people — knowing that, in the same way, they are taking a big risk — do the right thing... although that would be irrelevant if **everyone** were **always** doing good.)

One of the strongest obligations we have, on the morally noble side, is working towards the flourishing of one's spouse or children. (I should note that, at the failure end of this continuum, there is parenting that is bad enough to positively inflict harm on the children, such as by failing to provide proper sanitation and nourishment; this *is* a moral evil, and does deserve punishment.)

Corresponding with how well one does this, one undergoes self-sacrifice, frustration, disappointment and so on... and sometimes actual pain or heartache. Not only does this "harm" often go with being morally noble in this area... but indeed it is arguably systematically part of what it is to be morally noble, that one is prepared to pursue something in this category *at personal expense*.

Conversely, it is ostensibly also part of what it is to be morally noble — generally, but very obviously, pertinent to spouse and children — that there is tremendous reward in all this effort.

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This brings us finally to homosexuality.

In a society that is obsessed with individuality and self, and rejects even the notion that there *is* moral truth... the fact that homosexuality is inescapably a sexual perversion is rejected as meaning nothing.

Nonetheless, human beings still know moral truth. I have tried to show, therefore, that there are things that pertain to marriage — as it has been understood across the whole of human history — that have massive moral weight, and involve very hard work, and are extremely rewarding.

Homosexuality offers a poor shadow of these things. Men and women are different. A pairing of two men or two women misses out on all the richness of that.

Absent children, any real or artificial union of two persons misses out on further massive richness.

A pair of men or a pair of women can not have children that are *their own* — noting that children are partly their (biological) father and partly their (biological) mother — at all. They can obtain children that are not — or at best half — of themselves (as a pair). The richness of self-sacrifice is there, in bringing up any child... but not the richness of it being **your own**.

Some failures of what is morally noble cause harm; an example is choosing to not work for one's living. Others arise from existing evil; an example is never giving to charities.

I suggest that homosexuality is in both latter classes... but possibly more in the latter.

We can only feel sorry for someone who wants a fantastically weak shadow of the richness of marriage.

... And we certainly should not make it worse by endorsing it.