

We Are One: On the Idea of the Moral Postulate

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The moral postulate is the key concept of ethical pragmatism that suggests that whatever is genuinely beneficial, an individual must be genuinely good for the group. Dewey suggests that the moral postulate implies the solutions to moral disagreements. This paper examines pragmatists' ethics and proposes that people are justified to hold this belief. Moreover, that people hold the belief makes the realization of the moral postulate and solutions of moral disagreements possible. This paper provides a unique approach to solving moral disagreements and avoids the dichotomy between Kantianism and Utilitarianism.

Keywords: moral pragmatism, moral postulate, moral disagreements, Dewey, virtue ethics

Introduction

Pragmatists' Ethics

Philosophers have long considered the question: "Can people reach moral agreement?" The moral dogmatist's demand for absolutes and the relativist's complete rejection of moral absolutes have failed to produce a fruitful outcome over the past 2,500 years. Pragmatists identify a third way between the horns of the false dilemma of dogmatism or relativism, called moral pragmatism, which argues that, while the actually right is not ready to hand, frequently the actionably right is. Robert Holmes defines "actual rightness" and "actionable rightness" in the following sentence, "what *is* right is the actual rightness...only acts that are justifiably believed to be right are actionably right; that is, justifiably performed" (2007, p. 225). Morality for pragmatists focuses on action, on practice rather than on theory. At the end of inquiry, the morality that remains contains the actually right. But we are still just in the process toward this morality.

Moreover, C. L. Peirce points out that the actual truth appears at the end of scientific inquiry. If we do not have sufficient reason to challenge a belief, and the belief successfully addresses its related problems, then we hold the belief as a truth. As Misak expresses:

The aim of inquiry is to get true beliefs and the beliefs which would be produced if inquiry were to run its unhindered course would be true. For if inquiry would no longer be able to improve upon a belief, then that belief would satisfy all of the aims we might have in inquiry...The pragmatist then suggests that there would be no point in withholding the title "true" from these beliefs. The beliefs satisfy not only the proximate aims of inquiry, but also the ultimate aim of inquiry—truth. (2004, pp. 515-516)

In other words, for Peirce, an actionable truth is revealed to be an actual truth only at the end of inquiry when no new evidence can improve or challenge a belief.

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To James, morality is a genuine problem, and people can decide whether to become part of the moral community or not. While people cannot know what is revealed at the end of inquiry is truth, people trust that it is warranted given that we cannot know whether it is true or not. If we have the will to believe and our choice is genuine, then it is warranted to believe. James proposes that morality can be realized if everyone believes and acts in accordance with the belief in morality (James, 2014, II).

This paper applies Peirce's notion of truth and James' solution to Dewey's ethics and argues that the moral postulate of Dewey's ethics is a realizable ideal.

The Moral Postulate and Its Justification

John Dewey's moral philosophy proposes a regulative ideal called "the moral postulate". That is, we can legitimately hold true that in the long run, the interest of the individual is identical to the interest of the group and vice-versa. Dewey also believes that part of being a good person entails the belief that our moral beliefs will dovetail. If we collectively proceed with belief in the moral postulate, then if it is possible for our moral beliefs to dovetail, it becomes true that our interests harmonize. If our interests harmonize, then in the long run, moral dilemmas will be resolved by appeal to our common interests. One way to resolve a moral dilemma is to decide that both sides are actionably right, in which case tolerance leads us to wait for the moral postulate to be realized and our moral beliefs to finally dovetail. Our belief that it is so can help to make it so, and this is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Moral conduct is based upon faith in the moral postulate, and the moral theory must recognize this as the postulate upon which morality rests. Just as science is based upon faith in the scientific postulate (Holmes, 2007, p. 47), science should recognize the postulate it rests upon. As John Dewey argues in *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, the moral postulate can be expressed as the following proposition:

In the realization of individuality there is found also the needed realization of some community of persons of which the individual is a member; and, conversely, the agent who duly satisfies the community in which he shares, by that same conduct satisfies himself. (Dewey, 1969, p. 131)

Holmes defines the moral postulate differently. He argues that it implies that moral disagreements can be resolved in the long run. If one's genuine interest is the genuine interest for others, then there should be no fundamental moral disagreements between one and others. Holmes, in *Basic Moral Philosophy (Third Edition)*, writes, "It (the moral postulate) is that if humankind strives to understand the human situation in all its complexity...moral judgments will eventually converge" (2007, p. 235). Thus, the moral postulate implies that interests between one and others can eventually harmonize at the end of the inquiry, and the moral truth reveals itself.

Pragmatism treats morality as a means to solve problems in practice through a process of interaction. This presupposes that (a) moral agents cannot begin with themselves alone, since the interaction is a collective process that requires the engagement of others, and (b) agreements on what good is can be achieved over time through experience and discourse, as suggested by Holmes: Otherwise the approach is empty. While there is a difference between theory and practice in theory, there is none in practice. The result is praxis whereby theory and practice continually play off one another until they harmonize.

However, the pragmatists' proposal faces challenges. Many people question the validity of the regulative ideal since people tend to disagree with each other in the present. I argue that people can and should legitimately believe in the moral postulate from both macro and micro dimensions. I also address two main threats that

challenge the validity of “the moral postulate”: egoism that denies the importance of community and moral skepticism that argues that moral disagreements cannot be resolved.

The moral postulate can be achieved because (a) moral agents share an inescapable horizon including long-term common interests, (b) it is justifiable to believe that moral agents can reach moral agreement in the long run through their common interests and open discussion, and (c) people should believe in the moral postulate since believing it so helps to realize the moral postulate “and” morality.

The concept “horizon” is defined by Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity*: “things take on importance against a background of intelligibility” (1991, p. 37). In morality, the horizon is closely associated with a shared common ground of values that come unbidden with our mother tongue.

The first part of the paper argues that morality as a collective task is possible because we do share a common ground of values. That is, we can get others’ moral expressions right most of the time. If others’ moral expressions are not understandable, then morality is impossible too. However, this expression alone is not sufficient to argue that moral difference will dovetail in the long run, since we can disagree with others’ moral expressions. Thus, the second part of the paper argues that it is at least rationally justifiable to believe that moral agreements can be reached in the long run because differences dovetail by solving moral disagreements over the long haul. The method used is much the same reasoning that lies behind scientific reasoning as in scientific progress. Third, I argue that it is in one’s interest to believe in the moral postulate because having the belief makes the moral postulate possible according to the self-fulfilling prophecy and also creates hope for humanity.

Overall, we cannot know with assurance that any present moral dilemma is intractable, nor capable of ever being resolved. The process of discourse, moral debate, tolerance, careful analysis and reasoning, reliance on the scientific method and attitude, etc., may always bring a future solution. We only know by trying and meanwhile, it is our interest to try because of the possibility of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the Validity of the Moral Horizon

The Unity of the Interests of Individual and the Interests of Others

Moral agents can indeed interact since they have a shared common ground of values, and this traces back to the mechanism of moral decision. We share a common moral ground because we are “in part” the products of our culture. As Blackburn says, we take in values by the very fact of learning the language (2021, p. 209). Morality comes unbidden. This is the customary morality that informs our initial emotive reaction to a problematic situation. Reflection turns such a hypothesis into moral judgments through inference to the best explanation, reflective morality. When making a moral decision, an agent needs to decide what is right or wrong to do. It is essential to notice that no theoretical guides at that moment can replace the role of the agent, the decider. As Holmes notes, no matter what theory the decider finally believes and acts in accordance with, the decider needs to choose to believe the moral theory and hence acts in accordance with the conduct that follows from that moral theory. A decider imagines the potential outcome of a moral decision and its influence on others through reflective deliberation. An agent also deliberates on how the others will respond in the dramatic rehearsal. The deliberation, the informed reflection of an agent, is crucial for moral conduct (Holmes, 2007, p. 230).

The dramatic rehearsal requires a common ground of values. This process of reflective deliberation begins with a problem to examine, while what action to choose is known as “dramatic rehearsal” (Dewey, 1969, pp. 292-293). In fact, the dramatic rehearsal is a process by which one transcends one’s own standpoint to reach a standpoint of shared values based on the common point of view: the point of view of those with whom one is in

solidarity. At the end of inquiry, we would all live in solidarity. Dewey defines the dramatic rehearsal in the following sentence:

We give away, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan... We find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. Deliberation is dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal. (Dewey & Tufts, 1908, pp. 292-293)

So moral judgment looks like aesthetic judgment. The dramatic nature of the dramatic rehearsal requires interactions between persons in a moral community, just like actors and audiences collectively complete a drama through interactions on and off the stage. In other words, the deliberations of morality are analogous to those in the drama. Steven Fesmire argues, “the artist’s anticipation of an audience enables a dialectical interaction that gives point and focuses to art. Communication is called forth, whether or not it is intended” (2004, p. 118). In essence, dramatic rehearsal requires a recognition of others, which causes people to interact with each other and to transcend the standpoint of a limited ego. Dewey summarizes the moral end as “the realization of a community of wills” (Dewey, 1969, p. 117). Sorrel also argues, “moral inquiry demands evaluation of present enjoyment of foreseen goods for oneself, and, at the same time, sympathetic understanding of others” (2013, p. 39). These examples all express the idea that the perspective of the individual and the perspective of the others is unified. There are differences since there is, as yet, no unified common point of view. But at the end of inquiry, the actually true and actually right are revealed in the long run.

Objection of the Individualists

Now, a direct objection should be considered, which is closely associated with the notion of “individualism” and the “modern freedom” that follows from it. In the past, people considered themselves as belonging to a larger order. For instance, people who lived in medieval times considered themselves as belonging to the cosmic order, and people who lived before the era of atomic society considered themselves as members of families and communities. However, due to the development of the notion of individualism, many people reject these “larger orders”, and the current trend is characterized as “disenchantment” by Max Weber (1994, p. 116).

There is a popular proposition held by individualists: “I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. Similarly, the rightness of my action is and only is defined by myself, and no external order or external community can legitimately judge my moral action, and hence no one should judge others’ moral actions”. This is the standard belief of individualists. This belief denies the existence of an external moral ground that unites oneself with others, and is a one-way street to relativism: “Whatever I believe is right is right”.

The Inescapable Horizon

The standard belief of individualists, however, is a false belief that misuses “authenticity” to defend a moral theory that cannot be justified. The horizon, the background against which we think and judge, is inescapable. First, it is critical to notice that a person has a dialogical nature. Davidson argues that the very use of language indicates that we are already in communities (2001, p. 990). The fact that language is inter-translatable into other languages suggests that we begin to be embedded in a community that is itself embedded in humanity. We do not use language to define a concept by invoking self-definition of a moral concept. Rather, we define the concept of morality in dialogue with others and through conversations. Therefore, we necessarily think from a common point of view when making moral decisions.

Secondly, and even more importantly, any moral belief that denies the pre-existing moral ground is self-defeating, because it reduces morality to a trivial position which loses significance. This has been pointed out by Charles Taylor (1991, p. 38). The individualists intend to preserve the significance of morality by referring only to self-choice, but this demand is incompatible with the standard claim of individualists. The significance of moral values cannot be defended without invoking the pre-existence of the horizon:

In some forms this discourse slides towards an affirmation of choice itself. All options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth...But this implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice. But then the choice of sexual orientation loses any special significance. It is on a level with any other preferences, like that for taller or shorter sexual partners...No one would dream of making discriminating judgements about these preferences, but that's because they are all without importance. They really do just depend on how you feel. Once sexual orientation comes to be assimilated to these, the original goal, which was to assert the equal value of this orientation, is subtly frustrated. Difference so asserted becomes insignificant. (Taylor, 1991, pp. 37-38)

In this case, sexual preferences are relatively trivial. Morality as merely individual preferences, just like sexual preference, is not significant since it is nothing more than a personal feeling. Even the very idea that the significances of one's moral actions and one's life come from self-determination depends on a presupposition that there is something desirable, noble, and therefore significant to pursue. Otherwise, the choice is nothing more than a trivial, arbitrary decision.

Moreover, if Person A believes moral Proposition P and Person B believes moral Proposition not-P, they are both correct and do not disagree. There are no moral dilemmas in moral relativism. It reduces morality to merely a question of power since there is no sustainable referential system.

Moral value and moral judgment are tasks that are completed inherently. The moral agents involved in the situation give the significance of moral value to an action, and this is not merely a trivial matter of individual preference. For instance, people cannot say that the most critical task of their entire lives is to eat two grams of dust every day without any explanation and expect to be understood. However, once they explain, their explanation that defines the value becomes the basis for a dialogical conversation that involves others and hence the moral horizon.

Therefore, the moral horizon is an inescapable character of morality, so people share a common value ground with each other: customary morality from which we all begin and transform into reflective morality. This conclusion allows people to interact from a common ground of values, but disagreements may still exist, so the next section argues that moral agreements can be reached.

On Moral Agreements Among Individuals and Why People Should Believe in the Moral Postulate

Method of Reaching Moral Agreement: The Scientific Method

On the level of the individual, persons can resolve moral disagreements, and this guarantees a fruitful outcome of the moral postulate. In other words, moral agreements are achievable, and hence the moral postulate is achievable. The moral postulate can be achieved on the level of individuals, as Holmes notes, because morality offers a universal method for individuals to transcend cultural differences and definite perspectives (1966, p. 45). By using the same methods, people can form an agreement under a particular moral context. The method is a continuous testing process of the consequences, which Dewey characterizes as "the scientific method" and I have characterized as inference to the best explanation.

The scientific method is an ongoing inquiry that tests a hypothesis under different situations. It does not treat knowledge as a definite, objective truth, but only as a hypothesis that needs to be constantly tested. This is associated with the notion of the “inference to the best explanation” or abduction. That is, no one possesses the ultimate truth, and what a person has is only an explanation that is applied to a particular situation. The inference to the best explanation implies that morality, just like natural science, is empirically verifiable conduct. “If you want p, then do q”. The hypothetical imperative, the way that moral motivation and moral consequences link together, is in principle verifiable. A hypothetical imperative states the practical necessity of a possible action as a means of achieving something else that one wills, under rational conditions (Kant, 1998, p. 63). We need a reason to doubt a belief just as we need reason to believe. As long as a belief, including values, is reliable, we maintain the belief. Only if a belief becomes unreliable do we have a reason to doubt. “Trueness” and “wrongness” refer to experience, and hence a person can verify a moral judgement by testing the hypothesis in her experience. For instance, researchers discover a positive relationship between “counting kindnesses” and people’s subjective happiness. The conclusion states that the positive reinforcement of conducting kind behavior helps to make a person happier. The positive reinforcement of “kindness” is empirically verifiable (Otake et al., 2006, p. 367).

Morality is a mixture of the agent’s will and verification of the consequences in empirical experience (Werner, 1979, pp. 278-279). The scientific method provides an objective method to morality. Science relies on the same method, which treats scientific discoveries as a hypothetical explanation but not the actual truth. As long as no evidence refutes the explanation, the explanation is reliable knowledge to possess. In morality, if one’s proposal successfully solves the problem, it is a valid moral action. When distinct proposals contradict, according to the inference to the best explanation (IBE), the proposal that most successfully solves the problem wins. IBE is actually a large set of which the scientific method is one member. Moral, practical, and religious reasonings are all forms of IBE.

It is essential to note that the scientific method is not a dogmatic method with a definite form of inquiry. It has a flexible form in specific inquiries, and it has two traits. Firstly, the scientific method allows for investigation of the causal condition and consequences of a moral decision, and this investigation of consequences provides a condition for the generalizations of the moral agreements. Applying the scientific method to morality, a valid moral decision is one that can effectively solve the existing moral problems, and people can decide whether an action is valid or not by directly investigating the consequences of their action. Secondly, the scientific method requires a precondition for inquirers: the scientific attitude (Sorrel, 2013, p. 813). That is, the scientific attitude requires inquirers to regard their beliefs as hypothetical and to stay open to possibilities of fallibility. By applying the scientific attitude, moral inquiry is based on a relatively neutral ground that is free from cultural limitations.

It is noticeable that the pragmatist’s experimental method is not constrained by culture that causes people to disagree. In fact, the scientific method, with two characteristics (“scientific attitude” and “scientific logic”), requires a moral agent to make decisions from a point of view that is accessible to any person, and this, by nature, constructs an objective ground. The method is objective and provides objective findings. When we say, “Jack is wrong”, this is not merely because Jack’s practice is not allowed or understood in our “own” cultural environment but because we are confident in saying that the conduct and its implications fail to solve the particular moral problem. Fascism is wrong not because the western cultural ideal rejects fascism but because the fascist’s proposal fails to solve practical, political, and moral problems. In fact, fascism increases the tension and generates disagreements among different groups, and this is an empirically verifiable experience. Moreover, the key fascist societies of the 20th century all failed miserably, thereby showing them unsustainable even in the short run.

Thus, moral agreements can be achieved because the scientific method provides an effective means for people to form moral agreements.

Fundamental Moral Disagreements

The presented method, however, does not fully address an extreme form of moral disagreement: the intractable moral disagreements that are based on distinct values. Steven Fesmire notes, “mediation of intelligence will not always discover a channel for contending values, no matter how critically reflective and socially responsible. Real incompatibles emerge and this is the source of tragic situations” (2004, p. 122). When two people hold two incompatible values and hence form moral disagreements, it appears to be impossible to solve the tension by using the intellectual methods since the values themselves are equally valid, and the moral judgements derived from the values are also equally valid and incompatible.

Moral dilemmas appear to be irresolvable since they are based on incompatible values. Philosophers have argued for a long time in order to solve the problem of capital punishment, but the debates generated by the capital punishment persist today. It seems that any act that attempts to solve the dilemma is not successful.

Furthermore, recent studies suggest that the emergence of an intractable moral disagreement does not necessarily need two fundamentally incompatible values. What the emergence of an intractable moral disagreement requires is only a condition that two distinct values form two proposals. In “Moral Disagreements and Moral Semantics,” the Justin Khoo and Joshua Knobe illustrate an interesting situation in ordinary language:

- a. Cody: Let’s get a coffee.
- b. Sally: No, let’s get a beer.

I begin with a practical disagreement, and it is analogous to a moral disagreement. In this case, Sally disagrees with Cody about whether to get a coffee, but the disagreement is not best understood in terms of exclusionary content. Since neither speaker makes any assertion, there are no claims here whose contents could be exclusionary. (2016, p. 3)

However, according to our ordinary language, it is natural to say that Proposition (a) and Proposition (b) are incompatible. The authors suggest that, although the two propositions do not genuinely oppose each other since there is no exclusionary content, the two propositions are still incompatible in our ordinary language because they become proposals, and the participants can only choose one option for action. This convention of ordinary language is empirically tested by experiments: People report that they believe that Proposition (a) and Proposition (b) are sufficient to form a disagreement. Similarly, two moral propositions that do not contain genuinely exclusive contents may form irresolvable disagreement if they become proposals that determine an action. For instance, “you should not lie” and “you can lie under some situations” are not mutually exclusive, but they appear to be incompatible in action from the perspective of ordinary language.

Two positions, one extreme and one moderate, both advocate that there are fundamental moral disagreements that cannot be rationally resolved, no matter how reflective the moral imagination is and how effective the conversation is. If there are rationally irresolvable moral disagreements, then one’s interest may not be identical to others’ interest; otherwise, there should be no rationally irresolvable moral disagreements. Therefore, the moral postulate is a false ideal because it cannot be achieved by reason.

I will address the two challenges together. The mistake of the two refutations that argue that moral disagreements are intractable is that they argue from a fixed perspective, which is the standpoint of the present, and then argue that some moral disagreements cannot “ever” be resolved. This assumption is not true. Dewey argues, “Conflict of individual happiness with social welfare is just the incomplete conduct of morality” (1969,

pp. 133-137). In the meantime, we go with the best we have, the actionably right and tenable. In time and especially with ongoing conversation, people can decide to change or alter their values when they think reflectively.

Why Should People Believe in the Moral Postulate: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Even though people cannot know whether moral dilemmas are resolvable by reason, it is still justifiable and essential to believe that they can be solved because the moral postulate is the foundation of morality. The response can be summarized by the following argument:

1. For propositions that reason alone cannot resolve, it is in the meantime rationally justifiable to have faith in one or the other.
2. The moral postulate is a proposition that reason alone cannot resolve.
3. One has the right to believe what one wills to believe, according to (1).
4. Moreover, according to the self-fulfilling prophecy, believing that it is so helps to realize the moral postulate.
5. The moral postulate makes morality possible.
6. All things being equal, we should believe what makes morality possible.
7. Therefore, people can and should have faith in, that is, believe the moral postulate.

William James points out that, in Pascal's wager, a person can either believe in God or not do so, and clearly there is no evidence that can prove the existence of God or evidence that disapproves the existence of God, since God is inconceivable (James, 2004, II). Therefore, should a person believe in God? Pascal's wager suggests that there are situations that reason cannot deal with since the decisive evidence that directly proves the existence of God does not and will not exist, but a person must make a decision—either to believe in God or not. Therefore, it is actionably justifiable for a person to believe in God as long as no evidence contradicts this faith.

Moral dilemma is a belief that rationality cannot as yet successfully resolve. William James argues, "Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof...The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will" (James, 2004, IX). No definite justification proves that moral disagreements are fundamentally intractable, nor is there evidence that decisively suggests that moral disagreements are resolvable. Thus, according to James, it is an open question for each of us to answer and then decide whether to have faith in the moral postulate. Adopting James' argument for the moral postulate, it is justifiable to have faith in the moral postulate, and Premise (1) and Premise (2) are valid.

Having the faith of the moral postulate is not only justifiable, but essential, because this faith is the foundation of morality. Dewey argues,

The basis, in a word, of moral conduct, with respect to the exercise of function, is a faith that moral self-satisfaction means social satisfaction... Now such faith or conviction is at the basis of all moral conduct—not simply of the scientific or artistic. (1969, p. 128)

The very idea of the moral postulate is rooted in morality, and moral conduct stems from the moral postulate. Without this presupposition, the individual is isolated from the community, and hence morality is impossible since morality necessarily requires a horizon. Therefore, in order to establish morality, people need to have the faith in the moral postulate. Doing so can help make it true.

Faith in the moral postulate is nothing mysterious. Rather, it is similar to the faith in science. Scientists hold a conviction of the "permanent unity of objects known" (Dewey, 1969, p. 131). Natural sciences also require a

faith that goes beyond pure reason itself. The problem of the naturalistic fallacy in ethics is similar to the hasty generalization fallacy that underlies the problem of induction of science. Faith in science and faith in ethics are analogous to each other, and there is good reason for people to accept the latter if they generally accept the former.

Moreover, having the faith in the moral postulate causes an actual difference in action, which may bring the ideal of the moral postulate to reality. Holmes suggests in “John Dewey’s Moral Philosophy in Contemporary Perspective” a self-fulfilling prophecy in which believing that it is so helps to make it so.

That is, it (the moral postulate) represents the claims of a group as a whole upon the respective individuals in the group. These claims have overt expression in the de facto rules of a society and have their basis in the network of...cultural ties which integrate into a society that otherwise would be a mere collection of individuals. (1966, p. 66)

We need to recognize the relationship between the belief and its following action. Only if people hold the moral postulate, and hence to adopt the point of view that recognizes that the interest of others is the interest of ourselves, is moral conduct possible.

On the other hand, moral conduct confirms the validity of the moral postulate in practice by solving moral disagreements. Thus, even if there are existing debates regarding some moral issues in our current ethical climate, people still have good reason to believe and to act upon this faith. Only if people believe that differences between individuals are resolvable, and hence conduct active discourses according to the moral postulate, is moral disagreement resolvable in the long run. Otherwise, people simply give up the discourse and hence reject the possibility of solving moral disagreements.

For instance, the rights and wrongs of slavery appeared to be an everlasting debate in history. Aristotle argued that slavery is an inevitable practice in society. In ancient Rome, Seneca expressed his criticism of slavery. The debate about slavery persisted for more than 2,000 years, and it appeared to be an intractable moral disagreement, at least for the people who lived in the ancient world. This debate is an “incomplete conduct of morality”. However, through continuous discourse and debates between abolitionists and pro-slavery activists, slavery was first abolished in Europe, then in United States after the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, and today slavery is de jure abolished in all countries. Though there is racial discrimination and prejudice, significant progress has been made toward resolving one of human history’s most intractable disagreements. It is essential to notice that the progress on the issue of slavery is possible only because people hold a belief that the present moral disagreement is resolvable, and the resulting abolition supports that belief.

Therefore, it is not only rationally justifiable to have faith in the moral postulate because its very concept transcends the limit of the reason, but it is also essential to hold this faith in order to justify the establishment of morality. Moreover, holding the faith and then acting in accordance with the faith can realize the moral postulate in the long run. All things being equal, people can and should believe what makes the moral postulate and hence the morality.

“Why Be Moral”: The Perspective of Virtue Ethics

The moral postulate, as it has been discussed so far, is a valid regulative ideal from both the perspective of the community and the perspective of the moral disagreements among individuals, and this justification provides a solid ground for morality.

The validity of the moral postulate has philosophical significance. It answers the critical question of ethics: “Why be moral?”

“Why be moral” is at the heart of ethics. Morality imposes duties on an agent, and, conventionally speaking, desires are not completely compatible with duties. However, with the moral postulate, duty and desire are unified.

Firstly, it is in a person’s self-interest to be moral. According to the very definition of the moral postulate, whatever is genuinely good for an individual must also be good for a community. Thus, it appears to follow naturally that being moral and thinking from the perspective of others are good for the self; we need the social solidarity and the joy that comes from doing what one thinks is right. The moral postulate successfully frees us from the convention that desires are necessarily egoistic and hence immoral. Desires are not individualistic but socialized, and an agent thus conceives herself as a member of society when acting. Dewey argues, “interest in self, if the interest is pure, is just as much an interest in the moral end as interest in anything else” (1969, p. 105).

The dichotomy between “altruism” and “egoism” is a heavy burden to bear, which suggests a false incompatibility between duty and desire. In fact, self-interest and social welfare are merely two faces of the same coin. The moral postulate requires us to understand that interests are egoistic because interest provides satisfaction to the person, but it is also altruistic because, as a social being, the genuine interest of a person benefits society in general. Genuine interest is both altruistic and egoistic. The dilemma between altruism and egoism is harmonized by beneficence. An altruistic act is one that is solely other-regarding. An egoistic act is solely self-regarding. A beneficent act is both other- and self-regarding. It may be that there are neither altruistic nor egoistic actions; they may all be beneficent or the opposite. But at the very least, beneficent actions exist that render psychological egoism false and make room for morality (Blackburn, 2021, pp. 31-33).

Secondly, being moral is not merely an “interest”, but also the demand of the character of a person. The character of a person calls a person to be moral once the person is involved in a moral community. Once a person constantly gains satisfaction in the moral community by conducting moral actions that unify both the interests of oneself and that of the community, positive reinforcements provide sufficient reasons for a person to remain in the moral community. Dewey suggests:

The good character, considered in relation to the moral struggle, is the one which chooses the right end, which endeavors to be better...A wholly good man would feel such satisfaction in the contemplation of the ideal good that contrary desires would not affect him. He would take pleasure only in the right. (1969, LXIX)

Once again, goodness and satisfaction converge. For Dewey, virtues are not merely interests, but they complete the role of interests while performing what is good. For instance, truthfulness, for Dewey, is a special kind of interest that applies in the medium of human exchange. However, truthfulness certainly is a moral endeavor rather than merely a selfish interest as everyone can share in and benefit from the truth.

Therefore, the moral postulate provides a reliable explanation to answer the question, “Why be moral?” A person has personal interests in being moral, and the reinforcements of morality and character provide a sufficient reason for her to stay in the moral environment and then act in accordance with the moral postulate. The critical prerequisite for understanding the explanation is that people need to abandon the burden of the false dichotomy: Desire and duty are incompatible. Under the moral postulate, they are united, and hence provide reasons for people to be moral.

Conclusion: We Are One

In this paper, I have argued that the moral postulate is a valid ideal for two reasons. First, people are already involved in an already given moral horizon. People share a common point of view, which justifies the claim that

morality has an objective component. Second, it is rationally justifiable, and it is in our interest to embrace the moral postulate in order to establish morality. We can all expect to benefit from morality while the Hobbesian state of nature would be hell. Therefore, it is in the interests of everyone alike to be moral. Moreover, if we all hold the conviction and act upon this faith, the moral postulate can be realized in the long run by resolving moral disagreements. In other words, believing it is so may help to make it so, according to James' self-fulfilling prophecy about belief that legitimizes hope when we do not know.

Since the moral postulate is a justifiable ideal of morality, it provides a reasonable answer to address the core issue of morality: the reason for a person to be moral. People are freed from the dichotomy between desire and duty. In fact, as Dewey suggests, the genuine good for a person must also be beneficial for the whole; what is the "egoistic interest" in conventional understanding has an altruistic nature, too.

Unfortunately, we are currently all living in a world where conflicts persist. Disagreements prevail in our world, fragmenting society into different interest groups in conflict with each other. In this particular era, the moral postulate deserves to be recognized by the public. James' self-fulfilling prophecy has illustrated that people can be unified only if the vast majority holds the moral postulate and acts upon this principle. By doing so, disagreements may diminish, and interests may dovetail in the long run. Therefore, it is essential for people to participate in a continual undertaking of the "moral struggle". We treat moral belief as a hypothesis that can be empirically verified and whose validity can be tested by actions. If a proposal cannot be tested by actions and always fails to resolve the tension, then it is not confirmed by experience. Moreover, we need to restore confidence in the moral postulate that whatever is good for a person must be good for the community, and hence employ the point of view of others in discourses. In other words, rather than seeing judgments as absolute, eternal moral pronouncements, we come to see them as hypotheses that fit with the rest of our moral beliefs and have resolved the appropriate moral problems so far. We hold them true until we have reason to doubt them, recognizing that future moral problems may require revisions to our moral beliefs over time. As Dewey wrote, "Growth itself is the only moral end" (Dewey & Boydston, 2002, p. 177), an ongoing process rather than a present product.

Further studies need to provide a methodology for conducting effective discourse that can accelerate the process of resolving disagreements, and this methodology, according to Dewey, would closely associate political philosophy and ethics. Further studies also need to find a system that can guarantee the free exchange of opinions. These studies are critical to converting the ideal of the moral postulate to reality. I will quote Fitz James Stephen to end my discussion:

We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive... We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of a good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... (Stephen, 1874, p. 353)

We do not know what the moral truth is, but we are on the road to finding knowledge. In the meantime, we have what has worked so far, what we presently hold true: the actionably right. Moral struggles will continue in the foreseeable future, but it is a justifiable choice for people to have the faith of the moral postulate, embrace open conversations, and hence face the moral struggles in reality.

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