

CHAPTER 5

BENEFICENCE AND FAIRNESS

In Chapter 1 I argued that to determine what is right and wrong, we need to find some moral principles which are so basic to our understanding of moral beliefs that they can be considered truth conditions of moral judgments. I proposed that these can be discovered by examining the ways in which people argue about morals. If this is true, then our next step is determining what are the considerations to which people ultimately appeal in discussions of right and wrong. In this chapter I shall try to show that there are two such fundamental considerations — beneficence and fairness. In the next I shall argue that beneficence and fairness may be combined into a single principle, which enables us to resolve the great majority of conflicts between them.

Much of what follows in this chapter will sound platitudinous, because I shall state a large number of moral beliefs that are so widely held that no one thinks they need defending. They are, in other words, well established, having stood the test of time and having been adopted by people from all known times and places. My aim is to show that these moral platitudes may be interpreted as applications of the broader principles of beneficence and fairness. If any moral theory cannot explain our adherence to these extremely common beliefs, or is inconsistent with them, it will — if my earlier arguments are sound — fail to articulate the meaning of moral oughts. Success, on the other hand, will not prove that moral theory to be the only correct one. This, however, is not a problem for cognitivism, for according to the view of meaning expounded in Chapter 1, it is perfectly possible to have alternative sets of truth conditions for a statement, and which set to accept is a pragmatic matter rather than one of discovery. If, on the other hand, my theory can explain and be consistent with our common moral beliefs, and provide a coherent account of those moral judgments that have near universal acceptance, it will be correct — even if there are other possible correct theories.

Some may find it a weakness in the theory I present that it does not generate new moral ideas.¹ On the contrary, given the linguistic presuppositions of Chapter 1, the substantive principles by which the theory is tested must be principles which are well known and widely accepted. The theory should *not* entail novel and surprising moral conclusions; if it did, it would be inconsistent with the well-established beliefs among which truth conditions (in any area of discourse, moral or otherwise) are to be found.

The only exception to this general statement would be cases in which the theory is applied to novel situations, such as those relating to such technological advances as human cloning, or the ability to prolong life beyond the time that a person is likely to find life meaningful. Even here, however, solutions generated by a moral theory would need a close connection with the more general principles which are already accepted. Thus to conclude that euthanasia would not be wrong in certain cases where an individual remains alive in a state of misery might be justified on the basis of our duty to relieve suffering and on showing that this duty overrides others like that of not killing. Limits to euthanasia would include requiring free and informed consent from the person whose life would be taken.² Relieving suffering, not killing, and requiring consent of individuals before something with profound effects is done to them are well known and accepted moral beliefs, even though the question of euthanasia is highly controversial.

There are, of course, some people who have not accepted some of the platitudes to be discussed. Many unusual beliefs have been held by peoples in isolated circumstances; others have been adopted by those of certain religious or political persuasions. In many cases, however, these beliefs have never been subjected to debate and discussion with those outside the membership of such groups; furthermore, when they have been debated, an interpretation consistent with the moral platitudes is in most cases possible. Still, there is no doubt a remainder of instances in which people have had moral beliefs incompatible with the principles of beneficence and fairness to be articulated here. What I am going to argue is not that there is universal agreement with those principles, but rather that they are the principles to which moral debate has consistently pointed over time.

1. BENEFICENCE

Beneficence is making things better. It includes both doing good and refraining from doing harm, as well as the prevention, removal, and correction of evils. While everyone agrees that it is right to do good and wrong to do harm, there has been wide disagreement about what is good and what is harmful. In the last chapter I argued that what determines whether an experience is good for someone depends upon whether it makes him happier overall than he would have been without it. And how good or bad a person's whole life is for him is determined by the balance of happiness over unhappiness it contains. Being happy, in turn, is having the kind of life that brings contentment with its current direction.³

There is no question that a fundamental criterion for right action is that it produces good for individuals and that a criterion for wrong action is that it diminishes the good in people's lives. And of two possible actions, if one produces more good or less harm, that one is the better to do in most cases. The exceptions, I shall argue below, are invariably where considerations of fairness enter the picture. That we should do good and avoid doing harm is so obvious that it appears trivial. It may seem less trivial to discuss beneficence in terms of happiness for individuals. Yet we never question whether it is good for a person to be happy or bad for her to be unhappy — with two

exceptions. The first is when temporary unhappiness or lack of happiness will bring about greater happiness for her in the future. The second is when she is considered not to deserve happiness, or when her happiness causes diminished happiness for others. The second consideration is a topic to be discussed under the distribution of good — i.e., fairness.

Thus — with considerations of fairness excepted — everyone holds that it is good to make people happy and bad to deprive them of happiness. And we *ought* to act in ways that do not interfere with another's attaining happiness. As noted in Chapter 2, what we ought morally to do is what is required to attain moral ends, and the happiness of individuals is unquestionably a moral end. It should be pointed out, however, that while in nearly all cases we ought not to deprive an individual of happiness, it is not generally true that we *ought* to do whatever makes people happy. The injunction not to make people unhappy is stronger than the injunction to make people happy. We consider it worse to take something away from a person who has it already than not to give it to him when he does not already have it (or have a claim on it). Hence I ought not to steal your car, but — happy as it might make you, it is not the case that I ought to give you a car (unless you have a claim on it because you have paid me for one or I have promised it to you — in either of which cases I would effectively deprive you of a car by not giving it to you, because you expected and counted on it). It is generally worse to take something away than not to give it, because when a person already has something — or has reason to expect to have it —, then not having it causes pain and unhappiness from frustration of expectations over and above whatever one might suffer from the simple lack of that thing. In addition, as I shall argue below, it is also unfair — apart from what harm it does — to take something away from a person, but it is not generally unfair not to give someone something.

For the most part, an individual's happiness is not dependent on the actions of other people, but rather on her own. That I don't provide you with food, shelter, and boosts to your self-esteem hardly prevents you from having these goods. Only if you are uniquely dependent upon me — as a child is on its parents — would this be the case. On the other hand, if I steal your food, burn down your house, or make some devastatingly hurtful remark to you, I have directly interfered with your capacity for happiness. Such actions ought not to be done, primarily because they interfere with a moral end — namely, your happiness. On the other hand, while it would be nice for me to give you food, a house, or compliments, these aren't things I *ought* to do because they aren't necessary for achieving moral ends; for the most part you can obtain basic requirements for happiness on your own and hence others' doing such things for you is not necessary for your good.

In choosing to act for the greater happiness of a group of people, we need to be able to assess their degree of happiness. Although, as I argued in Chapter 3, we have a rough yardstick for saying how happy or unhappy a person is, which is the amount of time he spends contented minus the time he spends discontented, it is never possible to know with certainty how any particular future action will affect the happiness of an individual. Hence there are major practical difficulties in determining what choice

creates the greatest amount of happiness, not to mention what would be fair. There are clearly limits upon the extent to which we can know the effects of our actions on people's happiness, and this has important implications for practical ethics. However, it does not follow that we cannot know anything about what actions create the most good, or which are most fair.

There are certain things which people must have in order to satisfy their desires, regardless of the nature and intensity of those desires. And there are others which may not be necessary, but which contribute greatly to the happiness of anyone. Both classes are part of what Rawls called *primary goods*.⁴ They include food, shelter, money, good health, education, political freedom, opportunity to develop and use one's talents, self-respect, and the love of others. These may or may not be enjoyed for their own sake by particular individuals, but there is no question that they contribute to the happiness of any person, regardless of his particular desires. Furthermore, being deprived of any of these goods will have an adverse effect on the happiness he is likely to attain. Anyone — no matter what else he or she may want — will want more of these goods rather than less. And this is true, even though particular individuals will care differently about specific primary goods.

There may be other primary goods we do not recognize. Some, in fact, have been relatively recent discoveries. For example, after World War II the importance for infants of being frequently held and cuddled became widely recognized. Otherwise, they fail to grow properly and may even die. Until the extensive experience with displaced children brought by that war, few people knew how necessary touch and handling were for the future development — and happiness — of infants.

Many of the primary goods are measurable, so that it is possible to know how much of them a person has and to compare what he has of it with what another has. We also know, in many cases, how much and what kind of certain primary goods are needed for certain purposes. For example, we know how many calories an individual needs to consume to stay alive and to maintain an appropriate body weight. Further, we know what types of foods are required to maintain good health. We also know that too much food, and particularly too much of certain types, is detrimental to health.

All this knowledge can be used to determine how much and what kinds of food are best for a given individual. That which is best for him, which will be most apt to promote his happiness, is that which will enable him to live, feel as well as possible, and engage in the activities he needs and wants to engage in, and which does not contribute to debilitating and life shortening diseases. While the type and amount differs for different people, everyone agrees that it is of prime importance for each person to have his or her nutritional needs met. Unless they are, the individual will be to some extent hampered in the ability to become or remain happy. Furthermore, having *more* food than is necessary to meet nutritional needs adds relatively little to happiness and overall good; at best it provides pleasures of taste, and at worst, clogged arteries and premature death.

Of course, our understanding of nutrition, as well as other human needs, has changed greatly over the years. It may well be that what we now think we know may turn out not to be so. But given a certain body of presumed nutritional knowledge, we

can make decisions about what a person ought to eat for her health. As we shall see, we can also make decisions about what is a *fair* distribution of food. These decisions may be mistaken, but they are more likely to be mistaken because of misinformation about the effects of certain types of food than they are to be mistakes about values. We *know* that shortened life and the diseases of nutritional deficiency and excess are bad for one and ought to be avoided. And we know that feeling well and being able to perform the activities one needs and wants to do are good, even if we do not know how best to attain those goods and avoid harm.

Similar remarks may be made about other primary goods. For example, everyone needs sufficient shelter and clothing to protect him from the elements. While beauty, comfort, and privacy are also cherished, protection from the elements is more necessary to happiness. Health care, too, varies in its value, or the extent to which it can promote happiness. Prenatal care for a pregnant woman is more likely to promote future happiness and prevent sorrow than is keeping a comatose ninety-year-old stroke victim alive with a ventilator and artificial feedings.

We have less precise knowledge about nonmaterial goods like self respect, the love of others, and freedom. Yet we know the harm that can be done when these are distinctly lacking and we know the sorts of actions that can promote or inhibit these goods. For example, we are all aware of the devastating effects of partiality and discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Not only are these unfair, but the lack of opportunity is all the more painful when one can see what others have. While we cannot measure freedom or love or self-respect on any scale, we can determine (theoretically, if not practically) the roughly measurable effect on the happiness of a particular person of having a certain form of one of these goods.

In short, we may not be able to tell precisely how happy any individual is, or whether he is happier than any other person. We do, however, know a lot about the *means* to happiness: i.e., the primary goods. We know how they (and their absence) affect happiness, the relative importance of particular types of these goods in promoting happiness, and how to measure them. We know this because we know roughly how these goods affect the amount of time people in general spend in contentment.

Supplying or removing primary goods results in increasing or decreasing happiness by decreasing or increasing the distractors that prevent a person from contentedly pursuing his or her activities. If Ann is ill and Bill can cure her illness, so that she is able to do the things she needs and wants to do, she will be happier. If Clara can give David a job, so that he no longer has to worry about where his next meal is coming from, he benefits. If Ernie picks on Frances and undermines her self esteem, she is clearly less happy. In ways such as these, a person can be brought to spend more or less time content with his situation, and thus made more or less happy.

We are now in a position to formulate the principle of beneficence more precisely. It is that it is morally good to increase the happiness of persons and avoid causing unhappiness; that when we have alternatives, it is better to choose the one which will bring the greater amount of happiness (or least unhappiness) provided that requirements of fairness are met. We ought, moreover, to do certain things which are



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