Purposive Morality:
Rationality and Moral Justification in Management

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Abstract

This paper raises the question of how one may justify a moral perspective in management. Traditionally moral propositions have been justified by appeals to intuition and empirical facts, expressed injunctively and thus judged to be obligatory. This tradition has, however, led to moral relativism and a widespread scepticism about the possibility of bringing morality into the rational realm.

The authors reject moral relativism in favour of a rational approach to moral justification in which moral conclusions are deductively derived from purposive propositions. Since moral justification is purposive, the premises from which any moral justification is drawn must contain or imply a purposive proposition.

Moral relativists believe that moral obligation arises from social expectations and obligation to conform thereto. The authors argue that there are more effective strategies for moral justification than that offered by relativists. They offer four strategies for analysing moral judgements that arise from the essential rational identity of morality, the relatedness of purposes, the nature of humanity as part of the empirical universe, and the teleological fact of purposiveness.

The view defended in this paper is called purposive morality and the authors argue that it is relevant for all aspects of intentional behaviour. Finally the implications of purposive morality for management are briefly adumbrated.

Keywords: Purposive morality, rationality, moral justification, purposiveness.
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Introduction

The problem of how one may justify a moral perspective arises in all serious discussions of management. Every rationale for managerial action begs the question: how may any moral perspective be justified?

Solomon (1999) is one of many authors who have lamented the moral relativism in management and the general pessimism about the possibility of being rational about moral perspectives. Nietzsche stands at the head of this trend because of his virulent criticisms of Christian morality and the growing nihilism of 19th Century Europe. Indeed Nietzsche appeared to deny all moral standards and authorities. Such a nihilistic view found many ‘postmodern’ disciples. Midgley (1984), however, offers convincing evidence that Nietzsche and other ‘immoralists’, despite their own protestations, are not in fact amoral. She shows that Nietzsche and others like him always depend in their criticisms of morality on premises which are of a moral kind, even if not conventional.

Moral propositions are usually justified by an appeal either to intuitive knowledge of right and wrong or to empirical facts. In both cases, the philosophical arguments advanced purport to provide some reasoned support for the moral propositions in question. A traditional moral perspective is usually expressed in an injunctive form and is then viewed as implying an obligation for people to behave in the manner prescribed.

There are many people who believe that ‘obligation’ is the essential element of morality. They consider that any moral perspective which does not create some kind of cosmic onus or transcendental demand is less than moral. This could fairly be represented as the ‘big stick’ view of morality. Descriptions of this idea are generally in terms of our feelings of obligation or habits of obedience. These feelings are projected into our moral reasoning in the form of vaguely transcendental demands.

It is difficult to conceive of a moral system which does not depend on the feeling of obligation. It is unsurprising then that many philosophers have woven their ethical theories around the remnant of our pre-rational state of being and have failed to provide a way forward for moral thinking which is capable of transcending our cultural heritage.

If the idea of transcendent obligation is merely a projection of a (biologically based) tendency to a feeling of obligation, then there is no reason to believe that any form of transcendent obligation actually exists. Does that mean that there is no sense in which a moral proposition may have objectivity?

Even though we may not validate a concept of transcendental obligation, still it is possible to speak of a moral proposition having objective authority. The form that this
authority will take is the form of an empirical proposition which contains information about empirical facts, logical reasoning as to the implications of those facts and a third element which marks the specifically moral character of the proposition. If we can come to the point of carrying on our moral debate in terms of propositions of that kind we will have succeeded in bringing morality into the rational realm.

If it really is possible to reach an understanding on the nature and rationality of moral justification, then it will be possible for managers to communicate on moral and policy issues in a newly effective manner. It should then be possible to develop objective standards or methods for applications in critical enquiries and boardroom debates.

In short, we propose in this paper a rejection of current moral relativism in favour of a rational approach to moral justification.

The Experiential Realm of Moral Justification

There is a traditional distinction in philosophical language between cognitive and affective states of consciousness. The cognitive states of consciousness are concerned with confronting, processing, reviewing data and include perception and reason, both of which play an essential part in the processes of science.

Reason plays a significant role in the integration of scientific observation but is not actually the authoritative foundation of scientific knowledge. Perception, and in particular the observation of replicable causal sequences, is the foundation of science and carries the final authority for the justification of any scientific claim. Reason is authoritative in all questions of logic. It is not possible to impugn the logic of a proposition on the strength of an empirical observation. Reason and observation may co-operate to extend knowledge but, in the final analysis in any question of proof or justification, each is restricted to a distinct and limited field of competence.

The other side of our awareness, that which is not cognitive, is our affective experience. This embraces emotions, feelings and desires. Some people think that our affective experience is essentially irrational. That attitude probably springs from an ancient belief that our emotions and desires are constantly at war with our reason - a reflection of the difficulty people find in actually conforming with their own best judgement. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume, thought that the affective faculties had won the war; he saw reason as the slave of the passions. Affective states would therefore appear to be at the heart of every question of rationality and of morality.

Morality vs Rationality

The concepts “morality” and “rationality” are used in two quite distinct contexts. “Morality” brings to mind codes of rules, community judgements, a sense of “rightness” and “wrongness”, reward or punishment and the feelings of “guilt” and “self-righteousness”. “Rationality”, in direct contrast, brings to mind ideas of self-
interestedness, reasonableness, relative costs and benefits and success or failure. Morality carries a much stronger emotional colouring and seems to demand a higher degree of selfless dedication.

These differences between what we see as moral and rational are entirely accountable in terms, firstly, of our common heritage of the “big stick” view of morality, and secondly, in terms of the appropriation to the specifically moral viewpoint of all altruistic motivations. The false dichotomy between the rational and the moral has necessarily inclined us to see rationality in terms of rational self-interest. There has also been an underlying attitude that altruistic beliefs are in some sense irrational and unjustifiable. This attitude appears to be very common. It shows itself in a subtle way in the flashes of self-righteous indignation that emerge from senior executives when their patience is tried or in the backlashes of supremacist feeling that emerge from privileged classes when the pose of noblesse oblige is shattered by a liberationist demand.

A wholly rational or wholly moral person would not experience the kind of dissonance and tension that is engendered in the moralist who undertakes his altruism as an extra-rational sacrifice to an ineffable principle. The wholly rational man would not act on altruistic principles unless he genuinely identified the altruistic purpose as truly his own purpose. He would only favour the interests of “the other” in action if in fact the interests of “the other” were his own dominant concern. In that case, he assesses the risks, the costs and benefits, realistically according to his own genuine purposes and does not accrue the resentment and moral pride that develop in the man for whom morality is a handicap imposed on his truly rational purpose.

Conflicts in the man whose rationality and morality are divided are a sign of the false dichotomy of those concepts. The phenomenon is symptomatic of the “bad faith” described by Jean-Paul Sartre. “Bad faith” is a form of moral cowardice displayed by the individual who has been intimidated by the “big stick” conception of morality and who acts out a role to which he is not committed.

The other side of this coin is the appropriation to the specifically moral viewpoint of all altruistic motivations. This leads to false ascriptions of motivation (the altruistic principle being arbitrarily pre-empted as a moral rather than a rational kind of motivator) and to a related denial of the possible rationality of altruism. For example, in the face of extreme provocation from a rude subordinate, a manager may keep his cool and explain to witnesses only later what his feelings were. It is possible to see his behaviour as motivated by the moral precept that one should “turn the other cheek” and it is highly probable that it will actually be seen that way. But this would be to ignore the wealth of rational motivation which could explain the behaviour. The manager may be determined to provide his colleagues with a model of dignity and self-possession, to instil in them the importance of politeness, and to ensure as far as possible for his own part, by affirmative action, that he lives in the kind of community in which people observe correct forms of courtesy. All of these are genuinely rational objectives. It would similarly be rational to adopt a policy of “turning the other cheek” as a step towards a general pacification of social life. As long as it may reasonably be conceived as serving some identifiable purpose, any precept generally regarded as moral may also be regarded as rational.
An important element in the common conception of rationality is “reasonableness” (an ideal defined in law in terms of what a competent, caring and self-disciplined person could be expected to do). Reasonableness can be seen as an expression of social interest as distinct from the self-interest of the rational agent. If rationality implies reasonableness, and reasonableness means being competent, caring and self-disciplined (which are all concepts requiring some degree of social definition), then rationality implies some degree of social definition and denotes some quality of social interaction. Such a quality could be justified by rational self-interest but no demonstration of rational self-interest is at all necessary to the legal concept of reasonableness. The law clearly sees reasonableness as a standard or expectation the community imposes on its members regardless of their individual concerns. This seems a fair representation of the idea of reasonableness in the concept of rationality. There is no necessary reason to regard rationality as primarily a self-centred ideal.

It is therefore quite reasonable to conclude that a genuinely altruistic purpose may be a rational purpose, conceived from the agent’s perspective, provided only that it is conceived by the agent as springing from his free desire rather than from some external purpose with which he does not fully identify.

**The Rationality of Moral Justification**

If we believe that morality can be justified rationally then moral conclusions must be deductively derived. Yet it is obvious that a moral justification is purposive, which means that the premises from which any renewed moral justification is drawn must contain or imply a purposive proposition. For example: (i) “I prefer not to suffer from bronchitis” (purposive proposition); (ii) “If I smoke cigarettes regularly I will contract bronchitis” (empirical premise); (iii) “Therefore I ought not to smoke cigarettes regularly” (logical conclusion).

The argument establishes that purposive propositions are necessary premises in moral justifications. Even if the argument is valid it may still be argued that a necessary premise need not be a sufficient premise. Some element other than a purposive proposition may need to be present before recognising the conclusion as being a moral justification.

There is no reason why science cannot generate a continually expanding body of true propositions of the form of the one concerning smoking and bronchitis. Conceivably, propositions of that kind (“how to” and “how not to” propositions) could be framed and tested experimentally for a wide range of human ambitions. All people share a mass of similar experience in terms of their desires and the repetitive scenarios of the human life cycle. Purposes that may be addressed in this manner may include “how to” questions relating not only to behaviour but to experience also. This kind of research may well yield an effective moral technology.

**Strategies for Analysing Moral Justification**

Moral relativism proposes that moral obligation arises from social expectation and that one’s duty is to conform to the behavioural expectations of one’s social milieu. The relativists who rely upon community expectation as an authoritative basis for the assessment of moral issues do so, it seems, because of a need to apply some structure
or rules which can somehow sharpen the process of moral discussion, giving it a
degree of precision. This eliminates the idiosyncratic or anarchistic tendencies of
relativism.

Happily, there are more effective strategies for the refinement of moral judgement
than the one offered by relativists. A thorough judgement of one particular purpose
requires consideration of related purposes. To a fair extent we can judge a purpose
according to our knowledge of a consensus of human purposes and quickly reach a
satisfying appreciation of the significant issues involved. In the final analysis though
we can each determine our overall attitude to the purpose in question only by
determining which purposes we ourselves judge to be most significant. A moral
judgement remains a \textit{judgement}, it never becomes simply a calculation. This is
probably due to the fact that the human individual is at all times a motivated agent,
not set on a fixed course with a single purpose but with constantly variable and
somewhat mixed feelings and desires continually arising afresh.

The strategies which enable us to simplify the process of moral judgement arise from
the essential rational identity of morality, the relatedness of purposes, the nature of
humanity as part of the empirical universe with certain more or less fixed purposes
and the teleological fact of purposiveness.

\textbf{(a) The Rational Identity of Morality}

Morality, as discussed in this paper, occupies the same area of human experience that
rationality does. We have come to expect a different quality in specifically rational
behaviour than we expect in specifically moral behaviour but this expectation is
merely a part of our heritage of the unsatisfactory “big stick” view of morality. There
is no reason why what has typically been regarded as a moral kind of motivation
cannot now be regarded as a rational kind of motivation and vice versa.

We are in the habit of expecting certain hallmarks of rational action precisely because
we have conceived of rationality as being associated with goal-directed behaviour. As
we are now looking at moral behaviour in the same light it stands to reason that we
may have the same kinds of expectation of moral behaviour. For example, we can
now judge moral behaviour according to whether it takes reasonable account of the
relevant information available that has some bearing on whether or not our action will
fulfil its explicit purpose. Similarly, we should take account of whether the logic used
to explicate our purpose is valid. Also, if we are judging an action in relation to
community purposes we may validly take account of whether or not the action was
consistent with the kind of action a reasonable man would take.

In short, the rational identity of morality permits us to have regard to the rationality of
the action or purpose we are considering for moral justification.

\textbf{(b) The Relatedness of Purposes}

Purposes are related insofar as the fulfilment or frustration of one purpose often has
implications for the fulfilment or frustration of another purpose. Human society
embraces multitudinous and often conflicting purposes but the fact that one purpose
may impinge on another provides a functional basis for assessing convergence or
divergence of purpose. This type of comparison may be extended and clarified because it is usually the case that a specific purpose is conceived as being directly related in a functional manner to a prior purpose. When examining a particular purpose we may take account of the prior purposes that are being served.

Only in very rare instances do we find that an action arises from some primary and unitary purpose, such as a compelling hunger. In almost all cases we find that an action is undertaken so as to fulfil a harmonious range of different purposes.

The inter-relationship of purposes, both individual and social, permits an action to be rational and justified on a multiplicity of different counts. The integration of purposes in this manner is the hallmark of what is commonly called rational behaviour.

A convergence of purposes can never justify an action or purpose in an absolute sense but it does provide additional moral weight. When a moral judgement is made in a social manner it may carry the weight of social authority.

(c) Empirical Human Nature

Humans share a number of more or less fixed purposes. Purposes such as physical comfort, safety, nourishment, appear to be universal and biologically-based insofar as they all emerge in all individuals when satisfaction of the more urgent of them is achieved. Noting that these purposes are innate and universal does not permit us to infer that they imply a universal moral obligation. That would be to commit the error of arguing from the fact of their universality to the value of obligation. We may validly take account of the innate human purposes but only so as to assess whether those purposes are in fact furthered or frustrated by a purpose that we are comparing. A moral or rational justification based on the innate purposes will always follow the form followed by every other valid moral justification:

namely:

(i)  x purpose does/does not further/frustrate the satisfaction of y need;
(ii) it is preferred that y need be/be not furthered/frustrated;
(iii) therefore (and for the purpose of y need only) x purpose is/is not good.

Although it does not allow us to justify a concept of universal moral obligation, the fact that there are universal human purposes does allow us to advance our understanding of what kinds of moral judgement or purpose will tend to be acceptable to other people.

(d) The Teleological Fact of Purposiveness

The fourth strategy for the refinement of moral judgement differs from the ones already described in being neither simply conceptual nor simply empirical. It is teleological: of the nature of a final cause. It may be described very simply: we may choose.
The act of choosing has in common with values, purposes and feelings the quality of being affective, an expression or experience of purpose. When pressed for a justification of some value, such as “a value for the preservation of human life”, we may find ourselves hard pressed to advance an abstract reason. There is, however, no valid reason why we may not advance the fact of deliberate choice in justification of a moral value.

One may feel that “choice” is not a satisfying possible foundation for moral justification. First it could be objected that to say “I hold \( x \) value because I choose to” is a tautologous statement and therefore meaningless. It seems clear, though, that the proposition is not empty because it conveys a psychological fact, the fact of the event of my resolve. In all probability the fact of my resolve is not in any case without affective precedent. It is most probable that my choice is actually made as a consequence and crystallisation of a history of strong feeling on the issue. Whilst the criticism of tautology could conceivably be valid in the instant of choice, it cannot be extended to any future occasion on which \( x \) value is applied.

Secondly, it could be objected that choice is not a satisfactory kind of moral justification on the grounds that it may be an isolated and idiosyncratic event. This kind of justification could encourage irresponsible individualism, subjective and indiscriminate. An idiosyncratic choice of a value which was not justified on any additional grounds would, admittedly, be weakly justified. Strong moral justifications are the product of a convergence of purposes. Also, whilst some such choices may be subjective and indiscriminate, there are many instances in human history where such a point of resolve has been the impetus to a career of high distinction. In these days of “managerial leadership” we must surely be able to recognise the potential power of a seminal choice of value.

Purposive Morality

The view of morality here espoused can be called **purposive morality** and is relevant to all aspects of intentional behaviour. Should I become a manager? Should I keep up with management fashions? Such questions are moral questions in terms of purposive morality. The traditional distinctions between moral and non-moral issues, which were always arbitrary when they depended on arbitrarily promulgated moral rules, break down in every consequentialist morality. For example, John Stuart Mill defined the ultimate good in terms of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. This implies that every question which has a bearing on the happiness of the greatest number is necessarily a moral question and that no question which has no such bearing may be a moral question. Purposive morality sees no distinction of kind between say “moral rules” and “policies” or between “functional” and “good”. It opens up all fields of choice and goal-setting to some degree of rational moral enquiry.

The implications of purposive morality for management seem endless. It suggests that the questions to be addressed by management researchers are:
(a) Which goals, desires and purposes typify work experience? Which are most important to managers?
(b) Which of those goals, desires and purposes can be attained and at what costs in relation to the other typical purposes?
(c) How can we maximise our individual and organisational effectiveness in fulfilling our purposes?

Management psychologists have typically attempted to study the psychological and social reality as though people are automats. They have seen their role as identifying the causal laws that determine human action and experience. Somehow they have failed to recognise that the universe they deal with in the case of human experience is essentially affective. It is not possible to conceive of human experience devoid of evaluative and intentional dimensions. For the management psychologist to suggest that his cognitive faculties are capable of making sense of a universe which is external to his cognitive experience by means of his cognitive experience, and at the same time to deny any significance or substance to his affective experience, is arbitrary and inconsistent. For the management psychologist to deny the significance of affective experience in explaining human behaviour when in fact he can explain his own behaviour, intelligibly, only in affective terms, is obstinate obscurantism.

Humanity’s privileged perspective on its own experience reveals that a universe, in that part of it which we know best, is purposive. If we wish to come to an understanding of the behaviour of that part of the universe then we must study it as a purposive thing. To do so we actually need to study the purposes that are of relevance to the particular entity we are studying. This means coming to grips with what people actually want and elucidating the conflicts of purpose that exist. That course will necessarily indicate situations where the convergence of purpose that actually exists presents some challenge to more limited purposes which have some established privilege. To this extent a purposive management psychology will necessarily be revolutionary in the sense of imposing a regime of change. However that is not to imply that the most effective strategies for maximising the fulfilment of purpose will be combative. A purposive management psychologist may be strongly orientated towards conciliation and conflict resolution as tools to harness the synergistic properties of co-operation. A purposive management psychologist, acknowledging his own share in the purposive universe, may validly choose to study purposes with which he sympathises in preference to those he opposes.

When we talk about a purposive morality we are talking about something vastly different from traditional morality at the experiential level. The traditional conception of morality involves ideas of guilt, obligation, blind obedience, reward, punishment and self-righteousness. These ideas need not play any part whatsoever in a purposive morality. It may take time to reach that point but there are encouraging signs. Parent Effectiveness Training, one of the most valuable techniques generated by modern psychology, specifically opposes the use of the traditional moralising approach to child rearing. On the other hand, it encourages the full and free expression of emotion and the clear definition of individual goals and preferences. We await similar developments in management psychology.
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