



'Right' and 'Good': Moral Properties?

A difference is made in metaethics between a cognitivist position, which assumes that statements with a moral content can be true or false, i.e. judgements, and a realist position, which additionally assumes that there are moral facts. Opinions are divided as to whether a cognitivist position *per se* implies a kind of realism. In this context it is necessary to clarify the concept of a 'fact'. Broadly speaking, facts can be defined as what determines whether or not a statement is true or, in the case of a true statement, as what makes it true. According to this definition, most cognitivists, even those who do not see themselves as moral realists, assume that there are moral facts. Contained within the concept of a true statement is the idea that 'there is' something else separate from it which forms the basis making it true. The statement 'Ulm cathedral is higher than Cologne cathedral' is true, for example, if Ulm cathedral is higher than Cologne cathedral. Likewise, the statement 'there is a moral obligation to help people living in extreme poverty' is true if there is a moral obligation to help people living in extreme poverty.

What is commonly understood as moral realism goes beyond this interpretation of 'facts'. Moral realists do not regard moral facts as merely meaning that 'there is' something upon which the truth of moral statements depends or which makes them true. Far more, they claim that moral facts *exist*. I do not wish to initiate a discussion about the difficult question of what 'existence' means exactly. I assume that the judgement that something, for instance Pegasus, 'exists' means that it is located somewhere in our world or that it is located in relation to ourselves. It is important to see that in many cases the terms 'there is' and 'exist' refer to different things. You can say: There is a being possessing four legs and two wings which you find in Greek mythology and its name is Pegasus. Indeed, *there is*, but this does not mean that Pegasus *exists* in the sense of being located in our world. In the same way you can say: There is an obligation to help the poor (you find in



morality), without saying that this obligation exists in the sense of being located somewhere in our world.

When we say of a thing that it exists it is not necessary that it is given independently of our mind. Colours exist in the sense of being located in our world but they are not given independently of our perception.¹

The realist position assumes that terms like 'right' and 'good' refer to something which exists in this sense of being located somewhere in our world and the realist speech of 'moral facts' means exactly that. How this existence is to be perceived is a matter of dispute. Naturalistic realists are of the opinion that moral facts can be derived from natural facts, or that they are constituted by natural facts. Accordingly, the existence of moral facts is given with the existence of natural facts. Stating that an action is right or good is thus interpreted as identical to stating that an action promotes human well-being.² This is a natural, empirical fact. Non-naturalistic realists, in contrast, dispute that moral facts can be derived from natural facts and view moral facts as facts *sui generis*.

Non-naturalistic realism is extremely plausible regarding *thick moral concepts* like 'inconsiderate', 'cruel' or 'generous'. This is behaviour which we can encounter and perceive in reality. Expressions such as these differ from ones referring to natural characteristics because they entail a component of moral judgement. *Thick moral concepts* are a much-cited example of how real life cannot be reduced to a strict dualism of (descriptive) facts and values. Take the statement 'Peter behaved inconsiderately', for example. If we ask why Peter behaved inconsiderately and are given the answer 'he slammed the door', then this statement is not a *description* of what Peter did, but a *narrative*, which exposes his lack of consideration for all to see (in their imagination). A mere description would not constitute the judgmental element contained within the expression 'inconsiderate'. Morality is con-

¹ McDowell J (1985) Value and Secondary Qualities. In: Honderich T (ed) *Morality and Objectivity*, Routledge and Kegan, London, pp 110-129.

² Cf. Schaber P (1997) *Moralischer Realismus*, Alber, Freiburg i.B., pp 90-122.



cerned with a reality which cannot be captured in descriptions akin to scientific accounts. It is something we experience, as shown by the narrative character of moral communications.

Do we also encounter in reality what is referred to by the expressions 'good', 'right' or 'ought'? Can we experience it directly, in the same way we can experience a lack of consideration? If the naturalistic realists had their way and the expressions 'good', 'right' or 'ought', for example, were to be identical to the expression 'promotes human well-being', then this would doubtless be the case. Most non-naturalistic realists also believe that these expressions denote real qualities or characteristics of actions. In the following I would like to debate this point.

As an advance indication of the direction my reflections will take, I would like to start with an analogy and return to the two cathedrals. It is an empirical fact that Ulm cathedral is higher than Cologne cathedral. And yet this relation between the two church spires is not something we encounter in reality – the spires are not, in themselves, related to each other – but something which we construct in our minds by comparing the heights of the two spires. In particular, 'higher than Cologne cathedral' is not an *attribute* of Ulm cathedral. It is an attribute of Ulm cathedral that it has a certain height, and the same applies to Cologne cathedral. But the relation between the heights of these two spires is not one of the attributes of Ulm cathedral, just as it is not an attribute of Cologne cathedral. It is something which we bring to mind by comparing the spires. This is reminiscent of Kant's analogy between the cognitive powers of a scientist and the dealings of a judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions asked of them. The scientist does not simply find out what he knows in the natural world, as if reason were "to follow in the leading-strings of nature"³. Instead, what he perceives is determined by his enquiry. In my opinion the same is true of the expressions 'right', 'ought' and 'good'. Statements which contain these expressions can be

³ Kant I (1855) Critique of pure reason, *Bohn's philosophical library*, translated by John Miller Dow Meiklejohn, Henry G. Bohn, London, 27.



true or false, just as the statement about the church spires can be true or false. Notwithstanding, these expressions do not denote something which we encounter in reality, e.g. as an *attribute* of actions, but evaluate actions *in relation to something*, and this is a relation which they do not enter into by themselves, but which we construct or create mentally.

I have spoken of 'actions', but this was for the sake of brevity. As I have explained in more detail elsewhere,⁴ the distinction between deontic and evaluative judgements requires in turn a distinction to be made between two concepts fundamental to morality, namely *acting* and *behaving*. Actions are the objects of deontic judgements, whereas evaluative judgements address behaviour. This deviates from the widespread conviction that evaluative judgements are concerned with motives, dispositions and character traits.⁵ Ostensibly, this conviction is plausible. If two people in two identical situations do the same thing, the first out of sympathy, the second driven by calculation and avarice, then our evaluative judgements of them are different, seemingly because we judge their motives differently. Thus evaluative judgements seem at first sight to refer to motives or dispositions.

And yet this claim fails to stand up to closer scrutiny. If we focus on the motive of sympathy, for example, then we focus on it by referring to an action for which it is the motive. Incidentally, sympathy is an emotional state, not a motive. A motive cannot, therefore, be evaluatively judged separately from the action for which it is the motive. Assuming somebody is asked why he has helped somebody else, and he answers: "I felt sorry for him", then this comment tells us his motive, but only if it is understood in response to the question of why he acted as he did. Otherwise it is a depiction of his emotional state. If we judge evaluatively what this answer gives us to understand, then what we are judging is not the fact that he felt sorry for

⁴ Fischer J (2009) Der epistemische Primat des Guten. Zur Kritik der Regel- und Prinzipienethik, Institut für Sozialethik Online-Publikation, www.ethik.uzh.ch/ise/publikationen.html. Accessed 27 Oct 2009

⁵ Cf. Frankena W K (1973) *Ethics*, 2nd edn. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, p 61.



him, but this comment as an answer to the question posed, namely that he helped the other person for reasons of sympathy. Thus, we do not first judge his motive, separately from his action, and then, derived from this, the action itself; instead, we judge *his action thus motivated*. The same can be said for dispositions. A disposition towards something is defined by the thing one is disposed to. Thus dispositions cannot be evaluatively judged separately from the things to which they dispose us either, as is assumed by the school of thought which believes that evaluative judgement first refers to dispositions and then, derived from them, to resulting actions. This means that the original objects of evaluative judgements are neither actions nor motives or dispositions somehow thought of apart from these actions. Instead, the object of evaluative judgement is located in something uniting what we, in speaking of actions, distinguish and separate as the action itself on the one hand, and the motive for it on the other, namely *behaviour*. In this sense, we speak of malicious or jealous behaviour, for example, and not, or at least not if we are aiming at linguistic precision, of malicious or jealous actions. Here, malice or jealousy are components which make up behaviour, in contrast to the separation of the action itself and the motive for it when we speak of actions. So we come to the conclusion: If two persons in two identical situations do the same thing, the first out of sympathy, the second driven by avarice, then our evaluative judgements of what they do are different, because their *behaviour* is different.

Morality is not only based on actions, but there are two concepts basic to morality, actions and behaviour. This may be illustrated through a text by Christopher Cordner. Cordner criticises Peter Singer for reducing morality to the question of how we should act. A woman has to decide whether to help her sick and suffering husband by active euthanasia. "As far as I can see Singer can recognise no place for the thought that the taking of that life remains a momentous and grave matter. But I would say that if this woman understood what she was doing she would have to recognise that she was involved in something momentous, even terrible – *even she held to the con-*



viction that she must do it. What that indicates, I should say, is that a sense of value of life can show itself not only in what one decides to do, but also in the spirit in which one carries out the decision. A sense of the terribleness of taking life can inform even the resolute decision that in *this* situation one must do it."⁶ What Cordner calls "the spirit in which one carries out the decision" is what I mean by the term 'behaviour'. It has to do with the question of *how* we do something. So we speak of loving or thoughtful behaviour. Behaviour has effects of its own which differ from the effects of the action it is connected with. Loving behaviour has the effect that the other person experiences love. Our lives would be very poor without this dimension and if we were confronted only with actions and their effects. The fact that modern ethics focusses on actions has to do with the functional or instrumental character of reason in modern culture which results from what Charles Taylor calls the 'affirmation of ordinary life' as a consequence of reformation in connection with the modern concept of nature, natural sciences and technology..

Now the following distinction can be made between deontic and evaluative judgements.⁷ Deontic judgements evaluate *actions in relation to given situations*: acting in *this* way is right or ought in *such and such* a situation. In a different situation, acting in the same way might be wrong. Evaluative judgements, in contrast, evaluate *behaviour in given situations*: behaving in *this* way in *such and such* a situation is praiseworthy or good. What is relative to the situation in this case, then, is not the judgement, but that judged as a behaviour in a given situation. Here, too, behaving in the same way in a different situation might no longer be good, might even be bad. Disregarding this difference, the crucial point in our context is that both types of judgement focus on and evaluate their objects *in relation to a given situation*, and moreover a relation in which this object does not stand in its own

⁶ Cordner C (2005) Life and Death Matters: Losing a Sense of the Value of Human Beings. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 26: 207-226, 213.

⁷ Cf. on the following the publication named in comment 4.



right. It may be correct that an action stands in a *factual* relation to the situation in which it ensues. And yet the relation which is expressed through the *evaluative* expressions 'right' or 'ought' is not given simply with this factual relation. An action is not already right simply because it relates to a situation. Far more, this relation is something which we do not encounter, but which we construct or create by forming a correlation between action and situation.

We should not forget that situations are or can be morally significant in their own right. This is true at an elementary level not yet concerned with 'right', 'ought' or 'good'. If we witness an accident in which persons are injured, then the most obvious reason why we help is the fact that the injured persons require help, and not an idea that it is right, ought or good to help them. Here we focus on a situation which requires certain action, and it is this situation which causes us to act accordingly. The moral significance of a situation is something which we encounter in reality. If we describe the situation in all its forcefulness, it can also be envisioned by others. With the idea that it is *right* to help in this situation, in contrast, we focus on the action of helping and relate it to the situation: it is right because it is the action demanded by the situation as a result of its moral significance. We do not encounter this relation in reality, but create it mentally in asking ourselves what would be the right course of action in this situation. Unlike the judgement 'right', the judgement 'ought' (duty) seems to contain the idea of what the consequences would be if the injured persons were not helped. The idea of obligation obviously results from the idea of *not performing* an action in the light of a situation demanding this very action. This idea triggers an internal compulsion to perform this action, as is contained within the idea of obligation. Once more, this relation between action and situation is not something we encounter in reality, but something which we create mentally. Finally, in the judgement '*good*', we do not relate the action to the situation, but imagine an actor in this situation who does what the situation demands *because* the situation demands it (and not, for example, in a calculated man-



ner, in the hope of a reward). It is his action for this reason, i.e. his *behaviour* in this situation, which we judge as good. This relation between behaviour and situation is again not something we come across, but something we create prior to arriving at the judgement 'good'. As should now be clear, all three judgements are based on the moral significance of situations in the sense that they refer to an action or behaviour corresponding to them. As already mentioned, we encounter only this significance in reality, and not what is expressed by the judgements 'right', 'ought' or 'good'. Somebody erring with regard to what is right, ought or good, does not err with regard to the reality he has encountered, but about the relation between two things which can be encountered in reality, namely actions or behaviour on the one hand, and situations on the other, and this relation is not encountered, but constructed or created.

A critical light is now shed upon the naturalistic interpretation of moral facts. If the expressions 'right' or 'good' were identical to the expression 'promotes human well-being', or if what they express were to be given with natural facts, then we would be erring with regard to reality if erring with regard to what is right or good. The following consideration illustrates why the two cannot be identical. If we say of an action that it is right, then we make a *judgement* about that action. If we say of an action that it promotes human well-being, then we make not a judgement, but an empirical statement. This means that the two declarations cannot have the same content. The non-naturalistic realist view of the expressions 'right', 'ought' or 'good' is open to similar enquiry. This view also states that we err with regard to reality if we err with regard to what is right, ought or good.

The difference between what is referred to by the expressions 'right', 'ought' or 'good' and *thick moral concepts* like 'inconsiderate' or 'cruel' should now be clear. The latter behaviours are not relative to a situation. Otherwise the same behaviour would necessarily be cruel in one situation and not in another. Behaviour can be judged to be right or wrong, good or bad in a particular situation at a particular moment in time, however, and



that judgement then depends upon the situation. For example, generosity can be right or good in one situation and wrong or not good in another, e.g. if it is exploitative or renders the other person dependent. Generous behaviour is only positive *prima facie*.

This point is important concerning the evident objection that we regard generosity as a good thing and that, consequently, if generosity can be encountered in reality, then good can also be encountered in reality. The response to this is that the *prima-facie* judgement of generous behaviour as good is based on the assumption that it is appropriate to the situation in which it is found at the time and that it does not redound to the beneficiary's disadvantage. Generosity is thus not good at all times and independently of the situation in question, but in relation to the relevant situation. Being good is not an intrinsic attribute of generous behaviour.

It has been said that we ourselves construct or create the relation underlying the judgements 'right', 'ought' or 'good'. This raises the question of how we do this. In my opinion, it does not happen purely as a thought process, but through perception, bringing us back to Ulm cathedral. If we could uproot Cologne cathedral and plant it in Ulm, right next to Ulm cathedral, then we could *see* that Ulm cathedral is higher than Cologne cathedral. Of course, this would only be visible to those able to form a perceptual relation between two things and compare them. In the same way, we can *see* that an action is right or wrong, or that a behaviour is good or bad, by envisioning them in relation to the relevant situation and its moral significance. As mentioned above, the fact that we can see this does not mean that we encounter it in reality. We encounter kind, merciful, generous, caring or affectionate behaviour. But 'good' is not such a behavioural definition, one attributed to a behaviour independently of its relation to a situation. This relation is something which we create through our perception.

That means that we can distinguish three kinds of perceptions:



1. The perception of a *situation* and its moral significance. I call it the act-guiding perception. Imagine the parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. The perception of an *act in relation to a situation* and its moral significance. Here we speak of 'right' or 'ought' or 'obligation' or 'duty'. I call it the deontic perception.
3. The perception of *behaviour in a situation* having moral significance. Here we speak of 'good'. I call it the evaluative perception.

From a theological perspective, the first and the third perception are important for the understanding of Christian love. On the one hand, Christian love is an act-guiding perception. On the other hand, Christian love is a behaviour which is perceived by an external spectator like listeners to the parable of the Good Samaritan. This behaviour results from the act-guiding perception of love. (I do not think that Christian love in this second respect is a virtue. The parable tells a story not about virtues, but about good behaviour. Jesus does not say: "Become a good person like the Samaritan!" but "Go and act in the same way!", Luke 10, 37) The second, deontic perception of an act in relation to a situation requires that you are able to ??? the first perception of a situation and its moral significance. In my opinion here we can find the connection between love and justice. Justice has to do with duties and rights. The deontic perception of a duty you have or a right another person has requires that you can perceive the moral significance of the situation of that other person.

The consequences of these deliberations are far-reaching. Their application would mean saying goodbye to the metaphysical idea of good existing. Good is not something which we encounter in reality as an intrinsic attribute of actions or behaviour. Our comprehension of moral orientation is affected. We perceive an action as having moral worth if a person does the right thing for the sake of being right and is not inspired by other reasons or motives, such as self-interest. If what is meant by the expression 'right' were to be a



real quality or attribute, then 'doing the right thing for the sake of being right' would mean doing it because it has the quality of being right. Moral orientation would then be an orientation towards moral judgements. This changes if the expression 'right' is seen to evaluate actions in relation to situations and their moral significance. Then 'doing the right thing for the sake of being right' would mean doing it because of the relation between action and situation, namely because the situation demands precisely this action on the basis of its moral significance. Then a person does not do it because it is *right*, i.e. on the basis of an evaluation as right, but for the sake of what *makes* it right, namely on the basis of the given situation. Moral orientation is an orientation towards concrete situations, and not towards the 'being right or ought or good' of actions or behaviour.

Here is the point of the present deliberations as far as ethics is concerned. The idea that the right, ought or good exists in the sense of an objectively binding reality which can be encountered, and the concomitant idea that the task of ethicists is to locate it and substantiate its obligatory character argumentatively, are thus misleading. These ideas are based on a mere *belief* in a pre-given moral world order. We need to banish from our thoughts questions such as whether a moral obligation 'exists' to do something about global poverty. Instead, we should ask ourselves what it means for people to live in poverty and what we can do to help them out of their situation. It is the moral significance of their situation which is important here.

In the 1970s Peter Singer wrote an essay concerning the question of whether there is an individual obligation to help people living in extreme poverty.⁸ When you read this text you feel that Singer was deeply affected by the suffering of the people in Bengalen at that time. But nowhere in his text does he refer to their suffering as a *reason* to help them. In Singer's view we have a sufficient reason only if it can be *argumentatively* demonstrated that we have an *obligation* to help them. Singers argumentation is a

⁸ Singer P (1972) Famine, Affluence, and Morality, in: Philosophy & Public Affairs 1 (2), pp 229-243.



casuistic one, referring to the famous example of a child in danger of drowning.⁹ If we acknowledge a moral obligation to help this child, then we must acknowledge a moral obligation to help the people in Bengalen because there is no relevant difference between these cases. Singer's text is a good example of the mainstream conviction of modern ethics that moral orientation is an orientation towards moral judgements (or 'values') and not an orientation towards situations and their moral significance, and that ethical deliberation is based in rational arguments. In my opinion, H. A. Prichard was right in arguing that a moral obligation or duty cannot be demonstrated by an argument.¹⁰ In his words "the sense of obligation is absolutely immediate" (not derived from elsewhere). It is the sense of the moral significance of situations. In this view the reason for helping the people in Bengalen is their suffering. The difference between this kind of reason and an argument is as follows. With an argument we claim to be able *to show* (demonstrate) that a judgement is true. In the ideal case an argument has the form of a deductive conclusion you cannot deny. When we refer to that other kind of reason, i.e. to the moral significance of a situation, *it must show itself* to the eyes of the other one perceiving the situation. Ethical deliberation which is based on arguments and only on arguments is a form of *disengaged reason* (Charles Taylor). It fades out the moral claims of reality itself. The other kind of (narrative) reason addresses *engaged reason* perceiving the moral claims of reality.

It may be added that Singer's argumentation is convincing only if we have a sense of the moral significance of the situation of the child. Here we are motivated to help.¹¹ But it is an important question whether we can be

⁹ Singer's argumentation is a bit more complex. First he formulates a principle: When we are able to prevent a bad thing without sacrificing something of a comparable moral importance then, in a moral view, we should do it. Then he argues that the case of the child is an application of this principle. The further argumentation refers to this case, asking whether there is a morally relevant difference between this case and the case of the people in Bengalen.

¹⁰ Prichard H A (1970) Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake? In: Pahl K, Schiller M (ed) Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, pp 402-416.

¹¹ In my opinion we are motivated not by the principle formulated by Singer (cf. comment 9), but by seeing what happens. In order to identify the case of the child as an application of that moral principle



motivated to help people in extreme poverty by a casuistic argumentation. If these considerations are true, it is necessary to make people sensitive to the situation of the poor by asking what it means for a human being to live in such a situation. In doing so, we not only generate a motivation to help, but we also give them a *reason* to help, which results from an act-guiding perception of their situation. A casuistic argumentation is based on duties which are already accepted, like in Singer's example of the child. In other words, it is based on the *status quo* of already accepted duties and it does not generate an insight into further duties which until now have not been accepted and which cannot be derived in a casuistic manner from duties already accepted. This insight can be generated only by making people sensitive to the moral significance of situations.

These deliberations require an addendum. It has been said that we judge actions and behaviour as 'right' or 'good' in relation to *situations*. That is usually, but not exclusively the case. Other relata for such judgements can exist, too. One example is human dignity. The judgement that it is wrong to expose a human being to humiliating or brutal treatment relates such action to the fact that it is a human being at stake. Here, evaluation of such action as wrong is therefore independent of the situation. This is what makes the idea of human dignity categorical.

This leads me to a last point. I have argued that deontic and evaluative judgements refer to relations we do not encounter in reality, but ones we construct, and that therefore 'good' and 'right' are not something we encounter in reality. But we must realize that our cognition not only refers to a given world, but is also *creative*, creating reality. We find this fact in the structure of the social world. This world is constituted by *recognition* and *respect*. Recognition governs who belongs to the social world or to a particular group within it, as well as the social status a person has within this world. Respect has to do with the claims and rights a person has on the basis

we must already be able to perceive the moral significance of that case. We must be able to see that what happens is of moral relevance and importance.



of social belonging or a certain social status. This creative character of social recognition and respect means that the right and good – which we do not find in reality, but construct by comparing acts and behaviour on the one hand and situations on the other – *can become a social reality by our social recognition and respect*. With the recognition of human beings as human beings in the sense of members of the human community, *on the strength of which they are* members of the human community, we recognize their claims and rights in this status, with the consequence that *they have* these rights in social reality. As I have argued, the sensibility concerning these rights and the realisation of them result from deontic perception which refers to the moral significance of situations like poverty in relation to which actions are ought. This ‘ought’ is nothing we encounter or find in reality. But it can become reality by the creative power of social recognition. In my opinion, we find this fact in the reality of Human Rights and Human Dignity. In my view it can be shown that Human Rights and Human Dignity *are* a social reality.¹² Those disregarding human dignity and human rights disregard a social reality and not a philosophical or theological construct. This can be made plausible by illuminating the structure of the social world. Therefore, in thinking about *moral realism* we should include the structure of this world.

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¹² Fischer J (2009) Human Dignity and Human Rights. On the Normativity of Social World, www.ethik.uzh.ch/ise/publikationen. Accessed 27 Oct 2009