

Notes referenced in *My Philosophy*

Extracted from ideas3.doc, 4-Jul-17

14 January 2017

The basis of morality is the innate sense of fairness (also interpreted as equality, justice, or fair-dealing) that is felt by all persons. And the basis of this innate sense of fairness is the balanced two-way relationship that results from repeated bilateral ‘trading’ of goods or services between individuals. For example, a mother provides food and comfort to her baby, and in return the baby stops crying. This implicit trade agreement isn’t ordained by holy scripture or underwritten by a legal contract, nevertheless it works for both parties. Repeated many times for many people in a society, it gives rise to a collective notion of what is fair, which in turn is the basis of what the society considers to be ‘right’, that is, morally correct behaviour.

15 January 2017

Once a moral principle has been established, by whatever means, there is simply no need for any individual to derive it again ‘from first principles’. It is what it is, another percept, albeit on an abstract/high level. As such, although it has pretensions of universality, a moral principle has a limited range of applicability, just like any other percept. This finite domain is delimited through relations held with other percepts: which, for example, describe particular instances associated with the general moral principle. To repeat, a moral principle is no different from any other type of percept: despite appearances it is *not* innate, rather it is acquired through interactions in the real world; and it is ascribed meaning through its association with other percepts; see HMM p.86. This is the case regardless of how it was first discovered or invented. Thus the claims of original and privileged insight by ... ‘manifestations of God’ are irrelevant. Where they agree they are stating the obvious, and where they disagree they are like barking dogs scrapping over old bones. Meanwhile the rest of humanity has moved on and is learning new percepts far beyond the ken of the religious leaders and their devotees: they who betray their ignorance by closing their eyes to the real world and taking comfort in the unfalsifiable and meaningless ‘prophecy’ that we’re all going to hell in a handbasket.

8 March 2017

Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (Yale 2015).

p.vii: “Effective altruism is based on a very simple idea: we should do the most good we can.”

p.50: “It isn’t clear that making the rich richer without making the poor poorer has bad consequences, overall. It increases the ability of the rich to help the poor ...”. This is rubbish! There is no advantage in allowing wealth inequality to increase, and it shouldn’t be up to individual philanthropists to ameliorate the worst effects of an unregulated free market. It’s up to governments (on local, national and international levels) to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty. Citizens can and should raise concerns with their elected representatives, and it’s self-defeating to conceive of a social system which allows individuals to amass great power and wealth in the naïve hope that they will then do the government’s job.

p.51: “Moral codes of behavior often give the principle “Do no harm” priority over the principle “Do the most good you can.” Those who take this view will consider it wrong to

work for a corporation that is harming innocent people, even if the good that one can then do would hugely outweigh this harm.” I too prefer the principle “Do no harm,” because anything else leads to a pragmatic approach, which is wholly unethical.

p.147: “For those who assert that nature has intrinsic value, the comparison of that value with other values, such as the well-being of humans and animals, becomes an insoluble difficulty. My own view, which I have defended elsewhere, is that intrinsic value is to be found only in conscious experiences (not in all conscious experiences but only in positive ones). On this view, nature itself, independently of the sentient beings whose lives it makes possible, does not have intrinsic value, and so the difficulty of comparing its intrinsic value with the intrinsic value of the experiences of sentient beings does not arise.” For me, nature has intrinsic value. Therefore I reject Singer’s mistaken inferences, and, by *modus tollens*, the notion of ‘effective altruism’.

p.176: “The replacement of our species by some other form of conscious intelligent life is not in itself, impartially considered, catastrophic. Even if the intelligent machines kill all existing humans, that would be, as we have seen, a very small part of the loss of value that Parfit and Bostrom believe would be brought about by the extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life. The risk posed by the development of AI, therefore, is not so much whether it is friendly to us, but whether it is friendly to the idea of promoting well-being, in general for all sentient beings it encounters, itself included.” This is *reductio ad absurdum*! What is the point of talking about ‘effective altruism’, or indeed *any* ethical concept, if a logically consistent outcome of your value system is the complete extermination of the human race? In conclusion: on the positive side, ‘effective altruism’ might encourage individual acts of charity, but this agency is meaningful only if it also involves free choice (whereupon ‘effective altruism’ is less a universal principle than a mere aspiration); and, on the negative side, effective altruism can easily subvert the purpose and functioning of government, while bestowing an unearned veneer of piety to the nauseating displays of wealth by the filthy rich.

16 March – 1 April 2017

Louis Pojman, *Ethical Theory* Fourth Edition (Wadsworth 2002).

p.4: “It might seem at this point that ethics concerns itself only with rules of conduct based on an evaluation of acts. However, the situation is more complicated than this. Most ethical analysis falls into one, or some, of the following domains: ... 1. Action ... 2. Consequences ... 3. Character ... 4. Motive”. This list is incomplete, because it omits the ‘rules of conduct’ mentioned just before. Including ‘5. Rules’, we get: {Idealist = Motive; Activist = Action; Empiricist = Character; Theorist = Consequences; Conformist = Rules}.

pp.8-14, the *Crito*. It seems to me that this and other traditional moral philosophy depends fundamentally on the notion of a ‘teacher’ who sets out and upholds certain rules of conduct. But what of a society that has no prescribed or implied rules of conduct or etiquette, and just has a set of laws? In such a society one would be free to do whatever one wanted, *within the law*. Could such a society exist? Yes: Arguably, that’s how I’m living here and now. Are questions of morality important in such a society? No: I hardly ever need to consider what I *ought* to do; rather, I act simply in order to fulfil my chosen obligations; and these commitments are contractual, not ethical. Can this system work for all members of society, in particular, for children? Yes: Even the mother-baby relationship is ‘contractual’ in the sense that it relies on give-and-take. See also my earlier discussions (6-15 April 2016¹ and 14 January 2017) on ‘contractual rights’ and our ‘innate sense of fairness’.

¹ (Footnote added 4-Jul-17) Entry omitted on the grounds that it is a massive digression. The point is made.

p.332: “In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* precious little is said about what we are supposed to *do*. One would think that ethics should be, at least to some extent, action-guiding. Aristotle’s answer seems to be, Do what a good person would do. But, the question arises: Who is the good person and how shall I recognize him or her? Furthermore, supposing we could answer that question without reference to kinds of actions or principles addressed by the nonvirtue-oriented ethicists, it is not always clear what ideal persons would do in our situations. Sometimes Aristotle writes as though the right action is that intermediate or ‘golden’ mean between two extremes, but it is not always easy to understand what this means in concrete situations.” These two principles of Aristotle are rediscovered in PI’s definition of the IDEAL man, and the maxim *Omnis extremus, sed non in extremis*.

pp.363-376, Alasdair MacIntyre “compares five different conceptions of the virtues as they appear in the works of Homer, Aristotle, Jane Austen, and Benjamin Franklin, and in the New Testament. Five different theories seem to emerge, although MacIntyre finds elements of commonality among them.”

pp.364-365: “For Homer the paradigm of human excellence is the warrior; for Aristotle it is the Athenian gentleman. ... the New Testament not only praises virtues of which Aristotle knows nothing – faith, hope and love – and says nothing about virtues such as *phronêsis* which are crucial for Aristotle, but it praises at least one quality as a virtue which Aristotle seems to count as one of the vices relative to magnanimity, namely humility. ... Two features stand out in Jane Austen’s list. The first is the importance that she allots to the virtue which she calls ‘constancy,’ ... In some ways constancy plays a role in Jane Austen analogous to that of *phronêsis* in Aristotle; it is a virtue the possession of which is a prerequisite for the possession of other virtues. The second is the fact that what Aristotle treats as the virtue of agreeableness (a virtue for which he says there is no name) she treats as only the simulacrum of a genuine virtue – the genuine virtue in question is the one she calls amiability. ... Franklin includes virtues which are new to our consideration such as cleanliness, silence and industry; he clearly considers the drive to acquire itself a part of virtue, whereas for most ancient Greeks this is the vice of *pleonexia*; he treats some virtues which earlier ages had considered minor as major; but he also redefines some familiar virtues. In the list of thirteen virtues which Franklin compiled as part of his system of private moral accounting, he elucidates each virtue by citing a maxim obedience to which *is* the virtue in question.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phronesis>: “a type of wisdom relevant to practical things, requiring an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously and encourage practical virtue, excellence of character, in others.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleonexia>: “a philosophical concept which roughly corresponds to greed, covetousness, or avarice, and is strictly defined as ‘the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others’, suggesting what Ritenbaugh describes as ‘ruthless self-seeking and an arrogant assumption that others and things exist for one’s own benefit’.”

{Idealist = Aristotle, *phronêsis*; Activist = Homer, the warrior; Empiricist = New Testament, emotion-based virtues; Theorist = Franklin, maxim-based processes; Conformist = Austen, constancy}. This mapping suggests that these five ‘theories’ make up a complementary and complete set which is necessary and sufficient for the definition of a universal ethical system. This in turn suggests that this ‘universal ethical system’ is none other than IDEAL.

I’ve given up trying to read this book. A brief flick-through doesn’t unearth anything which either supports or challenges my idea that “The basis of morality is the innate sense of fairness ... that is felt by all persons” (see above, 14 January 2017).

14 May 2017

Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (Penguin 1996).

This book is a popular presentation of a number of key observations and ideas in the social sciences. Although ‘the selfish gene’ is occasionally cited as the basis for higher-level social behaviour, this attribution is not substantiated or explained except through reference to nepotism (the favouring of family members from within a broader society), which is another higher-level phenomenon. Thus while the front cover carries Dawkins’ claim that “If my *The Selfish Gene* were to have a Volume Two devoted to humans, *The Origins of Virtue* is pretty much what I think it ought to look like”, this is true only in the negative sense that *neither* of these books explains higher-level social behaviour in terms of lower-level genetics. Ridley’s main point, best expressed in Chapter 7, is that virtue is the consequence of the associated instincts of reciprocity (fairness) and group behaviour (nepotism). I agree with that; but I don’t agree that these instincts are driven by ‘the selfish gene’. No, they both result from the extended family system. Fairness is inevitable amongst autonomous siblings (see above, 14 January 2017), and nepotism is inevitable in an extended family (see OOTK²). This is not to say that all (or even any) members of an extended family are aware that they are being virtuous: they are just doing what comes naturally to them, given their social situation; and it is only the religious leaders who have subsequently described such behaviours as good or bad. That is, ‘virtue’ has its origins in the description and criticism of social behaviours by contemporary and subsequent commentators.

(Does this mean that Plato’s ‘forms’, or ‘universals’, don’t exist? I need to read Bertrand Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy* again.)

20-22 May 2017

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912).³

p.12: Definition of ‘sense-data’, which are what I would call ‘percepts’.

p.24: Assumption of “every principle of simplicity”, without definition or justification.

Chapter IV, pp.37-45: A strong refutation of Berkeley’s idealism.

Chapter V, pp.46-59: Having based his epistemology on a distinction between ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ and ‘knowledge by description’, Russell begins to lose his way, and from this point onward his arguments appear increasingly contrived and unsustainable.

p.54: “Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions”; No they aren’t, they are labels signifying definitions in terms of associations with other labels.

p.58: “*Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted*”; Apparently this is the “fundamental principle of his epistemology”, p.xvi; But it relies on our ability to “understand”, a concept which is introduced without definition or justification; This is particularly weak in comparison with my unified perspective on love, truth, meaning, and understanding, see HMM pp.181-182.

Chapter VI, pp.60-69: Russell assumes that we go from observations to general beliefs or expectations by a process of logical or statistical inference, which he calls ‘induction’; No we don’t, we use System 1 pattern recognition.

p.69: “The general principles of science, such as the belief in the reign of law, and the belief that every event must have a cause ...”; This is based on a rationalist/deductive-nomological view of science, which is much too simplistic; The main characteristic of science is not that it is rule-based, but that it is method-based, these methods being pattern recognition (System 1) and the toolkit approach (System 2).

² (Footnote added 4-Jul-17) OOTK = my book *The Origin of the Kingdoms*, available on my website.

³ (Footnote added 4-Jul-17) OUP 1997 edition, ‘With a New Introduction by John Perry’.

pp.73-74: Empiricists versus rationalists.

pp.75-76, Russell's first reference to values: "Perhaps the most important example of non-logical *a priori* knowledge is knowledge as to ethical value"; Since Russell's system is based on the assumption that knowledge is gained either by acquaintance or by introspection, it prevents him from coming to the (obvious?) realisation that ethical values are usually acquired by simple rote learning/repeated pattern recognition.

p.79: Russell's description of deduction and induction; Interesting but imprecise, and irrelevant to my system as set out in HMM.

p.80: Russell's distinction between *a priori* propositions and empirical generalisations; Again, not relevant to my system.

p.84: Russell discusses '7 + 5 = 12', Kant's stock example of a synthetic *a priori* proposition; But this is a mathematical equation, the truth or falsity of which is discovered by undertaking several well-defined operations in basic arithmetic; Kant's/Russell's synthetic/analytic distinction fails to take account of the existence of such operations and other mathematical/logical procedures; Which is another reason why the resulting scheme appears increasingly contrived and unsustainable.

p.90: "relations ... must be placed in a world which is neither mental nor physical"; Russell appears to be moving towards an epistemology based on relations; Good!

Chapter IX, pp.91-100: Russell describes Plato's 'ideas'/'forms', which he renames 'universals'.

p.100: Russell is impelled (by the internal logic of his scheme based on universals and particulars) to introduce a distinction between "the world of being" and "the world of existence", which is pure sophistry.

p.103: "*All a priori knowledge deals exclusively with the relations of universals*"; Well, who knows?; I'd simplify this to "All knowledge is based on the associations between percepts", plus the requirement to use pattern recognition (System 1) and the toolkit approach (System 2).

p.106: Russell's discussion of "All men are mortals" doesn't improve our understanding either of syllogisms (which would be handled better in a logic textbook) or of his epistemology (the complexity of which makes it impossible for me to continue to suspend disbelief).

p.109: Russell's useful summary of his scheme, including a passing reference to "ethical propositions"; "If the above account is correct, all our knowledge of truths depends on our intuitive knowledge"; Which conclusion means that his "above account" is irrelevant!

p.112: Another passing reference to "ethical principles"; But nowhere does Russell define or discuss what he means by ethical values/propositions/principles.

p.112: Russell discusses general principles and particular instances, which for decades I've called GPs and PIs.

pp.114-115: Russell discusses the role of memory, but misses the key point that memory is vital for pattern recognition.

pp.117-118: Russell tries to explain how PIs are combined in support of a GP, but I don't think he nails it.

pp.121-122: The correspondence and coherence theories of truth.

p.128: "a belief is *true* when it *corresponds* to a certain assorted complex, and *false* when it does not"; Looks OK?

pp.135-136: A "complex fact" may be known by (1) judgement or (2) acquaintance; Yes, but there are three more ways, see HMM p.168.

pp.141-145: Russell discusses Hegel's dialectic; To me this is over-complicated and unconvincing; Popper did a much better job.

p.149: “The essential characteristic of philosophy, which makes it a study distinct from science, is *criticism*.”; This is true if science = Kuhnian ‘normal science’ (*i.e.* iterative development based on System 1 pattern recognition), while philosophy = Kuhnian ‘scientific revolutions’ (*i.e.* frame-breaking based on the System 2 toolkit approach); But I would argue that ‘true’ science = ‘true’ philosophy = System 1 + System 2 = IDEAL.

pp.160-161: Russell’s closing call to arms ...

Summary. Russell bases his epistemology on a distinction between ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ and ‘knowledge by description’, within which there is another distinction between ‘universals’ and ‘particulars’; This scheme fails to give a convincing and complete account of knowledge, or understanding, or scientific method, or theories of truth, or ethics; In comparison, my arguments (in HMM) address all of these topics in a much more satisfactory manner; Therefore I can put Russell’s book back on the shelf and carry on with my own ideas. And my answer to my question of 14 May 2017, “Does this mean that Plato’s ‘forms’, or ‘universals’, don’t exist?”, is “Yes”.

As far as ethical theory is concerned, these findings mean that my list of percept-generating “inputs on a number of levels” (HMM p.86) should include ‘values’; for that matter, it should also include principles, laws, traditions, theories, *etc.*; but arguably all these are covered already by the current list, which includes “attitudes, beliefs, concepts, intentions, actions,” *etc.*; and certainly it’s always been my intention that this list covers every conceivable input.