BERNARD GERT ON THE NATURE OF MORALITY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

In the post-medieval period, with the advent of science and scientific advances, the age of faith gradually faded. The authority of the age-old religions and religious dogmatism dwindled with the advent of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Religious mythology got replaced by the science of cosmology and superstitions with scientific discoveries. Descartes separated physics from metaphysics and rendered the world free and independent of any divine interventions. Darwin located the origins of life on Earth, and Freud dissolved religion and its corollaries in psychopathology. All this made religion and metaphysics, to say the least, irrelevant. This posed a peculiar problem for philosophers regarding morality. If religion is not to be regarded as the fountainhead of morality anymore (which was considered the best and the easiest explanation of morality for ages), then what is it that would define and explain it? Philosophers like Kant tried to locate it in human reason, which was considered to be universal & hence commanding explanatory scope. Bernard Gert essentially is trying to do the same thing through his work on "common morality". In this paper, we will provide a brief treatment of this issue.

Keywords: Common Morality, Moral Theory, Rationality, Public System

Introduction to Bernard Gert's Notion of Common Morality

The whole edifice of Gert's idea of morality lies on his notion of *common morality*. For Gert, morality is essentially a public system in which all people participate. According to Gert, common morality is a moral system that people implicitly use when making decisions and judgments. By "people," he means the whole of humanity. Or almost all; i.e., except those who, by age or some severely disabling condition, cannot be considered moral agents. This is the first primary characteristic of Gert's common morality,[1] and that is an appeal to a universal human nature. Reason being something inherent in human nature, it will equally be a prerequisite of the correct application of common morality. Every rational human being will take it into account in their decisions, though this does not mean, according to Gert, that there will always be agreement. Common morality allows disagreements, and even these are equally legitimate.[2] This is the second important feature of Gert's work: common morality, as a moral framework, is flexible.

The notion of Common Morality, as mentioned above, is public and eliminates all kinds of relativism. He is not discussing the morality of this or that kind, but morality in general. He does not consider variations in morality as representations of multiple moral systems, but rather as different applications/variations of the same single, common system. Gert provides an analogy for this notion of morality: grammar.[3] Grammar is a public system in which all agents (speakers) participate equally. Although not everyone might be able to articulate the nuances of grammar, all agents seem to know it and apply it. Common morality is practiced by everyone, although not everyone may be able to explicitly outline it, which is what moral theories aim to do, a topic we will discuss shortly. There might be some variations in the grammar, says Gert, but the qualifying test of its veracity would

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[1] Paranhos, Flavio, et al. "The Theory of Common Morality of Bernard Gert", p. 4.

[2] Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, p. 4.

[3] Ibid., p. 5.

be to determine whether it allows speaking in a way all competent speakers regard as acceptable and rules out speaking in a way that all of them recognize as unacceptable.

This analogy with grammar brings Gert's notion of common morality in close proximity with the Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" particularly the way American Pragmatist, Richard Rorty articulates it (in his synthesis of Later Wittgenstein and Darwin) and that is all human traditions, discourses and systems in the public interface are nothing but different languages with their own vocabularies and the meanings attached to them. However, according to Gert, there is a crucial difference between grammar and morality: morality is rational in a way that grammar is not. Grammar derives its authenticity solely from its usage, irrespective of its rationality or irrationality. However, Gert considers morality a derivative of human rationality, and thus it has a reference point by which it can be deemed correct or incorrect, despite people using it in either way.

Since common morality is a public system grounded in universal reason, its essential feature is that it is known to all. However, Gert says,[4] religion is not known to all. Moreover, every religion has some features that could not be chosen by all rational persons.

Gert defines morality as an informal public system[5] and says that any adequate definition of morality must include two important features, i.e., (1) everyone participating in the moral system must know what kind of behavior morality prohibits or encourages, and (2) it should not be irrational for any of them to use morality as a guide for their conduct.

BERNARD GERD'S CRITIQUE OF MORAL THEORIES

The first question is, why have a moral theory? Providing a moral theory that attempts to outline common morality is quite useful because it supplies an explicit account of the practiced morality, which can then be applied to new and challenging situations. Gert clarifies that there is a crucial distinction between morality as a public system and various moral theories that attempt to explain it. It is the job of a moral theory to explain, make explicit, outline, and, if possible, justify the already prevalent common morality. Common morality is applied to moral problems or situations rather than a specific moral theory. Moral theories do not create morality; they only explain it. If we come back to Gert's analogy of grammar, there is another interesting point that can be made here in this context. Mostly, it is the language that arises first, is spoken by large numbers of people, and then travels from generation to generation; eventually, someone writes a grammar book outlining the rules of the already prevalent language.

However, Gert is not particularly pleased with the plethora of moral theories presented to explain this common system. Gert says that most of these theorists have blurred this important distinction between morality and moral theory.[6] These theorists confuse moral theories with common morality itself. In their attempt to explain morality, they end up presenting oversimplified, reductive moral guides for complex problems. These proposed guides are far simpler than common morality and thus "sometimes yield totally unacceptable answers to moral

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[4] Ibid., p. 6.
[5] Ibid., p. 11.
[6] Ibid., p. 6

problems."[7] The reason behind the failure of these theories, according to Gert, is the failure to provide adequate descriptions of rationality, impartiality, and morality. Since morality is a system practiced by humans therefore any moral theory must recognize those features of human nature that explain why morality has the features it has. It must demonstrate which features are morally relevant in describing a situation, and it must outline the procedures involved in moral reasoning.

Gert goes on to say that "I do not regard myself as generating a new moral system from the moral theory but rather as providing a more precise statement of the common moral system made possible by the understanding provided by the moral theory."[8]

To illustrate the problem with conventional moral theories, Gert discusses Ethical Egoism. Most of the time, moral theories consider morality as a guide for the "individual" person who adopts them. But everyone agrees that a moral view must not merely be one that would be adopted by everyone; it must also be a view that a person would put forward to be adopted by everyone. Ethical egoism advises individuals to maximize their own self-interest, but this moral guide is inconsistent with universal application. To tell others to act in their own self-interest would not be in the individual's self-interest, putting forth the theory. Gert appreciates Hobbes for recognizing the public aspect of morality, which affects others.

Gert says[9] that defining morality as a guide to conduct that people adopt for themselves leads to the disastrous conflation of morality with "code of conduct". Such a code lacks universality and begets the morality of this group or that, as Gert gives the example of *Nazi morality,* which is justified by a specific group in a specific context but cannot be preached as a universal standard to be adopted by all rational agents.

A CRITIQUE OF GERT'S COMMON MORALITY

Gert, in a sense, provides a *neo-foundationalist* account of Morality, attempting to ground it in human reason. Gert's primary point is that morality is derived from common human features, such as rationality, and therefore achieves universality. But human reason itself is a product of multiple variables and loses objective referential quality. Darwin traces it to a historical process of survivability, whereas Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and others trace it to sub-human structures. In ultimate analysis, reason does not command the objectivity that it should have in order to support the weight of the moral system. Reason itself requires grounding.

Moreover, even if we assume that there is only one moral reality, one moral universe, it is highly unlikely that there is only one unique description of this universe possible[10]. As Richard Rorty says that "there are many descriptions of the world and of ourselves possible, and the most important distinction is that between those descriptions which are less and those which are more useful with respect to a specific purpose."[11]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., p. 7

[9] Ibid., p. 10

[10] Keulartz, Jozef. "Comments on Bernard Gert", p. 142

[11] Rorty, R, *Philosophy and social hope*, p. 27

What is or is not morally acceptable is largely dependent on moral rules and justifiable violations of them, whilst the criteria for moral acceptability are given in terms of the avoidance of harm. Thus, the theory is rule-based, with the locus of moral value centered on the avoidance of harm.[12] One significant feature of the theory that distinguishes it from other consequentialist theories is the importance of publicity in cases where a violation of a moral rule is being considered.[13] Gert distinguishes ten moral rules, neatly divided into two distinct categories: the first five rules prohibiting *directly* causing all of the basic harms and the second five prohibiting those kinds of actions that *indirectly* cause these same harms (do not deceive, keep your promises, do not cheat, obey the law, and do your duty). It seems highly implausible that the exploration and explication of the rich moral life could result in the conclusion that the agreement that exists among our moral judgments "is based on agreement about the nature of morality, that it is a public system with the goal of reducing the amount of harm suffered by those protected by it". That we all agree about the nature of morality seems questionable, and that we all agree that its goal is to reduce the amount of harm suffered seems even more difficult.[14]

There is also a problem of naturalistic fallacy to some degree in Gert's work. An important feature that relates common morality to human nature is the recognition of our fallibility and frailty, which forcibly makes us obey the rules of common morality, because we do not want to suffer damage of any kind; so, we all observe the rules tacitly accepted for that.[15] So, what we ought to do is equate with what is true or correct. This kind of approach suffers from the flaw of every approach that intends to develop the "ought to be" from the "is", i.e., the problem of the naturalistic fallacy.[16]

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[12] Keulartz, Ibid, p. 142

[13] *Ibid*

[14] Keulartz, *Ibid*

[15] Paranhos, Flavio, ibid, p 6

[16] *ibid*