WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD?

Trinity College Dublin Lecture Series – Dr Elizabeth Ventham
WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD?  
THE TALK’S STRUCTURE

• This talk will be full of straight answers

• … just kidding
WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD?
THE TALK’S STRUCTURE

• A few ‘classic philosopher’ moves
  • Not a straight answer
  • “What does this question even really mean?”
  • Not doing this just to milk my 1-hour slot – but because the issues are complex!

• I’ll talk about a few different ways we could answer the question.
  1. We should be good... because we should! Because of external facts!
  2. We should be good... because it’s good for us!
  3. We should be good... because we want to!
WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD?
THE TALK’S STRUCTURE

• I’ll also try to clarify the ideas by asking further questions:
  • Why are we sometimes bad?
  • What can we say to someone who doesn’t want to be good?
BUT FIRST: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

• Firstly, why does it matter?

• Because we want to believe that morality is real, that there's something out there that is *good*.

• And usually, even people who aren’t moral realists, they still want to live as if that is the case – under a kind of moral fiction.
BUT FIRST: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

• And we want to better understand ourselves!

• How to make better choices

• And how to encourage others to do the same
BUT FIRST: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

• We sometimes think that morality is very demanding of us.

• There’s a lot of pain and suffering in the world that we’re failing to fix.

• And it seems like we’re not just failing to fix it because we don’t know how – we also lack motivation, the enthusiasm, the will.

• So understanding why we’re good, why we should be good, can help us to think about the nature of morality and our relationship with it.
1) **BECAUSE WE SHOULD? / BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL FACTS?**

- There are a lot of different ways to approach answering this question.

- You might try:
  - Why should we be good? *Because we should!*
  - Why should we be good? *Just because!*
  - Why should we be good? *Because the rules say so!*
1) BECAUSE WE SHOULD? / BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL FACTS?

• These aren’t very satisfying answers.

• But for some people they’re the best kinds of answers you’ll get!
1) BECAUSE WE SHOULD? / BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL FACTS?

• Alternatively, you might think about the answer in terms of external/moral facts.

• Why should we be good? ➔ Because suffering is bad! Because lying is bad! Because helping others is good!

• But again, there are ways in which this is unsatisfying.
1) BECAUSE WE SHOULD? / BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL FACTS?

- Instead I’m looking for answers we might be able to give about ourselves.

- Why is it that moral obligations fall upon US?

- Why *us* in particular? Why you, me, Brian over there?

- Why should *we* be good?*
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• The second kind of answer is about whether we should be good because it’s good for us to be good.

• Why should you volunteer at the soup kitchen? Because it’s good for you.

• Why should you help your friend? Because it’s good for you.

• Why should you stop kicking the puppies? Because it’s good for you.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

- Obviously one thing this answer depends on is a particular conception of what’s good for us!

- Why should you volunteer at the soup kitchen? Because it’s good for you. Satisfaction of hard work for a good cause.

- Why should you help your friend? Because it’s good for you. We’re better off with stronger friendships, happier friends.

- Why should you stop kicking the puppies? Because it’s good for you. Nobody likes an evil puppy-kicking villain! You want to be able to sleep better at night!
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• Think about the range of different kinds of things that make us happy.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• It’s clear that some things that are good for us, some things that are pleasurable, for example, are short and quick.

• But we can also really benefit from long-term pleasures and satisfactions.

• And experiences that we’ve worked hard for, that we’ve sacrificed something for.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

- So maybe then we can see why doing good will usually be good for us.

- There’s something about being a good person which is … satisfying.

- Being good helps us to sleep well at night.

- And the sacrifices that we make can make that satisfaction seem even greater.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• A similar idea can be found in thinking about ‘Karma’.

• This can be found, for example, in Buddhist philosophy.

• There are a wide varieties of ways to understand karma, but broadly: it’s the idea that performing good actions (and having good motivations) will make it more likely that we will have good experiences.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

- But these versions of the answer might be unsatisfying.
- It seems arbitrary and contingent that good actions will make us happier.
- What about people who don’t know they’re doing good?
- What about people who are mistaken about whether they’re doing good?
- What about people who happen to be able to sleep *worse* when they’re a better person?
- Isn’t it only ever a real *sacrifice* if we’re losing out, if we’re worse off?
Some philosophers want to give this kind of answer in a more satisfying way.

Aristotle (and other modern Aristotelians) thought that doing good was necessarily better for you.

For him, the relevant concept was ‘eudaimonia’

Eudaimonia is the highest good
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• This highest goodness, this human excellence, involves having a good balance of the virtues. Courage, wit, friendliness.

• Moral virtue is good for the soul, the person. Where this might be different from what’s good for our body.

• And different from what we might think of as ‘pleasurable’.

• Instead, it’s a broader conception of happiness and well-being.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• So where we might’ve worried that good actions and happiness came apart, Aristotle avoids that objection by stipulating that good actions and happiness are the same thing.

• They always go together.

• Good actions are constitutive of happiness.
Some philosophers want to give this answer by telling a story about what kinds of creature we are.

Again, we’re persons as well as humans. We’re (largely) rational creatures.

What it is to be a good version of ourselves *is* to be morally good.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• We’re also social creatures.

• Some philosophers think this explains why being moral is good for us.

• Because we benefit from living in a world with co-operation, with love, with relationships, where we help each other.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• But perhaps it goes even deeper than that!

• Some philosophers think that to truly understand and recognise ourselves we have to act in the world in such a way that involves (moral) interactions with others.

• We can learn about who we are as *individuals* through moral actions and our relationships.
2) BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US

• So that’s enough of the first answer:

WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD, LIZZY?

MAYBE BECAUSE IT’S GOOD FOR US??

But this kind of answer is only going to be satisfying in some ways, and to some people.

You have to be on board with the stories about how morality does match up with a broad construal of happiness, or ‘goodness’.
“Why you gotta play that song so loud?”
“Because we want to! Because we want to!”
“Why you always run around in crowds?”
“Because we want to! Because we want to!”
“Why’d you always have to dance all night?”
“Because we want to! Because we want to!”
“Why’d you always say what’s on your mind?”
“Because we want to! Because we want to!”
(Billie Piper, 1998 “Because We Want To”)
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• An alternative way of answering the question is to say... we should be good because we want to be good.

• This is my preferred answer to the question!

• First I’ll clarify a bit about ‘desire’
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

Sometimes what a man should do depends on his passing inclinations, as when he wants his coffee hot and should warm the jug. Sometimes it depends on some long-term project, when the feelings and inclinations of the moment are irrelevant. If one wants to be a respectable philosopher one should get up in the mornings and do some work, though just at that moment when one should do it the thought of being a respectable philosopher leaves one cold.

3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• What does this example tell us about desire?

• That we have desires even when we’re not conscious of them, when we don’t feel them as strongly.

• Furthermore, it’s not just that we talk about desires as if they persist when we’re not thinking about them. They also affect us when we’re not thinking about them!

• For example, we can be motivated by desires we’re not conscious of.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

- But desires can affect us in more ways than just that!

- “Consider how well you can tell songs that you like apart from each other and how songs from genres you dislike all sound the same: depending on what you dislike, all operas are the same screaming, all rock music is the same drum-banging, and so on. Songs from genres that you like, on the other hand, sound different. The fact that you like these songs, that is, the fact that these songs have the qualities you desire from songs you listen to, makes you “really listen” and understand them better.” Arpaly and Schroeder, 104.

- “Similarly, if two people study a topic, the person who has an intrinsic desire to learn about the topic finds it much easier to learn about it.” ibid
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Desires can affect us:

• Through involuntary shifts in attention
• Through changing dispositions to learn and recall
• Through changes in subjective confidence
• Through distortion by emotions and wishes

(ibid)
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Why should we be good? → Because we want to!

• It’s not just because we fancy being good, it’s not just about whims.

• We should be good because…. We want to be good!

• If we have this desire, it’s the kind of desire that isn’t always in our consciousness, but that we still have nonetheless. Something we want over the long term.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• But do we desire to be good?

• Deep down, do we really want to be good people?

“Get down get deeper and down; get down get deeper and down” Spice Girls, 1997
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• “If, for example, sympathy is, as Hume held, a deeply seated and widely shared psychological trait, then, as a matter of contingent (but “deep”) psychological fact, the vast majority of people will have at least some desire to comply with what they perceive to be their moral obligations, even with those other-regarding moral obligations. Moral motivation, on such a view, can be widespread and predictable, even if it is neither necessary, nor universal, nor overriding.” Brink, 1989 p.49
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Even when we do things wrong, we often feel bad about it.

• Particularly if/when we come to recognise that it was a bad thing to do.

• That suggests that a part of us wanted to do otherwise.

• Similarly, when we consider doing something bad we feel torn.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• And even if we don’t always think of it as “being the good thing to do”, it’s common to feel a need for justice, for fairness, for avoiding hurting others.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• So perhaps most of us do want to be good.

• It’s a contingent fact, one that we’re lucky is the case

• But a fact nonetheless!

• Compatible with evolutionary explanations.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Some people think this provides a good explanation for why morality is normative.

• The desires explain the normativity – explain why morality is important to us, why we ought to follow it.

• Philippa wants the coffee  \(\rightarrow\) so Philippa ought to get the coffee!
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• So in this sense it’s a good answer!

• But we’d also need to explain how this can be the kind of answer we give to morality in particular.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Kant, in particular, argued that morality was something that we should obey regardless of what we desired.

• Kant's *Categorical Imperative*

  • Categorical because it applies to us all *categorically*

  • An imperative because it *directs* us to certain action.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Remember one of the reasons we thought an answer to this question is important:

• We want to understand the **objective nature of morality** and how such a thing can influence us.

• So if this is going to be a persuasive answer then we need to show how it’s compatible with such an objective morality.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

• Firstly, morality under this picture still has a hold on us

• And there are ways in which this hold is inescapable!

• After all, we can’t escape our desires.

• I don’t stop wanting to be a philosopher no matter how cosy my bed is, and we can’t stop wanting to do the right thing no matter how convenient it would be for us at a certain time.
3) BECAUSE WE WANT TO

- Secondly, this doesn’t imply that morality itself isn’t **objective**.

- We can still understand morality as an objective set of rules!

- It’s just that we ought to follow these rules **because we want to be good**.
• So where are we?

• I set out to discuss just a few possible answers to the question “why should we be good?”

• There are lots of ways to discuss the question, but I focused on two/three main ways of answering:
  1. We should be good… because we should! Because of external facts!
  2. We should be good… because it’s good for us!
  3. We should be good… because we want to!
TAKING STOCK!

• Is there more left to discuss? (… always)

• Now we’ve discussed some answers to the original question, we can consider a couple more.
WHY ARE WE SOMETIMES BAD?

• Lots of reasons!

• Sometimes we’re just weak-willed. We don’t do the things we most want, or that are best for us.

• A lot of the time we don’t know what the good is. We have sincere disagreements about what’s right to do.
WHAT CAN WE SAY TO SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T WANT TO BE GOOD?

• What if someone doesn’t want to be good?
WHAT CAN WE SAY TO SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T WANT TO BE GOOD?

• I still think that in nearly all cases the person will want to be good – they just might not realise it.

• But if not? And none of the kinds of answers I’ve given today will persuade them?

• Then there might not be much more we can say.
We discussed a few – but by no means the only – ways of answering the question: Why should we be good?

1. We should be good... because we should! Because of external facts!
2. We should be good... because it’s good for us!
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1. We should be good… because we should! Because of external facts!
2. We should be good… because it’s good for us!

And my personal favourite answer:
Why’d you gotta be good?
3. Because we want to! Because we want to!
Further reading:

Pettit, Philip; Smith, Michael (1990) ‘Backgrounding Desire’ in *Philosophical Review*, vol.99 no.4 pp.565-592
Scanlon, Thomas (2000) *What We Owe To Each Other*, London: Harvard University Press