

How to Be a Compassionate Empiricist

Existence is experienced as a process of becoming; the present moment is definite and actual whilst the future is indefinite and potential, a path that branches in infinite directions. Thus, to exist is to be in a very precarious situation, constantly forced to choose a single definite trajectory from an infinite set of possibilities. Naturally, the following question arises: which trajectories are good, and which are bad? In other words, what distinguishes actions which are morally good from actions which are morally bad? Call this question the *moral dilemma*.

To resolve the moral dilemma, many moral philosophers have searched for first principles which determine, for any given action, whether it is good or bad. For instance, Immanuel Kant argues that the categorical imperative determines the goodness of an action by the goodness of the principle which motivates it, whilst John Stuart Mill argues that the principle of utility measures the goodness of an action as a function of the happiness and suffering that results from it. Call this general approach to resolving the moral dilemma the *approach from first principles*.

Unfortunately, the *approach from first principles* faces a significant problem; most strict moral principles have apparent counterexamples. For instance, the categorical imperative implies that lying is always morally bad even if doing so would save many innocent people from being murdered, and the principle of utility requires that individuals dedicate their whole life to increasing the net amount of happiness and decreasing the net amount of suffering, even if that means giving up their own dignity and depriving themselves of basic human rights. In light of these problems, I argue for an alternative approach to the moral dilemma which I call *compassionate empiricism*.

Compassionate empiricism is defined by two fundamental truths—(1) and (2).

- (1) Events and actions *in-and-of-themselves* (i.e. noumena) are neither morally bad nor morally good. On the other hand, events and actions as they are experienced (i.e. phenomena) can be made morally good or morally bad by the humans which experience them.
- (2) Making events and actions morally good or morally bad can limit the compassion people feel for each other.

This view avoids the problems facing approaches from first principles by not sticking to a strict notion of what is right or wrong. Additionally, it provides a reason—namely, (2)—to not always make/view actions as morally good or bad. Doing so limits compassion by obscuring things as they actually are (i.e. noumena).

In part one, I defend my objection to the *approach from first principles* by demonstrating that Kant's categorical imperative and Mill's principle of utility imply absurd conclusions. In part two, I defend compassionate empiricism by explaining and justifying (1) and (2), drawing from

David Hume's argument for the nonexistence of the self, and from Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*. Furthermore, I show how compassionate empiricism avoids the problem facing the approach from first principles. Finally, in part three, I elaborate on the concept of compassion by drawing on Martha Nussbaum (2008), giving an account of the moral differences between human and non-human animals.

Part One: On the Approach from First Principles:

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative (CI) and John Stuart Mill's principle of utility (PoU) are both examples of using the approach from first principles to solve the moral dilemma. By reasoning from supposedly self-evident truths, both Kant and Mill take their respective principles to determine the moral value of any given action.

(CI) Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (Kant, 1785, Pg. 30).

(PoU) Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness (Mill, 1861, pg. 7).

(CI) determines the moral value of an action based on the intention or maxim by which the action is done. (PoU), on the other hand, determines the moral value of an action according to its causal consequences. Consider both of these principles, in turn.

1.1 The Categorical Imperative

To understand how (CI) works, consider how Kant applies it to the act of lying. Imagine a man who borrows money and promises to pay it back, and yet knows that he will not be able to repay his debt. According to Kant, the maxim behind the man's action could be stated thus: "When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so" (Kant, 1785, Pg. 31). Now, if this maxim is converted to a universal law, it might be expressed as follows: "[...] anyone believing himself to be in difficulty could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it" (Pg. 31). On Kant's view, the latter claim leads to an obvious contradiction when subjected to (CI), since no one would will that it become universal law that a person should lie any time they find themselves in a difficult situation.

To abstract from the latter case, the categorical imperative can be used to determine the goodness of an action using the following procedure. First, determine which maxim or principle caused the action in question. Next, convert that maxim to a universal law. Finally, ask yourself whether you would want that universal law to exist. If so, then the action is morally good. If not, then the action is morally bad.

1.2 Objection to the Categorical Imperative

In an article entitled *On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, Kant responds to an objection to his claim that lying is always wrong, which (as I show above) follows from (CI). The objection goes as follows:

- (i) Kant's theory implies that it would be wrong to tell a lie to a murderer who is pursuing a friend that has taken refuge in your house.

- (ii) It would not be wrong to tell a lie to a murderer who is pursuing a friend that has taken refuge in your house.
- (iii) Therefore, by reductio, Kant's theory is false.

Indeed, I think most people agree with (ii). To lie about the location of your friend to the murderer who is pursuing them is not to do something which is morally wrong. Nevertheless, Kant doubles down on this ridiculous conclusion, writing,

[...] if by telling a lie you have in fact hindered someone who was even now planning a murder, then you are legally responsible for all the consequences that might result therefrom. But if you had adhered strictly to the truth, then public justice cannot lay a hand on you, whatever the unforeseen consequence might be (Pg. 65).

Perhaps Mill's (PoU) avoids such absurdity.

1.3 The Principle of Utility

To understand how (PoU) is applied, first note how Mill wards off a common objection against utilitarianism. Describing the common opponent of utilitarianism, he writes,

To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and groveling, as a doctrine only worthy of swine (Mill, 1861, Pg. 7).

According to Mill, the problem with this objection is that it fails to acknowledge all of the forms of human pleasure and happiness that are sophisticated and noble. Due to the different forms of pleasure and happiness, "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Pg. 10). Thus, (PoU) does not imply that we should maximize all pleasures equally, but rather, that some pleasures—specifically, moral or intellectual pleasures—are worth more than others.

Indeed, one advantage of (PoU), at least as it relates to (CI), is that it accounts for intuitive differences in the goodness of lying in different circumstances. Applying (PoU) to the murderer case discussed above, it could be argued that telling the murderer the truth is morally bad, since it causes more suffering than it does happiness, leading to the death of your friends.

So, to apply (PoU), one must calculate how much happiness and how much suffering will result from the action in question. If the action creates a net increase in happiness, the action is good. If the action causes a net decrease in happiness, then the action is bad.

1.4 Objection to the Principle of Utility

In addition to the obvious problem of calculating how much happiness and suffering will result from any given action, there is also the fact that (PoU) requires you to maximize happiness at all costs. Thus, the person who truly lives by (PoU) will do nothing but try to maximize the happiness of others, no matter how much it causes them to suffer. They would, in effect, turn themselves into a 'happiness-pump,' a machine that makes other people happy. I think most would agree that this is an unwanted consequence of any moral theory. Therefore, (PoU) should be rejected.

Another objection to the principle of utility can be gleaned from Ursula K. Le Guin's (1978) short story entitled *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*. 'Omelas' refers to a town in which everyone experiences a constant state of bliss and happiness at the expense of a single child, whose immense suffering is necessary and sufficient for the bliss and happiness of the rest of the town's inhabitants. Utilitarianism would seem to suggest that this situation is just, because the child's suffering is insignificant compared to the happiness it creates. But many would disagree; no child should have to face immense suffering, regardless of whether it creates a state of guilty bliss for the rest of society. Again, this thought experiment provides good reason to reject (PoU).

1.5 Conclusion

In sum, I have demonstrated that (CI) and (PoU) lead to absurd conclusions when applied in particular ways and to particular cases. This is an unsurprising consequence of their strictness and generality. Generalizing from (CI) and (PoU), I conclude that approaches from first principles tend to have absurd implications in particular cases. This conclusion calls for an alternative approach to the moral dilemma.

Part Two: Compassionate Empiricism

Compassionate empiricism is based on Hume's argument for the nonexistence of the self and inspired by Pema Chodron's claim that viewing actions as right or wrong (i.e. morally good/bad) can prevent us from having compassion for ourselves and others. To justify (1), I adapt Hume's argument for the nonexistence of the self to show that morally good/bad actions do not exist, at least not in the actual world. To justify (2), I argue that seeing things as right or wrong obscures the truth, which can limit compassion.

2.1 Justifying (1)

Recall the first fundamental truth of compassionate empiricism—(1).

- (1) Events and actions *in-and-of-themselves* (i.e. noumena) are neither morally bad nor morally good. On the other hand, events and actions as they are experienced (i.e. phenomena) can be made morally good or morally bad by the humans which experience them.

(1) follows from the basic tenets of Humean empiricism but is stated using the Kantian terms of noumenal and phenomenal worlds. This use of Kantian terminology is simply out of convenience; the theory is still perfectly Humean.

2.1.1 Basics of Humean Empiricism:

According to Hume, all perceptions of the mind fit into two distinct kinds—sense-impressions and ideas (Hume, 1739, Pg. 7). These two kinds can be intuitively distinguished by the force with which they enter the mind. Sense impressions enter the mind most forcefully; this group comprises that which immediately arises from the senses of sight and touch, for instance. Ideas, on the other hand, are prototypically faint and low and do not seem to be formed by the impression of some object on the senses. Now, this distinction is sometimes blurred, as is the case with faint impressions that resemble ideas, and with dreams, where ideas are difficult to

distinguish from impressions. Nevertheless, despite the overlap between impressions and ideas, the distinction between the two is intuitively clear.

The distinction between impressions and ideas corresponds to the distinction between noumenal and phenomenal worlds. The noumenal world (i.e. the world before it is experienced) is known through sense impressions. This follows from the fact that, to have a sense-impression, some object must impose itself on the senses. Thus, for each sense-impression, there must be some corresponding thing, or set of things, in the noumenal world. The phenomenal world (i.e. the world as it is in experience) on the other hand, consists of ideas which do not necessarily correspond to some external reality. Consider, for instance, the concept of a unicorn. We can have an experience of a unicorn by thinking about it to ourselves, though there is no unicorn impressing itself on the senses. To account for imaginary objects such as unicorns, there is one further distinction, between simple and complex ideas. Hume writes,

[...] every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea. That idea of red, which we form in the dark, and that impression, which strikes our eyes in sun-shine, differ only in degree, not in nature (Pg. 8).

So, each simple idea corresponds to some sense-impression, whilst complex ideas (like unicorns) can be formed by the imagination's arrangements of simple ideas, and do not necessarily correspond to some sense impression.

In sum, the basics of Humean empiricism can be stated as follows: Sense-impressions are perceptions that enter the mind forcefully and are formed by the impression of some actual object on the senses. It is through sense impressions that the noumenal world is known. Ideas (on the other hand) are perceptions that generally enter the mind less forcefully, and do not necessarily correspond to some current sense-impression. Rather, ideas can be distinguished into two categories—simple ideas, which correspond to some sense-impression, and complex ideas, which are composed of some arrangement of simple ideas into a compositional whole by the imagination. The phenomenal world corresponds to the perception of ideas and is not actual.

2.2.2 The Nonexistence of the Self and of Goodness and Badness

It follows from Humean empiricism that to determine whether an idea corresponds to something in the actual world there must be some sense-impression which gives rise to it. The self, as it is commonly understood, is that which preserves one's personal identity through time. Thus, if the self exists (in the noumenal world), there should be some unchanging sense-impression of it which remains identical to itself throughout time. However, upon reflection on the self, it is clear that there is nothing but a blur of sense-impressions and ideas, constantly coming and going, and constantly changing. As Hume writes,

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception (Pg. 134).

Indeed, since there is no unchanging sense-impression which corresponds to the idea of the self, the self must not exist at all, or at least not in the noumenal world. Why, then, do we constantly talk about ourselves?

That which is called the self does not correspond with any sense-impression; thus, it must only exist in the phenomenal world as a construction of the imagination. Like most other objects, the self is understood as identical to itself through time, not because it's actually remaining identical, but because the mind has a propensity to ignore differences and posit some connection of cause and effect between objects in one moment and objects in the next. Thus, Hume continues,

For what is the memory but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions? And as an image necessarily resembles its object, must not the frequent placing of these resembling perceptions in the chain of thought, convey the imagination more easily from one link to another, and make the whole seem like the continuance of one object? (Pg. 138).

This, then, is the origin of the idea of the self; It is not an actual thing in the noumenal world, but rather, an idea constructed by the imagination due to the close resemblance of each thought to its predecessor. It is simpler to see two very similar things as one than it is to distinguish between them. Thus, the mind has a natural propensity to posit simplicity and connection between similar events, even if the relations are not there in the actual world. Given the resemblance of one perception to the next, the mind falsely assumes that there is some identity which preserves the self between those varied perceptions. But there is still a crucial distinction to be made here; even if something does not actually exist as something in the noumenal world, it can still 'exist' in the phenomenal world as an idea.

As with the self, so with the concepts of moral goodness and badness. If goodness and badness exist in the noumenal world, then there must be some sense impression which gives rise to them. However, upon reflection, there is no such sense-impression. Consider, for instance, a beautiful painting, which you consider to be of the highest good. Where, on the painting, is the good. In other words, what part of the painting gives rise to a sense impression of goodness? If there is no such sense impression, then goodness must not exist in the noumenal world. Similarly, if there is nothing creating a sense impression of badness in a murder scene, then badness must not exist in the noumenal world. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume asks the reader to attend to Cicero's paintings of the crimes of a Verres or a Catiline, writing,

You must acknowledge that the moral turpitude results, in the same manner, from the contemplation of the whole, when presented to a being whose organs have such a particular structure and formation. The orator may paint rage, insolence, barbarity on the one side; meekness, suffering, sorrow, innocence on the other. But if you feel no indignation or compassion arise in you from this complication of circumstances, you would in vain ask him, in what consists the crime or villainy, which he so vehemently exclaims against? (Hume, 1751, Pg. 87).

From this passage it follows that no matter how strongly one feels about an event or an action, no moral goodness or badness can be found therein. Paintings may cause us great rage or passion, though they do not contain anything which gives rise to any sense-impression which is called rage or passion. So it is too with events and actions.

I conclude that moral goodness and badness do not exist in the actual noumenal world. Rather, they are only part of the phenomenal world (i.e. the world of experience and imagination); the mind has a propensity to categorize actions and events in the imaginary categories of good and bad. Thus, (1) follows. The observer of an event has a choice of how to use their imagination to construe that event, but they do not necessarily have to construe it as good or bad, since goodness and badness are not in the event itself. Thus far, compassionate empiricism may seem rather uncompassionate, cold, and rational, as it refuses to hold that goodness and badness actually exist in the world. By justifying (2), I hope to show that this is not the case; compassionate empiricism is, in fact, compassionate. The fact that it is possible to view all actions and events not as morally good or bad is not necessarily a bad thing but can actually be seen as a good thing, because it opens up the possibility for compassion.

Justifying (2)

Recall the second fundamental truth of compassionate empiricism—(2).

(2) Making events and actions morally good or morally bad can limit the compassion people feel for each other.

As Pema Chodron emphasizes in *When Things Fall Apart*, it is the concepts of right and wrong (i.e. morally goodness and badness) which justify blame, and blame, in turn, blocks compassion. Chodron writes,

[...] one of the main exits we take when we find ourselves uncomfortable, when we find ourselves in an unwanted situation or an unwanted place, is to blame. We habitually erect a barrier called blame that keeps us from communicating genuinely with others, and we fortify it with our concepts of who's right and who's wrong. We do that with the people who are closest to us, and we do it with the political systems, with all kinds of things that we don't like about our associates or our society (Chodron, Pg. 81)

So, the problem with seeing things as morally right or wrong is that it justifies our blame for things which cause us unwanted feelings. Now, I do not mean to say that this is always bad. In fact, maybe there are times when it is reasonable to blame. But perhaps blame is overrated. What good comes from seeing someone as bad, or as doing bad things? Is it not more productive try and understand and empathize with them?

Hume's rejection of the self, and of the concepts of moral goodness and badness, demonstrates that things are not good or bad in-themselves. Rather, things are only good or bad because of our minds and the way we perceive the world. Thus, predicating properties of goodness and badness to the world amounts to a distortion of the truth; to call an actual object, event, or action good or bad is to state a falsehood, because actual objects in the noumenal world do not have those properties.

By recognizing that things are not always right or wrong, a middle path opens before us, allowing us to see the world as it truly is. Again, Pema Chodron writes,

Instead of making others right or wrong, or bottling up right and wrong in ourselves, there's a middle way, a very powerful middle way. We could see it as sitting on the razor's edge, not falling off to the right or the left. This middle way involves not hanging on to our version so tightly. It involves keeping our hearts and minds open long enough to entertain the idea that when we make things wrong, we do it out of a desire to obtain some kind of ground or security (Pg. 83).

Notice the parallel here between holding onto the concepts of right and wrong, and holding onto the self. Holding onto an illusory sense of self is another way of creating false sense of ground or security. This grasping at a sense of self seems to be related to the grasping at a sense of right and wrong; if there is no self, it is nonsensical to blame or praise others for their actions, and hence, it makes little sense to view actions as right or wrong. Letting go of the concept of self and the concept of right or wrong creates an opening for an immense amount of compassion. No longer do you have to blame or praise others, but rather, you can see them as they truly are, before your image of them is clouded by illusions of the mind.

Part Three: What is Compassion?

So, in sum, I have defended compassionate empiricism by drawing from Pema Chodron and David Hume, arguing that since the concepts of good and bad cannot be traced to any particular sense impression, they must not be real. Since the concepts of good and bad (or right and wrong) are not real (rather, they are objects of the imagination), events are made good or bad by those who experience them. Furthermore, making events good or bad can limit the compassion people feel for one another. But what is 'compassion'? Above, I have merely gestured at the term by arguing that making things right and wrong limits it by justifying blame. Here, I draw from Nussbaum (2008) to provide a more detailed account.

Nussbaum sheds light on the notion of compassion by first examining the similarities and differences between the moral capacities of humans and non-human animals, pointing out that many scholars who have examined the same topic think of the relation between human and non-human morality in terms of the metaphor of a Russian doll (i.e. a doll within a doll within a doll). She writes,

[...] many if not most of the people who write on this topic evoke the image of a *scala naturae*, in which we humans are at the top, the largest Russian doll in the set of dolls, the only one who is capable of full moral agency (Pg. 6).

But this view, which conceptualizes humans at the top of a moral hierarchy, capable of greater good than other animals, is perhaps deeply mistaken. Nussbaum goes on to point out that, even if humans are capable of producing immense good, they are also capable of committing immense moral atrocities that no other animal would dream of—think racism, sexism, holocausts, warfare, etc. Thus, she puts forth a different picture, in which the Russian doll on the outside is malicious, contorted, in ways that do not correspond to any deformation of the inside dolls" (Pg. 6). If this picture is true, and humans are somehow morally 'deformed,' then what causes this deformity?

According to Nussbaum, compassion has three thoughts as necessary parts—a judgment of seriousness, a judgment of non-fault, and a eudaimonistic judgment. Briefly, the judgment of seriousness is about taking the suffering of others serious (laughing at another's suffering is not compassionate); the judgment of non-fault is about not blaming others (we tend to feel less compassion for someone if we see the cause of their suffering as chosen or self-inflicted); and the eudaimonistic judgment is a thought which places someone else's suffering high on a hierarchy of goals and things that are important (Pg. 8-10). Here, Nussbaum's claim that a necessary part of compassion is a judgment of non-fault—in other words, a refusal to make someone's action bad by seeing it as something done with a bad intention—echoes Pema Chodron's claim that making things good or bad limits the compassion one feels for them.

I conclude that the deformation of the largest Russian doll (as Nussbaum puts it), can be accounted for by the human ability to make things good or bad. Given that no animal has a robust conception of fault and non-fault, “the compassion of animals will potentially include many suffering people and animals to whom humans refuse compassion on grounds of fault (Pg. 12)”. This is what accounts for the fact that humans commit genocides and start wars, while animals do not.

Conclusion

Some animals are (arguably) much more compassionate than humans. Is this, as Martha Nussbaum suggests, due to the uniquely human capacity to attribute non-existent properties to real things? Indeed, this explanation provides a compelling account of human atrocities. Many authors have argued that humans are morally superior to non-human animals because of their intellectual capacities, but few have pointed out that humans are capable of moral atrocities no non-human animal could dream of. In addition to giving us an incredible capacity to empathize and understand others, our intellectual capacities also gave us the capacity to think of ourselves as fundamentally different and superior to others by making them good or bad.

Recall the moral dilemma I mentioned in the introduction; what makes an action morally good or morally bad? Kant's answer is the categorical imperative, whilst Mill's answer is the principle of utility. Both of these answers, however, lead to absurd conclusions, and both make the mistaken assumption that things-in-themselves are genuinely good or bad. Compassionate empiricism, on the other hand, states that the mind determines whether an action is morally good or morally bad. Hence, in a way, compassionate empiricism avoids answering the moral dilemma. I do not think this is such a bad thing. As Pema Chodron argues, declaring things to be right or wrong is a way of justifying blame, and blame blocks compassion. Perhaps, rather than viewing actions as right or wrong, we should strive for radical acceptance. Rather than protect our fragile sense of self, we should reject its existence and realize that we are one and the same as those we disagree with, as those that we call right or wrong.

Now, I must make a disclaimer or two. I am not advocating for moral relativism, which would amount to saying that the truth of a moral claim is relative to the person who makes it. Rather, I am arguing that moral claims are not true or false at all; our moral sentiments are brought on by the imagination, which categorizes events and actions into the boxes of right or

wrong. Perhaps we should just do our best to empathize with and understand others, not relying on some strict principle to guide our action. At first glance, compassionate empiricism can appear cold and rational, but a more critical analysis reveals that it opens the possibility for compassion and radical acceptance.

Bibliography

Chodron, P. (2005) *When Things Fall Apart*. Shambhala Publications.

Hume, D. (1751). *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Kant, I. (1785). *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Le Guin, U.K. (1978) *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. Granada, London.

Mill, J. (1861). *Utilitarianism*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Nussbaum, M. (2008). *Compassion: Human and Animal*. INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES KOLKATA.