

## *The priority of the good and the contingency of the right*

Many philosophers accept the “priority of the good”. But even among those who share the same conception of good – welfare, say, or benefit more generally – many disagree about the correct criterion of *rightness*. Some are act consequentialists, others rule- or motive- consequentialists, and others have different theories still (such as Coons’ “ideal carer” theory).

This paper argues that “goodists” should not care about any supposedly universal facts about what makes something right. To the extent that beliefs about “rightness” have any practical import, it is because they give us *guidance* in action-deliberation, assigning praise or blame, and internalising principles and motivations. What matters is not having the “true” views about these things, but having the beliefs that it is good for us to have. And *what is best to believe* will vary across context. So either rightness is practically – and hence ethically – irrelevant, or it is highly contingent what criterion of rightness we should adopt. Considerations of goodness, on this view, generate views about rightness by playing the role of a *criterion for theory-selection*.

**What is the Priority of the Good?** Sumner (1996) offers the following definition:

*The Priority of the Good:* Facts about which states are intrinsically good explain which duties and moral reasons we have. The point of ethics is to bring about good (or better) states of affairs. In this paper, I focus on theories, like welfarism, that conceive of goodness in terms of *benefit* to us and other creatures that can be benefitted. Coons (2012) identifies two key features of such theories. First, goodness plays a *justificatory* role. Why engage in the practices associated with ethics? – because they are good (for us)! As Keller says, if morality really advised something other than what is good for us, “would we not be *better off* with something other than morality?”(Keller 2009: 91). Secondly, although most goodists are consequentialists, it is actually unclear how to *derive* a criterion

of rightness from concern for the good. My argument takes this claim further – if our interests are practical, there is *no* singular derivation of a criterion of rightness from concern for goodness.

**Aspects of rightness: 1 – Deliberation-guidance.** What practical role do beliefs about rightness play? The most obvious is *action-guidance*. We want to know what is *right* to guide our actions. But as the literature on self-effacingness shows, consequentialists accept that there is a difference between what is “right” and what action-guiding thoughts it is best to use (eg Parfit 1984, Railton 1984). Always to deliberate using the act-consequentialist calculus would not produce the best outcomes for creatures like us, in situations like ours. Likewise, it’s not clear that deliberating by reference to one “true” standard of rule- or motive- consequentialism will be good either. Rather, facts about which deliberation-procedures do good are highly contingent on context.

**Aspects of rightness 2: - Praise and blame.** Perhaps the practical role of a criterion of rightness is to help us *evaluate* actions. But consequentialists - and other goodists should agree - paradigmatically decouple questions about *who we should blame* (both publicly and in our own heads) from questions about *who has done wrong* (or, who is *blameworthy*). And it is the former, not the latter, that are practically significant. But if we also accept that consequentialising thinking (at least potentially) self-effaces when it comes to action deliberation, then it will equally self-effacing when it comes to trying to work out how to evaluate ourselves and others – after all, deciding to blame is a form of action-deliberation. So, again, the question “who is it *right* to blame?” (even on a consequentialist standard of rightness) is not practically significant. What we need, rather, is to have the beliefs about how to assign blame that it will be good to have.

**Aspects of rightness 3 – Internalising principles and cultivating motivations.** Some versions of rule- and motive- consequentialism tell us what makes *acts* right – they’re right if they

are in accordance with the right rule or stem from the right motivation. But an alternative approach does not ask what makes *acts* right at all, focusing solely on internalising the right principles or motivations. Yet again, whether it is *best* to focus on principles, motivations, or something else, and which it is best to seek to internalise (those that would be best if everyone *had* them, those that would be best if “most people” *followed* them, etc), will depend on our context.

**Avoiding regress – how to think about what’s best to believe.** Call a set of beliefs about how to deliberate, praise/blame, and cultivate principles/motivation a *normative code*. We should want our normative code to be as *good* as possible – *good at producing goodness in our actual context*. But my view isn’t that it’s *right* to be perpetually trying to work out what code it is good for us to have. That would not do good! And it’s unlikely that we can work out an optimific code from first principles (Griffin 2015). Rather, following a Peircian account of inquiry, we should see the job of moral philosophers as attempting to identify where our current views are letting us down, and to propose reforms to our normative code that are likely to be useful. Normative codes should be tailored to particular contexts. Creatures better at calculation and less prone to corruption than us might do well to adopt act-consequentialism. Those in tight-knit communities might do well to focus on motivations and character. In large, diverse societies, publicly articulable principles might be more useful. But none of these is “the” correct standard of rightness. All that matters is what normative code it is good to believe. Goodness is a standard for *selecting* a normative code.

**Conclusion** In a sense, a universal criterion of rightness is too deontological for a goodist. Why care about what is *right*, so long as we do *good*? Ethics is not some disembodied judge evaluating us for our righteousness. Goodness won’t *justify* an impractical normative code. But, ironically, doing good might, in our actual context, require us to adopt a moral code that looks a lot like deontology.

**Bibliography:**

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