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A Rational Approach to Reason

My essay is an attempt to understand the author who has posed in the quote the problem of how people get swayed by demagogues without examining their arguments, and to understand the author's idea that this problem is a result of the failure of people to think for themselves and examine themselves. I shall present my arguments for the existence of such a problem as described in the quote and examine the author's arguments implicit in the solution stated by him in the quote. Finally, I shall attempt to argue against this proposed solutions by presenting some examples where it does not hold true.

Contingency of Morality

We may group propositions into two camps: the 'is' and the 'ought'. 'Is' statements are descriptive in nature insofar as they describe reality and its contents. On the other hand, 'ought' statements are normative since they provide directions about what *should* be done. For example, "I should work because I am able to work" can be analyzed thus: "I am able to work" is descriptive while its apparent corollary that "I should work" is normative.

While we have logical tools like deduction to arrive at descriptive statements, it is far tougher to do so for normative ones. Disregarding skeptic doubt for the time being, I can say I am fairly certain that I am able to work: I have functional limbs and a functional brain. But the logical imperative that implies that I should work (given that I am able to work) is weak if not non-existent. David Hume most notably pointed out this distinction in his "is-ought divide". Is there any logically waterproof sequence of ideas that dictates that I should work? It may be said that if I don't work I will not have the means of sustenance and that I will die, but then the question is why should I live? Why should I do anything to change the present state of things. The answer to that boils down to "because it is the right thing to do". But the logical imperative is nonetheless absent.

Bridging the Divide

While it is true that a logical lacuna exists between normative and descriptive statements, it is also true that such a lacuna can be reduced by a combination of knowledge of objective facts and accepting certain axioms. Consider the question of morality of homosexuality. Science (and objective facts) tells us that a person's sexual orientation is not a matter of his personal choice but the result of his genetic composition. This makes us question the so-called immorality of being gay as it is not really a person's fault that they are born gay. Furthermore, if we accept the axiom that all people are born equal, we will be inclined to arrive at the conclusion that we *should* not discriminate against homosexuals. Thus we see that knowledge of objective facts coupled with an axiom helps us logically arrive at a normative statement.

This line of reasoning is not flawless, though. Of course, it was the acceptance of certain axioms (or dogmas) that led to the persecution of gays in the first place (the dogma being that being gay is unnatural). Secondly, while science does inform morality, it does not determine it. Science can tell us that being gay is not a matter of choice but the imperative is on us to see where we want to go from there: do we punish people for things that are not under their control or not? In society this question

has a yes and no answer. For example, if two people who are equally drunk leave a party at the same time in the night in different cars and only one ends up killing a person who walked in front of his car, we treat him more severely than the other person; while the former is charged with manslaughter the latter pays a monetary fine for driving under the influence of alcohol. Thus we see in this case we do hold people accountable for things not under their control. The point is to show that even with science informing our morality, the divide between 'is' and 'ought' persists.

Man's Quest for Certainty

It is a fact well accepted that we strive for certainty in our lives. We recommend young people to think before making important decisions about where they want to go to college or where they want to get a job so that there is some *surety* or *certainty* that the decision they make is the right one. We extend this striving for certainty to morals. Man has always looked for an objective morality. The idea of some kind of God in human civilization serves that exact purpose of laying down rules to lead a "godly life"; religions have their own moral codes of conduct for their followers.

But this certainty faces doubt when we think about the 'is-ought divide'. If morality is contingent and not necessary, where is the certainty of knowing that my actions are moral? Of course, I can take the subjective route and say what is true for me is true but that leads to contradictions in moral codes which leads to violence, as it often has led to in the past as religious violence is not a new concept. Thus, man finds himself in the difficult position of being morally uncertain about his actions, but he has come up with ways to solve this problem, as described in the following section of the essay.

Passion and Reason

Appealing to emotions and passion is a very powerful tool to strengthen ideas. I may be opposed to the death penalty on philosophical grounds but it is hard for me to say so to the family of a murder victim who want the murderer to be hanged. Perhaps the 'is-ought divide' then is reduced (at least apparently so) when we supplement emotions with reason. In the recent American Presidential election campaign, Donald Trump "argued" against free trade by appealing to the plight of blue-collared American workers who had lost their jobs. He had some logical arguments to be sure as there are against free trade but his ideas were strengthened by this appeal to emotion.

The problem arises when instead of supplementing or strengthening your argument, you use passion as a substitute for argument. Emotional reasoning has the virtues of being popular, instant and requiring not much thinking and effort. Besides, it makes us apparently fill the gap that strict logical reasoning creates between the 'is' and the 'ought'. Given this and the man's quest for certainty in terms of morals, it can be understood why people fall for the rhetoric of the demagogues. The example are many but we will mention just one: Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Hitler was a gifted orator who used his oratory to inspire Germans to do things which are today unconscionable. He used passion and emotions to not supplement his logical argument (there are none which advocate the murder of an entire race) but substituted the former for the latter.

To sum up our argument so far:

1. Morals are not necessary and a divide exists between normative and descriptive statements.

2. Objective facts inform morality but do not determine it; or this divide can be reduced but not entirely bridged.
3. Man strives to attain some certainty about the morality of his actions.
4. Passion and emotions while harmlessly supplement logical arguments, cause much more harm when its supplementary quality is equated to its substitutability.

Since the author calls this problem a result of failure of people to examine themselves, I infer that actually examining ourselves is a solution to this problem, an idea which shall be explored in the next section of the essay.

Examining Oneself

Morals are viewed in relation to an agent or agents. When we discuss notions of an action being “right” or “wrong”, the obvious question to ask is “Action by whom?” and “Action which affects who?” In this context, perhaps the examination of the agent precedes the examination of the action by that agent. Broadly speaking, we need to examine the nature of man and his attributes before we talk about what actions he ought to do or ought not to do. One of the most useful assumptions in ethics is that man is a rational being. Without that assumption, many important ideas about what man should or should not do fall apart. For instance, when we disregard this assumption, even very basic ideas like “Unprovoked violence is wrong because it only leads to pain and suffering which, thus caused, are easily avoidable” don’t have any significance in a society inhabited by irrational men.

Another aspect to discuss before we specifically address the author’s argument is the ‘crowd mentality’ of men. We are extremely suggestive beings who can be motivated to do things because our peers are doing it. Typically, this is seen in pursuing material goals of success and money because that is what is expected of us by society. In that sense, men who do not think of or about themselves become extensions of society serving its purpose not theirs. This mentality of big groups served an evolutionary purpose to be sure — hunting in packs was advantageous to hunting alone as the former increased chances of survival. But in today’s world, its virtue is questionable.

In this spirit, the author presents the solution to the problem of being moved by passionate rhetoric as: examining oneself. By looking within and rationalizing things on our own, instead of depending on the crowd and blindly being swayed by emotional rhetoric, we can reach more logically sound moral statements. Examining oneself then becomes a sort of meta-rational idea: one should be rational enough to understand it is right to think rationally and not emotionally. The point being made is that it is suggested that instead of looking without for moral truths, we rationalize them from within.

According to the author, this would result in not just a more logically sound picture of morality and what we should or should not do, but will also make us more critical when we listen to others’ ideas since we will apply the same rational approach which we used to examine ourselves, when we examine the ideas being propagated by others. This is so because all logically unsound ideas which are propagated by demagogues would be inconsistent with his own worldview and this would spur him to not simply accept the demagogue’s words at first hearing. On the contrary, for a person who has not examined himself and for whom his idea of morality is same as that of the group of which he is a part, there is no personal conception of morality hence there would arise no inconsistency when he hears the demagogue and thus he would be blindly swayed by emotion without critically analyzing the argument.

If we agree that we can never arrive at moral truths through logical deductions comprising of descriptive statements, we are led to the problem of certainty about moral truths for man which he solves by using emotion as a substitute for reason. But the solution presented by the author of looking within and rationalizing the morality by examining oneself would then also be insufficient because the 'is-ought divide' implies that such an entirely rational approach is insufficient to arrive at normative truths. However, I do not regard this as a completely justified counter-argument because what the author is advocating for is not that we can find morality from within, but that we must attempt to do so by rational thinking. By asking people to examine themselves the author is supporting the idea that even though the moral truths which we arrive at ourselves may not be logically waterproof, at least we would have some ideas of morality on our own and we will then be motivated to not accept contrarian points of views (which may be thrown up by demagogues) easily, i.e., we would be critical in our approach. The opposite is true for people who "fail to examine themselves" and use ideas held by the group instead—they are the gullible masses who fall for demagoguery. But is this solution flawless?

Law versus Vigilantism

It has been said that "The law is reason devoid of passion". For the purposes of this essay, law is a good metaphor for the rational and critical approach that the author argues for. Conversely, vigilantism would be a good metaphor for the people who follow ideas propagated by demagogues blindly because they are too moved by passion. By bringing in these two ideas, I will attempt to state a virtue of vigilante justice over law, which will be used as a counter-argument to the author's position.

A typical argument for death penalty, which has also been mentioned in this essay previously, is the emotional suffering of the victim. If someone were to ask some father if he would favor the death penalty if it was his daughter that had been raped and murdered, his answer would probably be yes. But this is the reason we have legal systems in place; so that punishments are decided in courts of laws and not be fathers of murder victims. This is so because the purpose of justice is not retribution but reformation: a man is punished not because he commits the crime but so that the crime is not committed again.

All this sounds good and echoes well with the critical and rational approach advocated by the author, however, things are not so clear when we bring into the picture notions of vigilantism or vigilante justice. There are a lot of crimes which are so heinous and unspeakable that perhaps reformation is not good enough—retribution is needed. And in light of the legal system being opposed to this course of things, the public takes matters into its own hands. Take for example the case where when a person who had fatally shot a young police officer was being brought to the court, he was almost beaten to death by a vengeful mob. There is no logical justification for this action: the courts are there to administer justice and sentence the person appropriately. But there is an emotional justification: the absolute horror and suffering of the family when they find out their young son is dead. In these cases it is very hard to see the rationale behind reformative justice over retributive justice.

And that is the larger point I am making here: sometimes, reason and pious platitudes by philosophers do fall short of appealing to the masses because such reasons really are unfair at the time. When Marc Antony and his group of Senators stabbed Caesar, two very different speeches were delivered to the Romans. The first, by Marc Antony who was a close friend of Caesar, was based in reason; it said that Caesar was becoming dictatorial and that killing him was the only way to ensure Rome's welfare. But the second one by Brutus was focused almost entirely on rhetoric and appealing to the grieved public's

emotions. Unsurprisingly, it was Brutus' version of events which the public found acceptable. But can we really blame the Roman people for it? Is it not an unrealistic expectation from us of them to have behaved rationally and emotionally at such heartbreaking news?

I believe while it is without doubt right to be rational, be critical and not be moved by emotion but reason, it is also in extreme cases an unrealistic expectation. Not all appeals to emotion and cries for mercy are the result of manipulative demagoguery by evil dictators: sometimes they come from the weakest sections of society who rightly feel that they have been wronged. So while it is fair to apply the critical self-examination method propounded by the author in most cases, one must also be aware that there are exceptions to the rule; exceptions which make it not only unrealistic but wrong to expect people to behave rationally and calmly, at least the time being. What would, however, be definitely wrong is to extend this reasoning and use it to validate what evil dictators have done to further their own ends. This is where I acknowledge that my counter-argument falls short and my support for the author's proposed solution becomes stronger.

Conclusion

I have examined the implicit premises in the quote by the author, namely the contingency of morality and man's thirst for certainty about morals and used it to explain why people attempt to bridge the divide between the 'is' and the 'ought' by using emotion not just in supplement to but oftentimes as a substitute for reason. I then discussed the virtues of the self-examination method to promote critical and rational thinking to arrive at moral truths which has been suggested by the author. Then, I brought in the notions of law and vigilantism to illustrate that in some cases it is not only unreasonable but also wrong to expect people to behave rationally and critically and not be moved by passion. Finally, I conceded that no matter this failure of the author's solution to hold true in all cases, it is nonetheless good enough to be applied generally by people, since the opposite would lead to a more serious problem, namely doing wrong things by blindly following demagogues.