The Difference Between Right and Wrong

A. W. Eaton

In the American judicial system, insanity is sometimes used as a defense, and the test for sanity is whether or not the accused can tell the difference between right and wrong. I suggest that, by this test, the vast majority of the human race is insane, for very few know how to correctly determine whether a particular action is right or wrong. Sure, we have been given a set of rules with the labels Right and Wrong, but we haven't been given valid reasons why particular labels are chosen. Correct reasoning is the key ingredient in any search for truth. To determine right from wrong, we must first use correct reasoning to establish the basis for differentiating right from wrong. Then, with this basis, we can use reason to determine the rightness or wrongness of any particular action or thing.

To begin with, right, wrong, good, and bad are unfinished terms and have no meaning until completed with a statement of right for whom, wrong for what, etc. Good and evil are often talked about as though they are "things" that exist on their own, but they are not. They are more properly used to evaluate the effects of some action or thing. So how do we determine which actions/things are good and which are bad? Many people still believe that knowledge of good and bad is intuitive, that we are born with a "conscience" that directs us down the right path. Some believe that knowledge of right and wrong is to be learned from some religious document. In any case, we each have a stock of beliefs that we have acquired by various means, and the beliefs about moral right and wrong are included in this stock.

Even in the most basic rules of ethics on which there is widespread agreement, we realize that there are some circumstances where one might take exception to the rule. For example, it is generally accepted that it is wrong to lie, but, if lying to a vicious criminal saves an innocent victim, most of us would lie. Therefore, obedience to the rule should not be the ultimate goal; rather, the rule should be a tool that is used to achieve the ultimate goal. A rule is a means to an end, not the end itself.

We don't have to look very far to see there is widespread disagreement on many rules of conduct. Many rules differ from country to country, culture to culture, and religion to religion. Some behavior is inherently wrong and is wrong in any culture, but some is wrong simply because it goes against the expectations and habits of a particular society. Obviously, the more important rules are those that deal with inherently wrong behavior. But we receive them all mixed together from the same sources and can't tell which rules should be vigorously defended and which can be modified to accommodate different cultures. And what if the rigid rules of my culture are in direct conflict with the rigid rules of your culture? In such cases one or both of us must be incorrect in our belief of what is right and what is wrong. It follows that if my belief is incorrect then the reasoning that led to it must be faulty.

There is a reason for every belief, even if the original reason has been forgotten. For example, I may believe that it is wrong to steal and, if asked why, I may say, "Because it just seems like the wrong thing to do." The reason it seems wrong may be that my mother told me at a very young age that it is wrong to steal, and I stored that rule in the part of my brain where such rules are stored. There is a reason for every belief and, if the reasoning is correct, the belief is likely to be correct. If the reasoning is faulty, the belief is probably faulty.

How do we know if a reasoning process is faulty? For thousands of years people have been studying and formulating rules for reason and logic. The rules that are valid are the ones that consistently yield correct conclusions. If a method of reasoning produces a conclusion that can be shown by other means to be definitely in error, then that method of reasoning can be discarded. For example, if a single method of reasoning can be used to produce conflicting results, the method must be faulty. Let's say I believe in Santa Claus because my mother assured me that he exists, and mothers are always truthful, and you believe Santa does not exist because your mother told you so, and mothers are always truthful. We are both using the same reason—mothers are always truthful—to arrive at conflicting conclusions. We can therefore conclude there is a flaw in the reasoning and that we cannot be certain that something is true just because a mother says it is.

By starting with known facts and applying valid reasoning, additional facts can be ascertained, which can be used to derive still more facts. As in solving a complex mathematical problem, if an error is made at any step in the process, the final conclusion is unreliable. (It could still be correct by accident!)

When two beliefs are in conflict, at least one must be in error. The abundance of conflicting beliefs indicates that a lot of faulty reasoning is taking place. Conflicting beliefs often lead to physical conflicts, as evidenced by the large number of wars and fights that are still occurring. If everyone could purge the false ideas from their stock of beliefs, most of these conflicts could be
resolved. Thus, it is worthwhile to learn how to reason correctly and how to recognize fallacies. Many books have been written on the rules of correct reasoning. Unfortunately, they are rarely incorporated into public education.

**The Importance of Being Happy**

Let’s cleanse our stock of beliefs by following the example of Descartes and starting with the most certain bit of knowledge—the knowledge of our existence: “I think; therefore I am.” I would paraphrase and say, “I feel; therefore I am.” The ability to think has no value in itself, but the ability to feel is very significant. One of the first things we learn is that we have the ability to experience feelings and that feelings have both positive and negative values. From the moment of birth, we can tell the difference between being hungry and isolated versus being fed and held. We can experience various degrees of pleasure or happiness, and we can experience various degrees of pain or unhappiness. Without this ability, nothing would have any value or importance. A rock doesn’t care if it gets crushed. A peach doesn’t care if it gets eaten. Humans do not care about anything that does not affect their feelings. The value of any rule, action, or thing is determined by its effect on feelings.

It is natural and all right that we seek to increase positive feelings (happiness) and decrease negative feelings (unhappiness). The ultimate goal of each person—either consciously or unconsciously—is to maximize his or her happiness. This will not feel right if you have been taught that hard work and sacrifice are good and the pursuit of pleasure is wrong, but happiness is used here in a broad, general sense to include all positive feelings, not just hedonistic pleasure. It seems that even acts of apparent generosity and self-sacrifice are connected—directly or indirectly—to some positive reward or to the expectation of some reward. Sometimes a selfless act comes automatically, as a result of training or character development. But rules of behavior that become one’s character are originally adopted for acceptance, praise, or some other reward. Someone once said that the one thing worse than being unhappy is being despicable, to which another remarked that the trouble with being despicable is that it makes you so damned unhappy!

The immediate reaction to this thesis is usually, “How selfish! Surely there is something more important than the pursuit of one’s personal happiness.” Before rushing to judgment, however, let’s continue to build on our foundation of fact. Now that we have acknowledged that sane people strive to maximize their happiness, the next step is to determine what we can do to accomplish this goal. Happiness comes in many forms from many sources, but it didn’t take long for humans to discover they could not accomplish much by themselves. Not only happiness, but survival itself, requires the help of other people. So what happens when people gather in a group and each wants to maximize his/her own happiness? Compromise! Cooperation! They quickly learn that to receive the help they need, they must be willing to give the help others need.

This brings us to the concepts of right and wrong. For an individual, things that are right are the things that increase one’s happiness and things that are wrong are things that decrease one’s happiness. I think most people would prefer to have their total happiness spread over their lifetime rather than have one day of ecstasy and little or no happiness the rest of their lives. If one were to plot a line graph where the Y axis represents Happiness and the X axis represents Time, the resulting line would show the variations in this person’s happiness over time. The line would show positive peaks at times of greatest happiness and negative peaks at times of greatest sorrow. In mathematical jargon, the area under the Happiness/Time curve represents the integral of Happiness with respect to Time. Perhaps the optimum life is represented by a maximum net area under the curve, or the most happiness for the longest time.

Ideally, society represents all its members equally, so the goal of society must include a factor that represents the number of people receiving a fair share of the Happiness-Time integral. Until a more precise formula is developed, we can say that the goal of society should be to achieve the greatest happiness for the most people for the longest time, and society’s rules of right and wrong should be based on how an action or policy affects this goal. Let’s call this principle the “HPT (Happiness-People-Time) factor.” To correctly evaluate the rightness or wrongness of a law or policy, the total net effect on HPT must be evaluated.

Rarely does an action produce results that are 100 percent good or 100 percent bad. Often, results cannot be predicted with enough accuracy to be sure which is the best course. To be as accurate as possible, it is necessary to apply correct reasoning to the best knowledge available, to keep an open mind to new knowledge, and to remember the objective of maximizing the HPT factor.

We should not forget that the basic goal of each person is to increase his or her happiness. The creation of a society by enlisting the cooperation of others is one of the tools to further that goal. Society is created to serve the individuals, not the other way around. If the rules of a society maximize the chances of happiness for as many of its members as possible, those members will be motivated to cooperate with those rules. Nevertheless, there could be times when the best interests of a person are not served by the rules of a society. In these cases the person has a right to reject those rules and attempt to achieve happiness by some other path. If in so doing the happiness of others is affected, the others have an equal right to protect their happiness by enforcing the rules of their society. One example might be a case where a person is charged with a crime he or she did not commit. The evidence could be so strong that reasonable jurors could conclude that the probability of guilt is beyond a reasonable doubt. The accused knows he or she is innocent but has no way to prove it. He or she has the right to try to escape or use whatever means are available to try to preserve his or her freedom and happiness. On the other hand, society has the right to restrain him or her and protect its other members from possible harm.

In the above example, the harm resulting from society’s error will be much less when our penal systems have advanced to a level where their goal is protecting the public rather than exacting vengeance. In the absence of absolute knowledge, society must continue to judge guilt based on probability. And, yes, it is better to occasionally convict an innocent person than to punish untold numbers of innocent people by letting large numbers of criminals go
The Extinction of Priests

Charles M. Selby

Recent surveys about the Catholic “religious” have shown that one-third of priests are over seventy years old. I made a rough estimate of the present situation:

- Priests over 70: 11,500
- Priests 55-70: 14,000
- Priests under 55: 12,500

Given the present rate of new ordinations per year, the situation in fifteen years would be about like this:

- Priests over 70: 14,000
- Priests 55-70: 11,000
- Priests under 55: 1,000

Enrollments in seminaries have declined steadily for the last forty years, such that the figure may be near zero in another three or four years. If that happens, the annual priest population will continue to decline, so that in fifteen years there will be very few under seventy. Most who are now over seventy will be gone.

The attempt by Pope John Paul II to force all the Catholic universities to accept official theology has raised opposition: I think the academics hope to delay amending their curricula until a new pope leads the church. But many who were considering becoming teaching-priests must now be rethinking that decision.

The Catholic claim to control 23 percent of Americans is way overblown; it may have that number on one list or another, but in reality a lot have already quit or are inactive. I don’t know what part of the present priests are “parish” priests, but it seems to be under 17,000, because there are about 19,000 churches, with around 2,000 without a priest. Most over seventy years old are retired, so that, if there are still 17,000 parish priests, there are approximately 9,000 others under seventy who are mostly academics or administrators.

The average age of the priests continues to increase, being now between sixty-five and seventy. Older priests can’t relate very well to the younger people; for that they must be thirty-five.