

Philosophical Groundwork for the Theory of Morality as Cooperation

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Abstract. A novel theory named Morality as Cooperation (MAC) theory has proposed a different perspective in the study of morality, the theory claims that morality is a series of solutions humans gave to questions and problems raised by cooperation throughout history. This paper analyzed the MAC theory in a philosophical way to demonstrate whether the theory is logically justified. In the process, the essay answered the following points: It is true that morality cannot be formed on a personal level, hence interpersonal interaction is required for the development of human morality; human morality as of today is in fact a series of solutions to problems, and cooperation is the source of all these problems. The philosophical exploration of this paper provides some support for the theory: the theory has great potential not only in science but also in philosophy, which also inspires future research to continue the discussion on morality with more perspectives.

Keywords: Morality; Cooperation; Philosophical analysis.

1. Introduction

The Morality as Cooperation (MAC) theory is a theory that attempts to determine an ultimate definition for all problems and ideas of morality, and the result it came to is that morality is derived from problems and conflicts, and these problems are generated throughout the process of cooperation. According to the theory, the perspective focused on cooperation alone provides a basic standard that enables the studies on the definition, origin, action, and purpose of morality, such a theory contradicts many of the previous views and argued that morality should be exclusively discussed as the results and solutions of the problems of cooperation. Based on this assumption, the theory also categorized moralities into different distinctions, all of which are the cultural, social, and biological solutions human gave to the questions raised by cooperation [1].

Even though the theory has specified that it should be considered and utilized as a principle to conduct scientific studies on moralities [1], what cannot be set aside is the potential philosophical implications of the theory. Hence, the question of whether cooperation is in fact the foundation of morality can be raised, and can be analyzed through the following detailed question: Is it possible for a set of philosophical reasoning to reach the same or similar conclusion as the MAC theory? If so, what does it imply? The following passages of this essay will be attempting to answer these questions with the purpose of either confirming or locating flaws in the reasoning of the MAC theory with a fundamental philosophical analysis followed by an attempt at philosophical justification of the theory.

2. Philosophical Analysis

2.1 Philosophical Analysis of the MAC theory

To discuss the theory from a philosophical view, what must first be expressed is the view this paper adopts on the way philosophical analysis should be conducted, which is also the key point of this essay. Such a view is that philosophy is not the quest for the “eternal truth”, a term that is often considered in terms of religion [2]. However, what is meant by the term is that it represents the ultimate purpose of all philosophical thinking and a destination of truth that unravels all the mysteries of reality. What is being held against this point is that humans cannot presumably consider anything beyond human levels, the threshold of these levels is set by the lack of human knowledge, the inevitability of personal bias as well as the fallibility of human reasoning. Hence the analysis in this

essay will not go as far as the original paper of the MAC theory, which started with the discussion on the origin before the born of mankind [1], the discussion of other species will not be included in this essay either and what will be focused on is solely the moralities of human, not out of anthropocentrism, but simply the acknowledgement of the limitedness of human philosophy.

The view on cooperation adopted by the MAC theory has a strong reliance on the game theory, which proposed that cooperation can be viewed as what the game theory specifies as a nonzero-sum game [1]. What the nonzero-sum game represents is the situation in which both or all parties involved in an activity receive a positive outcome [3]. This view on cooperation is not different from most philosophical views on cooperation, which all stress the positive outcome of cooperative activities. What is different between the theories and most of the traditional views is that it aims at defining moralities as solutions to problems, which denies views that consider moralities as a natural aspect of human minds. The scope of the theories stresses the interactions among human beings and has put the development of morality on a social level instead of considering terms of human nature, an interpretation of this view can be that it is impossible for morality to be developed within one individual without others, given that the core of cooperation is interaction. To confirm this, as inspired by the “floating man” [4], one possible way is to consider a lonely being without the sense and knowledge of others. What has been already confirmed by the philosopher Ibn Sina is that this being is able to recognize the self. Following this result, what must be assumed is that the being will take a certain action, or at least a change must appear for the being to determine the good or bad of the change, however, an action of the being would require a motive, and there appear to be no possible needs since the being does not possess a physical form. Additionally, the being does not appear to have developed the sense of finitude, hence there would not be any motivation that can be assumed [5]. In a word, without a proper and justified motive, any action that is assumed to be taken by the being or change that is assumed to happen would render the thought experiment to be merely a fiction, and if any development of morality is to be concluded from such a process, that would be a fictional morality.

A fictional morality is a morality developed solely through the thinking of one person, without the participation of any other people, and naturally, without cooperation. This is a broader way of defining the term instead of moralities developed in relation to existing fictional works [6], but the two definitions do not contradict. The reason why this term is important in the analysis of the MAC theory is that if any fictional morality is to be proven to be an actual morality, it would challenge the very core of the MAC theory and deny the sole causal relationship as proposed because cooperation would not be the sole foundation of the development of morality in that sense. Hence the hypothesis: Fictional morality is different than actual morality in the sense that the former is not morality at all.

One way to approach this hypothesis is through recreating the process of developing a fictional morality, but existing fictional works, as well as persons that have already developed the sense of morality from real life, cannot be used in such process, because otherwise whether the morality developed is only a fictional morality or the utilization of real-life morality cannot be determined. In this case, what can be assumed is a person with a physical form that is no different than any normal people except for the fact that the person is not aware of any other beings except for himself/herself (himself for clarity), one can also understand the person as an infant. Because the person can see himself, it is possible for him to imagine another being as equivalent to his own. The person is aware that the other being is purely visualized by himself, in another word, fictional. Suppose that he is thinking about killing the other being, an action that is considered immoral in real life, but under this context in which the person is not aware of the pre-existed morality formed in real-life, the thinking of the person may cover a large but vague range of aspects such as the motive of it killing the other being, the consequences of the killing, and through these evaluations, he would come to a conclusion of either good or bad, hence a fictional morality. Then, supposing that he repeated the visualization again and created another being, would he act according to the established fictional morality and avoid or continue killing it? It is very unlikely because fictional morality is created under a certain context and is developed to apply to certain characters, once a fictional morality is put beyond the

context in which it was developed, it would not act as an actual morality humans use to evaluate real-life actions.

Morality and emotions are tightly related to each other because the effect morality has on humans is the sense of good and bad since there are no actual requirements written down or at least specified by morality. One may argue that morality should be agreed upon by the majority [7], but the existence of countless moral dilemmas would suggest that the way people evaluate actions, even though all based on a sense of morality, is in fact, individual. In this sense, what morality does is that it manipulates the emotions humans feel as triggered by actions, and in the case of fictional morality, without any already established morality, it is undeniable that emotions are also triggered by fictional actions, but not in the way that encodes the future emotional response to similar actions, but only in relation to the current actions individually.

To get to the very basic definition of morality, in a way that neglects the development, origins and other aspects, morality can be concluded as the consequence that humans come to a shared sense of good or bad regarding a certain set of actions. What this paper has yet accomplished is that morality is impossible to be developed alone by an individual, it has to be derived from interactions of more than two people. However, the thesis that morality is developed solely from the problems of cooperation is not yet confirmed nor denied, to achieve a conclusion, what must be carried out with an attempt of philosophical justification for the theory.

2.2 An Attempt at the Philosophical Justification

According to Jeffery C. King, the fundamental focus of a philosophical analysis should be the concepts [8], which act as the object of the analysis. Adopting this view, this paper should start by looking for the concepts proposed by the MAC theory. They are as followed:

Cooperation: The action among multiple parties that results in a positive outcome for all the parties involved.

Morality: A shared sense of good or bad regarding an action

Neglecting other relevant concepts, given that the conclusion of the MAC theory is the logical relation between the two, what can be proposed is to start with the origins of the two basic concepts, and try to see if the conclusion made through logical development is consistent with the MAC theory. So, to bring out the cliché of philosophical reasoning, the question to start with is “what was the first cooperation?”

As stated at the beginning of the paper, the philosophy thinking should not attempt to go beyond the knowledge of humans, hence the following analysis will not start with the supposed cooperative aspect before the born of mankind as presented in the original thesis [1], instead, the analysis will start with the assumption of a certain human(A) looking to resolve a problem of his own. Determined by the nature of cooperation, as well as the nature of human actions which would require motives [9], the first cooperation would be triggered by the difficulty brought by a certain action that cannot be accomplished alone. Such an action is not necessarily required for survival, but is of great importance for A’s life, thus the motive of cooperation is created.

A then reaches to another person(B) and proposes cooperation, and the decision by B on whether to accept the offer of cooperation or not is also triggered by a motive, which may involve considering the outcome of the cooperation and whether it is positive, and also many other possible aspects. However, it does not matter whether B would accept the offer or not because A would likely keep on asking other people until the cooperation is agreed upon, therefore, supposing that B agrees due to the possible shared outcome, the first cooperation is then created. Cooperation is not merely an agreement, it also requires a set of actions, which is agreed upon, therefore the question of whether the actions are in fact carried out is raised. Given the different specifics of the actions of cooperation, it is difficult to methodologically control so that the actions are always executed as planned. In this sense, to create a problem of this cooperation, what can be supposed is that one party did not execute the action as agreed upon which resulted in a less positive or negative outcome for any of the parties, and an immediate conclusion of bad can be reached by both parties. Note that only with the presence

of morality can a certain action be considered as good or bad, hence the first morality is then formed as triggered by a problem of cooperation.

This is only one of the many possible situations where morality is developed, in a way that is similar to the “primitive” societies pictured by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown [10], and since what the MAC tries to establish is a determining causal relationship between problems of cooperation and the development of morality, two statements would also be required to be justified: Firstly, morality cannot be formed without the presence of cooperation, and solely in the case that problems of cooperation have been discovered. What can be derived from this first statement is that all the moral principles that humans possess today are the consequences of problems of cooperation. These two conditions are equivalent and by confirming one of them, one can then move on to the conclusion of confirming the MAC theory.

Now, suppose that A comes to B with an offer that is not cooperation in the first place, which means that the outcome of it would only be positive for one party. Without any developed morality or the experience of cooperation, if the offer is agreed upon, it would become a problem of cooperation, and the only reason for the party that appears to receive no positive income to agree to the offer is the sense of good, as interpreted by people that has already developed the sense of morality, the sense of good would be because of generosity, hence the development of morality. This reasoning can be applied to all other cases because interactions other than cooperation would not be defined until problems have been discovered from the process of cooperation in a way that renders it outside of the definition. Additionally, humans act according to their needs and human actions to satisfy them, the only type of interaction that can satisfy all needs of all the people involved would be the only interaction human can naturally engage in, namely cooperation. At this point, the two statements in the previous paragraph have both been confirmed, as well as the followed confirmation of the MAC theory.

3. Summary

What this paper looks to achieve is whether there are possible philosophical justifications for the MAC theory, and through a philosophical analysis of the theory, what can be concluded is that the MAC theory is a novel philosophical idea that is backed up by logic and reasoning to a certain degree. Because morality can be understood as encoded emotions triggered by various actions, and the only way to manage the “encoding” would be through interactions with other people. And naturally, human actions require the motive of satisfying needs, and the motive of interactions also follows, hence the only type of interaction that satisfies the needs of all the people involved by providing a positive outcome would be cooperation. In short, as proposed by the original paper on the MAC theory, given the definition of cooperation based on non-zero-sum games, the thesis that morality is solely developed by problems of cooperation is confirmed by a series of philosophical analyses.

To answer the question regarding the implications of the result of this paper, as stated in the original paper on the MAC theory, what the theory is trying to achieve is to make the study of morality to be a branch of science that can be systematically researched, due to the very reason, the original paper did not look to explain and explore the theory itself in a fundamental way, as a result, one may consider the theory as underdeveloped and yet remains a notion. What this paper is trying to achieve is a certain level of justification of the theory due to its great potential not only scientifically, but also philosophically. The view that considers morality as a series of solutions to the problems of cooperation is a novel idea that remains to be argued and developed, hence the motive and innovation of this paper is to set up an initial argument to consider such a view as a philosophical argument. The implication of this theory is well expressed in the original paper, yet additionally, as most of the past research has shown, the development of science often results in challenging and eventually modifying and perfecting past philosophical arguments, the fact that the same development is shown in the research of MAC would also indicate the promising potentials of the theory.

There are yet many other unanswered philosophical questions alongside the current research based on the MAC theory. Whether the reasoning could undertake challenges from cultural differences, whether exceptions could be discovered, whether flaws in reasoning may later be noticed, whether different or even contradicting perspectives may be proposed, the answers to which shall lead a new path for the discussion of morality in the future.

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