The Aims of Morality

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What are the aims, what is the project of morality? The following considerations are limited to morals which are *normatively binding* (including imperfect duties) *via social sanctions*. Besides to them there may be *individual morals*, which are conceptualised independently of social bindingness and which can be followed also by eremites, Robinsons or inner emigrants, e.g. an individual morality of virtues or a morality of supererogatory acts, which go beyond imperfect social duties. (Note: Of course, also a socially binding morality has to be based on motives present in *individuals*. For being able to function as the basis or a support of socially binding morals, these motives have to fulfill certain additional conditions (see below). – In case the sense of an individual morality does not place very specific requirements (I want to leave open these requirements here for a moment) the socially binding morality could be a particular part of the individual morality, which has been adopted by the person independently of its social bindingness. – The morality which is at the basis of our moral emotions certainly for the most part is a socially binding morality or at least intended as such. Therefore, it would be possible in principle that some people do not have a real individual morality (apart from the socially binding morality) or that only a socially binding but not an individual morality can be justified validly. But also the contrary conceivable (i.e. that only an indivudal but not a socially binding morality can be justified validly). Neither the possibility of an indivudal morality shall be questioned here, nor shall its importance be ranked as being inferior. The only reason for the focussing on socially binding morals is that presently it is easier for me to establish the sense of these morals.

From a naturalist point of view, the most plausible way of determining the aims and function of morals goes via the *theory of evolution*. Which function have the biological foundations of morals and morals itself had in the development of the human race? A simple reply to this question is this. Moral motives and emotions as well as motives and emotions near to morals (like sympathy and respect), have moderated internal conflicts in societies and increased the internal cooperation and thereby improved the external strike power and resilience of societies against other human societies and against all kinds of negative natural influences. And this in turn has increased the chances of survival and procreation of most human beings. The aims of morals to be inferred from this answer would be 1., generally, improving the chances of survival and (intelligently) maximising the procreation of all humans and 2., specifically, promotion of cooperation as well as elimination or moderation of conflicts. However, this determination is a non-starter. In times of seven billion human beings and far reaching environmental degradation maximising procreation should definitely *not* be the aim of morals; and 'improving the chances of survival' does not say

anything about the quality of these lives. And also the more specific determination of the aims of morals does not say anything about the modalities of and in particular fair terms of trade within cooperation – which, however, given that cooperation is often achievable on a mere rational basis, is the morally more important question. Altogether, the determination of the aims of morals does not reply to the moral questions in our society.

A *liberal* conception of the meaning of (socially binding) morality is that morality serves to eliminate conflict by determinig non-overlapping individual liberties. This concept is not entirely wrong, but underdetermined: *Every* social order should eliminate social conflicts by the establishment of conflict-free liberties protected by norms; however, the specific moral question is how these freedoms are to be cut and distributed. To this question, the liberal conception as such (initially) cannot give an answer. (Another problem with the liberal conception is the restriction to freedom rights and (negative) duties to omit: No socially binding morality can do without positive duties, even if these are only duties to participate in some manner to threatening with and execution of sanctions in the event of infringement of basic standards. However, if there must be positive duties, their restriction to this duty in turn is arbitrary.)

A determination of the meaning of (socially binding) morality as *social cooperation* again contains a kernel of truth, but has similar difficulties as the liberal conception: it is under-determined; one part of the content of morality is also to settle the kind of cooperation, particularly the distribution of advantages and disadvantages.

Difficulties of a different kind arise with a determination of the meaning of (socially binding) morality as the: realisation of *solidarity* or altruism or as *satisfying sympathic inclinations*. *Partial altruism* (i.e. that many moral actions aim to increase other subjects' benefit without the guarantee of immediate reciprocity of benefits) is, as far as I can see, in fact, a universal feature of morality. But everybody can act altruistically and show solidarity even individually, without that this would be demanded by a social duty protected by sanctions. Solidarity, etc. could therefore already be the sense of *individual* morality.

A determination of the aim of (socially binding) morality that avoids all of these difficulties and accommodates the previously mentioned positive aspects, rather is *consensualist*: The sense of social binding morals is to provide an intersubjectively uniform and mandatory system of values (desirability function) and regulate freedom conflicts and cooperation on this basis, especially cooperation to satisfy sympathic inclinations, or more generally: to cooperatively realize a better world, better in terms of this value sytem.[1] (This concept takes up ancient (e.g. Aristotle) ideas of morality, morality as a concept and realization of the social good.) Only such consensually established social order promises a lasting peaceful and conflict-free coexistence, because this order

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[1] Another less formal determination of the aim of socially binding morals is that it serves to *cooperatively maximize social welfare*. This determination is indeed appealing by specifying a material aim, but has the disadvantage that it uses an undefined concept of social welfare and that the individual ideas of it are very different. Consensualism instead provides, initially, only the approach to arrive at an intersubjective uniform and binding definition of 'social welfare'. Cooperative maximization of social welfare is, therefore, an adequate determination of morality's aim, where the concept of 'social welfare' is clearly defined and if this concept is understood as a condensation of an intersubjectively binding system of values.

is based on a commonly accepted value system, which can act as an arbitrator in cases of conflict. In addition, the consensualist system of values positively constitutes a unifying factor between all members of society. Implications of this determination of the aims of morality are: The binding social morality is necessarily a collective project of the addressees of morality; and the moral order of values and moral standards must be acceptable to all addressees or morality arise out of what is desirable for them.

If this consensualist determination of the sense of morals is combined with some conditions of adequacy for moral justifications[2], some further narrowing of the required consensus and differences to other types of consensuses discussed in philosophy result: A determination of the sense of morals according to which a simple *actual* or *merely doxastic* moral consensus is the aim of (socially binding) morals is incompatible with a valid justification of morals; the aim can only be a consensus based on motives stable against new information: the moral value system must be *justifiable* from the perspective of each individual. This consensus is actually achieved only if individuals are sufficiently informed and rational. As long as this precondition is not met, ethicists can only construct on the basis of the assumed motives and preferences how the value systems (prudential desirability functions) justified stably against new information should look like, and then search for intersubjective matches. Anticipating later explanations, the required form of consensus could be called "*prudential consensus*". This consensus thus does not consist in actual agreement of opinions, but in the accordance of certain parts of the prudentially constructed desirability functionen of subjects.[3] – Moral consensus does not exclude individual goals and life projects, because in addition to the moral value system, there will be individual rational desires.

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[2]   These conditions of adequacy are developed in the full version of this text. They include (roughly): *Motivation internalism:* A rational subject who is conviced of the justification of a system of morals and who is convinced that the demands of these morals apply to one of his options is motivated somewhat to choose this option and to act accordingly. *Stability against further information:* This motivation is not diminished by acquiring new true information which leaves intact his conviction about applicability.

[3]   Within ethics "consensus" and "consensualism" is often connoted to Habermas. Prudential consensualism and Habermas' ethics have really in common that in each case not the actual but the ideal consensus counts, in Habermas consensus under ideal conditions of discourse, in prudential consensualism a consensus among prudent and informed subjects. The main differences, however, are: 1. The consensus in practical discourse envisaged by Habermas emerges analogously to the consensus in theoretical discourse and is a consensus in the moral assessment of individual issues: it is an epistemic consensus. The prudential consensus, however, is an accordance of certain components of the (initially amoral) individual prudential desirability functions, i.e. that certain states of affairs are (when limited to certain value aspects and prudential construction of desirability) rated equal (or must be so); it is a practical, axiological or motivational consensus. (Instead of "consensus" one could therefore also speak of "*concord*".) 2. The basis of individual consent, whether it is a question of moral knowledge or of rational compromise or something else, remains unclear in Habermas' theory; accordingly, in his theory it cannot be determined analytically and independently of actual consensus about what questions an ideal consensus should result. The prudential consensus (or consonance) of the individual desirabilities meant here, however, is based on intersubjectively equal motives, equal (prudential) criteria of rationality ánd similar or analogous individual situations. Because if somenone only knows the basic criteria of the people and has sufficient situational information, he can determine the prudential desirabilities of individual issues for a particular subject independently of the valuations of these issues by the subject, the prudential consensus can be anticipated theoretically.

Moral consensus does not even rule out differences between *individual* morals. "Prudential consensualism" is not collectivism.[4] – To hope for a truly complete consensus, even a prudentially constructed one, is unrealistic; certain idealizations are always required. So there may be people with organic brain disorders, which simply lack the biological basis for forming the, otherwise consensual, moral value system – as may be the case in psychopaths. Such isolated cases shall not compromise the – then idealized – consensus. That such exemptions are admitted, of course, makes the concept of 'consensus' imprecise and leads to moral problems all of its own. But probably no ethics based on empirical hypotheses can do without exceptions and idealizations.

A first objection to this consensualist conception is that the moral value order is always only *one component* (and a weak too) of the individuals' desirability functions, so that in critical situations individuals would therefore have enough reasons to breach the morally justified order, with the consequence that even such an order could not guarantee a peaceful and conflict-free coexistence. – This, however, is a general problem of morality, not specifically one of the consensualist conception. It can be resolved only by a dynamic of social norm enforcement. Another objection is that at least since the beginning of the modern age there is no longer a consensual morality. – For one thing, prudential consensualism does not claim that all people (or only all normal adults in our society) have accepted the moral desirability function to be defined as their own morality; instead they just need to have the appropriate motivational basis for rationally accepting the morality to be justified. For another, in their moral reactions people presuppose if not the factual, yet the potential rational consensus. For example, you can only be outraged about someone if she violates standards that one sees as potentially shared standards. (In outrage over Nazis, one assumes that they actually should have the same moral standards, which we have; for small children and animals one does not presuppse this, hence one does not feel this outrage about them.) Finally, the revival of rational discussion about morals and the search for justified morals is also an achievement of modern times. That a consensual morality is possible, is here not claimed a priori; if the project of inter-subjective moral justification succeeds, then the objection is proved to be unfounded; and if the moral justification does not succeed, then a consensual morality is not available. But the fact that this objective has not yet been achieved, however, is no objection to putting this goal.

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4   The prudential consensus marks in some way a common good, a bonum commune. *Communitarianism* speaks of the common, social good. There, however, is meant some good constituted by society and preceding the individuals, which they accept. Prudential consensus, however, consists in the accordance (concord) of certain (components of) individual desirabilities, which are independent of society. The common good results from this accordance – and not vice versa. On one hand, the conception defended here is thus weaker than the communitarian insofar that the former depends on that the prudential consensus actually results – which is by no means certain. On the other hand, this already from the outset liberates the prudential consensus from the collectivist train, for which liberals often accuse communitarianism.