

Mohammad Ali Shomali
(Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, Iran)

HUMAN NATURE AND THE NATURE OF MORALITY

What does “moral” mean?

Customs and morals both regulate and direct our voluntary actions. Failing to comply with them usually causes blame just as conformity to them brings about praise. A very important question arises here: what is the difference between customs and morals? I think customs are socially or culturally approved regulations for bringing some harmony in a society and avoiding confusion or discord, such as the customs about how to dress in a funeral ceremony or the rules of greeting or treating guests¹. In many cases uniformity and consistency are more important than the particular way of conduct decided by the society². People might wear white clothes or black ones at a funeral ceremony. What is more important is that there is an established custom to harmonise them³.

What about morals? It is true that morals too regulate our conduct. However, I think morals aim at something more important, that is, to direct us towards some ideals. Unlike customs, which are generally social phenomena, morals may be very personal and private, such as the way one should behave in his relation to himself or to God. This is why people are more attached to their morals than to their customs. That is also why commitment to morality requires lots of spiritual efforts and determination because it is usually against one's selfishness and immediate desires. Therefore it is much easier to observe social customs than moral rules.

¹ These are the things concerning which we are inclined to say: «When in Rome, do as the Romans do».

² As Scanlon (*Scanlon Th. What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. P. 339) suggested, there is sometimes a need to regulate a particular kind of activity, but there are different ways of doing it that no one could reasonably reject. He adds that what he calls the Principle of Established Practices holds that in such situations if one of these non-rejectable principles is generally accepted, then «it is wrong to violate it simply because this suits one's convenience». (Ibid.)

³ Of course some factual parameters, whether local or universal, may bear on the formation of customs, such as nature, the climate, the economic situation, population and religious beliefs. I think Rachels is right when he emphasises the fact that there are many factors bearing on the production of customs other than the values of the society at issue. This is why mere difference in customs does not imply difference in values. See: *Rachels J. The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993. P. 23.

When does morality start?

Morality or moral enquiry starts when one is faced with questions on how to act in respect to himself or others, such as: What should I do in relation to my parents? What should I do in relation to my relatives? What should I do in relation to my friends? What should I do in relation to my neighbour or strangers? What should I do in relation to my society? What should I do in relation to the nature and the environment around me? What should I do in relation to my self: my possessions, time, body, talents, potentialities and so on?

Surely there are different ways of establishing these relations and every choice needs some criteria: defining a relevant ideal and defining a practical way to reach that ideal. Without having an understanding of an appropriate ideal in advance one cannot decide what to do. It is only after consideration of one's ideals that one can choose a course of action and be able to justify it for himself and others⁴.

Everything to be able to motivate an agent to act has to be something that both he has interest in it and is in his interest (i. e. he gains benefit out of it); otherwise he would not care about it or would go for alternatives. Thus, we do not act if we believe that we will not get anything from our act. Even in non-serious acts such as playing a game or telling a joke or moving our rings in our hands we have certain purposes, to which we are not indifferent.

Is there any conflict between self-love and love for others?

In this way, I think that morality is based on one's natural desire for one's improvement, one's desire to achieve one's ideal (-s). This theory of morality can be called "morality of self-love". It has to be noted that this theory is different from egoism. I think to secure one's interests perfectly one needs to satisfy all sorts of genuine desires, including his benevolent desires⁵. A person who loves himself not only loves his parents, children, relatives and friends, but also may love all human beings, animals and the nature. Human beings do not enjoy a comfortable life when they see that others are suffering or striving. Their concern for themselves, for their happiness and perfection requires them to be benevolent. This implies that we may have self-interest in what has no *immediate* effect on us. Thus, all voluntary actions of every agent derive from a basic desire or inclination in himself towards his concerns and interests, including his concerns for others⁶. The satisfac-

⁴ Of course this does not mean that there should be a certain gap or period between these two parts. What is important is that in a well-grounded moral policy the latter logically comes after the former.

⁵ According to Harman's description of Hume's position, Hume believed that, due to the power of sympathy, people can sometimes have unselfish concern for others and this concern provides them «with (weak) reasons to act so as to benefit others apart from any expected gain for oneself». (*Harman G., Thomson J. J. The Nature of Morality. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. P. 138*).

⁶ Nagel believes that «we have a reason to do whatever will promote the satisfaction of any desire» (*Nagel Th. The possibility of Altruism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970*). In this regard, Nagel sees no difference between the satisfaction of one's own desires or other's desires. It would be irrational not to help another person when you can help and there is no reason

tion and the spiritual pleasure that one gains through giving one's food is much more than what one gains from eating the food itself. Such a person acts on what *he* wants, but the object of his want is to help others. He has discovered that benevolence is improving and selfishness is degrading⁷.

Regardless of what one may come to feel in respect to benevolence and helping others, my general argument in the whole article is that human *genuine* desires and interests that shape morality depend on human nature⁸. Therefore, they are binding for every human being, since there is a *real* relation between human nature and those desires and interests, and the obligatoriness of moral requirements is derived from such a real relation. For example, every person should take care of his life (and any other innocent life), even if the life is boring or embarrassing for him and he is willing to die or commit suicide. Thus, my view is completely different from those who hold that moral requirements apply only to those people who are willing to adopt them.

Process of making a moral decision

Before making any decision, we have to go through a complicated process that consists of different stages:

At first we conceive some action, to say, going to a party. It is impossible to make a decision without conceiving the subject. Then we start to think about that action and its outcomes: its benefits and/or harms. This evaluation helps us to decide whether to go to that party or not. It seems clear that, unless we have already made or had an assessment of an action, we will not decide to do it before considering its results. A teleological approach better fits our moral experience. Later we will throw more light on this point. Although people might evaluate actions differently, all of them just perform the action that they have overall evaluated positively. Even a criminal who knows that crimes are wrong commits a criminal act only when he takes that act to be good for him in that particular moment and actually better for him than not doing it.

The evaluation is sometimes very easy, to the extent that it might not even be noticed. However, the required evaluation or assessment sometimes may take a

not to help. In response to Aristotelian or Humean thinkers who hold that the desires of others can bear on your action only when you have pre-existing desires to satisfy their desires, Nagel thinks that there is no basic desire in us to satisfy their desires. This is just a reflection of the way in which practical reasoning works.

One of the problems with Nagel's view is that he has not demonstrated why it is irrational not to care about other people. (For such argument against Nagel, see: *Harman*. Nature of Morality. P. 72.)

⁷ Rachels (*Rachels J*. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 2nd ed. New York: Mcgraw-Hill Inc., 1993. P. 67) suggests that although almost all moral systems recommend us to behave unselfishly, it is the *object* of my want that determines whether I am selfish or not, not the mere fact that I am acting on *my* wants. If I want my own good and also want other people to be happy and I act on *that* desire, my action is not selfish.

⁸ I mean by «genuine desires» real and irreducible or basic ones. There will be discussion on different types of desires later on in this article.

long time, since it might not be easy for the agent to study the action, its possible consequences and the available rules. Failure to come to any conclusion leads to non-action. In other words, non-existence of a reason for action serves as **a reason** not to act, just as non-existence of a cause can be considered as **a cause** for the non-existence of its effect.

I think there is a necessary link between two types of reasoning: “theoretical reasoning”, which is concerned with beliefs, and what Aristotle called “practical reasoning”, which is related to decision-making and is concerned with desire or intention. Practical reasoning is always preceded by some sort of theoretical reasoning. At first the agent finds some reason to believe that in reality a certain act is or is not conducive to his ideal (-s). Then, having found some reasons to believe that one alternative is better, he will get the motivation to act accordingly. It is only after being motivated that we intend or decide or become determined to perform the given action. Here and during the assessment the role of emotions and desires is very important.

Thus, unlike emotivism, this theory does not reduce every thing to emotions and, therefore, does not ignore the rational aspect of the process of decision-making. This theory can explain why and how emotions become directed towards one of many alternatives. On the other hand, this theory is different from those rationalist theories which ignore the role of emotions and fail to explain how we follow our rational judgements. For example, according to Kant, reason is the only motivating source. To decide what to do you have just to ask yourself what you have reasons to do. Kant believes that basic moral principles are binding on all rational beings including angels and intelligent Martians. It means that these principles can be known by all rational beings. The subtle point here is that since the acceptance of these principles needs to be motivated to follow them, there must be a source of motivation in reason itself⁹.

I think what Kant’s argument really requires is that there must be a source of motivation in all rational beings, but it does not imply that the reason itself has to be such a source. Whenever we find some action good, that is, conducive to our ideal (-s) we get interested in doing it. There are always desires for doing whatever suits us. Usually we are not in need of any decision to create desires in ourselves, otherwise we would be in need of creating another desire for creating the first and again we need a third desire to create the second. This leads to an endless or circular chain of desires which is impossible to undertake and which is not what we find in ourselves when we reflect on the process of decision-making. On the other hand, as discussed above, it is impossible to desire something in which we have no interest and out of which we think we shall not get any pleasure or benefit.

⁹ For more discussion about the Kantian approach see e.g.: *Harman*. Nature of Morality. P. 67. Thomas Nagel in «The possibility of Altruism» on a Kantian basis argues that basic desires such as hunger and thirst serve just as some data for reason. We do just what we have reason to do. What desires do is just to give us some reasons for action.

Different types of desires

To hold that we do only those things by which we satisfy our desires and get pleasure does not mean that we have accepted a crude version of hedonism. There are different types of desires and, correspondingly, different types of pleasures:

1. “Physical” or “sensual” desires are related to those things that bring about physical or sensual pleasure.
2. “Semi-abstract” desires are more enduring. The pleasure one gets from having money or high position or fame or respect is not directly caused by physical matters and therefore has nothing to do directly with any senses or parts of the body.
3. “Abstract” desires, such as the genuine desire for confidence or peace of mind. I mean by “genuine desire” a desire which is first of all real and secondly basic or irreducible to any underlying desire. A genuine desire is a desire that we may feel directly and independently and not simply because it leads to another desire. A pleasure that a truth-seeker gets when he discovers a new fact is not necessarily for money or job or respect¹⁰.

Reflection on our desires and inclinations shows that *we never desire what is vicious as such*. We have no desire or inclination that is directed towards some act or thing vicious *in itself*. This is why a person who always observes moral principles does not necessarily feel frustrated. If there were some desires in human nature that could only be satisfied with the immoral the result would be that all moral people must have felt unsatisfied, disappointed and frustrated. However, it seems not to be the case. I think there is no doubt that there have always been in different cultures some people who observed carefully all moral laws and at the same time they felt very happy, confident and satisfied in their life.

I believe that it is up to us to direct our desires towards the virtuous or the vicious. For example, there is a genuine love and desire in human beings for the opposite sex. This love or desire directs man and woman to a close relationship, through which, on the one hand, they can supplement each other and give peace and confidence to each other and, on the other hand, humankind can continue. One person might decide to satisfy this desire through marriage and another through adultery or a free sexual relationship. We are not now discussing which one should be blamed or praised. What is important is that there is no genuine desire that has to be satisfied with things such as stealing, adultery, oppression and the like. As I explained earlier, I mean by genuine desire some desire which is real and irreducible to another desire.

¹⁰ There is a beautiful and inspiring story about Abu Reyhan Biruni (941—1021), a prominent Iranian mathematician, astronomer, historian, pharmacologist and theologian. A few minutes before his death, Al-Biruni was visited by one of his neighbours, a jurist. Biruni started to ask him something about inheritance in jurisprudence. That man was surprised and asked Biruni why he was interested to improve his knowledge while he was near to death. Biruni replied: «Which one is better: to die while I know this or to die while I am ignorant?» Biographers say that he used to do research and study all days in a year except two days.

A potential objection on my claim might be made by considering the case of the young Augustine who stole some pears while there was no hunger and no poverty¹¹. He stole that, of which he had “enough, and much better”. Those pears were not “tempting neither for colour nor taste”. Augustine confesses that his joy was in “the theft and sin itself”¹². Now, one may argue against my claim by saying that this example shows the possibility of acting just out of the desire for the vicious (in this case, for theft).

In response, I have to say that there is a difference between acting to enjoy the theft and having *genuine* (real and irreducible) desire for the theft *as such*. St. Augustine himself points out that he had no genuine desire for theft; it was his misordered desire for freedom and power that motivated him for theft. He says:

What did I love in that theft? And wherein did I even corruptly and pervertedly imitate my Lord? Did I wish even by stealth to do contrary to Thy law, because by power I could not, so that being a prisoner, I might mimic a maimed liberty by doing with impunity things unpermitted me, a darkened likeness of Thy Omnipotency?¹³

He also adds that companionship and amusement i. e. laughing together when deceiving others were also influential in motivating him and enhancing his love for liberty through theft to the extent that if he had been alone he would not have stolen those pears¹⁴.

On the combination of desires, I would like here to refer to three important non-physical desires that quite often get combined with well-known basic desires (such as the desire for food, for sex and the like.) Those three are the desire for rest, the desire for freedom and the desire for excitement (or amusement). Of course, these are not the only ones, but I consider them here very important, since they can usually be found active and effective when analysing wrong and immoral actions¹⁵. None of these desires separately or jointly directs the agent towards one side. This is the agent himself who reckons and evaluates different factors and finally selects one side. Indeed, it is part of his decision-making to invoke the desire for easiness instead of, to say, the desire for honesty or loyalty. It is also part of his role to consider easiness from one aspect or another and in short-term or in long-term. Of course, the agent's judgement is influenced by his information and his beliefs, but, having the same information and beliefs, people might still decide to behave differently¹⁶.

¹¹ For my response to an objection by considering the case of the kleptomania, see: *Mohammad A. Shomali*. *Ethical Relativism: An Analysis of the Foundations of Morality*. London: ICAS, 2001. Ch. 6.

¹² *St. Augustine*. *The Confessions*. Book II. Ch. VI.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Ch. IX.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion about these desires, see: *Shomali*. *Ethical Relativism*. Ch. 6.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the role of information and beliefs, see: *Mohammad A., Shomali*. *Self-knowledge*. Tehran: International Publishing Co., 1996. P. 109—113 (chapter «The Importance of Knowledge in Decision-making»).

Now, let us study the claim that we never desire the vicious as such in relation to abstract desires. In the case of abstract desires the above fact is more obvious. Abstract desires not only do not direct us towards the vicious, but they seem to carry a positive and virtuous nature. It seems that, unlike physical desires, abstract desires are not to remind us that we need to be able to live and that human species needs to continue and, similarly, they are not to encourage us to just struggle for life. Indeed, physical desires are to a great extent recognisable in all animals, encouraging them to act according to their instincts, which show them what to do and what not to do to survive. Of course, it seems that there is no moral implication here since there is no moral agency requirement, such as responsibility.

This affirms what I mentioned earlier about human physical desires that they might be satisfied morally or immorally. But abstract desires deal with what can be considered as full-fledged human needs. This is because the main element in the nature of every being that constitutes its identity and distinguishes it from other beings that might share some common genus is *differentia* which is the exclusive part of its nature. Therefore, what is really *human* is not to be found in other animals. Accordingly, unlike abstract desires, physical desires are not *distinctively* human, though human beings have them.

Elsewhere, referring to a similar fact, however from a different approach, I said:

Most people seem to instinctively realise that every being has a different level of perfection, closely matched to that being's inherent characteristics and purpose in the scheme of things in the universe. For instance, an ordinary shade tree, which does not bear fruit, compared with an apple tree, which does the latter as well as the former, is considered of a lower status of perfection in the scheme of things. It is for this reason that an apple tree in an orchard, which grows enough leaves to provide ample shade but for some reason does not bear fruit, is most likely to be cut down and replaced with one that does. It has not lived up to its potential, its level of perfection. In other words, although the tree remains useful in many respects, it has failed in that aspect which distinguishes it from the less perfect trees which do not bear fruit.

The same analogy works when comparing humans and animals. If a human being does not exhibit characteristics which rise above those shared with animals, i.e., eating, drinking, seeking comfort, shelter, pleasure, and the continuation of the race, then that human being has not reached his or her full potential, or perfection¹⁷.

Of course, from what I suggested above it does not necessarily follow that such a person who does not exhibit *human* characteristics is not a human being, since one may suppose that the potentiality of having human characteristics is what suffices to recognise such a being as a human being and distinguish it from non-human animals.

¹⁷ *Shomali*. Self-knowledge. P. 14, 15.

Thus, based on our nature, our self-love defines our ideals of life which can be summed up in largest quantity and greatest quality of life. Our self-love also establishes a cluster of desires that may give us sufficient motivation to perform what the practical reasoning instructs us to be a good means for achieving our ideals, our goals and objectives. Performing what we desire gives us a proportionate type of pleasure, though we might not have aimed having that pleasure. For example, a mother who takes care of her child gets some pleasure, but she might not have thought about getting pleasure when she got up from her bed and gave food to her baby.

Whatever is demanded by our genuine desires (i. e. the real and irreducible desires) is a natural value for us and gives us pleasure. Demands of physical desires and perhaps some of the semi-abstract ones (possibly the desire for winning competitions) are shared by animals and can be considered as *animative* values. Whatever is exclusively demanded by the nature of human beings is a *human value*. Achieving *human* values as such is required for *human* happiness, while achieving *animative* values plays only a secondary or preparatory role. It would be morally good to pursue the latter values as much as they serve the former. We feel no conflict in ourselves between our moral ideals and the demands of humanity. This fact is closely related to another fact that “good” and “bad” are not conventional or contractual, but rather they are really there and they can be realised and discovered by human reason through consideration of human nature, human talents and potentialities and their perfection.

Different factors bearing on moral judgement

The proposed analysis of the process of decision-making gives an account of the roles internal and external factors play in our moral judgements. I believe that a proper understanding of these roles can help in settling disputes over many important issues in morality, such as relativism versus absolutism and subjectivism versus objectivism. These roles can be summarised in this way:

1. Role of beliefs, knowledge and information: One of the crucial parts of our moral judgements is the way we conceive the problem and then the way we assess the results and consequences of each side of the problem. Differences and disagreements in this realm can lead towards different judgements on the same action. Even the people who share the same moral ideals or rules are not exempted from these differences and disagreements.

2. Role of desires: The desire for each alternative act as a key factor in our decision-making. Although genuine desires are the same among human beings and they lead them towards their needs for survival and happiness (or, in other words, towards a larger quantity and greater quality of life), the result of their interaction and the way of their application might be different. It is up to the agent to prefer this desire or that desire or even strengthen one side with, to say, consideration of different optional combinations of desires or with negligence of the weight of the other side.

3. Role of upbringing: It should also be noted that the way one is brought up or trained and the way one has already constructed his character are also very im-

portant and influential in future decisions. A person which has always been encouraged since his childhood to be kind and benevolent to others has stronger desires to help others and to stop their suffering, even if it requires him to bother himself or spend his time and money. Of course, after all that, there is a large place for the agent to make his own decision and exercise his own will.

4. Role of one's own will and decision: Although there are lots of restrictions made by external and internal conditions, the agent is after all free to make his decision. Without a belief in free will nothing remains as morality. The difference between different agents in exercising their free will can be traced in these parameters:

- a. In adopting some ideals or values for their lives. One's favourite ideals of life are very important in directing their actions and in shaping their lives.
- b. In their readiness to acquire required information and to do a proportionate study of it. Some prefer to be far-sighted and cautious. Some tend to be pessimistic about the future results and some tend to consider only the positive points and even sometimes to overlook unpleasant possibilities.
- c. In organising their desires and ordering them by giving priority to some of them or by combining some of them to overweigh another desire.

Thus, I do not agree with Harman who, like Kant and Nagel, holds that we have to consider our desires merely as some data for the reason (and not more). He thinks that being faithful to free-will and being rational require us to treat our desires as data (and not some forces or compulsions). He admits that sometimes desires act as compulsions, but not normally. I think there can be a position between the position that takes desires just as data and denies the motivational role of desires, from one side, and the other position that takes desires as forces and compulsions that leave no place for free-will, or decision, or reasoning. Desires motivate us towards alternative acts or an act and its negation, and it is just then that we turn to exercise our free-will or make a decision. When there is only one way in front of us, we cannot speak of decision-making and the like. And, since both sides of the decision are usually in one way or another, more or less, desirable and it is up to us to strengthen or weaken each side, we are usually able to resist one set of desires or the other.

Indeed, it is this view that makes free-will intelligible. Two human beings in completely the same relevant conditions may decide differently. One may prefer, for example, instant desires and the other may prefer future desires. One may prefer the desire for comfort and relaxation, and the other may prefer the desire for acquiring knowledge. Rather, it is the Kantian and Nagelian view that takes freedom away. If you treat desires just as some data along with other data and facts and fulfil all logical requirements you will come to a certain conclusion. It is not a voluntary action to come to this or that conclusion. If people come to different conclusions it is only because of their mistake or ignorance. You are not free to come to your favourite conclusion. In this case, you cannot speak of good will. Neither can you

blame wrongdoers. Yes, they are blameworthy if and only if they did not do their best in collecting good data and making good arguments, which, in turn, would be determined by a prior set of mistakes or ignorance. Finally, the result would be not to blame wrongdoers and criminals at all.

- d. In their practice and the way in which they want to apply their desires or they want to act according to their desires, such as the decision one makes whether to satisfy one's desire for sex through marriage or through adultery.

5. Role of one's mental and intellectual abilities and talents. For example, analytic and critical minds may make better decisions or may decide more easily.

6. Role of conditions. By conditions, here, I mean circumstances or particularities that surround the case of judgement, including the agent's physical and mental condition (such as health and illness), the agent's feelings such as happiness or sadness, the agent's capabilities, conditions of other people who might be involved (for example, a teacher has to consider conditions of his students), time, place, laws, culture (including customs), available resources, means and aids. Any change in these conditions may require the observer and the agent to change their judgements on the appropriate decision or action.

Knowing and paying attention to all the facts that decisively or possibly, consciously or unconsciously, bear on our decision-making help us to have them in our own control as much as possible. In this way, we can make a kind of judgement that is really to our benefits¹⁸.

An analysis of moral concepts

(1) "Good" and "bad": Whatever is useful, firstly, to protect our life and our species and, secondly, to make us more perfect, is good. In other words, the intrinsic goodness is "larger quantity and greater quality of our life (or being as a human)". Whatever brings about larger quantity of our life (such as taking care of our health) or greater quality of our life (such as acquiring more knowledge or confidence or peace) is good. Whatever is harmful to our being and causes shorter life or lower quality of life, is bad.

There might be some actions, which are neither useful nor harmful. They are simply neutral, such as walking or speaking without purpose. Here it is also possible to say that, whatever is not harmful to our ideal, is "good". It can also be said that, whatever is not useful, is "bad". In this way "bad" extends to include neutral actions. I think that the last way is better, because everything that does not promote our perfection is a loss. (Consider that we have limited life, power and resources!)

¹⁸ Paul Taylor has a very useful study about the requirements of a rational choice. Taylor believes that a choice is rational *to the extent that* it is free, enlightened, and impartial. Of course, he believes that actually no choice can ever be completely free or enlightened or impartial. (See Paul Taylor, "The Justification of Value Judgments: Rational Choice", in Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers (eds.), *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2nd edition, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts 1970, pp. 345—360.)

People are also different: some people feel guilty when they spend their time purposelessly and some do not care. It depends on the degree of self-care and determination for self-improvement.

(2) “Right” and “wrong”: Every action that can contribute to protection of our life and our species and, secondly, to our perfection, can be called “right” as well. Every action that is harmful (to our ideals; either to the quantity or quality of life) is “wrong”.

If we use “good” in a broader sense, then it can be applied to whatever has a positive relationship with our being and nature and, therefore, is precious for us, including both non-voluntary matters (like our own existence) and voluntary actions or qualities (like learning or jealousy), but “right” seems to be applicable exclusive to voluntary actions and qualities. In other words, “right” seems to mean good voluntary action. The same point is true about bad and wrong.

In any case, when we believe that an action is good or right, we will be motivated to act accordingly, since we have corresponding desires and motivation to do whatever is useful or pleasant to us. (We have discussed this point earlier in this essay.) According to this analysis, it seems pointless to seek for any additional reason for doing what we find good or right. Indeed, it is impossible for our reason (intellect) alone to prove that we should be concerned with our interests and we should do whatever secures our interests and therefore is good for us.

(3) “Ought” and “ought not”: In any case, we might have another approach to actions. We might consider the relationship between some action and our moral ideal and discover that it is necessary to perform that action in order to reach our goal. In other words, we might find a causal relationship between our action, such as learning, and our ideal, that is to say, perfection. It means that learning occurs in a chain of causes leading to perfection. Since we want to reach our ideal (i. e. perfection), it is necessary to bring the cause (i. e. learning). We express this *necessity* in terms of “ought”. In this way, we say: “We *ought* to learn”. Similarly, if action *a* is preventing us from reaching our ideal, that is, its absence is necessary to be able to reach our ideal, we say: “We *ought not* to do *a*”.

Relativism and absolutism

Based on what said above, it seems clear that the best strategy for relativists would be to show *that different individuals or societies can adopt parallel ideals which are equally justified*. As we saw above, there is a *real* and *close* relationship between our self-love, our genuine desires, our ideals and our nature. To be able to show that it is possible to have parallel ideals which are equally justified the relativist has to show that there are different types of human nature with different genuine desires and that, depending on what type of nature they have, people’s ideals vary. One appalling implication of this view is that it would be impossible for an individual or society to decide to adopt a new moral ideal unless that individual or the members of that society first *change* their nature! Or, more precisely, they cannot change their moral position, unless their nature has been already changed! I think this is something that relativists are not prepared to accept.

Study of human nature is far greater than what can be undertaken in this essay. However, I would like to give some clues for a further work. I believe there are good grounds to think that human beings have the same nature. Of course, it is clear that biologically human beings are the same. However, what I mean by human nature here is more. Human nature is an ontological notion that partly can be known through philosophy and partly through psychology. Historical and social manifestations of this notion partly can be known through sociology, history, anthropology, arts and literature. However, I think that through an internal reflection everybody can understand many aspects of this notion and to a greater extent can testify others' views regarding human nature.

As I have explained earlier in this article, when we reflect on our characteristics, we find that there are some characteristics that we share with animals and there are also some characteristics that belong exclusively to human beings and the latter are the main element in constructing our identity. Or we can say that there are some characteristics without which one is no longer considered as a human being and there are some characteristics without which one still can be considered as a human being. For example, we can still consider as human a person who has no desire for food or sleep, but it is not the case with the one who has no desire for happiness or perfection or truth or beauty. This is something that we can find through internal reflection, and, of course, philosophy and such sciences as psychology can enrich our findings. The characteristics that differentiate human beings from other animals can be divided into two categories: perceptions and desires. There are some types of perceptions distinctively human and this is why we see human beings have been able to develop different sciences and improve their techniques and conditions of life. There are also some desires which are exclusive to human beings and this is why they have been always after knowledge, perfection, benevolence and arts.

Thus, what I mean by human nature is not just human body as a biological identity; it is rather a more abstract identity that causes these similar characteristics for all human beings. If there were no such a common nature among human beings there would be no place for disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology or even economics. All these sciences presuppose that human beings are similar in essence and behave similarly in similar conditions. If there were no such thing as a shared humanity common among us that joins us together there would also be no place for talking about human rights and human fellowship.

Using ideas that we have developed so far, let us see what guidance we can take for choosing a justifiable moral ideal. This discussion further illustrates the fact that our choice of moral ideal (-s) is not arbitrary.

Characteristics of a justifiable moral ideal

People may adopt different types of ideals in their lives. This adoption may partly or completely be shaped by factors such as religion, culture, training, professions, family up-bringing. Ideals adopted in this way may vary and, indeed,

may oppose each other. Yet, they all have the same function — to define one's values and shape one's form of life. Every rational person should always think about his ideals and see whether they are worthy of being adopted as ideals or not. Therefore, we have to distinguish between what I call "a justifiable moral ideal" and what has happened to be adopted as a moral ideal, that is between an *ideal* ideal and *actual* ideal.

Here I list what I believe to be characteristics of a true moral ideal. Of course, there might be more than what I have thought about. Those characteristics are:

1. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be compatible with human nature.
2. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be conceivable by our reason; otherwise one can not follow it (them).
3. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be supported by reason, because, as discussed earlier, no one decides to do something unless he believes in the usefulness of that action for himself. When this is the case with a single action, how can one adopt some ideals for all his life and to define all his actions without belief in its usefulness or properness? It is also clear that there can be no belief without passing rational assessment. It is part of human experience that we justify our beliefs, moral judgements and even emotional conduct and argue for them. Even for those people who think that there can be voluntary (or indeed arbitrary) beliefs or emotional beliefs or any other non-rational beliefs there should be no doubt that there can be no belief which contradicts reason. Any such contradiction or conflict is against what we find in ourselves: the unity of our "self" and coherence of our faculties. Moreover, no one can confidently devote himself and allocate his life to an ideal and sacrifice everything for this end while he has doubt in his mind about the truth or falsity of that ideal, let alone while that ideal contradicts his rational standards. The adoption of a true moral ideal has to fulfil all the requirements of a rational choice. As we saw earlier, a choice is rational, if it is free, enlightened and impartial.
4. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be supported by our genuine desires; otherwise it cannot motivate us to move and act according to what we discovered to be good for us.
5. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be achievable and practical, otherwise it would be a dream and not a guideline for our life.
6. Justified moral ideal (-s) must be able to encompass all other values and moral standards and to arrange them in right hierarchy. If you ask a person for his reason for this or that action, any appropriate response has to involve an evaluative or normative element. For example, if you ask a teacher why he teaches, he is not expected to say because I teach or because there are students. None of these or similar facts explains why he teaches. An appropriate response can be like "It is good to teach" or "I should help people" or "I have to serve my country or people" or "I ought to do what I am paid for". Responses such as "I like to teach" or "My father advised me to

teach” can be plausible only when we consider the hidden premise (-s) in each case, such as “It is good to do what you like” or “You should take your father’s advice”.

If we study carefully all evaluative or normative statements used by a person we can discover his system of values. One’s ideal (-s) has/ have the central and crucial place in his system of values. Any system of values is built around some moral ideal (-s). Moral ideal (-s), firstly, define (-s) one’s values, and, secondly, put (-s) those values in order. Regardless of what moral ideal (-s) is/ are or should be and regardless of whether “good” is definable or not, we can say that for each person his moral ideal is the highest good. If we successively ask anyone for his reasons for action, he goes step by step higher and finally he reaches a point in which he cannot go any further. It is at this point that we can discover his ideal (-s). For example, if we ask a student at high school why he goes to school, he might reply because he wants to go college. If we ask him why he thinks it is good for him to go college he might say because then he can go to the university. Successively we might hear these responses: Because “then I can become expert in management”, “then I can become good manager”, “then I can develop my country”, “then I can help to create enough job opportunities and security for my people”, “then I can feel that I have been helpful to my nation and especially needy people”, “then I feel happy, confident and pleased”.

Finally, this series of ends has to come to an end and that happens when one reaches his ideal or ultimate good. Other ends get their validity from this ultimate good. Closeness to or remoteness from the ultimate good defines the position of each end or value in a given moral system, that is, in a hierarchy of ends or values adopted by a person or a group or a society. Considering places or degrees of each end or value, the agent can decide what to do when he faces a practical conflict between some values. In such cases one has to distinguish between good and better or between bad and worse. Indeed, most of the moral disagreements between individuals or societies arise here. Reflection on many examples invoked by moral relativists as candidates for moral disagreements show that individuals or societies usually agree on what is good or bad. We are not now concerned with the number of ideals. What is important is that a true moral system has to contain an ideal that meets all these requirements.

Now let us consider again characteristics of a true moral ideal: it has to be in complete accord with our desires¹⁹, with our rational standards and, above all, with human nature, it has to be practical and has to encompass all other ends and values and put them in the right order or hierarchy. I think this account of true moral ideals gives us objective criteria, against which we can test different candidates. In this way, we realise that the ultimate end of our moral enquiry has to be to discover the most promising set of true moral ideals, i. e. the most promising moral system.

¹⁹ The most relevant desires here are abstract desires, which are in a real sense human.

Although the above account is sufficient for the main purpose of this essay, here I would like to refer to different proposals about what should be considered as ultimate end or intrinsic good or moral ideal for human beings.

There are lots of candidates, such as life, consciousness, and activity; health and strength; pleasures and satisfactions of all desires or certain kinds of; happiness, beatitude, contentment, and so forth; truth; knowledge and true opinion of various kinds, understanding, wisdom; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; morally good dispositions or virtues; mutual affection, love, friendship, co-operation; just distribution of goods and evils; harmony and proportion in one's own life; power; and experiences of achievement; self-expression; freedom; peace, security; adventure and novelty; good reputation, honour, respect²⁰.

I think the main reason for such a huge variety of proposals is the complexity of human nature and its multi-dimensional features. Our above discussion of how we can get motivated shows that our basic drive is self-love and that we are only after what is useful for us or pleasant to us. Therefore, the intrinsic good can be understood only after we discover what a human nature can be at best. We need to know human capacities and potentialities.

Of course, it is not now our concern to define what is exactly the intrinsic good and what are the derivative ones. However, I think we can briefly say that our basic drive is self-love and, as introduced earlier, our intrinsic good is "larger quantity and greater quality of our life". This seems to involve all other candidates and, therefore, to be in a sense acceptable to all their advocates.

Conclusion

Distinguishing between morals and customs, I argued that every moral system is based on some moral ideals. Moral ideals, firstly, define one's values, and, secondly, put those values in order. For each person his moral ideal is the highest good or final end. Moral ideals are, in turn, defined by our self-love. Thus, based on our nature, our self-love defines our ideals of life, which can be summed up as the largest quantity and greatest quality of life possible. The moral status of every act depends on the relation between that act and those ideals. An act is good if it can lead to our ideals. Our self-love also establishes a cluster of desires that may give us sufficient motivation to perform what the practical reasoning instructs us to be a good means for achieving our ideals, our goals and objectives. Whatever is demanded by our genuine desires (i. e. the real and irreducible desires) is a natural value for us and gives us pleasure. This fact is closely related to another fact that "good" and "bad" are not conventional or contractual, but rather they are really

²⁰ This list of candidates for intrinsic good is originally made by William K. Frankena in his *Ethics*, 2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p.88, and later invoked by Robert Audi in his "Intrinsic Value and Moral Obligation" (in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 35 (Summer 1997)) and *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 251).

there and they can be realised and discovered by human reason through consideration of human nature, human talents and potentialities and their perfection.

Bibliography

Arrington 1989 — *Arrington R.* Rationalism, Realism and Relativism. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Audi 1997 — *Audi R.* Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Audi 1997 — *Audi R.* Intrinsic Value and Moral Obligation // *Southern Journal of Philosophy*. Summer, 1997. Vol. 35.

Augustine 1960 — *Augustine*. The Confessions / Trans. J. K. Ryan. London, 1960.

Benn 1998 — *Benn P.* Ethics. London: UCL Press, 1998.

Billington 1993 — *Billington R.* *Living Philosophy: An Introduction to Moral Thought*. London: Routledge, 1993. 2nd ed.

Blackburn 1993 — *Blackburn S.* Essays in Quasi-Realism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Brandt 1959 — *Brandt R. B.* Ethical Theory: The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1959 (reprint. in: *Sellars W., Hospers J.* (eds.). *Readings in Ethical Theory*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970. 2nd ed.

Cooper 1992 — *Cooper J. M.* History of Western Ethics 2: Classical Greek // *Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics*. 1992.

Darwall 1998 — *Darwall S.* Philosophical Ethics. Oxford: Westview Press, 1998.

Donagan 1992 — *Donagan A.* History of Western Ethics 12: Twentieth-Century Anglo-American // *Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics*. 1992.

Fletcher 1966 — *Fletcher J.* Situation Ethics. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966.

Foot 1961 — *Foot Ph.* Goodness and Choice // *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. 1961. Supplementary Vol. 25.

Frankena 1973 — *Frankena W. K.* Ethics. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973. 2nd ed.

Hare 1993 — *Hare R. M.* Universal Prescriptivism // *Singer P.* (ed.). *A Companion to Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993. P. 451—463.

Hare 1991 — *Hare R. M.* Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. 6th impres.

Hare 1990 — *Hare R. M.* Comments // *Seanor D., Fotion N.* (eds.). *Hare and Critics: Essays on Moral Thinking*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Hare 1963 — *Hare R. M.* Freedom and Reason. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

Hare 1952 — *Hare R. M.* The Language of Morals. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

Harman, Thomson 1996 — *Harman G., Thomson J. J.* Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

- Harman, Thomson 1977 — *Harman G., Thomson J. J.* The Nature of Morality. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Hume 1965 — *Hume D.* A Dialogue // *Alasdair MacIntyre* (ed.). Hume's Ethical Writings. New York: Macmillan Company, 1965. P. 157—174.
- Hume 1857 — *Hume D.* Essays: Moral and Political / Ed. T. H. Green, T. H. Grose. 4 vols. London, 1857. Vol. II.
- Hume 1752 — *Hume D.* An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. London: Cadell, 1752.
- Hume 1739 — *Hume D.* Treatise on Human Nature. London, 1739.
- Kahn 1992 — *Kahn Ch. H.* History of Western Ethics 1: Presocratic Greek // Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics. 1992.
- Katz 1964 — *Katz J. J.* Semantic Theory and the meaning of 'Good' // Journal of Philosophy. 1964. Vol. 61.
- Kellenberger 2001 — *Kellenberger J.* Moral Relativism, Moral Diversity and Human Relationship. The Pennsylvania State University, 2001.
- Kenny 1998 — *Kenny A.* A Brief History of the Western Philosophy. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998.
- Kockelmans 1992 — *Kockelmans J.* History of Western Ethics 11: Twentieth-Century Continental, Part 1 // Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics. 1992. P. 522—528.
- MacIntyre 1988 — *MacIntyre A.* Whose Justice? Whose Rationality? Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.
- MacIntyre 1984 — *MacIntyre A.* After Virtue. Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. 2nd ed.
- Mackie 1977 — *Mackie J. L.* Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- McNaughton 1988 — *McNaughton D.* Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1988.
- Nagel 1986 — *Nagel Th.* The View from Nowhere. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Nagel 1970 — *Nagel Th.* The Possibility of Altruism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Neimark 1995 — *Neimark M. K.* The Selling of Ethics: The Ethics of Business Meets the Bus. 1995.
- Nietzsche 1967 — *Nietzsche F.* On the Genealogy of Morals / Trans. Kaufman, Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Pojman 1998 — *Pojman L. P.* Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998. 3rd ed.
- Rachels 1998 — *Rachels J.* Ethical Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Rachels 1993 — *Rachels J.* Subjectivism // *Singer P.* (ed.). A Companion to Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993. P. 432—441.
- Rachels 1993 — *Rachels J.* The Elements of Moral Philosophy. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993. 2nd ed.

Railton 1998 — *Railton P.* Moral Explanation and Moral Objectivity // Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. March, 1998. Vol. LVIII. № 1.

Rand 1964 — *Rand A.* The Virtue of Selfishness. New York: Signet, 1964.

Rorty 1989 — *Rorty R.* Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Rorty 1980 — *Rorty R.* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

Sartre 1970 — *Sartre J. P.* Existentialism and Humanism. Frome; London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1970.

Sayre-McCord 1996 — *Sayre-McCord G.* Fact-Value Distinction // *Audi R.* (ed.). The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Scanlon 1999 — *Scanlon Th.* What We Owe to Each Other. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. 2nd ed.

Schacht 1992 — *Schacht R.* History of Western Ethics 10: Nineteenth-Century Continental // Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics. 1992.

Schneewind 1993 — *Schneewind J. B.* Modern Moral Philosophy // *Singer P.* (ed.). A Companion to Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993. P. 147—157.

Schneewind 1992 — *Schneewind J. B.* History of Western Ethics 8: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century // Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics. 1992.

Schroder 1992 — *Schroder W. R.* History of Western Ethics 11: Twentieth-Century Continental, Part II // Becker's Encyclopedia of Ethics. 1992.

Shomali 1996 — *Shomali Mohammad A.* Self-knowledge. Tehran: International Publishing Co., 1996.

Shomali 2001 — *Shomali Mohammad A.* Ethical Relativism: An Analysis of the Foundations of Morality. London: ICAS, 2001.

Sidgwick 1967 — *Sidgwick H.* Outlines of the History of Ethics. London: MacMillan and Company Ltd., 1967.

Stevenson 1944 — *Stevenson Ch. L.* Ethics and Language. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1944.

Stevenson 1967 — *Stevenson Ch. L.* Facts and Values. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1967. 2nd ed.

Singer 1990 — *Singer P.* Reasoning towards Utilitarianism // *Seanor D., Fotion N.* (eds.). Hare and Critics: Essays on Moral Thinking. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. P. 147—159.

Sturgeon 1998 — *Sturgeon N. L.* Thomson against Moral Explanations // Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. March, 1998. Vol. LVIII. № 1.

Taylor P. The Justification of Value Judgments: Rational Choice // *Sellars W., Hospers J.* (eds.). Readings in Ethical Theory. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970. 2nd ed. (reprinted from: *Taylor P. W.* Normative Discourse. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hill Inc., 1961).

Williams 1997 — *Williams B.* Ethics // Philosophy: A Guide Through the Subject. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 2nd ed.