

PHRONESIS part 5

Efferent Information Processing, Ethics, and the Categories of Action

Abstract: Over centuries, philosophers have theorised about what constitutes 'the good' regarding behavioural choice. Characteristically, these attempts have tried to decipher the nature and substantive values that link the apparent trichotomous nature of the human psyche, variously articulated in terms of human reasoning, feeling, and desiring. Of the three, most emphasis has focused on the unique human characteristic of reasoned behavioural choice in terms of its relationship to the emotions. This article determines the principle dynamics behind 'ethical' behaviour: In the nervous system, efferent nerves, otherwise known as motor neurones, carry nerve impulses away from the central nervous system to effectors such as muscles. A great deal of neural activity underpins 'efferent information processing'. What follows is a categorisation of the structure of 'efferent information processing' in a manner, that enhances our understanding of the attempts of philosophers, from Plato to Russell, to explain 'what it is to behave well'.

Introduction

To understand ethics, first and foremost, is to understand behavioural choice. It is not, primarily, to consider or evaluate what it is right to do, or what it is to lead a good life.

Ultimately, behavioural choices are made. Only after this is understood, can one be drawn to contemplate the nature of what it is best to do. In this secondary endeavour one tries to determine what, why, and to whom a particular behaviour is of benefit. Such considerations lead to judgments about, or to the apportioning of value to behavioural positions. Their purpose is to grant individuals an equitable or stable behavioural and contemplative stance i.e. to secure a moral identity and subsequently, to create the foundations for principles of ideology.

This notion that ethics is about behavioural choice rather than about making judgments as to what behaviours are right or wrong presents a problem of efficacy, for what then, is it "to be ethical". To be ethical, is commonly regarded as meaning; to be consistent with agreed principles of correct moral conduct i.e. Being ethical is about behavioural evaluation and judgement. Alternatively, I suggest that to be ethical is to apply due consideration.

What does it entail to apply due consideration to behaviour choice?

Overview - Historic perspectives

Over centuries, philosophers have theorised about the relevant benefits of particular moral and behavioural stances and attempted to identify principles that explain behavioural choice. Characteristically, these

attempts have tried to decipher the nature and substantive values that link the apparent, trichotomous nature of the human psyche, variously articulated in terms of human reasoning, feeling, and desiring. Of the three, most emphasis has focused on the unique human characteristic of reasoned behavioural choice in terms of its relationship to the emotions. Much less thought is given to primitive desires that respond to the basic bodily needs and functions:

In 'The Republic', Plato suggests that through the main social classes there correspond three parts of the soul, those being, reason, spirit, and desire. Desire corresponds with the basic appetites of, for example, hunger, thirst, and sex. The spirit of emotion or the 'act of being spirited' includes such things as anger, conscience, and shame. Reason is that cognitive process that rules spirit through self-control and strength of will, and inhibits desire to its basic physical requirements. In Plato's trichotomy of influences, a good individual is one that promotes the harmonious relation between these three aspects of the human soul, with reason *ruling* over spirit and self-control inhibiting desire to its essential physical requirements.

In contrast to Plato and central to Aristotle's 'Doctrine of the Mean' (from *Nicomachean Ethics*) is the thesis that explores the mean between excess and deficiency through an attempt to determine a more inclusive relation between reason and feeling. Whilst the 'Platonic' position emphasises the inhibition of feelings through reason presenting an antagonism of the two, Aristotle gives credence to feeling when its expression is 'more or less' appropriate to the situation.

Hume maintains a relational stance between reason and feeling in 'Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals': Through reason, humans have the capacity to relate their feeling experiences with other individuals. This relation imbues them with a unique sense of 'sympathy' and sense of humanity. It is this sense of sympathy that enables humans to formulate the concept of what constitutes virtuous behaviour and consequently, to prescribe moral judgements. However, Hume's account indirectly usurps the role of feeling in morality, because in his account, sympathy is a construct of reasoned assertions *about* feeling. This stance enables Hume to conceive of the notion of fixed general moral standards founded on objective utilitarian qualities, which effectively subjugate the operation of one's sympathy. In this view, as sympathy is a recognitional construct or some form of emotional empathy, the acknowledgement of its sentiments are merely a respectful nod in the direction of human desires and passions.

In 'Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals', Kant excludes all consideration of the individual human's inclinations and feelings in favour of a concept that emphasises duty bound actions, which for him are a formal requirement in respect of moral law and pure reason. Kant's position makes requisite, the denial of the needs of the individual self in respect to the benefit of others and of society as a whole.

In contrast, Mill's 'Utilitarianism' commits to the view that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote unhappiness, where happiness constitutes pleasures in absence of pain and vice versa. In order to counter arguments that such a view of life would propose that there is no higher end than pleasure, Mill distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures. He draws a distinction between the "qualities" or hierarchies of pleasures: "Human beings have faculties more elevated

than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.” (Chap II, para 4). Consequently, Mill acknowledges the spirits and desires of man, but much like Plato, regards them as subservient to the 'higher' reasoning pleasures of creative, literary, artistic, and intellectual enquiry.

Both Freud and Nietzsche view morality as a mechanism of repression. For Nietzsche, this repression is societal, where morality serves to rationalise and legitimate the institutions of the social classes. For Freud, morality is an internal compensatory response to the frustrations of desire. With both these contrasting views, the symptom of morality is interpreted as a negative constraint on the needs and desires of the individual. These views express an antagonism between the reasoning behind moral ideals and the emotive needs and desires of the individual. In Nietzsche's view, our moral choices are an attempt to impose our will on the external world. In Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, the moral conscience or 'super-ego', is an internalisation of external authority. The 'id' is our impulsive desires and wants. The rational 'ego', is that which attempts to exact a balance between the impractical hedonism of the id and the unattainable ideal of the super-ego.

In the 20th century, Russell (1935) espouses the idea that when it comes to judgements about whether one or other moral stance is good, the lack of rational evidence either way calls for any given stance to appeal to the emotions and to employ the kind of rhetoric that will arouse similar emotions in others. For Russell, the question of 'values' lies outside the domain of reasoned knowledge so that when we assert that something has 'value', we are giving expression to our own emotions and not to a fact which would still be true if our personal feelings were different. Consequently, an ethical stance in Russell's view is not one whose primary function is to convey knowledge. Rather, his emotivist stance presents ethical discourse as an essentially non-rational activity whose language tends toward the expression and evocation of feelings and emotions. Richard Hare concludes in 'The Language of Morals' (1952), that any given moral reasoning must ultimately commit to a morality premise that cannot be empirically verified. This requires the commitment to a 'decision of principle' that is not founded on a statement of truth or fact, but rather requires our sentiments and passions to motivate. In other words, human reasoning is an incomplete stratagem to ethical conclusion and that the demand for behavioural conclusions befall the defensive insecurities of the passions for temporary resolution.

Philippa Foot (1958/9) adds further consideration and weight to the importance of basic human needs by suggesting that purely innate universal desires and physical requirements demand of humans to seek those conditions that maintain 'good' physical health and functioning – There is a call to satisfy one's basic needs, like for example, avoiding physical injury. Similarly, and at the other end of the scale, there are other human needs like the need for a sense of meaning in one's life, or for the need to care for family and the wider social group, or to feel that one is making a valuable contribution or providing a good service to others. These aspirations come to define our concepts of virtuous behaviour and endeavour, both to the cause of self-interest and to the functioning of a healthy body and society.

When reviewing the catalogue of opinions that philosophers have expressed over the centuries, it is unclear that there is a viable 'dialectical' Hegelian reduction of possible alternatives, which might enable us to achieve a new and more informed understanding as to how mankind might prioritise behaviour when there is conflict of reason, feeling, and desire. Assessing reason in the absence of feeling is a form of applied logic and in being so is devoid of 'sensitivity', whilst feeling without reason is devoid of any 'civilised' reference points and explanation. In conclusion, this brief historical exposition reveals no principles to clarify the nature of behavioural evaluation. We are left to muse over the relative value of the trichotomy of influences in the selection of behavioural choice.

The trichotomous nature of behavioural choice

Looking at their contributions, it is notable that philosophers appear not to contest the trichotomous nature of human behaviour choice. These might be paraphrased as follows:

1. Humans have a call to act to satisfy bodily needs - their raw innate needs and desires.
2. Humans too, like many other animals, possess feelings and emotions that are powerful at eliciting behavioural responses.
3. Finally, humans alone can call upon powers of reason to guide their behaviour. In doing so, they are able to assess the potential merits of conflicting needs and reach an informed decision as to which is a preferred course of action.

Philosophers also recognise that in choosing to act, humans are faced with a trichotomy of influences that are competing and vying for expression. The problem, therefore, has been in identifying underlying principles. Without such principles, we are simply hostages to and often victims of popularised or emotive rhetoric. It is little comfort that we must rely on our intuitions and faiths in order to make behavioural decisions, which we might *reason* and *believe* to be ethical.

The relevance of Hierarchical Systems Theory to the trichotomy of influences

In providing a reductive explanation of phenomenal experience, Pharoah (2007) details three distinct systems categories. These three categories coincidentally, align with the trichotomy of behavioural influences thereby providing philosophers with the coherent principles that reveal the underlying dynamics of behavioural choice?

1. What does HST's first of three systems categories explain about innate desires?

Organisms evolve over generations and in the process, develop bio-chemical and bio-mechanical diversity.

What is the purpose of bio-diversity?

Hypothetically, for any given system structure, the cessation of bio-diversity would be indicative of an exceptional adaptive state. Such an all-embracing structural state would arise only if there were no active potential to drive further structural adaptation. That there is continuous bio-diversity, therefore, is reason to conclude that the ultimate objective of bio-diversity and of evolving organic systems is to continue adapting until an absolute all-embracing structural adaptation be realised; whatever that realisation might be.

Any given bio-diverse organism represents, therefore, a transitional state: It is a product of evolution and its systems structure will continue evolving further. Being a product of evolution, an organism's transitional state is a physiological expression that embodies and is a product of all its previous environmental adaptations. Consequently, all replicated physiological structures are a legitimate interpretative *proposition* of an all-embracing structural adaptation.

How do these principles of Hierarchical Systems Theory relate to ethics?

Adaptive physiological structures are what determine innate activities and behaviours. In other words, any call to action is determined by innate environmental adaptations. These behaviours are the observable actions that express a system's interpretive proposition of an ultimate and all-embracing systems state.

At any given moment, an organic structure may have numerous innate intentions competing for behavioural expression. Their combined function is prescriptive of the system's interpretative version of what it is to be an absolutely stable state.

All animals, including humans, possess innate calls to action. These calls to act are prescriptive of evolved innate neural and biochemical mechanisms. The neural mechanisms are part of the 'efferent information processing network'.

2. What does HST's second of three systems categories explain about feeling?

When an individual organism assimilates environmental experience on a realtime basis, it is capable of expressing behaviours that are adaptive. However, there is no compulsion to adapt behaviour if past and present interpretations of experience are identical and where there is no impetus that might promote the reappraisal of behavioural responses. Conversely, there is a compulsion to adapt behaviour if interpretations of past and present experiences do differ. Realtime varying interpretations of experience demand behavioural reappraisal.

The neural processes involved in the reappraisal of past interpretations of experience generate an experiential sensation. This sensation is the phenomenon known as 'feeling'. Thus, following its experiential interpretations, an animal is compelled to adapt behaviour through the evocation of its feelings.

How is feeling relevant to ethics?

Through the evocation of feelings, the many sensations of experience are what guide the behavioural decisions of animals. Inevitably, experience generates a continuous narrative of changing sensations competing for behavioural expression. In addition to this narrative, innate desires also seek behavioural resolution. From this dichotomous conflict there ensues a juxtaposition of competing value: The value associated with an all-embracing structural adaptation and that of an all-embracing behavioural adaptation.

Additionally, the evolution of both innate structural adaptations and capabilities associated with behavioural adaptation are intimately entwined. They compete for behavioural expression leading to complex behavioural and physiological characteristics.

Hierarchical Systems Theory tells us that humans have no analytic access to the processes that generate their phenomena of feeling but that feelings do call them to action. Additionally, innate desires call humans to act. Both have a significant impact on a determined choice of action. Typically, the feelings experienced are given the term 'emotions'. Note however, that emotions are conceptual interpretations of feeling types and are, consequently, not equivalent. Emotions are just a convenient way of referencing different classes of feelings. But feelings, like colours, come in infinitely subtle shades and hues.

3. What does HST's third of three systems categories explain about reasoning?

Whilst the relationships of contextual experience generate an individual organism's feeling, Hierarchical Systems Theory explains that the relationships of conceptual realisations are what generate an individual human's reasoning.

It is a requirement that any conceptual construct be stable. This is so, because any individual's concept of reality includes the essence of the concept of themselves - An unstable conceptual construct is fundamentally objectionable to the individual experiencing it.

Despite this powerful requirement for a stability, an individual's thought processes are compelled to reappraise its conceptual construct when its concept of reality is demonstrably recognised as being in conflict or inconsistent with reality. Notably, the reappraising of thought processes appear to the individual, only to apply processes of reason. This appearance, though, is false because practical reasoning itself is no more than the instrument of action for the reappraisal of conceptualised reality. Reasoning is merely a process by-product. In practice therefore, human reasoning, however powerful its logic, will avoid mental propositions that do not support an individual's concept of reality - Individuals would rather twist reason than allow it to alter their conceptualisation of reality.

Within these parameters, humans have the motivation to act according to what each individual "reasons" is supportive of their concept of reality, where reasoning is not intrinsically a faculty of logic or truth. Reason is presently the highest known dynamic of influence in ethical discourse. But note, like learning, reason is a by-product of a more fundamental systems process. This process, which is the guardian to reason, demands a stable concept of reality however biased that process is required to be.

Processes of reason and logic are complex, sometimes counterintuitive and conflicting. Additionally, an individual's motivation to act according to reason is further mitigated by their spirit of feeling and their innate desires. Each separate function has its own behavioural agenda. When individual humans have cause to act, these trichotomy of influences bear down. Without conceptual knowledge of these influences, the individual is facing a cocktail of unknown values and aesthetic consequences.

Unlike the processes that lead to feeling and innate desire, conceptual processes are open to analytical access. That the reasoning which humans attribute to those analytical processes *seem* unassailable means that humans give great bearing on the calls to action that are based on reason. But should humans uphold the value of the conceptual decision above those calls to action that are generated by feelings and innate desires?

How should humans evaluate what is the 'right' cause to action?

The evaluation of what is 'right'

We have a broad articulation of the trichotomous nature of the human psyche that is involved in behavioural choice. Humans possess desires, feelings, and concepts: The physiologically innate needs, the emotions that we conceive to understand through their association with our feelings, and finally the concepts that we maintain with reasoning. Each plays out to a different and sometimes conflicting tune.

It is evident that none of the trichotomy of influences is submissive by default. Despite this, for hundreds of years, there has been considerable bias to the view that decisions founded on reason are the higher moral aspiration.

Why is this the case?

One might desire water in a desert, but to deny another of a precious water resource that one carries on one's person would 'not be consistent' with one's *concept* of what it is to be human (i.e. where 'what it is to be human', is a concept integral to one's concept of self). It is a painful realisation when one's reasoning tells one to give away some water to another, however during the reasoning process, such a stance will reinforce a sense of moral ideology which is consistent with one's *elected* stable concept of reality. Conversely, to deny another of water and retain a water resource for one's own exclusive consumption is reasoned as basal: To do so, is to deny a sense of humanity in order to feed a core thirst desire. To deny water from a humanitarian perspective requires the rejection and then reappraisal of an initial and potent concept of self. Such denial

seems dark or cold. Is it any wonder that philosophers have continued to bias in favour of reason as their founding principles to morality. To do otherwise is to be forced to dismantle and realign their concepts regarding self and reality. In conclusion, it seems 'morally' preferable to deny core needs than to deny the self. Why? Because our concepts of reality and of self are constructed from reason and not from our emotions or desires.

On the justification of behaviours

On occasion, when I have walked into my living room, I have found my dog 'Impy', curled up on the sofa. Impy knows the sofa is out of bounds and before I have made any utterance, he looks at me sheepishly with head lowered, sagging droopy eyes glancing up at mine as he climbs carefully and slowly down with his tail between legs, back curving downward.

I might conclude that he displays in this manner because he feels 'guilty' for having sat where he knows he is not allowed. However, his behaviour cannot be attributed to his own 'sense of duty' or to his evaluation of what is 'right and wrong'. Whilst he is undoubtedly experiencing something, it is I that is tempted to attribute what he is experiencing to the emotion humans call 'guilt'. Nevertheless, one can reason that he *is* experiencing the feelings that humans *attribute* to guilt.

Of course, words like 'guilt' are emotive terms. Such terms are our human way of conceptualising and then verbalising about the phenomenon of feelings which we experience and interpret. Humans attribute many emotions to the phenomenon of feeling, but note, these attributions entail conceptual reasoning.

Analysing guilt

The feeling that humans attribute to the emotion of guilt relates to the enforced appeasement of self-interest. Its roots lie in the dynamics of a social hierarchy where dominance affects social status and with it, mating, feeding, preening, and sheltering opportunities. Arguably, societal dynamics that lead to feelings of guilt have an objective purpose:

Animals have to make decisions that, one can reason, effectively *amount to* the assessment of self-interest. My dog's interest is to sit on the comfort of a sofa. This is in conflict with his recognition that I am dominant in our 'family/pack group' and I demand his appeasement through the rule of 'not sitting on the sofa'. But he will attempt to get away with any behaviours that service his interests and will display regret, when caught out, for violating individual and group authority. Interestingly, Impy does not think, 'sitting on the sofa will disrupt the dynamics of my family group'. He thinks only of servicing his own interests, which are a matter of weighing up the need for comfort with the desire not to be chastised. The decision that my dog is to make is quasi-moral - The decision depends on his assessment of the merits of his desires and feelings, and do not include the merits of a stable concept of reality.

On the other hand, the dominant animal's interests are frequently serviced simply by the minor's appeasement display. This apparent 'remorseful' appeasement is usually justice enough for the dominant because it reaffirms the demands that are implicit in the nature of the social hierarchy. However, such appeasement is not really indicative of the recognition of 'remorse'. The behaviour is not indicative of the presence of 'the *concept*' of emotional 'regret', which the appeasing animal experiences and is communicating. Rather, it is simply an expression of a feeling, which only humans are able to recognise to be characteristics of remorse and whose associated behaviours tend to mitigate the harm that could be inflicted by the dominant one.

A distinction between emotion and feeling

Looking further at the distinction between the feelings of animals and those of humans, for nonhuman animals in this example, the pursuit of self-interest is mitigated by what transpires to be, the benefits of group interaction. Effectively, animals make decisions, which, if they were human, could be interpreted as moral or ethical - in this example; the denial of self-interests for the benefit of the group. For humans, guilt is the *conceptualised* description of a feeling; a description that embraces the fullness of the feeling's experiential contexts.

This explanation clarifies just one of many types of feelings that animals experience. It is difficult to argue with any conviction that feelings and experiences such as joy, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, wonder, disappointment, remorse, and jealousy are the preserve of humans alone. Nevertheless, to interpret such feelings as 'emotions', is to apply human *conceptions* that apportion descriptive terms of value and relation to feeling phenomena. A nonhuman animal does not place terms of value and relation to feelings - Feelings are experienced and that is the end of it. There is no contextual conception for animals.

Whilst feeling and behaviour has factual function for all animals, the tendency of every human individual's creative reasoning capability is to play a game that entails describing terms of reference to those feelings and from that, formulating the individual's evaluative moral identity. The nature of this game causes doubt and confusion because the dynamics of the mechanism of our feelings remain outside of our conceptual analysis - conceptual analysis is confined to relational interpretations or inferences between what is felt and what is objectively experienced.

Whilst humans obey the same principles of self-interest and social dynamics, they are unique in having the capability of analytical creativity. They are able to question, evaluate, and apply reasoned concepts to emotive responses: So I might ask, "Is it fair to get off the sofa because someone senior to me tells me to? What are the reasons? What are the arguments that I might pursue to maintain my self-interests over the group? What are the benefits, risks, or alternatives available to me?" There is a complex misappropriation of the core instincts in humans that would normally drive their animalistic behaviours. Humans disassociate feelings from their related emotions by using faculties of reason. Humans can re-evaluate their self-interests, their sense of duty, and manipulate. The behavioural choices that humans make are determined by weighing

up juxtaposed feelings and interpreting their emotions with complex conceptions of individual, social, and environmental consideration. In this manner, they assess the nature of value and lend credence to their sense of judgment and to their chosen ideology and *course of action*.

The Principle of Relational Ethics

The reason why I introduced my dog was to indicate a relationship between the human concept of morality and non-articulated nonhuman feelings and behaviours. From the simple organisms to the most complex, there are evolving if not understood directives behind behaviour. One might argue, quite reasonably, that there is justification behind the behaviour of systems *that are not even alive*; for do not those that pursue the fundamental principles of physics seek the 'laws' that appear to qualify, and thereby 'justify', all systems' behaviours?

Similarly, moralising is a process that seeks to apply laws that mean to justify human behavioural choice. But what are the principles of morality with which to make these judgments?

Recognising the trichotomy of influences and the nature of their dynamic relationships enables certain conclusions to be drawn. For example, one can state that

- 1.1. Reasoning is a by-product of the processes that maintain conceptual reality.
- 2.2. Consequently, there is nothing implicitly moral about decisions derived from reason.
- 3.3. Therefore, every possible behavioural consideration from the trichotomy of influences should be assessed on its own merits and understood on its own terms in the evaluation of choice.
- 4.4. Individuals will defend with absolute conviction, by verbal, physical, and all possible means, the reasoning that purports to service their stable concept of reality, however ideologically or personally twisted it may have become.

We cannot rely on our reason to establish any fundamental moral positions. This is because reason is a function of our desire for a stable concept of reality and is subject to the accuracy of that concept. This explains why there are as many moral stances as there are concepts of reality. All 'bad acts' are validated by the proponents of that action; if their concept of reality provides the reasoning to validate it - Any individual's concept of reality can easily become twisted by circumstance.

If we cannot use reason to gauge the quality of our moral stance, what are we to do to determine fundamental or universal moral principles?

On the evolution of morality

Reasoning tends to be highly regard because of its assumed basis in logic - Individuals do not see themselves as acting or thinking illogically. This is because human behavioural decisions utilise reason in a manner such

that it maintains compliance with the individual's concept of reality. That concept 'has to make sense'. In this way, reasoning appears to be at the heart of decision making, but in truth, is a slave to the individual's concept of reality as it develops from one moment to the next. The apparent logic of reason is flawed. Reason is but a subservient by-product.

If one is to accept the devaluation of reason in this manner, what can one conclude is morality if anymore than a human construct designed to institute compliance with stabilising conceptualised values?

One might legitimately argue that morality is no more than a human construct to validate dogmatic conceptual ideals. One might believe that there can be no more depth to morality than that it aligns to general principles relating to our 'sense' of humanity. Should one conclude that there is no moral high ground to which man might aspire?

Whilst behavioural choice is determined by fundamental principles relating to the trichotomy of influences, morality is an entirely different discourse:

The substance of moral subjectivity

Hierarchical Systems Theory informs us that the process of conceptualising reality is what enables an individual to become aware of their consciousness. In this regard, a concept is not necessarily a verbal statement but is formed by the systematic interpretation of understandings in terms of the relationship between learning and experience. Because of the relationship between conceptualisation and consciousness, the process of trying to locate and uphold a moral imperative through conceptual realisation, is formative in the evolution of an individual's consciousness. In other words, seeking the correct call to action affects the essence of an individual's consciousness.

In this manner, morality is an aspirational process that determines the nature of the evolution of individual consciousnesses and that also influences all those conscious entities with whom every individual has contact.

The essence of conscious experience is evolving in reaction to the development or in reaction to the discovery, of what one might term 'universal moral principles'. These in turn, modulate our concepts about the world in which we live. Thus, we can expect morality to evolve as an intrinsic element of our conscious experience.

Is morality the intrinsic property of consciousness in all its forms? Does relating ethics to Hierarchical Systems Theory create a relationship between physical properties and the intrinsic property of consciousness?

There is no reason to suppose that the trichotomy of influences is all there is to decision making. After all, before humans evolved, there was no trichotomy. Instead there was only a dichotomy of influences.

According to Hierarchical Systems Theory, there will be further evolutionary stages that will eclipse our current ethical motivations. The proposition therefore, is that there is an ethical viewpoint and ultimately, a vision of morality that will overshadow all current human understanding.s

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