

Universal Moral Standards

Question

Can a universal moral standard be developed based on the definition of a moral standard as that set of rules or guidelines that produce the set of actions that will minimize overall human suffering and maximize human happiness on earth?

Proposed Answer

Yes. All that would be required is a proper understanding of the human psyche which would in turn enable us to determine what circumstances would result in the maximum happiness and minimum suffering for each person, from which we could determine the optimal average combination of happiness and suffering, thus giving us the overall combined minimum amount of human suffering and maximum amount of human happiness on earth. From this optimum list of actions, we can establish rules to cause humans to always select the actions that lead them down the optimum path of maximal happiness and minimal suffering.

Consideration

The proposed answer seems sound, but it requires several impractical achievements including complete understanding of the inner workings of all human minds, fore-knowledge of all future actions not invoked by humans but that affect the circumstances humans are placed in, and the ability to see the possible outcomes based on all compatible combinations of all human decisions made up to the end of existence.

Consider a simple two-person game in which two players make alternating moves, each trying to achieve the highest individual and combined score. Assuming that for each player's turn, 20 different moves can be played, each with different point values that will be added to that player's score and thus to the total score. Also assume that play is fully observable - that is, for any level, a player could look ahead at the game tree as far as he chooses and see what set of moves would be available in the future given any combination of choices by himself and the other player. A naïve player may choose to select the highest value out of the 30. In general, this may be a good quick strategy. The problem with this is that it may be possible that choosing the highest value now only allows for lower choices later on, thus preventing the player from either maximizing his personal score or the combined score. A more astute player would look ahead to see what the highest combinations are over the next few moves, but even this would not guarantee the ultimate best choice. The only way to guarantee an optimal outcome would be to look at all possible outcomes (of which there are 30^n , where n is the number of moves), select the highest one, and then trace back from there through the game tree to the current choice, making the choice that heads down the newly discovered optimal path. Note that a greedy or selfish player would optimize his own score with no thought for the combined score, while a malicious player would seek to optimize the value of his score minus the other player's score.

We are faced with a similar problem in trying to minimize human suffering and maximize human happiness. Even assuming that we have complete understanding of the human psyche and a valid method for quantifying happiness and suffering (which we don't), the number of end states to be evaluated would be tremendous and would require an understanding of outside future events that would affect overall happiness and suffering at each step, both those incurred by humans and those not (that is, a knowledge of the future). Even in the simplified problem above, given only ten moves, we are faced with 5.9049×10^{14} , an enormous number. Increase to 200 moves (still ridiculously less than the number of human decisions to be made by the end of time), and we end up with over 2.65×10^{295} , which is a 265 followed by 293 zeroes – an astronomically large number far outside anything human beings could hope to process.

Conclusion

So, given this definition of morality, a universal moral standard could be established, but only by an entity with complete understanding of future events and consequences, with a complete understanding of the psyche of all humans, and with the ability to consider a practically infinite number of outcomes. That is, it would require a being that transcends time (exists outside of time – able to see the future as well as the present) and is therefore omniscient and not bounded by temporal complexities. Such a being is God.

Note: I do not agree with this simplified definition of morality, though it does allow us to show that even for a “morality” defined this way, a universal moral standard could not be developed by humans. I believe that a more appropriate definition for “moral” would be “conforming to a standard of right behavior,” (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary), where the standard of right behavior is one set down by God himself, who is therefore the only one who can truly create a universal moral standard.