

COMMON MORALITY, MORAL DILEMMAS, AND HERMENEUTIC ABILITY*

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Abstract

The theories of common morality start with the idea of a set of moral rules generally accepted, albeit at a pre-theoretical level. The common morality is also assumed to be universal, trans-historical, implicit and, of course, systematic. Some scholars prefer to speak about a common set of universally recognized values and understand them as a kind of common language which makes communication possible beyond the cultural boundaries. This paper give firstly a brief account of these ideas. My aim is to display some of the benefits and the limits of this concept in one particular circumstance, namely the moral dilemmas. I will discuss three versions of ethics fundamentals at a pre-theoretical level (1, 2, and 4) and I will mention several objections to these projects (3, 5). I will present an example of common morality at work, because, according to some authors, it serves as grounds for decisions in the medical practice (6). Finally, I will show what common morality can provide when facing the moral dilemmas (7, 8). This result will lead us to a less obvious, though crucial, aspect of moral reasoning: its hermeneutical work (9). I believe this feature proves the openness, fallible, provisional, and perfectible nature of the solutions we can give to the moral dilemmas.

Key words: *common morality, common values, moral dilemmas.*

* Preparation of this paper was supported in part by a grant from the Romanian Research Authority CNCSIS (Project Id_1997/2009-2011) and by University of Konstanz, Germany. I would like to thank the „Wissenschaftliches Forum” of Konstanz University who provided in 2007 and 2009 funding for my research on common morality and moral philosophy

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The theories of common morality start with the idea of a set of generally accepted moral rules, albeit at a pre-theoretic level. The task of the moral philosophy is to set forth a theoretical system of morality starting from the premises that such common set of widely accepted moral rules really exists. The common morality is also assumed to be universal, trans-historical, implicit and, of course, systematic. Philosophers describe it, make it explicit as a linguist would make explicit the implicit rules of language (Gert, 2004). The idea of a common set of universally recognized values is sometimes understood as a kind of common language which makes communication possible beyond the cultural boundaries (Bok, 1992). Common morality can be discovered and described (ordered, classified etc.). Some scholars claim that we can even provide a theoretical foundation of common morality, too, not just describe it as an empirical fact. The problem of foundation must be discussed apart from that of description as it marks the transition from the descriptive perspective to the normative one. Finally, the aim of this enterprise is the same as in any ethical theory: a better approach of the difficult and controversial cases, those „hard moral questions”. We cannot provide a final solution to such questions (and it is generally assumed that we are unlikely to). They are more or less „life and death” issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, modifications on the human genome, the fair distribution of health care services, the use of embryonic stem cells for research purposes, etc. In the following, I shall give a brief outline of the common morality concept. My aim is to display some of the benefits and the shortcomings of this concept in one particular situation, i.e. dealing with moral dilemmas. This issue is of major

interest because it is precisely the case of those hard moral questions that make evident a pluralism of moral positions and of the related solutions. At the same time, the use of a pre-theoretical common set of moral values seems to be for most of the people, a promising way of reaching a consensus in the controversial cases. I shall discuss three versions of ethics fundamentals at a pre-theoretical level: through common morality (1, 2) and through a minimal set of common values (4). Without going into the rather complex details of a critical discussion, I will mention several objections to these projects (3, 5). I will attempt to illustrate the common morality at work, because it serves, according to some authors, to the decision-making process in the medical practice (6). Finally, I will show what common morality can provide when confronting with moral dilemmas (7, 8). This result will lead us to a less evident, though crucial, aspect of moral reasoning: its hermeneutical work (9). I believe this feature, the ability to provide a reasonable adjudication of an ethical debate, adequately accounts for the open, fallible, provisional, and perfectible nature of the solutions we can give to moral dilemmas.

1. The common morality is universal and has a normative meaning: it consists of a system of rules or principles which all people must comply with. The latest edition of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* attempts to accommodate the idea of common morality to medical ethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). In a recent article, Tom L. Beauchamp defines the common morality as „the set of norms shared by all persons committed to the objectives of morality” and lists ten standard examples of compulsory rules of common morality (Beauchamp, 2003): 1) Don't kill, 2)

Don't cause pain or suffering to others, 3) Prevent evil or harm from occurring, 4) Rescue persons in danger, 5) Tell the truth, 6) Nurture the young and dependent, 7) Keep your promises, 8) Don't steal, 9) Don't punish the innocent, 10) Treat all persons with equal moral consideration. Beauchamp clearly shows that there is only one common morality (although there are several theories thereof) and that it is universal. As a matter of fact, he insists upon the danger of making it relative to other moralities: the common morality is not just a morality distinct of, and opposed to, other moralities. It is applicable to anyone, anytime and anywhere. It stands across cultural differences, because people with different social and cultural backgrounds learn and internalize a number of basic rules of moral conduct as they are growing up. Cultural variety is accounted for by a series of particular (hence, not universal) moralities, which have a richer content. They reflect aspirations, ideals, attitudes, or sensitivities formed in different contexts or cultural, religious, and professional traditions. Professional moralities, too, represent a kind of particular morality (Beauchamp, 2003, p. 262). Still, there is a common set of rules, virtues, and ideals shared by everyone who adheres to the general aim of morality: to promote the human development. This common ground coexists with, and is often enriched by, particular moralities. – There are other ways to create this relationship. The normative meaning of the idea of common morality can be justified by making more suggestive the opposition between the universal morality and the particular moralities (Gewirth, 1993). The key feature of Gerwith's concept of common morality is that the precepts of the common morality *must* be shared by all moral

agents. The common morality is not *just* a system of principles contrasting with the plural background of other moralities by being more widespread in a particular time. The common morality has a normative meaning: it is a system of rules or principles which all people *must* comply with. Therefore, to argue that the principles of morality *must* be observed by all people is to provide the common morality with a justification over other moralities.

2. Common morality represents a public informal system which guides the conduct of all rational persons.

Bernard Gert has built a system of common morality (Gert, 1988, 1998, 2004, 2005a; Gert, Culver, Clouser, 2006). In fact, this is the very *system of morality* because, in his opinion, there is indeed a common or universal morality beyond the particular moralities of a certain group or society. In Gert's view, the common morality is the moral system people use implicitly or unknowingly when they are presented with several alternatives and try to make a reasonably moral decision, or when they make moral judgements regarding their own or other people's actions (Gert, 2005a, p. 3; 2004, p. 4). By reasoning through the common morality, people gain the ability to recognize the types of conduct allowed or forbidden, encouraged or discouraged, imposed or simply recommended by the society. The system of common morality cannot be considered similar to other (potential) moral systems such as the Kantian or the utilitarian one. We cannot set the Kantian morality against the utilitarian one, and both as opposed to the common morality. The moral systems are descriptions and justifications of morality, in the singular form. Bernard Gert believes that Kant and Mill failed in their attempt to provide a proper account

of the common morality because they did not undertake its necessary description. Other moral systems failed because of the same reason, and Gert's system claims to offer an accurate description and the full justification of the common morality. Hence, Bernard Gert has two aims in mind: to describe the common morality system and to justify it. To describe it means to provide an accurate compendium of the moral rules, ideals, and values. Here are, for instance, the ten moral rules: 1) Do not kill, 2) Do not cause pain, 3) Do not disable, 4) Do not deprive of freedom, 5) Do not deprive of pleasure, 6) Do not deceive, 7) Keep your promises, 8) Do not cheat, 9) Obey the law, 10) Do your duty. To justify the common morality means to show that any rational person agrees that the common morality functions as a public system which guides the conduct of each person who is able to understand and comply with it. Bernard Gert does not say that the moral agents *must* adopt the principles of common morality, but only that they *could* do so under *certain* given *circumstances*: „Showing that all moral agents would endorse adopting a moral system that required everyone to act morally with regard to, at least, all other moral agents is what I regard as providing a justification of morality.” (Gert, 2004, p. 81). Justifying morality is the problem of showing the circumstances in which all rational agents would adopt the rules of common morality. Another important aspect in justifying the morality is to identify the cases in which one could have enough reasons to break a moral rule. As a matter of fact, a great deal of the mental effort in ethical debates seems to be spent on finding the reasonable exceptions from morality.

3. Far away from being universal and transhistorical, the common morality crystallized itself into concrete rules in a given historical context. Hence the inherent inconsistencies. The idea of common morality faced serious arguments against its legitimacy (objections 1-4) and its utility for the moral theory (objections 5-8). – 1) There are reasons to reject the idea of a universal and transhistorical common morality due to the lack of historical, sociological, and anthropological evidence (Turner, 2003). The existing evidence would rather prove that the common morality itself came into historical being in the pluralistic context of different moral traditions (seen as moral worlds or tapestry of cultures). – 2) Against Beauchamp & Childress's project speaks the authors' very remark, that no theory of the common morality can meet the entire set of requirements that a proper theory should observe (consistency, comprehensibility, power of justification, and so on). Therefore, a theory that does not meet this set of preconditions better than other moral theories has no support. And, if the authors still sustain it, this suggests their antitheoretical orientation and their tendency to embrace the moral *status quo* (DeGrazia, 2003). – 3) Another objection says that, whenever the theories of the common morality try to justify the moral decisions based on procedures of rational decisions, as Bernard Gert's theory shows, the moral problems turn out to be problems of rationality or, better said, problems about the rationality or irrationality of assessing and classifying moral damages without giving a reason for what an irrational classification would be (Strong, 2006b). – 4) Unfortunately, it is more likely that we do not have final criteria for what an irrational classification means.

Consequently, Gert's theory would even lead to wrong answers (Strong, 2006a, 2006b). – 5) Common morality is not of much help when it comes to those hard moral questions and to the issues that go beyond our common moral intuitions. Bernard Gert's theory would fail even in the relatively non-controversial cases (Strong, 2006a). – 6) We can often derive different public policies from the same principles, intuitions or norms. For the principles to have practical relevance, they must be interpreted, which is done mostly depending on certain substantial conceptions varying, as a rule, according to culture, religion or political orientation (Turner, 2003). – 7) Even though the common morality provides with a core of widely accepted judgements, people may share the same correct moral views but for various and not always moral reasons. Besides, there is also a general agreement on some moral preconceived opinions: people may share the same wrong moral views (DeGrazia, 2003). – 8) Finally, another objection underlines the fundamental inconsistency at the level of the moral judgements. Some authors sustain that moral judgements are not and cannot be brought to be in a reflexive equilibrium with the moral norms (Brand-Ballard, 2003; Turner, 2003). – After a brief inspection of some objections to the theories of the common morality, let us turn our attention to another attempt to provide a foundation to morality at a pre-theoretical level: through a minimal set of common values.

4. The common values are shared by all human beings and elaborated in all human societies. These values provide a common basis for judgement, action, and moral debate. The concept of common values refers to those values shared by most of the human communities. The idea that there

are such values is another attempt to outline a pre-theoretical basis of morality, similar to the idea of common morality. Sissela Bok understands these values as minimal, or survival, values: „fundamental values that have traditionally promoted the cohesion and survival of communities under stress” (Bok, 1992, p. 12). She starts from the assumption that a minimalist ethics built upon such values has a better chance to be accepted by as many people from as many different cultures as possible than a complex ethical theory of the utilitarian or Kantian kind. Once defined, a minimal ethics will serve as a common basis for judgements and actions, it will be the starting point of any dialogue and the prerequisite for any moral debate. Consequently, it will be an indispensable instrument to the intercultural cooperation (Bok, 2002). – The ethical theories working on the idea of common morality (viewed as a common core of values or rules) automatically adhere to a framework with the following characteristics: a) a minimalist orientation; b) a weak foundationalism; c) a certain caution towards the arguments pertaining to the concepts of „normal” and „human nature”. Sissela Bok defines her own project as being minimalist (Bok, 1993). The minimalist orientation consists not only in adopting a weaker form of foundation, but also in the formulation of a minimal and irreducible set of values. This includes: a) forms of mutual support and loyalty; b) restrictions regarding fraud and violence within a group, and c) rudimentary forms of procedural justice. Sissela Bok believes these minimal values meet the requirements of the last two weaker forms of foundation (they are upheld and shared by all human beings, and elaborated in all human societies) and ensure a common field for moral

debates and for the criticism of some undesirable practices like violence, torture, or discrimination.

5. By relating the moral thought to the common values, moral philosophy leaves behind those abstract features such as human nature or human rationality and focuses on the common experiences which bind us together. Many objections may be brought to the idea of a set of common values. For instance, they are by far insufficient to support emergency action in face of some global threats such as military conflicts or environmental damage. Moreover, we cannot expect the minimalist ethics of the survival values to adequately describe such complex relationships as those within a family or community. To account for these relationships, but also to deal adequately with issues on different generations and cultures, we need a more complex ethics indeed, of a maximalist kind. Yet, Sissela Bok claims that the minimalist ethics of common values would be indispensable for the intercultural cooperation and it would ensure therefore the grounds for the elaboration of a few maximalist and more comprehensive positions. In response to the objection that the common values ethics is too limited and allow only a progressive course resulting in imperfect changes in the social order, Sissela Bok reminds us that the radical and revolutionary changes do not enhance, but rather inhibit progress, incomplete as it may be. The fact that the common values may have different interpretations in different cultures (which is yet another objection) does not go against the minimalist view. After all, this perspective does not exclude our task to explore different ethical evaluations, but it strongly urges us to do so. Lastly, Amartya Sen wonders whether it is not

more urgent to ensure a consensus on some conducts (even if acceptance thereof emerges from different values) rather than agree on a universal set of values, provided those conducts converge towards desirable collective results (e.g., peace, prosperity, welfare, etc.). Instead of valuational congruence, he recommends behavioral concordance (Sen, 1992). – Despite these objections, the project of a minimalist ethics based on common values seems reasonable from more than one point of view. Firstly, any dialogue ought to begin with, and rely on common elements. Also, these elements are rather few and have their limits. On the other hand, the minimal values identified by Sissela Bok could be easily interpreted as oriented towards survival and wellbeing. It follows that the behaviors associated with these purposes, too, virtually converge towards universally accepted forms. But the most important aspect in the common values project is to give up the method of justification by self-evident intuitions of eternal values or values pertaining to the human nature. The only things that really connect us are some common needs and basic experiences (the experience of vulnerability, for instance). The starting point for ethics is „our common humanity *in practice*: not by reflecting on whether some property is or is not, essentially human’ ” (Bok, 1992, p. 25).

6. There is no structural difference between the common morality and the morality of various professional practices such as the medical practice. Thus, the common needs and experiences keep us together. A minimalist ethics project has better chances to be held by everyone if it proceeds bottom-up rather than top-down. That is, it should start from these common experiences and

identify the principles or values liable to be recognized as widely as possible, and not proceed from an abstract level down to concrete cases. So, the starting point *must* be our „common humanity in practice”. Since we only identify the common values and norms by understanding the common experiences first, the common morality may also provide a basis for various professional practices: „Common morality is better suited to play a foundational role in bioethics than [other] ethical theories.” (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001, p. 404) „Common morality is the framework on which bioethics is appropriately built.” (Gert, Culver & Clouser, 2006, p. 4) and: „Professional ethics is not distinct from common morality.” (Gert, 2005b, p. 135); and: „*Professional moralities* are one type of particular morality.” (Beauchamp, 2003, p. 262). There are no differences of principle between the common morality and the morality of various professional practices such as the medical practice. The interpretation of a general rule in the context of a practice or cultural institution would lead to a particular moral rule (Gert, Culver & Clouser, 2006, p. 79-81, 89.). The rules „Do not kill, cause pain or disability”, combined with the practice of alcohol consumption and vehicle driving, would result in the rule „Do not drink and drive”. The rule „Do not deprive of freedom” placed in the context of medical practice would lead to the more special rule of informed consent: „Get the informed consent before proceeding with therapy”. Similarly, „Do not deceive” in the same context gets us to „Tell the truth”. – With Gert, Culver & Clouser, the strategy of contextualization confirms the universal and singular nature of the common morality: „there is no important theoretical difference between particular moral rules and the

basic general moral rules.” (Gert, Culver & Clouser, 2006, p. 79.). The foundation of the professional moralities upon the common morality provides us with an instrument of evaluation, a standard which enables us to decide when a particular professional rule acquires the status of a moral rule. Moreover, we may decide when it is necessary to derive new moral rules and to what extent the cultural variables can exert an influence in this context.

7. All theories of common morality must confront with the other side of the coin: some moral questions will have no unique correct solution. I shall move on now to a serious difficulty concerning the concept of common moral values, namely, the way we deal with moral dilemmas. Let us assume that we have collected enough empirical evidence for the concept of common morality and that we provided it with a solid foundation. In other words, let us assume that we have identified a set of moral rules and/or ideals which we can say are generally shared in all times and cultures. As we have seen, to some authors, the common morality is a minimal concept, an ethics of survival, an exceptional oasis of agreement against the disturbing background of disagreement on numerous theoretical positions, rules of socialization or personal opinions. The common morality guides us in certain (fairly simple) matters, but it will have less influence on other (more complex) moral issues. Practically, in the case of those hard moral questions, the questions of life and death, it seems that the common morality runs out of arguments. When it comes to abortion or euthanasia, we need to consider more elements than just the simple rules like „do not kill” or „do not cause pain”. In order to establish if

abortion or euthanasia break these rules, we must share some understanding about the meaning of life and we must also understand the pain, even as a physiological phenomenon. These substantial aspects help us to add or withdraw relevance to the rules of common morality. We are bound to conclude, from case to case: „This rule does not apply; in fact it does not make sense to me.“, or „ This rule does not help me to solve the conflict in question“. The substantial aspects bring into discussion other controversial rules and recommendations as we continue to debate, as well as various valuations of right and wrong. Is abortion an act of killing? Does it inflict pain on the foetus? The answer depends, among other things, on various suppositions regarding the individual and its autonomy, the forms and meaning of life, the more or less metaphysical necessity to maintain certain areas beyond human intervention, etc. The result is that certain dilemmas will essentially remain unsolved. This conclusion comes from the advocates of common morality: „Consequentialist, Kantian, and contractualist moral theories do provide unique correct answers to some moral questions. However, this happens only when common morality provides a unique correct answer to that moral question and the theory in question provides the same answer. However, common morality does not provide a unique correct answer to every moral question. When it does not, no moral theory can provide one, for these moral questions have no unique correct answer.“ (Gert, 2005a, pp. 370-371; cf. also Gert, Cluver & Clouser, 2006, pp. 51-52).

8. The practical solutions to moral dilemmas are not *per se* moral solutions as long as they relate to

problems impossible to solve. In a quite pragmatic sense, a practical solution to a moral dilemma is a recommendation which guides the action without pretending to have solved that dilemma. What mechanisms do we have to generate practical solutions to insolvable moral problems? What criteria enable us to decide that a given or proposed solution is the correct one? – Here is the standard answer in terms of common morality: „Since abortion and the treatment of animals are irresolvable moral questions, and it is necessary that the society have some rules about these matters, the question is transferred to the legal and political system. They resolve the questions on a practical level, but they do not resolve the moral questions, as is shown by the continuing intense moral debate on these matters.“ (Gert, 2005b, p. 131) – The moral dilemmas can be tackled through public debates and compromise. But we are not expected to reach the one moral solution, the final solution that smooths over all difficulties within the so-called hard moral questions. – There are at least four questions I want to discuss here in order to refine the position I have just quoted above: 1) It becomes easy to understand why certain practical solutions to difficult moral problems like abortion or euthanasia are prone to include substantial aspects which are very controversial. If one position or another has a stronger support at a given time in a given moral debate, e.g. the idea of the sanctity of life, this will have a direct influence on the political debate as well. The political actors will speak out their partisanship and reflect it in the solutions they subscribe. In such political debates, the participants contribute with their own background of beliefs and convictions, suspicions and uncertainties. As long as they do not debate on constitutional

problems, they want the practical solutions to reflect their legitimate preferences. 2) As a consequence, the current practical solutions in a society must be taken as provisional solutions, practicable in the context of a plurality of conceptions about the good. In the face of proselytism and intolerance, it may be said that this provisional aspect has never been underlined enough. 3) It is important to understand the separation between politics and morals. But this separation must not be taken for a divorce. It guarantees the possibility of personal options and encourages the revision of the solutions achieved. It also encourages renewed considerations of the moral dilemma itself. 4) Therefore, the theory of common morality cannot ignore the theoretical possibility of putting a moral dilemma in a new light some day and realize that the conflictual aspect is gone. There is a real tendency to view moral dilemmas as problems one can solve in the light of some common and universally accepted principles. This tendency makes us want to carefully identify the problems impossible to solve (at least within the common morality). But is this segregation desirable?

9. Our solutions to moral dilemmas have the same characteristics as literary interpretations: they are open, fallible, provisional, and perfectible. One way of seeing the moral problems other than as „soluble within some common principles” comes from Hilary Putnam, who borrows the legal concept of adjudication and the literary concept of reading as alternatives to solving (Putnam, 1990, pp. 179-192). Unlike the idea of solving, *adjudication* and *reading* are more adequate in seizing the open, fallible, provisional and perfectible patterns of our positions when it comes to one or another moral dilemma.

Naturally, the interpretation must lead to an working and reasonable position in a given context: „Seeing that an adjudication of an ethical dispute is reasonable (at a given time, for a given purpose, for a given group of people) and that another is unreasonable is like seeing that one reading is better than another.” (Putnam, 1990, p. 183). In a moral debate, the parties most often agree on a compromise, an acceptable reading which cannot be the final word on the controversial moral issue and neither can it claim the status of a solution that follows from principles, regardless of how widely they are shared. There is another reason why Putnam distrusts the way of seeing the hard moral questions as problems to be solved through binding principles: once we have derived a solution from such principles, we will be tempted to label the non-compliers as immoral. – In other words, unlike Bernard Gert, who believes that, when confronting with issues which common morality cannot solve, there is always the alternative of the political decisions, albeit not moral solutions in themselves, Hilary Putnam understands the exercise of interpretation and adjudication of moral dilemmas as a genuine expression of practical reasoning. Undoubtedly, this practical reasoning manifests itself in the very legal and political solutions assumed at a given time. They say considerably more about the nature of morality (nonfinality, fallibility, etc.), especially in the face of those hard moral questions, than what happens in the clear-cut cases where the use of one or more rules may be an almost mechanical act. The example quoted here – the ruling given by the Supreme Court of the USA on abortion (a foetus in the first trimester does not have legal protection, abortion in the second trimester must be decided primarily in the interest of the mother’s

health, and a foetus in the third trimester must be protected by law) – is, in Putnam’s opinion, a classic case of reasonable adjudication of a moral dilemma in the absence of an acceptable theory able to answer and harmonize substantial questions such as: „When does a foetus become a person?“, „In

which stage of the foetal development can we speak of interests?“, and so on. – If the theories of common morality will assume the pragmatic and interpretive aspects constitutive to the debates on moral questions, they would better complete their two predominant interests, the descriptive and the normative one.

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