# Neil Cooper's Concepts of Morality

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In a recent discussion note entitled "Morality and Importance" (MIND, January 1968, pp. 118-121) Neil Cooper attempts to clarify the question of whether anything can rationally be regarded as more important than morality by distinguishing two concepts of morality. While this question is in need of some such clarification, Cooper's distinction between "positive" and "autonomous" morality will not serve this purpose.

Cooper describes positive morality as "a social phenomenon . . . a framework of rules and ideals conformity to which is enforced by a distinctive kind of social pressure or sanction, ' the reproaches of one's neighbours ' ". We refer to autonomous morality when we talk of the "moral beliefs and principles of individuals." Autonomous morality is said to be an answer to questions such as: " ' What considerations ought we to hold most important in making up our minds what to do? ' " or " ' What ought our master-concern(s) to be? ' "

Here the first difficulty arises. What is the sense of " ought " in these questions? It is clearly a moral " ought " and not the " ought " of prudence, for otherwise autonomous morality would be simply prudential, whereas in fact individuals may have moral principles which are not principles of prudence. But Cooper maintains that there are two kinds of moral " ought ", so we must now ask which one is being used here. If the " ought " here were that of positive morality, autonomous morality would not be the fully independent concept Cooper claims it to be. So the " ought " can only be that of autonomous morality. Therefore Cooper must be saying that a person's morality is what he thinks it most important to think most important. If this is not nonsense it is at least a redundancy and may be reduced to the claim that a person's morality is what he thinks is most important. That this interpretation is correct can be seen by Cooper's next sentence which states that in the autonomous sense of morality " nobody can consistently think that anything is more important than *his* (italics in original) own morality . . . if anybody does think something more important than morality, then this too is part, and the most important part, of his morality." Thus Cooper makes it a matter of definition that whatever a person thinks most important is his morality, in the autonomous sense. In support Cooper quotes a description of the Bohemians as having " ' one morality, one devotion and that was Art ' ". Similar descriptions are cited of groups such as capitalists and religious thinkers, for whom commercial success and Divine commandments respectively also constitute " morality ".

This account of autonomous morality may be objected to by those philosophers who hold that a person does not make a moral judgement unless he makes a judgement which he is prepared to apply universally. For there is no reason why a person must regard those principles

which he is prepared to universalise as of paramount importance. An egoist's basic principle may be to do whatever is in his own interest, without recognising the right of others to act in a similar fashion. Cooper's account appears to imply that despite the lack of universal application, this principle should still be described as the egoist's morality. A doubt as to whether Cooper would welcome this implication arises, however, because all of his examples are cases in which the autonomous morality is one its holders would have been prepared to apply universally.

This doubt is confirmed if one follows up a footnote reference to a fuller treatment of the distinction between positive and autonomous morality in an article by Cooper entitled " Two Concepts of Morality ' (*Philosophy*, January 1966, pp. 19-33). Here autonomous morality is in one place described as the " universal evaluations " to which a person is prepared to commit himself (p. 27) and Hare is mentioned as an Autonomous Moralist (p. 28). Indeed there is no mention of the " paramount importance " aspect of autonomous morality. Positive morality is outlined in the same way as in the discussion note, but autonomous morality is said to be employed " whenever we stand back from the positive morality and try to make up our minds whether to accept or reject some part of it " (p. 23). In accordance with this definition, Bentham is listed alongside Hare as an Autonomous Moralist and Sidgwick is described as having been " obsessed by the Autonomous uses of moral words " (p. 28). This shows very clearly the inconsistency between the two pieces of writing, for as Sidgwick himself said in the final chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*, there is no reason, short of belief in reward and punishment in the after-life, which could induce a rational egoist to treat the greatest good of all as more important than his own greatest good.

Are there then three concepts of morality—the morality of a society, the morality of personal universal evaluations and the morality of whatever a person thinks to be most important? The third concept has the weakest claim to be a genuine concept of morality, opposed as it is to the view that universalisation is the pre-requisite for morality. But this is not the place for an examination of this issue. It should be noted, however, that Cooper has given no reason for holding that such a concept of morality does exist, because his examples are all of universalisable moralities. This is not to say that no example can be found which would support this concept. It has been suggested that we do sometimes say of an egoist who is not prepared to universalise egoism that " his morality is purely selfish ".[1] So there may be this third sense of morality. Nevertheless it would seem more natural to say of such a person that " he allows his own interests to over-ride moral considerations ", so this is a less common and possibly metaphorical use of " morality ".

In any case, even if it were true that there is a proper concept of

[1] D. H. Monro, *Empiricism and Ethics* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 129, 223.

morality according to which it is not possible to hold anything to be more important than morality, little consolation can be drawn from this for those who desire to show that it is rational to allow considerations such as the interests of others to over-ride one's own interests. For in this sense of morality, egoism is just as proper a morality as any other and Sidgwick's point, mentioned above, still stands. On the other hand, the question of why it is rational to regard morality (in any sense other than the one just discussed) as more important than anything else still awaits an answer.

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