

Permaculture Ethics and the Chain of Benefits

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Introduction

Why do we act as we do? What guides our ethical decisions? Consider the following two passages from Geoff Mulgan's *Connexity*:

For it to be *right* for governments to encourage their citizens to take on more responsibilities, certain conditions need to be in place. ... It is ... *morally wrong* to impose responsibilities that are far beyond people's capacities (Mulgan 1997, p. 199, emphasis added)

Communities are facts of life, as are governments. The only interesting questions concern how they can be used, or shaped, to achieve *benign* ends. (Mulgan 1997, p. 200, emphasis added)

Two modes of discourse are deployed here, two ways of speaking – and hence thinking – about how to evaluate and choose courses of action. The first is the language of right and wrong; the second, the language of goodness and harm. They each have their area of applicability, and they often get confused.

The Right

What is right has to do with conformance to rules or regulations. This is easy to see in non-ethical situations. For instance, the right answer to "What is two plus two?" is "Four." We apply a mathematical rule and derive the right, or correct, answer. In ethical situations, we apply a moral rule to determine what the right course of action is. If one finds a wallet with some money in it and the owner's identification as well, the right thing to do is to return the money to the owner. The moral rule is "it is wrong to keep something that does not belong to one."

The problem, of course, is how to determine the moral rules. Humans have an innate sense of morality, of right and wrong; but, notoriously, the actual set of rules they espouse varies from culture to culture. Although many people unreflectively adopt the rules taught them by their parents, teachers, religious leaders and culture, one wishes to provide a rational grounding for one's choice of what rules to follow. Philosophers have proposed numerous ways of determining what the rules are, such as divine command, the dictates of pure reason, and using an intuitive moral sense to apprehend an unseen but existent world of values. So far, there is no agreement on which of these is correct.

The language associated with this approach uses the terms "right" and "wrong" to evaluate actions. Some synonyms for "right" are "proper," "legal" and "correct." Some synonyms for "wrong" are "improper," "illegal" and "incorrect."

The Good

By contrast, what is good has to do with benefits, not rules. Something that benefits something or someone else is called good for that thing or person. The concept of goodness may be instrumental or biological. Instrumentally, a hammer is good for pounding nails, and what is good for the hammer is what enables it to do so well. Biologically, air, water, and food are good for living beings.

To make sense, an instrumental usage requires reference to somebody's purpose or intention. Thus, a hammer is good for pounding nails, and one pounds nails in order to build things such as furniture or housing. One's intention is to acquire the comfort and utility these things afford us.

The biological usage does not require reference to purpose or intention. It is expressed in terms of health and well-being. That which nourishes a living thing is good for it. The good, in this sense, is that which enables a thing to function well.

The instrumental usage intersects the biological when we consider what is good for something that is itself good for a purpose or intention. For instance, keeping a hammer clean and sheltered from the elements is good for the hammer, and enables the hammer to fulfil its instrumental function. In the instrumental sense as well, the good is that which enables a thing to function well.

The approach to ethics that emphasizes goodness uses the terms "good" and "bad" to evaluate actions, things, people and states of affairs. Some synonyms for "good" are "helpful," "nourishing," "beneficial" and "effective." Some synonyms for "bad" are their opposites: "unhelpful," "unhealthy," "damaging" and "ineffective."

Confusion Between Right and Good, and Why It Matters

Too often people confuse the notions of right and good, treating them as if they were the same. The confusion is understandable; both concepts apply to what one should do, and often the debate is really about persuading someone to act in a certain way. But the two domains of discourse really are different. That something is in accordance with a moral rule does not make it good. That something has good effects does not make it right. If someone says something is right, one can always ask "according to what rule?" If someone says something is good, one can always ask "good for what?" It is not useful to mix the two concepts.

As designers we need to be clear not only about what we are designing but also about why, and that leads us to considerations of ethics. Making the distinction between Right and Good can help us here because it promotes clarity of thought, and the clearer our thinking, the more likely we are to succeed in designing solutions that satisfy our stakeholders, be they clients, employers, customers, or friends and neighbours.

The philosophical, or meta-ethical, question is which of the two paradigms is to be preferred in making ethical choices. For many reasons, detailed in another paper, I believe it makes more sense to adopt the Goodness paradigm (Meacham 2008). One of those reasons is that the Goodness paradigm is more fitting to the connected and interconnected nature of reality.

Goodness and Connexity

The Goodness paradigm is more appropriate in a world of connexity than the Rightness paradigm. The latter implies division and separation. It is all too easy to distinguish those who obey the rules from those who don't, and to vilify and persecute the latter. Of course the latter have their own set of rules and vilify and persecute the former. The result is strife and discord.

Lacking a recognition that all things are interconnected, a focus on goods rather than rights or duties may also lead to strife, as numerous wars over territory and resources have demonstrated. But it is much easier to consider additional evidence within the mentality that looks for benefits and harms than to break out of the “us vs. them” Rightness mentality. Better outcomes result from thinking in terms of good and bad than from thinking in terms of right and wrong.

An ethic based on the Goodness paradigm looks at the health of the whole and of each part of the whole. It seeks to include the parts in the whole. In today’s world it is impossible to overlook the connectedness and interconnectedness of cultures and societies. Such social connectedness grows out of the ecological interdependence of all living things in the natural world. The Goodness approach is thus more congruent with the actual state of reality.

Permaculture

The Goodness paradigm is an integral part of a design discipline called Permaculture. Permaculture aims to create sustainable human environments. It takes inspiration from the interconnection between things in the physical world as we find it, designing solutions that explicitly take advantage of interconnections between design elements. The term was coined in 1976 by Australian ecologist Bill Mollison and his student David Holmgren as a contraction for Permanent Agriculture and has been expanded to mean Permanent Culture, for food production is only one of many activities needed for healthy, sustainable environments for humans. (Grayson and Payne 2007) Permaculture is an interdisciplinary practice focusing on sustainable food production, energy-efficient building, recycling, wastewater treatment, land stewardship, and just and workable social structures and economies.

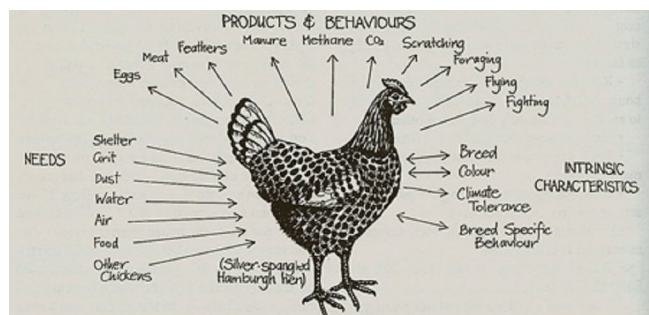
Permaculture’s fundamental principle is to design with nature. Mollison says

In designing with nature, rather than against it, we can create landscapes that operate like healthy natural systems, where energy is conserved, wastes are recycled and resources are abundant.
(Mollison and Slay 1994, p. 72)

Permaculture recognizes that every design element has needs and services; that is, every element requires inputs in order to function and produces outputs. The trick is to use the outputs in such a way as to be inputs for other elements. Doing so reduces waste, reduces the need for artificial energy inputs and enhances the yield of desirable outputs. Traditional site design concerns itself with placement of elements to achieve aesthetic or economic effects or both. Permaculture extends this effort to create environments that are healthful and nurturing for the humans and other species inhabiting the site and that are sustainable in their use of natural resources.

[A modern concept of industrial design, the “Cradle to Cradle” approach, bears some resemblance to Permaculture in taking nature as an inspiration for design. One of its leading proponents, William McDonough, says “when designers employ the intelligence of natural systems ... they can create products, industrial systems, buildings, even regional plans that allow nature and commerce to fruitfully co-exist.” (McDonough 2006). Permaculture focuses less on industrial and more on habitat design.]

Take, for example, the chicken, a favourite of introductory Permaculture courses (Mollison and Slay 1994, p. 7).



Chickens have needs: shelter, water, a dust bath to deter lice, a protected roosting area and nest boxes. They need a source of grit to grind food, other chickens for companionship, and, of course, food. They provide many useful products: meat, eggs, feathers, manure, carbon dioxide, sound, heat and methane. (Some of these products may not immediately appear to be useful;

the trick is to make them so, because they are products of the chicken whether we use them or not.) In addition, chickens exhibit behaviours. They scratch for food, walk, fly, roost in trees or perches at night, form flocks and lay eggs. In order to design the optimal placement of chickens on a site, we want to (a) allow them to behave naturally, thus doing work that the humans would otherwise have to do; and (b) place them close to elements that can make use of their outputs. Some of the ways we can utilize chickens in a site design are as follows:

- The garden needs fertilizer, mulch and water; and it produces leaves, seeds and vegetables. Placing the chicken pen near the garden enables easy collection of manure for fertilizer and easy feeding of surplus produce to the chickens.
- The greenhouse needs carbon dioxide for the plants, methane for germination, fertilizer, heat and water. Placing the chicken house next to the greenhouse provides night-time heat to the greenhouse, as well as manure for fertilizer.
- The orchard needs weeding, pest control, manure and some pruning. It provides fruit and nuts and also breeds insects. If we allow the chickens to roam in the orchard, they will eat the insects and provide manure for fertilizer.
- The woodlot needs management, fire control, pest control and fertilizer. It gives solid fuel, berries, seeds, insects, shelter, some warmth in cool time, and shade in sunny times. Chickens can roost in the trees, feed on insect larvae and assist in fire control by scratching or grazing grasses that would otherwise provide fuel for fire.
- The cropland needs ploughing, fertilizing, seeding, harvesting and storage for the harvested crops. It gives food for chickens and people. Chickens can provide manure and do the cultivating as well. Put a large number of chickens in a small contained area, and they will clear the vegetation and turn the soil over by scratching, as well as eat bugs that would otherwise eat the crops. A time-tested technique is the “chicken tractor,” a movable cage open to the ground. You put the cage in the field before planting, put a bunch of chickens in the cage, and let them scratch and forage. When the area under the cage is sufficiently cleared, you move the cage. Chickens, not people, do the work of cultivating and clearing.

In each of these examples elements are located in a chain of needs and services or benefits, sometimes multiple chains. What benefits the garden (or greenhouse or orchard, etc.) benefits the chicken. What benefits the chicken benefits the garden. Each, of course, benefits the human inhabitants; and wise design and usage by the humans benefit the land and the creatures living there. The natural world is a network of such chains of benefits. Permaculture design thus mimics the natural world.

A Goodness Ethic

Such a chain of benefits, or goods, is exactly what the ethical paradigm of Goodness is based on. When we say something is beneficial or good, we mean it is good *for* something. There is an end or goal either stated explicitly or implied. Biologically, what’s good for an organism helps that organism survive and thrive. Instrumentally, what’s good for a thing is what enables that thing to serve its purpose.

Just as good is defined in relation to an end, the value of the end is defined in relation to another end. For instance, a hammer is good for driving nails. Driving nails is good for, among other things, building houses. We build houses to have shelter and warmth. And we desire shelter and warmth because they sustain our life.

This chain of goods and ends stretches in both directions from wherever we arbitrarily start looking. A hammer is good for driving nails. So what is good for the hammer? Whatever enables it to perform its function. It's not good to leave it out in the rain; it is good to handle it carefully, swing it accurately with grace and force, and put it away safely.

This feature of the world – that things are interconnected in beneficial ways – has given Permaculture a strong sense of ethics from the very beginning. Here is a summary:

1. Take care of the earth.
2. Take care of the people.
3. Share the surplus.
4. Emphasize optimism and cooperation. (Michael 2004. See also Mollison 1988, p. 2, and Holmgren 2002, p. 1)

All of these ethical principles mimic the natural world. The injunction to take care of the earth means simply that if you want to provide for something – in our case, for human beings – you have to provide for the needs of all the elements that nurture and sustain the humans. It comes first, because if you start out focusing on the humans, you risk – as numerous now-extinct civilisations have done – overlooking the factors that sustain us. Taking care of the people thus comes second. In a sense it is the point of the whole enterprise, because as humans we are interested in caring for and perpetuating ourselves and our kin and progeny. But we also have a role in caring for the earth. The earth, as a whole system of interconnected complexity, would be poorer in our absence. The advice to share the surplus comes directly from observation of healthy natural systems. No animal, even those that store food for the winter, takes more than it needs. Every plant and animal provides nourishment and resources for other beings in its ecosystem. Humans are the ones that hoard surplus; and while doing so has led to great civilisations, it has also led to great impoverishment and misery. We can do better. Finally, the last point, to emphasize optimism and cooperation, reminds us that despite appearances to the contrary, all is not doom and gloom. Just as natural systems are vibrant and resilient, able to absorb the impacts of fire, flood and storm, so also are human beings, with our ability to handle intelligently any situation we find ourselves in.

All of these points are elaborations of an ethic based on Goodness, which can be stated concisely this way: We are all in this together, so we need to find a way to make it work for everyone. Fortunately, we are smart enough to do so.

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