

## Universally Preferable Behaviour - a rational alternative to morality

Stefan Molyneux in *Universally Preferable Behavior: A Rational Proof of Secular Ethics* argues that instead of morality we should use the expression universally preferable behaviour. For Molyneux, universally preferable behaviour is libertarian and rational. Anybody who understands the why behind it will see it makes sense. Universal means that the behaviour is not preferable regardless of time or place. It is always and universally unpreferable.

Let us ask if morality is rational. David Hume made a good case for saying it is not.

Hume suggests that he does not consider choice to be the cause of what you do on its own. He thinks your passions and instincts are the reasons you do what you do as well. The will then is not as important as it is made out to be. It is not all about what you choose. He rejects the view of most preceding philosophers that reason and the will can control the passions and instincts so that the latter are not the masters. He writes "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will - can never oppose passion in the direction of the will".

Morality is not rational or impossible to prove as rational if the passions have that big of an input in what we do for even when we control them it is only because they let us and they are still in fact boss. Incidentally morality hardly invites love and passion for it looks like rules and acts like rules and threatens the disobedient. Its side-effect will be people preferring the dark side.

Hume says that if you felt an urge to do something reason would need to work up another urge to stop it but that is not what happens.

Hume then concludes that moral good and reason are not the same thing and it is wrong to call evil unreasonable. That is because reason on its own "can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving of it" (T 458).

Hume also asserts that moral judgements do not state facts. It is not a fact that it is morally wrong to hurt a baby for nothing. It is not a fact that a painting is beautiful. That is what Hume means by saying an is does not give rise to an ought. A baby is hurt and that does not mean it ought not to be. Reason cannot turn a fact into an ought or show how an is can imply an ought. Some think Hume means that as morality is really just feelings that is why a fact cannot imply an ought.

Hume also said that we praise an action for we think it shows a good motive but the motive need not be really good. What we care about is that we approve of it. Us approving of it does not make it good.

He starts out by saying that some preferences are preferences you should have and others are preferences you should not have and that everybody should be in one mind about what is best to prefer. He declares them binding which means they can be forced on others. He insists that people with bad preferences must be corrected.

He writes, "If I argue against the proposition that universally preferable behavior is valid, I have already shown my preference for truth over falsehood — as well as a preference for correcting those who speak falsely". This he says by default means a willingness and preference to correct the bad preferences of others. It is objected that it shows what the preferable behaviour is to you but it still does not imply that you should fix others. What if you should not for they should do it themselves? There is still no obligation that one may prefer to impose on others. He gets preferred behaviour but not universally preferred behaviour.

The objection in fact says there is an obligation to neither impose or not impose. Doing neither is still doing something. So there could be an obligation to impose, an obligation to not impose and an obligation to do either which is the same as an obligation to do neither. Thus Molyneux DOES succeed in getting something universal. It makes no sense for that something to be just anything so it must be something preferable.

The argument he gives is fundamental and really the only one that is important. If it is wrong then there is no such thing as universally preferable behaviour. Thankfully the argument when teased out correctly shows itself to be true.

He writes, "It is impossible that anyone can logically argue against universally preferable behavior, since if he is alive to argue, he must have followed universally preferable behaviors such as breathing, eating and drinking." Against this it is said that our biological need for those things is unrelated to morality. The objection is that he is confusing descriptive and moral. A need is descriptive not moral. You need water but that need does not give you a moral obligation to take water.

The answer to the objection is that needs may be descriptive and not moral but that does not mean that the two are not inseparable.

One objection to the universal nature of Molyneux's universally preferred behaviour is that his contention that it makes no sense to say it is okay for some people to murder which implies that others may murder. He writes, "I also cannot logically argue that it is wrong for some people to murder, but right for other people to murder. Since all human beings share common physical properties and requirements, proposing one rule for one person and the opposite for another is invalid — it is like proposing a physics theory that says that some rocks fall down, while other rocks fall up. Not only is it illogical, it contradicts an observed fact of reality, which is that human beings as a species share common characteristics, and so cannot be subjected to opposing rules (page 44).

It has been observed that murder can be allowed up to a point.

Although I have so far been critical of Molyneux, I am happy to give him credit for an excellent idea. He suggests that a good test for a moral theory is its ability to arrive at the correct result for obvious cases, like rape, murder, and theft. If a theory cannot show that a rule that purported to make such conduct obligatory is ill-formed, the theory should be rejected. Molyneux thinks he can show exactly this for his own account of universally preferable behavior.

His "argument" against a rule that mandated rape must be read to be believed. I hasten to add that there is nothing to be said in favor of rape: to the contrary, it is obviously morally horrendous. But even here, Molyneux founders. He says, "If 'rape' is a moral good, then 'not raping' must be a moral evil — thus it is impossible for two men in the same room to both be moral at the same time, since only one of them can be a rapist at any given moment — and he can only be a rapist if the other man becomes his victim. (p. 66)

Incredibly, Molyneux takes the rule he is considering to be one that requires people to be continuously engaged in rape. It never occurs to him to take the rule as mandating, "at some time or other, you ought to attempt rape," an evil imperative that would escape his strictures. Evidently this construal would violate his bizarre requirements about universality: a morally required action is one that everyone must perform at the same time, all the time.

He deploys an analogous argument against a rule that made theft obligatory: people could not always and everywhere steal. He adds another consideration that is equally inept.

In other words, working to gain control of a piece of property is only valid if you can assert your property rights over the stolen object. No one will bother stealing a wallet if he has certain knowledge that it will be stolen from him the moment he gets his hands on it. (p. 81)

This last sentence is entirely reasonable, but it has no bearing on the rule mandating theft. If people think that theft is obligatory, it by no means follows that anyone will succeed in taking away something you have stolen.

He writes, when discussing my view of ethics:

"These preferences, furthermore, have to do with morality, behavior that can be forcibly imposed on people. 'Those preferences which can be considered binding upon others can be termed 'universal preferences' or 'moral rules'" (p. 40)."

When I use the word "binding," I am not referring to physical violence - otherwise I would use the word "enforceable" or "compulsory." "Binding" means "having power to bind or oblige; obligatory: a binding promise." It does not equal violence.

He then writes:

"Is there, then, behavior that is in his sense universally preferable?" (emphasis added)

"In his sense"? If I'm talking about universal preferences, I am not talking about subjective preferences, thus inserting the phrase "in his sense" moves the discussion from universal and objective to subjective and personal. This is like saying "Does Stef follow his own personal version of the scientific method?" If it is my own personal version, it is not the scientific method. If it is the scientific method, it is not my own personal version.

David then writes:

"His first claim is that the very fact of engaging in inquiry over the existence of universally preferable behavior suffices to answer the question in the affirmative. If I am engaged in debate about this topic, must I not prefer truth to falsehood? An attempt to deny this leads to contradiction: 'If I argue against the proposition that universally preferable behavior is valid, I have already shown my preference for truth over falsehood - as well as a preference for correcting those who speak falsely' (p.40)."

First of all, the word "claim" is incorrect. "Claim" is a weasel word designed to downgrade your opponent's arguments -

there is no philosophical content or value in the word "claim," since it is by definition a statement with neither empirical or rational backing. A "claim" can be dismissed without argument, since it is not founded on arguments - since I make both prose arguments and break those arguments down into a series of syllogisms, the correct word would be "argument," not "claim."

David then writes:

Molyneux is certainly right that someone who wants to discover whether universally preferable behavior exists, prefers, while trying to find the answer, truth over falsehood; but how does this generate a preference to correct others with mistaken views? Molyneux wrongly supposes that if someone wants to discover the truth, he must be engaged in an actual debate with someone else. Why must he? Further, what has any of this to do with enforceable obligations, the ostensible subject of his inquiry?

Using the word "exists" is problematic, since I clearly state many times in the book that neither morality nor UPB "exists" in the way that trees or rocks do - but more importantly David has just ignored the actual words from my book that he just quoted a paragraph earlier.

What I wrote was, "If I argue..." David then substitutes "if someone wants to discover the truth" - which is not the same thing at all, and a complete straw man. "Arguing" is objective behaviour; "wanting to discover the truth" is an unverifiable subjective desire. Throughout the book, I repeatedly argue that thought is not subject to ethical judgement - only behavior, which is reflected in the title of the book - Universally Preferable Behaviour.

I fully accept that someone who wants to discover the truth about where he left his keys is not engaged in a philosophical debate, but so what? I also will concede that someone sitting in a darkened room attempting to remember something from his childhood is also attempting to discover the truth, but this has no bearing on a philosophical discourse about universally preferable behavior.

I spent quite a long time writing this book, and really picked my words carefully, which is why I used the phrase, "If I argue against the proposition that universally preferable behavior is valid..." and not "if I want to discover the truth in any context." I don't know exactly what to say about this kind of repetitive substitution and straw manning, other than that it seems clear that David is not being exactly objective about the book.

David then writes, "Further, what has any of this to do with enforceable obligations, the ostensible subject of his inquiry?"

Well, the answer to that is in the book, where I write in the chapter UPB: Ethics or Aesthetics?:

Although we first focused on UPB in the realm of ethics, UPB can now be seen as an "umbrella term," which includes such disciplines as:

- The scientific method
- Logic
- Empiricism
- Debating
- Language
- Ethics

Ethics is the subset of UPB which deals with inflicted behaviour, or the use of violence. Any theory that justifies or denies the use of violence is a moral theory, and is subject to the requirements of logical consistency and empirical evidence.

If we can establish the validity of the concept of universally preferable behavior, we have come a long way towards establishing a rational system of ethics. So if David is bewildered as to what UPB has to do with ethics, he must have missed that part of the book, or misunderstood its relevance.

David then writes:

Molyneux has many more arguments on offer. How can we deny the existence of universally preferable behavior, he asks: does not life itself depend on it? "Thus it is impossible that anyone can logically argue against universally preferable behavior, since if he is alive to argue, he must have followed universally preferable behaviors such as breathing, eating and drinking."

Is it not obvious that Molyneux has confused two different senses of "universally preferable behavior"? Biological laws are, as even our author elsewhere realizes, descriptive regularities; Molyneux fails utterly to show that acting in accord with

such laws to keep oneself alive has anything to do with moral obligation.

As I write many times in the book, UPB is not synonymous with ethics - ethics is a subset of UPB. It is so obvious that biological laws are not the same as moral laws that I don't even know really how to reply to it. Biological laws are involuntary, universal, objective, and scarcely need human or philosophical reinforcement. Moral laws are voluntary; I can choose to steal, but I cannot choose to be an amphibian. Exercise is a choice; the effects of exercise are not.

If you argue against the validity of UPB, however, when you are only alive because you have followed UPB (eating, drinking, sleeping), that is a self-detonating argument, the same as yelling into someone's ear that sound does not exist.

This only proves the validity of UPB, not the subset called ethics. That is one reason why the book continues after this early argument. If the book ended with me saying, "You have to eat in order to live, and therefore you cannot steal!" well, that would be quite an incomplete argument, to say the least.

He next tries to dissect a paragraph I have written about universality:

"I also cannot logically argue that it is wrong for some people to murder, but right for other people to murder. Since all human beings share common physical properties and requirements, proposing one rule for one person and the opposite for another is invalid - it is like proposing a physics theory that says that some rocks fall down, while other rocks fall up. Not only is it illogical, it contradicts an observed fact of reality, which is that human beings as a species share common characteristics, and so cannot be subjected to opposing rules. (p. 44)"

Molyneux offers no argument that the rules of morality must respond only to the characteristics that define the human species. If someone proposed a rule of the form, "Human beings who meet such-and-such requirements, and not others, may kill under the following circumstances," no doubt we should want to look at the reasons alleged for this claim very closely; but we could not dismiss the proposal outright because it draws a distinction between two classes of people. Arbitrary appeals to the laws of physics or biology have nothing to do with the case.

First of all, when David says that I make no arguments about why morality must apply to all human beings, that is entirely false. Please see the chapter "UPB: Optional and Objective."

Secondly, if I propose a moral rule which says that redheaded people may murder every second full moon, then I have violated universality. This would be like a biologist saying that green spotted frogs become mammals for 10 minutes every second full moon. Other biologists would doubtless ask how frogs could change their essential physiology in order to be classified so differently. We cannot create arbitrary rules in philosophy, any more than we can in physics or engineering or biology or any other rational and empirical discipline. In the book, there is an entire chapter rebutting arbitrary distinctions:

In the same way, an ethicist cannot validly put forward the moral proposition: "It is evil to rape the elderly." "Rape" is the behaviour; whether the victim is elderly or not is irrelevant to the moral proposition, since as long as the victim is human, the requirement for universality remains constant. "Thou shalt not steal" is a valid moral proposition according to UPB - "thou shalt not steal turnips" is not, for the simple reason that theft is related to the concept of property - and turnips, as a subset of property, cannot be rationally delineated from all other forms of property and assigned their own moral rule.

Perhaps David did not get to this part of the book, or perhaps he did not understand it, or perhaps he did not understand its relevance - he certainly did not quote or rebut it.

When David gets to my arguments against rape as UPB, he quotes me:

If "rape" is a moral good, then "not raping" must be a moral evil - thus it is impossible for two men in the same room to both be moral at the same time, since only one of them can be a rapist at any given moment - and he can only be a rapist if the other man becomes his victim.  
(p. 66)

Incredibly, Molyneux takes the rule he is considering to be one that requires people to be continuously engaged in rape. It never occurs to him to take the rule as mandating, "at some time or other, you ought to attempt rape," an evil imperative that would escape his strictures. Evidently this construal would violate his bizarre requirements about universality: a morally required action is one that everyone must perform at the same time, all the time.

This is not my complete argument, although it is a challenging argument for most people to understand. Rape cannot be UPB because sexual penetration is only rape if it is unwanted - thus one man must want to rape, while the other man must desperately not want to be raped, which means that both of them cannot simultaneously value rape as universally preferable behavior. It certainly is true that it is physiologically impossible to rape all the time, which is empirical evidence for the

invalidity of the theory that rape can be UPB - but more importantly, it is logically impossible for rape to be UPB.

David writes:

It never occurs to him to take the rule as mandating, "at some time or other, you ought to attempt rape," an evil imperative that would escape his strictures.

This does not escape my strictures (and again, if they are my strictures, then we are talking subjective preference, not objective truth) - because as I repeatedly point out in the book, the word "universally" means "independent of time or place." Thus when David says "at some time or other" he breaks universality, and thus is no longer talking about ethics. Again, this would be like a physicist saying "my universal theory is that on Wednesdays, between 2 and 3 AM, rocks fall upwards."

He deploys an analogous argument against a rule that made theft obligatory: people could not always and everywhere steal. He adds another consideration that is equally inept.

David provides no argument against my formulation of the ban against theft, but then says that another of my arguments is "equally inept." In other words, he says, "You have a first argument - your second argument is equally inept."

He quotes from my book:

In other words, working to gain control of a piece of property is only valid if you can assert your property rights over the stolen object. No one will bother stealing a wallet if he has certain knowledge that it will be stolen from him the moment he gets his hands on it. (p. 81)

This is one of a few arguments against "theft as UPB" in the book - a thief is both violating and affirming property rights when he steals, which is a logical contradiction.

He then writes:

This last sentence is entirely reasonable, but it has no bearing on the rule mandating theft. If people think that theft is obligatory, it by no means follows that anyone will succeed in taking away something you have stolen.

This is not my argument at all. The logical contradiction involved in stealing – the simultaneous violation and affirmation of property rights - does not require that someone else actually succeed in stealing from the thief. (The other argument I make in the book, that stealing cannot be UPB because property transfer must be opposed in order to be theft, is not addressed in this article.)

Molyneux interestingly says that we own our bodies and our selves. Thus we own the effects of what we do no matter what we do. We own what we make or create or produce. If you create a murder you own the murder. If you create a sculpture you own it.

Let Molyneux have the last word,

1. Truth is universally preferable to falsehood. i.e. it is not a subjective opinion, but arguments which conform to reason and evidence.
2. It is universally preferable for my arguments to be rational, and not irrational.
3. It is universally preferable for me not to contradict myself.
4. In the realm of rational argument, success is universally preferable to failure, and success and failure are not subjective outcomes.

To do no harm and to do some good are two separate issues and ideals. To do no harm matters more than doing some good because if harm does not matter then doing good cannot. The sheer logic of this shows that morality is indeed rational even if we are not sure how. Sometimes something is hard to put down as sensible until you see what conclusions you get. You may not understand how the maths worked out but the end result shows you have got it right.