Some thoughts on morality and the European migrant crisis - Chris Lyons, 20.09.15

Morality

Our moral actions are guided by two, often conflicting, elements – reason and emotions, or the head and the heart.

Reason.
Moral reasoning falls within the field of philosophy. There are a number theories, the main ones being Virtue Ethics (Aristotle, emphasises moral character), De-ontology (Kant, emphasises duties) and Utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill, emphasises consequences). None of these is entirely satisfactory and able to be applied unqualified to all situations. For example, utilitarianism claims that the moral act is the one which leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number, but this can be achieved by scapegoating. Consider that a terrorist commits an atrocity. The population is outraged and demands the perpetrator be caught. A suspect is arrested, tried and convicted. Everyone is happy. Everyone, that is, except the one convicted who claims to be innocent. But the condition of the greatest happiness for the greatest number has been satisfied. Utility has been maximised and the possibility that the suspect was framed is not relevant to the theory.

Emotions.
So we feel uneasy about accepting utilitarianism as the single guide to our moral behaviour. But where does this feeling come from and should we trust it. Most of us do trust these gut feelings implicitly – they are what guide our everyday behaviour. But are we right to trust them? Jonathan Haidt has identified five moral instincts which are present in all the people he’s studied in every part of the world. But they are present in varying degrees and given different emphases by different cultures. The five instincts are:

- Justice or fairness (which was absent in the utilitarian example above)
- Avoidance of harm
- Loyalty – to one’s family, group or country
- Respect for legitimate authority
- Purity – avoidance of actions that give rise to the feeling of disgust

It can be seen that though these five are all present in everyone it’s possible for them to conflict. Modern liberals emphasise the first two at the expense of the remaining three. Conservatives emphasise the first two less than liberals, but consider the remaining three of greater importance than they do. Liberal democracies are successful in part for having suppressed nepotism - in other words, for emphasising justice above loyalty. We think it’s immoral for someone in public office to dole out favours to their friends and relatives, but in many societies someone who had the power to help his brother, but refused to do so, would be considered a despicable bastard. Likewise with purity – the emotion of disgust probably evolved to protect us from the dangers associated with excrement and rotten flesh, but it later accreted into other areas. In fairly recent times activities that caused disgust and thereby attracted moral opprobrium included, sexual relations between people of different races or of the same sex, autopsies, blood transfusions, organ transplants, and, still today, the consumption of pig products is morally repulsive to many Jews and Muslims, as is associating with those of a lower caste to many Brahmins.
In order to examine the possible unreliability of our feelings about the avoidance of harm, psychologists have developed a thought experiment called ‘the trolley problem’, which has now been tried on many thousands of people and has led to a whole field of study known as ‘trolleyology’. In its simplest form you are asked to imagine standing by a railway track and seeing a trolley (wagon) which has broken free and is running rapidly down an incline. Ahead, but just out of sight and ear-shot, you know there to be five men working on the track, who will be killed if hit by the trolley. But there is a branch-line onto which you can direct the trolley by operating a lever. Working on the branch, however, is one man, who will doubtlessly be hit and killed by the trolley. When asked, the vast majority of people consider it justifiable to redirect the trolley and thereby cause the death of one person, to save the lives of five. But now you are asked to consider a different scenario. The trolley is still hurtling down the track towards the five workmen, but there is no branch-line. Instead there is a footbridge over the track on which you are standing – as also, is a very fat man. You would be able to stop the trolley only by heaving the fat man over the bridge into its path. You would once again save five lives by sacrificing one – this time that of the fat man – so the arithmetic is identical to the previous scenario. But this time, when asked, very few people consider it to be justified. What is the difference between the two cases and can the differences in the feelings they evoke be considered valid.

The trolley scenario has been refined many times to try to tease out the difference in the two cases where the utilitarian arithmetic is the same. It seems to be that harm inflicted ‘up close and personal’ is more repulsive to us than that done more remotely, and this probably relates back to our evolutionary past when harm could only be inflicted from up close. But this has consequences of which we should at least be aware. In warfare, for instance, sticking a bayonet through someone’s chest is far more gut-wrenching than dropping a nuclear bomb from a plane thirty thousand feet above a city.

So what legitimates our moral instincts? I suspect that there isn’t anything that does and that there’s no solid ground on which to stand. Perhaps the best we can do is a balancing act, never letting our feelings completely rule our reason, nor our reason our feelings. But often there might be no actual right answer.

Migrant crisis

So how does this relate to the current migrant crisis in Europe? The recent photograph of a small boy, drowned on a Turkish beach caused a big outflow of emotion in Europe. The archbishop of Canterbury, the chief rabbi and all those Thinkers of the Day joined in to exhort us to open our borders and welcome the migrants. But the question is, should this incident have swayed people to demand a policy change? The fact is, of course, that there had been hundreds, if not thousands, of people who had drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in the previous months, but the image of the little boy was more potent than the statistics. And, of course, who could not feel moved by the suffering of these people – their plight was indeed dire. But what the media called for was unconditional generosity on the part of EU countries, without any consideration of the consequences. Could Europe withstand the arrival of so many, and might not the migrants kill the goose that was laying the golden eggs that attracted them in the first place? What was absent was any discussion of numbers and when there was it was uninformed. So, when Cameron, under pressure, announced a modest increase in the number Britain would take – twenty thousand – MP
Gerald Kaufman denounced it as hopelessly inadequate and compared it (unfavourably, in his opinion) with the many more children Britain had saved from the Nazis during the thirties. Yet, if he had checked, he would have found that the number saved by the Kindertransports was something less than ten thousand. The scale of today’s migration is much greater than it was then.

The question that needs to be discussed and answered is how many migrants would come to Europe if there were no limits to the welcome they would be given, and how many would it take to destabilise and destroy European culture. The answer to neither question is easy and the best that can be come up with is a guesstimate. Nevertheless, it certainly doesn’t seem implausible that the number would be tens, if not hundreds, of millions and that this (in my opinion, at least) could well lead to chaos. Here’s a Gallup poll survey that has a stab at an answer: [http://www.gallup.com/poll/161435/100-million-worldwide-dream-life.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/161435/100-million-worldwide-dream-life.aspx) Of course, it relates to the US, not Europe, (though the Mediterranean is easier to cross than the Atlantic) and we simply don’t know to what lengths the interviewees would go to accomplish their stated desire. So the question becomes – can we, with the imperfect knowledge we have, take the chance of having an open door policy to migrants. My answer would be, no, I don’t think we can. I think we should go to considerable lengths to provide refugees reasonable security, food and shelter – so far as it’s within our power to do so – but this would be in camps close to their place of origin. I don’t think that unlimited (or extremely large) numbers of people should be offered permanent residency in Europe.

But you might disagree with me. You might think me heartless. If you do and can support your position with good reasons, I’m open to being persuaded.

References:

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