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The Rightest Theory of Degrees of Rightness

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1 Introduction

In *The Dimensions of Consequentialism*, Martin Peterson elaborates and defends a novel form of consequentialist moral theory, which he calls “multi-dimensional consequentialism”. One of the “key claims” of this theory is that rightness is not all-or-nothing, but rather a matter of degree; not binary, but scalar [Peterson, 2013, 8–13]. Actually, that’s *two* claims. One is negative: rightness *is not* binary. The other is positive: rightness *is* scalar. I agree with only one half of this, the positive half. That is, on the view I shall propose, rightness is both all-or-nothing *and* a matter of degree.

That may sound paradoxical. So let me explain what I mean. On this view, there is a property, *right*, which a thing—typically, an act—either has or has not. That’s the binary bit. In addition, however, there is a comparative relation, *more right* (and cognate relations, *less right*, *equally right*, etc.), which holds between things and, importantly, which allows intermediate cases. That’s the scalar bit. An intermediate case is an act *x* such that, for some acts *y* and *z*, *x* is more right than *y*, and less right than *z*. The existence of such cases is important because, without them, we would not have degrees of rightness in the non-trivial sense Peterson wants. Someone who believes in only two “degrees” of rightness, *perfectly right* and *perfectly non-right*, may nonetheless say the former is more right than the latter.

There is no obvious reason to think that this property and this relation are mutually exclusive. The view is, therefore, *prima facie* coherent, at least. I aim to show that it has even more going for it. I begin by reviewing Peterson’s case for degrees of rightness, with which I largely agree. I argue, however, that, although this argument may provide good reason to accept degrees of rightness, it provides no reason to reject all-or-nothing rightness. This I do in part by showing that similar considerations arise in other cases where we would not want to do away with the relevant all-or-nothing concept (I give the example of circularity). Next, I argue that we also need all-or-nothing rightness. My argument, in brief, is that without this concept, we cannot adequately answer important moral questions. Finally, I suggest a way of having both concepts. I propose an analysis of degrees of rightness which reduces these to all-or-nothing rightness.

2 The Case for Degrees of Rightness

Peterson’s argument for degrees of rightness rests on another key claim of multi-dimensional consequentialism: that there is a plurality of incommensurable values [Peterson, 2013, 27–34]. So far as I can tell, however, these parts of the view are independent, and, in particular, the case for degrees of rightness depends not on pluralism. Even a monist may appreciate a need for degrees. Thus, the argument I give below, though in the same spirit as Peterson’s, is perhaps somewhat simpler, since it makes no appeal to plural values.

The argument, briefly, is that without degrees of rightness we cannot make moral distinctions that need to be made. Acts that are not morally equivalent may nonetheless be equivalent with respect to whether they are right or wrong. Thus, merely by classifying acts as either right or not right we cannot give a full account of moral situations. We must say, what’s more, whether one act is more or less right than another.

Consider an example. One day, while strolling through town, you are approached by a tourist who asks you for directions to one of the local attractions. Helping the tourist would cause you

no significant inconvenience. You know the location she seeks and could easily instruct her how to get there; no more urgent matter requires your immediate attention; and so on. What should you do? Among the things you *could* do are the following:

- (a) stop and give the requested directions,
- (b) ignore the request and walk away,
- (c) give false directions that will send the tourist far off course and, predictably, ruin her day.

Here is something we might say: (a) is right; (b) and (c) are not right. Few, I assume, would disagree with this. But to say *only* this is not to tell the full moral story. This statement discriminates between (a) and (b), and between (a) and (c), but not between (b) and (c). It places (b) and (c) together in the same moral category, “not right”. But these acts are not morally on a par. Our attitude to a person who sent the tourist off on a wild goose chase would not be the same as our attitude to one who simply walked away (though we would not think very highly of either). The gap in our story may be filled by introducing degrees of rightness. The moral difference, we may say, is that (b) is *more right* than (c).

Or, at any rate, (c) is *more wrong* than (b). This would amount to the same thing if “more right” were the inverse of “more wrong”, as, for example, “taller” is the inverse of “shorter”. But I am not sure that it is. I am accordingly more confident in degrees of wrongness than degrees of rightness. Still, since Peterson focuses on the latter, I will follow him in doing so here.

It is important to be clear on what this argument shows (if it shows anything). It does *not* show that our non-comparative statement, “(a) is right; (b) and (c) are not right”, is false. It shows at most that this statement is not the *whole* truth. The argument supports Peterson’s positive claim, but not his negative claim, in other words. To emphasise this point, another example will be helpful. What can be said about the three shapes, *A*, *B*, and *C*, shown in Figure 1? Here is one thing we can say: *A* is a circle; *B* and *C* are not circles. But, again, this does not tell the full story. This statement places *B* and *C* together in the same geometric category, “non-circular”, but these are not geometrically equivalent. What we want to say is that *B* is *more circular* than *C*. But surely we should not conclude, on this basis, that there is no such property as being a circle. We should not, that is to say, be driven to a view about circularity analogous to Peterson’s negative thesis about rightness. It is not wrong to say that *A* is circle, or that *B* and *C* are not circles, even if it is wrong, in some sense, to say *only* this. This is wrong, the argument suggests, in the sense of being incomplete, of failing to include some relevant truth, not of including some falsehood.

The example may also serve another purpose. Given the similarities between the case of rightness and the case of circularity, it seems natural to seek a general account that applies to both. I return to this thought below.

3 The Case for All-or-Nothing Rightness

Moral theories purport to answer the question “What ought I to do?” But to say merely, for example, that (a) is more right than (b), and (b) more right than (c), is not to answer this question, not fully. Such comparative rightness judgements alone are insufficient to tell us what to do. We need, in addition, a non-comparative judgement: for example, that (a) is *right*, and only (a) is. A moral theory that confined itself to comparative judgements would not be doing its job.

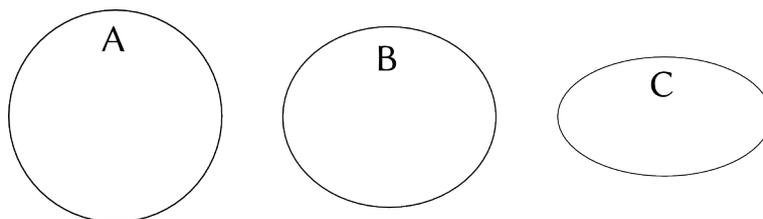


Figure 1: three shapes

It is instructive to consider the analogy with belief suggested by Peterson [2013, 27]. As Peterson reminds us, the notion of all-or-nothing belief gives rise to puzzles which may be sidestepped by eschewing this notion in favour of degrees of belief. For example, it is natural to suppose that justified belief is closed under logical implication; for example, if I am justified in believing each of two propositions, then I am justified in believing their conjunction. But there are well-known counterexamples. For each lottery ticket, I am justified in believing that this ticket will not win. But I am not justified in believing that no ticket will win. One proposed solution is to replace all-or-nothing belief with degrees of belief, with credences or subjective probabilities. Rather than ask simply whether I am justified in believing this or that proposition, ask what credences I am justified in assigning to these propositions. A consistent credence function may give low credence to the proposition that *this* ticket will win (for each ticket) but high credence to the proposition that *some* ticket will win. This is no mystery.

Whatever the merits of this view in the case of justified belief, I do not think it can be transferred smoothly to the case of right action. The reason is that belief and action differ fundamentally. Belief can be divided; action cannot. I can distribute my credence between a proposition and its negation, giving some credence to each. When I do so, I partly believe one proposition, and partly believe the other. In this way, I divide my belief. But I cannot, in the same way, divide my action between two acts. If my options include taking the 3:00pm train and taking the 4:00pm train, then there is no way for me to partly do one and partly do the other. I cannot divide myself in two, sending one half on the earlier train and the other half on the later train. I could perhaps take the 3:30pm train, but that would be a way of doing neither act, not a way of doing both.

Peterson advocates a decision procedure which, superficially, may seem a way of distributing one's action over several alternatives. But really it is not. Peterson's suggestion is "randomisation". In the above example, I may randomise by, say, tossing a coin to decide which train to take. Peterson claims that randomisation is the most "fitting" response to situations in which several alternatives are right to some degree. The probability that should be assigned to an alternative, on Peterson's view, is equal to the "force" of the alternative divided by the sum of the forces of all alternatives, where force is a function degree of rightness and another quantity which Peterson calls "strength" of rightness [Peterson, 2013, 117–21].

But randomisation is not distribution. To see this, consider again belief. Suppose my evidence is neutral between P and $\neg P$. What should I do? One thing I could do—the *rational* thing, I would say—is distribute my credence equally, giving $1/2$ to P and $1/2$ to $\neg P$. Another thing I could do is toss a coin, giving 1 to P if it lands heads (and 0 to $\neg P$), or 0 to P if it lands tails (and 1 to $\neg P$). Clearly, the latter approach is not a way of partly believing each of two propositions. Whichever way the coin lands, I will believe one proposition completely, and the other not at all. But the latter approach is Peterson's randomisation. The former approach—the rational one—has no analogue in the case of action.

Peterson might reject my initial premise, that moral theories are in the business of answering the question "What ought I to do?" This question, he might say, belongs not to morality, but to rationality.¹ There are two problems with this. First, it is revisionary. Certainly, Peterson is entitled, if he so wishes, to use "morality" to refer to a narrow subject matter consisting solely of questions about degrees of rightness and no more. But then he risks merely "talking past" the vast majority of moral theorists. His multi-dimensional consequentialism will not be a moral theory in the ordinary sense, or not a complete one. Second, it seems that whatever reasons Peterson offers for rejecting all-or-nothing morality, these same reasons will arise again in the case of rationality, in which case the problem simply recurs. Peterson may merely have swept the bump from under the moral carpet to the rational one.²

¹Such a position is suggested by Peterson's comments in response to the objection that endorsing randomisation "annihilates the claim that moral rightness comes in degrees" [Peterson, 2013, 120].

²Peterson explicitly rejects the view that "we [should] introduce degrees also on the level of rationality" [Peterson, 2013, 118]. But he gives no argument for rejecting it. Doing so, he says, would be beyond the scope of the book. Fair enough. But it does leave a significant worry about his view unresolved.

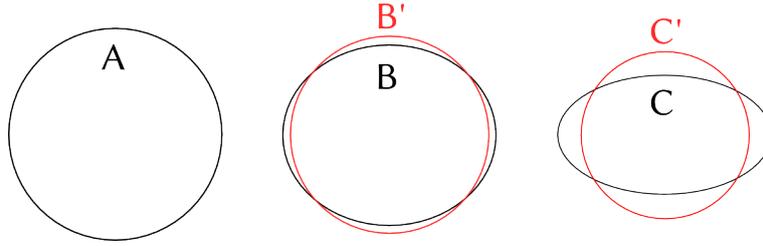


Figure 2: three shapes and most similar circles

4 How to Have Both

4.1 General Schema

The case for degrees of rightness, as we have seen, is not unique. Considerations of the sort that justify positing degrees of rightness are also present other cases (for example, the case of circularity). It seems desirable, therefore, to find a general account which applies to all these particular instances.

Such an account is nicely suggested by the circle example. By saying that B is more circular than C , what we mean is that B is *closer* to being a circle than C is. B is a better approximation of a circle. This may be expressed more precisely in terms of similarity. Let B' and C' be circles maximally similar to, respectively, B and C . This is illustrated in Figure 2. To aid comparison, B' and C' are superimposed on B and C . Notice that B' is more similar to B than C' is to C ; the dissimilarity between the former pair is less than that between the latter.³ This, I suggest, is roughly what we mean by saying that B is more circular than C .

It is only rough because it rests on an over-simplification, namely, that there exist *unique* circles maximally similar to B and C . This need not be so. But the analysis is easily adjusted, in a familiar way, to accommodate this possibility. The result is the following general schema:

x is at least as ϕ as y if and only if there exists some x' such that

1. x' is ϕ
2. for any y' , if y' is ϕ then x' is at least as similar to x as y' is to y .

Substituting “right” or “circular” for ϕ yields an analysis of degrees of rightness or circularity. A *degree* of rightness may be defined as an equivalence class under the relation of being equally right (x and y are equally right if and only if they are at least as right as each other).

A virtue of this analysis is that it is neutral between theories of the right, or moral theories. Degrees of rightness may seem more at home in a consequentialist theory than in, say, a deontological one. Consequentialism already gives centre stage to a notion, goodness, which comes in degrees. Consequences are not merely good or bad, but better or worse. Deontology, by contrast, sees right action as a matter of acting in accordance with strict, exceptionless rules, such as “Tell the truth”. A given act must either satisfy the rule or not. How, then, can there be degrees of rightness on such a view? Notice, however, that even among falsehoods, some may be *closer* to the truth than others. A mild exaggeration has something true in the nearby vicinity; a complete fabrication is not even in the same neighbourhood. The deontologist may therefore say, in line with the proposed analysis, that the former are more right than the latter.

4.2 Similarity for Consequentialism

In order to fit this general analysis to consequentialism, we need to plug in an appropriate metric of similarity between acts. In this section I will propose such a metric. I do not claim it to be necessarily the best that the consequentialist can do. My main aim is merely to illustrate how the general analysis might work in the case of consequentialism.

³I do not have an account of similarity between ellipses to offer, though I think one could be given. I hope the judgements of similarity above are intuitive enough for present purposes. For philosophical discussion of similarity, see, e.g., Lewis [1973].

The metric I propose incorporates two dimensions: the value of the acts (or, more precisely, the value of their consequences), and the value of the best alternatives. That is, the extent of dissimilarity between acts α and β is determined by (1) the difference in value between α and β , and (2) the difference in value between the best alternative to α and the best alternative to β . (An *alternative* to an act is an act that could be done instead of this act. An alternative to walking to work is taking a train, for example.)

Thus, for these purposes, an act may be represented as an ordered pair $\alpha = (\alpha_1, \alpha_2)$, where α_1 represents the first dimension of dissimilarity (the value of the act), and α_2 the second (the value of the best alternative). For simplicity, we will treat being an alternative as a reflexive relation: every act is an alternative to itself. We must therefore require that $\alpha_1 \leq \alpha_2$ (nothing can be better than the best). And α is *right* if and only if $\alpha_1 = \alpha_2$.

We may then define the following metric of dissimilarity:

$$d(\alpha, \beta) = |\alpha_1 - \beta_1| + |\alpha_2 - \beta_2|$$

The dissimilarity between α and β , denoted by $d(\alpha, \beta)$, is given by the sum of the (absolute) differences in each dimension of dissimilarity.⁴ Combined with this metric, the proposed analysis implies that α is at least as right as β if and only if $\alpha_2 - \alpha_1 \leq \beta_2 - \beta_1$. This follows from the fact that for any act α , the minimum dissimilarity between α and any right act is $\alpha_2 - \alpha_1$.⁵ The rightness of an act is judged by how far it falls short of the ideal: the further short it falls — that is, the greater the gap in value between this act and the best alternative — the less right it is.

This might seem implausible because it takes into account only the *difference* between the value of an act and the value of the best alternative, rather than the *ratio* of these two values. Consider, for example, the acts $\alpha = (1, 10)$ and $\beta = (91, 100)$. On my proposal, these acts are equally right, because the difference is the same. One might feel, however, that β should be regarded as more right than α . Whereas in the case of α , the act is only 10% as good of the best alternative, in the case of β , it is 91% as good.

The trouble with this view is that it presupposes that the value of acts can be represented on a ratio scale, and therefore that there is some non-arbitrary way to fix the zero-point of this scale. Suppose, for example, we shift the zero-point “upwards” by uniformly subtracting 101 from each value. The result is to transform α and β into, respectively, $\alpha' = (-100, -91)$ and $\beta' = (-10, -1)$. By the same reasoning as above, it seems we should now say that α' is *more* right than β' . Whereas in the case of β' , the best alternative is only 10% as bad the act, in the case of α' it is 91% as bad.

It is doubtful, however, that there is a uniquely correct way to set the zero-point. A comparative virtue of my proposal, therefore, is that it is insensitive to the zero-point. It requires only a cardinal or interval scale, not a ratio scale.

4.3 Comparison with Lockhart’s Analysis

The analysis I’ve proposed is reductive. It reduces “more right” to “right”. Peterson discusses a similarly reductive analysis, that proposed by Ted Lockhart:

x has a greater degree of moral rightness than y in situation S for agent A just in case, if x and y were the only alternatives open to A in S , then x would be morally right for A in S and y would be morally wrong for A in S . [Lockhart, 2000, 81]

The two analyses are not obviously incompatible. But one important difference is that my analysis is more general. Lockhart’s analysis applies only to pairs of acts that are alternatives to each other, that may be performed in the same situation. This seems a drawback. A person who uses her mobile phone while watching a movie in a public cinema may be acting wrongly, but surely not as wrongly as one who does the same while driving a heavy lorry on a motorway thereby

⁴This is a metric in the strict mathematical sense. In particular, it satisfies the following: $d(x, y) \geq 0$; $d(x, y) = 0$ iff $x = y$; $d(x, y) = d(y, x)$; and $d(x, z) \leq d(x, y) + d(y, z)$. This particular form of metric is sometimes called a “taxicab metric”, because the distances it represents are like those travelled by a taxicab on a grid-like network of streets.

⁵Suppose β is right and $\alpha_1 \leq \beta_1 = \beta_2 \leq \alpha_2$. Then we have $d(\alpha, \beta) = (\beta_1 - \alpha_1) + (\alpha_2 - \beta_2) = (\alpha_2 - \alpha_1) + (\beta_1 - \beta_2) = \alpha_2 - \alpha_1$. It is straightforward to show that for any right β , if either $\beta_1 < \alpha_1$ or $\alpha_2 < \beta_2$, then $d(\alpha, \beta) > \alpha_2 - \alpha_1$.

causing a major accident. This seems a perfectly natural comparison to make. However, because it involves comparing acts performed in different situations — by different agents at different times — it is not a comparison that can be made using Lockhart’s analysis. My analysis, in contrast, has no such limitation, and so in this respect, at least, it seems superior.

Peterson objects to Lockhart’s analysis on the basis of a certain implication it has:

It immediately follows from Lockhart’s proposal that if an agent is faced with only two options, she will invariably perform an act that is either entirely right or entirely wrong. From a multi-dimensional consequentialist point of view, this makes little sense. [Peterson, 2013, 41]

My analysis does not share this implication. Consider a situation in which the agent has only two alternatives, α and β . Suppose α has better consequences. Then α is right, and β is wrong (not right). But it does not follow that β is “entirely wrong”, if that is taken to mean that no act is more wrong (less right). Certainly, no act available in *this* situation is more wrong. But there may be an act performed in another situation that is more wrong. Indeed, my analysis allows the possibility that *no* act is entirely wrong. It could be that for any act α , there is another β , such that $\alpha_2 - \alpha_1 < \beta_2 - \beta_1$. My analysis may, therefore, be more amenable to Peterson’s general multi-dimensional approach.

5 Optional Add-ons

The analysis developed so far is, so to speak, the core package. I now want to suggest two amendments designed to deal with potential objections.

5.1 Self-sacrifice

The first objection concerns the relevance of self-sacrifice to comparisons of rightness. Consider an example. You are in a position to save either one, two, or three lives. The cost to you of saving lives is cumulative: by saving each additional life you will incur an additional cost. But the maximum total cost you may incur — if you save all three lives — is still small. I am also in a position to save one, two, or three lives. But the cost to me is not cumulative. I will incur the same small cost no matter how many I save. You save one. I save two.

The proposed analysis says that your act is less right than mine. The best thing that either of us could have done is save three. We have both fallen short of that ideal, but you have fallen further short than I. However, that seems wrong. Your act seems, in one important way, more right than mine. Each of us should have saved more lives than we did. But you can defend your failing to save more in a way that I cannot. You can say that saving more would have cost you more. This may not be sufficient to justify your failure, but it is at least a relevant consideration. I, on the other hand, cannot say even that much. I could have saved more at *no* further cost to myself. My failing to save the third life is simply gratuitous. I have gratuitously allowed someone to die; you have not.

What this highlights, I think, is a problem not with the general similarity-based approach I have proposed, but rather with the particular similarity metric suggested above. That metric considers only two dimensions of similarity. We could add a third dimension which takes into account self-sacrifice in the necessary way. Working out the details of such a metric I leave as an exercise for another time. I hope the general idea is clear enough for now.

5.2 Supererogation

Nothing can be more similar to anything than a thing is to itself; that is, for any x , y and z , x is at least as similar to x as y is to z . This seems as near to a conceptual truth as anything could be. Combined with the general analysis proposed above, it has the consequence that nothing can be more ϕ than a thing that is ϕ , and that all things that are ϕ are equally ϕ . The threshold for being ϕ is set maximally high. Only those things which are ϕ to the highest degree are counted as being ϕ .

This seems fine in the case of circularity. Nothing can be more circular than a circle, and all circles are equally circular. But it is more problematic in the case of rightness. It may be thought that some right acts are more right than others, in particular, that a *supererogatory* act

is more right than a merely permissible act; going beyond the call of duty is more right than barely doing one's duty and no more. We should not rule this out by definition.

This view may be accommodated by revising our general analysis as follows:

x is at least as ϕ as y if and only if there exists some x' such that

1. x' is maximally ϕ
2. for any y' , if y' is maximally ϕ then x' is at least as similar to x as y' is to y .

If being maximally ϕ is the same as being ϕ , then the revised analysis reduces to the original. This may be the case for circularity. In the case of rightness, however, we may wish to allow that an act can be right without being maximally right. For example, we might say that α is *right* if $\alpha_1 \geq \alpha_2 - k$, where $k > 0$, and *maximally right* if $\alpha_1 = \alpha_2$. Combined with the revised analysis, this implies, as before, that α is at least as right as β if and only if $\alpha_2 - \alpha_1 \leq \beta_2 - \beta_1$. The difference, however, is that it allows one right act to be more right than another right act. This would be so, for example, if $\alpha_1 = \alpha_2$ and $\beta_1 = \beta_2 - k$.

It might be objected that the analysis is no longer *reductive*, as I claimed it was, because the concept of being *maximally ϕ* already contains degrees of rightness. To be maximally ϕ , we might say, is to be ϕ to the highest degree. But this seems not a decisive objection. Reductive or not, the analysis may still provide an illuminating account of the relation between being right and being more right.

6 Conclusion

The view of rightness I have proposed appears to share all the advantages of Peterson's view, but none of the disadvantages. Because it includes degrees of rightness, it allows comparative rightness judgements of the sort we need to fully represent moral situations. Because it also includes all-or-nothing rightness, it allows answers to the central moral question, "What ought I to do?" Moreover, it provides a neat account of the relation between these two. Overall, then, it seems to be a view that should be happily adopted by advocates of multi-dimensional consequentialism, and by others too.

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