Morality as Mathematical

In a 1705 lecture series titled “A Discourse of Natural Religion”, Samuel Clarke lays out a view which argues that there is a self-evident system of proper behavior. Clarke’s argument relies on the fact that there are natural differences between things, and so there are certain actions which are more fit to be performed. An issue for Clarke’s view is finding the impetus for moral obligation. The worry is that Clarke’s view does not suffice to give moral judgements any force which would obligate people to behave morally. I will defend Clarke by arguing that Clarke’s view appears once someone already intends to act, and so doesn’t require a force of obligation, but instead exists to direct preexisting inclination in the right direction.

Clarke’s argument begins with the differences between things. From seeing that not everything is alike, Clarke moves to the position that things are not alike in their fitness. This is simply the move that begins with recognizing the existence of distinctions, and then notices that distinctions can be consequential. Clarke then applies this type of general principle to the specific case of human behavior. Clarke says that “from the different relations of different persons one to another, there necessarily arises a fitness or unfitness of certain manners of behavior of some persons towards others” (192). Here Clarke is saying that actions towards others can be more or less proper simply from the way people are in relation to each other. Or put in another way: our actions are given a meaning on the basis on the social and economic contexts that we find ourselves in. In particular, the question of the cohesion of an action with its context will determine the propriety of an action.

Having established that there are actions more appropriate than others, Clarke endeavors to find principles for proper behavior. Here the fundamental guiding concept is that of reciprocal behavior. This reciprocity, of treating others as we would like them to in turn, is justified by the notion of equality. To this end, Clarke tells us that “Whatever relation or proportion one man in any case bears to another; that same that other, when put in like circumstances, bears to him” (208). Since people are essentially the same in all the most important and fundamental of ways, what action would be proper in a context is independent of which player you are. So, if in the

same situation the roles were reversed, so that instead of you being the one performing an action towards someone else, it was that other person performing that same action towards you, the question of which action is more proper would still have the same response. This follows from the symmetry between people as thinking, feeling and speaking living beings. Using this notion, we can start to figure out which actions are proper in any situation. For if a person is in the position of being acted towards, they will have a clear preference. So in considering the proper action to take in any particular situation, one need only imagine themselves as being that other person which they are engaging with, and act as the other they would wish for in that imagined circumstance.

Clarke sees this notion of morality as similar in clarity and certainty to mathematics. Under Clarke's view, the question of whether an action is proper is analogous to questions like whether two quantities are equal or whether two shapes are similar. In both cases, there is a simple and clear solution to the question, and finding this solution requires only applying the right type of reasoning, at which point the solution will be obvious and undeniable. Clarke lays out this analogy in saying "to deny the truth of these things; is… as if a man… should deny the most obvious and known properties of lines or numbers" (194). Since there is a concise and solid reasoning which leads to knowing the fitness or unfitness of an action, the certainty and universality of moral judgements mirrors that of mathematics.

This analogy of Clarke's between morality and mathematics is somewhat suspect however. A distinction between the two can be drawn, as math only describes a state of affairs, while moral judgements aim at compelling certain types of behavior. In order to obligate moral actions, something stronger than a clever argument is needed. To put it another way, what can be said to the moral skeptic, who upon hearing all of Clarke simply responds "you can't make me".

The underlying issue here is that the moralist is expected to justify bringing up the topic in the first place. With respect to mathematics, the relevance and utility of the discussion are generally taken for granted before the conversation begins. So that when encountering a mathematical theorem, we won't ask of it whether the nature of mathematical objects is describable in general, but rather we'll take it at face value as describing some process or object.

A mathematical theory puts forward that if a student is interested in a mathematical object, then they'll find the theory useful, but it doesn't try to start a conversation with someone who isn't a student of mathematics. Not so in setting forth a theory of morality. In addition to whatever particular technical contribution a theory of morality brings to a discussion, we expect the theory to go back to the beginning and explain why one would care at all. A theory of morality demands something even of non-adherents, it says that everyone ought to listen up and take it seriously. In order to grab the attention of an apathetic listener, a theory has to do better than describe a state of affairs.

This distinction between morality and mathematics is then an issue for Clarke's theory of morality. It's not simply that we've found an important distinction between morality and mathematics, two things which Clarke told us behaved similarly. Instead the flaw is more fundamental. We have now seen that for any theory of morality, we require that it compel the disinterested. Clarke's theory however only portends to describe a state of affairs. It turns out then that the fact that Clarke's theory of morality is analogous to mathematics becomes a flaw instead of a strength, because in a theory of morality we are looking precisely for something that does work over and above description.

I think that Clarke can avoid this type of objection by simply being a theory of action. That is to say that instead of trying to compel any specific action, or even an action in general, Clarke is merely prescribing the most appropriate path to the interested. Clarke is talking to a person already on the threshold of deciding on a behavior, and points to the state of affairs which exists insofar as possible actions are concerned. Here, conveniently, it turns out that everyone is a student of behavior because everyone takes actions. Much like the student of mathematics who encounters some theory about numbers through investigation, so too with the action taker, who in pondering what to do stumbles upon the principle of reciprocal action. Since all people engage in the enterprise of taking actions, it is as indefensible for them to neglect this principle of reciprocity as it is for them to hold an incorrect view of numbers. It is simply a fact of the matter about interpersonal actions that there is a correct way to proceed and that it is found in this principle of reciprocity which is grounded in the equality of people.