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Social Contract: The Last Word in Moral Theories

Abstract:
Most meta-ethical theories fail either for lack of real content or because they fail to make needed distinctions, or to give sufficient account of what a moral theory is about. Positioning that values are intuited is useless or worse, since the very problem that gives rise to the need for morals is that people’s values vary, greatly, from one to another, thus leading to conflict, and ‘intuition’ is no basis for interpersonal agreement if we have initial disagreement—as we surely seem to do. Conflicts can, of course, be steamrollered when the philosopher proposes that everybody should do things his way. But the trouble is that people may not (almost certainly will not) have motivation to conform to what the philosopher proposes. Yet motivation is of the essence. A moral theory that everyone is free to recognize with no discernible effects on his behavior is useless. The ‘Social Contract’ idea is, very simply, to account for morals by starting with the actual motivations and deliberations of individuals, then considering the effect of placing such individuals in a society of other, especially differing ones. We play our cards right if, in some relevant and useful sense, everyone can expect to do better by embracing moral constraints than not. Then the motivation problem is squarely faced from the start. The idea is that it will transfer to morals by virtue of the relations we can expect to have in society, given our various interests. This essay explores these issues, explaining why there is simply no alternative to the social contract idea.