Contractarianism

Imagine that you were living through a horrific civil war. Your previously stable society is being torn apart. Your traditional thoughts about morality, about obeying the authorities (which ones?), about working peacefully for the good of all, these are suddenly pulled from under your feet. In horror you stand back and think: how can I tell what is right? Is there any reality to morals or are they just a veneer of social convention?

This was the challenge facing Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) as he observed the nation’s slide into the disastrous English civil war of 1642–1651. Hobbes’ great work Leviathan (1651) imagines the state of our life if there were never to be any stable society, any ruling authority. He states:

‘In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; ... no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.’

Hobbes concludes that morality is a human invention in order to avoid this condition, and that rather than tracking any ultimate ‘rights’ or ‘wrongs’ morality simply describes an implicit social contract that includes us all. The contract is implicit: we do not have to sign up to it. Its existence may never have occurred to us. Nonetheless by living in a particular society we are part of it. This forms the basis for our social mores and indeed our whole way of life.

To Hobbes all authority systems such as kings and parliaments and laws are simply embodiments of this social contract. Their authority derives from their universal benefit. Contractarianism sees right and wrong simply as an issue of mutual convenience. Thus, it is well suited to a physicalist view of the universe. It invites easy synthesis with evolutionary theory and studies of primate behaviour.

It leaves us with the problem of ‘the knave’ in society: why should a rascal not freeload on the good behaviour of others (so long as he can get away with it), if there is ultimately no right and wrong? How can we condemn Bernard Madoff (or come to that Pol Pot) if it is a matter of opinion as to how the contract should actually work?

It also becomes less convincing when we are the victims of what we perceive to be a serious injustice. Is the parent of a murdered child really to believe that they are the victims of an error of social manners rather than of a moral wrong? Clearly an implicit social contract exists in the human world. However, this does not have to mean that it lacks an underlying moral imperative. A civil war does indeed show us the horror of a failed society, but this does not mean that our belief in right and wrong as real categories in the human world must fail also.