



*Chapter 8*  
**MORALITY**

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*Chapter 8***MORALITY**

**I**t is appropriate that a belief in human purpose has led so directly to the subject of morality. Morality, after all, describes *how* we should behave while purpose describes *why*. Morality should be the servant of purpose: what promotes purpose should be moral; what frustrates it should be immoral. It would seem that if we could define morality well enough, it would lead us to human purpose. Alas, moral philosophers throughout history have struggled in vain to find a compelling way either to describe morality, so we'll know it when we see it, or to prescribe morality, so we'll know what we should do.

The enormous welter of thought finally comes down to only three generic approaches to describing and prescribing morality:

- Commandment: morality is what some religious or secular authority says it is.
- Sentiment: morality is what an individual feels it is.
- Utility: morality is whatever produces the best consequences.

The first test for moral prescriptions should be that morality is absolute: the same act performed in the same way with the same motivation and yielding the same consequences cannot be morally right for one person and morally wrong for another. Because each of these three approaches allows several different answers to the identical

moral question, none of them meet the test of being absolute.

The commandment approach to morality is the most susceptible to this problem. The world now has many religious moral codes that have served different peoples well for millennia, but those religions do not all command the same behaviors.

Commanded morality is essential in the human schema. We all needed it as children, and most people have no reason to give it up once they mature. Morality is so complicated that even erudite philosophers have not been able to pin it down. An ordinary person with a life to lead and no time to spend sifting through great moral themes can be excused for grabbing whatever moral code is at hand, and the code typically at hand is the one provided by the local religion. Yet commanded moral codes, even if they come through a secular teacher, such as Confucius or Marcus Aurelius, ultimately trace to intuition rather than rational argument. As with all intuitive reasoning, the validity conditions and veracity cannot be known. There is no way to set one against the other and reconcile differences. Once you say, “I believe it,” the conversation ends. Beliefs are first premises; they cannot be proven.

The sentimentalist approach is almost as vulnerable. On the face of it, saying “I feel” is only a tad more objective than saying “I believe.” Yet, the sentimentalist approach to morality has been adopted by some excellent philosophers; chief among them is David Hume in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Hume argued that nature fitted us with the ability to know moral behavior without reason and argument. This is the core of a valuable idea, and I’ll return to it in a few chapters, but we must first describe its great weakness. Nature gave us feelings about many things. Our evil impulses spring from natural feelings. I believe that most of the great evildoers of history were driven by a deep feeling they were right. Hitler, for example, was so filled with rage as a result of World War I that he probably felt that his attempts to eliminate and enslave Jews and communists were righteous. The British sentimentalist school, to which Hume belonged, undermined its argument when a proponent cited as an example his deep feeling that it was immoral for the trains to run on Sunday.

A subset of the sentimentalist approach is associated with some-

thing called natural law.<sup>1</sup> It holds that nature provided us with the ability to know right from wrong, and that such knowledge has a stronger claim on our obedience than human legal authority.<sup>2</sup> The archetype for natural law is Antigone in Sophocles's play. She argued that natural law gave her the right to bury her brother against the king's expressed command. However, I find this archetype is also a fine example of what's wrong with the whole concept of natural law. Antigone's impulse was more cultural than natural. Her culture had taught her that unless her brother was buried, his soul would wander the earth and not find peace. We who do not share that culture would not see the need to bury the dead as a natural moral imperative.

Perhaps nature, or human nature, has supplied us with feelings that are an appropriate guide to morality, but the whole problem with the sentimentalist approach is the problem of distinguishing true moral sentiments from those come from our biology or our culture.

Utilitarianism, judging an act by the usefulness of its consequences, would seem to be more objective than the other two approaches, but it shares their problem of determining whether a judgement is right. Even if all we had to do was base our choices on what is right for us, it is often nearly impossible to know what is actually in our own best interests. But beyond that, we seem to have a moral obligation to consider the consequences of our actions on others. How can we possibly account for and balance all the consequences for everyone?

Utilitarian philosophers have proposed criteria to help tally the

#### Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century moral philosopher who developed a utilitarian argument for morality. He wanted to establish a moral calculus that would, for example, help states decide how many lashes a criminal ought to receive to balance the harm of the whipping to the individual against the overall benefit to society from the punishment.

<sup>1</sup>Natural law is usually thought of more as a legal theory than a moral one, but it deserves mention here.

<sup>2</sup>Natural law theorists aren't pure sentimentalists. They allow that reason, which is also a natural human faculty, can supplement felt inclinations. However, this grounding in felt inclinations is why I include natural law here.

benefits and harms from an action. Two popular ones are “the greatest good for the greatest number” and “enlightened self interest.” But any criteria of this sort assumes that it is possible to know all the consequences of an act, to weight them by their severity and number of people affected, and to set all the harms and benefits against each other in some moral pan balance. This is impossible. Consider some examples:

- A narrow utilitarian approach can lead to miscalculations. A man may consider giving money to a beggar who pleads that her children are hungry. He calculates that the value of the money to the woman, who is poor and desperate, is higher than its value to himself, since he is comfortable, so greater good comes from giving her the money. But, of course, he presumes that she will spend it on food; she might spend it on whiskey, get drunk, and beat her children. That would certainly throw off his calculation. He cannot know the real consequences of his actions as he reaches for his wallet.
- A utilitarian approach also tempts us to fudge on our assessment of consequences. If a man wants to cheat on his wife, he may rationalize it by presuming that he won’t get caught, so there won’t be any harmful consequences, but he can’t know for sure as he goes to the rendezvous.
- An act may initiate a cascade of consequences in which most of the harm comes after a long chain of cause and effect. A couple may seek a divorce because they genuinely expect it is the best way to protect their children from emotional hurt. Perhaps it does achieve the immediate effect they seek, but in the process, their divorce scars the children emotionally and makes them wary of entering into long-term relationships. Their hesitancy may deprive them of the satisfaction and growth that marriage can provide. The couple cannot anticipate this result as they sit across the kitchen table discussing their options.

When we make moral choices, we just don’t have enlightened knowledge of all consequences. Usually we don’t even have much time to reflect on more than the immediate results of our actions. Without enlightenment, the utilitarian approach fails.

So all three approaches to morality – command, sentiment, and utility – have fundamental shortcomings that make them flawed guides for moral behavior and no help at all in discovering human purpose.

### *What Makes Something Moral*

Morality, reduced to its essence, concerns the qualities of good and evil. Good and evil are almost impossible to define, but they are not hard to characterize. Good actions reduce the suffering or promote the well being of others. Evil ones, on the contrary, cause suffering or reduce the well being of others.<sup>3</sup> Good is not the absence of evil. A person who refrains from causing suffering does no good act. Acts that are neither good nor evil are amoral. A more difficult problem comes when one foregoes an opportunity to relieve suffering, perpetuating suffering without causing it. But before we can tackle the difficult cases, we need to explore the basic subject of morality more broadly.

I offer this as a characterization instead of a definition because consequences do not, by themselves, make an act good or evil, even if we could account for them all. *The moral character of an act depends on three considerations: motivation, means, and consequences.* Each of these three presents a separate moral test, and the interactions of the three make it hard to define morality succinctly.

*Consequences.* Some actions that are evil beyond argument can still have good consequences: a thug murders a man to take his money, but the man was a shiftless, drunken, wife-beater. The act has good consequences but is still evil. An act that is intended to be good may have bad consequences: you give money to what seems to be a charity but is actually a front for a terrorist group. Furthermore, an amoral act can have good or bad consequences: a person who laughs at a joke might gag on a bite of food, choke, and suffer brain damage.

This discussion will be clearer if we draw a distinction between the morally loaded words *good* and *evil* and the amoral words *good* and *bad*. Bad things are those that cause suffering with or without any intent to do so. Let us call such bad things *harmful*. Some harm-

<sup>3</sup>In general, the moral imperative seems to focus on humans, though most people would agree that, for example, torturing animals has an evil character.

ful things are acts of nature, things like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and fires. Some are accidents or the unintended effect of an act someone intended to be good. However harmful the consequences of a flood or plane crash may be, no one can say they are morally evil. Both evil and amoral bad things cause harm, but the harm in amoral bad things is not intended. Similar argument applies to amoral good things, things that produce good results without a particular intention to do so. Let us call these good things *beneficial*. Accidentally killing a serial rapist in a car crash, no matter how beneficial the consequences, would not be considered a morally good act because, among other things, it was not intended to cause those good consequences. To distinguish *good* and *evil* from *good* and *bad*, I will refer to the latter only as *beneficial* and *harmful*.

*Motivation.* The morality of an act depends as much on what motivates it as it does on the consequences. If a person intends to kill someone, but the gun misfires at the last moment, this is an evil act even if it is not followed by harmful consequences. When Iago<sup>4</sup> muses, “How am I a villain?” in giving Cassio sound advice about using Desdemona to bring him back into favor with Othello, we must judge him on his motivation; he intends to cause harm, so his beneficial act is still evil.

Evil can also spring from a willful disregard for the possibility of causing harm. Suppose a lecherous man seduces a young, innocent woman, uses her crudely, then abandons her. She suffers grievous emotional hurt. The man cannot escape culpability by claiming, “Hey, I didn’t know she was going to take it so hard. I’ve screwed lots of women, and they don’t get all spun up like she did. How was I supposed to know?” This kind of rationalization is beside the point. He must have known that his behavior had the potential to cause harm, even if he couldn’t be sure whether it would in any particular instance. Moral behavior insists that we be on guard against causing harm even if we do not specifically intend it.

Because good and evil depend on intent, they must flow from free will. Acts that are not under the control of one’s will, even if they are performed by one’s physical body, must be considered acts of nature

<sup>4</sup>From Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

and therefore not evil no matter how harmful the consequences of those acts may be. Consider the notorious case of the mother who, in the throes of serious mental illness, drowned her children to spare them from what her delusions convinced her was condemnation to hell. Her moral guilt rests on whether she had sufficient control of her will to have acted otherwise.

*Means.* The means criterion for morality is the most complicated and the most easily neglected. Most ethical philosophers don't accept the idea that the ends justify the means. A person may have a sincere desire to help an abused woman, but killing the abuser is not justified by either the laudable motivation or the beneficial consequences. Evil means make it an evil act.

There are some occasions, especially those that involve society as a moral actor, in which the only right means to an end may be an evil means. Again, I must pause to draw a distinction between *good* and *evil* and *right* and *wrong*. Right and wrong imply that there is a specific goal and speak only to whether the means will achieve that goal. So if one's goal is to get money without working hard, the right way to achieve that goal may be to rob a store. It's an evil way, certainly, but the way I'm using *right* and *wrong* doesn't include moral considerations, only pragmatic ones.

Because right and wrong are pragmatic judgments that do not consider motivation or means, when we force them into the moral context – for example, by insisting on a beneficial outcome – they often reduce to something like “the greatest good for the greatest number.” So the man who gave money to the beggar who then spent it on drink made the wrong choice for what he hoped to accomplish since more harm than benefit came from his choice. This is the case even though his motivation was laudable and his means were amoral.

In some moral decisions, the right pragmatic choice may not be a morally good choice. The allies' decision to enter into World War II is the archetype of this paradox. Without question, the decision was pragmatically right because it achieved the best overall balance of benefits and harms, yet it was an evil choice because it deliberately caused harm. The moral choice that would have avoided war's evil might have been the wrong choice under those circumstances because

it might have permitted more harm than it inflicted. Willy Loman<sup>5</sup> may have made the right, pragmatic choice for his family in committing suicide, and his motivation may have been laudable, but it was an evil choice nonetheless because of the means he chose. Although we would like to think that good and right will always align to produce beneficial outcomes and that wrong and evil will always align to produce harmful outcomes, reality does not support our desire.

#### A Good War?

Can war ever be morally good? Even if a war is motivated by good intentions and has beneficial consequences on balance, it is still difficult to argue logically that the means are moral. Without a rational argument to judge the morality of the means, we look to history for empirical evidence. My assessment of history leads me to believe that war as a means to an end is harmful enough to inherently keep war from being a morally good choice.

This wrong vs. evil dilemma does not provide an example of where the ends do justify the means. The means are evil even when they are pragmatically right. This will be clearer after a discussion in a later chapter on the fundamental nature of good and evil.

Allowing the end to justify the means has often been used to rationalize evil. Sometimes the only means available are evil means, but there are often other choices of means that are not evil. If the ends justified the means, there would be no particular reason to seek a less evil means.<sup>6</sup>

Wrong vs. evil dilemmas are most likely to occur at the end of a chain of evil.<sup>7</sup> The decision to enter World War II, for example, followed on a need for action against an evil aggressor. The evil aggressor came to power as a consequence of an evil treaty. The evil treaty came into being because of an evil war. The evil war was caused by a number of circumstances that accumulated from decades, arguably centuries, of evil activities and institutions. This cascade might have been broken by a benign action earlier in the chain; if it had been,

<sup>5</sup>From Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

<sup>6</sup>As I write this paragraph, at the end of 2005, I have recently been particularly appalled by the extent to which the political administration of the United States uses ends to justify means that cannot be reconciled with moral goodness or legal correctness.

<sup>7</sup>This observation aligns with Robert Kane's distinction between freedom of will and freedom of action for an individual, described in a previous sidebar.

then the choice between wrong and evil would never have arisen.

Intolerable suffering is often near the root of wrong vs. evil dilemmas. If suffering can be reduced, the chain of harmful causes and effects may never begin. Consider a mayor who is faced with a decision about whether to put down a riot with force. The decision may be both right *and* evil. But if the riot is a reaction to an environment in which injustice thrives, working proactively for justice preempts the mayor's painful choice between wrong and evil. The chain of consequence might also originate in an amoral harm. Perhaps the riot grew from a famine that resulted from a flood that wiped out a crop. A compassionate, morally good effort to feed the victims or an amoral social project to dam the river might have broken the chain of cause and effect that led to the riot. This would have spared the mayor his wrong vs. evil dilemma.

This wrong vs. evil dilemma is most salient in situations where the moral actor is society itself. I will call such cases *societal morality*. Society's choices place individuals in situations that prompt good or evil acts. For example, war must be regarded as evil because during war people deliberately kill and destroy property. A society that foments war deserves moral censure. Yet, not every warrior, let alone every individual in the warring society, commits an immoral act; an individual's participation in an immoral activity of his or her society may be amoral. Relieving suffering must be considered a morally good act, but when a society tries to reduce suffering through a massive effort to find a cure for cancer, with drug companies striving to profit and taxpayers grudgingly supporting government research, the moral merit for the effort cannot be credited to everyone in the society who unwittingly or even unwillingly supports the effort through taxes.

Still, the society's and the individual's moral responsibility interact. If there were no warriors, there could be no wars, but when society forces individuals into war, a personal stance for pacifism is unlikely to sway societal behavior enough to be considered a moral imperative. If the members of a society generally didn't care enough to allocate some of their taxes to cancer research, there could be no reduction of suffering, but an individual's disagreement with this use

of his non-voluntary taxes is not immoral.

The issues of societal morality are complex and penetrating. I will discuss them at length after preparing considerably more ground.

In sum, the many complications of morality seem to prevent us from using morality to reveal human purpose.

### *Non-moral Values*

Moral values apply to everyone everywhere; they are absolute. They are essential for guiding our lives to good outcomes under every circumstance. But we also value other imperatives that do not have a moral character. They reflect arbitrary choices that a group makes in order to function effectively. Different sets might serve different groups equally well or better, depending on their particular circumstance. Before completing this survey of the complexities of moral reasoning, we must appreciate the distinction between moral and non-moral values. The two most important areas of non-moral values are those concerning legality and ethics.

*Legality.* There is no necessary connection between the concepts imbedded in *good* and *evil* and *legal* and *illegal*. Laws are enacted to maintain the good order of society. Certainly some immoral things – murder, rape, and robbery – disrupt society enough that they should always be illegal. Other things – adultery, deceit, and emotional cruelty – may be evil because of their intent and ability to hurt people, but their effect on the good order of society is not important enough to try to enforce laws against them. Some things are established in law only to maintain good order – which side of the road you drive on, how old you must be before voting, or the requirement to get a permit for building – but have no moral content whatsoever. Some attempts to preserve good order resulted in laws that permitted or even encouraged something immoral, for example, the slave laws. Sometimes, fussy attention to strict legality can frustrate moral goodness; consider Inspector Javert.<sup>8</sup> And certainly the law imposes no obligation to be morally good in the sense of taking action to relieve the suffering or improve the well being of others.

Yes, a person ordinarily has a moral duty to obey society's laws,

<sup>8</sup>In Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*.

but many of the acts this duty compels are arbitrary choices designed to ensure order. They have no inherent moral character. When a law stands against morality, a person may have a moral duty to ignore, disobey, or even defy the law. The overlap of law and morality is actually not large at all.

Some argue that the state should have a role in enforcing morality. A simple, intimate, homogeneous society, like a farming village, might be able to do so effectively, but a complex, impersonal, heterogeneous society realistically cannot. Without a clean description of or prescription for moral behavior, a moral code appropriate for government enforcement in a complex society would be impossibly complicated.

Societies seek good order by trying to control the consequences of actions, but morality also depends on motivation, which is inherently subjective. Suppose a man runs over the beloved dog of a neighbor he hates. Who can say whether this is an act of immoral spite or an amoral accident? Only the man can know for sure. No one else can punish him fairly because no one else knows his motivation.

The very notion of justice demands that all people be treated fairly by rule. But a moral code that can apply fairly to every case must be based on supple principles rather than on rigid rules. The woman who drowned her children in the throes of schizophrenia might be excused; the woman who did it to make herself more eligible for a date must not.

Three millennia of human history have witnessed the waxing and waning of innumerable societies: large and small, complex and simple, primitive and advanced, religious and secular, utopian and pragmatic. In this group, we do not find a single instance of a society aligning its law with universal moral principles well enough to be praised for its justice by all who know of that society. This failure adds empirical evidence to my claim that law is incapable of enforcing morality. Today enlightened societies limit the role of government to the minimal set of things necessary for public order and leave the enforcement of morality to the informal coercion of families, religions, and peers. Even if we were to establish that, for example, abortion is immoral, it does not necessarily follow that it

must be illegal. Unlike the murder of an adult, which disrupts society, murdering a fetus is unlikely to affect society's good order and may, therefore, not be a germane matter for law.

*Ethics.* Next, let me draw a distinction between morality and ethics. The words are often used synonymously; sometimes the word morality refers only to sexual behavior, and ethics describes the broader set of imperatives that I have called morality. For the sake of clarity, I will only use morality in the broader sense and reserve the word ethics for values that imply a higher standard than morality but apply to a limited class of people or circumstances. For example, it would be immoral for a public official to accept a bribe, but it would not be immoral for him to appear to exchange official action for personal gain if he did not actually do so. It would, however, be unethical. It would not be immoral for a lawyer to discuss a client's situation with a trusted friend, but it would be unethical. However, it would not even be unethical for a hairdresser to discuss a customer's situation with a trusted friend. Ethical behavior is dictated by particular circumstances; moral behavior is independent of circumstances.

In general, the arguments in this treatise will be directed at morality, those behavioral imperatives that have some universality, though the discussion will touch on ethics again in the context of societal morality.

#### Higher Standards

Besides ethics, there are other categories of values that have nothing to do with morality: courtesy, etiquette, and protocol. Courtesy is a culturally standardized way of showing respect. Etiquette is the show of respect for established cultural patterns, and protocol is a show of respect for narrow rituals. If these behaviors proceed sincerely from moral values, then they represent a "higher" standard of behavior than morality. However, they are no substitute for morality since they can be performed by rote in a way that allows or even supports immorality.

The previous chapter concluded that soul character had something to do with morality. To continue my deductive train of reason, I had hoped to use morality to point the way to purpose. I cannot. Moral-

ity is too complicated. Yet, the issues of morality are central to any discussion of human purpose. For my philosophy to be useful, I must find a way to reconcile these complexities and provide simpler guidance for personal and societal action in the world. It seems I must change tack to make any further progress. If morality cannot lead us to purpose, purpose should certainly lead us to morality. Purpose, after all, motivates morality.

We can no longer evade the question of what exactly human purpose is.