

Morality: The Bigfoot of Theory

“Now some think it is nature that makes people good; some think it is habit; some that it is teaching”—Aristotle

Despite valiant efforts to define, describe, characterize and classify morality, it has proven to be an elusive creature, much like ol’ e Nessie or Bigfoot. No one has been able to produce a clear, indisputable picture (or in this case, definition). Even the mere existence of morality has been up for debate. The idea is there, some say ingrained in our very being, but the concept is difficult to verbalize. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines morality as, “conformity to ideals of right human conduct,” but what does this *mean*? What is the *right* conduct? This is the question that has been haunting humanity for ages; this is the question that so interests and perplexes theorists. What *is* morality?

Before one can discuss morality, one has to understand the distinction between Moralism and morality itself, as the two are often confused. *Moralism* is the oversimplification of life into unquestionable, rigid laws, prohibitions and obligations; it’s the separation of morals from culture. In other words, Moralists are anti-Sociologists. As noted literary critic and author Terry Eagleton explains, “Moralism believes there is a set of questions known as moral questions which are quite distinct from social or political ones” (143). Moralists are often self-righteous, refusing to accept the idea of moral ambiguity, rejecting those who don’t follow the same laws and christening them “immoral.” On the other hand, *morality* is finding the nature of those laws and applying them contextually to create a rich and abundant life. Moralism is the belief in truisms—unchanging truths or facts of life—while morality “means asking if there is anything

new to learn, not simply assimilating the event to preexisting dogma” (Willis 18).

To approach the distinction in another way, consider the raised-line writing paper used to teach letters to students in elementary school. The raised lines form the boundaries for the letters; they prevent the student from creating too large marks and teach the correct proportions between capital letters and lowercase. These raised lines are akin to the laws and obligations of Moralism. They are set boundaries, set standards that cannot be broken, creating identical letters. Morality would then be learning to write without this lined paper. It is the development of one’s distinct handwriting, albeit within certain parameters, but with flexibility.

The problem with Moralism is that it views moral statements as unalterable truths. It lacks reflection. When one begins to take values for granted and ceases to reflect on them, “you are in danger of making your morality into a dogma, you are in danger of becoming intolerant of the values of others” (Murdoch 66); however, to say that the moral statements of Moralism are entirely unnecessary would be false. As Aristotle taught long ago, “Arguments and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone;” one cannot simply teach morality to an individual, “but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits” (168). The rigid laws that Moralists cling to are needed to create those moral habits. The raised line paper serves as a tool for teaching, but the inch-high rule couldn’t be used for a novel. In the same way, the prohibitions that form the base of Moralism are needed to reach moral maturity, but to latch onto them as an ideology or dogma deters one from a thriving, successful life. In other words, the Moralist’s laws are for those morally immature. In his chapter on moral development, Aristotle points out “[Law] has the power that compels” (169). Those who are not yet morally independent require the structure and outline of rules and codes before they can develop habitual virtue. These laws serve as scaffolding to prop up those who are ethical toddlers (Eagleton 147). To grow into moral

maturity, one must learn how to study the facts but also to make his or her own choices in light of the facts and his or her values (Murdoch 67).

Morality is not simple continual adherence to moral statements. Yes, these statements create moral habits, but one must also have the habit of reflection—the ability and willingness to reflect on his or her own moral habits. Moralists never achieve this habit of reflection, merely latching on to moral statements as a crutch, never learning to walk without them; they forgo moral autonomy. They “identify morality with the obligations and prohibitions, rather than with the thriving” (Eagleton 145). As Gabriel Brahm points out, “[Moralism] actually leaves us weaker and not stronger, morally speaking, when the chips are down and independent judgment—not mere conformity—is what’s needed most of all” (“Re: Appointment Rescheduling”).

In the case of what cultural studies theorist Michael Berubé refers to as “the Manichean Left”, referred to as “the post-left” by Brahm and others, Moralism creates a paralysis. Their extreme anti-imperialism allows them to avoid the “moral ambiguities” of being citizens of the United States, a significant superpower in the world (Willis 13). They are paralyzed by the belief that *any* action by the U.S. is imperialistic, that we somehow caused the attacks of September 11, 2001 and will only receive redemption through nonviolence. They are oversimplifying “the shaping of collective power, conflict over competing interests and struggle for influence, differences of opinion and interpretation” (Brahm, “Understanding Noam Chomsky” 454). To believe absolutely in Noam Chomsky’s truism, “You oughta stick with the underdog” (458), is to extremely reduce the complexity of all situations, including that of 9/11; “It trivializes the Islamic fundamentalist movement,” which as Ellen Willis points out, “has quite bluntly declared its dedication to destroying unbelievers and their morally corrupt societies” (16). She

intelligently asks: If we believe in the simplified view that America created this monster, shouldn't we, as the creators, bear the responsibility of confronting it (16)? However, the post-left are paralyzed into inaction by Moralism, believing that "violence is [always] bad; any military action by the United States is imperialist" (15). Their unwavering belief that any action by America is imperialist aggression prevents them from acting when action is needed. Morality, as Willis points out, is to question not only what you do but what you don't do. To remain inactive and allow terrorists to condemn innocent civilians to death could be defended as *just as immoral as holding the weapons or wearing the bombs yourself*. In this case, "pacifism is immoral," agrees David Gerlenter, "it is the co-conspirator of wickedness" (204).

Genuine morality then, compared to our definition of Moralism, is contextual, taking social, political, cultural, and personal factors into account. It is "the exercise of ethical judgment per se" (Brahm, "Understanding Noam Chomsky" 454). It is finding the nature of the moral laws and applying them with perspective. As Eagleton points out, "Principals can be flexible and still be principals," what distinguishes them is, "the vital nature of what they safeguard or promote—vital from the viewpoint of fostering an abundance of life" (144-145).

For Aristotle, morality is found ultimately in our shared function, our shared minds—the capacity to reason. According to Aristotle, "each function is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper [to that kind of thing]. And so the human good proves to be the activity of the soul in accord with virtue" (10)—the activity of the mind in accord with *reason*. Happiness is the virtuous state of the soul, not just having reason but using it. Virtue is the middle path, neither excess nor deficiency. The problem is that our human nature, naturally, pushes us to one extreme or the other. It's our reason that brings us to the middle. For example, bravery is a virtue while cowardice (deficiency) and rashness (excess) are vices. To be brave is

not to ignore the dangers to yourself, to dive fearlessly into a flaming building, but neither is it to run from the scene, afraid for your own life. It is a balance—acknowledging your fears and the danger but not allowing them to paralyze your actions, simply taking them into account. You might take a moment to search for the safest entrance into the building or, as firefighters do, equip yourself in flame retardant gear beforehand (Highland). Such is morality: acting despite prejudices, self-interests, or fears but acting with them in mind. Morality is then realizing the human nature at its best, in the middle path.

Eagleton follows a similar line of thought by connecting the idea of a shared form—the human body—to morality; however, for him, moral values are founded because of our ability to feel compassion and a link to others (156). Our bodies literally allow us to “enter into forms of communication far deeper and richer than physical contact”—our ability to love (158). The need for rules and laws is due to the obscure nature of love: “moral language is a way of trying to get what counts as love into sharper focus” (146). For this argument, “love” is defined not as a romantic passion but as a form of empathy. According to Eagleton, one finds fulfillment in life by helping another find fulfillment or happiness. In this way, one’s own happiness is based on the other’s; therefore, to be violent, dominative, or self-seeking is destructive to one’s self (170).

Then to be moral is to take the feelings of others, and their best interests, into account. The principles act as moral guidelines; however, as Michael Ignatieff, political philosopher and Canadian Member of Parliament, points out, “No doctrine has any power in itself to withstand moral mutilation by wicked people” (127). This is the problem we see arise with radical Islamists; we see hatred promoted over love. The fundamentalist leaders encourage adherents to believe that “their own love of life and their scruple about taking the lives of others are forms of weakness to be overcome” (126). Hatred is fed with sexual phobias and corrupted religious

doctrine. Eventually, followers become blind to the immorality of their actions and see their victims as “unworthy of moral concern” (127). The radical Islamists’ hatred for America allows for their indifference. If they were to recognize, as Eagleton points out, that “what we share with them is just the fact that they are cultural creatures like ourselves” (160), their indifference would not be so easily maintained.

The very fact that American culture conflicts with that of radical Islamists is proof of a similarity on some other level. We share the same basic body and therefore the ability to communicate. “Only someone with whom you can communicate can affirm their difference from you,” as Eagleton points out, “Only within some kind of common framework is conflict possible” (159). Although our cultural differences direct our logic, we also share the same basic ability to reason. This idea that even the most divergent cultures share *some* common ground—our very body, our very minds, our ability to communicate and to reason, the fact that we are all cultural creatures—gives hint to the possibility of a common good. But what is it? How do we strive for the Good if we don’t know what we seek? “What relations has the Good to religion, to faith in God, whatever mode such faith may adopt?” (Steiner xi). Is the common good truly universal if we are so different? Yes. If there is something that we all share in common, then there has to be something for us to unite for. We share the same goal, however obscure it may be at times. As Berkley sociologist Robert Bellah says, “The common good is the good we seek in common” (qtd. in Brahm, “Applied Literary Theory”). To be aware of its virtual existence, whether or not we know its final form, is to be one step closer to achieving it. Simply realizing the similarity of having differences and discussing the problem of finding a common good can bring us together and closer to realizing that good. In other words, “believing in it and striving for it is a part of it” (Brahm, “RE: Appointment Rescheduling”).

So what then is morality? Such a question is difficult to answer because, as we know, life is not always black and white; inconveniently for us, morality tends to lie in the shadows of the gray areas. We have a vague sense of what is there, of what it is, but as with the legendary Bigfoot, it's impossible to produce a clear picture of morality to truly verify its existence. In fact, attempting to "unify the picture" would actually be counterproductive: "our own conception of the ethical in general...[as well as] important differences of moral concept may be blurred or neglected" (Murdoch 75). One cannot produce a specific model of morality, for then, "it is not a model of any morality whatsoever. It is a model of his own morality" (67). Morality is not as simple as "Do this. Do that," but is complex—contextual; if you attach morality to the substance of the world, "you are in danger of making your morality into a dogma" (143). Therein lies the problem with Moralism—the oversimplified reduction of life to rules, prohibitions and obligations leaves no room for the ambiguity of life (143). While the laws of Moralism serve as guides until moral maturity, to treat these laws as dogma is to diverge from the path to a thriving life. To reach moral autonomy is to throw the crutch away and manage by oneself (147).

You ask: But how should we *behave*? Differently (Munro 242). As celebrated short-story writer Alice Munro expresses, we should behave differently *as opposed to indifferently*; caring as opposed to uncaring. Morality is about compassion and love, realizing fulfillment in the fulfillment of the other; yet, Aristotle makes a valid point—it is also about reason. Morality means using our reason to determine the correct action, free, to a degree, of narrow self-interests and prejudices. Perhaps that is why we cannot accept either Islamist Fundamentalists *or* the Manichean Leftists as moral. While the Islamists have, what they regard as, sound reasoning for their actions, those actions are formed on hate, not love. On the other hand, the post-leftists feel compassion for the other, but lack reason for their inaction. George Bernard Shaw once said that

“The man who listens to Reason is lost” (qtd. in “Reason Quotes”); however, we often also hear that, “Love is blind.” Reason appears to lack emotion and Love, sensibility. Perhaps then these are not morality itself but the excess and deficiency of its virtue. Perhaps morality is neither Reason nor Love, but a balance of both. The key to finding a common good appears to lie in our common body and our common mind. Only by realizing our similarities can we discover and achieve Bellah’s common good, Aristotle’s Happiness. Only by balancing our reason and our love, through habitual reflection, can we discover and achieve morality.

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