

Why it Matters if You are Moral

Previously unpublished. Remarks made to a student meeting at USC after the Student Senate had adopted a code of ethics in 2005.

Who Is The Morally Good Person?

The morally good person is a person who is devoted to *advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, in a manner that respects their relative degrees of importance and the extent to which the actions of the person in question can actually promote the existence and maintenance of those goods*. Thus, moral goodness is a matter of the organization of the human will called "character."

"Character" refers to the settled dispositions to act in certain ways, given the relevant circumstances. Character is expressed in what one does without thinking, as well as to what one does after acting without thinking. The actions which come from character will usually persist when the individual is unobserved, as well as when the consequences of the action are not what one would prefer. A person of good moral character is one who, from the deeper and more pervasive dimensions of the self, is intent upon advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact (etc.).

The person who is morally bad or evil is one who is intent upon the destruction of the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact, or who is indifferent to the existence and maintenance of those goods.

Being morally good or evil clearly will be a matter of degree and there surely will be few if any actual human beings who exist at the extreme ends of the scale. (An interesting but largely pointless question might be how humanity distributes on the scale: a nice bell curve or...what?)

This orientation of the will toward promotion of human goods is the fundamental *moral* distinction: the one which is of primary human interest, and from which all the others, moving toward the periphery of the moral life and ethical theory, can be clarified. It is, as ethical theorists from Socrates to the present have understood, a matter of the inward organization of personality around the promotion of what is good. For example: the moral value of acts (positive and negative); the nature of moral obligation and responsibility; virtues and vices; the nature and limitations of rights, punishment, rewards, justice and related issues; the morality of laws and institutions; the role of moral principles, rules and codes; and what is to be made of moral progress and moral education. A coherent theory of these matters can, I suggest, be developed only if we start from the distinction between the good and bad will or person--which, admittedly, almost no one is currently prepared to discuss. That is one of the outcomes of ethical theorizing during the 20th Century. It is directly opposite to the consensus of the late decades of the 19th Century, which was that **the fundamental subject of ethical theorizing was the will and its character**. (See Green, Bradley, Sidgwick) What has happened since then is a long and involved topic which we cannot take up here.

Why It Matters If You Are Moral:

The reason it matters should be fairly clear, once you understand who the moral person is. Everyone around you, including yourself of course, will benefit in general from your devotion to the human goods that make for human flourishing. Your devotion to these goods will provide a structure to your life that will keep it directed toward what is productive, honorable, and deeply satisfying to yourself and others. You will have a solid basis for self-esteem, while at the same time you will be held back from arrogance and self-importance by your subordination to goods beyond yourself in the lives of others and in the world around you. Matthew Arnold, in the opening paragraph of his essay "Marcus Aurelius," in *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. I, expresses the view that has predominated among ethical theorists for most of Western history: "The object of systems of morality is to take possession of human life, to save it from being abandoned to passion or allowed to drift at hazard, to give it happiness by establishing it in the practice of virtue; and this object they seek to attain by presenting to human life fixed principles of action, fixed rules of conduct. In its uninspired as well as in its inspired moments, in its days of languor or gloom as well as in its days of sunshine and energy, human life has thus always a clue to follow, and may always be making way toward its goal."

People desperately want to be good and to be recognized as good. It is, finally, a matter of mental health and well-being. They need to be worthy of approval. The quest for self-esteem is based upon this need. But you can't just pump yourself up with it, you have to achieve *genuine human worth*, and this is done by attaining moral character and life as described above. Otherwise self-esteem rings hollow and creates inauthentic and unsatisfying self-absorption—the "little Jack Horner" syndrome.

How Rules and Codes Enter Into the Moral Life:

They state standard ways in standard situations for caring for the human goods which our actions influence. In this way they give us knowledge of what we ought, morally, to do when we (in the usual case) cannot see how our actions influence human goods. They are an essential part of moral education, but serve that purpose well only when we understand how they are grounded in human goods and human character. Codes standing alone are merely ways of holding others responsible and of being held responsible by them. Codes standing alone, and not reaching into character and the good, are the way of the Pharisee and the legalist or formalist. They have nothing to do with the kind of person one is—and that is one reason why some people today like to stay at this level and to avoid any issues of character. (It is now widely regarded as morally "bad" to get into questions of peoples' character or make judgments to the effect that persons are bad or evil. It is okay or even automatically good to say they are "good.")

If a code proves to be generally effective in governing life it will only be because of character in the people governed—character that expresses itself in virtues such as benevolence, honor and integrity; and it will be from these virtues and not from the code, that people act. Indeed, one never acts from a code. A code by its very nature never addresses the question of motivation. If you knew someone had kept the code, you would have no idea of whether or not they were ethical, or morally good, people, or of what they would choose to do if they were sure they would never be found out and hence were not known to have broken the code.

Most so-called "professional ethics" today is restricted to codes and have nothing to do with character, and that is one reason why they have such little power over behavior. They are basically telling us how to stay out of trouble with clients, the law, and our fellow professionals. They have nothing to say about our moral identity, about who we are as a doctor, lawyer, engineer, professor, etc. etc.

The Two Levels Of Moral Reality Present in the USC Student Code:

The code states: "We will not tolerate plagiarism, lying, deliberate misrepresentation, theft, scientific fraud, cheating, invidious discrimination or ill use of our fellow human beings." But it also says: "Honor and integrity are the foundations of our character." This latter statement shifts to the level of virtue and character. Honor and integrity are not *acts* but states of being characteristic of the good person. These are demands that one places on oneself. As Ortega y Gasset remarked, the person of moral quality is one who makes great demands on themselves as to the kind of person they are. Being an honorable person is a matter of holding oneself to a high standard with respect to who they really are, and not just with respect to how others will judge their actions. Academic integrity is not a matter of keeping someone else's rules, but of inward focus on excellence of intellectual and artistic attainments. One who has such a focus sees immediately why plagiarism etc. are simply out of the question for them.

Why We Have A Problem Now With Addressing Matters of Character:

It is mainly because the current paradigm of knowledge leans toward the natural sciences, and those sciences, in virtue of their subject matters, have nothing to say about moral distinctions. If you look back at what was said above about being a good person, you will see that it falls in an area of which nothing that looks like scientific knowledge can be had. There is thus nothing to be known or taught in the domain of moral goodness. We can still have codes, but not rational basis for them. They are just rules to be agreed to or enforced. This is all part of the generalized epistemic crisis in which our culture and its universities exist today. It can be stated briefly: The only knowledge is what the sciences put out as such, and the only knowable "reality" is what the sciences deal with. All the rest is feeling and political negotiation. At one stroke that removes the living of human life from the domain of knowledge, and leaves only authority and political agreement to go on—if that! Human action, where those do not function, is left to drift or to caprice, and codes, laws and politics are invoked to provide some sort of control over behavior, because, after all, not everything is tolerable in the concrete situations of life.

Of course moral knowledge still *exists* as a genuine possibility for those who would like to know. For various reasons it is *no longer available on a routine basis* from the dominant institutions of society: family, church, schools and professional bodies of the various sorts. In this sense moral knowledge has "disappeared." But that does not mean it does not exist or is impossible. To have knowledge of a subject matter means **to be able to represent it as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience**. This applies to *any* subject matter. And in this precise sense it is possible to have knowledge of moral distinctions, as they exist among persons, actions, character traits—and even laws and institutions.

If one wishes to have such knowledge, they should begin with careful and thoughtful observations of human life among unsophisticated people: preferably, with respect to how they think about who is a good and who a bad, or a less-than-good, person in the intimate connections of life, where people cannot hide who they really are. Then you might read some things from people who have made a great impact upon "lived" morality on earth. Jesus stands at the head of any list of them, and then Socrates (Plato, Aristotle). You often can make good use of the great moralists, recognized as such, in Western literature—Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Hume, Kant, Mill, for example—but learn from their *observations* about life, and don't spend a lot of time worrying about their theories. You should also inform yourself about Confucianism and Buddhism, but it is difficult to get them right unless you are at home in their cultural contexts. Again, learn from their observations about life.

The metaphysical and theological backgrounds of these famous people and traditions pose many difficulties to thought and practice. But remember that you are seeking knowledge of how to live best, and that is not an obscure, recondite, and especially not a *scholarly*, matter. In fact, scholars seem, on the whole, to do less well at it than many ordinary citizens.