

Dumbing it Down
A Little Black and White Thinking to Make Understanding Ethics Easy
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm a fan of *South Park*. Okay, I am ashamed to admit it, but I'm a fan nonetheless. My favorite character on what may be the most juvenile, insensitive, offensive, politically incorrect, inappropriate show ever to bring up in a sermon, is South Park Elementary School counselor, Mr. Mackey. Mr. Mackey is best known for his habit of saying "mkay" at the end of almost every sentence, like the time he was teaching the kids about drugs. "Drugs are bad. You shouldn't do drugs. Mokay. If you do them, you're bad. Mokay, drugs are bad. It's a bad thing to do drugs. So, don't be bad, by doing drugs, mkay. That'd be bad, Mokay." Then there was the time he caught the kids smoking near the dumpster at the back of the school. "Let me tell you something about smoking. Smoking's bad, mkay. And if you start smoking at an early age, mkay, it's going to be bad. Mokay, because smoking can lead to all kinds of health problems like cancer. And let me tell you something about cancer, mkay, cancer is bad, mkay."

We shouldn't be surprised by Mr. Mackey's tendency to boil everything down to being either good or bad. As a two-dimensional character, he has a dualistic way of thinking and moralizing about things. It reminds me how simple my own life was back when I still knew everything, when I was about twenty. Back then, I was certain I understood the difference between right and wrong. Back then, I didn't have to listen to anyone who disagreed with me because I knew they had to be wrong. Back then, I wasn't responsible for wrestling with life's moral problems because the difference between "good" and "bad," mkay, had already been determined by some external authority. Back then, all I had to worry about was adhering to a few arbitrary rules that were disconnected from their outcomes or impacts on others, and was otherwise free to think mostly about myself. That's why it was all so easy, because I didn't have to think for myself, I didn't have to question my beliefs, I didn't have to consider other opinions, I wasn't personally responsible for making moral decisions since morality had already been spelled out for me, nor did I have to care about how following the rules might harm others. It wasn't my fault if they got in the way of me doing what's right.

But then my Liberal Arts education required me to take my first philosophy class, convincing me everything I thought I knew was probably wrong. So, I decided to major in the subject to figure out what the right answers really are, expecting to regain the comfort of knowing the difference between "good" and "bad," mkay. Alas, it didn't take long before I realized I would never again be as certain of anything as I had been before philosophy wrung me out. That reminds me of another *South Park* character, Towelie, but we won't go there. So, I view Mr. Mackey, and his dualistic, simplistic approach, with a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time in my own life. But, nostalgia aside, once awoken, it's difficult, if not impossible, to return to what philosopher Immanuel Kant called out state of, "dogmatic slumber."¹

¹ *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic* (1785; trans. Bennett J: online at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com>, page 2)

Not that I wish I could return to such a state, or that I want to take the easy way out, or that I admire black and white thinkers. But to me there's a kind of innocence, even a sweetness, in Mr. Mackey, in his belief everything is so simple, and in his devotion to promoting what's "good." I think there are a lot of goodhearted, well-meaning people like him in our three-dimensional world too—people devoted to doing what they believe is right, and who feel confident they know precisely what that means, even though their morality lacks the third dimension of depth because they haven't gone deeper into the perennial questions about the problems of morality.

The main problem is this; almost every ethical decision involves a moral dilemma. In its rawness, a moral dilemma means accomplishing something good by doing something bad. It's a terrible position to be in for anyone of good conscience, and a great excuse to do terrible things for those who have unconscionable goals. To justify the deaths of dozens, maybe hundreds, of innocent bystanders to possibly kill one or even a few suspected terrorists, is as unconscionable as the terrorists who kill as many innocent people just to make some political statement. These are not genuine dilemmas because the choice was made before the question was ever even asked, through established policies and practices of collateral damage and terrorism tactics. But when, on January 7th, 2015, Corrine Rey had just returned to work from picking up her five-year-old and was suddenly surrounded by gunmen who demanded she enter the keycode to the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* or else they'd shoot her little girl, no matter what choice she made, something terrible would result. In this case, she saved her daughter's life, but her actions allowed the gunman to kill twelve other people inside.

Fortunately, most moral dilemmas we face aren't as extreme, but they are still present whether we acknowledge them or not. Simply choosing to care for our own kids in an age of Global Warming may end up having terrible ramifications. Such care, for example, usually requires us to have a job, but how do we get to work without taking fossil fueled transportation? What if the only job we can get has a huge carbon footprint, like working for the airline industry, or as a truck driver? Likewise, by splurging to buy a computer to help with their homework, we've supported an industry that uses non-renewable resources to manufacture its product, a product that will eventually become obsolete and go into the mounting stream of technotrash that's polluting our environment with hazardous materials. Just enabling them to do a Google search supports a company that produces 1.5 million tons of carbon annually. The production and transportation of the food we feed our kids and the clothes we give them are also detrimental to the environment, in addition to upholding other systems of suffering and injustice around the world.

What we eat, what we buy, what we drive, where we live, where we work, how we vote, and so many other common choices, often represent competing moral interests. How we deal with such conflict, with these moral dilemmas, depends upon how we answer the fundamental question of ethics, "Are we to do the *right* thing, or the *best* thing?" Doing the right thing simplifies morality because all we must do, like Mr. Mackey, is look at our list of *dos* and *don'ts*, our list of prepared authoritarian laws and commands that tell us what is unequivocally "good" or "bad" regardless of the situation, and not worry about the consequences of our decisions or actions because we can feel confident, no matter what the

outcome, we have done the right thing. If the list says, “Thy shall provide for your children,” or, “Thy shall seek first your own interest for the good of the economy,” or, “Thy shall subdue and have dominion over the Earth,” or, “Thy shall avoid and ignore any truth but the truth that has been given unto thee,” then the moral problem is resolved easily by breaking off one of the horns of the dilemma, allowing us to act as if there is no dilemma by eliminating one of the choices. We’ll just go about our lives, business as usual, pretending Global Warming isn’t the greatest threat to human existence since human existence, or knowing that it is, but not caring because, regardless of the consequences, we know we’re doing what’s right.

If, on the other hand, our rule book says, “Thy Shall Not Leave a Carbon Footprint”—period—then our children would have to wear rags, go hungry, unsheltered, and live miserably in many other ways. So, the only reasonable choice is to answer the fundamental question the other way, realizing it isn’t our moral obligation to do the *right* thing, but to do the *best* thing. The problem with doing the *best* thing, however, is that knowing what’s best is a lot more complicated than knowing what’s right. Knowing what’s right is as simple as looking at the rules. We don’t have to understand why it’s right. We need only obey, and feel confident we made the right decision whatever the outcome. But doing the best thing means it’s up to us to decide the difference between right and wrong in each situation—that it’s our moral duty to wrestle with difficult ethical decisions. It means the possibility of making a mistake. It means, no matter what we do, our choices will have some negative consequences because doing what is *best* is a relative term, and may only be the lesser of two evils. Surely, we must feed, clothe, shelter, and nurture our children in every way, and, not only ours, but all children everywhere, even if doing so adds to the problem of Global Warming. The best we can do, and, therefore, the morally right thing to do, is to mitigate our carbon footprint the best we can while also attending to other competing moral interests.

How we respond to Global Warming is only one example. Again, what we eat, what we drive, what we buy, where we live, where we work, how we vote, and so many other common decisions create competing moral interests we must choose between. If doing what we believe is right in every situation, regardless of the outcome, is akin to breaking off one horn of a moral dilemma, then doing what we believe is *best* in a situation, is akin to confronting a problem head-on through some sort of moral compromise. It means recognizing that morality is something relative that happens between the extreme positions of absolute right and wrong.

We often hear it said that, “the ends never justify the means,” but I don’t accept that *the means justify the means* either. I would agree that harming innocent civilians to kill a few suspected terrorists doesn’t justify the means, but simply obeying the rules with no regard for how they impact others is often just as bad. After the Jewish holocaust, the International community developed and agreed upon the Nuremberg Principles for defining war crimes, which essentially state that saying, “I was only following orders,” is no excuse for murder, rape, enslavement, torture, plundering, or the wonton destruction of property and communities. It may be a soldier’s duty to obey orders, but not at the cost of everything else. Blindly following the rules, doing what we are told is right, without regard for the consequences of our own actions, is unethical because it lets us off the hook—it disengages us from the ethical necessity of sorting through our moral dilemmas. Being ethical requires us to own our moral

agency, and to recognize it is us, not our commander, not our rule book, not our god or our religion, who is ultimately accountable for the outcomes of our decisions.

All of this explains why I am not a black or white, right or wrong, good or bad moralist, because I find moral decisions almost always have both positive and negative consequences, which requires us to delve deeper, to think things through, and to take personal responsibility for our choices. But this doesn't mean we must decide what morality means in every new circumstance. Three-dimensional morality requires us to go deeper into ethics, which leads us to embrace certain principles that can help guide in most circumstances. Some philosophers have argued that *justice* is the greatest of all principles, by which they mean *just distribution*. Just distribution leads to equality for all as the just distribution of rights, to income equality as the just distribution of wealth, and to political equality as the just distribution of power.

In my judgement, Justice as equality, is a pretty good umbrella principle for helping us sort through our moral dilemmas. But, as of late, there's another umbrella principle I like just as much, that which psychologist Erich Fromm calls the principle of "human productivity." This isn't an appeal to the Protestant or American work ethic that values people only for how hard they work. By human productivity, Fromm is referring to the duty of ever individual to achieve her full potential, the duty to become her best. Consider how different our world might be if this were our highest moral aim. We would not practice punitive, racist, mass incarceration, because prison is a lifetime sentence for most that prohibits them from becoming their best. Instead of prison, we'd have to ask, what went wrong? What leads one to commit a crime? Was it poverty? Neglect? Lack of safety? Lack of education? Whatever it is, let's fix the root of the problem. As a society, let's create a system that guarantees everyone's basic needs are met. And let's make sure no one is neglected or unsafe, and learns the skills one needs to get along. We might have to maintain a few institutions that humanely care for those who present a real threat to themselves or others, but we could shut down our prison industrial complex.

Nor could we continue upholding our delusional belief in the myth of the Nation State, in which one region of the world feels obligated to pursue its own interests at the expense of those in other regions. For the point is achieving human potential, not national potential. The point is human sovereignty, not national sovereignty. In the true spirit of democracy, any person anywhere ought to have a say, a vote, in the decisions that impact them. If a country makes decisions that impact the well-being of people in foreign places, then the people in those places should get a vote in the matter. I'm talking a global democracy, which, I know, is radical thinking, and some may disagree, but this is what happens when the wellbeing and growth of people, not places, becomes our priority. Imagining "there's no countries, nothing to kill or die for," may be harder to do than John Lennon thought.

A morality in which, as Fromm says, "*the sole criterion of ethical value [is human] welfare*,"² cannot be anthropocentric because such welfare is intricately linked to a healthy environment, to clean air, clean water, good food, health, safety, security, and so on. So, a

² Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13

humanistic ethic is an environmental ethic, because, as Fromm puts it, “[human] purpose cannot be fulfilled in a state of unrelatedness to world...”³

I could go on about how different I envision our world might be if we made human welfare and fulfillment the goal of our moral decisions, as evidenced by our laws, education, economics, politics, and so forth, but, for now, I just wanted to suggest what a system based on universal principles or categorical imperatives can look like. All of this, furthermore, is how I have come to consider the complicated matter of ethics. To summarize, ethics is not a simple, black and white, right or wrong, good or bad issue, because almost every moral decision we make is accompanied by a moral dilemma. Almost every moral choice leads to both positive and negative consequences. Secondly, morality cannot be reduced to a few simple authoritarian rules. We must take personal responsibility for our moral choices, which means studying ethics, its problems, and the different ways some have tried solved them. Thirdly, morality is situational, which means embracing overarching principles and values like justice, equality, and human welfare to help guide us as we determine what is best when facing any moral dilemma.

Like many others, I’ve been speaking of morality in this way for many years, yet society, by and large, still seems to treat the subject as if it were a simple black and white matter. I’d be fine with that, if it worked, but black and white morality leaves too much and too many out, and doesn’t seem to care who gets hurt in the process. Take white supremacy, the most literal kind of black and white ethic ever. In an article on the subject, sociologist, Nicki Cole, says, “Historically, white supremacy has been understood as the belief that white people are superior to people of color. As such, white supremacy was the ideological driver of the European colonial projects and U.S. imperial projects: it was used to rationalize unjust rule of people and lands, theft of land and resources, enslavement, and genocide.”⁴ This brief definition succinctly shows how easily dualistic morality leads to horrible and endless injustices. The notion that people can be divided into whites and nonwhites, and that one must be “good” and one “bad,” resulted in the worst genocide in human history, to the eradication of more than 20-million indigenous peoples in the place we occupy today, and to capturing and importing millions of people from other lands to use as slaves, to treat as property, and visit other untold horrors upon, and to systems of institutional racism that favor whites to this day.

This is just one disturbing example of how detrimental simplistic, authoritarian, black and white morality can be. It’s why I continue to say ethics is complicated, it’s our moral duty to dig deeper, and we need to consider the consequences of our decisions in terms of justice, equality, and human welfare. But when I consider all that passes for morality in our society today, I’m beginning to realize too few are listening, that most people prefer to take the easy way out, to let someone else simply tell them the difference between right and wrong in no uncertain terms. So, today, I thought, I might acquiesce, for once, by asking, what would Mr. Mackey say?

³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴ <https://www.thoughtco.com/white-supremacy-definition-3026742>

Take racism, for example. Today, more than 150 years past the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, and more than 50 years past Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement, “blacks and most racial minorities,” as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says, “lag behind in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators.”⁵ I could go into a lengthy explanation as to why the continued discrimination against nonwhites is morally bankrupt, but, in the spirit of the KISS system, keep it simple stupid, I ask only, what would Mr. Mackey say?

“Racism is bad. You shouldn’t practice racism. Mokay. If you practice racism, you’re bad. Mokay, racism is bad. It’s a bad thing to practice racism. So, don’t be racist, by practicing racism, mokay. That’d be bad, Mokay.” Wow! That felt good! I get the appeal. Let’s try another.

“Let me tell you something about taking healthcare away from millions. Taking healthcare away from millions is bad, mokay. And if you start taking healthcare away from millions, mokay, it’s going to be bad. Mokay, because taking healthcare away from millions can lead to all kinds of health problems like cancer. And let me tell you something about cancer, mokay, cancer is bad, mokay.” Hey, this really works! Let’s keep going.

Giving 600-billion-dollars in tax breaks to a few of the wealthiest Americans at the expense of millions of others, mokay, that’s bad.

Citizens United, mokay, is bad. Saying corporations are people and money is free speech, is bad. So, don’t be bad. Get money out of politics, mokay.

Five men being wealthier than half the people on Earth—is bad, mokay.

Gerrymandering districts to give unfair advantage to one political party, is bad, mokay. So, don’t be bad. Don’t gerrymander, mokay.

Voter suppression—that’s bad, mokay. So, don’t be bad. Don’t suppress voting, mokay.

Stealing is bad. So, don’t steal Supreme Court seats, mokay. If you steal Supreme Court seats, you’re bad, mokay.

Bathroom laws are bad, mokay? Let me tell you something about stopping people from going wee-wee, stopping people from going wee-wee is bad, mokay. If you stop people from going wee, it’s going to be bad, mokay. So, don’t be bad. Let people go wee-wee, mokay.

Global warming, is bad. Don’t be bad. Stop global warming, mokay.

Gun violence is really bad, mokay. You’ve got to stop gun violence cause gun violence is bad, mokay.

⁵ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Reiner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

Dumbing it Down

Grabbing women or calling them pigs or paying them less than men is all bad, mkay. So, don't be bad, mkay.

Not letting people in your country based on their religion, is bad, mkay.

Not letting refugees fleeing from violence into your country, is bad, mkay.

Building walls to keep out your neighbors, is bad, mkay.

Exporting immigrant families with children born in this country, is bad, mkay.

Tweeting mean things, is bad, mkay.

FOX News is bad, mkay.

Demonizing and silencing people you disagree with is always bad, mkay.

Killing unarmed black men, is bad, mkay.

Mass incarceration, is bad, mkay.

Cutting funding to public education, is bad, mkay.

So, don't bad. Let me tell you something about being bad. Being bad is bad, mkay. And if you're bad, mkay, it's going to be bad. Mkay, because being bad can lead to all kinds bad problems. And let me tell you something about bad problems, mkay, bad problems are bad, mkay."