

An Immature and Fixated Morality

What Are the Signs?

By

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Have you ever asked yourself, *where* is morality? That's an awkwardly phrased question, so probably not. We might ask ourselves *what* morality is but not where it is, because it's a concept not a substance that we can point to our put our hands on. Yet when we speak of morality we often speak as if it is real and that we know exactly what it is. As a student of philosophy, I continue to ponder a lot about morality and ethics and have come to believe it doesn't exist. This doesn't mean there aren't cultural, social, and individual moral values and opinions, some of which are better than others, or that we should not behave morally toward other people, animals, and our planet. What I mean is that there is no universal guide hovering about somewhere in the ether by which to measure the difference between right and wrong. There's no religion, holy book, philosophical belief, legislation, or social conventions that can assure us that our behavior is right by any universal standard. Unlike the physical laws that we have reason to believe work everywhere in the Universe, there is no universal standard determining the difference between right and wrong.

Yet some of us, a lot of us, think there is such a universal standard, and delight in using it to tell others what they should and shouldn't do, and, often, what they should and shouldn't believe, say, and even how they should or shouldn't feel. The High Priest, the Papal Authority, the Medieval belief in the divine right of kings, are a few extreme examples of the authoritarian righteousness such thinking has led to. But there are also ordinary people in our every day lives who are so sure of their moral opinions that they assume they have the right to tell others what to do, and who dislike or even demonize those persons or groups who won't "listen." (*Listening*, in these cases, is a euphemism meaning they won't obey.)

This sense of moral authority, that justifies telling others what to or not to do, with the expectation they ought to obey, can be grounded in one's personal religious beliefs, values instilled by one's parents or passed down through one's culture, and other social laws, mores, and expectations. But most essentially this moral sense is rooted lazily in one's feelings. One has an emotional response to an environmental situation in which others are involved, causing one to feel mildly or seriously threatened, and then decides on the spot what will make the individual feel safe. Whatever that thing is, is what the person will consider the moral thing for others to do.

This line of arguing is based on the relatively new field of Evolutionary Psychology, a branch of psychology that tries to explain human psychology based on how certain kinds of thinking and behavior has helped our species survive and reproduce. One example is Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems theory. ETAS, for short, considers how the emotion of fear has helped and helps our species survive. Cognitive therapist Paul Gilbert says, "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."¹ This is not usually a conscious thought but an instinctive sense and experience. It might initially present itself, for example, as a feeling of awkwardness or shyness around people we don't know. It's why we must, as we often say, "warm up" to others, or to a new idea or situation. Such

fear makes us cautious and conservative about venturing too far or quickly into unknown territory, which isn't a bad survival instinct.

If we apply this instinct to the question of morality, to how the concept of morality helps our species survive and thrive, we can easily conclude that it codifies safe behaviors that have proven to protect us from danger and from others putting us in danger. Instructing our kids to look both ways before crossing the street is a rule that helps keep them safe. *Thy shall not kill* is a rule that keeps us safe, as individuals and as a society, and *Thy shall not steal* helps keep the stuff we need safe. So we can easily see how developing a sense of morality that makes human behavior predictable has aided in our evolutionary success.

Our species also has a large brain, with more folds and a larger frontal cortex than any other animal. This has given us great advantage and made us the most dominant species in Earth history. However, this advantage requires that our species must continue gestating outside the womb in order to fit through the birth canal. Otherwise, our brains would have to remain small. As biologist Stephen Jay Gould once said, it is clear that a human baby is "still an embryo."² Our bones have not fully hardened, our skulls have not fully closed, and, unlike any other apes, our brains are only a quarter of their eventual size and can continue developing throughout our entire lives.

Our big brain advantage was an evolutionary trade for a weaker and more vulnerable body than other apes. We have an ape body, but not powerful apish strength or powerful jaws and protruding teeth to protect ourselves. We don't have the arm strength to easily climb trees for protection, or to toss ourselves from limb to limb without most likely falling to our deaths. Other apes are born with the immediate strength to cling to their mothers, and within two months are moving about and playing on their own. Human infants are born with limbs that will remain almost useless for months and won't learn to walk for nearly a year or more, and even afterward, will remain incredibly dependent upon the protection of caregivers for years to come.

From an evolutionary perspective, we must wonder how such a weak and vulnerable species could ever have survived, let alone become so dominant? How could a mother, who is herself in danger of predation from other species, spend so much of her own energy and years caring for a child or children at the same time. Why would a father put himself at risk of predation to routinely go out into the world to find food and resources for his mate and offspring?

The answer is that evolution isn't about survival of the individual, but survival of the species. It's not about the individual organism but the information inside the individual that needs to get passed on through the ages. So, we have evolved feelings that motivate us to care for others, particularly our offspring, to provide and protect them even at our own expense. But our need for the protection, care, and cooperation of others continues throughout our entire lives. Today, most everything we have, our food, clothing, shelter, safety, roads, technology, and so on, depend upon others who live all over the world. Hence, this emotional bond is often most powerfully felt for those most related to us, but is also felt for others, including, to varying degrees, people we don't

know. Today, a lot of us are emotionally concerned about all the people in the world being impacted by the terrible wars and violence happening right now.

All of this is to say that our survival as a species depends upon our innate need to care for others and to be cared for by others. And this is where our sense of morality comes in, at least according to evolutionary psychologist, Robert Wright. In his book, *The Moral Animal*, Wright says, “the closest thing to a generic Darwinian view of how moral codes arise is this: people tend to pass the sorts of moral judgments that help move their genes into the next generation.”³

In short, we are social animals because we need to depend on others for our survival and, because our genes need us to survive, they have evolved to program us to treat each other with care. And it is such care that is the basis of our morality, that which I often refer to as the humanistic ethic. Social psychologist Erich Fromm, who also describes our species as a social animal, says that love is our greatest human power. But he doesn’t define love as a sentiment. “The most fundamental kind of love,” he says, “which underlies all types of love, is brotherly love. By this I mean the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life.” Going on to explain that “Brotherly love is love for all human beings ... characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness.”⁴

Fromm also, ingeniously, in my opinion, solves the problem of morality, meaning its lack of a universal standard, by saying we only have to consider it from our human perspective. This isn’t to say it’s anthropocentric, because being a fully developed human being means having compassion and empathy for all creatures. What he means, rather, is that human beings need each other and thus must take responsibility and care for others, respect them, and seek to understand them. This is why, in *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Fromm says “Materially,” ethics “is based on the principle that what is ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity].”⁵ And this is why, he most profoundly says, “*the sole criterion of ethical value [is] [human] welfare*”⁶ and “ that the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities.”⁷

To summarize, so far, I’ve made three main points. Firstly, morality has no independent existence or universal standard. Secondly, as social animals that depend on each other, our innate sense of what is good is rooted in our need to care for and be cared for by one another, which is the basis of what we mean by morality. It’s why when we harm others, we feel ashamed, or should feel ashamed. And it’s why, when we are harmed by others, we feel moral outrage. Thirdly, our humanistic morality is expressed most fully as responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of others, which must be the point and goal of all our social and political endeavors. (Respect means to take a second look—to re-see— beneath what is on the surface, such as one’s gender, color, sexuality, nationality, politics, religion, and so forth. This is what Fromm means by “knowledge of others,” seeing who they really are, their humanity, beyond their individual identities.)

If only this were so. Today, there are two brutal wars going on in the world in which this humanistic standard is not being followed. Here in the U.S., we are so divided that even our

political leaders in the same party can no longer get along, not even long enough elect a House Speaker. By the moral standard relative to us as humans, which requires us to care for all people, we are falling short.

Why? Why do we too often reserve responsibility and care for those closest to us, our own families, our own groups, our own people, but not everyone else? Or, better put, why can't we see that all people are like us, given that they too are human beings? This stems, firstly, from the principle of kin selection, in which our instinct is to care mostly for those most genetically similar to us, especially or offspring, following by our siblings, then our cousins, then our friends, until our concentric circles of relationships are so distant, they become meaningless to us.

But the other reason is because our simplest understanding of morality is expressed as *fairness*. One of the first moral complaints a child learns to make is saying something isn't fair. "It's not fair!" Fairness, at an early age, means being treated the same as everyone else. I once read of a child whose older brother, who had already finished his dinner and dessert, got an extra piece of chocolate cake. The younger brother, who had not yet finished his dinner, began insisting that he should also get two pieces of cake. His mother told him he must finish his dinner and first piece of cake before any talk of a second. "But it isn't fair!" The child cried. Before long, his moral outrage turned into a tantrum. His mother, in a moment of frustration, took her butter knife and, whop, sliced his single piece of cake in two. "There!" She said, "Now you have two pieces." To her surprise, the younger boy was perfectly appeased by the act and resumed eating his meal.

The problem with this simplistic understanding of fairness, whether we are children, who can be forgiven, or adults, who ought to know better, is that it miscalculates what morality means. When the younger boy's single piece of cake had been cut in two, he felt justice had been served, but his brother still had twice as much cake. As Erich Fromm once complained, "Equality today means 'sameness,' rather than oneness."⁸ Today, our largely punitive response to crime is a more serious example. Somebody commits a crime and must make restitution by going to jail or prison for a certain amount of time. But how does time compensate for the damage or loss resulting from crime? In this system the victims of crime are not made whole, and the criminals are often made worse. It's like halving the boy's piece of cake into two and believing justice has been served, that fair is fair, when nothing meaningful has been accomplished.

Another example of the problem with equating morality with fairness is that it often leads to an eye for an eye response to injustice. Granted, an eye for an eye is a great advance over a head for an eye, or a hand for a stolen loaf of bread, or a life locked into a criminal justice system for a single misdeed. The eye for an eye principle at least tries to make the punishment fit the crime. But because it is still a fair-is-fair mentality, it confuses what justice really means. As Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind."

When I was studying restorative justice, an alternative to punitive justice, I heard about a kid who immediately became the most bullied student at his new school. His worst tormentor of them all

had previously been its most bullied student. How, we might wonder, can someone who knows what it's like to be bullied do the same thing to somebody else? But, as a child with an immature understanding of morality, it makes perfect sense. The child was only making the world fair again. He had been bullied; therefore, it was only fair that he should bully someone else to bring balance back to the world. But this attitude doesn't exist merely among children. Only two weeks ago, I heard an Israeli official talking about Israel's response to the horrific attacks by Hamas. She said Israel's response would be swift and must be harsh, knowing many innocent people would be injured or killed in the process. She said there would be no warning, justifying this admission by saying, "They didn't give us any warning." Unfortunately, Hamas and the innocent people suffering the consequences are not the same "they," not anymore than the new kid was the person responsible for bullying his tormentor. Yet he was the one who would be punished for it and his bully would feel like justice had been served. It's not unlike the U.S. going to war with Iraq after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and other American targets; even though Iraq had nothing to do with those terrible events. But most Americans didn't care so long as someone was paying for the crime, anybody. After all, fair is fair, even if, like cutting one piece of cake into two, nothing truly changes.

Developmental psychology has long taught us that a punitive mindset is one of primary qualities defining the earliest stages of moral development. Lawrence Kohlberg wrote, "The young child is not oriented to the bad as 'being selfish,' 'Being deceitful,' etc.; he is, rather, oriented to the bad as being punished."⁹ James Fowler says, "stage one [development] looks to the consequences of an act and the probable degree of punishment it would entail."¹⁰ And child psychologist Jean Piaget said, "In the domain of retributive justice, every punishment is accepted as perfectly legitimate, as necessary, and even as constituting the essence of morality."¹¹ And this is what we're really talking about, our retributive understanding of morality and justice that is rooted in an immature mindset. The punitive, authoritarian, black and white, fair is fair, understanding is the lens through which we are dealing with crime and terrorism, and, these days, is how many on the left believe they will bring about social justice.

Yet cutting the cake in two rather than keeping it whole, "sameness rather than oneness," mistakes justice for everyone having exactly the same, which migrates easily into everyone looking the same, acting the same, thinking the same, and speaking the same. This is the mindset that considers Robin Hood a heroic figure, because he balances the scales by robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. Children, in particular, love the story of Robin Hood. Disney has even made a classic animated movie about this bandit and his band of merry men, or, in this case, merry woodland animals. Today, in the real world, there are many who believe the solution to our economic woes is leveling the playing field by forcibly redistributing wealth, taking it from the richest people and giving it to the poorest. Fair is fair, after all. They don't recall this has already been tried in other countries, which have become the most inhumane and unjust in history.

But psychology also tells us that when we're operating and thinking like small children, we are "fixated," a term that means we are stuck at an early stage of development. It also informs us that

the earmark of mature morality is care and respect for all people, no matter who they are, where they are from, what they believe, or how much or how little they have. This, again, is the core of the humanistic ethic, “love for all human beings,” as Fromm said, “characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness.” It isn’t about bringing people to justice but bringing justice to people. It’s not about retribution but reparation and restoration. It’s not about punishing someone for the damage done but fixing the damage that has been done. It’s about making sure human welfare is “*the sole criterion of ethical value*” and that the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all our social and political activities. This is how a mature person, a mature society, a mature world operates—and, oh, what a world that would be.

As a religion based upon this mature understanding of morality, the humanistic ethic, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must lead by example, make sure that everything we do demonstrates our “love for all human beings,” by demonstrating care, responsibility, respect, and understanding toward others and working for a world in which human need is met and every individual has the opportunities necessary to achieve their full potential. Anything else is just the icing on half a piece of cake.

¹ Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

² Gould, Stephen Jay, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, from the chapter *Human Babies as Embryos*, Penguin, 1977.

³ Wright, Robert, *The Moral Animal*, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1994, p. 146.

⁴ Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving* (pp. 42-43). Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁸ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 12.

⁹ Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1980, p. 80.

¹⁰ Fowler, James W., *The Stages of Faith*, HarperSan Francisco, HaperCollins, New York, NY, 1981, 1995, p. 58.

¹¹ Gruber, Howard E. & Voeche, J. Jacques, eds., *The Essential Piaget*, Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1977, 1995, p. 187f.