

**Becoming Good**  
**On Deciding the Difference Between Right and Wrong**  
By  
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Millions of US citizens took to the streets in protest of the Vietnam war, largely in reaction against reports of the cruel and indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians by the US military. They chanted phrases like, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today,” or “Stop the war, stop the killing,” and angrily hurled accusations of “Murderer” and “Baby Killer.” This atrocious disregard for innocent human life was so blatant that the nation’s military then began using the phrase “collateral damage” to officially describe the civilians being killed in its brutal bombing campaigns. During the Gulf war in 1991, the invasion of Afghanistan beginning in 2001, and the Iraq war starting in 2003, almost everyone was using this sanitized phrase—the US military, the news media, and ordinary citizens—when referring to the hundreds of thousands—more likely millions—of innocent people killed in their aftermaths.

As unforgivable as these deaths were, the most euphemized disregard for innocent life was during the Nazi Holocaust, resulting in the deliberate and mechanical murder of millions of Jews, Russians, Poles, homosexuals, and disabled persons. They referred to these planned exterminations as “The Final Solution,” to their mass executions as “special treatment,” to their arbitrary arrests of innocent people as “protective custody” and to their removal as “cleansing” and “purification,” and to the killing of those with disabilities as “mercy killing” or with the scientific term, “euthanasia,” as if they were doing these particular victims a kindness by ending their suffering. Their gas chambers and crematoria were called, “special installations” where they only “processed” those they had merely “deported.” Such language allowed Hitler—a vegetarian who could not bring himself to attend a single murder or execution—to avoid confronting himself with the true consequences of his evil heart.

Today, Israel is rebuffing anyone who calls their actions against innocent Palestinians—including their murder, forced removal, and starvation—“genocide” and “war crimes.” They prefer to blame these results on Hamas, accusing the Islamic militant group of using their own people as “human shields,” or they point to the cruel and horrific events of the October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, attacks as justification for engaging in the same or even worse behavior themselves. But how would this excuse hold up if the police showed up to a bank robbery and shot all the hostages to get at the bank robbers? Would they get away with blaming the criminals for their deaths?

These are extreme examples of something we all do every day—rationalize our own behavior to justify what we are doing, even to ourselves, especially when we know, deep down, that what we are doing is wrong. We blame those we victimize. We convince ourselves what we are doing is for some greater cause—to save Germany, to protect our freedoms, to kill the kidnapers, to get the “worst of the worst” criminals out of our country, as Donald Trump is now claiming to justify indiscriminately rounding up and

removing thousands of innocent immigrants from our communities. But all of us sometimes engage in such behavior, even if on much smaller scales.

A couple of years ago, for example, a driver, going too fast through an uncontrolled four-way stop, totaled my car. As we waited for the police to arrive, the body language of the driver responsible suggested he was becoming increasingly agitated. He began angrily glaring at me from across the street, which made me think he was blaming me for the accident. After a while, he gave me a look of disgust, flicked his cigarette to the ground, abruptly jumped into his lightly damaged truck, and sped away. He must have given further thought to the wisdom of fleeing the scene of an accident and soon returned.

Fear, the feeling that we are endangered, often turns to anger, which prepares us to defend and protect ourselves. That this fellow had both emotions after a serious car accident is no surprise. Nor is it a surprise that he rationalized his emotions by concocting reasons to blame me, the source of the threat, for the accident; reasons that he explained to the police officers once they arrived to take his statement. Having no feelings about the accident, however, the officers looked at the simple facts. My vehicle was coming from the right, his from the left. So, they cited him for failing to yield the right of way and his insurance company paid for the collision, not mine. Yet, at least for a period of time, he had managed to convince himself the accident was my fault and, therefore, felt justified in committing an additional crime by initially fleeing the scene of the accident that, in reality, he had caused.

But even this example is too big. The same dynamics can emerge over the slightest and most insignificant matters, like which sports team is best, whether a movie is good or not, what color we should paint the walls, where we should place the furniture, or any other matter of mundane importance. We have a subjective feeling about an issue, big or small; then rationalize that feeling by translating it into an idea. We then moralize the idea by considering it not only right, but righteous. Thus, we feel we have a moral obligation to protect it against nonbelievers, which means anyone who simply disagrees with us.

We do this because, as Socrates said, "No person knowingly does evil." Very few of us want to be the bad guy in our story, so we rationalize our true motives to make ourselves seem the hero, no matter how wrong or harmful our behavior is. We are the heroes because we are protecting the world from evildoers. Hitler didn't consider himself an evil man, but the defender of Germany, which he rationalized by demonizing and blaming the Jews, among others, for the nation's woes, and by using euphemistic language to deny what was really happening, even to himself. Such repression is also why the US government and military, and later the news media and public, used the term "collateral damage" to describe the indiscriminate killings of untold numbers of innocent civilians in the countries it invaded and occupied. It's why just this week Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described his intention to occupy Gaza City as "freeing" it.

Most of us are so inclined to justify our decisions and actions in this way, no matter how big or small, no matter how badly they impact others, that philosophers have long sought the best means of knowing the difference between right and wrong, regardless of how we feel about it or how it impacts our personal interests. This branch of philosophy is called *Ethics*, which comes from the Greek word meaning “character.” Our character refers to those qualities about us that are true and reliable no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. It is different than the *persona*—the mask we wear in public to get along in society. Our character remains present whether we are in public or alone, whether we are seen or not, whether we are acting deliberately or instinctively, whether our circumstances are difficult or easy, whether we are happy, sad, shocked, mad, or afraid. It is our character that guides us to do the right thing when we are in an accident, or when our society is vilifying some group that it has decided to scapegoat, or when our nation is responsible for violence and injustice against innocent people.

This is why it is vital, by which I mean, essential to our lives, that we intentionally learn about and develop ethics; because ethics means character, and having character is part of what it means to fully unfold as individuals. Developing ethics also means that we are far less likely to make moral decisions on the fly that are based on our own feelings and self-interests. Instead of making random emotional decisions, they are based on our character; those qualities about us that remain true and reliable no matter what situation we are in. And this requires more than adhering to what we have been taught or told are the differences between right and wrong by our families, peers, communities, religions, and so forth. Whether some of these may be correct or not, they are derived from our social conditioning, not by taking personal responsibility to learn about and choose for ourselves which ethical approach is best.

To help with this, I’m going to broadly outline the three main ethical systems, then conclude by sharing about my own ethical journey and why I think it’s best. These include rule-based ethics (deontological), outcome-based ethics (teleological), and value ethics. Deontological ethics, from the Greek or for “is,” *ontos*, bases ethical behavior on rules, laws, mores, and the like, that are believed to be right in all situations, no matter the consequences. Theological voluntarism, the belief that we must always follow God’s commands, or the teachings of the Bible or Church, no matter what, is a good example. Outcome based ethics asks, what is the *right* thing to do?

Teleological ethics, from the Greek word for “end,” *telos*, bases ethical behavior on its results, like achieving the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people, even if it means breaking the rules. This is the thinking and justification for engaging in civil disobedience, for example. Outcome-based ethics asks, what is the *best* thing to do?

I consider value-based ethics a hybrid of these two opposites. It focuses on certain overarching principles, like justice, equality, charity, compassion, and so forth, without being overly directive, yet also bound by more than just the end results of our behavior. It

also allows us to remain free to choose the best way of adhering to our values. Kant's categorical imperative, *that no person should be treated as a means to someone else's ends, but should be considered an end within themselves*, is a good example of a broad value that is nondirective.

In keeping with what we know about moral development, we all start off as deontologists, feeling that right and wrong are determined by following or breaking the rules taught to us by an external authority who knows better than us. This is accompanied by a punitive mindset, the idea that rulebreakers should be punished and that our own actions are wrong only because we're punished, not because there is anything intrinsically good about the rules. As adults, we should outgrow this mindset, although some of us don't. These simply find surrogate authorities, other than their primary caregivers, to continue with this pattern of thinking. Perhaps they become rigid "law and order" moralists, or strict adherents of the moral teachings of their religion.

Like all of us, I began as a deontologist, wishing to obey the instructions of my parents, which, despite their own serious moral shortcomings, probably kept me safe. I still follow the rule of "looking both ways before crossing the street." These rules of thumb are called heuristics, a method for making good choices without having to give any advance thought. I continued as a deontologist throughout my youth, having come to believe right and wrong were best determined by following the tenants and teachings of my conservative Christian faith, although my failure to sometimes do so was accompanied by guilt and fear of damnation.

But after studying ethics for the first time while in college, I quickly became a teleologist, meaning I was far more concerned about the outcomes of my moral decisions than their means. As my philosophy professor Wallace Roark used to ask, "If the ends don't justify the means, what does?" Outcome-based ethics gave me a lot more freedom, agency, and personal responsibility in making moral choices. Doing so was harder yet more meaningful than simply obeying the rules I'd been taught, and also better assured that my road to Hell was not paved with good intentions; meaning I was less likely to engage in harmful or destructive behavior that I could simply blame on following the rules.

I remained a teleologist only until recent years, when I became more of a value-based ethicist. The problem with end-based ethics is that the only person accountable is oneself. It is ultimately up to the individual to determine what the best outcome should be, based on what? The greatest good for the greatest number of people? This isn't a bad outcome, but what if the greatest number of people is only 51 percent, leaving the other 49 percent out? Is it really ethical for one person to take actions that work against 49 percent of the population. These days Republicans often say "Americans have spoken," and "Trump is just doing what they have asked him to do." Yet almost half of all voters, voted against Trump. Are we do conclude by such rhetoric that they are no longer consider Americans?

By this same logic, shouldn't most nations be mostly working in the interests of India and China since they have the largest populations? And what of ethical egoism, the belief that the right thing to do for everyone is to always act in one's own interest. This was the belief promoted by philosopher Ayn Rand, who believed we should always act in our own self-interests, while respecting the rights of others to do the same. It is akin to idea of Laissez-faire, the economic and political doctrine advocating for minimal government intervention in the affairs of individuals and businesses so that the "invisible hand" of Capitalism will magically work in the best interests of everyone.

These questions lead to the greater question of who should decide? If it is entirely up to every individual to determine the answer for themselves, then, as these examples show, we might end up concluding we should act in our own self-interest, after all. Only, unlike rule-based ethics, there is no longer the threat of punishment for doing so, even if acting in our own interests ends up diminishing the lives of others.

Some might argue that value-based ethics is but a type of teleology. It has, indeed, been categorized as such since the time of Aristotle, who called it *eudaimonism*, from the Greek word meaning "good spirit," emphasizing ethical behaviors that lead to human happiness in general. I consider it a hybrid because, rather than being based on a large set of rules to follow, or one overarching categorical imperative, it can be based on several broad values or guiding principles. The first person to have advocated for value ethics was Zeno of Citium, Crupress, 300 years ago. Zeno considered values, which he called "virtues," the greatest good because they are the only thing that work in every situation. He said that "all else is indifferent," meaning nothing else matters, including our own self-interests. It could be that following our values results in our benefit or causes us to suffer, but these consequences cannot be part of our moral calculations. Our goal must be to uphold our values, no matter what the consequences. Yet, because our values are broad, they stand to result in the greater good.

Zeno's virtues were wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. The seven principles that Unitarian Universalism recently abandoned, beginning with *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, are a more recent, and I think, better list of values that we should all adhere to in any circumstance, regardless of the consequences to our own lives. I also believe value ethics represents the highest stage of moral development as outlined by developmental psychologists. The founder of this field, Lawrence Kohlberg said this stage, which he called post-conventional morality, is based, not on the authoritarian punitive model of the early childhood pre-conventional stage, nor on the social laws and expectation of the middle conventional stage, but upon universal ethical principles that apply to all people in all situations. Such validation is another reason I feel confident that value ethics is the best way to go.

These days, I define my values as freedom, reason, tolerance, and, most importantly, human dignity. My main ethical drive is toward human dignity and fulfillment, which, I believe, can

only be achieved by creating social circumstances in which individuals are free to think and speak and choose our own purposes with equal access to the protections and benefits of society; societies in which we are free to reason for ourselves without being told what we must and mustn't believe by our governments or societies; and where we must all live and let live regardless of whether we agree or disagree. Another name for my particular value ethic is the *Humanistic Ethic*, the belief, as Erich Fromm put it, that the sole criterion of ethical value "*must be human welfare*"<sup>1</sup> and that "the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities."<sup>2</sup>

Whether you agree with where I've ended up or not, the important point is that my struggle to understand ethics, and to know what the best thing to do is, has changed over time and, I suspect, will continue to evolve. Making the right choices is never simple, no matter where we are on our ethical journey. At least they shouldn't be easy. If they are, it's a good sign something is wrong with your ethics. There are almost always negative consequences resulting from our moral choices. For this reason, every ethical decision is accompanied by a moral dilemma.

Yet it is vital, essential to life, that we develop the kind of character we can trust will help us make the best decisions we can in every situation, rather than merely deciding as we go along. In his book, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*, Donald Robertson tells us the stoics believed only "Foolish people ... vacillate, driven by contradictory passions, which flutter from one thing to another like butterflies."<sup>3</sup> Rather than developing a moral character, they rely on what philosopher Bertrand Russell called *emotivism*: ethical judgements that are merely disguised expressions of one's feelings about an issue that flap about inconsistently. Such unpredictability, as I discussed earlier, can lead to some of the most unforgivable cruelties imaginable. Yet, tragically, unbelievably, our society doesn't teach us ethics but prefers that we merely absorb and accept the cultural ethos through osmosis, without ever questioning what we have been molded to believe is right and wrong. This means it is up to us as individuals to take responsibility to develop the kind of character we can trust will guide us toward doing what's best no matter how doing impacts our own lives. But remember, it's a lifelong journey, for we are, or at least we should be, always in the act of becoming good.

<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, Donald, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*, St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, 2019, p. 107