Pathway or Pathology?

How to Know the Difference

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By

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Socrates once asked, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” In other words, is good absolute or is it relative? Is a particular action always right no matter its consequences? Or are the consequences of our actions what makes them good or not?

Is it always wrong to kill others, for example? Or is it sometimes necessary to do so for the “greater good?” Is it wrong to pull a switch that saves dozens from being killed by a runaway train, but causes the death of one person now standing in its path? Or, to avoid abstractions, was it wrong for the U.S. to kill Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sparing millions from his cruel and oppressive tyranny, even though it resulted in the deaths of innocent bystanders? Is ethics just a math problem? The greatest good for the greatest number? Or is it a based on unyielding rules that must never be broken—thy shalt not murder—even if not doing so leaves millions to suffer?

Questions like these indicate how difficult it is to truly know if our actions are good or not. Yet, as Socrates also said, “No one knowingly does evil.” Most of us want to be good. But some think they are when they aren’t, and some that they aren’t when they are. Yet almost all of us think we know the difference between right and wrong, although too few of us have ever studied ethics and learned about its many uncertainties.

Perhaps we want to see ourselves as good because we are social animals who need the approval of others to secure our basic needs, like belonging, safety, and security. Or maybe, as warm-blooded creatures, it’s because we innately cares for others and don’t wish to cause them harm. Whatever the reasons, we are a species that takes pleasure in the happiness of others. I believe this instinct is the basis of what it feels like to be good; being kind to others, valuing their happiness and welfare, and not behaving in ways that cause them to suffer.

Yet, as I spoke of in-depth last Sunday, this instinct to be kind to others often conflicts with our own survival instinct, especially when it comes to protecting and propagating the information within us, both our genes and beliefs. Our selfish genes and selfish memes, the unconscious drivers of our behaviors, don’t care about the welfare of others any more than they care about our mortal vessels, so long as they can use them long enough to copy and paste themselves into the future.

These competing drives, to belong by being good, and to progenerate the information within us at all costs, can cause us to falsely justify our selfish desires and actions in a number of ways.

1. Firstly, as I also said last week, we have evolved to be kind to those most like us and closest to us, while caring less or not at all about those we feel unrelated to or don't know. This instinct is called "kin selection," but it can also include kindred spirits, those whose beliefs, countries, cultures, and identities are most akin to our own. Yet it excludes strangers and foreigners, especially those with ways and ideas that seem strange and foreign to us. Because we cannot relate to them, we don't feel related to them, so we don't necessarily feel the impulse to treat them with kindness. Being kind to those closest to us is good enough to make us feel good about ourselves.

2. This leads to a second means of seeing ourselves as good even when we aren't; confusing *being good* with *being right*. Rather than equating goodness with the wellbeing of others, we equate it with having the right ideas and believing the right things. Like Zues who gives birth to Athena from his forehead—his ideal woman—we love our ideas and beliefs and become extremely defensive when they are threatened, wishing to protect our ideological children as much as we wish to protect our biological children. And why wouldn't we? We learn very quickly in life that in order to be accepted by others we must hold the right ideas. People have been exiled, persecuted, executed, and wars have been fought merely over ideological differences; because too many of us have confused being good with being right, or, better put, being right with being righteous.

3. Thirdly, being convinced we are right and therefore righteous is bolstered by another unconscious tendency, *the feeling of certainty.* In his book, *On Certainty*, neurologist Robert Burton says, "Certainty and similar states of 'knowing what we know arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason."[1] So, paradoxically, the more certain we feel about something, the more certain we can be that we are NOT thinking rationally. Nevertheless, feeling certain we are right and that being right is the same as being righteous, enables us to feel justified in demonizing and dehumanizing those with whom we disagree.

The limited reach of kin selection, equating being good with being right instead of with being good to others, and feeling certain we are right and, therefore, righteous, are among the primary reasons we feel justified in mistreating others rather than following our biological instinct to treat them with care and kindness.

Unlike other animals, as far as we know, humans have the unique ability to consider such matters. We wonder about our motivations, we scrutinize our behaviors, we want to be good so badly that we even fool ourselves into believing we are when we aren't. Such introspection, psychologizing, and, sometimes, rationalizing, are an attempt to liberate ourselves from the behavioral instinctiveness other creatures are bound to. It's our attempt to get control of ourselves and take charge of our behaviors despite our biological instincts and drives.

The fields of ethics, philosophy, science, and psychology have been born out of this desire to understand reality and to act in accord with it; with what in Taoism is considered the Way of Harmony with the Universe (with the way things really are). But it's hard, and few of us are very successful at it, and none of us are always successful at it. The ancient code within our bodies and the primitive ideas passed to us from generation to generation are akin to the programming that's now guiding autonomous vehicles, vehicles that move and act without thinking. They seem intelligent and responsive to their environments, but they are unconscious pieces of hardware being driven by software someone else wrote for them.

But the disciplines I've mentioned are our attempts as humans to understand our coding and how to override it if that's what it takes to become better people. This is why I chose to write my doctoral dissertation on the psychology of religion. Like the title of this sermon, it was entitled, "Pathway or Pathology." I began with the premise that religion represents humanity's first attempt to rewrite a moral code that overrides our most base instincts in order to create more just and peaceful societies. Judaism's Ten Commandments are a prime example, which I have myself rewritten to facilitate a modern understanding of what they would have meant to their original audience.

1. Don't revere anything more than freedom.
2. Don't take your ways and ideas too seriously.
3. Don't act like you have all the answers.
4. Do make sure workers have the rights, resources, and time they need to have good lives.
5. Do make sure you have a social security system in place to take care of your senior citizens.
6. Don't destroy the lives of others.
7. Don't dominate others.
8. Don't take what you want from others.
9. Don't demonize and dehumanize others.
10. Don't profit at the expense of others.

With these revisions, you can see that these commands were not fundamentally about worshipping or obeying a particular god, but about how to live more peacefully and justly with others. They are not a divine covenant, but a social contract, and pretty good one at that.

They are also a good example of religion operating as a pathway; as a way of life, that is, that helps us live better lives. On the other hand, when Moses insists, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Each of you, take your swords and go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other. Kill everyone—even your brothers, friends, and neighbors,"[2] the religion is pathological. In my opinion, its scriptures like this that enable Benjamin Netanyahu and his supporters to justify Israel's bloodthirst and destruction in Gaza and now in Iran.

My dissertation was based on a survey of what classical, modern, and developmental psychology has to say about religion. This research led me to conclude that most major mental illnesses are dissociative in nature, meaning they are pathological attempts to escape the harsh realities and traumas of life. Psychotherapy is about helping people reconnect and cope with reality in healthy ways. Without going deeper into it, this work led me to conclude that religion can be used to help us better cope with reality or to drive us deeper into our delusions, especially by helping us falsely confirm and justify them.

But this isn't true only of religion. As we have seen, the same can be said of ethics. We can use ethics as means of becoming better people, by which I mean kinder and more just, or we can use it to justify mistreating and dehumanizing others. So how do we know the difference? How do we know if we are truly on an ethical path, or behaving pathologically?

Firstly, good question. Keep asking it. What's the saying? "If you think you might be crazy, it's a good sign you're not." Remember what I said about humans being unique in our ability to self-reflect and work to take charge of our own behavior. It's the people who are sure they are right that we have to worry about. We should struggle over ethical problems because, chances are, whatever choice we make, it's not going to be perfect. *Am I doing the right thing? Is this really the best thing? What's the downside?* Questions like these are vital to being an ethical person, even if we don't always get things quite right.

Secondly, learn about ethics. We think we know the difference between good and evil, but few of us are ever taught about ethics, its approaches, and its perennial questions. Instead, we base our notion of good and evil on what we've absorbed from others, like our parents, our teachers, our peers, our churches, our culture, and so forth. Rather than relying on morality by osmosis, we ought to study the subject by reading books and articles or even

taking classes on the topic. Ethics is a field of philosophical study, not something we innately know or "pick up on" from others.

Thirdly, figure out which ethical approach you think is best and stick to it unless, through practice, you realize it may not be the best after all. There are essentially only three approaches, rule-based, outcome-based, and values-based ethics.

- Living by certain rules, like the Ten Commandments, especially as I've interpreted them, is a great way to keep our own biases and needs out of the equation, because we must obey them regardless of their impact on our lives. On the other hand, rules can be too rigid and outdated to handle the nuances of every situation, can become performative, and can justify harming others by claiming, "I'm just following the rules."
- Outcome based ethics determine right and wrong based on the consequences of our actions rather than the actions themselves. This type of ethic allows us to better adapt to particular and unforeseen situations. And, as my college philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark used to ask, "If the ends don't justify the means, what does?" Surely the consequences of our actions matter most. "But on the other hand," as Dr. Roark also frequently said, we cannot simply allow the ends to justify the means or we can justify all manner of wrongdoing to achieve the, so called, "greater good."
- The third ethical approach, value-ethics, also called virtue ethics, strives to live according to broad principles or values, like integrity, kindness, truth, equality, human dignity, and the like. If we foster these values within ourselves, they become virtues, that is, part of our character, which is actually what ethics means, character. In this way our ethical approach is neither too rigid, nor too open-ended. At the same time, because adhering to our values matters most, our personal needs and desires remain irrelevant. The goal is to adhere to them regardless of how doing so impacts our own lives.

So, study ethics, choose a path, and stick to it to help ensure that your own biases and desires aren't clouding your judgement and that you're not choosing whichever ethics best suits your own interests at the moment.

When I wrote my controversial book, *The Gadfly Papers*, in 2019, I was ultimately advocating for the ethical values that had once defined Unitarianism and are why I am a Unitarian. I knew there was a possibility it would not be well-received by some and that it might negatively impact my life. In fact, when the moment came to start handing it out, I did so with much fear and trepidation, but, because I practice value ethics, I could not allow

such worries to prevent me from doing what I considered, and still consider, the right thing to do.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, on the other hand, as my book portends, now adheres to rigid and unforgiving outcome-based ethics that lead its adherents to justify doing whatever they must to protect and propagate their new ideology as much as possible before they die. In my estimation, Unitarian Universalism has been transformed from a once venerable and ethical pathway into a pathological ideology, proving the point of my dissertation, that any religion can be used to help us better cope with reality or to drive us deeper into our delusions.

And if it can happen to Unitarians, it can happen to anyone. This is why I consider this topic, and the question I have raised to be so crucial: pathway or pathology? How can we be sure we are truly acting in ways that promote human welfare, peace, and justice, and not just doing whatever we want based upon our most basic instincts, fears, and desires, especially the drive to make sure our ideas dominate the meme-pool by forcing them on others?

There is, I think, a simple test. If our beliefs make us more compassionate, more humble, more curious about others, and more willing to admit we might be wrong, then they are probably serving as a pathway. But if they make us more certain, more defensive, angrier, and more willing to dismiss or dehumanize others, then they are probably pathological.

A genuine ethical path does not make us feel superior to others. It makes us more responsible for how we treat them. It doesn't give us certainty. It gives us humility. It doesn't divide the world into the righteous and the wicked. It reminds us that every human being—ourselves included—is capable of both.

So what kind of person do our ethical beliefs cause us to become? Do they make us kinder? Do they make us more patient with those who disagree with us? Do they expand the circle of those we consider our kin? If they do, they are a pathway. But if they narrow that circle—if they make it easier to hate, to condemn, or to harm—then no matter how righteous they feel, they have become pathological.

Pathway or pathology is an unending question. It is the ongoing practice of examining ourselves, questioning our certainty, and choosing anew to act in ways that affirm the dignity and humanity of others. Not because we must become perfect, but because we are always striving to become better, making the world a little better in the process.

[1] Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, preface.

[2] Exodus 32:27