

Where Does Morality Come From? And Why Do The Right Thing?

August 1, 2010

Opening Words - Rachel Teates

“Listen up, everyone, this is Jupiter, Supreme Being, Head Honcho, Ruler of All Things. I have an important announcement for my fine-feathered citizens. Tomorrow, at my place, there will be a pageant where I, as judge, will select the most spectacular among you to be King of All Birds.”

Upon hearing this news, the birds flocked to the community pool to bathe and preen their feathers, for they all wanted to look their best at the competition. The plain jackdaw was there with the rest, and realized that with his ugly plumage he didn't have a prayer of capturing old Jupiter's attention, so he waited for the other birds to finish priming and go home to get their beauty rest. He then waded about collecting the most brilliant, fancy feathers the others had dropped, and fastened the plumes to his own drab body.

The following day each bird strutted before Jupiter's throne. After careful consideration, Jupiter was about to appoint the jackdaw king, when the other contestants recognized the impostor and plucked the false feathers, exposing him as the ordinary jackdaw.[1]

This story may sound familiar to some of you. It's one of Aesop's Fables entitled “The Vain Jackdaw.” Just in case you're wondering, the Jackdaw is a small dark gray bird, and not particularly attractive. Anyway, the moral of the story is “those who cheat lose in the end.” Or maybe the moral could be “it's better to always be yourself.” No matter what our interpretation, it is the *moral* of the story that's important.

Now I use the word “moral” specifically because today's service is about morality. However, this service is more about how we act as people, and not necessarily about what ancient Greek tales can teach us; although they are important.

Today's service is about why we as human beings act the way we do and where we get our sense of right and wrong. If I asked you to tell me where this thing called “morality” comes from, I'd probably get a variety of answers. Some might say that our sense of morality comes from sets of laws given to the people by God. Think back to the Ten Commandments service a couple of weeks ago. Some might say morality depends on culture, some might say morality is an evolved biological trait. It could come from all of these sources and more and this morning we'll do our best to explore some of the answers to this question.

Come, let us worship together.

[1] Sneed, Brad. Aesop's Fables: Retold and illustrated. The Vain Jackdaw. Dial Books for Young Readers, A division of Penguin Young Readers Group, New York, 2003.

Reading 1 "The Lion and the Mouse," one of Aesop's fables

A lion was awakened from sleep by a mouse running over his face. Rising up angrily, he caught him and was about to kill him, when the mouse piteously cried out, "If you would only spare my life, I would be sure to repay your kindness." The lion laughed and let him go. It happened shortly after this that the lion was caught by some hunters, who bound him by strong ropes to the ground. The mouse, recognizing his roar, came and gnawed the rope with his teeth and set him free, exclaiming:

"You ridiculed the idea of my ever being able to help you; you never expected to receive from me any repayment of your favor. Now you know that it is possible for even a mouse to help a lion." No act of kindness is ever wasted.

Reading 2 "From the Ojibwa Indians"

Grandfather / Look at our brokenness.

We know that in all creation, only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.

We know that we are the ones who are divided.

And we are the ones who must come back together - to walk the Sacred Way.

Grandfather / Sacred One

Teach us love, compassion, and honor,

That we may heal the earth, and heal each other.

Sermon - Marc Renault

INTRODUCTION

Salesman Alan Williams found himself at a cross-roads. He was meeting with a potential client because this man had a contract with one of Alan's competitors, but the man was extremely dissatisfied with the service and was ready to give Alan his business. Alan really wanted this man's business, however, as they talked, it became clear to Alan that it was in the man's best interest to stay in his current contract - changing would mean big upheaval for the man's company, employees would have to be retrained, and if he left his current contract he was setting himself up for possible legal action. What would Alan do? Would he take this man's business knowing that he was actually putting the man in a worse position? Taking his business would mean a sizable commission for Alan, and would bolster his reputation in his company. What would *you* do if you were in Alan's position?

Alan recalls that moment, saying "It pained me, it pained me so much to have to say to this guy, you know, I'd really love to have your business, but what's best for you right now is [to stay

with your current contract].” Alan remembers this as one of his most painful experiences in sales. But it actually paid off for Alan. The man was so impressed with Alan’s honesty that he recommended Alan to anyone who asked for references. Alan ended up with several large clients as a direct result of this experience. [Williams]

Management consultant Peter Drucker once said, “It’s more important to do the right thing than to do things right.”

But *why*? *Why* is it important to do the right thing? Alan ends his story saying he’s glad he did the right thing because it ultimately resulted in more business. The lion was right to let the mouse go because his favor was ultimately returned. Hmm. That sounds a little self-serving. Should we do the right thing because we hope for future benefit? In fact, Alan did the right thing *without* the promise of future benefit. He didn’t know how things would turn out. He did it because he *knew* it was right. He didn’t want to hurt the other person.

There are salesmen who would have taken the contract, but I suspect that any of them would have felt in their gut that they *ought* to be honest, even if they end up acting selfishly.

So here’s our big question for today: Where does our sense of “ought” come from? Where do we get this moral sense that there is right and wrong and we *ought* to do the right thing?

This is a deeply significant question, because, if we can’t find a source, if there’s no foundation for morality, then we’re in danger of being thrown into a world where morality has no meaning, where anything goes, and any person’s moral sense is just as good as any other’s.

This morning I will seek the source of morality in four ways: through religion, philosophy, culture, and science.

MORALITY AND RELIGION

First, the religious route. Ethics writer Simon Blackburn writes, “For many people, [morality] is not only tied up in religion, but is completely settled by it. Such people do not need to think too much about [morality] because there is an authoritative code of instructions, a handbook of how to live.” [Blackburn]

Now, the most obvious code of instructions is the 10 commandments found in the Hebrew scriptures that form the basis for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. As we learned two weeks

ago in Julie Ham's sermon, the Jewish tradition actually lists 613 mitzvot, or commandments, that are found in the Hebrew scriptures. Other religions have their lists, too.

Many people today see the ten commandments as their moral foundation. Parenting advice author Dale McGowan recalls an event where he heard a theist and an atheist debating.

McGowan recalls...

When the discussion turned to morality, [the theist] said something I will never forget. He said "We need divine commandments to distinguish between right and wrong. If not for the seventh commandment..." He pointed to his wife in the front row. "if not for the seventh commandment, there would be nothing keeping me from walking out the door every night and cheating on my wife!"

His wife, to my shock, nodded in agreement. The room full of evangelical teens nodded, wide-eyed at the thin scriptural thread that keeps us from falling into the abyss. I sat dumbfounded. Nothing keeps him from cheating on his wife but the seventh commandment? *Really?*

Not love? How about respect? I thought. *And the promise you made when you married her? And the fact that doing to her what you wouldn't want done to you is wrong in every moral system on Earth? Or the possibility that you simply find your marriage satisfying and don't need to fling yourself at your secretary? Are respect and love and integrity and fulfillment really so inadequate that you need to have it specifically prohibited in stone?* [McGowan]

One problem with going to the written word of God for your morality is that you have to do a lot of "picking and choosing." Remember, there are 613 mitzvot. Will we really follow all of them? We are commanded to put to death people who work on the sabbath (Ex 35:2). We must exile those with skin disease (Lev 13:48). Anyone that curses his mother or father shall be put to death (Lev 20:9) And my favorite: don't wear clothes that have both linen and wool (Lev 19:19) (there's no death penalty for this, but just don't do it).

We don't follow all these commandments - we don't even think some of them *should* be followed! Why? We choose only the ones we like. We use *our own intuitive moral sense* to pick out the nice ones, then say that those were the ones that God really meant.

MORALITY AND PHILOSOPHY

So that is morality through divine command. What can philosophy tell us about the source of morality?

Plato

In the 5th century BC, Plato asked the following great question: do the gods command moral behavior because it is good, or is it the case that everything the gods command is good simply by virtue of the fact that they command it?

If the first is the case, that is, if the gods command moral behavior because it is good, then this moral behavior is good whether or not the gods command it. It places moral behavior beyond the authority of the gods.

This doesn't seem right, because we usually attribute ultimate authority to God or the gods. So what about the second case? What if we hold that whatever the gods command must be good? Well, then the gods could make *any* action right simply by ordering it. This seems terribly arbitrary. If they command that we eat figs twice a day, then we are morally compelled to do so. It is the right thing to do. But shouldn't the gods compel us to do things that are good, and not just arbitrary?

Plato's paradox, leads us to seriously question whether divine command is the source of morality we seek. Where else can we look? Does philosophy offer any suggestions?

Utilitarianism

For a while, philosophers flirted with **utilitarianism** - moral actions are those that bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people. In other words, an act is good if it generally increases people's happiness. There are some problems with utilitarianism. The goodness of an act is judged on the consequence of the act and not on the act itself. Is slavery ok? What if only one person is enslaved, but it brings benefit to 100 people? Morally questionable, at best.

Kant

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant addressed the weaknesses of utilitarianism and proposed a new basis for morality. In 1785 he published his short masterpiece, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This work, "has probably inspired more love and hatred, and more passionate commentary, than any other in the history of moral philosophy" [Blackburn] Kant wrote that "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration

and awe ... the starry heavens above and the moral law within." So what does Kant say about morality?

Kant argues that actions themselves are neither moral nor immoral, but it is our inner principles that are to be judged. So what is a moral inner principle?

This is Kant's famous **categorical imperative**: You should act only according to those principles that you wish everyone had. (*So you have these inner principles that you live your life by, how do you know if they are moral? You ask yourself, would I like it if everyone in the world was acting by these same principles? If the answer is yes, then these are moral principles.*)

The categorical imperative sounds similar to the golden rule, but an important distinction is that Kant places his categorical imperative on a foundation of reason. We arrive at the truth of the categorical imperative through reason alone. It is *reasonable* to follow the categorical imperative. For Kant, reason is the ultimate source of morality.

A philosophical search for the source morality is fascinating, and bookshelves have been filled in pursuit of this goal. But since the time of Kant and the Enlightenment philosophers, we have become so aware of so many different cultures and their different approaches to life that we begin to wonder if all morality is cultural. Perhaps there is no universal morality, all morality is relative and depends on where you grew up.

MORALITY AND CULTURE

What is the effect of culture on morality? To answer this question, psychology professor Joseph Henrich led a team of anthropologists, psychologists, and economists in a study of 2000 people across 15 different cultures. They studied communities in places like Siberia, Ghana, the Amazon, and Papua New Guinea. They even studied people from Missouri. For the study, the researchers involved members of the community in a game called "the dictator game." Here's how it works:

One player, called the "dictator", was given a day's wage, and then was given the authority to keep the entire prize or share part of it with another, unseen player, whose identity remained secret. Along with this power came the assurance that the dictator's identity would also remain secret, so that no one except the researcher would ever know how selfish the dictator had been.

The most lucrative option, of course, was to keep the whole prize and stiff the anonymous partner. Which culture was the most generous? The Missourians! On

average they shared more than 45 percent of the prize, and some other societies were nearly as generous, like the Ghanians living in the city of Accra and the Sanquianga fishermen on the coast of Colombia.

But most of the hunter-gatherers, foragers, and subsistence farmers were less inclined to share. The Hadza nomads in the Serengeti and the Tsimane Indians in the Amazon gave away only a quarter of the prize. [Tierney]

It turns out that the strongest predictor for how much a community values fairness is the community's level of *market integration*. That is, communities where people bought their food at a market or grocery store valued fairness more than those communities of hunter-gatherers or subsistence farmers. The idea is that large-market societies need a level of trust and fairness in order for marketplace interactions to operate efficiently.

Henrich and his colleagues concluded that much of the morality that humans possess is a consequence of the culture in which they are raised, not their innate capacities.

At the same time, though, people everywhere have *some* sense of right and wrong. You won't find a society where people don't have some notion of fairness, don't put some value on loyalty and kindness, don't distinguish between acts of cruelty and innocent mistakes, don't categorize people as nasty or nice. [Bloom]

There are differences in culture, but there's commonality, too. We hear the fables of Aesop and they still ring true despite the fact that they were written two-and-a-half thousand years ago on the other side of the earth.

So how can we uncover the fundamental morality common to all of us? Science! And where better to study fundamentals than in babies?

MORALITY AND SCIENCE

Innate Biological Morality

It has long been the commonly held view that babies are a "moral blank slate." However, a few months ago, the *New York Times* ran an article called "The Moral Life of Babies" by psychologist Paul Bloom, and Bloom writes that "humans do have a rudimentary moral sense from the very start of life. With the help of well-designed experiments, you can see glimmers of moral thought, moral judgment and moral feeling even in the first year of life. Some sense of good and evil seems to be bred in the bone."

In one experiment, the babies watched a little puppet show in which a circle was struggling to get up a hill. A square came along to help the circle up the hill. Then, along came a triangle and pushed the circle back down the hill (good square, bad triangle!) After the puppet show, the square and the triangle were placed in front of the babies, and researchers watched which shape the baby would reach for. “6- and 10-month-old infants overwhelmingly preferred the [square] to the [triangle]. This wasn’t a subtle statistical trend; just about all the babies reached for the good guy.”

As an extension to this experiment, babies were then shown the triangle either being rewarded or punished. Eight-month-olds preferred characters that punished the triangle over characters being nice to it. Mean, nice, justice, and fairness! Summarizing his findings from these experiments and others, Bloom writes, “Babies and toddlers can judge the goodness and badness of others’ actions; they want to reward the good and punish the bad; they act to help those in distress; they feel guilt, shame, pride, and righteous anger.” [Bloom 2]

Bloom warns, however, that the morality that babies exhibit isn’t *quite* the morality that we might hope for. For example, babies show clear bias toward members of their own race. If a wrong is being perpetrated on someone of another race, then a baby’s desire for justice isn’t quite as strong. It isn’t impartial.

Evolution

If babies exhibit a universal moral code, then a natural next step is to look toward evolution. How did we evolve to this point with the morals that we have?

Since natural selection works, at least in part, at a genetic level, there is a logic to being instinctively kind to our kin, whose survival and well-being promote the spread of our genes. More than that, it is often beneficial for humans to work together with other humans, which means that it would have been adaptive to evaluate the niceness and nastiness of other individuals. [Bloom]

Moral behavior can also be observed in monkeys and chimpanzees:

In one classic experiment, a chain in the cage of a rhesus monkey did double duty: it brought food to the monkey who pulled it, but delivered an electric shock to a second monkey. After observing the effect of pulling the chain on their companions, one monkey stopped pulling the chain for five days and one stopped for 12 days. Primatologist Frans de Waal recounts [this experiment] in his 2006 book, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. [He writes,] the monkeys “were literally starving themselves to avoid inflicting pain on another.” The closer a monkey was related to the

victim, the longer it would go hungry, which supports the idea that morality evolved because it aided the survival of those with whom we share the most genes.

Darwin himself viewed morality as the product of evolution. [Begley]

We seem to have reached the end of our exploration for the ultimate source of morality. The path that started with religion and worked its way through philosophy, culture, and psychology, has ended with evolution; along the way morality has been transformed from the divine word of God to an evolutionary trait produced by random mutations that encourages the propagation of our genes.

CONCLUSION

Is that all that morality is? This wasn't really where I expected to end. At the beginning of the sermon I said that finding the source of our morality was deeply significant because if we can't find a source, then morality has no meaning. Now I fear that I've found evolution as the source, and the very nature evolution, based on unthinking random mutation, implies that morality is meaningless.

When I started this study of evolution, this is not where I expected to end.

So I thought, and I thought. And I think that there is something deeper than morality. Something even more fundamental to who we are. And that is *compassion* - our ability to empathize - our ability to feel what another person is feeling. Babies express compassion before they express fairness or justice.

Compassion - that is what draws the line between "good" behavior and "bad" behavior. Morality is really about how we interact with each other, how we treat each other. Moral behavior arises when we empathize with others and act out of compassion.

It turns out that evolutionary theorists are surprisingly optimistic about the future of morality. They're optimistic because we now see people behaving in ways that aren't explained by evolution. [Railton] Evolution compels us to "be loyal to your kin and clan, and all others be damned." But in modern times, there's a growing realization that those people in other cultures - they're people too! International travel and communication have never been easier, and when you *meet* someone from another country, you realize "hey they're not so different from me!" Our circle of compassion grows.

Women's rights, racial equality, gay rights - they're not perfect, but how they've changed in the last 100 years! I hadn't (knowingly) met anyone who was gay until college. Then I found out that one of my friend was gay. "But he's so nice! I like him!" All that I'd been taught by my parents, friends, and society had to be balanced against what I felt when I looked into his eyes and saw another human being. There's the sudden recognition of our common humanity. Our circle of compassion grows.

This is why we uphold honesty, kindness, justice, integrity: at their most pure, these are expressions of compassion.

A few nights ago at dinner, Tara asked our daughter Olivia, "Olivia, what makes you good? Why do you do good things?" After a moment, Olivia replied, "A lot of people love me, so I know how to love."

We have received love. Let us return it - not just to those that give it, but let us pass it on to those that need it. Let it be our life's work to do the right thing and grow that circle of compassion just a little wider.

May it be so.

Closing Words “We Need One Another”

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.
We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.
We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.
We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.
We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.
We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.
We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.
All our lives we are in need,
And others are in need of us.

Sources Used in the Sermon

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