

What Is Moral, and What Is Not

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There is a curious dichotomy in the word "moral," understood as a noun and as an adjective. "The morals" of a society, for example, versus "this is moral, or immoral." The adjective "moral" is evaluative, it introduces a positive valuation, and perhaps the noun is also implicitly evaluative, since there is no society without morals.

To define what is moral we must proceed by levels of complexity, or centrality. A refined, complex or problematic morality is built on the foundations of a more basic or elementary morality. Thus "moral" behavior is, in principle, behavior that conforms to the generally accepted morality of a social environment—and all the more so if it involves personal sacrifice. There is here an element of generality, or mere "grammaticality" of morality, which follows established rules in principle, even in the case of notable or morally heroic actions.

But a more individualized analysis of an action or a situation may find that a given action is moral even if it (apparently) contradicts the values generally accepted in a social environment, or (conversely) that it is immoral even if it abides by them. One possible reason for this, among others, would be to declare an entire cultural morality as "immoral" from the point of view we adopt: thus, the act of Huckleberry Finn helping black Jim to escape is immoral for his slave-holding society, and even for the part of himself that has internalized those values, but it is moral for "us," the implied readers of Mark Twain's book, and for us, the implied readers of the present text

This notion of "generally accepted morality" has a certain sense at the operative or regulative level, in order to define an act against a social background that is always complex or conflicting, especially in modernity. It has a genetic sense also insofar as primitive or ancient societies share more widely a morality and religion common to all members. But even in ancient Greece, Socrates is problematically both moral (as an ethical hero) and immoral, as a corrupter of youth. The point of view we adopt to describe an act as moral or immoral requires a cognitive, as well as a sociological-historical analysis.

In modernity we contemplate as moral heroes those who distance themselves from a social consensus that we ourselves contemplate with distance (Greek piety, for example) in order to explore a more universalistic, complex or philosophical moral path. There may nevertheless be problematic moral heroes, such as Nietzsche, and even downright immoral ones, such as Baudelaire or Sade. Appraisal in these cases involves a degree of paradox, and

is often bracketed, so to speak. We love to read Sade, but to endure him in person would be an act of moral masochism.

There is therefore a certain moral imagination to be taken into account, and a certain moral evolutionism. This would go, according to the current interpretation, in the direction of an intellectual consensus of respect for public space, for mutually recognized rights and obligations (along Kantian lines) and for the free self-determination of the individual, within these parameters. However, it is also characteristic of the moral universe of modernity to recognize the sometimes irreconcilable tensions and paradoxes that arise between the different moral requirements imposed on the individual, for example between group tradition and this free self-determination. Moral heroism can be attributed either to acts of self-determination (in the style of James Joyce's *non serviam*) or to the self-limitation of this self-determination in search of social consensus, or of a historically rooted identity. (Take for example Unamuno's *San Manuel Bueno, Mártir*, or a contemporary American equivalent, Rebecca Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* (2011), where a skeptical rabbi nevertheless takes his place in his community and its rituals, overcoming his personal skepticism and his desire to escape from them by seeking a more open world.)

I will not go into the difference between morality and ethics, for it is clear that each tradition or author uses these terms as he pleases. In *Postmodern Ethics*, Zygmunt Bauman opposed grammaticalized social "ethics" to individual and creative "moral" heroism. Gustavo Bueno tells us instead (in his lecture on "Ethics and morality") that by etymology "morality" refers to social customs, and "ethics" to

individual character. The common parlance in Spain tends to follow this usage: we are told a given action is *ethical* even if it is not legal, even if it is judged as immoral, indecent, etc.— if it results from an conscious decision and reflection, individually or ideologically motivated, especially as a result of an *ethical conflict*... especially if we evaluate the action in question favourably, or respect it as tolerable within the margins allowed to moral autonomy. On the other hand, in common parlance, *moral* or *moralizing* brings to mind religious sermons, conventionalisms or discredited social customs which are no longer in keeping with contemporary actions, intentions or values, those appropriate to an open society. All of which should be understood with the aforementioned provisos.

As a last point, I will add that from the sociobiological perspective such as E. O. Wilson's (in *The Meaning of Human Existence*) there exist two inherent tendencies guiding human behaviour, tendencies which are inherently in mutual conflict, those resulting respectively from the principles of *natural selection* (which promotes individualism) and *social selection* (which favours groups that foster solidarity and mutually altruistic individuals). In every human mind there is a tension or balance between egoistic and altruistic impulses, and one or the other has a greater weight in a given individual or social group —or in specific decisions and attitudes. In principle, *altruism* (the primacy given to the social dimension, including generally accepted norms, or moral heteronomy) is *moral* or *ethical*, whereas *egoism* or the primacy of self-interest is *immoral*, as are its derived forms such as the manipulation of the altruism of others, machivellianism, parasitism, etc.

But, as noted above, the evaluation of the morality or immorality of a specific action becomes quite complicated due to the complex interaction of a number of social groups, given that an action which benefits an individual while damaging the coherence of the group may well benefit, on the other hand, a wider or narrower group, or may enhance mutualistic or altruistic cooperation between groups which were previously in conflict.

The evaluation of every situation or action must inevitably take into account the positioning of the analyst himself, given that there are no moral or immoral actions independently of the way they are evaluated. And the diverse social evaluations received by the action in question are evaluated in their turn by the moral theorist, at a greater level of abstraction, complexity or distance, from a standpoint which is different from that of the subject or subjects of the action, and different as well from that of other moral evaluators.

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