

Why be moral?

The question implies that I have a choice to be moral or not, the purpose of this essay is to examine the following possibilities as to the nature of morality.

a/ I have a choice to be moral.

b/ I don't have a choice to be moral, I am commanded to be so.

c/ I don't have a choice to be moral, it is a capacity realised by my nature.

First of all, what is the meaning of 'morality'? In the dictionary it says "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong behaviour". For Aristotle, ethics (ethos), which translate into 'custom, habit', are practical rather than theoretical, it is high moral standards that are aimed at, the 'virtues' are prized for ends. 'Eudaimonia' which translates into 'happiness' is the highest good, the final end at which all action should be directed towards. For Kant it is about 'duty' and having 'a good will', principles of right conduct depend not on the consequences of action but on the motives that are behind them and that they fulfil our duty and obligation, 'act always on such a maxim as thou canst at the same time will to be a universal law' (Kant, Metaphysics of Morals).

If I have a choice to be moral or not, there can be no guiding universal principles or God to demand that I 'be' a certain way or not, I can pick or choose what I want to do and how I behave. Now clearly if I murder a person or am caught in the act of stealing property that doesn't belong to me, I will face the consequences of my actions in a court of law. So we will take as given that those type of actions are not in question as to their being 'right or wrong', they are 'wrong' (of course, it is said that murder and theft can be justified i.e. in the case of abortion and for example theft concerning the property of a tyrant or dictator, but this is not within the scope of this essay to discuss). Instead I will focus on the following which possession of which will henceforth stand for being 'moral';

Telling the truth

Keep promises made

Exert Self control

Respect others (respect yourself)

Be tolerant and patient

Be benevolent

Quite clearly I could have listed many more attributes and of course I do not intend or infer that fulfilling (It could be questioned, 'what is the definition of fulfilling' in this case of my obligations, is it 100% of the time? 75% of the time? etc, again, this is not within the scope of this essay to discuss) the requirements of the listed are sufficient to be a 'moral person', but for the purpose of this essay that is what I am aiming at.

So back to the first scenario, if there is no-one or nothing to enforce that I 'ought' to be moral, I am an amoral solipsist, I can pick and choose when to be moral and when not be, I make up my own rules. I could tell the truth some time and others not, or I could decide to always tell the truth but treat others that I encounter in my experiences with total disrespect. There is no God, there are no universal moral facts, and there is no inherent goodness or indeed meaning woven into the fabric of this particular world. If I have a choice in respect of 'morals' it can only be because there is no teleological end or purpose to life.

Alternatively, scenario b/ I don't have a choice to be moral, I am commanded to be so, not necessarily by an all knowing deity, but I am tuned in (somehow, let's say that this is innate knowledge I possess) to objective moral values, an inner moral sense, that failure to follow can only be due to the weakness of my will (my lack of self-control or incontinence) my inherent human failing, that is shared by others to a greater or lesser extent. But if there were the same objective moral facts that we humans were all tuned into, how can we account for the different customs and attitudes that are found in different social groups and cultures, perhaps we have different frequencies to tune into that caters for these differences.

Finally scenario c/ I don't have a choice but to be moral, it is a capacity realised by my nature (that of a rational animal). I have sacrificed the self (as in man living alone) in favour of my family and my social groups and that is because I am a social animal. I have acquired my 'moral' standards during my life to date (on the basis on my specific imprint, modelling and socialisation periods) and my attitudes towards these standards are open to change and evolution. I am not so much a legislator but a moderator to myself and others, I am not the sole authority as to what is right or wrong (there is something called acceptable behaviour, which is owed a

definition, let us say without being more specific, being 'moral' most of the time) but it is important to me that I fit in with my peers and social groups, I feel a duty to others, it is not as if I feel under duress to behave in a certain way or that I am concerned of the consequences if I don't, but that I want to do so, I want to be moral. I can appreciate and respect others specific values (within reason), as Simon Blackburn says 'travel broadens the mind'.

To close off and to answer the question, 'why be moral', the moral solipsist wouldn't flourish, he would be an outcast and humans could not have had the success they have had without working together, practically and morally. The moral 'intuitionist' can't really account for the various moral codes that exist and change through time, and that objective values would be entities of a very strange sort. So I am not 'moral' because of my knowledge of these queer things, I am moral, because, I don't have a choice, I want to be moral, I have a capacity to be so and it is part of my inherent nature, I am a rational human being and no there is not a 100% success rate, there are failures, but that is a fact about humans, we are moral, but we are flawed.