

Why Be Moral?

*“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another.”,
Leviticus 19:11*

“The just man enjoys the greatest peace of mind”, Epicurus

“Your duty is to be a good man” Marcus Aurelius

In analyzing the question “why be moral?”, I have taken the perspective of a business manager. If we can answer this question through the lens of an individual that is able, if he or she wants, to hide under the cloak of their corporate obligation to increase profits within the bounds of the law, then the universality of our answer will be stronger. Since the industrial revolution, governments in developed nations have been closing the corporate gap between what is legal and what is considered ethical through legislation. However, modern governments are faced with the added problems of quickly changing global and virtual economies. Corporate managers can now shift business operations to countries with less strict labour and environmental laws in order to lower costs. Managers are now facing increasing ethical dilemmas and I believe that the answer to the question “why be moral?” is now more important than ever.

Up until the past few centuries the definitive answer to this question in much of the Western world would have been “because God says so”. We should be moral because if we are not then God will punish us, in this world or in the next. However, today this answer only applies to a declining group of believers who fear God’s wrath and adhere to God’s commands. If I have faith in this answer and believe it to be true it provides an answer to the question “why should I be moral?” but the question “why be moral?” is not referring to me specifically but to every member of mankind. In this case the answer “because God says so” is no longer adequate. Not everyone has faith in a divine ruler and even with those who do, commands vary from religion to religion. The threat of divine punishment may be an adequate reason to be moral for some, but it fails to provide an answer for the rest of modern society.

An alternative answer to this question appeals directly to our human nature. Modern capitalism has been built on the foundation of human self-interest. If we act morally, others will do business with us, if we act immorally, they will not. Therefore we should be moral because “it pays”, it is in our interest to do so. Adam Smith argued that we “truck, barter, and trade” out of our own self-interest and that people will behave ethically in a free market economy because not to do so would result in lower future profits as customers would no longer buy from them. While this answer may have been adequate for the two centuries since the time of Smith, recent economic changes have created a more global, and a more digital world, one where “it pays” to be moral may no longer be true. The eighteenth century butcher could not afford to act immorally or it could cost him financially however, today’s online merchant can easily find that acting immoral “pays” quite well.

Today, in an age of declining religious belief and increasing globalization, where unethical practices may be in the manager's best long-term interest, neither of these answers seem adequate. Kant offered a third option arguing that we should be moral because it is our duty to do so. Managers must be moral simply because it is right and it is their duty to do what is right. Kant believed in a universal moral law and claimed that we must act morally from, and only from, a sense of duty. While this appears to offer a better answer than the previous two options discussed, it still has concerns. The main issue with acting moral because it is our duty to do so, is that it assumes a moral law that critics argue cannot be proven to exist. Even if we assume the existence of the universal moral law, it is still not clear why one should accept this duty all of the time. Kant would consider lying to save our employee from a murderer an immoral act. It would be, he would argue, our duty not to lie to the murderer and thus allow him to kill our employee. This, most would agree, is hard to accept. Kant's answer that we should be moral because it is our duty to do so is simplistic and tempting but does not seem to offer the final answer.

I have attempted to answer the question "why be moral?" by viewing it through the lens of a corporate manager. It is clear that today religion has been far removed from the workplace and obeying divine command is not an adequate modern answer to apply universally. However, doing so out of self-interest no longer is either. It is more and more likely in business today that acting immorally is in our best interest. Acting ethically out of a sense of duty is the only answer that can apply universally and that views people, not as individualistic beings, but as social animals and considers others on the same level as ourselves. However even this answer does not seem to satisfy us completely. While the external motivation to be moral cannot be agreed upon, internally, morality offers us a foundation, a set of standards, and a philosophy of living that is necessary for a life of balance and tranquility. Perhaps this is the best answer of all.

References

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