

## Reason and Values Essay on the Question of Why One Should Be Moral

In a recent "Thinking Atheist" podcast the host, Seth Andrews, posited several morality questions to his audience, one of which was, "Imagine that you are in the market to buy a house. You find a little old lady who wants to sell hers for \$100,000; half it's market value. Would you inform the lady of her mistake, or simply pay the asking price without informing her?" While this is a fairly difficult question, most of us face ethical dilemmas of one sort or another almost daily. How we answer these questions derives from our upbringing, from experience and to some extent from the people in whose company we keep. Our family, friends and associates expect a certain level of moral integrity, in fact assume we maintain a moral standard of some sort (which they assume is like their own), so that they can live and work with us with relative ease. In our pursuit of an understanding of morality we are essentially looking for a coherent, reasonable structure on which to base our actions so that we, as social creatures, can survive and thrive in this world. For philosophers the subject of ethics is particularly difficult to answer, and presents a challenge to our understanding of the nature of reality itself. Most philosophers would believe as Socrates believed, that to lose interest in ethics is a moral failure. Here we will abolish this moral failure by discussing why we should be moral, how knowledge affects our moral values.

We must first delve into a definition of what morals are, and how they are different, if at all, from ethics. In common usage, morality and ethics are interchangeable. In philosophy there are subsets concerned with the evaluation of human conduct, such as descriptive ethics, normative ethics, applied ethics and meta-ethics. Here we will discuss morality as it applies to right conduct, a personal morality that affects relationships and the society in which we live. Specifically, we are concerned with "moral considerations that override all other considerations." (Reason and Values 1, para. 8) We are not merely satisfied with talking about morality as it suits us (subjective morality) but as it applies to all rational beings.

There is, for certain, an inherent fear in probing into a subject that is the basis for a stable society. By delving into morality, one might ask, are we unraveling what most believe to be intuitive? Do we undermine that which prevents us from being murderers? In other words, does the study of morality open the door for immoral behavior? Socrates would have disagreed and is famous for stating that the "unexamined life is not worth living." Socrates, as befitting his status as a gadfly, forced his Greek contemporaries, and especially its youth, to ponder how knowledge of morality leads to virtue, of right action (*arête*), whereas ignorance leads to evil and was not useful. He believed that one should not defer examination of one's morality to "experts", that one should examine one's own morality. (Socrates challenged tradition and thus the reason why he was sentenced to death.) (Reason and Values, para. 2) I would agree that living a life without self-examination, of ethics or otherwise, is not worth living and is as if one were living as a robot or animal: no abstract thought here! But the problem may not simply be with inquiry of morality, of right action, but failing to have the capacity to act on that knowledge. In short, one may lack conviction.

Hume argued that human beings are motivated by reciprocity: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Yet Kant argued that morality is not solely motivated on the basis of a tit-for-tat code. One does not always weigh the pros and cons of a moral action each time. It is especially incumbent in attempting to convince someone to be moral, and through a Philosophical inquiry into morality, that we find an objective, logical means of supporting right action. It would not do for us to peer into the question of morality to sketch out a subjective code (or perhaps none at all!), which is useless outside the confines of our own minds. It is not enough for us to say that people are ethical because of a fear of punishment, that it is immoral to murder someone because one will receive punishment in this life or the next. It is incumbent on us, as human beings, to rationalize morality—and yet there is the distinct possibility that it does not exist.

A subjectivist for the institution of morality may state that when living within an institution there are two levels of thinking about morality. There is the institution, a society for instance, and the "validity of the framework itself. As individuals in an institution we may accept the society's morals and values because it works for us, it keeps us happy and we are allowed to survive and prosper (Reason and Values, para. 13). In other words, we are moral within an institution to keep the peace, to maintain order within the institution, and to allow ourselves to flourish. For the nihilist this is an "unmasking of moral convictions", as if the basis of morality does not exist at all and that, in true nihilist fashion, the pursuit of morality is pointless! For me the position of the subjectivist is precarious, dangerous in fact, as it easy to slip off the precipice into immorality.

A recent court case in Saudi Arabia established that a 47-year-old man was allowed to marry his 8-year-old betrothed. Within the institution of the Saudi Arabian court this decision was staked on moral grounds, and on religious precedent (Mohammed married his 6-year-old bride, Aisha, when he was 50). To a western observer this case is abhorrent and morally objectionable. But if we allow for subjectivist morality, within an institution, do we have any grounds to object to what we may see as immoral? And what about someone who is entirely amoral? A sociopath for instance? How could we convince a sociopath (presupposing he/she was reasonable) to act in a moral way? Taking a subjectivist or nihilist bent is in no way helpful. In fact, we may enable a sociopath to act immorally. What basis could there be for an allegiance to rules for ethical conduct? (Reason and Values, para. 18)

Subjectivists must rely on feelings and attitudes (which is in no way helpful when trying to convince a sociopath), while objectivists seek to demonstrate reasons for action *not* dependent on subjective feelings and attitudes, but on reason alone. In attacking subjectivists, objectivists must prove that a reasonable person is incapable of accounting for morality subjectively. If subjectivists cannot account for our sense of morality, then perhaps the way is clear for the pursuit of objective moral conduct. But what if either the subjectivist or objectivist comes across a means to defend morality, if they establish knowledge that is unequivocal moral knowledge; ought we to then follow this morality? Are we as reasonable persons obligated to act on moral knowledge? People, agents, disobey laws

and act unreasonably all the time. Agents disregard simple rules, like not crossing the street while the stoplight is red. Do agents have the freedom to do as they please? How can we then expect an agent to follow moral laws given that they have the free will to disobey? And what if the agent is ignorant of the law? We know that every agent is a product of his/her past (personal history and experience), and of his/her genetic make-up, but this in no way implies that the agent is knowledgeable of an objective (or subjective) moral law, especially if they lead an "unexamined life". Our agent's morality derives from what they know from their parents, friends and the legal system. Is an agent's action then predetermined by personal history (taught morality) and/or biology (genetic dispositions) or are they entirely indifferent to these elements of their personality? If an agent must act according to social/biological imperatives it would seem that absolute freedom of will does not exist. But yet knowledge has a great deal, is probably the single most important factor in, moral action, knowledge that is derived from the institution in which one is raised. Let us return once again to the Islamic prophet Mohammed and his child-bride Aisha. If an agent derives their knowledge of morality from an institution, and an agent's lack of moral knowledge accounts for some of his/her immoral action, then it follows that an agent is not necessarily responsible for immoral acts as perceived by those outside the constructs of the institution. Morality is then relative to the values and mores of the culture in which one was raised. There can be no good or bad action. So, Mohammed, in marrying a nine-year-old girl, was not immoral but in fact moral given the knowledge derived from the culture (and times) he grew up in. This leaves the objectivist with a particularly difficult problem with regard to Mohammed and Aisha—assuming the objectivist objects to pedophilia. There are three possible ways for an objectivist to deal with this problem: 1. Blindly espouse that there is an objective morality regardless of "alternative moralities" 2. Deny culturally relative morality as misunderstandings of shared moral ideas, which were "applied differently in different circumstances", or 3. Admit that there are alternative "truths and realities, that moral beliefs can be objective and relative at the same time." (Reason and Values, para. 23)

We have thus far assumed that our agent, with the exception of the sociopath or psychopath, is a rational agent and has chosen to be logical. However no one is physically compelled to be rational as long as they have freedom of action. The agent is also not responsible for blind spots in his/her knowledge. (Reason and Values, para. 25). But when speaking of rationality we also might want to consider rationality as it applies to the future self. A common principle states that one should not do anything that one would later regret. In *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford, 1970) Thomas Nagel argued that committing an action, which will later be regretted by a future self, is a result of failing to identify with the future self, as if the future self is as a stranger. When I was young and fit, and in the Army, I often ran 6-10 miles a day in order to stay fit. I reasoned that the pain I felt in my body was not of any concern that it would not result in any permanent damage. However, in my 40s I now realize that those grueling runs have ruined my feet and knees. It would have been prudent of me to have slowed down, taken shorter runs in order to preserve my body for the long haul, but in youth I had no considerations of what

would happen in the future, as if my future self did not exist—which it didn't at that time. Nagel argued that our failure to take other persons into account "may be interpreted as failure to acknowledge the reality of another mind", even a future mind. Acting in spite of one's future self's may even be *because* it is the future self, as if deriving pleasure from harming the future self. (Reason and Values, para. 27).

Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford 1984) reasoned that if we disregard the Cartesian belief in an indestructible, immutable soul with its concept of personal identity, all other future selves are then the same as any other, but that our future self is something which is "like" the present self and in whose desires I should therefore grant equal weight to my own. The self is then like a computer program that changes, is not immutable, over time. It can be duplicated and/or altered into an altogether different structure. Unlike prudence, which takes into consideration the future self, Parfit's model of the alterable self eliminates the basis for the "rationality of prudence", which is for Parfit the basis for a rationality of moral conduct. (Reason and Values, para. 28).

Plato and Immanuel Kant believed in the split self. Plato spoke of a self split into two parts, of animal instincts and the rational self, which battled it out for control of the self. Kant's "transcendental idealism", of two selves separated by worlds, of the phenomenal world (of space and time) and the Noemenal world (things in themselves that belonged neither to space or time) was his version of the Platonic view. Both concepts envisioned an agent split in two battling between what they (the agent in its entirety) ought to do and what they wanted to do, as if reason were a slave of the passions. This morally subjectivist view disregarded the will and moral reason and was an unintelligible account of an irrational human being. Be though humans have an irrational side they are unlike animals in that they have the capability of rational thought. Perhaps it is not that an agent is battling him/herself but that it is oft times difficult to discern reality from observable facts.

Indeed, an agent's moral reasoning is flawed in that, as Socrates said, a good person may see what is to be done but "lack the philosophical understanding" to reflect on their moral judgments, and is therefore vulnerable to sophistical arguments. (Reason and Values, para. 39). This line of reasoning is observable almost daily. Take a trip to a car lot or electronics store where the sales people work on commission. One quickly finds oneself buried in a barrage of technical jargon and/or half-truths. The 1971, "Stanford Prison Experiment" is, in contrast, an example of agents losing sight of the moral picture within a very short period of time. In that experiment, in which a group of students from Stanford University were placed in a two-week investigation into the psychology of prison life, ended prematurely after six days because of what was happening to the students. The "guards" in the experiment became sadistic and the prisoners showed signs of depression and extreme stress.

While prudential reasons for an action can rationally be over-ridden—as in one does not necessarily identify with a future self and therefore

does not feel obligated to avoid actions which would be immoral to the future self—moral reasons cannot. Failure to do the right thing comes from a failure of knowledge. Are there other reasons agents commit immoral acts? Are they victims of a weak will? Do they disobey and/or disregard their conscience? Why regard the conscience at all if there is no reward or punishment for disregarding that nagging voice? Feelings of guilt or punishment are not in themselves rewards or punishments. We do not obey our conscience, our will, to avoid guilt or to obtain self-satisfaction. We obey through reasoning and are not free to choose how we act, as we are rational through and through. We are not free to choose but act according to the way we see things, and as the facts influence our decisions to act. Wrong action may result, but it is not from a fault of a weakness of will, or irrationality, but an obstruction of knowledge or bad instruction. (Reasons and Values, 41).

Knowledge determines right action. We are not, as the subjectivists claim, slaves of our passions but beings who make decisions based upon observable facts, interpreted through the lens of culture (of upbringing and the influence of parents, friends, and peers) and experience for the benefit of ourselves and/or those around us. Genetics does play a factor in moral behavior, but it is possible to act against one's genes to act morally. Fear of punishment and desire for rewards are there, but remain an unconvincing argument against or for moral activity. The death penalty is not a deterrent against crime nor is the reward of a love affair with a supermodel always an incentive for couch potatoes to visit the gym six days a week. What drives us to be moral is our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of a situation. Rationally guided action is equivalent to moral rationality, and therefore to be rational is a necessity.