

Morality and the Moral Person

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O'Fallon, MO. 20 August 2007

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The person who adheres to Morality is a moral person, and Morality is the conformity to the rules of right conduct; moral or virtuous conduct.

#1 definition in the Random House Webster College Dictionary, Random House, New York, NY. 1997, p. 852

What is the “Right (moral) conduct”? There are many answers to this question depending on cultural and religious traditions. For example, there are Five Constitutional Relations of Confucianism (480s BCE) [Note 1], Ten Commandments (1250s BCE) from Judaism [Note 2], Seven Principles of Unitarian-Universalism (1961-85 CE) [Note 3], and other social and religious guidelines for personal behavior, which are not mentioned here.

Most of these answers from various cultures and religions may be phrased differently, but are very similar in principles. They are designed to promote common-sense personal behavior for maintaining a just, fair and equitable inter-personal relationship in human society.

Overall, the most well-known answer to this question of the right (moral) conduct is the “Golden rule” which has been stated and restated in different languages and different ways [Note 4], simply put, it says in essence that:

**Do unto others as you would have
others do unto you**

A simple statement with a far-reaching significance and implications as follows:

1. A rule of proper behavior for inter-personal relations, extendable to living beings if needed.
2. Reciprocity and equality are absolute, and implemented 100 percent without any exception.

3. A self-restraining force on personal behavior based on not fear nor greed, but compassion.

4. A universal guideline transcending gender, race, culture, tradition, religion and national boundaries.

In the author’s opinion, the Golden Rule compels people to think rationally and reasonably in personal terms about justice and fairness in human relations here and now in today’s world.

So, Why do we need Morality? Because the lack of morality makes society more likely to be unjust, unfair and inhuman in dealing with existing inequities.

How do we know? History shows that there has always been one rule for the commoners, and another rule for the elite to preserve their privileges. The level of this injustice may vary, but remains pervasive in all human societies. Hence, there is always the need of “Morality and the Moral Person” to counter-balance this kind of injustice in human society.

Although law officers are established to uphold justice in society, law officers (police, prosecutor, judge, etc.) are themselves human beings, and are corruptible because of their inherited weakness in human nature. Remember the saying: Power corrupts (people), and absolute power corrupts (people) absolutely.

Since the dawn of human society, the social structure has been evolving to eradicate the

behavior of human corruption rooted mainly in greed and power. Yet, blatant social injustice occurs regularly even in modern societies with built-in checks-and-balances. Just read newspapers and watch TV news!

Thus, law officers are necessary but not sufficient to safeguard a just society. To complement the law officers' effort and to strengthen the building of a "universal" just society, we need to instill morality in each and every individual. Although morality does not guarantee justice, it will enable individuals to resist the temptation of corruption, i.e., to conform to the rules of right conduct; moral or virtuous conduct.

Who should be the leading authority on Morality? Out of operational necessity, human societies have been built as hierarchies - a pyramid with a ruler on top governing people down below through layers of bureaucracy. Presumably, the ruler will exercise the "Moral" authority. Yet, this hierarchical "Moral" authority is fundamentally flawed. Since the ruler, for most of the time, does not demonstrate a higher "Moral Character" than those he governs, he is generally not qualified to exercise the "Moral Authority".

An alternative to the hierarchical ruler is a religious leader who exercises the "Moral Authority" in the name of an all powerful and perfect creator, an incorruptible spirit reachable only by the religious leader. Thus, this religious leader, a human, becomes a de-facto hierarchy ruler as mentioned above, even worse in some sense. Since the "Moral Authority" comes from a perfect creator via only the religious leader who could not be challenged by any human means, the religious leader becomes, in fact, an absolute

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One may argue that there are many different religions in the world, perhaps religious diversity will reduce the risk of creating a ruler with absolute power. However, most, if not all, world religions have a similar mindset: a blind belief delivered through religious leaders who could not be challenged by free exercise of the human mind. So, although religious doctrines may vary for various religions, the central command regardless stays the same: Obey and do not question.

To be fair, many liberated societal and religious organizations have decentralized the ruler's authority (power) to much lower and local levels of the social structure. People are given much leeway to think on their own. One example of this decentralization is the Unitarian-Universalism (UU) Association, where members are actually encouraged to seek their own individual truth on the meaning of a spiritual (moral) life (Note 3, Seven principles of UU).

Will the decentralization of power structure reach the individual level? Does it need to? Yes, it will and it needs to. This is because the whole concept of "Morality" is to affect the personal behavior of individuals, and the organization or social behavior through the changes in individual behaviors. So, "Morality" is the best and most effective way to deter injustice from a personal mindset residing within an individual, or to make that individual a "Moral Person", and in so doing, the society will be able

to prevent organizational and structural injustice before it actually happens.

Thus, Morality or Moral Authority belongs to and begins with each and every individual. This means individual morality. No single society, no single nation, and certainly no single religion can and should claim its exclusive ownership for individual morality. Morality or the Moral Authority has to be established within the conscience of each and every individual. Of course, the individual must have an open mind and is willing to learn the concept and consequences of morality through the power of reasoning and rationality. This is why Morality or the Moral Authority can not and should not be imposed on individuals from without by economic, political, social, and least of all, military means.

On the other hand, Morality or Moral Authority can and should be instilled and strengthened in the mindset of individuals through educational means, and individuals need to be educated on moral principles so as to behave properly in human society. Hence, Moral education is a necessity in addition to the society's "Rule of Law" if the society is to reach the goal of being just, fair and equitable, and if interpersonal relationships within the society are to be built on mutual caring and understanding.

There are many forms of "Moral Education" in society. None are regular curriculum like mathematics, science and literature. Largely, this is because "Moral Teachings" are closely linked to cultural and religious activities, which are different for different racial/ethnic traditions. In Chinese culture, family traditions of Confucianism have played a major role for moral personal behavior. In Western culture, this is largely left to churches in weekly sermons and Sunday schools. In Modern times, liberal organizations such as the Unitarian-Universalism (UU) Association, pursue discussions and activities that are closely related with the current moral situation.

To illustrate: the following excerpts of a sermon *What Makes A Person Moral?* (by Rev. Krista Taves, Emerson Unitarian-Universalism Chapel, Ellisville MO, Sunday, April 15, 2007) serves as an example of "Moral Teaching".

"Our reading this morning draws from the words and deeds of two prophetic men – Jim Wallis, a public theologian and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, and Jon Stewart, anchor of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, Jan 18, 2005:

JON: My guest tonight, an evangelical and faith-based activist who is the editor of *Sojourners* magazine; his latest book is *God's Politics— Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*

JIM: People who are religious must make clear that religion does not have a monopoly on morality. Martin King did this best. The night before marching the streets, he had Baptists like him, he had Catholics, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the rabbi, Agnostics, they're all in the room; everybody felt a part of the conversation; cause you had to be prepared spiritually to face the water canons, the dogs, the clubs in the streets. So it wasn't a religious moment, it was how to find the spiritual resources to do what, in fact, was right.'

"Social movements are what change history.

A friend of mine, she was an African-American woman, from the streets of DC, so smart she went to Yale got her PhD. Went back to the streets and she was the best street organizer I had ever seen. Hip-Hop, Rap, she hugged and scolded and loved a whole bunch of kids to change their lives. She left a commission and it was this: Don't say

that all these problems are too big. Don't say we don't have any Martin Luther King Jr's any more. Don't you get it? We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Early this winter, we had a chance to really draw on our moral values.

So the first moral value we drew on was the moral value of honesty. We looked at the truth and integrated it into our lives.

Then, we needed to draw on the moral value of transparency, meaning being open about what you are doing and why.

So we called a meeting so that everyone had a chance to ask their questions about what had happened and why. And then, we draw on the moral values of commitment and compassion.

It was a time to draw on our deepest moral values, values that affirm that each of us has worth and dignity, that our lived experience is sacred and that in listening to one another we participate in the creation of the sacred. We drew on moral values like accountability and responsibility, and a deep openness to the various needs of all the people..."

One of the distinctions between Moral Teaching vs Science Teaching is: the subject is "Person's Life" vs "Natural World". The former is very personal; one fatal mistake can ruin an entire life time. In contrast, the latter is usually impersonal; one fatal mistake could be hopefully corrected without destroying a person's life. Thus, the question is raised: Can we afford to allow children to make their own mistake just so they can learn from it! On the other hand, how can children learn the significance of a serious mistake without experiencing it? Or can more sensitive children appreciate significance without direct experience of the same event?

It seems that a compromise may be formulated as to better define the seriousness of the mistake, and then draw a limit as to how far children can go in making their own mistakes. However, potential risk is often individualized, and may be best evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Even then, any prediction is only an educated guess.

Broadly speaking, some things are well known. For example, a hard drug-addiction is not a good thing for almost all children, and it can cause serious long lasting damages not only to children involved but also to their families and even to the society as a whole. So, hard drug-addiction should not be allowed for children even on an experimental basis. There are other common situations, such as binge drinking, drunk-driving, negligence of health hazards, wasting the opportunity of education, just to name a few.

Finally, morality and moral people are ever present just as life is, and both are essential factors for personal well-being and the well-being of a just, fair and equitable society. Both factors are inseparable from the individual's mindset, and more importantly, the individual's behavior. The individual behavior alone, not his belief, determines the moral quality of that individual. It is the individual, responsible for his behavior, not any spirit he happens to identify himself with.

Time-tested cultural and religious traditions can enable the individual to resist the temptations of wrong or immoral doing, but can not and should not be used as an excuse to avoid his/her guilt and responsibility. On the other hand, admitting guilt or taking responsibility for individual behavior is the expression of the individual's courage, and should be recognized and respected accordingly by the society at large.

Note 1: Five Constitutional Relations of Confucianism.

They are relations between:

- Emperor (Leader) and Ministers (Teammates),
- Parents and Children,
- Husband and Wife,

- Siblings (or the old and the young), and
- Friends (or your fellow men and women).

Of these five, the Husband-and-wife relation ranks the first and the foremost. A clear understanding of this relation leads to the establishment of Parent/children and Sibling's relations. Only after the order in the family is confirmed, can there be formal recognition to the status of Friends and Leader/ teammate relations.

Note 2: Ten Commandments of Judaism.

Among them, there are these "Moral" commands. (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th ed. Micropedia, V. 11, p. 627 (1995)), written on Stone Tablets based on legend of Moses and Ramses II (1290-1224 BCE)

- Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you
- You shall not kill
- You shall not commit adultery
- You shall not steal
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Note 3: Seven Principles of Unitarian-Universalism

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person,
2. Justice, equality and compassion in human relations,
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth,
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,
5. The right of conscience balanced by the use of the democratic process,
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all,
7. Respect for the inter-dependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Ref. UU Catechism by Rick Lohmeyer and Larry McAneny, July 7, 2002, Sermon on UU Principles by Rick Lohmeyer

Note 4: The Golden Rule as expressed by 12 world religions.

as documented by The Observer, P.O. Box 270214, St. Louis, MO. 63127.

Baha'i: Desire not for anyone the things that you would not desire for yourself Baha'u'llah (Gleanings LXVI)

Buddhism: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful" Udana-Varga, 5:18

Christianity: All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them Matt 7:12

Confucianism: Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you

(Do not impose on others that you don't want for yourself) Analects 15:23

Hinduism: Never do to others what would pain thyself Panchatantra III.104

Islam: Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you, and reject for others what you would reject for yourself Mishkat-el-Masabih

Jainism: In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures our own self Lord Mahavira, 6th century B.C.E.

Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not to your fellowmen. That is the entire law.... Talmud, Shabbat 314

Native American: Respect for all life is the foundation The Great Law of Peace

Sikhism: Treat others as thou wouldst be treated thyself Adi Granth

Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss your own loss T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien

Zorosatrianism: That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself Dadistan-i-Dinik, 94:5