



The Sense of Morality

What does morality mean to the individual and to society? These are vital questions to ask at a time when moral conduct seems to have gone out of style. Here we look at morals from a logical standpoint. And find that it only makes sense to 'be good'...

□ Whatever happened to morality? There are times these days when people brought up according to the traditional moral code of the western world may wonder whether our society has lost sight of the difference between right and wrong.

The news over the past few years has done little to dispel this pessimistic impression. To cite two glaring examples, a racing car driver who had broken a rule to win a championship appealed his disqualification on the grounds that the infraction was "common practice," and a student caught cheating on her final exams sued her university when it refused to grant her a degree.

Still, there is comfort in the thought that the news media would not go to the trouble of reporting cases of moral and ethical dereliction if people did not see anything wrong about them. If morality were really dead, then *immorality* would not be shocking. It would not be news.

It seems that what is missing is not so much the sense of morality as the sense of shame that once restrained people from doing things that were deemed disreputable. It was not all that long ago that a person caught committing an immoral or unethical act might find himself ostracized in the community, snubbed by his former friends, forsaken by his family, and/or out of a job.

The severity of social censure got out of hand under the Victorian moral regime which lingered to a diminishing degree well into the 20th century. It fed itself on ruined men and fallen women whose chief offence was to make a mistake. It lacked the Christian spirit of forgiveness. The Victorians managed to turn the essentially humanistic ethic of earlier times into a reign of terror of petty rules, self-righteous malice, and calculated hypocrisy.

We have come a long way from the days when so-called morality stifled the normal urge to enjoy oneself within limits. On the whole, this has been a healthy development. The question is whether we now have come too far for our own good.

For if morality is based on the word of God, it is also based on earthly common sense of the kind that says that people must abide by some fundamental rules if they are to live together in society. If, in the absence of a formal set of dos and don'ts, everyone were to assume the right to do whatever he wants, society as we know it would fly apart.

True, we do have laws, but if the mass of the population were to ignore the basic principles of morality, all the judges and policemen in the world could not halt a return to the anarchy of the jungle. The body of law is merely a part of the ethical structure of civilization. In most

western countries, only three of the transgressions listed in the Ten Commandments are against the law.

The jungle is not far away. As Walter Lippmann has pointed out, "Men have been barbarians much longer than they have been civilized. They are only precariously civilized, and there is a propensity, persistent as the force of gravity, to revert under stress or strain, under neglect or temptation, to our first natures."

The rules that tell us that we must not cheat, lie to, steal from or otherwise despoil our neighbours form the barricades of our survival. It was ever thus.

In his brilliant paraphrase of the works of Plato in *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant recorded the great Greek's thoughts on the subject:

All moral conceptions revolve around the good of the whole. Morality begins with association and interdependence and organization; life in society requires the concession of some part of the individual's sovereignty to the common order; and ultimately the norm of conduct becomes the welfare of the group. Nature will have it so, and her judgment is always final; a group survives, in competition or conflict with another group, according to its unity and power, according to the ability of its members to co-operate for common ends.

What happens to that "unity and power" when, as now, there is little group pressure for people to govern themselves according to certain principles? For one thing, it shifts the weight of responsibility for social survival from institutions onto the shoulders of individuals. "Liberty means responsibility," wrote George Bernard Shaw. "That is why most men dread it." The liberty we have gained has left it up to each of us to determine in our everyday deeds whether our world becomes a better or worse place to live.

As for group pressure, there can be as much of it to do wrong as to do right; in some circles, it's considered "dumb" to be moral. In his recent book *Ethics (and other Liabilities)*, *Esquire* Magazine columnist Harry Stein quoted a young New York woman as telling him: "There are a lot of closet ethical people. It's hard to speak up for something merely because it's right — you're always afraid of looking silly." This caused Stein to exclaim, "My God, are we really *that* far gone?"

Cynicism and disillusion can be as deadly as bombs

The pressure to cut moral corners is influenced by the dim view of humanity taken by the "smart" people in literature and the media who so often are the role models for modern life-styles. There is a sullen cynicism in the air, so pervasive that Harvard University sociologist David Riesman has warned that Americans are approaching the point where the prevailing ethic is: "You're a fool to obey the rules."

"We can destroy ourselves just as effectively by cynicism and disillusion as by bombs," wrote Kenneth Clark, the illustrious historian. That is something to remember as the cynics vie for control of the public mind. The world is not in fact as rotten as they make it out to be, but they do have the power to make it more rotten. It only takes more people to believe them, to join them in their scorn for the humanistic approach to life.

The cynics evince a mistrust of human nature. In the annals of philosophy, there have always been two main schools of thought. One — the cynical one — is that man is inherently corrupt and evil. The other is that man is inherently good, and is led by his environment into evil. The latter

school holds that man must strive to find, fulfil and express the intrinsic good that is in himself.

The negative view is mirrored in the modern slogan, "Look out for Number One." It implies that we must always be on the defensive against the evil propensities of others. The me-first philosophy already has had a loosening effect on our social cohesion. In a recent article on the decline of the American family, educationist Urie Bronfenbrenner observed: "We want so much to 'make it' for ourselves that we have almost stopped being a caring society that cares for others. We seem to be hesitant about making a commitment to anyone or anything, including our own flesh and blood."

The moral way is to seek the happiness of others

This is a far cry from the positive view of morality which has been defined and re-defined by humanistic philosophers over the ages. Benedict Spinoza, for instance, thought that moral people "desire nothing for themselves which they do not desire for all mankind."

Immanuel Kant declared that "morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness." Worthiness is to be found by seeking the happiness of others. The starting-point is to treat people "in every case as an end, never as a means."

In other words, it is immoral to use others as if they were objects for selfish purposes. Kant said that we must be conscious at all times that their interests and feelings are every bit as valuable as our own.

Out of this, some modern philosophers have developed the test of respect for others versus self-serving rationality. Thus, as Kenneth E. Goodpaster and John B. Matthews Jr. write in the

Harvard Business Review, "a rational but not respectful Bill Jones will not lie to his friends *unless* he is reasonably sure he will not be found out. A rational but not respectful Mary Smith will defend an unjustly treated party *unless* she thinks it may be too costly to herself."

The latter case takes us into a further dimension of morality in which courage is called for to stick by one's principles. Most of us have found ourselves in situations where doing what is right puts our own interests at stake. Either we do the right thing or we don't; often, no one else is any the wiser. It is merely a matter of being able to look at ourselves unflinchingly in a mirror.

Moral courage is reinforced by a quality known as integrity. "By integrity," wrote management scholar Warren G. Bennis, "I mean those standards of moral and intellectual honesty on which we base our conduct and from which we cannot swerve without cheapening our better selves."

Taking the long view of present behaviour

The nurturing of one's better self has never been more needed than in this age of individual liberty. We can use that liberty in two ways: to gain illusory self-satisfaction, or to seek out the goodness that is in us. If self-fulfilment is looked upon as self-improvement, it can be a force for good in the present *milieu*.

Still, many of us feel a little lost in this unrestricted world. It is fine to let our consciences be our guide, but our consciences themselves are sometimes in need of guidance. Since this guidance is normally found in churches which many people no longer attend, there is currently some confusion even over the simplest moral tenets. A Canadian psychologist recently lamented: "Ideas have lost their unifying strength, and as a result there's no beacon that serves as a guide for action any more. Now there seem to be so many choices that no one knows what's right."

Yet there is a positive side to libertarianism, which is that it at least requires people to think for themselves about what they are doing. In their own best interests, they must try to be rational in the fullest sense of the word, viewing their immediate concerns and desires in the light of the future consequences of their acts.

They may make mistakes in the process, but they may also come to realize that immoral or unethical behaviour is nothing but short-sighted. They may learn the age-old lesson that today's gratification is sometimes tomorrow's grief.

*Public morality is the sum
of what we all do every day*

They may discover, too, that decent and honourable treatment of others is returned in kind — that the moral course is not a hard and narrow road, but the way to broad new emotional vistas. For in its unadulterated form, morality is compounded of understanding and generosity.

It is also a force in human progress, because it enjoins us to add value to our own lives and to those of others. It brings out the finest qualities in the human spirit. To consistently follow the moral course, you must be courageous, unselfish and thoughtful to others; to use an old-fashioned word, you must be a *noble* human being.

As nature would have it, this accords with your personal obligation to a society which runs on the strength of an unspoken contract between the individual and the body politic. Under this system, every last person is duty-bound not to behave in a way that will harm or unduly impose upon the others in the group.

In writing of political scandals, the press uses the term "public morality," but there is more to it than the slippery ways of errant politicians. Public morality is the sum of the conduct of every citizen, every day.

"The great hope of society is individual character," wrote Lord Acton. Note the word "hope," with its implication that life on earth can be improved. The question we must ask ourselves as individuals is: Would I want to live in the kind of world we would have if everyone acted as I do? If the answer is no, then we should be actively considering what we can do to better our ways.

*The price of the common good
may not be as high as we think*

In these uncertain times, this may occasion a bit of study. Enlightenment may be gained from religious and educational institutions, and from library shelves lined with works on moral and ethical themes. In the crunch of a specific moral dilemma, of course, people must make up their own minds and answer to their own consciences. Nevertheless, a general grasp of moral principles cannot go amiss.

Who among us is so saintly that we could not benefit from a moral re-examination? The cleaning of our ethical houses may entail some self-sacrifice. As Denis Diderot put it, "There is no moral precept that does not have something inconvenient about it." In the practice of morality as in other activities, it takes exercise to build strength.

But the price we pay for the common good may not be as high as we imagine. Despite the smart popular notion that "nice guys finish last," virtue does have its own reward.

"In vain do they talk of happiness who never subdued an impulse to a principle," wrote Horace Mann. "He who never sacrificed a present to a future good, or a personal to a general one, can speak of happiness only as the blind do of colours." So perhaps there is a selfish motive for being good after all.