

Buddha, Freud, Kohlberg & the Middle Way

By

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March 15, 2009

I had occasion to be downtown this week and was approached by a panhandler. I often give a little something if I have it, sometimes more if the individual's scam is entertaining and unusual. How many people, after all, can actually have a flat tire in the same three-block area? But this fellow's approach was most certainly unusual. He removed a small wooden box from his rusty, three-wheeled grocery cart, opened it up, and handed me a cigar. "I suppose they're Cuban?" I said sarcastically.

"Better," he smiled, "they're magic."

At that point I figured I'd better give the man something and move on before he started hearing voices too. Still, I couldn't resist. "Magic huh? What's magic about them?" as I removed a five dollar bill, the smallest denomination I could find in my wallet.

"It's different for everyone," he responded, while simultaneously snatching the bill from my hand, then began disappearing around the closest corner almost as fast.

"You know," I shouted, "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar!" I don't think he heard me, or would have gotten the reference even if he had. After a simple inspection and quick whiff of my five-dollar prize, I stuck it in my coat pocket and completed my half block journey to the Louisville Bar Association. There, at the address I'd written down on a torn envelope was a door with a sign above it that simply said, "The Bar." Figuring I was in the right place, I entered and, to my surprise, discovered I was actually in a bar! The smoke-filled room was filled with the sound of many conversations, and an occasional "tink" of glass touching glass.

"May I help you sir?" The rather distinguished looking matradee asked.

"I must be in the wrong place." I responded, "I'm looking for the Louisville Bar, at 600 West Main."

"Yes, you're in the right place sir."

"Are you sure?" I asked, "I'm here for a meeting."

"Quite sure sir," he said, "As you can see, there are many meetings transpiring here."

"I don't see anyone I know yet," I replied. "I'm a little early. I'll just wait a bit."

"Certainly sir. May I get you something from our bar sir?"

“No thanks,” I said, “but what’s with all the smoke? Haven’t you guys heard of the smoking ordinance around here?”

“Smoking ordinance sir?” He questioned. “No sir, there’s no smoking ordinance here sir. Nobody is required to smoke, but it does seem to be the fashionable thing to do these days.” He said before departing.

As I stood there waiting a bit, listening to the chatter and clatter of the bar, smelling the strong odor of mostly pipes and cigars, I recalled and removed my recent purchase from my pocket and before I knew it found the attentive matradee standing before me again with a lighted flame. “Allow me sir,” he said. Not wishing to be rude, I took a drag as he lit it my cigar.

After my first puff of smoke cleared I saw an older gentlemen, oddly familiar, emerge from the cloud. “Ziggy,” he said, “How long have you been standing there? I didn’t recognize you until I saw you light your cigar. We’re having the most intriguing conversation at our table. You must join us.”

Well, this is where the story becomes unbelievable to say the least. I don’t know what was in that cigar, but after just one hit, I knew Dorothy wasn’t in Kansas anymore. I suddenly recognized the man who had so eagerly greeted me and nearly dragged me by my elbow to his table. It was Lawrence Kohlberg, the great American psychologist, widely regarded for his theory of moral development. Even more astonishing, however, was that he mistook me for Sigmund Freud. “Perhaps we both get our cigars from the same source,” I thought.

“Have you met the Buddha?” he asked.

“No, I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure,” I said, reaching to shake hands with a rather humble looking Indian fellow sitting at the table with another gentlemen that I did recognize. “Mr. Kierkegaard,” I nodded to acknowledge the presence of existentialism’s esteemed father, Soren Kierkegaard. By now, having unthinkingly taken a second puff of my magic cigar, I fell into my role quite naturally. In fact, I’d completely forgotten who I was, who I am, and felt and thought as if I actually was Sigmund Freud. Of course, I had no hint of a German accent, but nobody seemed to notice.

“Although I don’t like to attach myself to outcomes,” said the Buddha, as I sat down, “I’ve been feeling a little outnumbered here. But, given what little I know of your work, I suspect our conversation might now become a little more evenly matched.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Well Lawrence and Soren both share the similar view that the highest form of morality is expressed by universal principles that often transcend common sense and social conventions.”

“And you don’t?” I asked.

“Early in my life,” the Buddha continued, “I sometimes gave in to such extreme notions, but have come to believe that moderation is better.”

“I thought your Middle Way referred more to sensual indulgences and self-mortification,” I responded.

“At first, yes, but what is given over more to extremism than our ideas and beliefs?”

“I think we’d all agree there!” Kierkegaard piped in. “Some ideas are absolutely absurd, even if I do say so myself.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But tell me Buddha, what makes you so certain that you and I are in agreement about your Middle Way? I’m an atheist you know and only concern myself with religion in the most objective and professional manner.”

The Buddha laughed. “That’s exactly the point I’m making. Extremists can make a religion out of just about anything. But I wouldn’t categorize Buddhism as a religion. It’s really more of a perspective about the world and the best way to live. Whether or not one believes or disbelieves in God really has nothing to do with my teachings. Anybody can practice moderation. In fact, I wish more extremists would do just that.”

“But I don’t think there’s anything all that extreme about suggesting our highest morality ought to be based on universal principles.” Dr. Kohlberg interjected, “Sometimes we must violate our social conventions, even breaking the law if necessary, to do the right thing! That may sound extreme, but if it weren’t so, we would still have slavery, women wouldn’t be allowed to vote, and there never would have been a Civil Rights Act, not to mention a Declaration of Independence!”

“Yes!” said an enthusiastic Kierkegaard, “and that’s precisely my point about absurdity! If we see morality purely from an ethical place, that is, as a matter of adhering to the laws and expectations of others, we might actually be led to do something that is wrong. Sometimes we are called by a higher morality to go beyond what we’ve been taught is right, indeed, what we may believe in our core is right. But this takes a leap of faith that what we’re doing is right even if it seems preposterous and ridiculous to others.”

“Perhaps that’s true,” the Buddha responded, “But wasn’t that precisely the thinking of those responsible for the terrible acts of 9-11? Didn’t they believe that by killing thousands of innocent people they were serving a higher purpose? Isn’t it fair to describe this as an absurd leap of faith?”

The table fell silent for a brief moment.

“The Buddha certainly makes a good point,” I said. “Is this what you presume is our point of agreement?”

“A little,” he responded, “but there’s more to it. You see, the thing all of us at this table do share in common is that we each describe our moral philosophy as a three-tiered system.”

“That’s true,” said Kierkegaard. “I make a distinction between the *aesthetic stage*, in which one bases right and wrong upon the gratification of one’s own immediate desires.”

“That’s precisely how I describe the *Id*,” I interjected enthusiastically.

“Please, let me finish,” Kierkegaard continued. “What I call the *ethical stage* approaches morality from more of a social perspective, in which we consider the norms and expectations of others. But the *religious stage*, the highest morality, again, must be willing to abandon these ethics in favor of something greater, taking a leap of faith that what we’re doing is really the right thing even if it seems absurd.”

I must admit,” said Dr. Kohlberg, “Soren’s strategy is very similar to my own pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages of moral development. The pre-conventional is where we remain unconcerned about the needs of others in favor of our own. The conventional is where we learn to adhere to certain social conventions, even against our own interests, to get along peacefully with others and get most of our needs met. And the post-conventional is where we realize there are certain principles more valuable even than the social conventions we have ascribed to, and that sometimes we must violate these conventions in order to do what is right.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with your theories, as you know,” I said, “but I’m a psychologist, not an ethicist. While I’ve given some consideration to this subject, I’ve not come up with my own system of moral development.”

“Ah,” said the Buddha, “But I think your triune description of the human psyche coincides precisely, not only with Lawrence and Soren, but also with my trinity of *indulgence*, *the Middle Path*, and *self-mortification*.”

“So you’re suggesting *id*, *ego*, and *superego* are comparable? But if that were so, then my concept of the *superego* would be more closely akin to what Soren and Lawrence consider the highest form of moral expression. I’m sorry. I can’t go there. As you may know, the *superego* is rooted in unconsciousness. It’s the *id*’s repressed desires inflated, then justified as righteousness.”

“Here, here...” Dr. Kohlberg protested, “I don’t think that’s what we’re suggesting at all.”

“No,” argued Kierkegaard, “not at all. We’re ascribing to a higher righteousness, a higher authority.”

“Yes,” said Kohlberg, “based on principles like compassion, justice, and equality.”

“Can you give us a practical example of what you mean?” Buddha asked.

“The one I most often cite, of course,” said Kierkegaard, “Is Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own beloved child in an act of absurd faith.”

Kohlberg shook his head back and forth, “Soren, I’ve told you before, you must find another example. Promoting infanticide doesn’t do a lot to evoke sympathy for your argument. How about Jesus’ example, ‘You’ve heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye,’ but I say you must turn the other cheek and love even your enemies.’ Certainly it was within the law, that is, socially appropriate to punish those who had wronged him, but Jesus promoted a higher morality based on unconditional love.”

“I appreciate the attempt Lawrence,” I responded, “But I don’t find your example any more palatable than Soren’s. It might be more persuasive, but it seems less honest to me. At least with Soren’s example we can understand how terrorists might have justified bringing down the world trade center, then judge the value of this perspective based on its outcome. But your suggestion that we must do what seems so utterly unnatural to us as to love our enemies and allow ourselves to be abused seems equally preposterous to me in that it is a violation of our most basic instincts. What better example is there of the *id*’s inflated repressions being blown way out of proportion?”

“Are you suggesting that loving your enemies and practicing non-violence are immoral?” Lawrence shot back.

“I’m not suggesting anything of the sort,” I responded, “But I do think our behavior ought to be based on the reality at hand, not on some ideal rooted in our unfulfilled and unconscious wish to feel righteous. We ought to respond to whatever reality is before us. If someone is suffering we lend a hand. If there is conflict, the most practical thing for everyone is to handle it nonviolently.”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” Buddha said, “Please say more about what you mean.”

“Well, in my view the *Id*, that is, the infantile part of the psyche motivated only by the pleasure principle—the immediate gratification of its own desires—becomes angry with the *ego*, that is, with the part of the psyche that uses its senses to interface with reality, or at least the world outside the mind. So it attempts to supersede the authority of the *ego*, and to ignore reality in the process, by creating the *superego*, which is really just an inflated sense of its own self-righteousness.”

“I think you’re about to make my point,” the Buddha chimed in again.

“Yes, well, the only thing I would add, perhaps, to help substantiate my perspective, is to ask why is it that religion in general so despises the ego? Western religion, in particular, teaches that we ought to be ashamed of our bodies, that we can’t trust our senses, and that whole world ought to be condemned. Since it’s the *ego* that interfaces with the world through the senses, the *ego* itself is condemned by religion as fallen and sinful. And I’m sorry if it offends you Buddha, but Eastern religion isn’t much better in my boat. It routinely seems to promote the notion that this world is but an illusion and that we mustn’t cling to or concern ourselves with it. All of this religion, in my opinion is but an outgrowth of superego, of our unconscious need to justify our desires by making the claim they come from the highest authority, perhaps God himself, while allowing us to completely ignore and invalidate what our senses are telling us about reality.”

““Wow!” said, Kierkegaard, drinking yet another shot of whiskey, “Tell us how you really feel!”

“We’re not in disagreement at all,” Buddha said. “At least not about the negative aspects of religion, which always culminate, as you so aptly explained, in denial. But the positive nature of religion is represented by those beliefs and practices that promote true awareness, presence, and enlightenment. If used the right way, I think religion too can be a vehicle for helping put us in touch with reality. Nobody is committed to reality more than me. When I was a young man, as you may know, I had been shielded from all negativity in the world. Part of my own awakening was learning to see the world for what it is, even with all its suffering. Indeed, my philosophy, my approach, is that we ought to respond with compassion, not because of some ideal or principle hovering about in the Netherworld, but because there is real suffering before us, right now, in this place, in this moment.”

“I believe I now understand what you’ve been getting at,” I said. “You’re suggesting there’s a comparison between your Middle Way and what I refer to as the *ego*.”

“Precisely,” said Buddha. “My problem with Soren and Lawrence’s suggestion that faith takes precedence over relationship—principles over covenant—is that faith and principles are not rooted in reality, whereas an emphasis on relationships and covenanting to live in right relations with others and with our world brings us back down to reality, to the nitty-gritty of everyday life. And as far as we know, that’s all there is.”

“Are you suggesting,” Dr. Kohlberg asked, “that Soren and I ought to reconsider the priority of our conventional and ethical stages?”

“I’m suggesting, like my friend Freud, that we ought to devote ourselves to becoming more fully aware of reality, and not give ourselves over so easily to our extreme flights of fancy. Devoting ourselves to love, and life, and justice do us no good

if there is hatred and death and injustice right before us. I'm suggesting we stop clinging to our self-righteous and delusional ideas. I'm suggesting we open our eyes, that we awaken, and the best way to do this is the Middle Way, the way that recognizes the reality that is actually before us. And right now, right here, there's cold beer and cheap cigars." He toked on his magic cigar then chased it down with a swig of his favorite lager.

"I didn't think you drank," I said.

"In moderation," he responded, "In moderation."

I put out the butt of my cigar about the same time Dr. Kohlberg blew a puff of smoke in my direction. After the smoke cleared I found myself still standing outside the door at 600 West Main. Only this time the sign above the door said, "Louisville Bar Association." A man approached me from the street and asked, "He brother, I've got a flat tire, can you spare some change?"