

Ethics is Not Math **Can Two Wrongs Make a Right?**

By

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Today's talk was prompted by something I read recently in an essay by Lawrence Kohlberg, the noted psychologist and founder of the field known as "moral development." In an essay entitled, "Stages of Development as a Basis for Education," he suggested that when children at the earliest stage of moral development are asked, "Is there a right answer to these questions (moral dilemmas)?" they are likely to respond, "You must have the right answer in the back of your book."¹ In addition to making us wonder about the moral maturity of adults who continue thinking the answers to all their questions of right and wrong can be found in a book, this statement suggests that young children tend to see right and wrong as objective quantities, the same as numbers. Just as 2 plus 2 always equals 4; stealing, or lying, or not doing homework, etc., etc. are always wrong, and doing as you're told, not talking back, obeying your elders, etc., etc. are always right. Kohlberg goes on to say that even as children get a little older and do learn the distinction between moral problems and arithmetic problems, "they still believe moral judgments reflect an objective 'right' and 'wrong' external to the judge."² In other words, our tendency at the first two stages of Kohlberg's three developmental stages is to treat morality as if it were objective—that whatever is wrong *is* always wrong, and whatever is right *is* always right, in every circumstance and situation.

These sentences got me to thinking about just how often our culture discusses morality as if it were math. "Two wrongs don't make a right," we say, or act as if morality can somehow be reduced to its lowest common denominator, the Ten Commandments, or else treat it as a question of utility, "the greatest good for the greatest number of people." These ideas belie an underlying paradigm about our notion of the nature of right and wrong. They suggest, again, that we collectively accept morality as an objective fact. As Kohlberg put it, "although 'descriptivism' and 'objectivism' are inadequate metaethical views, they are the views of most of humanity."³

As much as anyone else, perhaps as much as *anything* else, I want to be able to consider myself a "good" person. Why this is so, I'm not sure. I'm not even sure if wanting to be "good" is *good*. Maybe my desire to be a good person stems from some unfulfilled narcissistic need to be loved by my parents, who have both now been deceased many years. Or maybe it's symptomatic of my own narcissism and codependency in general—that I want to fit in and be accepted by others. If this is the case, then the standard by which I measure what it means to be *good* is based upon the expectations of others, and may not have anything to do with what is really right and wrong at all. Then again, I may not care about being accepted as much as I want to

¹ Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1980, p. 39.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

simply justify the pursuit of my own interests and desires regardless of the cost to others. If I can convince myself that what I want is not only right for me, but is righteousness itself, I can do whatever I want with a clean conscience.

By inflating my desires into righteousness, what is good for me becomes the standard everyone must follow, and I expect what is good for me to be treated as God by everyone else, or at least as God's commandments. Isn't it convenient, for example, that the Hebrew children, wandering about the desert in search of a home, are commanded by God to destroy others and take what they want? "They did battle against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian... took the women of Midian and their little ones captive; and they took their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods as booty. All their towns where they had settled, and all their encampments, they burned, but they took all the spoil and all the booty, both people and animals. Then they brought the captives and the booty and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of Israelites..."⁴

It was also in homage to this divine command theory of morality that the indigenous peoples of North America were ethnically cleansed from their lands; not because their European oppressors admitted a bloodlust for their land and resources, but because they declared them the enemies of the good, Godless heathens and savages. And since the industrial revolution, individual greed and desire has been inflated into an entire economic system in which competing with others, that is, trying to figure out how to make ourselves win and other lose, is an unquestionable *good* called "Capitalism." Or take the modern dictum, "We do not negotiate with terrorists," which has led some to criticize Bill Clinton's visit to North Korea this week to secure the release of two American journalists, suggesting it would be better to have left them to spend years imprisoned. These are the sorts of injustices that may occur when we treat morality like simple math. "You must diligently observe everything that I command you," the Hebrew Scriptures instruct, "do not add to it or subtract anything from it."⁵ There can be no tweaking of the numbers once the sum of all morality has been divinely calculated.

But how does this happen? How do we grow into adulthood with the same simple morality we had as children? Never questioning our original notions of right and wrong? Kohlberg suggested it is because, as important as morality seems in our society, it is not something we learn about by any formal method. Amidst your years of learning reading, writing, and arithmetic, were you ever required to take a class on morality or ethics? Even in traditional churches, where there may be lots of moralizing going on, there is seldom, if ever, any discussion about morality itself. If I were to walk down the street and ask people if they consider themselves deontological ethicists or teleological ethicists, I doubt that I would find many who would even know what the hell I was asking! We all think we know the difference between right and wrong, but understand very little about the nature of right and wrong, that is, about what is it exactly that makes something right or wrong?

⁴ Numbers 13:7-12

⁵ Deuteronomy 12:32

Although, like life, an unexamined morality is not worth having, most of us live by some moral code, not because we formally study morality, but because certain cultural precepts and social expectations are quietly instilled in us almost from the moment we're born, and most certainly from the time we enter the schoolhouse. Kohlberg called this the *hidden curriculum*. "...some writers," he explained, "have argued that the unconscious shaping of teachers' activities by the demands of classroom management and of the school as a social system performs hidden services in adapting children to society."⁶ He illustrated with an example of his own second-grade son coming home from school and saying he did not want to be one of the "bad boys" as school. When asked, "who are the bad boys?" he replied "the ones who don't put their books back where they belong."⁷ His teacher, probably quite innocently, in an effort to keep order in the classroom, unintentionally and unwittingly began to shape this child's understanding of what it means to be a bad person.

Bad people are disorderly, which may explain why we say, as adults, "cleanliness is next to Godliness," and why we have laws against, "disorderly conduct." I cannot tell you how many times I have personally be aghast to visit the elementary school where my spouse works to see children huddled in the hallways with an angry adult attendant shouting, "Everyone get in one line," and, "Nobody is going anywhere until everyone is silent." It feels little different to me than when I'm visiting inmates at the prison where I volunteer, and I can't help but wonder how many of them stood in those hallways as children becoming dependent upon others to keep them in line; and how many of us in general have learned by osmosis that it is wrong to get out of line or to express ourselves in public.

But it should be understood this hidden curriculum is not malicious, and that even the teachers are often unaware that it's happening. "Most teachers are not fully aware that they must deal with issues of moral education," Kohlberg continues, "that they have no clear views on the subject, and that they have never had any training or educations in it. Nevertheless, they are constantly acting as moral educators, because they are continually telling children what to do, continually making evaluations of their behavior, continually monitoring their social relations in the classroom, and doing all of this as part of a larger social institution called school, which is defined by a still larger institution called society."⁸ Nor does this suggest that teachers are doing something improper by unconsciously instilling and modeling social values. If we are unwilling to say they are doing good, we can, at least, agree the hidden curriculum teaches us how to get along with others, how to live peacefully in society, how to take personal responsibility for our actions, and lots of other useful lessons in addition to the more overt training we get in school. It would also be a mistake to think the hidden curriculum is passed on solely by teachers or in school. As Kohlberg pointed out, it "is defined by a still larger institution called society." As members of that larger society, each of is also involved in teaching

⁶ Kohlberg, *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

and reinforcing the hidden curriculum—passing on our informal training in morality, passing on, with a word or a glance, what is expected and socially acceptable.

Isn't it always wrong to steal and to lie and to cheat as is written in the back of our textbook? Isn't it wrong to get out of line? Aren't we supposed to keep our opinions to ourselves so as not to offend others? Doesn't God want us to listen to our elders and obey the authorities without question? Doesn't God want me to have faith and never question what I've been taught? Doesn't God want me to be rich and to prosper? Isn't it God who says homosexuality is wrong, or that it's okay to own slaves, or to oppress infidels and unbelievers, and that men are better than women, or to subdue, conquer, and use the Earth for all my wants and needs?

But what, then, is the alternative? What if morality is not like the other subjects we learn about in school, objective and understandable? What if right and wrong are immeasurable? How shall we know what to do? How shall we feel good about ourselves? How shall we justify the way we treat or mistreat others?

Yet this is precisely the possibility I am suggesting here; that right and wrong do not exist anywhere in and of themselves. There is no measuring device hanging in the ether, or stretched out by some divine hand, or written in a book, by which we might determine the rightness or wrongness of our actions. The things we declare right and wrong, rather, are mere concepts that we might collectively agree upon, but that do not exist as "objective quantities, the same as numbers." Yes, I'm suggesting, like truth, morality is subjective, and bears no objective standard. As the Tao te Ching says, "When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad."⁹

This may seem like a scary place to leave us hanging, with no objective morality. Some would argue that without any concrete notions of right and wrong we would all succumb to our most selfish desires and base instincts. But haven't we already done this, even with all our divine commandments and social laws and rules? Haven't we already merely used these to justify the most heinous and selfish behaviors—war, oppression, slavery, greed, and ignorance?

On the contrary, in admitting morality is subjective, that we create it and invent it among ourselves for no other purpose than it suits our needs, we put ourselves and our society in a position to be more conscious about what we are doing, and to be more free and flexible in shaping a society that uses morality to meet the needs of everyone. What I'm advocating for here is that we *out* the hidden curriculum! That instead of depending upon cultural osmosis to do so, we actively and consciously begin teaching the principles of ethics in our schools, and throughout our lives. Yes, understanding these principles will cause us and our children to question the objective commandments, laws, and mores that have been mindlessly passed down to us from generation to generation, perhaps even leading us to abandon some of them, forever altering our society in the process. I'm

⁹ #2

saying that instead of quietly instilling values, which may or may not be positive, we actually begin teaching our kids to question right and wrong for themselves. Oh, but I forgot, that's the first sin isn't it, eating of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Maybe we should just leave the apple on teacher's desk.