

Right And Wrong - A Matter Of Context

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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{bot_wrgoogle}To understand this, we could start with the intellectual exploration of why morality exists. But there is a simpler approach that gets to the heart of the matter. That's to start with a simple example or two of how and why moral rules sometimes fails us.

For example, suppose you found a child, or Jesus, or Buddha starving, next to a rich man's estate. You are poor yourself, and have nothing to offer of your own, but you see that there is plenty of food out on tables - leftovers from a banquet the wealthy man just had. It is made clear that you are not welcome to it, that it will be theft if you take it. Yet there is the child or Buddha or Jesus on the brink of death. Do you steal the food?

First, although most people would agree to the general moral principle that to steal is wrong, I think it's safe to say that most would also violate that rule in a case like this. Immediately, despite any moral training or commandments in our heads, we would feel that it is right to save the life of the starving person. I personally would go further, and say that if you valued the life of that person, it would be wrong or immoral to not steal the food.

Even those who don't agree with my view still probably feel that they would like to steal the food and help the starving person. Why is this? It is because the moral value of life is a higher value than that of protecting property rights. This doesn't mean that stealing is right, or that a moral principle of not stealing is wrong. It is simply the recognition that there is a hierarchy of values.

Lying, for example, is an action generally considered to be wrong by most moral systems. This is so because as humans we have seen the damage done to others and to society from too much dishonesty. In other words, the moral principle of honesty is about the preservation of relationships and civilized life. Those are the higher values upon which the rule against lying is based. But what if telling the truth violates those values?

The classic moral dilemma is this: A killer asks where your children are, intending to murder them. You have been trained to think that you should never lie, so what should you tell him? I am suggesting that there is no moral dilemma here, that you simply lie because it is the right thing to do. It is right because in this case it achieves the higher moral value: the preservation of the lives of your children.

Right And Wrong Exist Beyond Our Words

The important principles here are:

1. There are real values in the world (which means morality has real meaning).
2. Right and wrong actions (moral or immoral) are those that achieve or destroy those values.

3. All expressions of moral principles in words are imperfect (we are not infallible nor omniscient) and can conflict with one another.

4. When, in a given situation, a rule or moral principle is in opposition to a higher value, it must be dropped if we are to do the right or moral thing.

Notice that there is no moral dilemma here. We simply recognize that our words and the moral principles we develop using them are meant to serve us, not the other way around. To say it another way, right and wrong are a matter of context, and cannot be fully and permanently carved into a metaphorical rock using our fallible tools: our words.

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