

Literature and Morality

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Morality Definition - The adjective “moral”, is derived from the Latin word “Moralis”, itself a rendering of the Greek ethikos, or Ethic. It carries a variety of senses, but commonly refers to ‘human character’ or behavior considered as good or bad... the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to actions, or character of responsible beings” (SOED:la). Morality is a complex issue. Most people know what they mean when they talk about something or someone being moral or immoral, however defining the term is somewhat more complex. Looking at the most simple explanation of the term, a dictionary definition highlights the complexity surrounding morality. Moral is said to mean both 'ethical', 'conforming to what is considered by society to be good, right, proper' and 'based on conscience'. (Higgleton, 1999, 1047). Morality is a complex issue. Most people know what they mean when they talk about something or someone being moral or immoral, however defining the term is somewhat more complex. Looking at the most simple explanation of the term, a dictionary definition highlights the complexity surrounding morality. Moral is said to mean both 'ethical', 'conforming to what is considered by society to be good, right, proper' and 'based on conscience'. (Higgleton, 1999, 1047). Morality speaks of a system of behavior in regards to standards of right or wrong behavior. The word carries the concepts of: (1) moral standards, with regard to behavior; (2) moral responsibility, referring to our conscience; and (3) a moral identity, or one who is capable of right or wrong action. Common synonyms include ethics, principles, virtue, and goodness. Morality as it relates to our behavior is important on three levels. Renowned thinker, scholar and author C.S. Lewis defines them as: (1) to ensure fair play and harmony between individuals; (2) to help make us good people in order to have a good society; and (3) to keep us in a good relationship with the power that created us. Based on this definition, it's clear that our beliefs are critical to our moral behavior.

THEORIES OF MORALITY

a) Moral Subjectivism

Right and wrong is determined by what we think or feel is right or wrong. In its common form, Moral

Subjectivism amounts to the denial of moral principles of any significant kind, and the possibility of moral criticism and argumentation. In essence, 'right' and 'wrong' lose their meaning because so long as someone thinks or feels that some action is 'right', there are no grounds for criticism.

b) Cultural Relativism or Moral relativism

Right and wrong is determined by the particular set of principles or rules the relevant culture just happens to hold at the time. Cultural Relativism is closely linked to Moral Subjectivism. It implies that we cannot criticize the actions of those in cultures other than our own. It implies that a culture cannot be mistaken about what is right and wrong and so it denies the possibility of moral advancement. Moral relativism is a theory which states that no one person's morals are better or worse than any other. Relativists argue that a person's moral code is shaped by the society in which he is raised as well as their culture, and it states that no society is inherently better or worse than any other.

c) Deontology: A Duty-Based Moral Philosophy

Deontology is a duty-based moral theory. Deontology states that society needs rules in order to function and a person can only be called moral to the extent that he abides by those rules. The most famous and eloquent exponent of deontology is generally agreed to be Immanuel Kant. Kant coined the following maxim, known as the Categorical Imperative, to help people decide which actions should be governed by rules: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can also will that it would become a universal law."

d) Divine Command Theory

Many claim that there is a necessary connection between morality and religion, such that, without religion there is no morality, i.e., no right and wrong behavior. Although there are related claims that religion is necessary to motivate and guide people to

behave in morally good way, most take the claim of the necessary connection between morality and religion to mean that right and wrong come from the commandments of God. This view of morality is known as Divine Command Theory.

e) Virtue Ethics

Right and wrong are characterized in terms of acting in accordance with the traditional virtues -- making the good person. Virtue ethics takes its philosophical root in the work of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Virtue theories claim that ethics is about agents, not actions or consequences. Living an ethical or good life, then, consists in the possession of the right character traits (virtues) and having, as a result, the appropriate moral character.

f) Utilitarianism

Right and wrong is determined by the overall goodness of the consequences of action. Utilitarianism states that actions are morally right if and only if they maximize the good (or, alternatively, minimize the bad). Classical utilitarian's like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill take 'the good' to be pleasure or well-being. Thus, actions are morally right, on this view, if and only if they maximize pleasure or well-being or minimize suffering. This approach is sometimes called hedonistic utilitarianism.

TYPES OF MORALS

At different developmental states, children have different values, different perspectives and a variety of relationships that influence moral development.

a) Morals of Punishment and Obedience

In early states of moral development, children are guided by an attempt to avoid punishment and meet personal needs through obedience to rules and a simple decision between right and wrong.

b) Morals guided by Expectations and Rules

With experience, guidance and support, children advance to the next stage of moral development where individual morals grow in alignment with interpersonal norms and the expectations of the group surrounding the individual.

c) Morals of Law and Order

Behaviour in this stage is characterized by an obedience to laws, a respect of authority figures and an adherence to societal rules or norms.

FANTASY STORY AND MORAL CHARACTER

Narratives can also dramatize circumstances, present human actions and suggest the motives that inform these actions. Because of this, stories may have the potential to provide the child with opportunities to rehearse the kind of moral evaluation that assumes man's freedom as a moral subject and that suggests, as the Catechism does, that human acts are either objectively good or evil. Stories may also provide opportunities for the child to evaluate the extent to which fictional characters participate in the virtues -- what Pieper (1991: 9) calls 'the realisation of the human capacity for being' and what the Catechism (1994: 1804) itself calls 'the fruit and seed of morally good acts'. Equally, they may also provide opportunities for the child to evaluate those failures of genuine love that harm man's nature and injure human accord (Catechism, 1994: 1872). It is part of the argument of this thesis that literature, and particularly fiction, has a role to play in dramatising the virtues within the context of imaginary worlds in ways that make them recognisable and even attractive to children.

For the child, one of the best ways to develop a healthy moral life -- habits of good behaviour towards others -- is a life based not on legalistic principles or rules, but on other lives (Kilpatrick, 1992: 98ff). Identifying with and learning to imitate someone who already practices the virtues such as courage and love was also the way suggested by Plato in *The Republic* for the training of a child's character (Lee, 1955). It is an approach that, according to some (e. g. Bennett and Delattre, 1978, Kilpatrick, 1994, 1997, Klee, 2000) lends itself well to the use of stories or narratives that provide vicarious experience of a much wider moral world and detailed descriptions of specific and contextualized moral experience. This is because narratives allow us to stop talking about the moral life and to point to it instead (Vitz, 1990: 718ff). The role of narrative in educating the virtues is also considered by Guroian (1996, 1998) in relation to the development of the moral imagination through reading stories.

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