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Why should we behave morally?

Why should we behave morally? Why should we not? Is doubt even fair? Are there things that shouldn't be questioned? Truth will stand the test of criticism, no matter what the arguments against it are?

Ancient Greeks would answer to a question with another question. Based on Socrates reasoning they would, in simple terms, use irony over certainties that might be more than opinions. Through doubt, castle walls would be shaken to see if, after pedagogical dialogue, those could resist, not for stubbornness but for rightness. If not, ignorance was recognised and a new path was chosen towards wisdom.

This would be for most forbidden in Middle Age. The large majority wouldn't even wonder about it. A strict education would've had teach them, that only if they behaved morally they could hope for paradise after death, as a reward for good behaviour.

This risk can only be worthwhile in the name of conscience, for doubt corrupts more than an unquestioned certainty. The demand is wanted and I will try a reasoned approach to it.

The main goal is to scrutinize moral behavior and its importance, from the philosophical point of view, supporting the way of thinking in specialized authors.

So, why should we behave morally? What is moral life? Moral comes from Latin *mores*, meaning Ethics comes from the Greek *Ethica*, both meaning customs. Etymologically could be the science of customs but it's far more, because all that is human is complex. Reality and pressures of life may be unreasonable.

This is not only concerned with what is but with what ought to be. Deals with the way we ought to live, with notions of right and wrong. It makes judgements of value differentiating

Good from Evil. It involves responsibility for our actions, courage to defend what ought to be true, and fibre to do what ought to be fair.

The subject calls for our conscience, our sense of duty and obligation. More than an idea, a number of beliefs are considered universal or accepted by a certain group, proposed by certain (spiritual) leaders or religions. Why ought we? Reclaims some authority when verifying and pronouncing about behaviour standards, for which is a practical doctrine.

According to this, who doesn't follow certain moral standards is pronounced immoral. Who has no moral principles at all is considered amoral. Morality is «(...) the practice of all practices (...) and the common characteristic of these practices is to be instrumental.» (Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1975)

But is moral behaviour¹ based on a conscience or is learned in school or in church? Something is to have and to hold, another is to search for it in the long run. Our *convictions* are being tested (convictions not as logical certainties but as moral certainties, as Kant would claim).

Moral attends to man's birth? Or comes as a result of personal experience and experiences of others we communicate with? Have we born moral? Have we born pure? Does society corrupts?² Will we grow to be wiser?³ Must we return to nature?⁴ Should we learn how to deal with others and live well in society?

Human beings are sociable creatures. They feel pleasure in association; rather they become depressed in the absence of human contact. But are sociable people always out of themselves not knowing how to live if not in opinion of others? Why do they aspire to others arbitrage? In small towns where everybody whispers, souls are put into test.

Is happiness essential for human inmost condition? Do we need to be moral to be happy? Does Moral have always the final word for we cannot live without it?

¹ Moral behaviour ought to be honest, compassionate, just and honourable (some don't like this word for they confuse it with over limited pride. I distinguish *good pride*, as the self-esteem that each person must have to be happy. Who's not happy can't make others happy. *Bad pride* meaning arrogance and selfishness). Moral behaviour should be truthful, faithful, good, incorruptible; perseverant but not obstinate; sincere, scrupulous, impartial judging others behaviour.

² Maurice Merleau Porty would hardly believe in such a thing. In his, he says that: «Our convictions are found less in values and discovered truths than over vices and errors of those we hate. (...) That which we pompously call the movement of ideas reduces itself to the amount of our nostalgias, of our rancour, of our shyness, of our phobias». (Maurice Merleau Porty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 1963)

³ Christ motivated people to follow his word and Truth would set them free. The Greeks would say: «Know yourself» (Socrates) and you'll reach Happiness.

⁴ Edgar Morin, says that (I translate from Portuguese): «There's no more social idea than the own idea of nature and returning to it», for, as he say some lines before, «The idea of nature is the product of an particularly developed culture, capable of making such differentiation, and this idea expresses at the same time the needs of a culture that wants to react against what, in itself, is artificial and constringent». (Edgar Morin, *Paradigma Perdido: a natureza humana*, 1973).

Ought we to behave morally? If the reason for fulfilling your moral obligation is as an end in itself then *ought* is moralistic. Of course, Kant would simply declare his categorical imperative, applied to all people at all times; so Kantians never ask why.

Steiner criticises that, for such a maxim «(...) spells death to all individual impulses to act» and cannot be valid for all; so it's unacceptable (Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 1992).

But ought we to behave morally exclusively for duty, as Kant says? If absolute concepts exist, I rather act accordingly because I believe it's right, not because it is an obligation in itself. Hume would say that «(...) reason is and ought only to be the slave of passions (...)» (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739). Hume locates all our motivations in passions. We only become slaves when we give up on our self-determination.

Thus, moral behaviour requires courage, experience and learning⁵. It's mostly hard because people are climbing different stages of the staircase.

Sartre defends that: «(...) Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, for he did not create himself; and nevertheless free because, once thrown to the world, he is responsible for all he'll ever do» (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being in Nothingness*, 1943).

But for what are we responsible? Which is the greatest of achievements, individual happiness or the good of the whole? They may not be compatible. Popular wisdom usually says *we cannot please everybody at the same time*. On the other hand, if we'd all try to look deep inside ourselves, wouldn't we obtain similar answers? And by putting those moral standards into action, the result wouldn't be a better world for all? Probably an utopia for the large majority doesn't effort enough (if tries, gives up fast; people turn between conformism and survival wanting). Thus, why should I?

At this point, let's introduce the prisoner's dilemma. Considering they're two individuals, facing all sort of pressures in life, acquainted or not. They share a troubling situation in which they can choose between behaving morally or immorally. If both act morally they won't be punished. But given the fact that they mistrust each other, they both fear that the other will not regard common interest but only his own⁶. If A behaves morally and B doesn't, A will be as ruthlessly punished as possible, while B will receive a smaller penalty (even if not as good as if both would act morally) and vice versa. In the name of one's self-interest, they'll both act immorally. They'll end with a medium sentence and a heavy conscience; but their fault won't only affect them, will it?

⁵ Michael Oakeshott would agree: «(...) moral practice (...) like an art in having to be learned better by some than by others, in allowing almost endless opportunity for individual style, and which virtuosity and mastery are distinguishable». (Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1975) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Prisoner's dilemma, given the example presented by me:

		Individual B	
		Acting Morally	Acting Immorally
Individual A	Acting Morally	0	10
	Acting Immorally	3	5

Next question: would you keep a promise? Making a promise means to give one's word as a guarantee; independently of what may happen in the future, the promise is to be maintained. This doesn't forbid that, for some reason, keeping the promise won't turn to be worse to the promise-receiver. In this case, choosing not to keep the promise could show that, who promised, was placing the interest of someone else's before his own.

This riddle may also be resolved by the prisoner's dilemma, but I'll try another move. We can always say that people reject situations of disadvantage agreed with a strange (or well-known; wouldn't be the first time!), but keeping promises depend on the kind of interaction each prevails or environments each lives in. When too many people fail we must mistrust, for may be dangerous. A relativist position could claim, «There are no objective values (...) no substantive moral conclusions or serious constraints on moral views (...)» (John Leslie Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, 1977)

I try to be self-sufficient so that, if people fail me, I won't get penalised. But if others really want to hurt you, they probably will. If they keep the truth for themselves and that harms you or dramatically interferes with your choices, it's unfair. But there are people who are selfish, care only about themselves and their opinions and perspectives of life, simply don't care about you, and just move one, leaving you behind in a worst stage than you were before. Some individuals will think that their own interest will be better served by doing only what's best for themselves.

But behaving morally is a matter of opinion⁷? Is morality relative or instead absolute? Can each defend its own moral? Kant thought morality to be action motivated by moral law. This author believed that humans were the only ones in nature capable of acting according to a representation of laws, because of their *will*.

Kant thought that morality is formal rather than material, and that ought to be accomplished for is absolute. His moral theory is deontological. Actions are morally right in virtue of their motives, which must come from duty rather than from inclination. Kant also defended that each individual may think and aspire to a universal law that is also his own.

To Montesquieu, man lives according to laws, even if he doesn't want to. Says he: man «as a sensitive creature is subjected to a thousand passions (...) could, at each instant, forget his Creator, but God calls him close to him through laws of religion; equally could at each instant forget himself but philosophers stop him through laws of moral; born to live in society, he could forget others but legislators bring him back to his duties through laws» (Charles-Loius de Montesquieu, *Do espírito das leis*, 1748), considering peace major among natural laws; that laws relate individuals among themselves and with the original reason and that these laws are a relation constantly maintained for «(...) all diversity is uniformity and all change is constancy (...)» (Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, *Do espírito das leis*, 1748).

⁷ Diplomatic joke: *My opinion depends on the sit I've taken.*

Tocqueville accepts as true that: «At different periods dogmatic believe (...) arises in different ways (...) but under no circumstances will dogmatic belief cease to exist (...) for without ideas held in common, there is no common action (...) there is no social body» (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835)

Moral laws dictate how people ought to think and behave? Can they be broken? Mendonça rather alerts: «(...) when we demand public recognition of our freedom, we content ourselves with a purely subjective expression of truth». «Than we don't ask for more, hopping «we may live each with each truth. The price for liberty is, therefore, relativism». (M Mendonça, *A Culture of Truth and Coherence*, 2001, Portuguese Catholic University texts) How many times have we heard: «Who're you to tell me what to do?» Man as *causa sui*. Besides, some declare moral variable throughout time. Camões used to say: «Times change, wills change/ beings change, trust changes» (Luís de Camões, *Lírica*, XVIth century).

Consequentialists think in objectives more than in moral rules, against the inflexibility of a deliberation based on *ought to* and man like Bentham and Smart defend that each person is worth for one and no one for more than one. Classic utilitarianism, for instance, consider that an action is good when, and only when, brings happiness to all involved. An utilitarian considers himself a realistic person, for which his judgements of value depend on circumstances

Which reminds me of Adam Smith's *invisible hand*: «An individual, following its personal interest, frequently promote the interest of society in a more effective way than he wants in fact promote it». But if someone kills an innocent, how can this improve the community's feeling of justice and safety? Is this a limit situation? I think that in normal circumstances people, if not insane, «(...) go to their big businesses, run to their small pleasures, creating no troubles» (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1759).

When things go wrong and individuals are pressed against the wall, moral is put in question. Do people truly reveal themselves in crucial moments, of stress or panic? Can we really test people in those situations? I'm not sure who to answer this. Depends is no answer.

Is it everything that is logical also moral? Contractualists defend that moral motivation results from a shared wanting to justify our actions and discuss standards that others, also wanting to justify their actions, could not reasonably refuse. The main objective is a general, informed and non-imposed agreement among parts.

Singer says: «Who follows non conventional ethic convictions live, in spite of this, according to ethical standards if, for any reason, thinks is doing good. The notion of living according to ethical standards is connected with the defence of the way lived (...), of justifying it» (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1979)

But moral is no playing with words and most certainly not playing with people's lives! As Mendonça would say that if people should act according to their conscience, «(...) there

can be guilt and moral responsibility if conscience doesn't reach truth», meaning we can't act in the name of moral if we hurt others. «Centring attention in freedom of choice, doesn't consider the fact that a free act doesn't rest nor ends in itself. (...) Accepting that we have an inapt capacity to choose, doesn't recognise we don't have the inapt habit of using it correctly and that habit is object of learning », for only throughout life we manage to learn how to act. (M Mendonça, *A Culture of Truth and Coherence*, 2001, Portuguese Catholic University texts)

Singer says that if «(...) a person can't find a way to justify what is doing, may reject it's pretension that lives according to ethic standards, even if what is doing respects conventional moral principles» (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1979)

This is also important for many acts in the name of something they've never cared to think about. What does this *conventional moral* means? Tocqueville is quite practical when he says: «If man was forced to demonstrate to himself all the truths of which he makes daily use, his task would never end (...) without ever advancing beyond them (...). He is reduced to take on trust a host of facts and opinions (...) which men of greater ability have found out or which the crowd adopts» (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835). This is logical but simplifies things. We can't pass our lives thinking with other's heads.

Descartes agrees with a practical attitude but instead proposing a provisional moral, a halfway answer before Truth. Meanwhile, we go on distinguishing from what's more or less urgent or probable (Probable Moralism), meaning: obey the law and customs of your country, decide (for irresolution is worse and won't get you no where) and assume some conformism, for you will live better if, instead of changing the world (that will move any way), you'll change yourself (René Descartes, *Discurso do Método*, 1637).

As an example, Giordano Bruno died in the name of his beliefs, which he never treason, while Galileo managed to keep himself alive, even if exchanging some lies for his head.

Thus, what ought we to do? Well, life is one of our *Human Rights*⁸, written in the chart of UN. They're natural laws. They guarantee the respect for human dignity, especially valorising peace, freedom and justice. Nevertheless, many speak abusively in their name, seldom in favour of the people they must protect. How many say them in favour of freedom but want to be our dictators instead? Or proclaim freedom, implying a total lack of restrictions forgetting that, like this, they also promote anarchy and disrespect for each other's space and freedom (one wants to kill the other, but the other doesn't want to be

⁸ These rights are legally recognized by juridical norms and they're notion is strictly connected with an extra juridical side, at the same time historical (proceeding reality), sociological (actual concretisation) and moral (supported by an axiological universe). «Art. 1: All human beings born free and equal in dignity and rights, and gifted as there are of reason and conscience must behave fraternally with each other», «Art. 2: Each person has all rights and liberties proclaimed by this Declaration, without any distinction of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion (...)», «Art. 3: Each individual has the right of life, freedom and security (...)». All have the right to defend themselves from unjust accusations and no one ought to be submitted to slavery. (United Nations Organization, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948). These are the hart of the chart, but there are many other rights that are essential for any human being to feel as such, so public authorities must guarantee them;

killed). Who has a word about moral cannot discriminate, whom arguments against injustice cannot judge without proofs, if wants peace cannot sell weapons to other countries, and so on⁹. Still, how many times society forgives or even rewards the ones unworthy?

Camões is fairly sarcastic: «Ever in this world saw I/ Good men suffer grave torments,/ But even more / Enough to terrify/ Men who live out evil lives/ Reveling in pleasure and in content» (Luís de Camões, Lyrics, XVIth century)

It's a sharp invective against injustice, a declaration of a restless and anxious conscience, exacerbated by clear universal disorder. Camões, watching it, decided that *in Rome act like roman*. But what happened? To his surprise, was rightly punished (he knows he was). In other words, justice still worked. Of course, some people may comment that only small delinquents are caught. Well, that's neither entirely true nor wrong. In fact, reminds me a story I once read, about a famous Indian woman, abused all through her life, grown as a revolted warrior, somewhat like a female *Robin Wood*, and that was being interviewed for the paper, confessing an advice that a man had gave her decades before: *remember, you can be hanged for one or two murders, for many you'll become a heroine and you'll never be caught*. This is intimidating, actually. Mainly because she was at the time admired in India, at least until she was killed.

Justice can't be restored by acts of revenge and violence. Gandhi realised that. As someone said: «React intelligently even to a non-intelligent treatment». Instead of an eye for an eye, be good; smile; disapprove a bad action (not to occur again) but constructively (not to instigate rage).

Aristotle would allege: «(...) happy life seems the one more according to virtue», but «A virtuous life can't be accomplished without a serious effort and doesn't consist in plain distraction» (Aristóteles, *Ética a Nicómaco*, IV b.C.)

Curiously, despite the horrible situations happening everyday everywhere (and many more are silenced), human societies maintain certain equilibrium of forces for thousands of years. Education plays a role in society teaching respect and moderation (temperance, the key to all virtues?) and things more or less function in the world. Surprisingly? How can this be?

We're not always what we seem, differentiating *actions* from *real intentions*. Oakeshott calls these two conditions composing moral practice: «(...) self-disclosure (...) the

⁹ Let's pick one human right, for instance: *all are equals in dignity and rights*, meaning that biologically they born different (even two man aren't ever equal) but that *all must be respected as human beings and have equal opportunities* to reach wherever they may. Implying no negative discrimination, but also no positive discrimination – for rather merit must be encouraged. At the same time, effort ought to be noticed. Passing from 8 to 80, is hardly the same as passing from 60 to 100; the second reaches higher, but the first races harder (and from further behind). Christ was one who truly understood this. All through New Testimony, the word is to help people like S. Mathieu or Maria Magdalena; remember the story of the prodigal son; this to avoid frustration (life-size cause of violence). But help those who *actually regret* their ulterior experience (not like mafia families that confess their crimes in churches but, in the next day, continue acting immorally), giving them a new opportunity in life;

intercourse of agents, each concerned with procuring imagined and wished-for satisfactions (which need not be self-gratifications) (...) Actions, here, are performances (...) responses to contingent situations conducive to the achievement of imagined outcomes», and «(...) self-enactment (...) understood in terms of the motives in which they are performed» and some lines afterwards, «(...) while *the intention* of an action itself understood in terms of the imagined and wished-for outcome the agent means to procure in choosing and performing it, *the motive* of an action itself considered in terms of the sentiment or sentiments in which it is chosen and performed.» (Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1975)

We cover ourselves sometimes – because we want to or unconsciously. Shakespeare would raise its existential problem: «To be or not to be, that is the question!». Authenticity theories and self-acceptation theories are popular nowadays. Something like, *I've got my personality, but you witness my character*. But remember, the word *person* comes from Latin *Persona*, meaning mask.

What's in the other side of the mirror? In Portugal there's a statement that says (translated to English): «Well prays Friar Thomas. Do as he says, not as he does», for people aren't always what they claim to be, in this case defending moral behaviours they do not follow; an example of dishonesty. But the opposite can also happen, when people are far more than they show themselves to be (not as faulty if unwillingly), as Calpúrnia (wife of the roman Julio Caesar) said: isn't enough to be, you ought to look like.

We cannot know for sure what is in the other side of the mirror? We would rather acquaint the *real man beyond the mirror*. But we have to accept the fact that individuals only show what they want. Some may reveal part of their secrets to a psychologist or to a priest. In general, people can only guess about *the other* and hope for an understanding of their souls, for themselves yet unknown (If we don't truly know ourselves how can we expect to know others?)

Inmost connected is the notion of privacy of thought, some say: *my imagination belongs to me*; for people need to have a confidential *space* to defend great ideals (utopias) and, oppositely, to liberate foolishnesses. How many times, after being hurt by others, we imagine huge revenges, but we end doing nothing morally wrong? Just because we thought it, doesn't mean we'd really (want to) make it. There's a difference. Imagination may be astonishingly helpful setting frustrations free, before recovering one's rational thought (as well as a proper solution to the problem).

Imagination never injures people, *while it's abstract and private*. People fear it when exteriorised; artistically, for instance. There's a point here, for all that comes out may influence others. People, rather want it or not, ought to assume the responsibility for what they show, through dancing, painting, cinema, what ever. Our History grown favourably and erratically a cause of peoples' exteriorised imagination.

As a result, the mask would be useful sheltering the wildest *self*. Actually, people abdicate some of their freedom in exchange for a stronger sense of security. They accept the bargain: I'm free until I interfere in other's freedom. But if violence overcomes, revolt germinates.

Schopenhauer wrote that: «unless suffering is life's direct and adjacent aim, our existence fails completely its finality» (Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the suffering of the world*, 1890)

I remember Domenach's paradox, troubling yet revelling: that people anger for freedom in oppression but that when they finally succeed in their wanting, they establish liberties that end enfeebling freedom; until freedom ceases to exist; it's when individuals start fighting to recover the needed freedom they now say they've lost. (Jean-Marie Domenach, *Justiça e Liberdade*, XIXth century)

Thus, *the search for the right balance is a nuclear question*. Knowing that harming others opens a precedent for stimulating them to do worse, we try not to. That justifies why we watch more threats than real actions. And if we're in pain we desire an apology. As simple as may seem, helps. *I'm sorry* and *thank you* are indispensable statements. Good deeds refresh society. Not wanting to be misinterpreted, they may assist more than good intentions¹⁰, for they promote peace. Feeling relaxed, individuals trust more and act morally because others do it too¹¹.

Ideally, of course, there should be no differences between *actions* and *real intentions* (read T. S. Elliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935).

Oakeshott says: «Although a man's integrity is certainly something which, if he loses it, he loses all (...) this knowing how to be loyal to himself is not a specification of worthy self-enactment but a postulate of moral conduct» (Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1975) In the other hand, we cannot lie forever; we have to reveal some of what we are in our actions.

We mustn't forget that society is formed and made by humans; imperfect yet a miracle of life, if well managed. We want happiness but everybody does it too. We may not be sure if it's an absolute concept but we ought to approach to it as humanly possible, and actions should move towards real intentions. Imagination belongs to us.

More than complaining, we should provide an example by behaving morally, *not doing to others what we don't want others to do to us* (which gives us a sense of limit). It isn't easy, in this world nothing is. I add that life is demanding and roads are unsafe. Consequently: be true, be moral, but don't be a fool, or you may not live long.

¹⁰ Descartes emphasizes: «Isn't enough to have a good spirit, *the important is to apply it well*». (René Descartes, *Discurso do Método*, 1637).

¹¹ Not all humans follow this tendency, but people tend to respect the sacred ground of churches, for instance, because there are priests there (good people, acting morally); if we go to a country less instable, we tend to refrain possible instincts, and play more by de rules. In the other hand, when most have a low opinion about the law, people tend to disrespect it, even because if they wouldn't, others would call them foolish.