

Week 3: My Bad – Moral Evil

Introduction

Tonight we deal with the hottest topic of all, when it comes to good and evil – our own personal decisions and actions. What makes one thing I do “good,” and another thing “evil?” Is there anyway for us to judge that something is “right” and something else is “wrong?”

- The Roman Catholic Church is electing a new pope. Lots of people would like the Pope to declare that certain things the church has always said were “wrong” are now “right.” How do these folks know what’s right, and why did the church in the past say they were wrong?
- In a recent survey conducted by *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, 80 percent of high-achieving high schoolers admitted to having cheated at least once; half said they did not believe cheating was necessarily wrong. 29% said it wasn’t wrong to run a red light even if you could have stopped; 56% thought it was okay to lie about your age. (U.S. News and World Report, Poll conducted in October of 1999).
- Bernie Ebbers, former head of WorldCom, bilked investors out of close to \$11 billion dollars through fraudulent accounting. At the same time, he was known as one of the most religious CEOs in the high tech sector, invoking God in speeches and press releases, and starting each board meeting with prayer. He was a deacon in his Baptist church, and led a weekly bible study.

If you’re a Christian, then “right” and “wrong” is simply what Scripture says “right” and “wrong” is. But what if you’re not? Or what if you’re just one those people who says you are a Christian because it’s a convenient thing to say? There are several different ways you can go about making personal, moral decisions if you are not relying on a holy book or holy person to guide you. Let’s look at each of the briefly.

Subjective Morality

First of all, there are two basic types of morality. There is subjective morality, and objective morality. Let’s talk about subjective morality first. A subjective moralist says “I do what I believe is right, and you do what you believe is right, but there’s no one or no thing that can say whether one of us, both of us, or neither of us is ‘right’.” For most people this is the most superficially appealing form of morality. If morality is subjective, then you can’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. No one can judge anyone else.

Say, for example, that I decide to hit Bob. It seems to me to be the right thing to do. Bob thinks what I’ve done is wrong. But who is he to judge me? At the same time, I can’t tell Bob he’s wrong for thinking it’s wrong of me to hit him. He might be right. Who knows?

“But,” you insist, “surely hitting Bob for no reason is, well, wrong!” Can a system of morality that says something so obviously wrong is okay be right? We would say “no.”

In more technical language, we would say “a viewpoint that produces an absurd or impossible consequence is, itself, thereby reduced to an absurdity.”¹ Subjective morality seems to disqualify itself by its absurd consequences. If morality is subjective, then ethics are just a matter of personal taste. To say “murder is wrong” would be the same as saying “spinach tastes bad.” You may like spinach. You may like killing people. Who am I to judge? That’s one argument why subjective morality must be wrong. It produces results that have already been judged to be false. If I say $0 + 0 = 1$, which means if I give you the Ferrari I don’t have and add it to the Ferrari you don’t have, we should end with at least one Ferrari, I’ve proved that $0 + 0$ can’t equal 1, right? So if subjective morality shows that murder is not necessarily right or wrong, and you know that CAN’T be true, I’ve just disproved it.

Another way of disproving it is by showing that subjective morality is ultimately self-refuting. Suppose I say that everyone has to be tolerant. Then what’s the one thing I’m saying I can’t tolerate? Intolerance! So even someone who says we have to be tolerant is usually intolerant about at least one thing. In the same way, someone who believes morality is subjective usually INSISTS that it must be so. So they have at least one objective moral standard that can be enforced – that no one can force their morality on me!

Objective Morality

So what is the alternative to subjective morality? Objective morality. Someone who believe that morality is objective believes there is a standard for our behavior, that there are some things that are always right and some things that are always wrong. That doesn’t mean that everyone agrees on what those standards are, though. In fact there are a few different ways of setting up your objective moral code. Let’s look at three different ways really briefly.

Atheistic Objective Morality

The first is what I’ll call “atheistic objective morality.” An atheist is one who confesses that there is no god. An atheist could be a subjective moralist, but they could also be the kind of person who believes there should be some things that are always right and others that are always wrong – moral absolutes. How does an atheist determine what is right and wrong?

One way is by appealing to what are called “moral truisms.” A truism is something that almost everyone accepts as being “true,” even if it can’t be proved. For example, “murder is wrong.” An atheist then seeks to arrange all these truisms into a coherent package and says, “Voila! My set of moral values.”

It sounds like a good idea. But here, in a nutshell, is the problem. First of all, just because you have a coherent set of moral values doesn’t make them “true.” The Nazis had a coherent system of beliefs that made executing all the Jews in Europe seem like a good idea. Do any of us agree with their “final solution”? I hope not. We can develop a

¹ p.35, *Can We Be Good without God?*

coherent moral system starting from lots of different truisms. For example, what makes humans “human”? Our ability to feel pain or pleasure? Our ability to reason? Our intrinsic value as human beings? Depending on where we start, we can end up with mutually contradictory but completely coherent systems. Then what? Each system, for example, would approach the Teri Schiavo case very differently.

Ultimately, atheistic objective morality begs a deeper question. If we base our morality on moral truisms, we need to ask where those moral truisms came from in the first place. What is *their* foundation? Can *they* be trusted?

Secular Humanist Morality

Let’s move on to another system of morality, that of the secular humanist. A secular humanist is one who bases their morality on human nature. Whatever violates human nature is wrong. What is human nature? It is human nature to be rational, social, moral and free beings. We can “think, remember, initiate activities, make decisions, plan ahead and live according to our plans.”²

Evolutionary Morality

An evolutionist is one who bases their moral decision on the belief anything that helps the evolution of the human race is good and right. Someone once said that an evolutionary moralist is one who believes life arose without any purpose or goal but that it’s rapidly moving forward toward some goal or purpose.

Christian Objective Morality

Christians believe God is the source of all good, and therefore the rules he establishes for behavior, even when we don’t understand them, will ultimately cause more good than evil. At the same time, Christians understand they cannot completely in this life disentangle themselves from evil, and so all actions will be tainted to a certain extent. There are few, if any, “sin-free actions.” There are only actions that are less sinful and more good.

Terri Schiavo

Adultery
Parenthood

Stem Cell Research

Life
Where WOULD you draw the line?
Err on the side of life, and draw it at creation
Are there not enough children to go around?

Bibliography

Callahan, David. *The Cheating Culture*. (Harcourt, Inc: Orlando, FL, 2004).

² p.116, *Can We Be Good Without God?*

Chamberlain, Paul. *Can We Be Good Without God?* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1996)

Geisler, Norman L. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (BakerBooks: Grand Rapids, MI, 1999)

Russell, Burton. *The Prince of Darkness*. (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1988)