

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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Lessons on morality

Morality is a heavily loaded contentious topic. We can explore it carefully to examine its benefits and drawbacks at individual, community or social level. From a psychological point of view, morality comes from conscience (super ego) that helps us judge right and wrong, good and bad. Our conscience develops in childhood from the messages we receive from caregivers (e.g. parents, teachers, elders etc.), however it continues to grow and change as we mature in life. Morality is also influenced by movies, TV serials, music, internet etc. It is influenced by education, knowledge and exposure. Morality of a population is also influenced by religion and culture. What is moral in one circumstance may prove to be immoral in another situation. Resolving moral dilemma requires a closer look to the context, eliminate preconceived ideas and challenge stereotypes. Healthy morality is a dynamic process that can sustain pressure of rapid social changes.

Absence or low morality in psychopaths and criminals gives rise to concerns about nature versus nurture. There is a saying - criminals are not born, they are created by the environment! Moral standards of a society guide implementation of this knowledge, and attitude toward juvenile delinquents, child labour or prostitutes. Morality can help integrate people back to mainstream or alienate people to isolation.

According to humanistic therapy, all humans have the potential to grow in a positive direction, unless adverse environment forces them to deviate from the true path. It is demoralising when the moral high ground is used inadvertently for political, social, religious or ethnic gains. Ironically, sometimes systemic oppression is justified on the ground of distorted morality. The whole purpose of morality gets defeated if the intent behind it is corrupted! Sometimes, with all the best intent, the impact could still be terrible. So, both intent and impact have to be carefully considered before deciding what is morally right or wrong.

Systemic oppression of women can often be traced back to carefully catered discriminatory moral standards fostered by authoritarian social, religious and judicial institutes. Similarly, morality is challenged when it comes to racism, ageism, ableism, sexism, sexual orientation and gender identity issues. We also observe back and forth

movements in social values. Trickle-down effect of mixed messages from top levels can create confusion and hesitation, followed by a stalemate in dynamic process of morality.

Hatred, aggression, and wars seem to be an inevitable part of human history, despite resistance from humanitarians. It is understandable that morality goes down the drain when we see sectarian violence is fuelled by false morality. It is sad to witness repetition of "might is right" or "winner takes it all!" Moral justifications of disproportionate revenge, retaliation, resentment etc. with reactive wrongdoing only help to pile up the number of wrongs!

Some universal moral values (vices and virtues) can be identified all across major cultures and religions. Some are heavily controlled with rules, regulations, rewards and punishments while others are not controlled externally, but left to the individual's internal moral standard.

As humans, we are wired to have an internal moral standard. Any transgression of that standard is supposed to evoke the feeling of guilt. A healthy guilt tells us when we are wrong, makes us uncomfortable and demands us to amend the mistakes. Guilt can become pathological and counterproductive too. Assuming responsibility of someone else's (except in case of a minor) action, harbouring guilt even after making amendments can be indications of emotional dysregulation.

Anger, jealousy, envy, greed, impatience, intolerance etc. are some of the "vices" we can easily notice in others, but often fail to identify it in us. Nobody is accountable for emotions, but people are held responsible for acting (or inactions in some cases!) on emotions. We have a moral duty to resolve negative emotions and rectify thinking errors before it spills over to action and impacts the environment. Spiritual practices like meditation, mindfulness, self-reflection and self-improvement can accelerate this process.

Self-development is often better than blaming others (when one finger points to others, three are pointing to self!). Actions speak louder than words. Examining and sticking to personal moral standard might be a better choice than preaching morality (unless you are on a mission for a higher cause) to others which might backfire anyway!

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