The Basis of Moral Choice

The Foundations of Morality

To begin, we must look into the fundamental and often neglected question in ethics: What is wrong? When are we talking about when we use moral language? Many times, we talk about things as simple as, say, right and wrong, good and bad, ought and ought not. Moral language is, by its very nature, subjective, relative, and not based on objective, universal standards. The idea that moral decisions are objective, and not simply a matter of personal preference, is an illusion. This, however, is not the end of our inquiry.

We know that "moral" and "immoral" are not objective, but are instead based on subjective, personal preferences or dispositions. Albert Schopenhauer saw an artifact as reflecting a subjective, personal, and cultural outlook on life. Thinking about these differences-and which is better or worse-is what these differences are based. Clearly, Schopenhauer said, there are no inherent or natural moral norms. Nor can we say that there is a universal, objective, and unchanging moral system. The idea that there is a "right" or "wrong" way to behave is an illusion. They are saying something true but it's basis is reality. The question at

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No area of deliberate human behavior lacks a moral dimension. That which promotes and enhances the value of persons and our generous host of an earth we call moral, good, decent, fair, or right. That which insults or hurts persons or their sustaining environment we call immoral, wrong, unjust, or even sleazy. Our vocabulary is filled with moral language. We are “the moral animal.”

The reason for this abundance of terms is that life is a series of moral choices that we face every day, and we soon learn that some of them are difficult, confusing, and painful. Not only do we learn that there are dilemmas but that there are right and wrong ways of behaving. Moral value questions are everywhere: in politics, sex, business, in the rearing of children, in the way we treat our physical environment, in what we choose to eat and drink, in the advances of technology and science, and in everything else we do as human beings. We are always in need of ethical reflection.

To begin we must look into the fundamental and often the most neglected question in ethics: What is morality? What are we talking about when we use moral language? Moral categories like just and unjust, good and bad might simply be mushy, ungrounded, arbitrary terms referring to emotional preferences or tastes. That would mean that all moral decisions are arbitrary, not really referring to anything objective, solid, and real. They might be a matter of custom or whim, not something we can take seriously, insist on, and reason about. That, however, would insult our experience.

We know that “moral” means something. When we use moral terms we are serious and they are serious. There is a real and moral difference between being a fraud or an honest person, a thief or a friend, an Albert Schweitzer or an Adolf Hitler. Ethics is a systematic way of thinking about these differences and trying to figure out on what these differences are based. Clearly, Schweitzer and Hitler do not just differ on tastes. Nor can we say they were just following innocent, differing preferences or customs. We are serious about calling Schweitzer “good” and calling Hitler “bad.” Nothing arbitrary there. Those distinctions are real. They are saying something that has a basis in reality. On what,
then, are they based? What is morality all about? We can’t talk ethics until we answer that because ethics is the study of morality.

**The Meaning of Morality…**

First, one can explain what morality is by clearing up the key word “moral.” The following might seem a little tedious, but stick with it. It is no slight favor to the mind to learn the meaning of basic categories. After all, all our laws are based on our agreed upon conceptions of what is moral. Morality is the foundation of society. It is worth a moment to know what it really means.

“Moral” simply means *what befits or does not befit persons as persons*. The term can also refer to behavior that enhances and respects the value of the good earth. Certain things may seem befitting and valuable from narrower perspectives. To a seeker of wealth, the getting of wealth certainly seems befitting, but *for a person as a person*, not just any kind of acquisition is befitting. We agree that there are some ways that persons ought not get wealth and we bring on “moral” language, such as “thievery” or “fraud,” “embezzlement” or “bribery” to describe them. “Moral” language deals with an evaluation of human actions and behavior.

Sometimes you will see the terms “amoral” or “nonmoral.” These terms refer to that which does not fall within the moral realm. It can’t be judged good or bad, morally speaking. For example, a chemical formula by itself is in the nonmoral (amoral) realm. It will enter into the moral sphere only inasmuch as human conduct is involved. If the chemical mixture is a drug like “crack” and it is being sold in a schoolyard, the moral dimension arises immediately and powerfully. How things affect persons is what morality is all about, and clearly “crack” in a schoolyard affects persons. “Moral,” then, can mean the opposite of amoral or the opposite of immoral, but it is always understood in relation to human activity and behavior.

When we get into moral arguments, agreement is a rare achievement. That is not surprising since we are debating what befits or does not befit persons in all their extraordinary preciousness and complexity. Thus, international peace groups demonstrating against nuclear armaments and war, civil rights leaders protesting against discriminating economic and social systems, Garrett Hardin recommending the neglect of starving peoples for population control, or white supremacists defending segregation and apartheid are all involved in ethics. They are pronouncing on what befits persons as persons in their judgments, and so they are involved in moral discourse. We may agree with them or we may argue that their positions are morally indefensible. However, we need not be unclear on what it is they are about. They are discussing or at least assuming in a controlling way what befits persons
as persons and, because they are making decisions concerning moral meaning, they are engaged in the work of ethics.

Another way of putting it is this: “moral” means human in the ought or normative sense. The word “human” can be used normatively (what humanity ought to be) or descriptively (what it is observed to be). Thus, you can say descriptively that it is human to lie (meaning that people do lie) and you can say normatively that it is not human to lie (meaning that people should not). It is in this latter, normative sense that we use “human” as the synonym of “moral.” When we say that rape is immoral, we are saying that it is inhuman activity; it is not what humans ought to do. Some cultures will show moral disapproval of certain activity by saying: “You’re acting like a dog.” What they are saying is that this is not what humans ought to do; it is immoral. (Whether the poor dog would act like that is not the point.)

Why Bother?...

Why must we be concerned about what befits persons qua persons? Is it because of convention or enlightened self-interest, or because of the command of society or a God? Why not just take care of me and forget you? Why treat you fairly if I can get what I want and get away with it?

The answer to those questions is quite simple, but that should not put you off. We often ignore the simplest and most basic truths that invite us to the deepest insights. The foundation of all morality is the experience of the value of persons and their environment. Every time you use moral language you are expressing your experience of the value of persons and/or their environment. If you say that hiding the defects of a used car is wrong, it is because you judge that in this matter persons are worth the truth. If you say journalists should be able to keep their sources secret, it is because you think persons are worth the results of that kind of professional confidentiality. If you say hospitals should arrange procedures so that patients can make their own decisions, it is because you think persons are worth that kind of autonomy. In a word: all moral language expresses the experience of the value of persons and/or their environment. That is the foundational moral experience. That is the answer to “why bother?”

This experience is the distinctively human and humanizing reality in our lives and the gateway to personhood. It is the basis of all law and the seed of civilization. It is also the sign of authentic human consciousness. You wouldn’t want to marry or do business with anyone who wasn’t immersed in the foundational moral experience. It would be impossible to imagine someone being utterly untouched by it. Those who are too slightly touched by it, we put in jail. Without an in-depth participation in it, morality would seem a meaningless intrusion on our whim and fancy, and moral language would be nonsense. If human be-
behavior and activities, governments, institutions, and religions do not enhance this humanizing experience, they are negligible and even objectionable, for they are failing at the constitutional level of human existence.

Every discussion of every moral issue, from mercy death to abortion, from ecology to chemical warfare, from nonmarital sex to the rights of citizens — whether we speak of medicine, politics, or business — is an attempt to apply the meaning of this foundational moral experience to concrete and specific cases. Moral debate takes place because persons and their environment are perceived as valuable and because life itself is intrinsically meaningful. Ethics exists as an effort to see what does and does not befit persons in all their activities and to affirm the meaning of moral value. Where moral value is not perceived, or where it is perceived as applying only to certain persons and things, distinctively human living is cut short. The foundational moral experience is not to be presumed or bypassed by any who study the meaning of human personhood. This foundational experience is morally formative, and, in exploring it, we touch not just on what morality is and means but on what a person is and on what the human power of love is.

Morality and love are contiguous notions rooted in the experience of the value of persons and in the lived awareness of the meaningfulness of life. In ethics, we are simultaneously exploring the meaning of morality, love, and personhood. Ethics is not a sidetrack subject. It is central to living and human thought.

The Foundational Moral Experience and “the Sanctity of Life”...

The foundational moral experience of the valuableness of persons and their environment can only be illustrated and not “proven.” Like all our deeper experiences, it does not fall within the simpler zone of the provable. What we can do is open ourselves to its impact, see it emerging in certain manifestations of human life, listen to those who speak of it, and show that moral meaning evaporates if the experience is not appreciated for what it is. Finally, we can attempt humbly to describe it and show that we cannot think or speak morally or understand ourselves, justice, or love if this experience is not accepted as foundational. All of ethics is organically linked to the value of persons. We must now look closely at this experience to see that it is foundational.

When we speak of the “sacred” or “the sanctity of life,” in reference to persons and their environment, we mean it to be that humanizing perception of value through which a world of moral meaning is born. The notion of sacredness is more basic than the notion of God. Even those who dispense with the idea of God must deal with the moral, that is, with the value or sacredness of persons as persons. Law and civilization are based on some conception of sacredness. Only persons
who hold some truths "sacred" can bond together in a viable society. "We hold these truths to be self-evident...." Those who infer that a deity exists will explain sacredness in the light of that belief. It is a functioning category of human existence without which the human animal cannot be understood. It is a notion that points to the positive affirmation of being and existence. Though experienced at times as imperfect, life is meaningful and that which we do as persons ought to confirm the perception of the intrinsic meaningfulness and value of life. Distinctions have always been made between "the sacred" and "the profane," "the holy" and "the secular," "value" and "non-value." If nothing is sacred, or if nothing has value and worth, life becomes absurd and ethical discourse and all law are rendered inane. In other words, if life were meaningless, it could not be sustained.

But how can we give justification or proof to such an ultimate and foundational notion as that of the sanctity of life? We cannot. Normally we refer to a more generic or a more basic concept when we attempt to define something. We cannot do that in speaking of so basic an experience as the value and sanctity of life. What one can do is say that moral experience cannot be explained nor can we understand our own experience if we do not accept the foundational role of our perception of the value of persons and their environment. To negate the foundational status of this awareness is to undermine the conditions for moral discourse. Moral judgments are always statements of what people are worth.

The FME and the Supreme Sacrifice...

To illustrate what we mean when we say that the perception of the sacredness of persons is the foundation of ethics, we should look first to its most striking manifestation, namely, the supreme sacrifice. The foundational moral experience (FME) of the value of persons exists in quiet ways throughout the whole of morality. The reason promises are to be kept and debts paid, and the reason we should seek to bring justice and harmony and due process to human affairs, is that persons are valuable. They are worth all these things. If we had not been struck to some degree by the perception of their value, we would find no force in those obligations. If we think of the foundational moral experience as a continuum, these obligations are at the undramatic, day-to-day end of that continuum. They are, of course, utterly basic and foundational. Human society would not endure were these person-related values not to some degree perceived and lived. However, the foundational moral experience is most discernible at the dramatic end of this continuum where its mysterious depths are revealed. The reference is to our natural tendency to esteem certain person-related values so highly that when they are at issue, we may actually die for them. If we do not have
the courage or the opportunity to do so, we will admire those who do and will call them heroic. History is filled with such heroes and heroines.

What makes this sentiment so awesome is the one fact we all know: this physical life of ours is the matrix for all the good things we experience. When we become a cadaver, that matrix is gone, although many people believe that it endures in another form and that personal life continues in a new mode. Those who affirm this, however, believe it. They do not know it with the immediacy and certainty with which they know their lived experience. Thus, believers and nonbelievers in an afterlife are in agreement here: the one thing they know with direct immediacy is that this life in the body is the precondition of all good things. And yet, we live with the anomaly that we are drawn to admire those who risk their lives or who give them up in certain situations, with no guarantee of any sequel or continuation of life and with the distinct possibility that they are giving up existence for nonexistence. No one who does ethics can ignore this outstanding paradox and mystery in human history. We focus on it here because it shows us in the most dramatic and outstanding way the profound depths of that value which grounds all ethics: the conscious apperception of the valubleness of persons. The boldest manifestations of any truth reveal more of what that truth is than when it comes to us in subtler ways.

We will give examples of the supreme sacrifice to point out that its extraordinary prominence shows that it is not the yield of one specific culture and that it is not a freakish element in human experience. Obviously, there are individual persons who reject it and cultures where heroic self-sacrifice is not esteemed. Something need not be socially universal to be considered genuinely human. No virtue that we would defend as enhancing our humanity will be found to be universally admired or practiced. For example, the Ik people of Africa, as described by the anthropologist Colin Turnbull, would see self-sacrifice as madness. Ayn Rand, consistent with her apology for selfishness, thought that love is nothing more than a reaction to one’s own value discovered in another person; thus, to risk your life for a stranger would be immoral unless it involved minimal risk or inconvenience to yourself. But, according to Rand, it could be moral and rational to risk all to save someone you love dearly for the simply selfish reason that you could not bear to live without this person. In other words, sacrifice is not sacrifice for Rand but just another investment of the ego in itself.

Ayn Rand is a good example of those persons who overreact to the philosophers and theologians who say that all self-love is morally bad. They are, of course, in error, as is she in overreacting to them. Some
of the classical systems of morality teach that you should love your neighbor as yourself, so that self-love is seen not as a deviation but as the paradigm for neighbor-love. In fact, the legitimacy and inevitability of self-love heighten the point about which we are speaking. Because we must and do love ourselves, we admire and perhaps feel drawn to imitate the supreme sacrifice in certain cases. This fact becomes all the more of a mystery.

Where Morality and Mystery Meet...

The mystery of the supreme sacrifice is a fact that shows up with great persistence in various and unconnected areas throughout the whole of human history. Our philosophical and religious traditions, our folklore as well as our recent history contain abundant examples of heroic self-sacrifice. In the Symposium, Plato writes that only those in love are willing to die for the other. Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics broadens the concept to include the nobility of the good person as a model of one who would die for friends and country. In Christianity, the idea of dying for others as the supremely moral action attains classical expression in the Gospel according to St. John: There is no greater love than to give your life for your friends. The giving of one’s life for another or even the risking of one’s life is perceived as an act of boundless love and moral courage. In less technologically and medically advanced countries, women give birth often with risk to their own lives, a reality that is easily overlooked by those with greater medical privileges. The act of selfless love affirms the perception of the sacredness of persons and validates the foundation of moral meaning. Paradoxically, the sanctity and value of life are confirmed by the supreme sacrifice.

This remarkable paradox often presents itself to us. During a snowstorm in January of 1982, an airliner crashed into the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Five injured passengers emerged from the wreckage and held on to the severed tail of the plane. A sixth person was floating several feet away and was the first to be rescued. When the helicopter returned, a lifeline was lowered to a man who passed it on to the person next to him, and each subsequent time he passed it on to someone else. When the helicopter finally returned for this person, who was later identified as Arland Williams, he was gone. His selflessness was heroic and morally enriching. There was something noble in his actions and death. We really do believe persons are worth such sacrifice, even if we personally might not be up to the task at any given moment.

J. Glenn Gray, in his thoughtful and absorbing book The Warriors, tells some poignant stories about individuals who risked death in the face of person-related values. In the Netherlands, during World War II, there was a German soldier who disobeyed orders when he refused to
shoot hostages. He was a member of a firing squad. What could be anticipated happened. He was immediately found guilty of treason and executed along with the hostages by the other members of his own squad. The incident had become fabled among the Dutch who related it to Gray. But notice that in this story the hostages still died in spite of the soldier’s dissent, and the result of his refusal was more death, not less. His action had a certain futility. It was not “efficient” or “cost effective.” And yet it remains admirable. If someone whom we had always negatively thought of as ruthless, egoistic, and self-serving did this, we would have to change our estimate of the person’s character because what we now see is a manifestation not of meanness or selfishness but of moral integrity. Is it not true to our deepest experience to say that we would hope that in a similar situation we or our friends and children would have the courage not to stand there like the other soldiers and obediently blast lead into the quivering flesh of innocent and desperate hostages? If we were among those hostages and knew that we would die anyhow, would we not still have realized something in this soldier that was beautiful and good, even if not useful to us? If we were a friend of that soldier, would not the incident have confirmed the good qualities that caused us to love him as a friend? Would not his sacrifice seem to represent the fullest expression of his goodness?

Gray tells another story about a German soldier who was ordered on a reprisal raid on a French village. The orders were to burn the village and allow no man, woman, or child to escape alive. He obeyed and joined the others in shooting down the villagers as they ran screaming from their burning homes. When Gray met this soldier, he was fighting with the French Resistance against his own people. Shortly after the slaughter, he had abandoned the German cause, and when he recounted the incident to Gray, his whole being shuddered anew at his offense. Had he refused to shoot the people, he would have been shot. His refusal would not have saved them. It would not have been a “useful” action, though it would have been moral, and supremely so. We can understand his guilt for not having refused, even at the risk of his own life. The paradox is with us and cannot be easily explained away. We are the only animal that knows and understands death and its devastation. And yet, we are the only animal that knows it should prefer death to the violation of certain person-related values, for we are the only animal that has a sense of moral value. The mystery of the supreme sacrifice must not be missed; it shows the depths of the apparently simple but mysterious experience of the value of persons. It is the most remarkable, dramatic manifestation of the foundational moral experience.

In approaching the foundational moral experience, we have begun at its enigmatic depths where the supreme sacrifice for persons
is felt as noble and not foolhardy. We are not, of course, implying that the supreme sacrifice is an absolute value, admirable under all circumstances. Indeed it could be irresponsible and immoral. In most day-to-day moral situations, the supreme sacrifice simply has no direct relevance, and most of us, fortunately, will never run into a situation in which we would face such a challenge. We make special note of the phenomenon of the supreme sacrifice because it shows how deep the foundational moral experience goes. It shows what that experience can command. Although such sacrificial behavior is exceptional, it is broadly and transculturally revered and admired. All this speaks to the worth of persons and thus to the roots of ethics.

*The Sense of Profanation, the Moral Ought, and the FME...*

Gray’s stories not only contain examples of the supreme sacrifice; they also reveal the moral sense of profanation, the disturbing sense of aversion and withdrawal that we experience in the face of that which offends the value of persons and their environment. The foundational moral experience is also manifested in the moral shock and horror that we feel when persons are abused and desecrated.

Less dramatic manifestations of the foundational moral experience are with us in the normal unfolding of human life and consciousness. We can seek to discern it in our more normal appreciation of moral oughts and moral shocks. Sir William David Ross, the British ethicist, said: “To me it seems as self-evident as anything could be, that to make a promise, for instance, is to create a moral claim on us in someone else.” He called this a *prima facie* duty,” and he considered among other such duties the obligation to tell the truth, to make reparation for wrongful acts, and to give to each her or his own. Ross said that he could not prove these oughts to anyone who would deny them. All he could do is to try to open the other to authentic moral experience.

Ross seems to go too far in saying that these duties are self-evident, since they might not be evident to everyone at every level of moral development. Life would be more pleasant if indeed they were. These moral duties, however, could be called primal responsibilities that are recognized by mature persons, and yet they make sense only if we see them as manifestations of the FME. Every moral ought derives from the foundational moral awareness of the value of persons. Because persons are so valuable, we owe them fidelity and truth and justice. A moral ought is basically a specified expression of the respect that we have for the value of personhood. Because persons are persons, they may not be bought and sold like cattle, plucked like weeds, set aside and segregated like mere objects without meaning and worth, subject to discrimination of a sexist or racist kind, reduced to exploitable means, misled, sexually harassed, and so forth. Persons have a certain
primacy of worth, and to know and respect this worth is to be civilized, moral, and human.

In another way, Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* expresses the same moral insight when he says that it is better for a person to suffer injustice than to commit it. The reason can only be traceable to what may be called a mystical perception of the inviolable sanctity of human life. This perception undergirds every moral ought and those who are alien to it are alien to moral consciousness. We are beyond the level of scientific proof here. Ethics, like much of important human reality, does not fall within the empirically validated proofs and measures of scientific verification. Socrates' statement has a validity that scientific method cannot prove or disprove and it shows us how moral shock gives a kind of negative entrée to the experience of the sacredness of persons. Violation often serves to reveal the value of the violated, a moral insight that finds expression as a *Thou shalt not*. It was the question of injustice and tyranny that occasioned Socrates' profound expression of the value of persons.

The sense of profanation evokes a tragic awareness of moral worth. Medical experiments done at Willowbrook on Staten Island in New York can provide a further illustration. In a 1956 study sponsored by the Armed Forces Epidemiologic Board and endorsed by the executive faculty of New York University School of Medicine, live hepatitis virus was administered to a number of the retarded children at Willowbrook. Conditions were a horror and hepatitis was rampant. Richard Restak, M.D., gives us a summation of how the justification for the experiments went:

Most of the children were going to contract hepatitis at some point in their stay at Willowbrook anyway. Many of these would not be diagnosed if the case were mild, even if it resulted in severe liver damage. By deliberately giving the hepatitis virus, an extremely mild form of the infection would be induced, followed by immunity. In the event that hepatitis developed, the children would be under care in a special, well-equipped, optimally staffed unit.

Given that the accepted treatments for hepatitis were not generally in use at Willowbrook, that effective steps to improve conditions were not taken, and that hepatitis cannot always be controlled, even within the best medical context, the exploitation of these children was flagrant. They were treated as means and not ends, as objects and not persons. Important scientific discoveries came from the experiments and were published in prestigious journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Most people would now admit that what occurred was morally outrageous. Our sense of profanation tells us that the foundational moral experience was suspended, as far as these children were con-
cerned. For that precise reason, the term "immoral" applies. This Willowbrook incident can serve as an argument against intuitionism, which proposes that the moral is self-evident, and as an argument for the importance of ethics. The abuse of these children was not self-evidently immoral to many who were thoroughly acquainted with the facts.