CRITICAL MORAL THINKING: SOME STARS TO STEER BY

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The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.
                    –T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets.*

The moral dimension of human thought and behavior is riddled with complexity. The very framing of moral debate splinters into a number of questions without easy answers (or with many seemingly irreconcilable answers): Why should we be moral? How should we be moral? What does it mean to be moral? At least some moral questions are what philosophers call "essentially contestable." Others (such as murder, sexual assault, or racism) are not.

Even when we disagree, however, there are certain meta-ethical considerations that can help us to deal with ethics. For one thing, we can achieve wide if not universal agreement on what the moral dimension is about. Morality is essentially social: it's about who gets what, who gets to do what, and the limits of our behavior vis à vis one another. Human interaction is what gives

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rise to moral conflicts in the first place. There are no moral values in nature alone, in a one-person universe, or for hermits (except perhaps in relation to animals). But put two or more people together in any context, and an ethical dimension emerges because of the potential for conflict. Like some other broad concepts—including language, rationality, and citizenship—morality presumes a social context. It's about what we do as members of communities, not what we do in our homes, on lonely forest paths, with other consenting adults, or in private moments.

The second way we can achieve greater moral clarity, if not agreement, is through what I will call critical moral thinking. What I mean by that phrase is a kind or rational (even logical) sorting that doesn't yield incontestable answers, but helps to narrow and guide the arguments that inevitably follow. The purpose of critical moral thinking isn't to ignore real disagreements or force consensus, but rather to identify broadly acceptable rules of the road for moral discourse.

Critical moral thinking begins with certain basic distinctions that clarify moral debates and enable them to proceed more effectively. Such distinctions may be called "logical" insofar as they identify basic definitional boundaries in our thought and language, and reflect basic fissures in the world. But there can never be a final map of the territory. These distinctions are tools for organizing knowledge and values, not knowledge or values in themselves. They are neither immutable nor exhaustive, just as distinctions that promote critical thinking in general (e.g., the distinction between facts and values or opinions) aren't immutable or exhaustive. They simply help to map the territory without ordaining a particular destination.

Like the guideposts of informal logic (which help us to improve our arguments, not eliminate them, and also to minimize bias, confusion, and error), those of critical moral thinking aren't shortcuts to the resolution of knotty problems, but keep discourse from veering off into the nonmoral, the nonrational, or the purely subjective. What follow are some of the distinctions I have in mind.

Facts Versus Values

We can't talk clearly about moral matters without distinguishing between facts, which refer (broadly) to ideas about how things are,[1] and values, which identify how we would like them to be. Differences about facts can in principle be settled by appealing to evidence in the world—although how we select them, interpret them, and fit them into our worldviews is another matter. Differences about values typically cannot be resolved, at least not in this way.

"All men are created equal," states the Declaration of Independence. That is not a statement of fact, but a moral assertion that people ought to be treated alike, in relevant respects, regardless of their actual differences: that they are equal as moral beings.

Moral Versus Nonmoral Values

In order to make appropriate judgments and sound arguments, it's important to distinguish not just between facts and values, but also between moral and other kinds of value, some of which are related or overlapping: political, spiritual, aesthetic, and prudential. Personal health and safety, for example, are prudential values, along with self-interest in general; and we tend to share these insofar as what's bad for me (reckless risk-taking, food poisoning, and avalanches) tends to be bad for you as well, because we are both people. But my self-interest may nevertheless conflict with yours (as when we have one life vest among us). What's good for me, prudentially, isn't always what's good for my conscience, for you, or for an affected community.

The Moral and the Political

Political arguments, like moral ones, seldom result in conversions, but in a democracy we have them anyway; and they can shed useful light on our differences and clarify how far and on what grounds we may expect to achieve consensus. It's important both to connect and distinguish the moral sphere and the political one, as parallel and overlapping regulative systems. Moral questions tend to be informal and interpersonal (or intra-institutional, e.g., between an employer and employee). In the political realm, we project our moral values onto a wider social matrix of laws, policies, and institutions.

Rights and Duties

In both the moral and political contexts, we often talk in terms of rights and duties (or obligations or responsibilities), and properly so. It's useful to demarcate ethical claims in this way (and that is what laws do) although all moral and political discourse isn't reducible to specific rights and duties. Rights and duties, however, don't exist in logical vacuums, but within a negotiated system of social reciprocity among agents. If I have a duty to pay you rent, you have a right to collect it; if I have a duty to pay taxes, I also have a right to government services. Thus, we can't have rights without corresponding duties (e.g., to respect the same right for others). Rights and duties aren't "invented" or discovered, but carved out of a common moral space by law or convention.

Consensus and Contestability

Another important distinction, alluded to earlier, is between the value differences we can tolerate and contest, and those we can't agree to disagree about while maintaining effective dialogue. The shared values of civility, and truth-telling and truth-seeking, are essential baselines for moral discourse. They are sometimes vague or imperfectly shared baselines; but without them, there can be no real attempts to understand one another, and so no community, and no critical inquiry. Again, such debates can never be expected to produce perfect consensus. But, they can lead to better understanding, and the partial, impermanent consensus and compromise that enable educational and democratic institutions to function. If we have to argue about whether truth, civility, or the prevention of gratuitous harm are universal moral values, it's unlikely that further debates will be productive.

I and Thou

There's a related distinction to be made, in certain contexts, between the moral principles I adhere to myself, and those to which I can fairly hold others: the (otherwise unnecessary or misleading) distinction between personal "ethics" and public "morality." Failure to distinguish these may give rise to the mischievous assumption that, within the penumbra of moral space beyond the legal-political realm, I can hold you to the same standards, on all matters, as I hold myself. The inherently reciprocal nature of morality might seem to support that assumption. Yet we can, and at times should, hold ourselves to higher moral standards than others, especially in areas that lie at or beyond the boundaries of the moral. Imposing our aesthetic or spiritual values on others, for example, whatever their ethical component, is the definition of fanaticism.

The Ambiguity of "Moral"

Quite apart from the ambiguity around morality and ethics, there are two distinct senses of "moral": one that applies *descriptively* to systems of shared beliefs regulating the conduct of a given community; and another that is used *prescriptively* in arguing for particular moral values or value systems. We need to be able to use the word in both ways, without obscuring the crucial difference, because it is necessary both to describe and to appraise.[2] One can describe primogeniture, human sacrifice, stoning, slavery, and other heinous practices as aspects of moral systems; but that doesn't entail approval of them. Nor can the imperfections of our own lives or cultures relegate us to silence or moral relativism. Even a hypocritical argument, contrary to the actions of the arguer, may be valid or compelling. We should judge the

speaker as well as the utterance, and judge whether they are in accord, but must judge them separately.

Explanation Versus Justification

A causal explanation for an action tends to converge with a justification of it. That's just how our minds work: reasons look like justifications. As the French say: "*Tout savoir c'est tout pardonner*" (to know everything is to forgive everything"). Causal explanations of actions tend to cite environmental, historical, psychological, or other influences that inferentially limit the scope of personal accountability. They test our principles against facts (extenuating or otherwise) that lie beyond the realm of free agency; and the causal environment is typically more accessible to us than the mind or conscience of an alleged moral transgressor. As such, we tend to see causal explanations as offsetting moral responsibility.

But understanding the causal background to an action doesn't strictly equate with justification, unless new facts fundamentally alter the case. It doesn't mean: "This had to happen" or "she couldn't help it, so we can't hold her accountable." Whatever the extenuating causal circumstances, we still need to preserve some room for free will and moral responsibility. How we strike the balance is itself a fundamental contestable moral (and political) question. If nothing else, keeping in mind the distinction between explanation and justification highlights the dilemmas of human and natural causality, and the need for "binocularity": our separate capacities to understand, and to judge and regulate, human behavior.

Victims Versus Heroines

There's a natural human propensity for compassion, as well as for cruelty; and in sympathizing with life's victims, we tend to invest them with qualities of moral rectitude or nobility. But this is another false equation. Victims of oppression or harm are certainly entitled to our attention and sympathy, and often to legal redress or other recompense; they may indeed be heroic or noble, for example, if the suffering is freely endured for some greater good. But there is no necessary connection between affliction and righteousness. Being unjustly accused, say, or being the victim of a crime, doesn't in itself make me a better person. Whether suffering improves character is a question for others to decide. But other things being equal, victimhood is not ennobling. Condemning the oppressor, as Primo Levi has pointed out in his memoirs of the Holocaust, doesn't elevate the oppressed. Whatever moral "credit" they earn is of a different kind altogether.

Above and Beyond

It's likewise important to differentiate moral duties, imperatives, or other moral impulses that we share in varying degrees, and what might be deemed laudable but supererogatory acts: those above and beyond the call of duty. This is the distinction between the good we can do for others, under such moral rubrics as honor, sacrifice, and altruism, and the good we must do. On the negative or "harm" side, there's a corresponding distinction between venial actions—minor incivilities or annoyances—and egregious harm. The boundaries aren't always obvious or incontestable. It's all about how we define the (sometimes complex and ambiguous) notions of "good" and "harm."

Moral Responsibility and Imagination

Another useful distinction, related to the foregoing, is between moral responsibility and what might be called the moral imagination. Both are components of the larger idea of moral citizenship. Moral responsibility means something minimal and nonnegotiable: giving due consideration to others and the will to avoid causing unnecessary harm. Moral imagination is not the same as "above and beyond," but something broader, more abstract, and hence more political in nature. It means thinking critically about how our actions affect others at a greater remove and on a larger scale (including people we may never meet because they may live in Africa or China, or in the 22nd century), as well as the debts we acknowledge to the past: to honor past sacrifice, altruism, creativity, and so on. Distance over time or space doesn't mean we can't recognize causal impacts and moral relationships that span them and link us to remote others. That's part of moral citizenship too.

Moral Intelligence?

Another way of thinking outside the moral box involves two ideas that are often confused or thought to overlap: our general mental abilities (the inherently problematic concept of "intelligence") and our disposition to be moral. We conflate these whenever we uncritically condemn the shortcomings of others: for example, scolding people for ordinary mistakes, or booing athletes who don't perform to our liking.

There are similar ethical gray areas when it comes to meeting responsibilities. A parent or babysitter watching children is accountable for their safety; but what about a highly-paid ballplayer who doesn't stay in shape or give a full effort? It's not always clear when mental lapses signify moral ones. But in most cases, being lazy, inattentive, or thoughtless doesn't equate with being bad, any more than being inept or unlucky does; we just tend to

equate them. No baseball player wants to strike out, or has a duty to get a hit. But then, ballparks provide safe arenas for relaxing our critical capacities.

Intelligence is a complex, mysterious, and largely hereditary set of traits, distributed with cruel irregularity across the human species. Most of us would rather have more of it than less. And certain basic aspects of our moral orientations, such as the disposition to be more or less selfish, violent, truthful, generous, manipulative, exploitive, and so on, seem partly embedded in our DNA. We all learn to behave properly from parents and others, but sociopaths are born, not bred; and our acquired values are rooted in our personalities, not baggage we can easily change or shed. Education is acquired; but there's at best a highly imperfect correlation between educational opportunity or attainment and intelligence, and no obvious correlation between either of these and what we loosely refer to as character: the tendency to try to do the right thing.

Intellectual sophistication—for example, the ability to discern relationships, organizing principles, or causal patterns in social life, to manage interpersonal relations, to understand human psychology or a particular personality—can refine our understanding of moral problems. But it doesn't make us better people or "right" on contestable questions. Mental acuity can also aid selfishness or criminality. It is not the same as the capacity or willingness to follow one's conscience or act altruistically. Critical thinking and learning can help us to become more effective citizens; they don't make us more virtuous.

Gravity Versus Complexity

Anyone who sits on a jury knows that people are innocent in the eyes of the law until proven guilty—and sometimes the innocent are convicted and the guilty set free. We shouldn't lose sight of the complexity of a moral issue because of the gravity of it, or out of sheer personal bias or conviction. Even heinous crimes may be committed under extenuating circumstances, and there may be factual uncertainty about what is alleged to have occurred. Even when such cases are clear, we may disagree about appropriate remedies or punishments.

This doesn't diminish the seriousness of the offense, or its effects on victims. But public opinion about a particular case may be wrong; memories are notoriously unreliable, though they seldom seem so to their owners; people are biased, laws are unjust, judges are flawed, and juries make mistakes. And the gravity of a crime is not an indication of who committed it. Here, critical moral thinking involves humility.

Conscience and Conformity

Speaking of public opinion: we're often exposed to powerful pressures to conform to a popular or dominant viewpoint on any number of issues within our community, age group, or institution. It may not be a wrong viewpoint; and on legitimately contestable issues there is no "wrong" viewpoint—although dominant views tend not to acknowledge this. Social media have greatly ratcheted up this pressure, creating powerful tools for instant public shaming, often with little real discourse or critical thinking.[3] But it's the job of a responsible moral citizen to resist such pressure. On moral as on intellectual questions, thinking critically means, first and foremost, thinking for oneself. So we should dare to be in the minority if need be—but we shouldn't deviate or conform for the sake of deviating or conforming. As Polonius counsels Laertes in "Hamlet": "Above all else to thine own self be true."

Conclusion

Critical moral thinking is a foundation of citizenship. It doesn't ensure wise or just decisions, or preordain specific outcomes, but rather invites us to start from a broader shared perspective on the moral enterprise. Like critical thinking in general, it urges us to find commonality beyond our personal values, needs, and biases, and to recognize what we share and what we don't.

Difference and conflict, like similarity and bonding, are intrinsic to all things human. Exposure to diversity is exposure to life; and it can sometimes make us more respectful and tolerant. It is certainly conducive to becoming a critical thinker, moral or otherwise. This is because acceptance of the other, the different, the unfamiliar, is a basic critical act, a willingness to look beyond instinct and evaluate fairly. It reflects a more flexible and systemic vision of the world, embracing the intersubjective communities that make life more bearable than it would otherwise be. It opens the mind as well as the heart and the conscience.

Morality is an inherently unstable idea: problematic, complex, contestable, and a matter of continual urgency and relevance. Outside of the law (which is stable as a public code, but likewise impermanent, imperfect, at times imprecise, and limited in reach), morality can never be reduced—except by dogma or fiat—to a single definition or system of rules. Yet moral discourse (and just as important, morally guided action) is anything but incoherent or boundless. In fact, it's the basis of all legitimate forms of community.

The essential framing idea of any legitimate moral community is equality and reciprocity among its members. That idea has a long history, and for

good reason. It's expressed in the Biblical Golden Rule; in Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, to act only in ways that one could will to be a universal rule; in John Stuart Mill's famous "harm principle" from the Introduction to *On Liberty*: "The only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

There's more than just that baseline of reciprocity, however, in the moral glue that holds us together. Honesty and truth-seeking, as we've seen, are necessary ingredients of any moral community. So too are the "moral" emotions that bind us: not just respect for others, but also felt ideas of kindness and empathy, honor and loyalty, and even a measure of altruism. "Felt ideas," because they are values: guiding emotions as well as concepts that we can think and talk about and, to some extent, negotiate.

All of these moral concepts represent ways in which we rise above our personal needs and interests to achieve community. It's not about what we can get from others, or striking the best deal—be it the Mayflower Compact, the US Constitution, the International Declaration of Human Rights, or the willingness to obey traffic signals. It's about what we can share to make life a little better for all.

Notes
1. To elaborate: I take "facts" to mean things that different people recognize as existing in more or less the same way, not to conditions as they exist apart from any such agreement. In this sense, facts are (for practical purposes) communities of agreement about states of affairs, not those states of affairs "in themselves." We need to make special exceptions for "facts" about the world that some people don't acknowledge, or that no one recognizes.
2. This is a literal, technically correct, application of the term "ambiguity," involving two distinct meanings, rather than vagueness about the meaning.
3. See, for example, David Brooks, "The Shame Culture" *The New York Times* (March 15, 2016): A29.