

## Morality

During a party last summer, I was talking with a person about the various indiscretions of our President. The person told me that President Clinton no longer deserved to be our President because he was an immoral person and we should not have an immoral person as our president. This person, it turned out was a very strong Reagen supporter. I told him that I believed President Reagen was far more immoral than Clinton. The man looked at me like some of you are looking at me now. He thought that I was either crazy or kidding. Actually, I was serious.

The more that I thought about that conversation, I started to realize that our definitions of morality and equations for becoming immoral were greatly diverse.

I believed that Reagen was immoral because of his involvement with Chilean dictator Pino Chet which directly resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people. I also focused on his policies on welfare which hurt millions of people in need.

My friend was looking at Clinton's sexual indiscretions and subsequent denials, even while under oath.

Both of us, it seems, were willing to overlook some things while focusing in on others to arrive at the diagnosis of immoral. Obviously, we were not using the same standards and we certainly were not agreeing on which things to consider.

So, who was right, or were we both wrong? Who is allowed to conclude that another person is immoral? Who gets to make the rules?

Well, I do not want to discuss the morality or immorality of our presidents, that is NOT the topic of this paper.

I want to discuss the concept of morality.

I intend to offer some ideas from various philosophers to give us some grounding for our discussion. The intent, though, is to find out what you think, not to debate what the philosophers think.

First a few disclaimers:

1. I am , by no means, an expert on the great philosophers. I have tried to read some of their works in preparation for this paper but found most of what they have written to be harder to grasp than a bridge book. A casual reading gets you nowhere.

Listen to this quote from Immanuel Kant which I selected pretty much at random,

“Thus is the common reason of man compelled to go out of its sphere, and to take a step into the field of a practical philosophy, not to satisfy any speculative want (which never occurs to it as long as it is content to be mere sound reason), but even on practical grounds, in order to attain in it information and clear instruction respecting the source of its principle,...”

Actually, that is only part of the sentence and if any one here other than Allen VerHey could tell me what I just read, I would be most impressed.

So, my summary of the teachings of the great philosophers, is suspect at best.

#2. I do not come to you as a special messenger of God who has been ordained to deliver the truth about morality. I do not even come as one who believes that my own moral ground is so secure that I am a reasonable choice to help you struggling sinners see the light. I come as a human being, no more able, and arguably less able, than many, to discuss this issue. I do have, however, my opinions which, I believe, are as valid as yours. When it comes right down to the it, no one can prove their specific rules of morality. There are no universally accepted books or manuals that have all the answers for all people. We, as humans, need ultimately rely on, and live by, our interpretations and beliefs.

My goal is to explore common thought regarding morality, stimulate questions and hopefully learn from each of you before the night is over.

So, what is morality, anyway? I suspect that you will soon find that this is not such an easy question to answer and that I will pose far more questions than answers in this talk.

Webster's dictionary defines moral as: "of or concerned with the judgement of the goodness or badness of human action and character and " a set of ideas of right and wrong."

The words, ethical and virtuous, are usually used interchangeably with the word moral.

The Latin word for moral is "Mores" which means customs or traditions.

Over time, the word "morality" has come to mean far more than a custom or tradition.

Morality now speaks of the character of a person...the heart and soul of an individual.

It refers to actions that are evaluated by the "golden rule"... do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Morally sound actions are those that mankind would approve of. Actions which God would approve of.

It is important to differentiate between a secular and religious concept of morality. Many religious people, including the many Calvinists amongst us, have been taught a doctrine which describes the "total depravity of man."

This teaching holds that mankind is plagued by sin. Humans, although made in the image of God and possessing basic goodness, are incapable of keeping God's laws. We do, think, and feel things that continually put us at odds with the will of God. Some of us are better than others at acting morally correct, but since everyone fails to live up to God's moral code, no one has the right to claim that they measure up to God's standard of morality.

But, for human standards, morality takes on a different connotation. It speaks to the character of a person and compares that to human standards. We consider most people to be moral, or ethical, even if they make numerous mistakes and commit many wrongs.

A person is considered immoral if his character is flawed and his actions bear that out. Generally, when we think of immoral people, we would think of people like Hitler, Idi Amean, and other ruthless dictators.

When we start calling people immoral, we get into a gray area. Is a prostitute an immoral person or is it possible that the prostitute is a moral person living an immoral life?

Basically, morality as we use the word today, is somewhat difficult to define but rest assured that if you do something that others consider immoral, those people are not thinking well of you. If you later are referred to as an immoral person, that may be the worst insult that you will ever receive.

So, where does a moral code come from?

There are, obviously, many thoughts on these matters.

Immanuel Kant maintained that humans are rational beings, equipped with the ability to love, and care for other humans. The very nature of humans demands a moral code. This code is ultimately centered around the "golden rule" (do unto others as you would have them do unto you.)

John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher of the 1800's, was a proponent of Utilitarianism. This view states that morality is human inspired and is defined by the Greatest Happiness Principle.

An action is morally correct if it leads to the greater happiness of society.

An extreme example of this would be:

If there are only five people and four of them are in need of various organ transplants to remain alive, the moral thing to do would be to sacrifice the fifth person in order to bring the greatest happiness to the other four.

Fredrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher of the late 1800's argued that there is no moral code at all. He believed that if people act good, or virtuous, it really is just out of weakness, or convenience. They really are not trying to live up to some mythical moral code, they are simply trying to survive.

Of course, these views have come under fierce debate by the religious community.

People of faith believe that, ultimately, the moral code comes from God. Granted, there is a huge range of religious beliefs and it is painfully simplistic to lump them all together but I think that it is reasonable to say that most people who believe in a higher being also believe that some moral code is associated with that being.

So, moral codes come from both divine and human pathways. The codes, of course, are not all the same.

Moral codes depend on one's religion, culture, era, personal standards and many other factors.

There is a story about an American professor that went to the Middle East to teach a class at a University. He hands out the first test and explains that there will be no cheating while taking the test. The students soon start walking around the class talking with one another. The professor restores order and again reminds that there will be no cheating. Again the students start talking with one another and discussing the test. The professor now is quite mad and demands an explanation. One of the students then explains that in their country, it would be cheating not to share information that you have. Refusing to share needed information with another class mate would be cheating, yes, immoral.

Just because one's moral code allows something, does not make it truly moral. Slavery was totally accepted by many people at one time, but today, we believe it to be immoral.

Human beings cannot agree on whether a universal moral code exists. Even religious people can not agree on a universal moral code from God. Some feel that God has a code, "set in stone" that handles everyone the same. It is our duty to try to define and live by this universal, absolute code. Others feel that God's moral code is such that the rules are different for different people in different times.

**We now have to ask who gets to make the rules about morality, who decides what is immoral or just a little indiscretion? Do the rules apply to everyone, all the time?**

First lets look at who gets to make the rules.

Religious people are often quick to volunteer for this task. Many feel that they have insight into the divine will of God and for them, the rules are clear.

Secular thought would argue for a "golden rule" mentality that applies to people regardless of whether they believe in God or not.

Essentially, anyone can appoint themselves to make the rules, the question is whether anyone accepts them as the rule makers. James Dobson is the ruler maker for millions of conservative Christians. The Pope is the rule maker for millions of Catholics. Charles Manson was the rule maker for his group of followers. Hitler was the rule maker for Germany. The list goes on.

The important part is that a rule makers can only be influential if people agree to accept their rules.

There have been countless rule makers throughout history and, of course, all have had different levels of support and following.

The problem of course, is when two people within the same group come up with competing rules which they each believe to be absolutely right....right, not only for themselves, but for everyone. Two groups of people, whose views are mutually exclusive.

This may well be the most challenging problem that is facing, and dividing, the Christian community today.

Some Christians believe that their understanding of the rules of morality are so correct, that they are entitled to hold these rules, not only for themselves, but also for others. In fact, to do less than that and actually allow for other viewpoints, would be a sign of weakness and lack of faith which in turn would lead to rampant immorality.

Francis Sheaffer is considered one of the foremost intellectual and spiritual Christian leaders of this century.

He writes, "With the Christian answer, it is possible to understand that there are true moral absolutes...If there is no moral absolute, we are left with hedonism(doen what I like) or some form of the social contract theory(what is best for society as a whole is right). ...Without absolutes, morals as morals cease to exist, and humanistic man starting from himself is unable to find the absolute that he needs."

Conservative Christians have taken hold of numerous absolutes. Their understanding of God's revelation to man leads them to be very uncompromising with regard to various moral absolutes. To show tolerance on such issues as homosexuality, abortion and the role of Christ in salvation, would

indicate a lack of faith and commitment to God. One cannot listen to Focus on the Family for more than 5 minutes without some reference to these issues.

Christians who do not interpret things that way, are, by their definition, wrong and on immoral ground.

So there are two distinct groups of Christians, both devote in their own way but the conservative group does not accept the position of the more liberal group.

Christians everywhere and now especially at Hope College are facing this very difficult situation which turns out to be extremely divisive and damaging to the over all goals of the Christian faith.

A main argument for having absolutes is that if there are no absolutes, than we are heading for chaos. If we can never say, "that is wrong" than we will be destined to that slippery slope where soon nothing is wrong.

This is a real fear, because, at some point, society needs to be able to step up and condemn various actions. Just because slavery was the accepted practice of many people, it is still immoral.

So, we end up having some people who believe that they are equipped to make the moral rules for society and other people who feel that no one has the right to do so.

Beyond the issue of who gets to make the rules, we must spend some time thinking about the rules themselves. What are the moral laws that we need to be kept?

What types of things are immoral and what does a person have to do to be generally characterized as immoral? I am referring now to our human standards of morality.

Immoral acts occur when laws are broken.

Before I get into this, it is important to make a distinction between civil laws and moral laws and religious laws.

Civil Laws are not necessarily morally correct. Civil laws are made by societies and/or their leaders. These laws are purely human and are inforced for any

number of reasons, some good and some bad. Many countries have laws which we consider wrong, yes immoral. Many people in our own country believe that some of our own laws are morally wrong. Examples would be our laws regarding abortion, gay rights, world policing, and the military.

Keeping the local law should not be confused with being morally correct. They are not the same. While there is a lot of overlap, the concepts are separate. There are many times when the morally sound thing to do is to break the civil law.

There are also many times when the civil legal standard is lower than a moral standard. Under most circumstances, it is not against the law to lie, but most would conclude that it is immoral.

Basically, things that are not in line with the "golden rule" are acts that we consider immoral. But, when you raise the standard higher than that, like religious doctrine for example, then there is much less unanimity of thought.

The religious concept of sinning occurs when you break God's law. Sinning is a common pastime that covers a wide range of thoughts and deeds. Sinning is synonymous with doing something immoral.

Moral people occasionally break laws, and probably sin on a regular basis, but are still considered moral if they are repentant and their heart is in the right place.

Most of us would agree that a moral person could do immoral things and still not be considered immoral.

How does happen?

There a range of transgressions which are wrong, but generally fall short of being considered immoral.

Cheating on your taxes to save \$20 is certainly not right but probably falls short of being immoral. Bombing a federal buildings is clearly immoral...unless they happen to be in Iraq...then we think that it is great.

So when does a person become immoral? Is that reversible?

Does a person become immoral by:



1. doing one immoral thing,... if it is bad enough
2. doing something little but not repenting?
3. Doing lots of little things wrong?
4. Or does it take certain big things: murder, armed robbery?
5. Are there certain categories that automatically make some one immoral?  
Abortion, homosexuality, child abuse, incest?

I suspect that there will be a lot of disagreement to the answers of these questions.

Once a person becomes accepted as immoral, how do they get out of it?

That depends on who is considering them immoral in the first place. Most people of faith believe that God forgives, in certain situations. Mankind is often less forgiving.

Before we get into what all of you think, just to get the ball rolling, I will give you a brief summary of my thoughts on some of these matters.

I believe that one's morality is highly personal and while subject to the scrutiny of others, it's value is not dependant on their scrutiny. I believe that there is a God and he is the ultimate judge. His moral code, however, is neither absolute nor consistent as evaluated by human intellect.

So, for me, there is an option that Francis Shaefer does not accept, an option other than absolutes and no-absolutes. Francis Shaefer bases his position on the classic basis of antithesis "if one thing is true, the opposite is false. In morality, if one thing is right, its opposite is wrong." He says, "This little formula, A is A and if you have A it is not non-A is the first move in classic logic."

Well, I fundamentally disagree. I think that something could be absolutely wrong for me and still right for you.

I think that we are on very thin ice when we start deciding what is morally right for others. It is important to follow a moral code, and equally reasonable to convince others of the merit of that code. But beyond that, final judgement is in the hands of God, not man.

Now, before you all start crying out that we soon will have a situation where nothing is wrong people will just do what ever they want. I do not think so. People are still responsible to abide by their own moral code and that moral code will ultimately be judged both by mankind and God.

In the meanwhile, we rely on the wonderful indefinite world of reason and good common sense. That continuous gray area that forces people to use judgement.

It is like we do all the time with our children. We use different standards for them than we do for ourselves. Eight o'clock is bedtime for an 8 year old but not for us. Wine with dinner is fine for us but we would tell our 16 year old that it would be wrong for him. As the children grow and mature, these rules change.

My point is that you can live reasonably in a situation where the rules are not absolute. So, when dealing with another adult, it is common place to have a situation that is wrong for me and yet not wrong for them.

It might be totally wrong, immoral, for my wife to have an abortion, but not immoral for a rape victim to have one.

There are many issues that would influence that including: religious belief, cultural understanding, circumstances, age, finances, etc.

What gives me the right to force my beliefs on you and who gives me the authority to call you immoral? I simply do not believe that God has appointed me, or anyone else for that matter, to be the rule maker for all people. Yes, God has given us a code, but we simply cannot be sure that we have interpreted it correctly.

Many claim that God gives that authority but what happens when two people read and study the same Bible and come up with different answers?

I can say only that this is what I believe and that this is right for me. I leave it up to God to sort out your beliefs and actions.

We can not live peacefully if all of the rules are relative. We need some stability. Civil laws work nicely to prevent civil chaos. We need those. We need speed limits, taxes, jail time for robbers, drug laws...we need all of those things. All societies do in order to provide some level of protection and comfort for all of its members.

Universal moral laws which go beyond civil laws are more of a problem. Moral laws often go beyond the golden rule situations into more personal beliefs and actions.

The state of Alabama, within the last month, tried to outlaw the sale of sex aides for adults. A majority of citizens get together and impose their views on a minority of adults who would choose to make and purchase them. I simply do not think that society has that right or obligation to police the private lives of people.

What a person does in his own home is his business. I may believe it to be immoral, but they should not have to be accountable to my standard of morality as long as society can live in harmony either way.

We do not need moral laws which are thrust upon us by self appointed moral law makers...we need moral advisers.

Moral advisers who give clear direction about their understanding of morality. Moral advisers who study and pray and live a moral life that will serve as an example and inspiration to the rest of us. Moral advisers whose credibility and wisdom compels us to listen very carefully to what they say.

But, Moral advisers who also leave room for the possibility that other equally competent moral advisers may disagree and may not be wrong in their disagreement.

I believe in a system where if  $A=A$ , then non-A might also equal A.