

Moral lives, meaningful lives

Ever since the financial crisis that currently afflicts the United States and the world hit, analysts from a variety of fields have hinted at the idea that disaster might have been brought about –at least in part– by a moral crisis (e.g. Jackson 2010; James 2008). Greed, corruption, egotistic individualism, and a lack of empathy and solidarity towards the worst-off, the argument roughly goes, are behind some of the direct causes of the financial catastrophe and all the suffering that has come with it.

If this analysis is right, as I contend it is, it suggests that ethical conduct is not merely a matter of doing what's right for the sake of it. Rather, morality is intrinsically related to well-being. I will argue that the breaching of ethical conduct brings with it unnecessary suffering to both self and others, and that the only way of pursuing a meaningful life –as well as both individual and collective well-being– is through the refinement of our moral skills.

There is plenty of evidence showing that breaking moral norms has emotional costs. Our heart rate goes up, we sweat, our body temperature rises, and we experience uncomfortable emotions such as shame and guilt, which express themselves through different body language signs (Eisenberg 2000; Ho, Fu, and Ng 2004; Lewis 1998). It is not only emotionally painful to incur in moral faults, but also to witness them. We feel distress at the sight of suffering, and this distress is intensified when we judge it to be caused by the unfair actions of others (Singer et al. 2006). We condemn acts that bring about the suffering of others because we can empathize with the victims: we know what it is like to suffer, and we experience discomfort when faced with others'

suffering. In fact, much of the brain response to pain is elicited when watching someone else in pain (Singer et al. 2004).

Moral violations are thus related to negative emotions. Conversely, moral virtue is associated to positive emotions. A study concerning a Prisoner's Dilemma game¹, suggests that people experience greater satisfaction when involved in cooperative behavior, even when cooperation comes at the expense of money (Rilling et al. 2002). Furthermore, positive emotions in turn lead to pro-social behavior (Isen and Levin 1972). In other words, the more one acts ethically, the better one feels, and the better one feels, the better the chances of one acting ethically.

Supposing that we accept this relationship between morality and well-being, the question still remains: how do we know what's ethical?

Sentient beings' potential to feel pleasure and pain bestow upon us moral obligations not to harm them and to help them achieve a greater well-being so long as we do not thereby sacrifice anything morally significant (Singer 1972). This means that we should try not to infringe pain and to relieve others' suffering whenever we can. I contend that most of the time, the problem is not about not knowing what's right. If we don't act ethically, it's generally because either we don't realize we are facing a moral dilemma (we think we are doing nothing wrong by going about our business) or because we can't control our impulses or habits.

¹ In this game, two people choose whether to cooperate with each other or not, and each is awarded a sum of money depending on the interaction of both players. If player A opts for non-cooperation and player B cooperates, then A wins more money than B. If both players cooperate, they both win a lesser amount of money than A in the first scenario.

So then the question arises: how can we teach ethics so that these obstacles are ameliorated? Another challenge is to instill morality without falling into the extremes of imposing absolute values or giving in to a moral relativism in which anything goes. To meet these challenges, education in morality must cover three basic domains:

1. Emotional intelligence and empathy (Goleman 1995). This includes an understanding of human beings not only as rational beings, but also as emotional beings. The study of emotions ranges from the enumeration and characterization of these, to the first-personal exploration of the feeling of emotions, as well as the training in detecting emotions in others through facial expressions and body language (Ekman 2003). If we have better knowledge about our own emotions and others' we have more information on the basis of which to make a more adequate moral decision (e.g. one must realize that one is making another person sad to act in consequence). Intimately related to this is the training in the regulation of emotions. People who are better at regulating their emotions have much higher chances of engaging in pro-social behavior (Eisenberg, Wentzel, and Harris 1998). Training in empathy should also require people learning and practicing how to put themselves in others' positions (e.g. If I were in such-and-such a position, how would I feel? What would I need? What would I choose?).
2. Critical thinking regarding interdependence. Students should be encouraged to evaluate, from a moral point of view, the consequences, not only of their actions as individuals, but also of governmental policies, business initiatives, etc. Awareness should be raised to the fact that, as emotional beings, we are

tied in a net of interdependence. Others suffering make us suffer too, and thus the question of an ethical society proves to be crucial for the cultivation of collective well-being. Furthermore, it is important to point out that not only actions have an effect on others, but also omissions (Singer 1972). In other words, morality is not only about what we do, but also about what we don't do (e.g. are we failing to benefit someone by spending our money the way we do?²).

3. Ethical theory. A general knowledge about theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, and care ethics are of value as tools that help us think through possible alternatives and solutions to moral dilemmas. These are useful instruments to develop moral imagination: the skill to imagine the consequences of different courses of action and to evaluate on the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

A comprehensive moral education emphasizes the fact that morality is not about memorizing the history of ethics. It is also not about writing down a pair of rules and carrying them around with you to remind you what to do. There's evidence that exclusively studying principles is not an effective way to change behavior, and it runs the risk of making people less attentive to contextual variables and making them feel less responsible for their acts (Abma et al. 2010). Rather, morality is about habits, skills, and determination. It is about cultivating the habit of taking others' interests

² Experts estimate that it would take around 40,000 million dollars a year to eradicate hunger, provide drinkable water, and arrange shelter for all human beings. Instead, the international community prefers to spend ten times that amount in publicity (Estefanía 2003, 137). Every year, individuals in Europe and the US spend roughly twice as much money in perfumes and food for pets than that which would be necessary to cover nutritional and health care demands around the globe (United Nations Development Report 1998). In light of these and other facts, analyst Jean Ziegler asserts that anyone who dies of hunger, is really dying of murder (UN Press Release 2002).

into account. It is about understanding ourselves as interconnected emotional beings who have the power to make others' lives better or worse. This power carries with it corresponding responsibilities that are to be acknowledged. Morality is about developing skills such as empathy and moral imagination. It is about making the decision to include a moral point of view in everything one does and doesn't do. This means that it is unacceptable to only look after our own profit and interest –be it as individuals, businesses, institutions, etc. Importantly, morality shouldn't be looked upon as a burdensome duty, as something one has to do because of some kind of external pressure. Refraining from harm and helping others is not a sacrifice. It is an opportunity to connect with other sentient being and thus can be carried out joyfully. It is a means to a greater well-being. It is the way into achieving a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. In philosopher Peter Singer's words:

We make our lives most meaningful when we connect ourselves with some really important causes or issues and we contribute to them. So that we feel that because we live, something has gone a little better than it would've otherwise; we have contributed in however small a way to making the world a better place. I think it's hard to find anything more meaningful than reducing the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering that there has been in this world or making the world a little bit better for all of the beings that are sharing it with us. (Singer 2008)

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