

Framing Morality in America Today

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The concept of morality operates on and can be divided into three spheres: a code of conduct put forward by an institution which, through a continuous process of questioning and contesting, is largely accepted and enforced by its members; the public discourse of morality which social anthropologist Jarett Zigon refers to as, “all those public articulations of moral beliefs, conceptions, and hopes that are not directly articulated by an institution” (Zigon, 2009); and a universal code of conduct which, under specific conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons (Bernard, 2011). Based on these spheres, morality then is a subjective notion dependent on the boundaries of actions permissible in any society, as well as unwritten ordinances culled from an individual’s social interactions, that form the standards upon which such an individual determines the extent to which he or she is a ‘good’ member of any particular society as well as inform the actions they will take in their self-interest or for the benefit of society.

Despite the fluidity of moral values, many Americans such as former congresswoman Clare Luce Boothe, have argued that morality in America is on the decline when compared to that of past generations. Her argument, as many others debating the decline of morality, use specific issues such as the decline of religious worship (specifically in the church) and traditional two parent families, the increase of nationwide crime rates and sexual freedom, and so on, as evidence that morality is indeed on the decline in America. To sum up such arguments, morality in America is on the decline because self-serving interests seem to be on the rise as opposed to altruistic efforts. In fact Boothe attests that American morality has in the past been influenced by Judeo-Christian institutions which “have placed their heaviest emphasis on altruism, kindness, and compassion” (Boothe, 1999). Such arguments, however, ignore the fact that morality is fluid

and depends to a great extent upon changing societal circumstances, which in turn influence individual and societal moral codes. It can be argued that because morality changes with evolving societal issues that govern a society, morality in America today has to be framed within the proper societal context in order to make an accurate and useful determination about whether American society has become less moral based on altruistic measures. This paper therefore, aims to view the evolution of morality in modern times based on specific economic and social changes which have influenced American morality in recent times.

According to the Social Identity theory formulated by psychologists Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, our identities are dependent upon our interactions with different groups of people such as family members, members of institutions to which we belong, and so on (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As our moral values are culled largely from the same sources as our identity, morality is crucial to our sense of self which in turn affects our sense of belonging (to our immediate communities and the social world in general), the permissible actions we take to attain our needs and wants, and the way society reacts towards such actions, all of which are crucial to living a satisfied, fulfilled and comfortable life. Morality then is important in helping people live fulfilled lives because it acts as a scale to 'place' their actions, values, etc., within the larger society.

To determine if Americans have become less moral with regards to sexual freedom, religious participation, and so on, morality has to be framed in line with societal changes. A specific social change which has pushed the boundaries of morality for many Americans is the acceptance of homosexual people. When compared with a few decades ago, specifically the pre-Stonewall era, homosexuality was less of an issue to the general society and marriage was

assumed to be the union of a man and woman, under the jurisdiction of a State. However in a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press it was found that 41% of people favor gay marriage, 47% oppose and 10% are unsure (<http://pollingreport.com/civil.htm>). With the increased visibility of homosexuals and gay-rights advocates, Americans are being forced to reconcile with the shifting boundaries on what was once considered immoral and either reinforce preset notions regarding marriage or change those notions to accommodate the social change. When the issues above are evaluated with the current social change towards homosexuality, questions that arise will not just focus on the morality of homosexuality, or the changing attitudes of Americans towards homosexuality, but will also have to consider religious establishment's response to these changes, and if their responses have affected the rate of religious participation in the country.

Plato of Ancient Greece suggested that the greatest morality is giving. To expand this statement, the greatest morality is shifting focus from oneself to another for the benefit of the other. American society in the past has been known for its altruism and selfless help to less fortunate people within and outside America. In a poll by the Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes (CSPA), 80% of respondents agreed that the government has "a responsibility to try to do away with poverty." This notion is however, almost opposite with the capitalist system America practices. Professor Joan Robinson in an address at the University of Maine attests that "the philosophy of orthodox economics is that the pursuit of self-interest will lead to the benefit of society." Between 1948 and 1952, the American economy went through a period of steady growth and was able to channel 13 billion dollars towards the aid of 16 European Countries. In recent times, with the credit crunch of 2008 in which the American housing market collapsed,

over a million jobs were lost, the unemployment rate dropped drastically to 9.1% and the retail industry hit a 40 year low, there are less resources and more people aiming for those resources. It may be argued that in the face of scarcity such as a recession, universal moral values such as generosity decline. When a group of people have to compete for the same resources, the already prominent individualism which orthodox economics encourages becomes even more extreme and leads to a shift from a collective view (concern with the general welfare of society and other people) to an individualistic view (concern with the welfare of oneself). However, according to data from the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteering rates in America are at a 30 year high, and have increased by more than 32% since 1989, despite the recession. When morality is therefore framed with America's economic structure in mind, it would seem as though the concern for other people, altruism, and generosity, values which Boothe argues are consistent with those the nation was built on, still remain constant in American society, expressed by the fact that there were 62.8million adults volunteering 8.1billion hours on average in 2010, despite financial constraints.

The changing economic situation of America however, also hints at an obstacle to living a moral life. With less resources and more people focused on providing for themselves within an economy of less, adherence to universal moral laws about compassion, harming others, etc., is bound to be less. In the boom year of 1960, the total number of crimes reported was 3,384,200, as opposed to 304,374,846 in 2008 and more recently, 308,745,538 in 2010 (disastercenter.com). A major obstacle to living a moral life in this case becomes a lack of certain basic needs and wants which forces people to relegate moral values to the background consciously or unconsciously in exchange for achieving some sort of goods or services which they determine to

be more important at that time than representing or adhering to their moral laws. Morality then becomes in economic terms, an 'alternative forgone,' given up to achieve a necessity ranked above the acceptance by society or a sense of satisfaction with oneself. In framing American morality based on economic changes in recent times, it would seem as though Americans are being more altruistic by volunteering their services, while at the same time feeling the need to give up moral values to attain what they want therefore leading to an increase in crime rates. Morality when viewed with economics does not provide a simple image of cause and effect or right and wrong.

In conclusion, what constitutes morality may seem on the surface to be a simple list of rights and wrongs, but is in fact a more complex notion derived from our very identities and our interactions with others. Morality can not simply be taught, just as it cannot simply be evaluated without context. As Ayn Rand pointed out, "the purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live." Moral laws cannot therefore be instilled within our education system as simply a list of ways to 'be,' morality is in essence a life long lesson and the best way to set up foundation for this lesson is to show children that our goal as moral individuals is not simply to be good (or to avoid being bad), but to be good with a purpose.

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