

## “The Crooked Timber of Humanity”

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In my reflection this morning, I would like to speak about two issues that I have been thinking about lately. The first is where and how we can find a valid moral standpoint in this morally challenged world we appear to be living in where, increasingly, everything seems to be measured by its cost or utility, and not by its inherent moral value.

The second issue is equally an challenging one: assuming we can identify what the morally right thing to do is, how can we move society to do it?

Turning to the first issue: the question of the basis upon which we can construct moral values today.

In 1784 the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) published in essay entitled *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. In this essay, Kant argued essentially that the human race was moving towards a meaningful goal, despite the fact that, as he put it, “[a]t the sight of the actions of man displayed on the great state of the world, it is impossible to escape a certain degree of disgust” or that, as he observed, “[o]ut of timber as crooked as that from which [humans are] made nothing entirely straight can be built.”

Yes, notwithstanding these observations, in *Idea for a Universal History* and in his other writings Kant—who, to us today, might seem a dusty figure from a distant past—held to the view that we humans, unlike all other creatures on earth, were, as rational beings, capable of the most noble achievement, that of legislating for ourselves the moral law. As Kant observes in one of his greatest works, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), nature and all of the creatures in it are governed by laws, but we humans alone are aware of the concept of law; we alone are capable of reason; we alone are self-aware; and we alone can recognize and live by a self-created and imposed moral law.

I have felt for a long time that we are living in a time of moral confusion, in a society and culture that have lost any common sense of moral values. This has been brought home to me—and perhaps to you as well—very forcefully recently as much of the moral progress I thought we had made, for example, in the area of race relations, has suddenly (it seems) been called into question. In these times, I find myself returning to the philosophers and thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, among whom Kant was perhaps the greatest. In part this is because, in a time when reason (for no discernible reason) seems to be under attack, the Enlightenment thinkers' championing of the liberating quality of reason, and their insistence upon clarity of reasoning, seems like a reassuring breath of fresh air to me. But also I have been returning to those thinkers because, as I see it,

they led the way in understanding morality as not something imposed upon us but as originating in our human nature itself. And, of those thinkers, it was Kant above all who emphasized the moral autonomy that is our birthright as humans, so that, despite the “crooked timber” out of which we are constructed, we can—as Kant hoped—achieve the highest good, that of living moral lives.

That the thinkers of the Enlightenment focused on moral questions was no surprise. Since at least the time of ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, moral questions—which all boil down to the Socratic question “what is the good”—have largely been the concern of philosophers. To be sure, in our own time the sciences and social sciences—evolutionary psychology, biology, sociology, psychology and psychiatry, and other sciences—have had much of value to say on the subject of morality and moral judgments. But, in my view, philosophy’s primacy in the area of morals has never really been threatened. For, while we have learned and can learn much of great value from scientific workers in the field of morals, science is not capable of answering the overarching moral question of what is the right thing to do for two reasons.

First, as the contemporary moral philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed:

“[T]he driving spirit of science is not to change the world but to understand it. Morality, on the other hand, as Immanuel Kant insisted, is ultimately practical: though it matters morally what we think and feel, morality is, at its heart about what we do.”

And second, and perhaps more importantly, while science strives to explain how we humans form moral judgments, it cannot tell us what those moral judgments *ought to be*. And, as I understand it, the goal of morality is to guide us in what *we should do*. Science may provide us with information that we can use to decide that question, but, by its nature, it is not equipped to decide the question for us. Nevertheless, science and philosophy have worked—and continue to work together to the benefit of each—in the field of morals.

The question of morality – its origins and how it should guide us—was much on the minds of European philosophers like Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as European intellectual life freed itself from the controlling influence of the Church, a sea change in Western civilization that was fueled by the huge advances in science occurring in that period. Here I am thinking of the greatest scientific genius of the age—Sir Isaac Newton, who to the thinkers of the Enlightenment epitomized the break with old and outmoded ways of thinking. Looking back, one sees the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the turning point when European thinkers began to seek for the origins of morality not in something given from the outside (such as, for example, a command from God, or a quality implanted in human beings by God), but as emerging from human nature itself. And among the first to make this break with the past were the thinkers of what we today call the “Scottish Enlightenment.”

One of the leading moral thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, a Scot and a near contemporary of Kant, was, of all people, Adam Smith. And because of his importance in this sphere to a thinker like Kant, I'd like to take a moment on this aspect of Adam Smith's work.

Today, based on his most famous book, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith is seen in the popular imagination as the father of unregulated, laissez-faire capitalism, and the prophet of the virtues of unbridled selfishness. In fact, these views almost completely misunderstand Smith, whose actual words in *The Wealth of Nations* show that he was not an enemy of regulation, nor was he a believer in any sort of gospel of capitalist wealth, nor did he think that unbridled selfishness was a virtue. As Amartya Sen has noted, a reading *The Wealth of Nations* shows a very different Adam Smith than the one-dimensional image presented so widely today.

But my focus this morning is not on *The Wealth of Nations*, but Smith's other great work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was published in 1759, 17 years before *The Wealth of Nations*. In 1752 Smith had been appointed a professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* developed from his teaching on the subject of morals. This work was a pathbreaking study of moral psychology, elucidating how, in Smith's view, moral values arise. In brief, Smith argues that they arise from the human capacity of

sympathy—what we would call empathy—rather than from any special moral sense. Nor, Smith argues, are moral values based on calculations of utility. Indeed, Smith argued—as Kant later would too-- , “that considerations of utility are the last, not the first, determinants of moral judgments.”<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, in Smith’s view empathy—the feeling of sympathy or compassion we have for others—is not merely subjective, it allows us to develop an objective sense of moral self-consciousness essentially by the imaginative feat of seeing ourselves as other see us. Thus, Smith introduced the concept of an *impartial spectator* as the judge of the rightness of our own actions. Here is Smith on the subject (I have sought to correct the gendered language in this quotation):

The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgments concerning the conduct of other people. We either approve or disapprove of the conduct of another [person] according as we feel that, when we bring [that person’s] case home to ourselves, we either can or cannot entirely sympathize with the sentiments and motives which directed it. And, in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another [person], and view it, as it were, with [that person’s] eyes and from [that person’s] station . . . We [must] endeavor to examine our conduct *as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.*”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, according to Smith we objectively judge our moral actions by

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction, p. 13, to the Liberty Fund edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Penguin Books, 2009), p. 133.

“seeing ourselves as other see us,” a view very neatly captured by Smith’s contemporary Scot, Robert Burns, in his famous (or perhaps infamous) poem “To A Louse,” which I, a bit irreverently, chose as our Centering Thought for this morning. The words of set out in the Order of Service might freely be translated into our English as follows:

Oh, that some power would give us the small gift  
To be able to see ourselves as others see us  
It would save us from many mistakes  
and foolish thoughts  
We would change the way we look and gesture  
and to how and what we apply our time and attention

What Burns here so poetically expresses here is pure Adam Smith.

Importantly, and rightly I think, Smith insisted that his notion of human sympathy, or empathy, is not in any way antithetical to what, in his day, would have been called the “manly virtues” and which we would term today the human virtues. As he puts it (again correcting the gendered language):

“The [person] of the most perfect virtue, the one whom we naturally love and revere the most, is [the person] who joins, to the most perfect command of his [or her] own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and the sympathetic feelings of others.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175.

Not surprisingly, Kant was an admirer of Smith's work on morals and, I suspect, especially of Smith's achievement of arguing that the question of whether actions were moral should be judged from an objective standpoint, i.e., that of an impartial observer. Kant also agreed with Smith that whether a moral action was useful was irrelevant: what counted was the intention of the action, not its effect. Finally, like Smith, Kant believed that morality is not handed to us, but is the creation of autonomous human beings.

But Kant's major achievement was to substitute for Smith's impartial observer, reason itself. What Kant sought was pure morality, freed from any contingencies, which, he believed, would alone command our obedience because it would be derived by ourselves from reason itself.

This standpoint, articulated most passionately in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), allowed Kant to make, in my view, a fundamental breakthrough. Where the other 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers of morals before him, including Adam Smith, described the origins and psychology of morality, Kant went beyond: he articulated the standard that an action must meet if it is to be considered moral. Earlier philosophers explained what we do; Kant articulated how to judge what we ought to do.

This Kant did in his famous formulation of what he called the "categorical imperative," explained for the first time in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of*



*Morals.* Like all of Kant's works, the *Groundwork* is dense and difficult, filled with the technical terms that Kant invented to explain his ideas. It is not an "easy read" by any measure, and requires real work to get through. Yet it seems to me, at least, to be a deeply passionate book, well-worth tackling because of its inspiring view that we humans, as rational beings, can, in fact, exercise our autonomy and both will and do the good: to put it another way, as rational beings we have the capacity to legislate the moral laws for ourselves. In Kant's view this amounted to real freedom.

And, in fact, the Categorical Imperative that Kant derives from Reason is something that is not all that difficult of grasp. Let me give you the first two versions of Kant's famous categorical imperative.

The first one is: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." For Kant a "maxim" meant the principle according to which we act.

Example: Suppose I borrow money from you promising to return it later, but I know full well that I will not return it. The intended maxim or guiding principle behind my action is this: "Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done." Kant explains that a contradiction arises once I view this maxim as a universal rule. Specifically, if such deceit were followed universally, then the whole institution of promising would be undermined, and I could not make my promise to begin with. So, on the one hand, I state "I promise such and such" yet, on the other, once universalized the practice of promise keeping itself would be nonexistent.

And the second: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.”

Same example: If I make a deceitful promise to you with the intention of acquiring financial gain, then I’m treating you as a thing or instrument and not recognizing your inherent value.

In the years since Kant penned the *Groundwork*, many critiques of his work have been written, and problems with the application of the Categorical Imperative have been identified, but in our times I find Kant’s formulations good rules to apply.

I would now like to turn to the second issue I mentioned at the start of this reflection. Up to now, I have been concentrating on the question of how each of us can understand morality and achieve a moral life. But what about the societies in which we live? How can we make them moral?

In this connection, I thought I would speak briefly about a fascinating work by the contemporary moral philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah entitled *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, which was published in 2010. Appiah, the child of a biracial marriage, grew up in Ghana, where his father was from, and was educated in England, including receiving his doctorate at Cambridge. He taught philosophy for many years at Princeton and is now a professor at New York University. As one of the leading moral philosophers

writing today, Appiah has made a career of calling attention to aspects of reality—such as race and identity—that contemporary philosophy has somehow overlooked and in *The Honor Code*, he does it again—this time by calling attention to the possibly role played in moral change by a concept that we might well have thought was completely outmoded, that of honor.

Appiah was drawn to the subject by asking how “moral revolutions” occur, i.e., what brings about a society’s abandonment of plainly immoral behavior.

What is a moral revolution? As he describes it, it is a change in social/cultural behavior such that, looking back people say: “How could we ever have done that, or thought like that?”

In his book he explores in illuminating, and I must say often entertaining, detail three such “moral revolutions:” the abandonment of dueling in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, the abandonment of foot binding in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, and the abandonment of the Atlantic Slave trade and slavery itself in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. In another, far more depressing chapter, he examines another set of immoral social practices that he believes require a moral revolution to undo, and where he sees a glimmer that such a revolution may already be happening. The immoral practices to which he is referring, and which he describes as a “war against women,” are the so-called “honor killings” of women in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Moslem countries. (I should note that his very first example of the War Against Women

does not take place in a Moslem country, but in Sicily. I should also note that just as was the case with the comparatively trivial example of dueling, honor killing is forbidden under Islamic law, yet it goes on in mostly Islamic countries.)

In each case that he describes, Appiah is struck by the fact that good and powerful moral arguments against each of the practices he describes existed for a long time before the changes, and yet those moral arguments did not seem to end the practices. So, he asks, what did? And his answer, which is not one that all would agree with, is that old concept of “honor,” or rather a reevaluation of the existing concept of “honor” that preserved bad practices into a new concept of honor that condemned them. In each case of a complete moral revolution that he describes, shifts in public opinion and the opinions of outsiders (for example, Christian missionaries in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century who decried foot binding) led to a transformation such that what was once considered honorable conduct (most clearly, and most trivially, fighting duels to preserve one’s “honor”) came to be considered dishonorable. The impact of honor is often subtle—and in each case it is not the sole cause of change—but as Appiah makes his case for “honor,” the changes he describes, the transformation of what was considered honorable into something dishonorable, it seems that he is really onto something.

This is because, I think, honor, like doing a morally good act, has value in and of itself. What is honor? As Appiah describes it, honor is, on the one hand,

“essentially a matter of one’s standing in the eyes of one’s peers, or the respect they give you,” and also, on the other hand, an internalized self-respect. And like acting morally, for we humans, honor is a value that we need and cherish. As Appiah puts it: “The honorable person cares about honor itself, not simply about the social rewards of being considered honorable.” And, I would say, the same holds true of the moral person.

And, to Appiah’s point, when we hear ourselves or our fellow-citizens say, in response to what we think is an immoral practice carried out by our own country, “This is not what America is about,” or “This is not who we are,” are we appealing to our own sense of national honor. Appiah notes that “honor and morality are separate systems,” and they can often pull in opposite directions (as with “honor killings”), but when aligned—as in the case of the abolition of slavery—they can prove to be a very powerful combination.

This is, in any case, an issue to explore, as we confront our own issues in our own country of how to bend our society towards moral and good conduct. May we never give up that effort!