

Is Morality Simply A Personal Sentiment?

When Johnny did not get to play in the Little League playoff game, when Brenda did not make the cheerleading squad, and when George did not get into the college of his choice, and when they all cried "It isn't fair!", maybe they were wrong. Some suggest that there is not an overriding moral force in the universe. Everything is simply human sentiment. Johnny did not get to play because he had a .092 batting average, Brenda did not make the cheerleading squad because she had two left feet, and George didn't make it into the college because he went to jail rather than finish high school. Certainly it seemed unfair to them because they did not get what they wanted. There are those who suggest that morality is simply a sentiment of desire for what we want.

It could very well be that if Johnny got to play, if Brenda made the squad, and if George got into his school of choice, that in fact would have been what was unfair. We would concede here that their claims of unfairness could have been nothing more than a sentiment. But, what do we do with Hitler who systematically destroyed a race of people, with Stalin who starved millions of his own, and Saddam Hussein who tortured and slaughtered tens, even hundreds, of thousands to keep himself in power and amused? Is our revulsion against such acts simply a personal sentiment? Even the most ardent amoralist talks about how it would be better if someone else were in power. Does he mean simply that he would be happier because he got his way? What in the world does it mean that something is better than something else, if there is no standard by which we can define good or bad; better or worse?

Some suggest that we operate on a herd instinct. That is, we will do things that benefit the whole because we see that it is in our own best interest to preserve the herd. These suggest that we will behave in an unselfish manner for the greater good of the herd, because that will, in turn, benefit ourselves. But Bertrand Russell, the humanist writer/philosopher wrote:

We feel that the man who brings widespread happiness at the expense of misery to himself is a better man than the man who brings unhappiness to others and happiness to himself. I do not know of any rational ground for this view (Thompson/Jackson).

Without a moral code whose source is outside of man, how can we ever account for truly selfless behavior? How do we account for the admiration of those who give to others without expecting something in return? How do we account for the honor we bestow upon those who give their lives to save others' lives or preserve their freedoms; to rescue others from disaster; or to defend them from crimes? Why do we bestow honor upon that which Russell perceives as irrational action? The herd sentiment quickly dissipates as the herd size increases and the sentimental attachment disappears.

There is no denying that we can, and do, operate off what we might call a "herd instinct." We may respond "naturally" to a cry for help with an

impulse to help. But we might also experience simultaneously a reluctance to help out of fear for our own safety. There seems to be still another impulse at work that says we "ought" to help. Whatever this impulse is, it is not either the impulse to help or the impulse not to help. It is something that stands in judgment over them both. C. S. Lewis writes of this phenomenon in man:

...this thing that judges between two instincts... can't itself be either of them. You might as well say that the sheet of music which tells you... to play one note on the piano..., is itself one of the notes on the keyboard. The Moral Law is, so to speak, the tune we've got to play: Our instincts are merely the keys.

Regardless of how we might try to manipulate the argument, there is an inescapable Moral Presence in the universe. If we could just know more about this Moral Force, we would understand life better. Is not the journey of which we have been speaking look ever more interesting and necessary?