

The Essence of Essence: On Morality in a World of Increasing Individualism

My interest in deep philosophy is on the wane. By deep philosophy I mean much of modern philosophy. The more one desires to *use* philosophy, the more one is inclined to make the distinction between deep philosophy and practical philosophy. Deep philosophy has a preoccupation with essences no matter what the focus, be it metaphysics, epistemology, morality, or ontology. Deep philosophy is on a quest to discover the pre-given nature, the essence, of all things material or symbolic, observable or non-observable. In contrast, practical philosophy is concerned with the humanly constructed nature of things. Essence is seen as a human construction varying with time and space. It is the philosophy of the lived-in world. It's not that deep philosophy is fruitless or unworthy of practice. It's mere practice is valuable fruit. It's products--however appetizing-- are not sufficient sustenance for the lived-in world. For me, deep philosophy used to be fun and enlightening, but now I consider it just an indulgence. I would rather cast my attention toward practical philosophy.

This inclination follows the lead of Kant who deemed the questions of metaphysics unanswerable using the methods of reason and observation and, consequently, we have eliminated it from our bill of fare. We also fully embrace Sartre's primary postulate, "existence precedes essence". As a consequence, we cast aside a program to discover the pre-determined essence of things. We also walk in the spirit of Wittgenstein, who like Sartre, understands that we know essence as a human construction molded by a language, a language that is embedded with the meaning of human interaction.

All of this is just prelude, since this is not an essay about philosophy. Rather it is an essay about morality. Well, not really, although we will journey through the morality station. Rather it is an essay about social organization and social conflict. Yet again, not really--but partly so. Although the journey culminates there, the sign above the penultimate station is flashing "Method"-- the method of analyzing the world, the method of living everyday life, and the method of deconstructing morality. That is the primary motivation for this ink. The journey will suggest to us that practical philosophy is really sociology and sociology is really practical philosophy.

On Morality

When invoking deep philosophy to identify the moral and the immoral, an implicit assumption is also being invoked. That is that moral or immoral are phenomenological things, that they were created with the universe and have an immutable essence. On the contrary, practical philosophy views these as meaningful human-made concepts that have evolved with language and living. They are indeed mutable. Using the method of practical philosophy, the point of origin is not a hermeneutic on pre-determined things, rather it begins by deconstructing their evolution as human products of meaning. It begins by looking to their historical evolution, their biological influence, their amorphous boundaries and then travels toward their place in the universe of meaning.

How does one interpret a class of things or attributes that we can think of as moral or immoral? If one is apt to search for attributes that lean toward the universal across time and space, one also needs to ask about the standard of meaning around which that search is being conducted and the

contemporaneous influence on the selection of that standard. It requires a double hermeneutic, one for the object of our inquiry and one for our inquiry. One also needs to turn away from the search in the things themselves and turn to the meanings that they represent in the universe of meanings and the practice of life. Invariance then is not a discovery of essence, but a discovery of the structure of meaning or a discovery of a biological imperative.

Morality in an Age of Individualism

It is an uncontestable truth that since the dawn of industrialization that we live in a world of increasing individualism and decreasing community. This is true of our social organization and the set of meanings that frame our lives (our grand narratives). Our lives are increasingly being framed by the person and less by the community. They are increasingly being framed by dispassionate reason and less by shared norms. This transition is fostered by a similar transition to the language of the person.

It follows from our assertions above that both our understanding of morality and *our understanding of our understanding* of morality should be evaluated in the context of this dominant trend in society. Although what we consider morality always included a focus on how the behavior of the individual affects the interests of others, that focus becomes more critical in an age of increasing individualism. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophers and thinkers of all sorts were scurrying around in an attempt to come to grips with this new form of social organization. Among these thinkers, the one who arguably was the most preoccupied with the decline of community and the growth of individualism was Emile Durkheim. In that context he situated morality in the group and the social organization that maintained it. He wrote:

"What is moral is everything that forces man to...regulate his actions by something other than....his own egoism."

In more contemporary times, Jonathan Haidt relied, in part, on Durkheim to offer his description:

"Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible."

Durkheim was solely interested in the organizing principles of society which he called "social facts", but he understood the moral feelings and meanings that these "exterior and constraining" structures invoked in individuals. Haidt begins with evolutionary biology and labels specific adaptive structures as "moral" using the spirit of Durkheim as a benchmark. One sees morality under the hue of evolution and the other in the light of societal integrity. Although different in their approach, the schema of both emerged within the historical context of an age of increasing individualism and the meaning of morality for them is indeed influenced by that context. The approach of both is quite different than deep philosophy's focus on the essence of morality. There is some necessity of the nature of morality in both Durkheim and Haidt and they share that with deep philosophy's quest for essence. Consequently, there is room to travel farther from

necessity and essence and disembark at the station of meaning.

The Meaning of Morality in an Age of Increasing Individualism

Our journey begins with peering into the creators of meaning, us, and observing how morality is created. The most profound observation upon this inspection is that morality is very broad, very broad indeed. We see morality in most acts from the sacred to the profane, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the private to the public. In our post-hoc creations of meaning, we are prone to invoke sentiments like "that's wrong" or "that's just wrong" or in the vernacular "that's sooo wrong". We implicitly or explicitly say this about almost everything we do. From something as simple as the way we use or fail to use utensils when we eat, to sexual behavior, to acts of kindness or cruelty, to acts of love or hate. Our inclination is to evaluate everything to which we give meaning through a moral lens. Seeing someone attired in a disheveled or non-customary manner can invoke a little bit of "that's not right" to a lot of it. Evaluating another's social or political views will do the same. Seeing a good Samaritan save a life or a bad Samaritan causing harm will do the same. When one starts to deconstruct one's creation of meaning and the creation of others it will become readily apparent that morality has a very big place in the process of meaning creation. This is an unconventional view of morality, one that is much broader than the traditional, but one that serves the needs of practical philosophy.

Embracing this pervasiveness of morality, one can ask where does it come from? What are its benchmarks? How and why does the lens of morality occupy such a significant place in our creation of meaning? The key to answering these questions resides in one's grand narrative (more on the grand narrative can be found [here](#) and [here](#)). Each of us has a story or narrative about the way the world is and works. It is a narrative about the big stuff, a grand story. The most important characteristic of the grand narrative is that the beliefs and attitudes included within it are very general and abstract. Another characteristic of the grand narrative is that there is a strong moral attachment to the beliefs and attitudes included within it. This is largely because the foundation of one's grand narrative is laid very early in one's life. Much of the grand narrative's foundation is internalized during childhood socialization. Socialization is the process in which the young internalize the general beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the culture in which they live. It is the process that allows children to fit in well enough to be social actors. Since a child has very little knowledge about these things, the content of that socialization serves as the foundation for all that follows. As new content is added, it tends to solidify the content of the initial foundation, making it more taken-for-granted, more legitimate, and increases its moral hold. The very nature of the grand narrative's content also contributes to its moral hold. These are big and moral questions. Most of all, its moral character results from its status as a taken-for-granted story about the way the world is--no questions are necessary. The grand narrative is about the "is". "Is" is right, "is" is good, and "is" is moral, no matter how trivial.

So the benchmarks for morality are based on our grand narratives. Most of this goes on automatically in the back of our minds. That does not preclude that we may purposively and analytically make moral evaluations, make evaluations that are less automatic. We often do so. But these are not about trivial things, just things that seem to demand a moral consideration. Even though we can perform a rational exegesis on the moralness of a thing, that doesn't imply that it can escape the influence of the grand narrative. That freedom only comes from

recognizing how the grand narrative influences our conception of morality and bracketing it in our thoughts. Such bracketing is not natural nor normal. One has to be a good philosopher to accomplish it. One has to be a good sociologist to accomplish it.

The content of our grand narratives have an automatic influence on our moral evaluation of things. It provides a rather powerful frame (more on frames [here](#)) in the development of the creation of moral meaning. It is not the only frame that is important, other frames are present in the creation of meaning. These include the notion of us as a self, as a *me*. It also includes the influence of others on the negotiated creation of meaning and other physical, social, and resources that are present when we create the meanings of our lives. Although our creation of meaning about morality strives for consistency with our grand narrative, it is subject to the pulls and tugs of these other frames. Over time, there develops a relative consistency among our grand narrative, our selves, and these other influences permitting morality in our mind to live in peace. It is always a project that is in process no matter how stable it becomes.

At one point in time and still in some places in the world, this morality was less variable and less problematic than it is where you and I currently sit. There was a stronger "is", a more shared "is", and less variability in behavior, behavior which required a more conscious moral evaluation. Everyday things just seemed to be routinely moral. Deviations from morality were easily solved by the overpowering shared "is". Unfortunately, they were often solved by shunning or burning at the stake. This was a time of community, a time of less significance of the person and more significance of the community. It was a time when individualism was sequestered and behavior was more circumscribed. It was a time when one's self and one's grand narrative were more faithful representations of the community. The resolution of inconsistencies between one's grand narrative, one's self, and a behavior of interest was easier and resolved more consistently. With that we return to our point of departure. The fundamental structure of how people create the meaning of morality may be relatively invariant over time and space, but within that process, there has been a significant shift in its execution as we have traveled from a time of community to a time of individualism.

The societal evolution from community to individualism has not only affected the execution of the personal creation of morality, it is increasingly becoming the substance of morality. Each of us has elements and influences from the world of old (community) and the world of new (individualism) in our grand narratives. It's a messy mix to say the least. There are cultural remnants of the old that remain even in the absence of a strong organizational structure that shouts community. There are cultural remnants of the new in the narratives of those who live in more community friendly environments. Everybody has a mix, but some will lean more toward the world of community and some toward the world of individualism. Elements of this mix have become very important concerns of the most public conversations about social and political views and the expressions of morality. On one side of the fence are those that cling to the remnants of the institutions of community-based organization and on the other those that cling to the cultural values of an individualistic rational social organization. One side expresses the moral necessity in the institutions of the family, religion, and community and sees moral corruption by larger more rational forms of organization like the growing state, internationalism, and multiculturalism. The other expresses the moral necessity of universal individualism and multiculturalism and sees immorality in provincialism. Although the morality of the more

mundane continues to exist as the biggest part of our lives, this articulated fight over the change from the old to the new is the most publicly expressed expression of morality.

Such a development should not be surprising since the creation of morality emerges from the "is" of our grand narratives. In times of change, like in times of heterogeneity, the "is" is more variable within cultures and expressions of morality and contentions about morality will be public. What this portends for the future is hard to predict. The "is" of an individualistic society has taken hold and is a dominating part of the narratives of the urbane among us. It is institutionalized in the structures that frame our creation of meaning and morality. The persistence presence of these structures will make the "is" more "is" and more moral as time unfolds. But without the shared holistic presence of a strong community and in the presence of an emphasis on the individual, its persistence and moral hold is tenuous. It is all very complex, but one thing is certain, the moral nature of everything will continue to be a very important characteristic of our creation of meaning and of life.

We just peeked at the social phenomenology of morality and the role that it plays in our creation of meaning. Valuable, yet less than satisfying. We still have a strong desire to know what is moral and what is immoral, what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. We still have a strong desire to do what deep philosophy does, find the essence of morality. We can summon the method of deep philosophy and zoom in on its essence. Our existentialist proclivity leads us away from such an endeavor and suggests that if we do so we are waiting for Godot -- the essence will never arrive. Yet our failure to recognize and find an essence still leaves us wanting, even if our epistemology warns us of its folly. But we can take heart, for another approach is in the playbook. That approach is the method of practical philosophy.

We can use observation and reason to aid us in understanding the effects of specific behaviors on others, an exercise in which many philosophers currently engage. We can also use our phenomenological sociology to aid in the understanding of the meaning of the behavior to the actor. We can then apply standards of morality to those findings. The method of practical philosophy carries with it one very important provision--that is that these standards must be understood as a human creation embedded in time and space. With that provision we shun the quest for essence and use the fruits of our labor in real time with real people, i.e. practically. Practical philosophy requires that we use both the top and the bottom of the double hermeneutic. We must include the exegesis of meaning for the moral actor and the exegesis of meaning in our role as philosopher and sociologist. We should acknowledge the importance of the age in which we live in the execution of both hermeneutics, an age of increasing individualism accompanied by a persistent conflict between community and society. In the end we should find contentment in discovering a paradigm of morality for the here and now, for the present, for the practical.

We have finished our journey. One that may appear to have taken many blue highways and roads of lesser note. Let's view a slide show of our journey and see if it had a purpose or was purely hedonistic indulgence. (1) Our first stop revealed a distinction between deep philosophy and practical philosophy. Embracing the spirit of 20th century existentialism and social phenomenology, we visited the claim that the search for essence is impractical. (2) We then journeyed to the spirit of Wittgenstein and social phenomenology and discovered that morality is a human creation known through language and not a necessary essence. (3) Remaining in the

geographically expansive village of social phenomenology, we discovered the pervasive role of morality in the creation of meaning and the conduct of life. We visited the museum of the grand narrative and the social self and found that these are critical arbiters of meaning creation. We found that "is" plays an important role in integrating morality with meaning. (4) We then crossed state lines and visited the state of historical trends. We discovered the important role that the historical trend from community to society (increasing individualism) plays in the social construction of morality, as well as, in the philosophical study of morality. Before we departed the state and headed home, we chose to dine at the Double Hermeneutic Diner. (5) Although our guide led us to believe that practical philosophy was sociology and sociology was practical philosophy, upon reflection we realized he was an exaggerator. Sociology is not philosophy and philosophy is not sociology. In our repose, we realized that although they were not one, they were bedfellows and not so strange ones at that. We also discovered the contentment of practicing practical philosophy and closeted our endless search for essence. Our contentment went further. After reflecting on our new understanding of morality, we basked in the acceptance of others that it afforded us. Along with bracketing the search for essence, we also bracketed the quick and hard judgment that comes from a necessary moral. We have come to understand the morality that is intrinsic to our new belief, a morality that has a special place in a world of increasing individualism. In the end we were content. Content in our morality. Content in our understanding.