Why Be Moral?

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We can discuss the nature of ethics, the merits of moral objectivism versus ethical relativism, and how best to determine what’s morally right. But what reasons do we have to be moral in the first place?

This question can be broken down into two parts:

1) Why does society need moral standards?
2) Why should I be moral?

Social Contract Theory

Social Contract Theory, proposed by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), is often used to answer the question of why society needs moral standards. It’s important to understand that most of morality involves how people interact with one another. As soon as there is more than one person involved, even if there are only two, we have a social reality, and ethics has entered the situation.

Hobbes believed that in their natural state human beings are only concerned with their own interests and will do whatever they believe is best for themselves. This is known as psychological egoism, which we will discuss later in the course. If left in this “state of nature,” for example, people would take whatever they wanted, regardless of whether it belonged to someone else. They would lie, hurt, enslave, or even kill other people, if they thought it would give them some advantage. Because humans beings are mostly similar in strength and intelligence, no one would have any real level of safety. Even if one man were particularly strong, for example, several people could combine their strength to overcome him.

In a social environment like this, life would be short, lonely, and full of danger and fear, with little to no opportunity for people to construct things, acquire knowledge, create art, or any of the things we’ve come to associate with society and culture, because anything a person might work hard to make would be taken away from them by someone else, who might hurt or kill them in the process. All of their energies would have to be directed toward their daily survival.

This state of chaos would be good for no one for any significant length of time. Even the strongest would live in fear. However, if people compromised and agreed to abide by certain moral standards or rules, then everyone would benefit, and most people would live much happier lives. This would require that people give up some level of freedom, namely the freedom to do things that intentionally hurt other people. But the payoff would be a greater level of safety, happiness, and prosperity. Even if some people broke the rules, as long as most abided by them, the majority would benefit.
If there were rules or laws, there would have to be someone to enforce them – to punish those who chose to break the laws. That would be the role of government, according to Hobbes. This is more a question of political philosophy, which is discussed in another course. However, the main point Hobbes makes is that society needs moral standards in order to create and preserve an environment where most of the people can be reasonably safe, and it’s worth giving up some freedom, and submitting to an outside authority or government, in order to have this. That’s why societies need to be moral.

**Why Should I Be Moral?**

But why should you be moral?

Some of the first answers people often give to this question relate to fear of punishment – either from the government or from God. Certainly, this can be a powerful motivator. However there are other forms of punishment, such as loss of the trust of others and the impact this can have on your relationships and future. There’s also the matter of the inner sense of guilt that you will experience. This, in itself, can greatly diminish any sense of benefit one might have from behaving immorally. But, let’s set aside punishment, for now, and consider the benefits – or what we gain from living a moral life.

First, we must acknowledge that living a moral life requires that we not always act in what we consider to be our *immediate* best interest. Performing the morally right action in a given situation, may not result in immediate gain. In fact, it may cost us something or result in a loss of some sort.

For example, you may think that cheating on a test, when there is little to no chance of being caught, will benefit you by making it easier for you to pass a course without having to invest as much time in studying. However, there are several things to consider.

While cheating may save you time and effort in the short term, choosing to be moral and do the work would result in your gaining knowledge and skill that could be of benefit to you in the future. Also, learning to apply yourself to tasks that are difficult and that you don’t particularly like can strengthen your will and self-discipline, allowing you to achieve much greater goals in life. Consistently abiding by moral standards can also increase the trust that others have in you, which can lead to benefits in nearly all areas of life, as people tend to help those they trust. Plato proposed that living a moral life produces a “harmony of the soul” or inner peace, that comes from consistently doing what we know to be right. If so, then this may be the most profound reason to be moral. So, while being moral can sometimes be to our disadvantage in the short term, it’s to our overall benefit in the long term.