

Sustaining Moral Competence

Catherine Chan
CUNY Brooklyn College
October 13, 2011

Morality Today In America
Fall 2011 CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest

As humans, we take life seriously; we perceive life as something that deserves meaning, and as a result, we work endlessly to add meaning to our lives. But in reality, our lives occupy but a mere amount of space and take up a minute amount of time on the vast cosmic scale. If this dichotomy exists, then life seems absurd or meaningless, ironic even, due to our own propensity towards seriousness in life amidst the inescapability of our own cosmic insignificance. So the question remains; if there is essentially no meaning to life, can we really lead meaningful lives?

In "The Meanings of Lives," Susan Wolf argues that while life may seem absurd, one can live a meaningful life by "living in a way that is significantly focused on, engaged with, and concerned to promote or realize value whose source comes from outside oneself" (802). As the philosopher so elegantly explains,

The suggestion seems to be that if you appreciate the reality of others, then you realize that their pains are just as painful as yours. If the painfulness of your pain is a reason to take steps to avoid it, then, the painfulness of their pain should provide reasons (801)

for you to avoid their pains as well. In short, to care about aspects of the world that have value independent of the self is to acknowledge one's own spatial and temporal place in the universe at large. That is, in order to live a meaningful life, one must not only live less egocentrically, but also simultaneously acknowledge the value of others around him.

If in fact, life becomes meaningful or fulfilled by acknowledging the presence and perspectives of others, then morality seems to play an essential role in living a happy life. Morality is the ability and action of an individual to acknowledge and respect the values of those around him. It is then, not only living life less egocentrically, but also simultaneously realizing the value of others independent of one-self.

American ideology proposes that if you work hard, then you will be able to reap the rewards and benefits of your hard work. This is the basic foundation of the American Dream. In

addition, America's capitalistic economy is highly focused on ideas of increasing profits while reducing costs. In what way then, does our economic ideology become an obstacle for living a moral life?

It becomes important to note that this is not an argument against capitalism. Simply stated, I propose that certain ideas from capitalism may have entered the realm of how an individual ought to live his or her life; or rather the discussion of what constitutes a happy life. Setting aside the discussion of American politics, we can argue that the capitalistic approach to life can in fact, produce a person who is generally concerned with individual gain and achievement. In turn, from the equation of the American dream, working hard in order to increase profits sidesteps the community at large, that is, the perspectives of others. It does not realize the value of those independent of one-self

But while American economic ideology may hinder morality, the concept of living a moral life still plays an essential role in the American Dream equation. Although our economy bids for increased profits and decreased costs, the capitalistic approach does not apply to human existence; it cannot transform family, friendship, or any relationship into a commodity. So while our ideology may propose egocentrism, our inherent nature believes in the idea that in order to live a happy life, you must live a moral one. Once again, we revert to the idea that in order to live a fulfilled life, it must be filled with meaningful acts that recognize the perspectives and values of others.

Now it seems that our American ideology has been tainted by the idea that working hard means to live without a conscience, that acting morally does not factor into living happily. The American Dream has been plagued by notions of greed and wealth; so much so, that some individuals are driven to commit self-serving, immoral actions. The question then becomes, at

what point in our education can we factor in lessons of morality so that future generations understand that it is significant?

I have already argued that morality is inherent in our nature, but how can we make it stand out? How can we ensure that the notion of morality overcomes notions of greed and egocentrism? We might begin with grade school. The concept of sharing definitely provides a comprehensive foundation for children to begin to understand what it is like to live morally because it requires them to acknowledge those around them. Yet perhaps our target audience should be the youth - those who are just old enough to understand American market ideology, but still retain some of their childhood innocence.

Right now, both private and public sectors of youth education focus primarily on making sure their kids do well and meet nationwide standards based on scores and ranking. But living a meaningful, happy life not only involves personal achievement, but also meeting those goals without hindering or hurting others. Perhaps in order to instill morality into the education process for our youth, we can further develop the concept of sharing by for instance, introducing volunteer programs in schools. I am not proposing that schools set a requirement for students in which they must complete a certain amount of community service. On the contrary, I think that schools should work in conjunction with organizations geared towards helping the community at large, so as to create an educational environment for which morality can thrive.

Take for instance, GallopNYC, a non-profit New York City-based organization dedicated to providing therapeutic horseback riding to mentally and/or physically disabled children. As a volunteer at GallopNYC, I see youths who come to help out, but quickly lose interest because it becomes difficult to interact with our riders. A way to reignite the flame, more specifically, the initial interest that brought them to GallopNYC, is to make it part of their educational routine,

that is, going to school. Schools of course, must become intricately involved in the development of these programs. Perhaps a day or even a chunk of time during the school day can be dedicated to community service. Students then, have the chance to work alongside their friends and teachers, and really witness morality in action. Positive reinforcement from their peers, family, and teachers further instill the notion that morality is essential to living a meaningful life because students are already actively engaged in realizing the value of others.