Morality Today in America

Kayla B. Kirshenbaum

CUNY Queens College

12 October 2011

Cain and Abel

The first reference to the issue of morality is found within the biblical framework of the Old Testament. The text offers a parable of brothers Cain and Abel, and the conflict that ensues between them. Cain becomes jealous of Abel after both prepare sacrificial offerings before god and only Abel's offering is chosen. Cain is overcome with jealousy, and, in his rage, murders his brother. The act of murder here seems to be a natural response to rage. However, in the context of American law (both social and civil), murder is an act of immorality. According to American law, Cain is an immoral murderer, and he would be tried and found guilty in a court of law. This biblical parable offers the idea that immorality is the natural reflex against which all humans battle, leaving morality as a result of conquering basic instinct. This idea creates the notion that morality must be achieved, and that the person who strives for moral action and emerges successful is the ideal self. Morality, as a concept, is the means by which a person lives as their best self and, as a result, lives a fulfilling life.

Consider the official definition of the word for a moment: "conformity to the rules of right conduct". This definition seems so vague, and begs a plethora of questions. To which rules is the dictionary referring? What makes the rules right in conduct? What would morality look like if it did not have an immoral context upon which it can be reflected? I imagine the rules are subject to change according to each and every society. A rule of 'right conduct' in one society may be viewed as harmful and immoral in another. Even within America there are different societies that follow different rules of conduct. In communities in Alaska, the practice of seal hunting is absolutely commonplace but in California, this performance may be seen as unlawful, unjust, and

immoral. How can a person reconcile the notion that, depending on which country he or she travels through, his or her moral compass must shift, even if it means putting aside what he or she believes to be right or moral?

On a recent trip to Italy, I witnessed a fascinating case of a shift in moral code. I was eating gelato on a long, wooden bench, just outside of the Duomo, a gothic style cathedral church. I looked to my right and spotted a colorful fruit cart. The man selling the fruit was an older gentleman who seemed to recognize his clientele. Then, from the right side of the cart, a young man casually grabbed a mango without paying for it or asking permission from the cart owner. When the owner realized, he called after the man in fierce Italian, and seemed angry. But as quickly as he had become enraged, he became subdued, and gave a hardy laugh at what had just occurred. It didn't seem to bother the owner that a man had just stole a fruit off of his cart. After witnessing this, I realized that Italians have a different moral code than Americans. In New York City, if a person lifted fruit off a cart on the corner of 34th and Broadway, they would likely be arrested for petty theft. The differences in rules of right or moral conduct between America and Italy fascinated me, and made me realize that each society must be ego centric in its own code of morality. Thus, in order to act morally, one must abide by the rules of the society in which they find his or her self.

In order to lead a fulfilling and happy life, a person must live as their best self. Consequently, people seem to be their best selves when they act morally. The motivation for living a more fulfilling and happy life is selfish at its root. Consider the fact that when an environment is fulfilling, a person feels fulfilled as well. When a person carries an old lady's groceries across the parking lot, he or she feels good about making the old lady

happy. The person feels like they have done something virtuous and kind, which in turn makes them feel good about themselves. When a person is moral, their environment becomes one of a moral foreground, which makes the individual happy. This aspect of morality creates a focus on the individual's happiness as a result of creating a positive environment.

But what happens when this said environment is riddled with obstacles that seem to goad a person in the opposite direction of the set moral code of the society? One of America's biggest moral obstacles appears in the form of the household. Moral conduct starts in the home and, unfortunately, sometimes ends in the home. A parent or guardian is responsible for teaching children in the household by example, and when this is not the case, the internal lining of moral code begins to slowly deteriorate. Consider this alarming situation: a young, impressionable girl is trying to fall asleep and hears a commotion going on downstairs. She pads down the stairs just in time to see her mother hurl a ceramic flowerpot in the general direction of her father's head. As the flowerpot crashes into tiny broken fragments, so does the little girl's framework of what is right and wrong. She then takes this broken framework to kindergarten with her, and when her friend won't share his doll with her, she whips a block at his head. She is scolded and punished, but cannot figure out why. She only did what Mommy did. Thus begins the spiraling deterioration of moral conduct.

While the unhealthy environment of a household affects the more vulnerable and younger child, the abuse of media poses as an obstacle that threatens American society on a much larger scale. This obstacle is most common and most dangerous, and affects the greatest amount of people. Certain aspects of the media challenges the way a person

weighs their moral code of conduct. Films and television series glamorize aspects of a person's life against which he or she consistently battles. Sexual misconduct and promiscuity on television encourages viewers of all ages to consider sexual promiscuity and unfaithfulness in a much lighter framework. This display of misconduct that contradicts the moral code of American society creates a less severe quality in the act of cheating or violence. These qualities make immorality seem commonplace and approachable. The shock-value is removed, making it an obstacle in one's moral thoroughfare in life.

The prime way to overcome these obstacles is to instill morality as part of the educational process for youth. If the media is the launching pad for a barrier to fulfilling a morally codified life, then let us use this medium as the same weapon against itself. Schools can create a complete canon of texts and classes that encourage students to act according to the moral code of their given society. In addition to creating classroom plans that incorporate all of the moral conduct qualities that support American societal codes, a creative means of accomplishing the aforementioned is instituting the "All My Sons Project". This project offers texts and classes throughout the United States that represents and encourages a codified set of moral rules. The title of the project is inspired by Arthur Miller's play All My Sons, in which one of the characters sees himself as an isolated being instead of as a part of a much larger society. The play displays the consequences of man seeking his own self-interest and the tragedies these consequences produce for the outside world. This lesson is inherent in the "All My Sons Project", which will provide students with the means to leading a more fulfilled and happy life, and overcome the obstacles that stand before them.

Virtue. Honor. Integrity. Decency. Goodness. Each of these words is a synonym for the word 'morality'. They can be used interchangeably, and seem to suggest images of cherubs, saints, and martyrdom. I would argue that the concept of morality could be found in immorality as well. Morality has a presence in shame and disgrace, in ugliness and indecency. Morality is a part of life, and both right and wrong conduct exists in this world. Morality's existence within the framework of immorality seems ironic, yet it seems that the one could not exist without the other. It is up to the educational system to provide the proper educational tools and the appropriate forum to motivate children and adults alike to create a more fulfilling existence, for both the individual and the greater American society.