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“It’s only cheating if you . . . .”

“It’s only cheating if you get caught.” I heard Lou, a high school friend of mine, say this after he admitted to cheating on a test. He actually said it with a bit of pride, like he felt a sense of accomplishment because he had gotten away with something. Over the years, I would hear this same phrase uttered by others in different contexts with respect to a variety of things, ranging from extra long lunch breaks at work, to shoplifting items from a department store, to running a red light. Herein lies the problem: many of us define morality as that “thing” we have to deal with if our little schemes blow up in our face. Look at Bernie Madoff. While he apologized to his victims and admitted his wrongs, would he have done so if he never got caught? Of course not.

So what is morality? Is it simply doing the right thing? If so, what is the “right thing,” and how do we teach it to our students? And, critically, does living a “moral” life really mean being happy?

It might be a hard pill to swallow, but morality can be one big grey area depending on the circumstances. This is true no matter where we look, even the Bible. For example, one of the Ten Commandments reads, Thou shall not kill. But what if someone is threatening your life, or the lives of your family members. Is it immoral to kill that person in self defense? Indeed, the law of this state, and others, permits one, under certain conditions, to use lethal force in self-defense. Likewise, another Commandment reads, Thou shall not steal. But what if your family is starving? Who would not steal a loaf of bread to feed their starving child. Or steal medicine to save your baby’s life?

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Let's say, for the moment, that we figure out what the "right thing" is in a given situation. Will doing what is moral make us happy? Not likely. Usually the high road is also a steep and lonely one, difficult to climb, and without others to look to for support. This came to mind the first time I read about Frank Serpico. He was a New York City Police Officer who exposed massive levels of corruption in the police department. According to a 2010 New York Times article, for his efforts, he was made a "pariah on the force." When he was "shot in the face during a 1971 drug bust while screaming for backup from his fellow officers," they "failed to immediately call for an ambulance." During his "months of rehabilitation" in the hospital, "he received cards telling him to rot in hell." Did Serpico's moral stance make him happy? In his own words, "I just wanted to be a cop, and they took it away from me"; "The department never recognized me for standing up for what's right . . . because I violated the omertà; I spoke out"; "I still have nightmares . . . I open a door a little bit and it just explodes in my face. Or I'm in a jam and I call the police, and guess who shows up? My old cop buddies who hated me." Doesn't sound like doing the right thing paved the road to happiness for Serpico.

Even on a less grand scale than exposing police corruption, the honest guy is very likely to finish last. Take the example of cheating on a test. Let's say one student has access to a teacher's answer key, and is thus able to get better grades, which then propel him or her into a better college and better life in general (at least as far as his or her paycheck is concerned). What is to become of the honest student who studied hard, but got a lower grade. That student will not reap the same rewards as the cheater, just as the athlete who says no to steroids will not have the advantages of the

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athlete who says yes. The cheater ends up “happier” than the one who played by the rules.

So, can we honestly say that morality and happiness are intertwined? That actually depends on how we define happiness. If happiness and fulfillment are defined as a constant state of bliss, then who among us could be called happy or fulfilled? Obviously, no one is happy all the time (certainly not Serpico). When we recognize this, we understand that life, no matter what path we take, will sometimes bring difficulty. But it is only when we act morally that our difficulties and hardships become a source of happiness and fulfillment because we know we’ve done right, and we know we’ve affected others and the world in a positive manner. That in and of itself will always be a comfort and a source of inner peace. Indeed, it is one of the most profound forms of happiness we can experience.

So, we’ve established that the trials and tribulations of the moral man or woman’s path can be a source of happiness. But how do we get the youngest minds among us to wrap themselves around this concept and lead a good life, following the high road at all turns? How do we make sure that our students, our future, follow a moral path?

As before, we must further redefine happiness for them. In the modern world, happiness is defined in monetary terms: a big house, an expensive car, and having lots of money. Things like this are portrayed as on par with air, food and water. And, as the Madoff case demonstrates, the pursuit of such things often leads to immoral behavior. This pursuit frequently begins in the classroom, where good grades are often the key to a good college, a good career, and a good life. Sad as it is to say, students will often do whatever they need to do, in the classroom and throughout their lives, to

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achieve what society has defined for them as “success.” Not that there is anything inherently wrong with money (we all need to pay our bills and feed our families), but there is a danger when money and monetary success are pursued and realized without a strong moral underpinning.

However, if we begin aggressively teaching our children the benefits of public/community service, and make these things an integral part of every school’s curriculum, perhaps students will discover that there is more to life than money and materiality. Mind you, the approach must be aggressive. We must add an “R” to the three that exist already. Every school must teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and reaching out to our fellow man. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, such as having students volunteer for charities, help the elderly, collect food for the homeless, etc. Schools and the world at large must place a premium on a student’s ability to impact those around them through kindness and generosity of spirit. When our students see that these latter values are taken just as seriously as their academic performance, then there is far less of a chance that any worldly success they strive for or actually achieve will come at the cost of them compromising their morality.

Another approach that may help students gain a strong moral compass is to expose them to real life scenarios where they must make difficult decisions. This could be accomplished through role playing exercises. For example, a student might play the role of an employee working at a large corporation who is confronted with fraud caused by corporate greed. He or she must decide whether to “blow the whistle,” or remain silent. Or, a student could assume the role of a police officer (or other public official) offered a bribe. Exposing students to potential scenarios they will face in the

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real world will leave them better suited to deal with these issues if they really arise.

In an ideal world, of course, there would be no need to teach morality . People would simply do what is right without having to be rewarded for it, kind of like Frank Serpico did. Of course, that's just the problem: we'll never live in such a world, and living a moral life will never be easy. But with guidance from our schools, and, of course, families and friends, our children will learn, just as they learn how to read and count, how to live a moral life, and about the happiness it brings. Perhaps then students like Lou will begin to understand, "It's only cheating if you cheat."

#### Sources

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