

BEING GOOD

RICHARD NORMAN



 Humanists UK



SUMMARY

What is the meaning of life? How should we live? How can I be good? What happens when we die?

The Big Questions is a brand new series of publications in which we aim to offer humanist perspectives on how to lead confident, happier, and more fulfilled lives in this, the one life we have. This series will explore some of the fundamental questions in our lives: questions about life, death, morality, meaning, and happiness – and will hopefully help you along the way to living a good life.

Humanists are people who seek to shape their own lives in the here and now, because we believe it's the only life we have, and we use evidence and logic to make sense of how to live. That's why these publications will contain clear, practical guidance on how to build these humanist perspectives into your own life.

Each publication, written by a different guest author, will also delve a little deeper into humanist thought and provide some guidance on further reading to give you a rounded understanding of the ideas underpinning these big questions.

CREDITS

Written by Richard Norman

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INTRODUCTION

Most people have some idea of how to be good. They may not always do it, but they know how to do it. They know how to be kind – to come to the aid of someone who has fallen over in the street, or to support a friend who is going through a bad time. They know how to be honest – to own up to an embarrassing mistake even though it makes them look stupid. They know how to be fair – to pay for drinks when it's their round. Of course these everyday examples are not the whole story. There is more to 'being good' than that, and the 'more' is what we will explore here. But for much of the time people do these things without having to think about it. They do not need a philosophical theory or a set of religious beliefs. They do not need to wrestle with their consciences. They just do it.

When we talk about 'being good', we mean something like 'being morally good', 'doing the right thing', and being the sort of person who regularly does the right thing. People often tend to think of 'morality' as a set of rules forbidding us from doing certain things, and geared to making us feel guilty when we enjoy ourselves. There is, however, a better way of thinking about it. Being a morally good person, in a broader sense, means taking seriously our responsibilities to others as well as to ourselves, and trying to live accordingly.

'Morality' in this sense is not some unknown territory out there, which we enter as

strangers. It is not some external set of rules and commands to which we must struggle to conform. When we come to think about these matters, we do it from within networks of relationships to others. We live in a social world where we have a range of responsibilities and commitments to other people. Deeper reflection may lead us to rethink some of these relationships and responsibilities. But this process of reflection builds on what we already know. We do not start from nowhere.

Rethinking the narrow view of morality also means questioning an assumption which often goes with it. This is the idea that human beings are by nature detached, uncaring egoists. It leads to the idea of 'morality' as something which has to be wheeled in from outside in order to set us back on the right track. It encourages the belief that human beings cannot act rightly unless they are commanded to do so, and cannot know how to be good unless they consult sets of rules in sacred texts and scriptures. Of course we human beings are not perfect. But we are not, as some versions of religion tell us, a 'fallen' species incapable of righteousness unless it is instilled into us. We often know how to be good.

As children we are told to 'be good', and initially we associate this with conformity to the expectations which adults impose on us. But our sense of what it means to

be good soon deepens. The child loses her temper with another child and hits him, or wilfully destroys another child's carefully painted picture, and she is asked 'How would you like it if someone did that to you?' And as she grows, she becomes increasingly able to respond to that question. She really can imagine what it was like, and be upset by the thought.

From a very young age, children tend to mirror the emotions of others. A baby may respond to a smile by smiling back. Crying is often infectious. A young child, seeing how distraught the other child is when she's smashed his toy, may herself dissolve into tears. Playing games with other children, we soon learn the words 'That's not fair!', and we learn the use of them not just as a technique for getting our own way, but as an expression of what it means to share and play together. We come to understand that 'being good' is not simply a matter of conformity; it is a matter of knowing how to interact with others. If and when, as we grow older, we come to reflect and think critically about ideas of right and wrong and concepts of morality and ethics, we do so from a standpoint of shared values.

So the challenge of how to be good is not the task of totally transforming ourselves from immoral beings into moral beings. It is the task of understanding why things go wrong – why we encounter difficulties and dilemmas, and how we should deal with them. It is also a matter of recognising that there is more to morality than simply how we live our everyday lives. As we come to reflect on our moral values, we will see that they have wider implications. We need to recognise that those same values apply also to large-scale moral dilemmas – questions about, say, the rights and wrongs of abortion and euthanasia, questions about war and peace, global poverty, and environmental destruction. How, then, can we deal rightly with both the personal and the larger dilemmas? And why do we often fail?



SHARED HUMAN VALUES

The first step is to stand back from our immediate reactions to situations and ask ourselves what our core values are. For example, most of us value kindness and consideration for others. Most of us want to get on well with those around us. We want to live in peace with others rather than in a climate of hostility and anger. We know that love enriches our lives, and that hatred diminishes us. Most of us value cooperation with others, and the satisfaction we get from applying our shared energies to a common task.

To cooperate with one another, we need to be able to rely on one another and trust one another. That is why we need the values of honesty, of loyalty, of being reliable, and keeping our promises and agreements. When we cooperate, we need also the value of fairness. We need to feel that everyone is doing their fair share of the work, and getting a fair share of the rewards and benefits. We are reluctant to cooperate if we feel that we are being used and exploited.

If we are to live and work with others, we will also need to recognise and live with our differences. We have different tastes and preferences. To some extent we espouse different ways of life. So we need values of respect and tolerance for one another. We value freedom to live our own lives. But we also recognise that if we are to live cooperatively with one another we have to accept limits to that freedom, at the point

where it infringes the freedom of others. We may want to put this in the language of 'rights', and the most basic right is perhaps the right to mutual respect.

We won't all come up with the same list of values. But we seem already to have a plausible list of values which many people would accept – kindness, consideration, peace, love, cooperation, honesty, loyalty, fairness, mutual respect and tolerance. The list may even seem obvious. If it does, that is all to the good, for it bears out one of the most basic tenets of humanism – that there are shared human values. The fact that we share them seems to be more than just a product of our shared culture. The same values are to be found in many different societies and across different religions and belief systems.

Of course, there are also deep moral disagreements between people, just as there are between different cultures and societies. We disagree on a personal level. We may also disagree about some of the big moral issues, about sexual relations, social justice, war and peace, and what we owe to strangers and foreigners. We'll consider, in a bit, why we disagree about such things, and how we might deal with the disagreements. But the first step to dealing with them is recognising that at a deeper level we have many values in common. Those shared human values are tools which we can use to reflect together on our disagreements, and to debate them rationally.

CONSISTENCY

The first step in being good, then, is identifying our core values, the values which matter to us at the deepest level. The next step is thinking carefully about what they commit us to.

Take the value of kindness. As we've seen, people often know how to be kind. We may come to the aid of someone who has fallen over in the street, or stand by a friend in need. Being a kind person, however, involves more than the occasional generous impulse. It demands consistency. It means recognising kindness as a value, being sensitive to other people's needs and sufferings, and responding appropriately. And it requires us to identify the blind spots which make our responsiveness partial and inconsistent.

Shylock's famous speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is, in part, an appeal for consistency:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?

As Shylock reminds us, too often we are more sympathetic to the needs of those who are like us. Too often, we are less inclined to identify with people from a different race or a different culture. Prejudice can get in the way and make us less responsive to the needs of people with whom we have less in common. Being consistent means reminding ourselves that they too can suffer, and that we should be equally responsive to their needs and their suffering.

We may fail because of prejudice and insensitivity towards those who are different from ourselves. We may also fail simply out of thoughtlessness. We may respond to the needs of those whose predicament immediately confronts us, as in the case of the accident in the street, but fail to think about the sufferings of those whose cases are less obvious. We may feel moved to help those with whom we have close ties, such as friends or family members, but fail to notice the needs of strangers, of those who are more remote. The values of kindness and consideration, if we are to be consistent, require of us more than just being occasionally prompted by particular circumstances to come to someone's aid. They mean being a certain kind of person, with certain qualities of character.



VALUES AS GUIDES TO ACTION

These qualities of character, such as kindness, honesty, loyalty, fairness, and justice, are what moral philosophers have referred to as 'the virtues'. The approach to morality which focuses on the idea of 'the virtues' has a long history. It goes back to ancient Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, writing more than two thousand years ago. It includes 18th-century philosophers such as the Scottish humanist thinker David Hume, as well as a number of contemporary thinkers who have revived the interest in this philosophical approach.

As well as thinking of these values, when consistently followed, as 'virtues', or qualities of character, we can also think of them as moral 'principles'. We can use them as tools for moral understanding, to guide our thinking and help us decide what to do when faced with difficult decisions. By 'principles' we do not mean rigid rules which deliver simple answers such as 'Never tell a lie'. We mean values which give us reasons for or against doing something, which we have to weigh up when we deliberate.

Sometimes our moral principles conflict with one another, and that is why they do not give us easy answers. Imagine an artist friend shows you her latest painting and asks you if you like it. You think it's pretty poor but don't want to be unkind, but you don't want to be dishonest either. What

should you do? We cannot assume that kindness always outweighs honesty, or the other way round. All we can do is weigh up these two values in the particular case – and ask ourselves how unkind it would be to say this or that, and how dishonest it would be. It isn't easy. But if we have tried to identify what our core values are, we are then in a position to think rationally about moral dilemmas of this kind.

When we are faced with, say, the question of how to act in a dispute with the neighbours, or how to respond to a difficult situation at work, we can do more than just respond impulsively. We have a moral vocabulary with which to think about it. We can recognise what is at stake. We can ask ourselves whether we are showing proper consideration for others, what it is that honesty requires of us, what would be fair in this situation. We can bring reason to bear to help us decide.





CLARITY

The same approach, of identifying our core values and applying them consistently, also puts us in a position to think rationally about the larger dilemmas of public life. These are the big issues, the contentious questions about which people argue and campaign and seek to persuade. Here is an example.

People disagree deeply about the rights and wrongs of assisted dying. By this we mean helping someone to die who is terminally ill, suffering unbearably, and begging for help to end their suffering by hastening their death. At present, in Britain, helping someone in this situation to die is illegal. Many people, including many humanists, want to change the law so as to allow it. But some people, many of them religious, strenuously oppose any such change. They say that it would be morally wrong. This is a deep disagreement, and one about which people on both sides of the argument feel strongly. Our aim here is not to try to resolve the question, but to use it as an example. How can we try to think rationally about moral disagreements of this kind?

The first task, again, is to identify the relevant values which are involved. An obvious reason for legalising assisted dying would be the value of compassion. If someone is in terrible pain and begs for help, the compassionate response is to help them. But, say the opponents of changing the law, there is another value which

overrides the value of compassion, and that is the value of life. Assisted dying would, in effect, be killing, and killing is morally wrong. However greatly someone may be suffering, they say, it can never be right to help them by taking their life.

At some level, the valuing of life is a shared value. Most of us think that, most of the time, ending someone's life would be a terribly wrong thing to do. But is the case of assisted dying different? This is where people strongly disagree, and it is a disagreement about how to understand and apply a shared value. What we need to do, then, is to get clear about what we really mean when we talk about 'the value of life'.

Some people say that what they mean by it is 'the sanctity of life'. 'Life is sacred', they may say. The language has religious connotations, but need not be based on any particular religious belief. The word 'sacred' is intended to mark an absolute prohibition: nothing can justify killing. And in the case of assisted dying, they may say that although the value of compassion is normally a reason for wanting to relieve human suffering, it cannot be morally acceptable to do this by ending the life of the person who is suffering.

However, it is not that simple. What do people really mean when they say that 'life is sacred'? If pressed to explain what they mean by it, they would probably say

that they don't mean all life. Most of them are probably willing to kill garden pests. Unless they are vegetarians, most of them probably accept killing animals for food. If they are to be consistent, then, they will have to say that it is human life that has a special value.

What are they to say about that? Can they consistently say that taking human life is always wrong, and that that is why assisted dying should remain illegal? Some may say that, but many won't. Many people think, in particular, that it can sometimes be right to kill in war. How can that be consistent? There are various ways to go here, but the argument which people most commonly come up with is that killing in war is different, because it is killing in self-defence. It is morally permissible to kill enemy soldiers if they are attacking us. What has traditionally been meant by 'the sanctity of life', it is said, is that it is always wrong to intentionally end the life of an 'innocent' human being. That raises the further question of what is meant by 'innocent'. The point is, then, that if you say that your moral value is 'the sanctity of life', you have to decide what you mean by that, you have to consider what it would commit you to if you applied it consistently, and you have to ask yourself whether that is what you really think.

There is another, different way of talking about the value of life. Many people would say that what they mean by it is not 'the sanctity of life', but 'the right to life'. Killing is normally a great wrong, they may say, because it is a violation of a human being's most important right, their right to life. If that is what we mean by the value of life, then the case of assisted dying may look rather different. If every human being has a right to life, wouldn't that mean that they

also have the right to choose whether and how to end their life? Wouldn't that make assisted dying something to allow, rather than keeping it illegal?

The disagreement about assisted dying turns out, then, to be in part a contrast between two different ways of understanding what we mean by the value of life. We are not going to settle the question of the rightness or wrongness of assisted dying here, and that is not the intention. What is important is to look at what we are doing when we argue in this way. We have a deeply contested moral disagreement. We look for the underlying values which both sides share. We try to work out clearly what those values really mean. We look for a consistent interpretation of them. We try to establish how we should apply those values to this particular case. In other words, in moral disagreements of this kind, we can argue rationally. We can give reasons.



CONSEQUENCES

The example of assisted dying also illustrates another aspect of the need to think things through. We have to assess the consequences of our actions. The argument about assisted dying is in part, we have seen, a disagreement between those who think that the most important consideration is compassion for the person who is suffering and those who think that it is overridden by the value of life. But opponents of assisted dying often also employ a different argument. They say that if assisted dying were made legal, it would take us down what is called 'a slippery slope'. People who are elderly or lonely or sick or distressed would feel under pressure to ask for an early death, even if they don't really want it, because they don't want to feel that they are 'a burden'. Those who stand to benefit financially from a sick person's death might put pressure on them to ask to die. What begins as assisted dying strictly for those who request it would then, it is said, lead to the killing of those who do not wish to die.

This is a very different kind of argument. It is one about consequences. How could we settle it? The only way to do so is to look at the evidence. It's not enough just to say that these consequences 'might' follow. It's no good just saying that it 'might' be a slippery slope. We need hard facts. In this case we could look at the evidence of what has happened in other places where the law has been changed, to see whether

the unwanted consequences really have followed. We could look carefully at the wording of any proposed new law, to see whether firm safeguards have been built in. That is the only way to deal with the question rationally – by looking at the facts.

The need to think about the consequences of our actions applies equally to our decisions about our everyday lives. Acting on a generous impulse – telling an incompetent colleague that he's doing a good job so as not to hurt his feelings, or lending money to a friend because he's hard up – may make things worse. The colleague perhaps needs to know the truth about his abilities. The friend may need to face up to his situation rather than be let off the hook. What the effect of our actions will be cannot just be guessed at. We have to look at the facts and consider what will work best. So being good is not simply a matter of doing what feels right. We have, again, to think it through and assess the likely consequences.

What's more, we need to think not only about the consequences of our actions but also about the consequences of our inaction – of doing nothing. Maybe we could do much more good in the world than most of us do. The humanist philosopher Peter Singer wrote an influential article in 1972 in which he argued that those of us who live in relatively affluent societies ought to do far more to meet the needs of people who

are suffering and dying as a result of global poverty. His argument makes use of the following example:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.

Most of us would agree that we ought to save the child. But if we agree, that seems to commit us to the principle that if we can save someone's life at relatively little cost to ourselves, we ought to do so. And if we apply that principle consistently, Singer says, we have to recognise that there is a great deal that we can do to tackle the problems of poverty and starvation and to save the lives of not just one child but millions of children. Many of us could easily donate more than we do to charities working to combat global poverty. If we could do so, then, he thinks, we morally ought to do so. It's not just an optional extra. If we fail to do more, that will have the very bad consequence that people will die preventable deaths. Singer takes this moral principle very seriously. He founded an organisation called 'The Life You Can Save' to encourage people to donate at least 1% of their income to charities tackling global poverty.

We can argue about Singer's example. We can argue about how effective the charities are, whether there are better ways of doing good, and whether there are other good causes which are more important. Those too would be arguments about consequences, and the general point is this. In thinking about how to apply our values, we need to consider the consequences of our actions, and that includes the consequences of doing nothing. There is more to being good than just keeping out of trouble and doing someone the occasional good turn.



EMPATHY AND IMAGINATION

We began by recognising that most people have some idea of how to be good. We posed the question: why then do things go wrong? Why aren't we better at it? Part of the answer, we've seen, is that we need to think things through. This means:

- Thinking about what our core values are.
- Applying them consistently.
- Getting clear about what they really mean.
- Looking at the consequences of what we do or fail to do.

It may now sound as though 'being good' is a difficult intellectual activity. That's not the intention. Yes, it's important to recognise that being good does require us to think, to apply reason. But the thinking which is involved is the kind of thinking which most people are readily capable of and very often do. We compare cases and appeal to precedents. When we ask 'How would you like it if someone did that to you?', we are looking for the consistent application of values to comparable cases. We're all capable of predicting consequences – 'You know what'll happen if you do that' – and what is important is that we should remind ourselves to do it rather than just act impulsively.

But being good is not simply a matter of the intellect. The thinking which is needed builds on our natural human responses, and most fundamentally on our capacity for empathy: our propensity to be moved by other people's feelings, to participate in the joys and sufferings of others. Once again, it's not something we do all the time. We perhaps don't empathise with others as much as we should. But nearly all of us do it at least sometimes.

At a minimum, we find other people's tears and sufferings upsetting. We often feel better if other people around us are enjoying themselves. We respond in this way especially to those who are close to us. A parent, for instance, will often be devastated by seeing their child injured or ill. But sometimes at least we may also respond to strangers in that way. And if we encountered someone who seemed entirely incapable of empathising with anyone, we would be inclined to think that there was 'something missing' in their make-up.

In his book *Against Empathy*, Paul Bloom argues that empathetic responses to others are a poor guide to moral behaviour. Bloom points out that we are more prone to feel empathy for people who are like us or share our social background. And feeling distress at others' predicaments may be overwhelming and incapacitating,

preventing us from providing effective help. The effective way of tackling a dangerous disease, he says, may be a vaccination programme, and that may necessitate overcoming the empathetic responses which would make us reluctant to impose costs and inconveniences on people for the sake of the long-term benefits.

All this is true, of course. Empathy can be biased and partial. It can sometimes stand in the way of effective action aimed at long-term benefits. That is why being good requires thinking about consistency and about consequences. But contrasting these with empathy is setting up a false opposition. Granted, empathy is not the whole of being good. But it is a precondition of morality. It is part of what makes it possible for us to have moral values. It is only because the wellbeing and suffering of other people matters to us that we can recognise and endorse the values of compassion and concern, and can recognise and endorse the obligations to be fair and honest in our dealings with others.

That is not to say that doing the right thing always means being motivated by and acting on immediate feelings of empathy in the particular situation. We may need to distance ourselves. Giving to charity is something we may decide, on reflection, that we ought to do because it is the most effective way of meeting people's needs. But the values of compassion and concern on which we are acting would not matter to us unless we were capable of being moved by the needs of others.

Another thing which stands in the way of our being better people, therefore, is a failure of empathy: a failure to put ourselves in other people's position and recognise what it is like to be, say, homeless

or starving or lonely. It is a failure of both feeling and thinking – or rather, it points to the artificiality of a sharp distinction between reason and emotion. If we were arguing with someone who saw no reason to help refugees and asylum seekers, we might say: 'Think how you would feel if you had lost all your family, had been driven from your country by war, and had nowhere to live and no means of support.' What we would be asking for would be both a recognition of the facts and an exercise of the imagination – a combination of thinking and feeling.

Developing our capacity for empathy is partly just a matter of listening to people – of hearing their stories. But the word 'stories' also points to something else: the power of creative literature and other art forms in helping us to imagine what it is like to be someone else.

A powerfully acted film can bring home to us what it is like to be dependent on social welfare and unable to work, and enable us to empathise rather than dismiss people as 'benefit scroungers'. A vividly imagined novel may reveal what it is like to be the victim of racial prejudice and to have one's humanity denied. A television play which traces the journey of a boy from a war-torn African country to a perilous crossing of the Mediterranean, exploited by traffickers, seeing his friends die, and struggling to survive in the most desperate circumstances, makes it more difficult simply to dismiss these individuals as 'illegal immigrants'.

What good novels and films and plays do is to bring other people's experience alive, by recreating them in all their detail, and bringing home to us what it is like to be in their shoes.



SELFISH DESIRES AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

We have seen that, when we think about how to be good, we shouldn't start from the assumption that human beings are naturally selfish, and that a concern for others and a recognition of our relationships to one another has to be somehow injected into us from outside. We start from a situation where we are all embedded in networks of cooperative relationships, where most of us are capable of some degree of empathy, and where most of us recognise and acknowledge and sometimes act on the values which arise out of that capacity. The challenge is to apply our values more consistently, to think more carefully about the consequences of our actions, and to extend our ability to identify imaginatively with the experiences of those with whom we might not readily empathise.

But of course there is still the problem of selfish desires. We all sometimes find ourselves faced with conflicts between what we know we ought to do and what would be in our own interests. And undoubtedly there are those whose view of the world and attitude to others appears deeply selfish. 'Why should I care about anyone else?' someone may say. 'I don't owe anyone a living. Look out for number one. If you don't, no one else will.'

Is there anything that can be said in reply to that? The proper starting point for any answer is that in general people are not like that. Yes, some do adopt an attitude of ruthless self-advancement, but it doesn't follow that human beings are naturally selfish. Those who adopt such an attitude often do so because of particular experiences in their own lives. They may be embittered. Perhaps they have been badly let down by others. Perhaps they have been frustrated in their ambitions and aspirations. It may have been an accumulation of such experiences. The point is that the attitude of 'looking out for number one because no one will look out for you' is a conclusion, a thought arrived at by seeing one's experiences in a certain light. It doesn't follow that it is something built into human nature.

The fact is that the way of life followed by the advocate of 'looking out for number one' would probably be bleak and empty. It would be a life of loneliness, trusting no one, devoid of friendship and love. A friend is not someone whom you make use of when it suits you; a friend is someone for whom you care. Love can, admittedly, become very possessive, and of course it may then drive people to do terrible things. But the kind of love which enriches our lives involves mutual caring and genuine sharing, not narrow selfishness. Cooperation with



others is a pursuit of shared goals, and it is most satisfying when we can see our own actions as part of a larger endeavour. The policy of ruthless selfishness would have no room for any of these essential components of a meaningful human life.

The negative answer can be developed into a positive case. Being good is an essential part of living well. Human beings are social beings. We flourish in community. Our deepest satisfactions come from shared activities, and shared activities generate shared values.

The virtues – the qualities of care and compassion, fairness and justice, honesty and loyalty – are qualities which we need in order to flourish in a human community. They are not merely instrumental values, not simply a means to an end. It's not just that we need to show consideration for others in order to get them to show consideration for us. Rather, these qualities are integral to human flourishing. Responsiveness to others, mutual trust, and cooperation based on fair sharing, are part and parcel of what it is to live a fully human life.



MORALITY AND RELIGION: DO WE NEED A GOD TO MAKE US GOOD?

Our discussion so far of how to be good has been developed 'from within' – starting from widely shared human values, underpinned by the human capacity for empathy, extended by the recognition of the need to think rationally about our actions, to aim for consistency, and to consider consequences.

We can contrast this approach with the idea that we need some external authority, some non-human source for morality, to tell us how to be good.

This is an assumption that many people make. They suppose that morality and religion are inextricably linked and that we cannot really have the former without the latter. It's the idea that in order to know how to behave, we have to consult rules laid down for us, rules to be found in a sacred text, a list of commandments coming from a god and bound up with a set of religious doctrines. Or, if not rules, then the inspiration of some religious figure, perhaps a prophet, a divinely inspired teacher, or even the human incarnation of the deity, whose teachings and example we should follow in order to be good.

Here are some familiar examples of moral questions which some people think can be settled in this way.

- For some Christians, the question of whether gay sex can be morally acceptable is definitively answered by a verse in the Bible at Leviticus 18:22: 'You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.' Muslims may similarly invoke the Qur'an (4:16): 'If two men commit a lewd act, punish them both.'
- Paul, in his letters to the Colossians (3:18) and to the Ephesians (5:22) says: 'Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands.' Some read this as a definitive ruling on the subordination of women to men.
- The sixth of the Ten Commandments, 'Thou shalt not kill', is understood by some adherents of the three 'religions of the book' (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to forbid practices such as abortion and assisted dying.



All of these examples are controversial, and in each case the text can be interpreted in different ways. Some would say that the texts about homosexuality, or about women's subjection to men, merely reflect the social conventions of a particular society in a particular time and place, and should not be understood as timeless moral truths. The commandment not to kill is, some would say, a prohibition of murder, and leaves it open whether we should recognise a right to die on the part of the terminally ill, or – to take other moral cases – whether killing in war is permissible, or whether it is morally acceptable to kill non-human animals for food. They might question whether terminating a pregnancy is killing a person.

The need for further interpretation is not just a feature of these particular texts. The point is that any attempt to get religious authorities or sacred texts to do all our moral thinking for us will always fail. It can't be done. Every bit of moral teaching purveyed by a religious institution or text has to be interpreted, and the only way to settle the questions of interpretation is by doing your own moral thinking. There are no shortcuts here. There is no alternative to trying to think things through, and appeals to religious authority or any other authority simply invite the further questions 'Should I accept that authority?' and 'How should I interpret it?'



Is that enough? If we accept that we always have to do our own moral thinking, does that mean that everything is up for grabs? Do moral right and wrong become purely subjective and relative? If it's up to us what to regard as right and wrong, that may appear to set no limits to what may be morally acceptable. And this is where religion is typically invoked as providing an absolute and objective external basis for right and wrong. Moral values, it may be said, are not just a product of human thinking. If a god ordains that something is wrong, if it is contrary to divine law, then it is wrong, regardless of what human beings happen to think.

Words like 'absolute' and 'objective' tend to be thrown around in these discussions with little regard for their precise meaning. They are slippery terms, which philosophers struggle to define. This is not the right place to try to define them.

The point to stress is that, in saying that right and wrong are grounded in our human values and human experience, in our capacities for empathy and reason, we are not saying that this makes it fine for people to do whatever they happen to feel like doing. We are not saying that if someone thinks that a certain kind of action is morally right, that makes it 'right for them'. We are not saying that moral right and wrong are determined simply by the consensus that happens to prevail in this or that particular social group. Some moral beliefs are mistaken. Some moral views are confused, muddled, deluded, perverse. And by the same token, some beliefs about how we ought to act are well grounded.

The fact that morality is grounded in fundamental features of our shared humanity gives us all the objectivity we can require. We do not always agree, but when we disagree we can argue rationally for and against the different views, and some of them will stand up to rational scrutiny and some will not. Applying our core human values such as kindness and compassion and justice to particular cases, looking for consistency and taking into account all the facts and the consequences, will provide a much more rational basis for our moral conclusions than appealing to ambiguous religious texts or to the widely varying claims to know God's will.

Thoughtful religious believers recognise this. They acknowledge the ambiguities of the texts. They do not claim to have a hotline to the deity. They start from the shared human values which are shared because they are the values necessary for human flourishing, and are for that reason to be found in all the great religious traditions. In practice, therefore, thoughtful religious believers engage in the same kind of moral thinking as thoughtful humanists.

RADICAL EVIL

All this may strike some people as naïvely complacent. Talk of making ourselves better people by developing our human potentialities may appear unduly optimistic about human nature. It may seem to be ignoring the extent to which human beings can do terrible things. When we survey the full extent of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ – serial killers, torture, race hatred, concentration camps, genocide, mass bombing, and slaughter in war – maybe we should abandon as implausible any idea of human potentiality for good. Perhaps we should conclude that only some external source of morality can set us right – and perhaps it is to religion that we have to look.

We should first clarify what has been said so far. It’s not that human beings are ‘naturally good’. Human nature is complex, embracing a great diversity of often-conflicting impulses and inclinations. It makes no sense to reduce this to a simplistic claim about our being ‘naturally good’ or ‘naturally evil’. The point has been only that ideas about what a good life would be like, and how we could live it, have to draw on what we already know and have experienced. We may fail, but most of us know when we fail and know how to do better.

And no one is saying that it is easy. Sometimes we are faced with difficult, maybe even agonising choices. Sometimes it is very difficult to foresee the consequences of our actions and know how

things will turn out. Sometimes, as we have seen, we are confronted with dilemmas where different values compete with one another. In all these cases we have to make a difficult judgement and we may well fail.

Still, it may be said that ‘failure’ is too weak a word to describe what can go wrong. The word ‘evil’ is sometimes used to refer to a level of wrong-doing of a different order – a positive willing that others should suffer in the most horrible ways, a malevolence that seems to defy human comprehension. ‘Evil’ here is not just a failure to be good; it is what the philosopher Hannah Arendt and others have called ‘radical evil’. Confronted with it, suggestions that we should be more empathetic and more thoughtful may seem hopelessly inadequate.

There is a range of cases here and it is important not to reduce them all to some generalised darkness in the human heart. Let’s look at various kinds of case in turn. There are, first, examples of horrific actions on the part of deeply disturbed individuals. In a twenty year period between 1967 and 1987, Fred and Rosemary West raped, tortured, and murdered at least twelve young women, as well as inflicting the most horrible sadistic treatment on their own daughters. As the facts came out at the trial in 1995 (after Fred West had committed suicide while in custody), the depths of depravity and cruelty to which they had sunk seemed almost incomprehensible.



To say that they should have developed greater empathy and thought more carefully about what they were doing appears utterly inadequate.

And so indeed it is. Behaviour of such a kind is deeply pathological and lies outside the limits of our ordinary moral thinking. We may try to explain it. We can refer to Fred West's childhood of poverty and deprivation, to the physical and sexual abuse which he may himself have suffered as a child, to his failure at school and the head injury he suffered in a motorcycle accident as a young man. The fact is, though, that we do not know how to explain such extremes of evil. Our ordinary thinking about how to be good cannot begin to get to grips with behaviour of this kind, and we should not expect it to do so.

Then there are examples of what we can describe as collective psychopathology, such as conflict between different ethnic or religious groups leading to genocidal slaughter. A notorious case was the Rwandan massacre in 1994, when between 500,000 and one million people, mostly members of the Tutsi ethnic group, were killed by members of the rival Hutu group. There was a long history of ethnic rivalry behind this, but the extent of the violence, with innocent people being hacked to death with machetes, burned alive in churches where they were taking refuge, and so on, was unprecedented.

We do not fully understand how it is that individuals can get caught up in mob violence in ways which overwhelm their normal inhibitions. We do, however, know something about the kinds of psychological mechanisms which may prepare the way for it and make it possible. When societies come under pressure, for example in

periods of economic hardship or political instability, there are social pressures to look for a scapegoat, to find a group on which to pin the blame because it is easier than trying to understand and deal with the real causes. This will typically go with a stereotyping of the scapegoated group, labelling them as an alien 'other', which then leads to the dehumanising of them and weakens the moral resistance to cruel and inhuman actions.

Another classic example was Nazi antisemitism and the demonising of the Jews as scapegoats for Germany's humiliation after the First World War and the economic disasters of the 1930s, paving the way for the concentration camps and the willingness of so many of the German population to accept what was happening. As individuals we may be relatively powerless to stand against overwhelming social and political movements of this kind when they happen. Still, we all have a moral responsibility to try to prevent such things from happening in the future. We can all do something to resist the demonising and dehumanising of others by nurturing our responsiveness to our fellow human beings.

Mention of Nazism should also remind us that people can be motivated to do terrible things by rigid ideologies. Other notorious examples are the mass crimes committed in the name of Stalinist Communism, and those committed in Cambodia in the 1970s by the Khmer Rouge, who killed up to two million people in the name of an ideology of completely abolishing all private property and a money economy, emptying the cities, and refashioning the whole of society, starting again from 'Year Zero'.

Those are examples of secular political ideologies, but equally terrible things are

done in the name of religious creeds. One such creed is the grotesque version of Islam practised by groups such as the self-styled Islamic State. It is used to justify the ruthless imposition of repressive religious rules, beheadings, and the total subordination of women, as well as indiscriminate killing in terrorist attacks. But equally horrific actions have over time been perpetrated in the name of all the major religions. Each of these religious groups has been confident of the unquestionable truth of its own orthodoxy. Another essential aspect of being a good human being is therefore a sceptical attitude towards all dogmatic belief systems, a willingness to question them and to think for oneself. No ideology deserves our allegiance if it has those inhuman consequences.

This may again seem remote from the everyday lives of most of us, but we have to remember that the practical impact of dogmatic ideologies has always depended on the willingness of ordinary people to go along with them. Various well-known psychological experiments are often regarded as having confirmed that many ordinary people have in them the potential to be the perpetrators of evil just by obeying orders and performing prescribed roles.

The Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram, in 1961, devised experiments which appeared to show that in a laboratory setting a surprisingly high proportion of people reluctantly agreed to administer what they were led to believe were increasingly violent electric shocks to an unseen victim, because they were told that the experiment required them to do so. Philip Zimbardo, in the well-known Stanford prison experiment in 1971, asked volunteers to play the roles of 'prisoners' and 'guards'

in a simulated prison setting and found that they internalised their roles to an alarming degree. The 'prisoners' increasingly adopted a 'victim' mentality and the 'guards' became increasingly callous and disposed to mete out cruel treatment.

We all sometimes find ourselves in the position of having to respond to orders and assigned roles. Most of us are not at risk of becoming the functionaries of vicious institutions and regimes. But we can all cultivate a critical stance towards evil ideologies. We can all oppose to them our sensitivity to the feelings, the joys and suffering of our fellow human beings. We can all examine our core values and think about what they commit us to if we are consistent in our espousal of them. We can all try to think more about the consequences of our actions. And in these seemingly mundane but vital ways we can help to resist the triumph of evil in our world, through our day-to-day efforts to be better people.



CONCLUSION

We have come a long way from the everyday examples with which we began. Helping a friend in need is part of what it is to be good, but it's not the whole story. Being good can sometimes be demanding, but it is not impossibly difficult. It draws on our shared values and our shared powers of thinking, feeling, and acting. It can be summed up in the Humanists UK strapline: **'Think for yourself. Act for everyone.'**

This means:

- Thinking critically about belief systems which lead people to do terrible things.
- Thinking about what your own values are, and what they commit you to if you are consistent.
- Thinking about the consequences of your actions.
- Thinking what it's like to be in someone else's shoes.

And it means:

- Doing what you can to meet the needs of others, whoever they are.
- Respecting the rights of others and being tolerant of differences.
- Looking for ways of doing your bit to make the world a better place.
- Doing what you can to oppose ideologies which dehumanise and oppress your fellow human beings.



We bring non-religious people together to develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. If you'd like to support our work you can join us at **humanists.uk/join**



39 Moreland Street,
London, EC1V 8BB

0207 324 3066

info@humanists.uk