

Understanding and Reason, Morality and Ethics

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Can Morality Be Reasoned? Are moral choices made with complete freedom? What perspectives do philosophers and the biblical message offer?

Understanding and Reason

A distinction can be drawn between understanding and reason. Understanding unconsciously links the effects of sensations to their causes. It is a mental experience grounded in sensory evidence and reasoning, which can provide coherence to the impressions of our senses.

Reason, on the other hand, is abstract, methodical, logical, deductive, and detached, as it does not rely on senses that can be deceptive. The principle of causality, which states that every effect has a preceding cause, belongs to the realm of understanding representations and perceptions of natural phenomena.

One might be tempted to extend this understanding of phenomena to the extrasensory world. However, the principle of causality applies to phenomena defined in space and time. The question of the universe's origin or the first cause remains unresolved unless one accepts the concept of a creator ex nihilo.

Morality and Ethics

Similarly, a distinction is made between morality and ethics. Morality differentiates between good and evil. The concept of morality is sometimes considered innate (Rousseau), inculcated (Freud), reasoned (Descartes), both innate and acquired, but also universal (Kant).

Ethics is the underlying principle of morality. It is not subservient to morality, dogma, or religion, although it aligns with morality in many respects.

Descartes sought to reduce morality and ethics to an equation: *ethica more geometrico demonstrata*. He envisioned a purely scientific approach to humanity. His contemporary, Blaise Pascal, criticized him for reducing God to the role of a cosmic watchmaker.

Pascal refused to define humanity by reason alone, asserting that "the heart has its reasons which reason does not know." He emphasized the subjective and affective dimension of humanity, arguing that human comprehension is limited by the senses and physical constraints. Human essence extends beyond the existence of *cogito ergo sum* to touch another dimension: the intimate breath of God resonating within each person's conscience.

On Free Will

One might argue that humans, endowed with reason, can exercise their will as they choose. Thus, human actions would be guided by will, subject to reason, which in turn is guided by conscience.

Morality could constitute an implicit a priori, as it is found in all rational beings; moral imperatives would not obey desires but would derive solely from reason.

If the principle of causality applied only to reason, freedom would not exist, as everything would be predetermined, leading to fatalism. However, considering the precedence of beings and things, one might argue that humans are subject to social, familial, and physical determinism.

Some go further, claiming that free will is illusory, as it stems from intuition, desires, and impulses. Freud posited that the ego is not master of its own

house. Spinoza argued that humans are driven by desires and instincts, with good and evil merely generalizations of what benefits or harms the individual. Hence, the need for an ethics that reclaims the affect to direct desire, recognizing that the world, including humans, is as it is, with no transcendent influence.

Contrary to those who view religious beliefs as idealizations of unattainable ideals, Pascal argued that the heart perceives fundamental truths as it expresses a sense of God: "*It is the heart that feels God, not reason.*" Freedom would thus be defined as spiritual commitment, with the sense of good often conflated with the divine (or belief in divine reward).

The question of whether reason, the heart, or desires dominate the psyche cannot be definitively answered, as intrinsic reason, sensory-induced causality, affect, and biological impulses are intertwined within the self. "*I is another,*" poet Arthur Rimbaud famously wrote.

Nevertheless, greater self-awareness enables one to better contextualize and channel thoughts and actions. Self-knowledge can inform the mind (from Latin *in* and *forma*, meaning to shape, instruct, or structure) and refine moral choices.

Regarding free will, Einstein suggested that "*everyone acts not only under external constraints but also according to an inner necessity,*" thus defining the limits of human freedom. Bergson added: "*It is correct to say that what we do depends on what we are; but we must also add that we are, to some extent, what we do, and that we continually create ourselves.*"

Jean-Paul Sartre asserted, "*In life, we do not do what we want, but we are responsible for what we are,*" an idea beautifully articulated by poet Antonio Machado: "*Traveler, the path is the traces of your footsteps, that's all; Traveler, there is no path; the path is made by walking...*"

What Does the Bible Propose?

The Bible offers precepts that aim to integrate the concepts of morality, ethics, understanding, and reason into a unified vision. Education and study play a fundamental role: divine words must be meditated upon (Joshua 1:8) and instilled (Deuteronomy 6:7); they must be studied, understood, interpreted, and applied to personal life while remaining faithful to the messages of divinely inspired prophets. These precepts form the basis of values guiding individuals and communities toward moral perfection.

The Eden narrative emphasizes the ability to discern good from evil; judging what is right and wrong is within human reflection's domain. The ability to act accordingly is also a legitimate right.

God is the creator of both good and evil (light and evil, Isaiah 45:7). He granted humans free will: "*See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil... choose life*" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 30:19), while urging love for God, neighbor, and stranger (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18, 19:34).

According to the Bible, humans are naturally inclined toward evil (Genesis 6:5). Yet, they have the means to develop a deliberate cerebral attitude to overcome this inclination (Genesis 4:7).

This capacity is independent of any anticipated reward: "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,*" declares the Lord (Isaiah 55:8).

The morality encapsulated by the Ten Commandments integrates the ethics signified by the last five commandments concerning relations with others, while the first five relate to the Creator and parents. In the Bible, ethics and morality are two arms of the same body represented by the Tablets of the Law.

The Bible also highlights morality's social dimension (Amos 2:6; Isaiah 2:7). Justice and generous charity are called for repeatedly (Deuteronomy 16:20; 17:68). Redemption is achieved through justice and righteousness (Isaiah 1:27; 5:16). Divine justice seeks true repentance: "God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 18:21-23).

Action and intention go hand in hand: "*Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart*" (Psalms 24:4). Positive action requires personal discipline: "Turn from evil and do good" (Psalms 34:15).

The heart reflects the person: "*As water reflects the face, so the heart reflects the man*" (Proverbs 27:19). Good-heartedness is echoed in Zechariah's words: "*Do not plot evil against each other in your hearts, and do not love to swear falsely*" (Zechariah 8:16-17).

Human qualities should serve a universal ideal: the messianic vision of a peaceful era should inspire everyone toward this ultimate goal: "*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*" (Micah 4:3).