

**MORAL CALCULUS:
THE SUM OF A “GOOD” LIFE?
SUNDAY, JULY 20, 2014
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There are a great many religious and philosophical figures throughout the millennia who have pondered and pontificated on the subject of a “good” life. In many cases, but not all, these thinkers took it upon themselves to identify particular attributes associated with a life well-lived. They prescribed a code of behaviors, dispositions, and social order centered around an individual or society’s relationships; relationships towards other individuals or groups, towards nature, and with a god or gods. As we examine these prescriptions from a modern context, we can identify many flaws, and people have dedicated their careers and lives to picking apart these worldviews. Those exercises are important in their own right, and I often enjoy them, but I don’t think I’m a credible critic and I don’t have the slightest belief that I would be able to convince anyone here that I have meaningful contribution to the subject. Yet the questions remain.

What is a good life? Is it a long life? A wealthy life? How about an educated or successful one? When we talk about these things in relation to happiness or a good life, we can find examples where rich, long-lived people with lots of tons of accolades and letters next to their names may live miserable or despised existences. Certainly one needs to have particular human needs met, and there are intense political disputes about what those needs are and whose responsibility it is to provide them. Again I will not be focusing on these topics today, because it seems to me like if there was a singular path to a good life we would already have discovered it. But how have we not gotten this done? Turn on the TV, go to a newsstand, visit a place of worship, there are people constantly telling us what we need to be happy or how to be good, or rather who is being bad. You would have thought we could crown a champion by now. I think I have a few basic questions that might help us understand where the lines begin to get drawn. Bear in mind, I don't have any answers here. Okay? Lets go...

How many times a month or week or year should I get to have sex? What kinds of sex can I have, when can I start, with how many partners, where, at what times, and are there people I should not have sex with? What kinds of drugs can I put in my body and still be a good person? Nicotine? Alcohol? Caffeine? How about weed, coke, crack, LSD, DMT, mushrooms...How much sugar? What kinds of foods can I eat, and how much is too much? How much harm can I do and still be in people’s good graces? Is there anything that is completely out of bounds? If I cross that line, is there anyway of offsetting violations of the moral code with unquestionably good acts, something akin to a hundred sit-ups and a 2

mile jog for that extra candy bar, a donation to a worthy cause, or a hundred rosaries. Religion, reason, culture and law give us different answers about these questions. But answers I've found from each often fails to genuinely overlap in a kind of absolute or even coherent way, and it becomes a dangerous source of conflict. Take food for example, and lets set aside halal and kosher, shellfish and pigs, cows and dogs. Have you ever heard a raw vegan and a strict paleo eater go at it? ****Real quick story, my son and I went to Swenson's on the eve of his 6th birthday to grab some food, and I make the mistake of asking, "hey buddy, should I get a fish sandwich or a salad boy (the salad boy for those who don't know is a veggie burger)" and he says, "well, do you know how they treated the fish?""No" "Well, then maybe you should get the other thing". I thought wow! I must be doing something right if my son is able to slice through all the rhetoric with something as simple and profound as that. And then I thought, @#(\$*#@#(*\$^ Do you know how they treated the fish... Do you know how they treated the farm workers? What kinds of pesticides they were exposed to, were they paid fair wages? Can you tell me that? Huh? No? Oh thats right you're six, and I'm trying to reduce my soy intake, alright?! It's more complicated than just the fish, okay? Isn't it complicated? Or is it? I got the salad boy, by the way.

So how do we make good choices? I looked at a fair bit of recorded wisdom of the ages to try and see if there are any unifying tools or rules of thumb the cut across the various camps, and I struck upon two. The first comes from Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who inspired, in addition to a great many others, the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau. He devised the Supreme Categorical Principle which reads as follows. "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become universal law." If you can explain to me what the hell that means, in such a way that I can justify the fish sandwich to a 6 year old I'll be in the fellowship hall shortly. And the other principle, known to all of us no doubt is the concept of the golden rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Turns out it existed long before Christianity in various forms with subtle but significant nuance in many world religions, from Hinduism to Confucianism, Judaism to Islam, and elsewhere.

And we really shouldn't be surprised that it's so popular, since when you hear its just got a certain truthiness to it. But there are practical problems with it that really poke holes in the theory, as an obvious example consider that a sadist is a masochist who follows the golden rule...let that one sink in a moment. In a more subtle critique, Bernard Shaw wrote, "do not do unto others as you would have others do unto you, they may have different taste"... This past year I was delighted when Evin Carvill-Ziemer introduced me to the platinum rule, "Do unto others as they might do unto themselves", which is a brilliant way of thinking about multiculturalism and individual liberties, but again there are limits to what personal tastes of others I'm willing to engage in. Also, as a guiding principle, this doesn't have the same universality that

Kant proposes. Is there any real way to distill what the absolute right thing to do is in comparison to other options?

We all wear many hats through out the course of our lives, and those different platforms allow us to entertain alternative perspectives and different tools to evaluate our choices. Today, for a brief time, I invite you to take a stab at being a Unitarian Universalist Utilitarian. That's right, a UUU. Utilitarianism has its origins in the works of Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, who both thought that a good life, and in fact, a good society could be brought about by maximizing happiness and pleasure, and minimizing suffering and pain. Setting aside arguments about the merits and problems that many perceive in Bentham and Mill's work, let's borrow the idea that we can measure the value of choices. The everyday choices each of us make, and the choices made by the societies we live in, the communities we create. We don't live in a perfect world, we have to make tradeoffs, with this in mind I invite you to join me in an exercise to help us find the balance between happiness and harm. We going to consider a trolley problem, a thought experiment first written about in the 1960s, so you kind of already know its trippy.

Some elements excerpted verbatim, some heavily modified¹

It's a lovely day out, and you decide to go for a walk along the trolley tracks that crisscross your town. As you walk, you hear a trolley behind you, and you step away from the tracks. But as the trolley gets closer, you hear the sounds of panic -- the five people on board are shouting for help. The trolley's brakes have gone out, and it's gathering speed. You find that you just happen to be standing next to a side track that veers into a sand pit, potentially providing safety for the trolley's five passengers. All you have to do is pull a hand lever to switch the tracks, and you'll save the five people. Sounds easy, right? But there's a problem. Along this offshoot of track leading to the sandpit stands a man who is totally unaware of the trolley's problem and the action you're considering. There's no time to warn him. So by pulling the lever and guiding the trolley to safety, you'll save the five passengers. But you'll kill the man. What do you do?

Consider another, similar dilemma. You're walking along the track again, you notice the trolley is out of control, although this time there is no auxiliary track. But there is a man within arm's reach, between you and the track. He's large enough to stop the runaway trolley. You can save the five people on the trolley by pushing him onto the tracks, stopping the out-of-control vehicle, but you'll kill the man by using him to stop the trolley. Again, what do you do?

Let's consider a different scenario, imagine that five people are trapped in a cave. The waters are rising; the reason that they can't escape the cave is because a fat man is stuck in a hole in the

¹ Edmonds, D. & Walburton, N.; *Philosophy Bites: David Edmonds on Trolley Problems*.
<http://nigelwarburton.typepad.com/files/trolleyology.pdf>

cave. His head is out, so he can breathe, but the water is slowly rising and the five others in the cave will all die unless – somehow – you can get the fat man out of the hole. You have a stick of dynamite. There's one thing you can do; you can blow up the fat man and all five people can then escape. Do you use the dynamite?

Obviously these scenarios are a little silly and unrealistic, albeit morbid, so let's consider something a little more realistic. Imagine there is a motor vehicle accident in a blizzard, and the victims all arrive at the understaffed, under-resourced hospital at the same time. You are the lead physician and you must decide - are you seeing the pattern yet? whether to treat the five patients who have slightly less immediate but still potentially fatal injuries, or save the one patient who would require the entirety of your resources. Let me make that clear. If you choose the five you could potentially save all of them, but if you choose the most severe and pressing victim, treating them will use up all the materials and manpower you have. This is straight up hospital drama stuff here. What do you do?

Last scenario. Same hospital, this time you're fully staffed and totally equipped, you have a five patients all in dire need, one in need of a heart transplant, two need kidneys, one needs a liver, and one needs a lung. You have another patient, who is seeking to do some good after a life of poor choices. They happen to be a match for the other patients, and they are ready and willing to give up their life and offer their organs in the hopes of restoring some semblance of their conscience, to get right with their gods and demons. It's illegal, of course, but no one besides you would know. What would you do?

Each of these ridiculous stories has something obvious in common. It turns out that roughly 80% or more of people would pull the lever to change the tracks, and about 80% of people would not push the man. When neuroscientists looked at this phenomenon, they discovered that when people were asked to consider different scenarios of this variety, fMRI machines recorded activity in very different areas of the brain even when math is the same, most of us feel very differently about the outcomes. It turns out that this is a product of our evolution, we have functional relics of our reptile ancestors that give the guttural fight or flight response, and then we have our rational brains, a product of inculturation, which you might look at as nature and nurture. This is what Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman popularized in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*. So when we have time to digest situations, these two systems in our brain seem to cooperate go to battle with one another, either to rationalize the initial quick gut reactions, or perhaps to overrule them. Sometimes the right thing to do seems utterly wrong at first. The real problem is, much of the time we still don't have any idea what right and wrong are, so we devise explanations that make them so.

Outlandish and extreme as these situations may seem, there are of course connections to reality. In our daily lives I think many of us feel it is unavoidable that we accept a certain amount of injustice, pain, suffering, as the risk, the price we pay for to pursue our conception of the good life. We often have to make difficult tradeoffs in deciding what kinds of religious, cultural, political, and ethical compromises and rationalizations we can accept from ourselves and of others, and which ones we cannot allow to stand.

The impact of these paradoxical problems goes back as far and beyond Thomas Aquinas, and the religious qualifications of a Just War, something we are still struggling with today, and the purpose of the original trolley problem was to provide a framework on which to discuss the ethics and legality of abortion and the reproductive rights of women. Sometimes the math doesn't add up so neatly, and we need some help deciding what to do. I'll have a little more to say on this shortly, but I thank you very much for listening and for playing along with my horrendous thought experiments.

My sincere apologies, I do not have a transcript for my final reflection and there was no recording.