CrossMark

GOOD TO BE BAD?

Paul Bloomfield

It is often thought that the first question of morality is 'Why be moral?', but since it is often thought that morality opposes our happiness, it is best to start with the question, 'Why not be immoral?'. An answer is given: being immoral is self-disrespecting, and self-respect is necessary for happiness.

Long before Bilbo met Gollum, Plato asked us to consider the effects of finding a ring of invisibility. He worried that without the fear of getting caught, there would be no reason at all for people to be moral. This is to view morality as a 'necessary evil', embodying constraints we ought to abide by even when they run counter to what we think is best for us as individuals. The question is not 'why be moral?', but rather 'why *not* be *im*moral?', especially when being immoral with impunity gets us what we want, can be so much fun, and a thrill to boot!

Even the Old Testament concedes that, sometimes, wicked people flourish like 'the green bay tree in native soil' (Psalm 37). And given the recent and tremendous proliferation of books written about *happiness*, across many disciplines, one might lament at how infrequently they discuss the relationship of happiness to morality: most often left implicit, they simply assume that immoral people can be just as happy as moral people. If this is true, then perhaps those of us who prefer to do our best and not win, over 'winning' by cheating, are nothing more than suckers, dupes, or fools.

Simon Blackburn has called the solution to this basic problem, 'the holy grail of moral philosophy'. Below are

doi:10.1017/S1477175615000032 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2015

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasons for thinking that this grail lies in the direction of considering the relationship of happiness to self-respect.

Ultimately, the problem with being immoral is that it keeps one from seeing the value of human life, and, as a result, one is kept from seeing the value of one's own life.

Consider a sketch of a defender of each opposing position. On one side, we've got someone, call him 'Niccolò' (as in Machiavelli), who thinks that traditional morality is society's way of keeping strong people in line and who thinks there is nothing wrong in itself with acting in ways generally considered immoral; Niccolò is willing to manipulate, cheat, or be disloyal, or even stab so-called 'friends' in the back, as long as it's good for him and he can get away with it. On the other side, we've got someone who has a strong sense of fairness, who believes all people have the same rights, someone who is genuinely virtuous, in all the positive senses of that term. Let's call her 'Eleanor', after Eleanor Roosevelt.

In order to find common ground from which to argue, let's first ask what Niccolò and Eleanor would agree on.

Both would seem to agree, first, that they should live as happy a life as they can. Both think they have a good idea about what happiness is and what living well amounts to, but of course each thinks the other is wrong about these matters. So, both will also agree, second, that people can be wrong about how happy they are and how well they are living.

They also will agree, third, that people cannot be happy without self-respect: on both accounts, people who are regularly disrespecting themselves cannot be happy, whether they think they are or not. This is because most people would consider self-disrespect to be inconsistent with happiness for much the same reasons that self-hatred or self-loathing is inconsistent with happiness. Insofar as this is true, self-respect is necessary for happiness.

Furthermore, both tend to think the other is wrong about their self-respect. Niccolò will think Eleanor has been conventionally brainwashed into being a dupe who is willing to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sacrifice what's best for her for the sake of others, which is not, according to Niccolò, something self-respecting people do. And Eleanor will think that people who 'win' by cheating arrogantly presume they have self-respect, but in fact they do not: she will think that people who have self-respect do not stoop to cheat. So, both agree, fourth, that people can be wrong about whether or not they have self-respect.

How can people have mistaken beliefs about their own self-respect? Well, Niccolò and Eleanor, and presumably everyone else, would agree that self-respect cannot be based upon illusions or wishful thinking or mistaken views about one's self: a necessary condition for self-respect is that people respect who they really are and not merely who they wish they were. If I base my self-respect on the belief that I am Socrates incarnate, then I do not respect myself, rather, I respect Socrates. 'Self-respect' based on wishful thinking is an ersatz version of the real thing. As a result, both Niccolò and Eleanor will agree, fifth, that for individuals to have self-respect, they must not be deceiving themselves (too much!) about who they are; they must have a fairly honest and accurate conception of themselves and base their self-respect on that.

So far, we have found five separate points of agreement. What to say from here? Well, note that having the accurate self-conception mentioned in the fifth point requires making accurate judgments about oneself, and accurate self-judgments must be fair in order to be accurate. Furthermore (here is the kicker), we cannot make fair judgments about ourselves unless we make fair judgments about others as well.

The reason is that, in general, we cannot make fair judgments unless we judge like cases alike. Say you are the boss and it is time to evaluate employees, and there are three who, objectively, all equally deserve a positive review. If you choose one arbitrarily and give that one a positive review and the other two negative reviews, then no one is being judged fairly, not even the one who gets the positive

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

review. Any process that leads to equals being treated unequally is unjustifiably unfair.

This same point holds when Niccolò is making judgments about himself as compared with others.

Niccolò, and people like him, say things like, 'Never give a sucker an even break', and 'A sucker is born every minute', and so tests everyone for how manipulable they are. For Niccolò, the only difference between people is how careful he must be in getting them to give him what he wants or in getting them out of the way. In general, he views people as if they are pieces on a chessboard and everyone else is taken simply to have more or less instrumental value to his success.

Yet Niccolò does not treat himself as a tool or an instrument, he treats himself as an end; on the chessboard in his mind, he is the only King. He views what is best for him as if this has either always the most value all told, or a different and special sort of value that trumps all else. Being instrumental to someone else's good, making sacrifices for others, is only for self-disrespecting 'suckers'. He judges himself according to a different standard, he sees himself as special or 'a cut above'.

But Niccolò's self-regarding judgments, as compared to his judgments about everyone else, are completely unjustifiable. They are not arbitrary – it is no coincidence that Niccolò sees himself in a more favorable light than he sees everyone else – but they are no more justified than arbitrary judgments.

No single human being's life could have a different kind of value than everyone else's. There is no basis for thinking, 'I am special' in this conveniently self-justifying way without self-deception: we are all members of the species Homo sapiens; we are all born of women; as babies we are all equally helpless; cut us and we all bleed. Yes, we are all unique, but no one is 'special' in the required sense. Thinking otherwise about oneself is the very definition of 'arrogating' to one's self more than is one's due.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

So, Niccolò arrogantly judges himself (the value of his own life) differently than he judges everyone else. The problem is that unless he can come up with some special story to justify these judgments, it will be evident that his self-conception is based on unfair judgments and, as we have already seen, this has negative implications for his self-respect.

And there are no such special self-justifying stories for Niccolò to tell. Being able to get away with something does not entail that one deserves it. Existentially claiming the Will to Power, or insisting 'I'm me!' simply won't cut it: claiming that one is special is not sufficient to make one be special. And there simply is no property that some humans can have which others lack, and which confers upon the former a special kind of *je ne sais quoi* capable of justifying immoral behavior.

If this argument is as sound as it appears, then Niccolò's judgments about himself are unfair and inaccurate, and his so-called 'self-respect' is based on a conception of who he wishes he were but in fact is not. Thus, Niccolò and those of his ilk have only the ersatz form of self-respect mentioned above.

And since everyone agreed up front that people cannot be happy without self-respect, we must conclude that Niccolò isn't really living a happy life, even if he thinks he is. Notice Eleanor does not have analogous problems.

Being moral is necessary for having self-respect, and self-respect necessary for happiness. Therefore, being moral is necessary for living a happy life.

This isn't the end of the debate, of course. But this is the direction that defenders of morality ought to go to justify morality both to themselves and to everyone else.

Paul Bloomfield is Professor of Philosophy at University of Connecticut. phsb@uconn.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press