CHAPTER 22

Good and Evil

Ignorance of good and evil is the most upsetting fact of human life.

— Cicero

Often we are faced with a moral dilemma. What is right and what is wrong? How do we decide what to do? By our motivation? By the consequences? Or by the act itself? At some point we all struggle with these questions, and sometimes it is difficult to tell what is the best thing to say or do. Let us examine some criteria that people use in distinguishing right from wrong.

Some people think, "What brings me pleasure is good, and what causes me pain is bad" or "If I get my own way, that is good; if I don't, that is bad. A person who helps me to do what I want is my friend, a person who stands in my way is an enemy." In other words, "I" am the judge of what is right and wrong, and the criterion is how something affects "me." This is a normal way of thinking for very young children, but they grow out of it as they mature. When we find this kind of behavior in an adult, we realize that this person has the moral maturity of a selfish child. Unfortunately, many people think like this and make decisions not because something is right or wrong, but because of how it will benefit them or their group. If we think like this, it becomes easy to take the position that the end justifies the means: To achieve one's goals, any means is justified. Such attitudes may affect the judgment of politicians. A nation often decides whether a policy or an event is good or bad by seeing whether it is in the nation's interest. This is one of the chief causes of conflicts and wars. Can "I" be the criterion for deciding good and evil?

Another common criterion is whether an act pleases others. For example, a young child wants to please her parents. What is right and wrong is determined by what makes the parents happy or unhappy. As people grow older, they become concerned about how they appear in the eyes of their peer group and thus they follow the moral values of the group. There are two questions, though: What should we do if our parents or peers want us to do something we know is wrong? If no one sees what we are doing and no one will find out, will we still be good? There are certainly some people who would commit all kinds of crimes if they knew no one would see them and they would not be caught and punished. If this were the only motivation for not doing wrong, however, we would need a police officer on every street corner and everyone would need to watch everyone else. Are there not more noble motivations for one's deeds?

Law-abiding citizens recognize that, in general, laws exist to protect people and maintain social order. Even if one thinks a law is wrong, it should still be followed, since willfully breaking a law weakens the whole social fabric. One's duty, therefore, is to keep the law and respect one's superiors. However, law cannot be the highest

standard of right and wrong, since we appeal to some higher authority when we say that a law is unjust. Laws should be based on justice, but they are not the source of justice. There have been unjust laws, and legal systems sometimes have been used for political purposes to eliminate opposition and stifle dissent. In such circumstances, is it one's duty to obey the law? These are not easy questions, and there are no easy answers, but such situations have arisen many times.

People who follow their conscience and the moral law within refuse to compromise their integrity by doing and saying what they know to be wrong, despite the suffering they will likely endure as a result.

Good and evil begin within oneself

Where do good and evil come from? Are people basically good or evil? We can discuss three different perspectives on this problem:

✗ Human nature is good.

✗ Human nature is evil.

✗ Human nature is both good and evil.

If we do something good or someone points out a good quality of ours, we are apt to take the credit for it. On the other hand, if we do something wrong or recognize some character defect, we tend to blame someone else for it. To realize that we are responsible for the quality of our character is a sign of a mature personality. To recognize that the origin of good and evil lies in the human heart is the most profound insight. It means that we cannot blame other people for how we behave. Although we sometimes feel that another person has "made us angry," we are only trying to locate the source of our own problems in someone else. This can be very dangerous and even lead to murder.

Although there is undoubtedly evil around us, the greatest evil lies within us. It is also the only evil with which we can deal. Attempting to change others while we remain unchanged can have disastrous consequences. We are responsible in some way for our situations, and if we change ourselves our situation will change. Our focus should be on inner regeneration leading to outer transformation.

This was the discovery of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who spent many years in the labor camps and prisons of the Soviet Union.

> It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil

moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an uprooted small corner of evil.

Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

And since that time I have come to understand the falsehood of all the revolutions in history. They destroy only those carriers of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). And they take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more.

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Everyone is personally tainted by this kind of evil. There are no exceptions. Can anyone look back on his life with a completely clear conscience, without shame or regret for wrongs done, or for good deeds left undone? No people, nation or race can claim to be without sin, nor does any people or race have a monopoly on wrongdoing.

Is evil natural?

Sometimes people believe that it is not possible for goodness to exist without evil. Others think, "You can't recognize goodness without the presence of evil." However, let us consider this. A baby intuitively knows his mother is kind. He doesn't need to be abused to recognize this. Children assume that all is good until they are painfully taught that evil exists. We know a delicious meal automatically. We don't make our taste buds more sensitive by eating dirt before sitting down to lunch. Obviously we can recognize and enjoy something that is good without evil. Good and evil are not complements like light and dark, male and female. Instead, they actively oppose each other because they have contradictory purposes. They cannot co-exist forever, since they intend each other's destruction. Still, if we have the right attitude, we can learn from both good and evil experiences.

In fact, evil is a distortion of good. Even something like love, which is good, can be misused and corrupted and thus become dangerous and destructive. Evil is parasitic, like a cancer on living tissue, or like organized crime on the legitimate economy. This is why Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages, said, "Good can exist without evil, but evil cannot exist without good."

Furthermore, evil appears to be limited to the human race. One of the qualities distinguishing human beings from animals is the capacity for good and evil. People have the potential to commit not only extraordinary acts of altruism and self-sacrifice, but also great evil. Man is perhaps the only being who fights and often tries to kill members of his *own* species. In the animal world, members of the same species do not generally fight each other to the death. The struggle within a species, such as the contest between stags, is for the purpose of deciding which is to be the leader of the herd. Once this is established, there is order again until the next challenge. They do not try to kill each other. When there are disputes over territory, for example, it usually becomes clear after a while which animal is the stronger. The vanquished animal slinks away and is not pursued. The main struggle in the animal world, the battle between a predator and its prey, results from natural instinct. Animals usually kill other animals (which are almost invariably of a different species) for food, either for an immediate meal or for a future one. It is only man who engages in the wholesale slaughter of his own kind.

This struggle between people is not constructive. The wars that have ravaged the human race have been enormously wasteful and debilitating in terms of lives lost, capital destroyed and cultural and moral resources diminished. Whole civilizations have been worn down and eventually destroyed by internal and external conflict.

How can we tell good from evil?

Relativism

Are good and evil relative, or are there absolute values? As we become more and more aware of the different lifestyles and opinions that exist in the world, it is easy to think that good and evil are just a matter of opinion. Long ago, Aristotle noted, "Fire burns both in Hellas and in Persia; but men's ideas of right and wrong vary from place to place." Although they may vary, right and wrong are still recognizable everywhere.

While it is important to recognize that there is a diversity of opinions, this doesn't mean that moral statements are mere opinion. If this were so, we would have no right to judge others and hold each other accountable for behavior that reflects common values. There have always been universal moral attitudes and actions. The reading below, "Virtues and Vices," shows this very clearly. There has never been a society that extolled cowardice as a virtue, or rape, murder and theft as noble deeds. Although courage and honor may take different forms in different societies, both are universal virtues.

Almost everyone thinks certain crimes are wrong in some absolute sense. Would we really want to inhabit a moral universe that says that child sacrifice is allowable, that Nazi morality is no worse than Christian morality, that we cannot complain if we are treated unjustly because that is merely our opinion and our opinion is no more worthy than that of our oppressor? Such a world would be intolerable. This is why people search for a standard of good and evil that transcends personal opinion and can be recognized objectively by everyone.

Before we consider some of these moral theories, let us examine relativism in a little more detail. One version of relativism states that there is no such thing as truth. Every moral perspective is just a matter of opinion. But this also means that the theory of relativism itself is only an opinion and need not be taken seriously! It is impossible to say there is no such thing as truth unless one admits that there is at least one truth. To see how problematic the theory is, take a strip of paper. On one side write, *"The sentence on the other side of this piece of paper is not correct."* On the other side write, *"The sentence on the other side is correct."* Which side is right?

Absolutism

This is the view that there are certain rules that are absolutely valid and binding on everyone. The right thing to do is to obey the law irrespective of the consequences. However, there are problems with this approach. Consider the commandment against stealing. Is it always wrong to steal? Suppose that a person through no fault of his own is starving. Is he entitled to take some food from someone who has plenty? It is generally accepted in religious ethics that in such a situation a person has the right to take enough food to feed himself. This is because human life is more valuable than property.

This does not justify stealing in other situations. Just because there is an occasional exception to a rule does not mean that the rule can be broken capriciously. If a mother and her child are poor and hungry, most would agree that stealing a loaf of bread should earn much less punishment, if any at all, than a thief who steals the same bread because he cannot be bothered to pay or thinks he is entitled to other people's possessions. Both the circumstances and the motivation are vastly different in each case.

One of the dangers of moral absolutism is that we are unable to make judicious distinctions between stealing a loaf of bread because one is starving, and stealing a car because one doesn't want to obtain it through honest work.

Again, suppose there is a person I do not like. I do the "right thing" by telling the truth when a local thug asks me where he is. Is it my fault in any way if he is beaten up? Does motivation play a part in deciding whether an action is right or wrong?

Motivation

Motivation is an important factor in deciding whether an action is moral or immoral. If one does the right thing for the wrong reason, is it good? For example, suppose I give someone a present because I want her to do something for me. Or I give money to a beggar so that I feel good. In these cases I would have an ulterior motive for what I was doing. I would be doing something good for the reward I am expecting to get. I am doing good not for its own sake or the sake of the person for whom the deed is done, but for my own benefit. Of course, it is generally true that we are more likely to do good when we are rewarded, but this should be only incidental and not the main motivation.

It is important not only to do what is right, but also to do it for the right reason, or to have the right motivation. A pure motivation is one that is untainted by selfishness. The word for this is "altruism," doing something for another person without expecting to be rewarded. For example, suppose a woman wishes to marry a rich man. Does she love him or his money? It is sometimes hard to be clear about our motivations for doing or desiring certain things. This is why when we do something for a person with the aim of getting him to do something that we desire, when he doesn't do it we feel angry and resentful. This shows us clearly that what we gave to the person was not primarily for his benefit. If it had been, we would have been happy with his happiness alone. Goodness is its own reward.

Where do goodness and evil lie? They do not exist in the outside world, but within oneself. Everything starts from you as an individual. If you are doing things for the sake of others, you may be called good. However beautiful a song you may sing for someone, if you are doing that out of an insatiable desire to be praised, your motivation is not pure and your deed is less than absolutely good. If you do things out of arrogance, out of pride in yourself, you are not quite doing things right. Arrogance has nothing to do with goodness. Even though we may do what appears to be a very good act, it is the motivation that determines if an act is truly good or evil.

Being good means that you must see things more for the sake of others than for

your own sake. You should listen attentively for the sake of other people, not for yourself. You should speak, act, and use all five senses for the sake of others, not for yourself. If you found anyone living like that, you probably would long to be with that person and would feel great affection toward him or her.
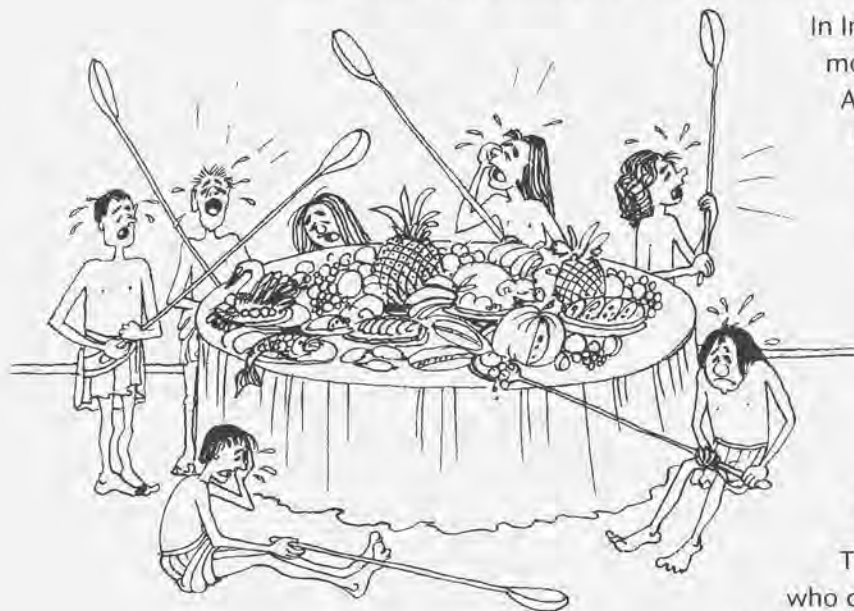
In Ireland there is a legend about a monk who died and went to heaven. At the gate to heaven he met St. Peter. "Before I enter," he said to St. Peter, "I would like you to take me on a tour of hell." St. Peter found a guide to take the monk to hell. When he got there, he was astonished to see a great table piled high with the choicest foods. But the people in hell were starving. The monk turned to his guide and raised his eyebrows.

The guide explained. "Everybody who comes here is given a spoon five feet long, and is required to hold it at the end to eat. But you just can't eat with a spoon five feet long if you hold it at the end. Look at them. They miss their mouths every time."

The monk agreed that this was hell indeed and asked to be taken back to heaven immediately. In heaven, to his surprise, he saw a similar room, with a similar table laden with very choice foods. But the people were radiantly happy.

The monk turned to his guide. "No spoons, I suppose?" he asked. "Oh yes," said the guide, "they have the same spoons, the same length, and they must hold them at the end just as in hell. But you see, the people who came here want to feed each other."

Consequences

Another thing to consider in deciding whether an action is good or not is its consequences. John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher of the 19th century, founded a branch of moral thinking called utilitarianism. He thought that since everyone desires happiness and wants to avoid pain, a good action is one that leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. While this sounds simple enough in theory, it is difficult to practice. When a murderer is punished, does this lead to an increase in happiness? It may be that the happiness of many people that

he is punished outweighs his unhappiness at being incarcerated. But what if an unpopular person is unjustly imprisoned? In this case we can see that the happiness principle by itself is not a reliable guide to judging what is right and wrong.

It is also impossible to know all the consequences of one's actions ad infinitum. Suppose as a doctor you saved the life of a young boy. Was your action good or bad? Perhaps he will grow up to become a mass murderer. In hindsight, was saving his young life right or wrong?

Despite the limitations of the theory, it is still important to take into consideration the consequences of one's actions. For example, is sex outside marriage right or wrong? Before making a decision that can influence your whole future, it is wise to consider the possible consequences — whether the joy of intimacy will outweigh possible feelings of shame and guilt, emotional burden, and the risk of disease or an unwanted pregnancy.

Universality

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant developed "the categorical imperative" when considering the morality of decisions. He said that we should do something only if we are prepared for everyone else to be able to do it as well. In other words, act as if the way you act were a universal law. Kant did not tell people what they should or should not do. Instead, he provided a general principle by which to make moral decisions. For example, is it ever morally right to tell a lie? Is it good that everyone be permitted to tell lies? If my decision should not or cannot be universalized as a general moral principle, then it is morally wrong to tell lies.

This approach has the benefit of ignoring consequences. Thus it is always wrong to punish an innocent person, even if by so doing other people can be deterred from committing crimes. However, there are times when two rules may coincide. For example, if it is always wrong to break a promise and always wrong to tell a lie, what happens when I have to tell a lie to keep a promise? Suppose I promise a friend that I will hide him from a murderer, and the murderer later asks me where my friend is. How am I to reply? If I tell the truth, I break a promise; if I keep the promise, I must tell a lie. Kant's theory leads to stalemate in such cases, and appeal must be made to some higher sense of right and wrong.

In this case, exceptions have to be introduced. For example, if I learn that a friend has purchased poison and intends to kill his girlfriend, it is perfectly reasonable for me to steal the poison to prevent him from harming her. Why is stealing permitted in this situation? I would wish that everyone would behave in the same way in the same circumstances. This reasoning, though, has the danger of leading to ad hoc justifications.

Good and bad character

Another way to discuss good and bad is in terms of character. A person of good character usually doesn't spend a lot of time agonizing over whether something is good or bad. He often just knows intuitively. Aristotle said that the aim or purpose of human life is to develop the virtues that make up a good character. A virtuous person acts and behaves in the appropriate way at all times, naturally being good and doing good.

Aristotle listed twelve moral virtues that fall between two vices: the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. For example, the virtue of courage would fall between its excess (which is foolhardiness) and its deficiency (which is cowardice). As we grow up, we learn to cultivate such virtues so as to be able to conduct ourselves with dignity. For example, if my car breaks down, I have the natural capacity to get angry. However, my attitude toward the feeling of anger is important. I could just release my anger and kick the car and smash the engine with a hammer. On the other hand, I

could get depressed and just abandon the car. Neither is a mature response. The right response would be to control my anger and channel it to motivate me to get the car fixed.

The Roman philosopher Cicero consolidated moral theory in the classical world and distinguished four primary virtues:

✗ **Courage**: A courageous person is able to conquer his fear and anxiety, whether it is caused by physical danger or by the challenge to face the truth.

✗ **Justice**: A just person treats people fairly in the way they deserve, without personal sentiment or malice.

✗ **Temperance**: This is the virtue of controlling what can be controlled and not attempting to control what cannot be controlled. A temperate person has a quietness of mind that allows him to concentrate and be balanced.

✗ **Wisdom**: A wise person knows himself, yet is not self-centered; sees life in proportion and therefore does not waste it on trivialities; knows when he can help and cannot help; and is able to discern what is going on in the world because he is not concerned with personal gain.

To these four were added by Christian thinkers what are known as the three theological virtues.

✗ **Faith** is continuing to believe what your reason tells you to be true despite your changing moods and the changing circumstances.

✗ **Hope** is the confidence that comes from knowing that God is active despite apparent problems and dangers.

✗ **Love** is giving oneself for the happiness and well-being of another.

Christianity also has elaborated a series of vices that have come to be known popularly as the seven deadly sins.

✗ **Pride** is sinful when a person thinks that because his work is good, he is good. This does not mean one shouldn't have pride in one's work or self-respect. A proud man wants to be honored and praised by others. If he is not, he may start to feel envy.

✗ **Envy** is a selfish and malevolent emotion that we may feel toward those we consider inferior but who, for some reason, appear to be better off than we are. We are not happy at their good fortune, and are secretly glad when misfortune strikes them.

✗ **Anger** is a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility, often provoked by having one's will thwarted. It distorts a person's perspective and when uncontrolled may cause him to commit terrible crimes.

✗ **Sloth** is the constant desire for rest and sleep. A lazy person tries to avoid all physical exertion and tries to understand things without making any mental effort.

- ✗ **Avarice** is the desire to get and keep things for oneself.

- ✗ **Gluttony** is the desire for more food than one needs. After overeating a glutton feels heavy and mentally dull.

- ✗ **Lust** is the uncontrolled passion for physical sexuality separated from sexuality's spiritual dimension. Lust fills a person's mind with sexual thoughts, corrupting and distorting his way of looking at others.

We have discussed different approaches to understanding what is good and what is evil. Perhaps the most important conclusion is that evil cannot be considered natural or relative, and also that both goodness and evil start within ourselves and not somewhere outside ourselves. It is up to us, to the extent that we are able, to overcome evil and to multiply goodness.

We have also discussed different theories that distinguish between good and evil. As we see, each theory has valuable points, but none is adequate by itself. They complement each other. In order to make the right decision in a situation of moral choice, one needs to take into consideration one's motives, the action itself and its consequences; and in order for one's vision to be clear, it is necessary to become a virtuous person. This is the way to gradually overcome evil — first within oneself and thus by example and extension in the world around one.

Virtues and Vices

From The Islamic Way of Life,
by Abul A'La Maududi

Moral sense is inborn in man, and through the ages it has served as the common man's standard of moral behavior, approving certain qualities and disapproving others. While this instinctive faculty may vary from person to person, human conscience has given a more or less uniform verdict in favor of certain moral qualities as being good and declared others as bad. On the side of moral virtues, justice, courage, bravery and truthfulness have always elicited praise, and history does not record any period worth the name in which falsehood, injustice, dishonesty and breach of trust may have been upheld; fellow-feeling, compassion, fidelity, and magnanimity have always been valued while selfishness, cruelty, miserliness and bigotry have never received the approbation of human society; men have always appreciated perseverance, determination and courage and have never approved of impatience, capriciousness, cowardice and imbecility. Dignity, restraint, politeness, and amiability have throughout the ages been counted among virtues, whereas snobbery, misbehavior and rudeness have never found recognition as good moral qualities. Persons having a sense of responsibility and devotion to duty have always won the highest regard of men; never have people who are incompetent, slothful and lacking in sense of duty been looked upon with approval. Similarly, in respect of the standard of good and bad in the collective behavior of society as a whole, the verdict has always been almost unanimous.

Only that society has been looked upon as worthy of honor and respect which possesses the virtues of organization, discipline, mutual affection and fellow-feeling and has established a social order based on justice, freedom and equality of men. As opposed to this, disorganization, indiscipline, anarchy, disunity, injustice and social imbalance have always been considered as manifestations of decay and disintegration in a society. Robbery, murder, larceny, adultery, fraud and graft have always been condemned. Slandering, scandal-mongering and blackmailing have never been considered as wholesome social activities.

Contrary to this, service and care of the aged, help of one's kith and kin, regard for neighbors, loyalty to friends, assistance to the weak, the destitute and orphans, and nursing the sick are qualities which have always been highly valued ever since the dawn of civilization. Virtuous, polite, mild and sincere persons have always been welcomed. Individuals who are upright, honest, sincere, outspoken and dependable, whose deeds conform to their words, who are content with their own rightful possession, who are prompt in the discharge of their obligations to others, who live in peace and let others live in peace and from whom nothing but good can be expected, have always formed the core of any healthy human society.

This passage above shows that human moral standards are in fact universal and have been well known to humankind throughout the ages. Good and evil are not myths to be hunted out. They are well-known realities and are equally well understood by all. The sense of good and evil is inherent in the very nature of humans. Hence in the terminology of the Koran virtue is called *"Ma'roof"* (a well-known thing) and evil is designated as *"Munkar"* (an unknown thing); that is to say virtue is known to be desirable for everyone and evil is not known to commend itself in any way. This fact is mentioned by the Koran when it says: "God has revealed to human nature the consciousness and cognition of good and evil."

— Surah 91:8