

MORALITY: A SHORT TALK

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Every Master of every Lodge solemnly agrees to 15 ancient charges.

The first of these is, “you agree to be a good man and true and strictly to obey the moral law.” He then bends his head a little forward and signifies his assent by sign and saying “I do.” I’ve done this twice.

But to which moral law was I assenting? What is “the moral law”? What is “morality”?

Mores, in sociology, are any given society's particular norms, virtues or values. The word mores derives from the Latin plural *mōrēs*; singular *mōs*

Mores derive from the established practices of a society rather than its written laws. They consist of shared understandings about the kinds of behavior likely to evoke approval, disapproval, toleration or sanction, within particular contexts.

The English word morality comes from the same root, as does the noun *moral*. However, mores do not, as is commonly supposed, necessarily carry connotations of morality. Rather, morality can be seen as a subset of mores, held to be of central importance in view of their content, and often formalized in some kind of moral code.

The Greek term equivalent to Latin *mores* is *ethos*. As with the relation of *mores* to *morality*, *ethos* is the basis of the term *ethics*, but does not itself carry connotations of morality as much as of customary proper behavior peculiar to a given society.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell once said “...most of the greatest evil that Man has inflicted upon man comes from people feeling quite certain about something which in fact was false.”

Consider the Spanish Inquisition: in their minds, they were eliminating from society a greater harm. That those they were persecuting were regarded as a disease or contagion which would infect and destroy civilization. They believed that they were purifying Society and that not doing so would be worse. This was the only way they knew to correct it. To do the hideous things they did came from a moral certainty that it was good and necessary

Similarly, consider wither the aboriginal residential schools were these set up so as to destroy an entire people and way of life. Absolutely not. They were considered to be a moral requirement for their improvement and advancement as a people.

These historical wrongdoings most people now believe were wrong. Does that mean that we now have moral certainty about all that we do? Well, the use of water boarding at Guantanamo Bay, at Abu Grail and the genocide in Darfur, are examples of the same thing: moral certainty leading to atrocious acts. The killing of innocent civilians (called

“collateral damage”) in Iraq and Afghanistan is considered necessary because we have moral certainty that it is so.

We all want to do something good.

Some societies base their morality on divine text, the Bible or the Koran. If that were simple obedience to the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes, that would be fine. But it can also lead us to banishment, stoning, and the forced removal of body parts. We haven’t stopped arguing over which parts of the holy texts to take literally and which metaphorically.

Other philosophers in history have based morality on their concept of human nature. One such was Aristotle, and more recently in the 12th Century, St Thomas Aquinas who devised what has come to be known as the “Natural Law Theory.” In essence this says that Man is an animal and thus in common with other animals we need security, food supply, shelter and procreation.

As rational beings we need knowledge. As social animals we need friendship, society, and mutual interaction based upon respect and tolerance. We are also creatures of God who wish to know God and can pursue religion and religious truth.

The natural law theory also allows for a secular approach to a moral code

All of which if followed, leads us to the good life or, if you prefer, a life that is “good”. However all societies do not have the same concept of what a good life is. In Canada, for example, we believe that access to universal health care is a social good. Denying that therefore becomes immoral. This is not so in the United States.

Similarly if we believe that homelessness is intolerable for the good life we develop moral certainty about this: we have developed an imperative which creates moral certainty. This is important but it is also a double-edged sword.

Moral certainty however can be a double-edged sword as we have seen in the Spanish Inquisition and the residential schools program.

Consider that, in biblical times and until the late 19th century, not that long ago, slavery was not considered immoral. Nor was the disenfranchising of women.

If slavery was considered moral by the early church (and it was) where does that leave us as to the question of the ordination of homosexuals?

I don’t propose to attempt an answer to that one!

I’m going to leave you with a couple of thoughts; things to ponder over and argue about.

1. In the 20th Century there was a leader who, in less than ten years led his country from abject poverty and rampant, runaway inflation to one of the greatest powers in the world. He was adored by millions as their savior and hero. He had raised their standard of living immeasurably and made them supremely confident of themselves and their country. To them he was a hero. His name was Adolph Hitler. Was he a moral man?

2. Ernest Shackleton was an adulterer. He carried on a flagrantly public affair with a married woman causing great hurt and anguish to his loyal wife and family who helped him obtain public support, moral & financial, for his Antarctic expeditions. Was he a moral man?
3. Rudyard Kipling knew that his son was disabled. That he was severely visually impaired. Yet he used all of his influence and power to allow him to obtain an army commission despite his having been medically turned down. Were these the actions of a moral man?

I don't propose to answer these questions. I'm just going to leave you to discuss and think about them. Either in lodge or outside of it. Those of you who are Past Masters may like to begin with the one about the first of the ancient charges.