

Morality (Part 1)

INTRODUCTION

'What does it mean to be 'good'?' This one, seemingly straightforward, question is at the heart of all ethical considerations. This series of sessions is essentially an introduction to 'Meta-ethics' – the philosophical consideration of what the terms 'right' and 'wrong' actually mean. Students will be introduced to the idea that some people believe that moral statements are factual statements about our universe whereas others think that morality is little more than an expression of personal preference. They will also be forced to consider where our sense of morality comes from. Did it evolve, as many scientists believe, as a natural by-product of living in close knit societies or is it the voice of God within us?

ACTIVITY: What is morality?

This session is designed to get students to think about what people mean when they utter moral statements such as 'Giving to charity is good' or 'Murder is wrong'. As such, it is important to begin by asking them to define the terms 'Good' and 'Evil'. It is important that they do this on their own so that they can compare their definitions later. Once they have written their definitions ask them such questions as:

- *Is this a difficult task?*
- *Is it easier to define 'Good' or 'Evil'?*
- *Are all your definitions similar?*

If all of their definitions are similar, really quiz them as to why this is the case. It is vital that you get them to question what MAKES something good or evil rather than just allowing them to list a series of things that they think are good or evil. If they say 'Murder is just evil' ask them WHY? This discussion should flow naturally allow you to steer the conversation towards the following critical question:

- *Is it possible to be wrong when you say something is good or evil? For example, most of you probably believe that murder is wrong but if somebody came in here and said 'Murder is good' would they be wrong?*

ACTIVITY

This discussion has the potential to get incredibly heated incredibly quickly. This is a good thing. However, it is important to remind the students that they are likely to passionately disagree about some of the things they are discussing today and that they need to listen carefully to

the views of other people and be careful to respect of everyone's right to hold very different opinions to one another. In my experience, most young people I have encountered tend to believe that moral statements are 'just opinions' and, consequentially, 'can't ever be wrong'. If you find that all the young people in your class have this view it is worth really pursuing this using some of the most shocking examples that you think are age appropriate. For example, with older students you might ask, if somebody praised rape would that really be ok? Younger ones might be asked the same question about stealing. Once this conversation has come to an end move the discussion on by asking such questions as:

- *Do we need to follow fixed moral rules or is the situation important in deciding what the right thing to do is?*

Explain that there are different views about moral rules. We might say that there are views along a continuum, with two extremes:

1. Moral Absolutism: The belief that moral rules are fixed and set and don't depend on the situation.
2. Moral Relativism: The belief that moral rules are flexible and should be used as guidelines.

ACTIVITY

Use the following thought experiment to see whether or not they tend towards moral absolutism. Say to them:

"Imagine a young girl started banging on your door and was crying and screaming for help. When you let her in she explains that there is a dangerous man with an axe who is chasing her and wants to kill her. The next thing you know there is another knock on the door. This time when you open it there is a man with an axe there. He asks you if you have seen the little girl. Would you lie to him or tell him the truth?"

Explain that the consequences of being a strict moral absolutist is that the situation does not matter AT ALL. For example, the philosopher Immanuel Kant was an absolutist about lying. This meant that he felt it was ALWAYS wrong to lie. He used the thought experiment above to illustrate his point. As such, he would even tell the truth in that situation. [Generally speaking, most classes will go wild at this suggestion. Harness that energy but play Devil's Advocate by introducing them to the idea that they cannot know the context of the story or know how things will turn out. It might be that the little girl is the man's daughter and is being naughty and the man with the axe is just a concerned father worried about her being inside the house of a stranger. Anything could happen.] Finally, explain that this is the issue that we will be delving into more deeply in the next session!

CONCLUSION

End the session with some music, e.g., 'Shades of Gray' by The Monkees, about the past being a time when everyone knew what was right and wrong! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHGP9-xShbs&feature=kp>