Moral Conflicts and the Virtue of Justice

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Conflicts

• A “moral conflict” is a conflict between people that concerns some real or supposed immorality.

• Moral conflicts are part of life. They’re often painful, unpleasant, frustrating, and disappointing.

• Your life and happiness depends on dealing with moral conflicts effectively.
Conflicts

• What does it mean to handle moral conflicts effectively? Be an egoist! As a general rule:
  • Reconcile with good people.
  • Distance yourself from mixed people.
  • Cut ties with bad people.
Example Moral Conflicts

1. Your boyfriend or girlfriend cheats on you.
2. Your boss blames you for his mistake.
3. Your client refuses to pay for work you’ve done.
4. Your friend attacks your sister on Facebook.
5. Your neighbor lies about lawn damage he caused.
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What should you NOT do?
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Some Fantasy-Based Responses

**Indulgence**
- Ignore the wrong and harm done.
- Assume that the person “meant well.”
- Forgive without an apology or amends.
- Forgive because “we’re all sinners.”

**Moralizing**
- Condemn the person immediately.
- Refuse to hear what the person has to say.
- Condemn based on personality or style.
- Condemn based on unrealistic standards.
Why are those fantasy-based responses?

- Fantasy-based responses to conflicts ignore facts about:
  - … the nature of the relationship.
  - … the known character of the person.
  - … the nature and motives of the action.
  - … the harms caused by the action.
  - … the results of indulgence or moralizing.

- Indulgence: unwarranted positive assumptions.
- Moralizing: unwarranted negative assumptions.
Perhaps we might try another method for dealing with moral conflicts, one based on facts.

What should you do?
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Some Fact-Based Responses

- Ask the person about what happened and why.
- Explain the harms caused by the actions.
- Explain how you feel about what happened.
- Distinguish personality and style from morality.
- Consider any extenuating circumstances.
- Identify the relevant moral principles.
- Ask the person for an apology and amends.
- Look for patterns in the person’s past behavior.
- Consider how to protect yourself in the future.
The Lesson

If you don’t solve your moral conflicts on the basis of facts, then you’re solving them on the basis of fantasy.
The Virtue of Justice

“Justice is the recognition of the fact that you cannot fake the character of men as you cannot fake the character of nature, that you must judge all men as conscientiously as you judge inanimate objects, with the same respect for truth, with the same incorruptible vision, by as pure and as rational a process of identification—that every man must be judged for what he is and treated accordingly…”

— Ayn Rand, “Galt’s Speech”
Justice in Moral Conflicts

• The most basic requirement of managing moral conflict well is basing your thinking and actions on facts, rather than fantasy.

• The problem is that the relevant facts are often concealed, overwhelming, confusing, equivocal, or just unknown.

• So, what kinds of facts should you focus on when in the midst of a moral conflict?
The Context of the Relationship

Lesson #1: Keep a firm grasp on the context of your relationship with the other person during any conflict.

• Ask yourself:
  • What is the nature and value of my relationship with this person?
  • What do I know about this person’s overall character, values, dispositions, and personality?

• What does that mean, more concretely?
The Context of the Relationship

• What does that mean, concretely?
  • What is the type and basis of our relationship?
  • How does this relationship benefit me?
  • What important values do we share?
  • What are this person’s working moral principles?
  • What are his notable personality traits?
  • What are his strengths, moral and otherwise?
  • What are his error and failure modes?
The Context of the Relationship

• Lesson #1: Keep a firm grasp on the context of your relationship with the other person during any conflict.

• Why bother? What happens if you fail to do that?
The Context of the Relationship

• What happens if you fail to keep the context of the relationship in a conflict?
  • You’ll make unwarranted assumptions of guilt or innocence.
  • You’ll put too much or too little effort into a resolving a conflict.
  • You’ll imagine personality conflicts to be moral conflicts (or vice versa).
  • You’ll hurt the person’s feelings and make him feel invisible.
  • You’ll preserve destructive relationships and destroy beneficial relationships.
Recap: Lesson #1: Keep a firm grasp on the context of your relationship with the other person during any conflict.

That means:

• Remember who you’re dealing with and the values at stake.
• Put more time and effort into relationships that matter most to your life and happiness.
The Nature of the Action

Lesson #2: Carefully identify and morally evaluate the actions at the root of any conflict.

• Ask yourself:
  • What the heck happened here, in fact?
  • What are my most scrupulously objective moral judgments of that?

• What does that mean, more concretely?
The Nature of the Action

• What does that mean, concretely?
  • What were the actual events and actions?
  • What did the people involved know at the time — or what should they have known?
  • Were better options available?
  • What goals were people pursuing?
  • What principles guided their actions?
  • What’s the nature and extent of the harms done, both existential and psychological?
  • Can the harms be undone or otherwise righted?
The Nature of the Action

• Lesson #2: Carefully identify and morally evaluate the actions at the root of any conflict.

• Why bother? What happens if you fail to do that?
The Nature of the Action

• What happens if you fail to identify and morally evaluate the actions at the root of any conflict?
  • You’ll make false assumptions about people’s actions, context, and motives.
  • You’ll blame someone for honest ignorance or when doing his best in difficult circumstances.
  • You’ll ignore or repress the full harms done — or overinflate the harm.
  • You’ll ignore the significance of the action, including any patterns over time.
The Nature of the Action

• Recap: Lesson #2: Carefully identify and morally evaluate the actions at the root of any conflict.

• That means:
  • Make sure that you know the facts about what happened and why.
  • Judge very carefully, distinguishing preferences and personality from morality.
The Aftermath

- What needs to happen in the aftermath of a wrongdoing to restore the relationship?
  - Recognize the wrong done, fully and clearly.
  - Discuss what happened and why.
  - Apologize and make amends.
  - Agree on steps to avoid repetition.

- Or: Accept the apology but add distance to the relationship or put the person on probation.
- Or: Reject the apology, terminate the relationship.
Moving Forward… Alone

- But… what if the person who has wronged you is unrepentant?
Moving Forward… Alone

• But… what if the person who has wronged you is unrepentant?
  • Accept that the wrong was done and that you can’t change that: pursue your positive values.
  • Feel the hurt, but don’t wallow in painful feelings.
  • Don’t keep hoping for change without reason.
  • Seek out better people to befriend.
  • Review possible warning signs for future use.
  • Talk to friends for support.
  • Make jokes on the internet.
Three Lessons

1. If you don’t solve your moral conflicts on the basis of facts, then you’re solving them on the basis of fantasy. (Hint: that’s not good.)

2. Keep a firm grasp on the context of your relationship with the other person during any conflict.

3. Carefully identify and morally evaluate the actions at the root of any conflict.

Most of all, remember that moral conflicts can be difficult! Be kind to yourself and the people you value.