Morality Today in America: Problems and Solutions

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Morality lies at the heart of human civilization. It is a defining characteristic of life in society. It is the foundation for people's happiness and it motivates people to contribute to society in positive ways. The need for morality can be understood by considering the consequences of immorality. Immorality may lead to long-lasting effects. In discussing the role of morality in modern American society, it will be helpful first to identify the sources of certain problems of morality, and then to consider possible solutions. We will examine three problems of modern society that obstruct a moral life for Americans— racism, the pursuit of money, and misperceptions of people's true motivations— and entertain possible solutions to these problems.

Problem number one is racism. Stereotyping and a self-perpetuating traditions lead to misunderstanding and create many problems. I once witnessed the following incident in a subway station. A black man was begging for money from a white lady. The lady not only refused him the money; she cursed him with a racial slur. The beggar didn't say anything; he just walked away. After that, the lady went to a convenience store to buy water. A bundle of money dropped out of her pocket, but she didn't notice it. The beggar stepped forward, picked up the money, and returned it to the lady. The lady seemed surprised and must have felt embarrassed. She didn't say anything, but she handed the beggar a five-dollar bill. This incident illustrates the importance of morality in social life. The beggar repaid the lady's immorality with morality, thereby removing the obstruction to a charitable social act.

The roots of racism lie in history and stereotyping. During the period of slavery, blacks would often act lazy or stupid as a form of passive resistance

against slavery.[2] They might deliberately break tools or work slowly. Less often, they resorted to actual violence. As a result, blacks came to be stereotyped as lazy and violent. This stereotype encourages some whites to harbor critical views of blacks even today. This lady may have believed that the black man could find a job if he really wanted, but that he was too lazy. She may also have been afraid that he would engage in violence. What can be done to break such stereotypes? The answer lies in education, and in social activities that integrate the races. Curriculum in the schools can emphasize the positive contributions members of racial minorities have made to society. Government and community organizations can create opportunities for diverse communities to interact socially.

A second major problem of morality in America is the ubiquitous, relentless pursuit of money. Even as child in China, I was often told by my parents: "To have a better life, you must earn lots of money." When I didn't do my homework in primary school, my teacher told me, "Do your homework and get good grades, so you will be able to earn a lot of money in the future." In conversations with my brother, he said to me, "I will be a success before you because I am older than you, so I can make money before you can." I was led to conclude that money offers a better life, that the goal of academic study is money, and that money is equivalent to success. Money becomes the goal that most people strive for, and the fight for money drives people's behavior; however, as the saying goes, "money is the root of all evil". People expose their weaknesses when they have a chance to get money. The pursuit of wealth makes people greedy, selfish, sly and tricky. Even the pursuit of a minimal basic income can lead people to engage in dishonest business practices, particularly when times are hard, as they are today. To get money people need power, and to get power they need to abuse others. In other words, when people pursue money for its own sake, they run the risk of becoming evil. Evil is the opposite of morality.

The pursuit of money can even undermine the purpose of education itself. People come to believe that the purpose of education is to obtain a high-paying job, rather than to obtain knowledge.

While we can't stop people from thinking about money, we can provide them with adequate opportunities to advance themselves and prosper in ethical ways. Education is one key. Course offerings in ethics, particularly in business ethics, should figure more prominently in the general education component of higher education. Of course, the increased availability of job opportunities for those who don't have an academic degree, which might come from philanthropic or government sources, would be another key.

People's actions that appear to merit disapproval sometimes appear less objectionable if one contemplates their motivations and origins. On a

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[2] See e.g. Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, Frank Freidel, and Alan Brinkley, *American History* 7th ed., vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), excerpted in Heather Robertson, *Bridge to College Success* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1991, pp. 70-77).

Facebook posting I saw a picture of a 15-year-old girl holding hands with her 1-year-old son. People called her a "slut." They did not know that she was raped at the age of 14. The same posting showed a man people called "fat;" no one knew he had a serious disease causing him to be overweight. Yet another old man was called "ugly" because no one knew he experienced a serious injury to his face while fighting for our country. There is a perceived high rate of criminality among African-Americans. This point of view is expressed explicitly in a song "Hell Yeah" by Dead Prez, which emphasizes that some African-American people keep committing crimes, such as fraud. Based on such sources, people might tend to think that African-Americans actually prefer such a lifestyle, because it affords them free food and an easy life. But Dead Prez's point is actually an expression of anger that African-Americans are treated unfairly due to discrimination, low-paying jobs, and failures of the welfare system. What this suggests to me is that people often are incapable of perceiving the truth behind what they have seen.

Part of the solution to this problem is to encourage people to do more reading, such as "*Black Theater,*" by James V. Hatch, a book of plays about African- American life. Knowledge is the remedy to misunderstanding. These topics should constitute robust elements of the higher-education curriculum. Outside the classroom proper, public lectures offer another possible way to increase people's awareness of morality.

The consequences of immorality pose seriously threats to American society. Racism causes Americans to act unjustly towards one another. The pursuit of wealth makes people dishonest. Misperceptions of people's motives lead to prejudice. Such problems are obstacles to a moral life. To overcome them, American society must turn toward education, both inside and outside of school, an increase in integrated social activities, and a more liberal distribution of wealth and opportunity. Today's Americans have the means to create a better, more moral society.