

Moral Humility: Neither For nor Against

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Our Gospel reading this morning is from Mark 9:33–35:

³³ [The disciples] came to Capernaum. When [Jesus] was safe at home, he asked them, “What were you discussing on the road?”

³⁴ The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵ He sat down and summoned the Twelve. “So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.”

One of the first things that I learned about Laurel, my wife, was that she doesn’t enjoy watching people or animals compete. I found that unusual at first, having grown up in a family of sports fans, but she finds it terribly sad that someone always has to lose.

And yet competition is highly prized today, especially in Western cultures. We compete on TV game shows, on high school basketball courts, and in baking contests. We compete to see who can eat a blueberry pie the fastest, who can lose the most weight, and whose children get into the best colleges. We like to think of ourselves as smarter, stronger, faster—more virtuous, honest, and generous—than people in other towns, states, countries.

In recent years, our competitiveness has divided us into opposing teams on issues of morality, especially in politics relative to our democracy. Americans have split into two groups, opposed to each other on issues that affect our sense of personal ethics and corporate morality—a woman’s control of her body, sexual orientation, access to healthcare, the ability to earn a living, the right to own and carry guns, and so on.

We differ greatly on basic ideas about right and wrong, but it goes deeper than that. We also see everything from an entrenched tribal perspective of *us* against *them*. If you’re *for* and *against* the same things as me, then you’re *right*. But if not, well, you’re just *wrong*.

Who doesn’t like spending time with people who see the world the same way that we do? We tend to surround ourselves—family, friends, work colleagues—with folks who are *for* and *against* the same things that we are.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, writes about what he calls the *moral matrix*, the basic foundations of morality, shared across cultures and religions around the world. Haidt argues that we are born with a sort of draft version of morality genetically implanted within us—some might call this the soul—and that this inborn morality is gradually influenced and changed by our life experiences.

Haidt and other social psychologists say that we all share five basic *moral foundations*. The first foundation is “Care.” We all care about the suffering of others and experience compassion for them. This is the basis for our instinct to protect other people.

The second moral foundation is “Fairness,” which is basically what we think of as the Golden Rule. Treat other people the same way that you want them to treat you. This foundation is common throughout the world’s religions. It has to do with unfair treatment and more abstract ideas of justice and human rights.

“Loyalty” to your group or tribe is the third foundation. The obligations of group membership including self-sacrifice and vigilance against betrayal. As humans, we share an inborn drive to form large groups who join together in protection or competition against other groups. This foundation has its roots in our long history of tribal living.

“Authority” is the fourth moral foundation, and it has to do with social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships, such as obedience and respect. For instance, this instinct helps us know when we need to obey someone else, whether an individual or a government.

And finally, the fifth moral foundation is “Purity,” sometimes referred to as sanctity. Purity is expressed in the idea that you can attain virtue by controlling what you do with your body, what you touch or put into your body, whether you exercise chastity and control your physical desires.

Taken together, these five moral foundations make up what many social psychologists believe to be our common inborn moral matrix, which has become encoded in our DNA as humans have evolved over time. As we grow up, our different personalities, contexts, and experiences gradually teach us to value some of these foundations more than others and to interpret them in different ways.

So, although we all start out as children with the same basic moral beliefs, we can end up as adults with a moral matrix that differs significantly from that of other people. For example, our instinct to protect other people might take a back seat to our instinct for loyalty to our own tribe, if we’ve grown up with racist parents. Similarly, our moral instinct for fairness might overpower our instinct to respect authority, if our state legislature passes a law that we believe discriminates against people of color.

In both situations, it’s easy to see how everyone involved believes that they are standing on firm moral footing, and that they are *right* while those who disagree with them are *wrong*. In effect, we compete with people who believe differently, despite the fact that we are *all* acting in accord with our moral matrix.

Research has demonstrated a strong connection between our moral matrix and our political identity. People who consider themselves *liberals* tend to place higher value on the first two moral foundations, Care and Fairness, while political *conservatives* emphasize Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. Liberals and conservatives are *for* and *against* different things, despite the fact that we all started life with the same moral matrix.

When a conservative is *for* something that a liberal is *against*, they each think that they're *right* and the other person is *wrong*. We are basically in competition with each other, and competition always ends with a winner and a loser. But do we really want to live in a world made up of winners and losers? How does the fact that we think that we're *right* and people who disagree with us are *wrong* fit with our Christian faith?

Sometimes we slip into thinking that being people of faith is easy, but over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus challenges us. For example, what do we do with this passage from Luke 9:46–50:

“Then a dispute arose among [the disciples] as to which of them would be *greatest*. And Jesus, *perceiving the thought of their heart*, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, ‘Whoever receives this little child in My name receives me; and whoever receives me receives Him who sent me. For he who is least among you all will be great.’”

Whoever is least among us will be great? What does that mean? Let's be honest. We don't want to be *least*—we want to be *right*. We want to be *winners*, not *losers*.

I think Jesus is just reminding us to be *humble*. Webster's defines *humble* as, “Having a low opinion of one's own importance: being modest or meek, not proud or haughty.” And if we merge human *morality* with Christian *humility*, I think we begin to understand what Jesus really meant.

According to sociologist Isaac Smith, *moral humility* combines three things:

- (1) a recognition of our own fallibility (I might sometimes be *wrong*)
- (2) an appreciation for the views of other people (Although I disagree with you, you might be *right*)
- (3) and a moral perspective that transcends the self.

Without *humility*, our moral matrix divides us into opposing teams and can blind us to the truth. Everybody thinks they're right, and somebody always loses. But what Smith describes here—*moral humility*—is what Jonathan Haidt calls “stepping outside the moral matrix.”

Eastern religions—Buddhism, Taoism, and others—are way ahead of us on this. They embrace what is known as the Middle Way, neither this nor that, but both. You're probably familiar with the yin/yang symbol, where two forms—one black and one white—interlock to form a perfect circle. In Eastern thought, Yin and Yang are complementary forces—not opposing forces. Together, they make a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts. The Middle Way transcends the Western emphasis on binary opposition and dualism, thus avoiding the pitfalls of division and competition.

I've come to realize that this idea of the middle way is one of the recurring themes of my own life. I was born female and raised as a girl, but I never felt at home in the world of girls. From a very young age, what I really wanted to be was a boy, and I dreamed of growing up and turning into a boy. It wasn't until I was well into my forties that I realized that I wouldn't be any more at home as a man, because I am actually both male and female. I'm a member of a third gender—a

middle way—that combines male and female, and that’s where I’m most comfortable. And the beauty of my “middle way” is that I understand and identify with both men and women.

As I’ve grown older, I can see how my own middle way extends well beyond my gender identity. I grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist church and now worship at a liberal UCC church. My father, the son of an alcoholic, grew up on a dirt farm in a house without electricity or running water. My mother grew up in a nice house in a small Southern city where her father, a highly respected man, ran the Post Office. As a child, I was comfortable in both settings. As an adult, I’ve voted both as a Republican and as a Democrat.

I’ve come to believe that everyone is doing the best that they can within their own moral matrix, and that simply being *for* or *against* something, without humbly trying to understand people who feel differently, is counterproductive. I can often be heard trying to explain to somebody why other people are homophobic, or racist, or won’t get vaccinated against Covid—not because I necessarily share their views, but because I think it’s more important to understand them than it is to be *against* them. That’s the only way that we can get to the truth—and the real truth rests in the middle way, the place of moral humility, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Listen to these words from Sengcan, a Buddhist monk who lived almost 1,500 years ago:

“The perfect way is only difficult for those who pick and choose. Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear. If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.”

The struggle between *for* and *against* is the mind’s worst disease. Powerful words.

We live in a world of *for* and *against* — for and against masks and vaccines, for and against green energy, for and against the right to own guns, for and against universal health care, and on and on. We are trapped in a moral matrix, stuck in a paradigm of winning and losing, where everyone thinks they’re *right* and anyone who disagrees with them is *wrong*.

Jesus invites us to step outside our human moral matrix and embrace Christian humility. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. In Jesus’s words, “He who is the least among you shall be great.”

May we all strive to follow Jesus on the only true road to peace, the path of moral humility, the middle way.