Morality from an HPCT perspective

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET):

Date: Thu Jun 03, 1993 3:11 pm PST
Subject: What's good about morality?

[From Bill Powers (930603.1445)]   Joel Judd (930603) --

Rick Marken appears to be arguing that if you just let children develop all by
themselves, they would turn out to be successful moral beings, but I don't
think that even Rick knows that. There's no way to test the proposition,
short of dumping your children into a wilderness and coming back twenty years
later to see if they're alive, and if so how they turned out. All parents
teach their children about how to be (or how not to be).

However, most of what parents teach children, I am firmly convinced, has
nothing to do with the words with which parents inundate their offspring.
Children learn how to be by considering what their parents do far more than
what they say. If you teach moral principles to children in a patient, kind,
and open-handed way, the children may well learn to be patient, kind, and
open-handed; if you teach the same moral principles in a stern, demanding,
unforgiving way, the children may well learn to be stern, demanding, and
unforgiving. That is, assuming that the children don't rebel or otherwise
refuse to take the parent as an example of a good way to be. The moral
principles children are most impressed with are the ones that the parents
live, not the ones they describe.

>   Surely one could be skillfully controlling for "selling drugs" to make a
     few $$$, or intimidating a classmate, or enjoying sexual intercourse,
     etc. all without conflict. Is that OK with you as long as they are
     functioning well PCT-wise?

Presumably, you're arguing that children need to be taught that selling drugs,
intimidation, and promiscuity are wrong; you're suggesting that they might
become organized to do such things in an unconflicted way, and so would not
violate any principles of PCT even though they are doing something "wrong" in
moral terms.

I think the crux of the present argument comes down to the justification one
gives for moral principles. If there is something wrong with doing the above
things, and many more such as murdering people, breaking your word, being
covetous or jealous or envious or greedy, how do you explain to someone just
what is wrong with doing these things?

The only answers I have seen coming out of religious teachings are that God
has told us that such things are wrong. Such religious teachings seem to
assume that if it were not for revelations handed down to man from God, nobody
would have any basis for declaring any human behavior to be immoral. If God
had not told mankind through Moses that it is a sin to murder, nobody would
ever have figured out that murdering is not an acceptable social interaction.

Perhaps it is true that an ordinary person raised in an ordinary family and
given an ordinary education does not learn any higher personal reasons for
moral behavior. A person raised in such a vacuum might easily find moral
principles difficult to understand, especially when they go against what one
wishes to do in the here and now. Without any framework within which to
understand why some principles work better than others, and to what end, a
person might simply give up on the whole question, and adopt whatever is
offered simply on the basis of threats of punishment or promises of rewards.
You then decide not to murder people because if you do, you will be arrested
and thrown in jail, or be executed. And if you happen to get away with it in
this life, God will catch up with you when you die and you'll roast forever in
horrible torment in Hell. Furthermore, if you do manage to keep all the
commandments in practice and in your heart, God will reward you with

everlasting peace and joy and your soul will spend eternity in an ecstasy of love.

That's all very well, but it still doesn't explain what is wrong with murdering people or breaking any of the other moral commandments, or what is good about keeping the commandments. To live up to the commandments simply because God told you that you had better if you know what's good for you is to give up on trying to make sense of them. You still don't really know why you shouldn't go around murdering people, stealing other people's spouses, etc.. You can find no reason _in your own understanding_ for adopting any moral principles.

From a practical point of view, it's probably a good thing that people who have no inner basis for morality tend to accept the moral pronouncements of authoritative institutions that deal in such matters. A person who truly can't think of any good reason not to murder whomever he or she pleases ought to be sent immediately into some religious institution, and be convinced that murdering people will bring sure and awful retribution, the more awful for being delayed. Such a person ought to be told in the most convincing possible manner that there is a God who knows their every deed and thought, and who is keeping score for a final reckoning. The other people in the world would be fully justified in doing this simply to protect themselves against a psychopath.

On the other hand, I think there can be a basis for understanding morality. HPCT suggests a way. Moral principles are not simply invented at random; they are generalizations which, if maintained in practice, tend to create a social system in which every person respects the will of others and can expect to be respected in turn. When you think of morality as a means for maintaining a certain kind of system, an idea of a human world of which one is a part, it becomes clear that certain principles simply will not work to achieve such a system while others seem to work quite well.

Consider contracts. When a person makes a contract with another, the expectation has to be that the contract will be honored during its lifetime. Each person must realize that there must be a general acceptance of the principle of honoring contracts, for without it, no individual could rely on anyone else. When one person becomes known for breaking contracts, that person finds it impossible to enter into any new ones, and thus loses all the advantages of being able to plan for the future and make bargains with others for one's own benefit. A principle that allows breaking a contract at a whim is simply not practical.

Or consider murder. If it is generally accepted that murder is an option open to any individual, then no individual is safe. Without a general agreement against murdering, you can never know whether the next person to be encountered won't take it in mind to win an argument or just express frustration with something private by pulling out a gun and blowing you away. Penalties for murder are always applied too late to help the victim. The only true safeguard against being vulnerable to murder is to shape a society in which everyone understands that this is not a practical method for solving problems, and why it isn't.

People without a clearly formed set of system concepts have no basis for choosing any particular morality. No basis, that is, except a belief that certain prescribed moral principles are enforced in some way beyond understanding, but also beyond escaping. There is nothing in such people to restrain them when a moral principle comes up against a practical immediate problem of comfort, health, or survival. A person with a clear concept of the kind of society he wants to be part of will be aware that violating the principle will violate something that is more far-reaching than the immediate problem. It makes the person into a member of a kind of society that is, above all, not to be encouraged or exemplified. Even a simple system concept of the kind of person one wants to be, without respect to what others want to be, can be a powerful influence on the outcome when principles clash with immediate needs. When one must alter principles, the existence of a clear system concept will make sure that the alteration does not create, even in principle, a way of being that is not viable for all.

System concepts are a higher level of perception and control than any others, including principles. A person who has a clear and consistent set of system concepts must necessarily submit to them: they are the person's own highest goals. To such a person, moral principles are not simply given as revelations from another world. They are the means by which the most important perceptions of all are maintained in a shape that is consistent, pleasing, and beautiful.

While we can't literally teach system concepts, we can describe, illustrate, and demonstrate them. We can rely on the capacity of a human brain, even a young one, to recognize consistency, elegance, beauty, workability. Even a child can see the difference between a playtime in which everyone squabbles over toys and always gets the favorite one snatched away, and another one in which each child can count on a turn with whichever toy is appealing. Parents and teachers who understand system concepts can show them at work, show how maintaining them results in a better life for even the least and weakest of the individuals.

Religious teachings, stripped of their explanatory frameworks, contain a great deal of wisdom and practical experience. Certain aspects of these teachings evoke in us a sense of powerful goodness, of rightness, as we recognize how much better the world would be if the teachings were followed by everyone. In my opinion, explaining these teachings by saying that they must be followed not because they make sense but because God in all his power and majesty commands that we follow them is to rob human beings of the chance to understand why they are so powerful and seem so good.

Perhaps there are people who are unable to comprehend experience at the level I call system concepts. I doubt that this is really true, but if it were true, there would be no recourse but to invent a God, a Heaven, and a Hell. Without some such constraint, people would pick principles without regard to the welfare of the system of which they are a part. They would choose principles that are to their own immediate advantage, and they would be unaware of what they were doing to the capacity of all people to get along together. The only way to enforce any sort of morality for the social good would be to substitute for understanding the idea that morality must be followed for the _individual's_ good: to avoid personal eternal punishment, or to attain personal eternal reward. That is the sort of concept that a person without system concepts can understand.

But I do not believe that any significant number of people is incapable of grasping system concepts. I think that system concepts are simply not articulated, made clear, made real, taught. I think that children can learn to see why moral principles make sense in their own lives, when they reach the age where system concepts become formed (whenever that is).

Best,   Bill P.