

Morality Part 2

Action, Intention, Circumstances

The topic of morality has two major outcomes: determining right from wrong and assessing the consequences of our actions. In the last session we began to explore the topic of moral law. Although complex, generally everyone accepts certain actions as right or wrong. Within this complex range of right and wrong actions are the nuances or exceptions to the rule which causes the grey of morality. These exceptions and nuances are part of the discussion for this session. We need some law through which we determine right from wrong so that we can decide how to act rightly. But another half of the debate is far more important to most people: am I culpable for my actions? Although we want to know right from wrong, our main desire is to not be punished for our actions. This is the focus of this session. Assuming that actions are right or wrong, how culpable is a person for the immoral action?

Action

The most vital starting point for any moral reasoning is the action. What did the person do? Our main goal is to accurately assess the action of the person so as to describe the scenario well. We fall in the many pitfalls as we try to assess the action of the situation. One pit fall is to be too vague. “The person did something wrong.” This statement tells me nothing about the situation and therefore gives us no way to figure out the morality of the action. Another pit fall is to be too judgmental. “He killed an innocent person.” In this statement I have already declared the action immoral so why bother continuing with the moral reasoning. I have already decided that the action is murder and the person being murdered is innocent. What more could be said? Another pit fall is to be too descriptive. “He used a knife to cut a slit across the man’s throat causing massive amounts of blood to pour out of the wound.” All I needed to say was “he cut a slit in the man’s throat.” This is an action. Our main goal in addressing the action the person took is to determine the morality of the action. If the action itself is immoral, then we don’t need to proceed to the other parts of the equation. Immoral is immoral. If, however, we can describe the action in more neutral terms, then we can address the other factors that affected the action adding color to the moral character of the act. Actions are classified as moral, immoral, or morally neutral. Actions like murder, theft, adultery are immoral. Actions like tripping, walking, taking are neutral. Actions like saving lives, protecting people, and giving are generally moral. Below are some scenarios, which we will use for the remainder of this session, with the appropriate action.

Scenario 1: I was walking along the trail that overlooks the Grand Canyon. As I was grazing at the canyon below, I tripped over a rock and stumbled into a disabled person who went crashing down the slope into the basin of the Grand Canyon. The person died.

Action 1: I murdered the disabled person

Action 2: I knocked into a person.

Action 3: I tripped over a rock while walking.

Scenario 2: After being rejected from two food banks and realizing that I have no money, I walked into the supermarket to get some food. Once the aisle was busy so that no one could see me, I took a box of chocolates from the shelf. I made my way out of the store and then a distance away before eating the chocolates.

Action 1: stealing chocolate

Action 2: taking chocolate from the store

Action 3: taking an item from the store

Scenario 3: As I was walking down the street, I noticed a guy who is my enemy. He constantly harasses me and belittles me. Making an effort to walk by him, I pushed him in such a way that he lost his balance and fell into a food cart covering him in oil that caught fire. Noticing the fire, I called for help then slowly backed away so that I didn't cause any more problems.

Action 1: set my enemy on fire

Action 2: bumped into a man

Action 3: pushed a man into a food cart

Scenario 4: I am in the midst of a major exam. As I take the brutal test my eyes begin to wander. All of the sudden I notice that some of the answers to the exam are posted on the wall. I try to avert my eyes, but the answers are stuck in my head. So, I write them on the exam. It's not my fault that the answers were posted on the wall.

Action 1: I cheated

Action 2: my eyes wandered across the room

Action 3: I saw the answers to the test.

Intention:

The next major part of addressing the morality of an action is the intention behind the action. Whereas we could all come to an agreement regarding the action in a given scenario, finding the intention is much harder. How can we know what a person is thinking? This system is designed that we may make our own decisions and know our own intentions. Intention dictates much of our moral culpability. Since sin is directed related to our choosing it, so moral culpability is determined by our choosing of the immoral action. If we didn't choose the immoral action, then we are not culpable for the bad outcome. If we did choose an immoral action, then we are culpable for our actions. Determining intention is difficult. Like determining the action, we must be careful to accurately describe the person's intention without coloring it with our own ideas of the intention. Take our above scenarios.

Scenario 1: I was walking along the trail that overlooks the Grand Canyon. As I was grazing at the canyon below, I tripped over a rock and stumbled into a disabled person who went crashing down the slope into the basin of the Grand Canyon. The person died.

Intention 1: to see the Grand Canyon

Intention 2: to kill a disabled person

Intention 3: to be lost in the scenery and ignore everyone.

Scenario 2: After being rejected from two food banks and realizing that I have no money, I walked into the supermarket to get some food. Once the aisle was busy so that no one could see me, I took a box of chocolates from the shelf. I made my way out of the store and then a distance away before eating the chocolates.

Intention 1: to steal chocolate

Intention 2: to eat some chocolate

Intention 3: to have something to eat.

Scenario 3: As I was walking down the street, I noticed a guy who is my enemy. He constantly harasses me and belittles me. Making an effort to walk by him, I pushed him in such a way that he lost his balance and fell into food cart covering him in oil that caught fire. Noticing the fire, I called for help then slowly backed away so that I didn't cause any more problems.

Intention 1: to kill my enemy

Intention 2: to harass my enemy

Intention 3: to push my enemy into harms way.

Scenario 4: I am in the midst of a major exam. As I take the brutal test my eyes begin to wander. All of the sudden I notice that some of the answers to the exam are posted on the wall. I try to avert my eyes, but the answers are stuck in my head. So, I write them on the exam. It's not my fault that the answers were posted on the wall.

Intention 1: to let my eyes wander

Intention 2: to let my eyes wander that I may find some answers

Intention 3: to cheat on the exam

Circumstances:

Circumstances color the action. They are everything that surrounds the action and intention giving new definition to the situation. If the action is moral or morally neutral, the intention is moral or morally neutral. Then we can address the circumstances. What other factors contribute to the culpability of the action? Did the person know that by pushing the person into the wall that the swords attached to the wall would kill him? Did the person have other options besides stealing that were not taken? Circumstances are the most complicated part of this equation. If you like black and white answers, then you will have hoped we stopped at action or intention. Often we can discuss circumstances almost endlessly to the point that the action becomes so

muddied or complex that it loses meaning. Therefore we must be careful to keep the circumstances to only those that relate to the scenario at hand.

Scenario 1: I was walking along the trail that overlooks the Grand Canyon. As I was gazing at the canyon below, I tripped over a rock and stumbled into a disabled person who went crashing down the slope into the basin of the Grand Canyon. The person died.

Circumstances: the rock that he tripped over, the fact of not watching where he was going, the laziness of not being attentive, the lack of attentiveness to both the disabled person and the giant chasm nearby.

Not useful circumstances: the fact the agent could walk.

Scenario 2: After being rejected from two food banks and realizing that I have no money, I walked into the supermarket to get some food. Once the aisle was busy so that no one could see me, I took a box of chocolates from the shelf. I made my way out of the store and then a distance away before eating the chocolates.

Circumstances: being turned away from the food banks, being hungry, not seeking other help, the object was chocolate.

Not useful circumstances: a busy aisle, the distance from the store before eating the chocolate.

Scenario 3: As I was walking down the street, I noticed a guy who is my enemy. He constantly harasses me and belittles me. Making an effort to walk by him, I pushed him in such a way that he lost his balance and fell into food cart covering him in oil that caught fire. Noticing the fire, I called for help then slowly backed away so that I didn't cause more problems.

Circumstances: guy is my enemy, made an effort to walk by him, pushed him, food cart, cart full of oil.

Not useful circumstance: the harassment and belittlement.

Scenario 4: I am in the midst of a major exam. As I take the brutal test my eyes begin to wander. All of the sudden I notice that some of the answers to the exam are posted on the wall. I try to avert my eyes, but the answers are stuck in my head. So, I write them on the exam. It's not my fault that the answers were posted on the wall.

Circumstances: major exam, poster on the wall, allowing eyes to wander, writing the answers on my paper.

Not useful circumstances: none.