





Focus

DOING THE RIGHT THING

by Prof Dominic Houlder

“Looking back from 2025, what would have been a good outcome from the pandemic for you and your organisation?” This is the question that we asked several thousands of our former students from London business School in a recent webinar. Some said that survival would be enough; others chose a return to normality. But over half in our poll said that more than anything else they would like to be seen to have done the right thing during the crisis.

What is the right thing? All of us have our own lists of activities that would put us on the side of the angels, and another list of acts of harm that we should avoid. But my definition of the right thing may not be yours. In calmer, easier times we can rub along with those differences. A time of crisis however polarises those differences as we face dilemmas that have no easy resolution and bring us into conflict with the values that others have put high on their own lists.

Could it ever be the right thing for you and your spouse to risk your four-year-old child being taken into care by social services? Would an act of lawbreaking that removed the risk, so minor that the police would take no interest, causing no harm to others, be a worse thing to

do? For Dominic Cummings, the answer was obvious. For many others, the answer was equally obvious: he had done the wrong thing and they remain very angry about it.

In a time of crisis, doing the right thing can deepen conflict unless we recognise the different interpretations of the right thing to do, and their roots, grounded in what philosophers call moral sentiment.

There are four sources of moral sentiment:

- Respect for persons, and the sense of duty – the foundation of the moral law;
- The pursuit of virtue – the cultivation of individual character;
- Feelings of sympathy – the hardwired motive to behave morally;
- The sense of piety – the disposition to revere what we regard as sacred.

“Doing the right thing” means taking all four sources into account. What makes this difficult is that these sources are often incompatible. Duty pulls us one way, and sympathy another way; piety leads us to do one thing, and virtue a different thing. The result is that we frequently find ourselves facing a moral dilemma, in which two incompatible versions of what is right are competing for our allegiance and compliance.

Duty

The best starting point is the categorical imperative, the moral law that treats all persons as sovereign. This is Kant’s version of the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would be done to” or, better perhaps, “Don’t do unto others as you would not want to be done to.” Whenever

we set aside our personal interests and desires, and see ourselves as just one amongst many equal members of the human race, we find ourselves logically compelled to agree on the basic principles of morality ... what might therefore be called the “natural law”:

- The principle of moral equality: whatever applies to one applies to all;
- Rights are to be respected, and duties are to be fulfilled;
- Disputes are to be settled by discussion and reason, not force or fraud;
- Those who abuse the rights of others forfeit rights of their own.

Obeying these principles creates a culture in which our relations with each other are mediated by negotiation rather than force. Moral intelligence resides in the ability to treat both our own interests and those of others consistently from the viewpoint of an impartial judge. Self-interest ceases to be the sole perspective from which moral reasoning emanates. The moral law is deduced from the premise of equality, that we are all subject to the same duties. No one should be morally privileged. The moral law, like statute law, applies equally to all. Human rights cannot be overridden by utilitarian arguments, such as cost-benefit analysis, or consequentialist reasoning, such as the means justifying the end.

Virtue

It is one thing, as a person, to recognise the logic of these four rules of moral conduct, but it is quite another thing to possess the fibre to obey them. Doing the right thing demands strength of will as much as knowledge of the principles. Acting in accordance with the moral law – especially



Sympathy is a core component of our genetic inheritance. Photo by Siggy Nowak.

when it conflicts with one's own personal interests – demands a particular kind of self-discipline and emotional intelligence.

This is where virtue finds its role. As individuals, we need to cultivate those facets of character and habits of behaviour that translate knowledge of what is right into commitment to act of this knowledge. We set aside the temptation to be greedy, selfish, or fearful; we choose to act justly when tempted to cheat; we are courageous when others would be cowardly; we exercise prudence when it would be easier to be careless; we are calm when those around us are intemperate; and so on.

The moral person is one who develops those habits that lean naturally towards embracing and enacting the moral law. By dint of effort and strength of will, virtuous behaviour gradually but surely begins to come naturally. By pretending to be brave, we become brave. By imagining ourselves to be kind, we cultivate kindness. By imitating those we most admire, we echo our heroes. In short, we act our way into the person we become.

Sympathy

We are moral beings not because logic commands it but because we are a social species, hardwired to empathise with others, feel sympathy for those in need, and drawn to alleviate suffering. This provides the mainspring for doing the right thing.

Sympathy is akin to Christian charity, the disposition to feel for others, to walk in their shoes, and to come to their aid. This deeply embedded instinct – accentuated by the coronavirus pandemic – motivates us to address, however imperfectly, the needs and concerns of others. Sympathy is a core component of our genetic inheritance. We are profoundly social creatures. Our most distinctive evolutionary endowment is our capacity for cooperation. As a motive, sympathy underpins and nourishes all the other sources of moral behaviour.

Without it, the moral impulse would never have formed. Concepts of duty, virtue, and care would have needed to have been invented rather than inherited. This is where moral conflicts often arise. We cannot rely wholly upon sympathy to guide

our behaviour. Sympathy can engender extraordinary acts of kindness. It can act as the primary motive in obeying the moral law. But it can also lead us to commit acts of injustice, such as favouritism, nepotism and what has been called “pathological altruism”. Sympathy easily degenerates into sentimentality, defined by TS Eliot as “emotion in excess of the facts”.

One way of addressing these conflicts is by drawing upon utilitarian ethics, the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Morality becomes a branch of economics, weighing benefits against costs, and optimising gains for some against losses for others. The danger here is that we infringe the human rights of a few to serve the interest of the many.

This is why we need the moral law. It acts to limit the behaviours that so easily and naturally spring from the sympathetic impulse. Questions of rights and duties must be settled before the utilitarian calculus is adopted.



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Piety

What makes one do the right thing is not just instinct and reason, but also tradition. We are creatures of our own history as a species. Morality evolves. The respect we show towards sacred things, both natural and man-made, is a permanent reminder of our moral duty. Without some notion that our lives have meaning, that each person matters, and that the world is imbued with value, morality would have little purchase on us, and even less staying power. The disposition to count our blessings, to revere the natural world, to exalt the human form, and to acknowledge the profound mystery of our being, including our own frailty ... these are the signatures of a morally serious society.

Summary

In seeking to do the right thing, particularly at a time of anxiety and suffering:

- Sympathy ignites our moral sensibility;
- Duty, embodied in the moral law, structures it;
- Virtue realises it; and
- Piety is restored by it.



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