EXCERPT FROM

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S RIGHT?

THINKING, DECIDING, AND PERSUADING

CLIFF STROMBERG

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Core Moral Frameworks

TAKE A CLIPBOARD, GO OUT ON THE STREET, and ask random people, "Excuse me, I'm taking a survey: Can you tell me if stealing is wrong, and why?" You might get a few responses like "What are you, stupid?" or "What do I look like, a philosopher?" But more likely you'll hear answers like these:

"It's just wrong: 'Thou shalt not steal' is one of the Ten Commandments."

"Stealing is selfish—it hurts other people."

"Stealing breaks an important rule. If everybody did it, society would fall apart."

"People have a right not to be victims of theft."

"There might be rare exceptions—like if a family is starving and they steal from the rich—but otherwise it's almost always wrong."

"I don't know, stealing just feels evil."

There you have it—wisdom from sidewalk philosophers! They've done pretty well, too, because while entire libraries could be filled with books on moral philosophy, the six responses above encompass the main ways of judging moral conduct that have been devised over the millennia.

This chapter will explore the principal moral frameworks that have developed in Western thought. They're quite intriguing in themselves—and they draw you into very human dilemmas. Understanding them has practical value in everyday life for several good reasons.

First, if you want to be a decent, moral person, you'll need to make decisions in lots of tough situations. Life is just like that; it can't be avoided. And those situations will often present conundrums:

- Do you tell a "white lie" because it spares feelings (or maybe it's not so "white," and just serves your selfish purposes)?
- Do you report a coworker friend because he did something bad and reporting him is the right thing to do—or is that a personal betrayal?
- Do you have a duty to tell your cousin that her husband is cheating on her, or is that wrongful meddling?
- Do you secretly look at your teenager's computer, or is that an immoral invasion of privacy?
- Do you cheat on your taxes "a little"—because, after all, "everybody does it" and you don't want to be "the dummy"?

In deciding such things, you can just go with your gut and muddle through. But at some point, your conscience will ask, "Am I sure I'm doing the right thing? How can I decide between several actions when none of them feels exactly right?"

First, having a moral framework you understand and trust can help you make tough decisions like these, and be at greater peace with your conscience. Amusingly, the erudite website Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that "ethics is widely regarded as the most accessible branch of philosophy . . . because *many of its propositions are, seemingly, self-evident or trivial truths*." Yet ethical choices are often neither self-evident nor trivial.

Second, moral frameworks help us be more effective. Nobody is morally perfect, and we all do unkind or dishonest things. But we don't want to compound that by doing what we intend as a good act only to find that it has the reverse effect. But unless you understand your moral framework—what factors you weigh most and what principles you're trying to uphold—you will stumble into that mistake.

Effective morality is an intellectual and social skill; it can be practiced and improved. Understanding your personal moral framework helps you hit the target you're aiming at. Let me use an analogy. Let's assume you want to be a really good parent. Fine, but unless you reflect on your core beliefs—when it's best to

guide children or let them find their way; why you nurture or withhold; why you forgive or punish them—you won't wind up being the effective parent you want to be. Likewise, you will find it hard to be the kind of moral person you want to be unless you understand *why* you make moral choices as you do.

Third, moral frameworks focus on different elements of morality and so at times they can lead to very different actions. Yes, people acting within each framework can be good and moral. Yes, they frequently reach similar conclusions. But other times they differ—and that's why your framework matters. As you read about these frameworks, one or two may feel more sensible and virtuous to you than the others. It makes sense to pay attention to that feeling.

A final reason for learning about moral frameworks is that you'll often need to argue with others who have different moral viewpoints. Morals are not like food or movies, where we don't really care much if others have different tastes. On moral issues, people believe they are right *and that others ought to see that*. Strong disagreements create emotional divides. Understanding the moral frameworks we'll examine can be essential to conveying your convictions, bridging to another person's viewpoint, and perhaps finding common ground.

The goal of learning about moral frameworks is not necessarily for you to select one as the perfect framework to follow in all circumstances. In practice, all of us switch back and forth between moral frameworks while wrestling with significant challenges. Humans are not purists who routinely rely only on one approach, and that reveals a lot about morality. (We'll explore that in the chapters that follow.)

One simple tool for puzzling through a moral issue is to ask yourself questions such as these:

1. What do I feel about this situation? What does my gut tell me?
2. What's my main reason for seeing this action as good or bad?
3. What will be the consequences for people?
4. Can I think of a principle that could usually guide us well in this kind of situation?
5. Are there good exceptions to that principle or rule? Is this situation one of them?
6. What would a good person do here? How will I feel about myself if I do A or do B?

An interesting, if snarky, tidbit: Some studies have investigated whether being a professional moral philosopher who knows all about moral theories leads a person to be, well, more moral than the rest of us. They found that mostly the answer is . . . No. Apparently, knowing and doing are different.

The Historic Starting Point: Morality Based on Religion

THR was belie tem- atic many time: ated in th you, do ye ition from shall not t shall love ful to you, nen- tary. T peo- ple d do to them I other whic le of dhar L find harm A ind- ness loss as yo A e for your N reci- proc have eme urce of moral inspiration for countless cultures and people through the ages.

About the Author

CLIFF STROMBERG ATTENDED PUBLIC SCHOOLS, won a National Merit Scholarship to attend Yale, from which he graduated *summa cum laude*, and a scholarship to Harvard Law School. He then served as law clerk to a federal judge. A few years later, the President appointed him as Deputy Executive Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, overseeing the policy coordination staff. He was later an advisor to the Federal Trade Commission.

Cliff is the coauthor of several books and was the founding editor-in-chief of a monthly magazine on the health care industry. He served on the board and then was elected chair of the American Bar Association's Civil Rights and Social Justice Section. He also coached traveling AAU youth basketball teams for many years. Cliff is a partner in one of the world's largest law firms, and during his career he has advised many of the nation's leading universities, health care systems, and other health organizations. He has a lifelong passion for philosophy, science, and history.

PERSONAL GROWTH / PHILOSOPHY

From the Introduction to

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S RIGHT?

ARE YOU A GOOD AND MORAL PERSON? Do you have good values? You probably say Yes, although if you're like most of us, you're also aware of how you fall short at times.

But suppose you had to explain to someone with different ideas *why* your ways of deciding tough issues of morals or values are right. Would you say that you just try to follow the Bible's teachings? Or that you adopt reasonable moral principles and follow them consistently no matter what? Or that you follow your gut and do what feels right in a given situation? Or that you try to assess what's the best outcome for most of the affected people? Or that you just seek to behave consistently with the values of the finest people you know?

These are all good starting points, but what if they conflict with one another? And what if your approach doesn't persuade someone else who really matters in the situation? Fulfilling good values and moral conduct isn't just a matter of having a kind heart and a benevolent will. Achieving good also requires *skillful reasoning and sensible problem solving.* It entails astute assessment of facts, emotions, and psychology, as well as wisdom in weighing choices and the ability to explain them to others.

Sharpening your tools for thinking and arguing about values and morals can help you a lot in life. Shouting matches charging people with having "bad values" or "lacking morals" rarely yield good results. Instead, knowing how to engage around values and morals in a skillful way can help one save a marriage, avoid losing a friend, reach wiser decisions at work, and be a better citizen in our democracy.

I know you will argue such issues often. I hope this book helps you do it well.

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