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An Analysis of Overlooking Morals and Ethical Failure

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In humanity, no matter what guidelines people use to live their lives, whether they are religious or not, the importance of “doing the good” is ubiquitous. Therefore, one might question how people fail to act morally so often, when doing the good is valued so highly in society. In order to address this question, one needs to look at the components that contribute to an individual’s moral judgment within a society. This includes the notion of knowing what “the good” is, as well as the simultaneous desire to be recognized and respected by our peers.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant explores the first component of how humans know what the “good” is in his Groundings for the Metaphysics of Morals, when he explains his moral law and the categorical imperative. The philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, on the other hand, explores the second component of the human desire for recognition and respect, in the form of honor through his idea of an “honor code” in his book, The Honor Code; How moral Revolutions Happen.

The ideas of the aforementioned philosophers will be used to assess the connection between morality and societal values as they control which individuals gain honor within a society. This essay will argue that people fail to do the good because the values or, as Appiah calls it, the “honor code” of their society is not created on the basis of a moral law, such as Kant’s moral law. In other words, people in a society do not gain honor and respect by acting morally, but rather by performing actions that are considered good by their peers. Therefore, people choose to perform actions that will yield the

highest gain of honor and respect from their peers regardless of whether their actions are moral or immoral.

As previously mentioned, knowing what is moral and immoral is a crucial factor to a society's ability to succeed in doing the good. Immanuel Kant explains how we know what the good is in his Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, when he talks about the moral law. Kant's moral law says that an action is considered moral if it is good in and of itself so that it could be adopted as a "universal maxim". For example, according to Kant, lying is not considered moral because it cannot be adopted as a universal maxim. If everyone were to lie, society would not be able to function properly. Furthermore, the only reason why people can lie, and get away with it, is because lying is not universal.

Kant also claims that morality is understood "*a priori*", meaning that any rational being can understand what is moral before they are influenced by external factors. In other words, any rational person can understand what is moral based on pure reason alone. This notion plays a huge role in Kant's belief that external factors can lead to immoral actions. Furthermore, he believes that in order to act morally, one must base their actions on the moral law, performing actions that are good in and of themselves and determined through pure reason alone. More specifically, these beliefs are explained by Kant's imperatives, which include the categorical imperative and the hypothetical imperative.

The categorical imperative includes duties that must be fulfilled regardless of personal desire or as a means to achieve a particular end. Furthermore, it includes actions that are good in and of themselves and are not influenced by external factors or to fulfill a personal desire. In the contrary, Kant defines the hypothetical imperative as "the practical

necessity of a possible action as a means for attaining something else that one wants (or may possibly want)” (Kant, 25). In others words, the hypothetical imperative describes an action that is done as means to achieve a predetermined end, and in turn is not good in and of itself.

Through Kant’s moral law, the idea of an *a priori* understanding of morals, and the categorical and hypothetical imperative, Kant explicitly describes how individuals know what “the good” is. As previously mentioned, however, when morality is not considered in the determination of who receives honor and respect in a society, people fail to do the good. Appiah explores the placement of honor and respect on individuals in a society in his book The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen.

One of the crucial points that Appiah makes in his book is that people have a deep need for respect, honor, and recognition due to their highly social humanistic nature. He believes that this idea has been overlooked when assessing how morality and values are shaped within a society. He illustrates this point when he says, “We human beings need others to respond appropriately to who we are and what we do. We need others to recognize us as conscious beings and to acknowledge that we recognize them” (Appiah pg. xiii). Appiah believes that recognition is directly connected to honor and respect, and that humans are inclined to act in a way to gain honor, respect, and recognition from their peers.

Furthermore, in his book, Appiah describes various moral revolutions to explain how it is not morality that causes social groups to deem an action as good or bad, but rather it is the threat to the honor of a society that causes a shift in moral perspective. One of the main focuses of Appiah’s book, as well as this essay, is how this need for

recognition, respect, and ultimately the gain of honor can be used to influence people to act morally, and therefore avoid the failure to do the good.

In the analysis of how one gains honor, Appiah discusses different types of honor that one can earn or be given. There is “competitive honor” and “peer honor”. The former being honor that people work to achieve by performing above a given standard and the latter being honor that is not necessarily earned but given to peers who are in the same social group.

This social group is what Appiah calls, an “honor world”. Appiah defines an honor world as “a group of people who acknowledge the same codes” (Appiah, 20). Or in other words, an honor world is made up of peers who share the same values or conception of honor. This notion of honor worlds and honor is crucial to Appiah’s arguments of how moral revolutions occur, and the power that honor possesses with regard to whether people act morally or immorally. Appiah explains that a threat to the honor of a society from individuals within the same honor world can cause people to shift their immoral practices to moral ones.

The honor code of an honor world is extremely influential on its individual members and their perception of what the good is. Therefore, honor worlds must base their honor codes on morality and give honor to those who do the good. As previously mentioned, people fail to do the good when the honor codes are not based on morals, but rather based on values that are immoral. Kant’s moral law is crucial in the formation of an honor code because it provides a foundation to practice objective universal morality that is applicable to all honor worlds.

As Appiah addresses the moral law in his book, he raises the question: if Kant's moral law provides the foundation to act morally, why is honor so important? Appiah answers this question by arguing that honor, rather than morality, is the agent that governs behavioral change. Appiah makes the argument that a moral law, such as Kant's moral law, by itself cannot drive people to be moral. Therefore, just as the honor code must be based on morals, the drive to act morally comes from honor.

Although Appiah believes that the honor code should be associated with morals, he makes a counterargument against basing honor codes strictly on moral law. He says, "To meet this moral challenge, we don't need forms of honor that are fully moralized, connecting the entitlement to respect only with doing your moral duty. What we need are codes of honor that are compatible with morality, which is much weaker than demand" (Appiah, 183). However, Appiah's argument against creating honor codes that strictly follow a moral law becomes insufficient when addressing situations such as the actions of Adolf Eichmann in the honor world of Nazi Germany.

Hannah Arendt provides evidence for what occurs when honor codes are not created based on universal objective morals in her book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. Arendt writes about the court trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel and the incredibly immoral honor world of Nazi Germany. Adolf Eichmann was a major bureaucrat in Nazi Germany, who was in charge of the mass deportation of the Jews, as well as their placement into concentration camps. In this book, Arendt introduces an incredibly controversial notion that, although Adolf Eichmann played such a large role in the mass genocide of the Jews, according to psychiatrists he was not insane, psychopathic, or sadistic. Arendt describes this when she says, "Half a dozen

psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal' - 'More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,' one of them exclaimed..." (Arendt 25). This is not to say Eichmann wasn't evil, however, psychiatrists just believed that he was psychologically normal.

Therefore, one of the explanations that Arendt offers for Eichmann's extreme failure to do the good is that he gave up his ability to "think". In other words, Eichmann did not assess or know whether his actions were moral or immoral because his honor world's honor code was not based on objective universal morality. On the contrary, the honor world of Nazi Germany consisted of an honor code that gave honor to those who became successful Nazis and in turn acted immorally with regard to objective universal morality. To illustrate this point, Arendt quoted Eichmann when she wrote, "'Nobody', he repeated, 'came to me and reproached me for anything in the performance of my duties. Not even Pastor Grüber claims to have done so,' he then added: He came to me and sought alleviation of suffering, but did not actually object to the very performance of my duties as such" (Arendt, 131).

Due to the idea that Eichmann did not "think" about what was moral or immoral, and his honor world did not find his actions immoral as well, he truly believed that by carrying out his evil duties, he was just a law-abiding citizen and gaining honor within his society. Eichmann's lack of moral assessment was a consequence of what Arendt called "the banality of evil" (Arendt, 252) in Nazi Germany. What Arendt meant by the banality of evil was that evil was so common in Nazi Germany that it became the norm for individuals in the society and therefore reversed their perception of what was right and wrong. As the previous example portrays, Eichmann, as well as many other members of

the Nazi party, failed to do the good because the honor code of their society was not based on morals, and in contrary encouraged evil practices.

As seen from the extreme deviation of Nazi Germany from the rest of the world, with regards to morals, the honor codes needs to be based on morality that is objective and universal. Appiah's claim that the honor codes should not strictly follow Kant's moral law leads to discrepancies between honor worlds on what is right and wrong so that individuals may perform evil without knowing that their actions are immoral. Only when honor is universally given to those who follow the moral law, such as Kant's moral law, will people avoid the failure to do the objective good, while succeeding within their honor world.

Reference:

- 1) Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. Print.
- 2) Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006. Print.
- 3) Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: With on a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*. Trans. James W. Ellington. 3rd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993. Print.