

CS489 Computer Ethics & Social Issues

Assignment #1

Self-evaluation: Am I a Moral Person?

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Q. Write a 500 1,000 words essay with the theme of “my perspective on ethics”. Feel free to choose a topic that meets the theme: you can pick a specific technical or social issue, or try to describe your broader ethical view.

In the recent lecture (of November 5th), we learned about different perspectives on ethics. I learned many new terms, but I was quite familiar with most of the concepts.

When I was a high school student, I read the first book of *The Republic* by Plato. I always wanted to be a ‘good’ person, but then I noticed that I never asked the relevant questions. What is good? Why should I be good? I noticed that until then, I was merely acting polite; following social conventions and behaving in taught manners. I was shocked by my ignorance, and I started to read diverse philosophy books. After I finished *The Republic*, I moved on to *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle, to *The Prince* by Machiavelli, and the journey went on to relatively recent books, such as *What is Justice* by Michael Sandel.¹ I was also interested in oriental philosophy. I believed if we get rid of some obsolete parts from the Confucianism, we can still find applicable wisdom from the philosophy. I had many debates on the morals of social issues with my friends and occasionally re-established my ethical perspective.

As I study, I was able to develop my morality. I categorized myself as a deontologist - but rather a flexible one. I followed my conscience, but it did not necessarily agree with the legal obligations. I was a guy who would cross a street in red light without guilt if there is no car around. For me, the law is no more than a social agreement to settle problems when conflict occurs. I put my moral law above those rules.

I was loyal to my conscience. I admired people who walk on the righteous path with good cause. I pursued virtues. I made an ideal - selfless, optimistic, and kind - version of me and tried to be the person. So in my definition, I was a moral person.

However, at the back of my mind, I knew I was not. I knew I was not the saint (or gentleman, 군자 in Korean) I wanted to be. I had selfish, anxious nature in me, and I often hesitated to do the right thing. I confess I sometimes let that weak aspect of me win, and ignored my conscience when I am stressed out. I felt like a hypocrite and blamed myself for not being a more disciplined person.

Anyway, I was confident that I had a concrete ethical standard. I may not be a moral person, but I believed I would know what is right and wrong with certain. But that arrogant misconception shattered in my first year at college.

It was during the school festival. My friends and I were selling hotdogs at the club booth, and the change ran out. Banks were closed, so we needed somewhere else to get

¹It doesn't mean that I understood those books in depth. I was a teenager, and I barely got a glimpse of the arguments

coins. I came up with an idea. I suggested that we can exchange coins from the coin-exchanger machine at school karaoke.² Nobody guards the facility, and since we're paying the equivalent amount of money, I thought there's nothing wrong with the idea. But then my best friend laughed out loud and said that I must be joking. He claimed that we shouldn't. Though he didn't even tell me why it's wrong, I felt a rush of embarrassment sweeping over me. The idea, which seemed like a clever one only a moment ago, now felt simply wrong.

I didn't know that I could withdraw my moral judgment that quickly. But it was not the act by surprise. The incident at the school festival was probably nothing. I could say "well, guess I'm wrong then" in a blink because it was not a big deal. But I asked myself, what if we disagree on more pressing issues? What if a person I love claims that what I believe right is wrong? Or even more, what if he/she wants me to do an immoral action on my standard? I would probably argue. I'll try to persuade him/her so that I could keep my conscience. But what if it's inevitable? If people I love need me to do something against my conscience, what shall I do? Answering the question wasn't difficult. I was ready to get my hands dirty for them. I'd rather live with guilt than let them down.

I realized that people I love mattered to me more than my conscience. It was because that was the basis of my morality. I was never concerned about being a 'good' person. I want to be a person that people I love need. But it doesn't mean that my past conscience, the inquiry in ethics became irrelevant. I built my relationship on my moral ground, so people around me share a similar ethical view with me. They are my external conscience, responsibility.

I am the same person as I was before. But now I am more honest with myself. I learned that I was not seeking justice but acceptance. I admitted my selfishness and desire to be loved and noticed. I no longer act as if I'm a philanthropist, but devote my love to people I sincerely care about. I now think of my moral laws as the preference, not the obligation. I try to be a good man not because I feel like I should, but because I want to.

I once thought ethics as the study of justice and truth. But perhaps, there is no such thing as absolute goodness. To be honest, I don't care anymore. I just hope I'm good enough for somebody. I study ethics to understand people; to learn their motives and behaviors. I study ethics so that I can respect people around me. I study ethics to be a better friend, a better companion. So am I a moral person? Well, it's not for me to decide.

²we have coin karaoke facility near the outdoor theater.