Why Be a Good Person?

The superlawyer argues that the truly moral person is the atheist who behaves well

By Alan Dershowitz

For most people, the question why be good--as distinguished from merely law abiding--is a simple one. Because God commands it, because the Bible requires it, because good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. The vast majority of people derive their morality from religion.

This is not to say that all religious people are moral or of good character--far from it. But it is easy to understand why a person who believes in a God who rewards and punishes would want to try to conform his or her conduct to God?s commandments. A cost-benefit analysis should persuade any believer that the eternal costs of hell outweigh any earthly benefit to be derived by incurring the wrath of an omniscient and omnipotent God.

Even the skeptic might be inclined to resolve doubts in favor of obeying religious commands. As Pascal put it more than three hundred years ago: ?You must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.?

I have always considered ?Pascal?s Wager? as a questionable bet to place, since any God worth believing in would prefer an honest agnostic to a calculating hypocrite. To profess belief on a cost-benefit analysis is to trivialize religion. Consider, for example, the decision of Thomas More to face earthly execution rather than eternal damnation. When the king commands one action and God commands another, a believer has no choice. This is the way More reportedly put it: ?The Act of Parliament is like a sword with two edges, for if a man answer one way, it will confound his soul, and if he answer the other way, it will confound his body.?

More followed God?s order and give up his life on earth for the promise of eternal salvation. For his martyrdom--for his goodness--More has been accorded the honor of sainthood.

I have never quite understood why people who firmly believe they are doing God?s will are regarded as ?good,? even ?heroic.? For them the choice is a tactical one that serves their own best interests, a simple consequence of a cost-benefit analysis. Thomas More seemed to understand this far better than those who have lionized him over the centuries.

To a person who believes that the soul lives forever and the body is merely temporary, it is a simple matter to choose the edge of the sword that will cut off earthly life but preserve the soul. Heaven and hell are forever, while life on earth, especially for a man of More?s age, lasts only a few years. Therefore, if More truly believed in reward and punishment after life, he was no hero. By choosing death over damnation, he demonstrated nothing more than his abiding belief; giving up a few years on earth for an eternity in heaven was a wise trade-off that should earn him a place of honor in the pantheon of true believers, but not in the pantheon of heroes.

The basic question remains. Why is it more noble for a firm believer to do something because God has commanded it than because the king has, if to that person God is more powerful than any king? In general, submission to the will of a powerful person has not been regarded as especially praiseworthy, except, of course, by the powerful person. Would Thomas More have joined the genocidal crusades in the 11th century just because God and the pope commanded it?

If he had, would he justly be regarded as a good person?

Nor is this question applicable only to Christian believers. I have wondered why Jews praise Abraham for his willingness to murder his son when God commanded it. A true hero who believed in a God who rewards and punishes would have resisted that unjust command and risked God?s wrath, just as a true hero would have refused God?s order to murder ?heathen? women and children during the barbaric crusades.

The true hero--the truly good person--is the believer who risks an eternity in hell by refusing an unjust demand by God. The great 18th-century rabbi, Levi Isaac of Berdichev, was such a hero. He brought a religious lawsuit against God, and told God that he would refuse to obey any divine commands that endangered the welfare of the Jewish people.

By doing so, Levi Isaac may have risked divine punishment, but he acted heroically. He stood up to a God who he believed had the power to punish him but who he also believed was acting unjustly. In challenging God, he was following the tradition of the heroic Abraham, who argued with God over His willingness to sacrifice the innocent along with the guilty of Sodom, rather than the example of the compliant Abraham, who willingly obeyed God?s unjust command to sacrifice the innocent Isaac (or the ultimately compliant Job who apologizes to God for doubting His justice, after God had indeed acted unjustly by killing Job?s children just to prove a point to the devil.)

This then is the conundrum of judging goodness in a religious person who believes in divine reward and punishment. Those religious leaders who select martyrs and saints cannot have it both ways. They cannot declare someone to be both a hero and a believer, because the two honors are logically inconsistent. The undoubting believer is less of a hero for choosing death over eternal damnation. The real hero is necessarily less of an undoubting believer. Real heroes are those who face death for a principle--say, to save the lives of others--without any promise of reward.

Only if More were in fact a hypocrite, feigning belief in the hereafter but really a secret disbeliever, would he deserve the status of hero, but then of course he would be denied the accolade given for true belief--and for honesty.

There is, to be sure, an intermediate position. More could have been someone who tried hard to believe but could not suppress doubt. I suspect many thinking people today are in that position. If that were the case with More, his decision to choose death entailed some degree of risk. Maybe he was giving up a bird in his earthly hand, namely what was left of his life, for two in the heavenly bush, namely a chance at a possible heaven.

But this, too, would be a calculation, albeit a more complex and probabilistic one. (I am not suggesting that religious martyrs always think this way consciously, but surely they experience this mix of belief, calculation, and action at some level.)

This is not to argue that believing persons cannot be truly moral. They certainly can. Perhaps they would have acted morally without the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. This is to suggest, however, that to the extent conduct is determined by such promises and rewards, it is difficult to measure its inherent moral quality, as distinguished from its tactical component.

But what about atheists, agnostics, or other individuals who make moral decisions without regard to any God or any promise or threat of the hereafter? Why should such people be moral? Why should they develop a good character? Why should they not simply do what is best for them?

Even the Bible provides a model for such people. The author of Ecclesiastes explicitly tells us that he (or she, since the original Hebrew word for Ecclesiastes is Koheleth, which means ?female gatherer?) does not believe in any hereafter.

> I have seen everything during my vain existence, a righteous man being destroyed

> for all his righteousness and a sinner living long for all his wickedness.
>
> [T]he fate of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As the one dies, so does the other, for there is one spirit in both and man?s distinction over the beast is nothing, for everything is vanity. All go to one place, all come from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows whether the spirit of men rises upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?

Not surprisingly, Ecclesiastes concludes that ?there is nothing better for man than to rejoice in his words, for that is his lot, and no one can permit him to see what shall be afterwards.? And Ecclesiastes goes onto recommend hedonistic selfishness as a response to the absence of a hereafter: ?I know that there is no other good in life but to be happy while one lives. Indeed, every man who eats, drinks and enjoys happiness in his work--that is the gift of God.?

Ecclesiastes is wrong. Even if there are no heaven and hell, there are good reasons for human beings to do better than merely be happy. The truly moral person is the one who does the right thing without any promise of reward or threat of punishment--without engaging in a cost-benefit analysis.

Doing something because God has said to do it does not make a person moral: it merely tells us that person is a prudential believer, akin to the person who obeys the command of an all-powerful secular king. Abraham?s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac because God told him to does not make Abraham moral; it merely shows that he was obedient.

Far too many people abdicate moral responsibility to God; as Abraham did. Accordingly, for purposes of discussing character and morality, I will assume that there is no God who commands, rewards, punishes, or intervenes. Whether or not this is true--whatever true means in the context of faith--it is a useful heuristic device by which to assess character and morality. Just as Pascal argued that the most prudent wager is to put your eternal money on God, so too, it is a useful construct to assume God?s nonexistence when judging whether a human action should be deemed good.

There is a wonderful Hasidic story about a rabbi who was asked whether it is ever proper to act as if God did not exist. He responded, ?Yes, when you are asked to give to charity, you should give as if there were no God to help the object of the charity.?

I think the same is true of morality and character: in deciding what course of action is moral, you should act as if there were no God. You should also act as if there were no threat of earthly punishment or reward. You should be a person of good character because it is right to be such a person.

I am reminded of the cartoon depicting an older married man marooned on a deserted island with a younger woman. He asks her to have sex, arguing, ?no one would ever know.? The woman responds, ?I would know.? The ?I would know? test of good character is a useful one.

What then is the content of good character in a world without the threat of divine or earthly punishment and without the promise of divine or earthly reward? In such a world every good act would be done simply because it was deemed by the actor to be good. Good character in such a world would involve striking an appropriate balance among often competing interests, such as the interests of oneself and of others, of the present and of the future, of one?s family (tribe, race, gender, religion, nation, and so forth) and of strangers.

Since the beginning of time, civilized humans have struggled to achieve that golden mean. The great Rabbi Hillel put it well when he said: ?If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am for myself alone, what am I??

Good character consists of recognizing the selfishness that inheres in each of us and trying to balance it against the altruism to which we should all aspire. It is a difficult balance to strike, but no definition of goodness can be complete without it.

Lawyers, perhaps more than most others, need a strong moral core because their professional terrain is so ethically ambiguous and because the temptations to take moral short cuts are so pervasive. For some, this moral core will derive from religious belief, for others from a philosophical commitment, and yet for others from the oath we take when we are admitted to the bar. Whatever its source, the moral core should serve as a constant, against which professional judgments are evaluated.