

AlbertMohler.com

# Modernity, Madness, and Morals

Monday, July 14, 2008



Why do you do what is right, rather than what is wrong? That is hardly a new question. It troubled the minds of the ancients. Some felt that humans are naturally drawn to virtue, but they were hard-pressed to explain why some individuals seemed to resist this impulse. Others argued that society had to make a firm impression upon the young, inculcating a desire for virtue and character that was more external than internal.

Fast forward and the Victorians in Britain were convinced that a lack of virtue could be traced to either heredity or deprivation. Assuming the British middle class as normative, the Victorians offered the advice famously advocated by Jiminy Cricket to

Pinocchio — “Let your conscience be your guide.”

Experience indicates, consistent with what the Bible teaches, that this advice has limited value. The conscience is a human capacity for sure, part of the moral sense that testifies of the *imago Dei*, but it is just as deformed by the Fall as any other capacity. Conscience alone explains nothing. Many of the most heinous acts in human history have been done by individuals with a clear conscience. The conscience can lie, rationalize, and deceive.

More recently, moral philosophers have settled on a more clearly secular theory of morality — rational choice theory. According to rational choice theory, people tend to settle on a moral code that fits their needs and leads, or is likely to lead, to their desired outcomes. In other words, individuals make a rational choice. A young woman might make a rational choice not to engage in premarital sex because she does not want to harm her reputation or opportunities or marriage. A young man might not shoplift because it would harm his chances of advancement. Rational choice theorists argue that their theory can explain virtually *any* human behavior, including moral choice.

We must admit that there is ample evidence to support this theory, at least in many cases of moral choice. This is a very significant insight for Christian theology, for it reminds us that when people make a choice to *do* good, it does not follow that they *are* good.

Take the example of two ten-year-old boys. One is considered a “good” boy because he is pleasant, respectful, obedient, and rarely breaks rules. The other boy is a “bad” boy who is markedly unpleasant, disrespectful, disobedient, and regularly flaunts his breaking of rules. Without doubt, we would rather that our own 10-year-old son, if we had one, would sit next to the first boy in class, rather than the second. But is the first boy really a “good” boy, and is the second really “bad?”

In reality, the first boy may have decided that being “good” works for him. His parents expect it of him. He is rewarded when he obeys (even if the reward is what merely comes his way with parental pleasure) and he is punished when he disobeys. He may have learned to play the game — a game with far larger rewards later in life. Life goes much easier for this lad when he behaves well and is seen to do so — so he does.

The second boy has no experience of similar controls. He does not expect life to go better for him if he behaves well.

He may lack parents who would even teach him how to behave, much less reward him when he obeys and punish him when he disobeys. Instead, he learns that cutting corners, breaking rules, flaunting his misbehavior, and playing the part of the “bad” boy works for him. He gets more attention (even if negative attention) and gains the respect of his peer structure by misbehavior.

As twentieth century authors like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut understood so well, standing upside-down works rather well when the world is upside-down.

Minette Marrin raises many of these issues in her insightful report on Britain’s problem of criminal youth — boys and young man who have rejected the social contract and are seemingly beyond the reach of those who would reform them. In other words, these are young males who have made a rational choice to be criminals, she argues.

Her report was published in the July 13, 2008 edition of *The Times* [London]. As she makes her case, she also offers some important insights into how Britain negotiated away its common moral commitments.

She writes:

*No one disagrees any longer that Britain is in parts and in places broken; Gallowgate [in Glasgow] is a horrifying microcosm of broken families, broken spirits, broken health and broken schools; it is a dark place of chronic unemployment, violence and crime, of disorder and fear — a disgrace to the supposedly developed world.*

*It’s also true that at long last people of all persuasions are beginning to recognise that this social breakdown is due in part to the abdication both of authority and of personal responsibility that began some time after the war. Some are inclined to emphasise the demoralising paternalism of the welfare state, others the permissiveness of the 1960s, but few now question this abdication, at all levels. Not only that — taking personal responsibility is sometimes forbidden, or punished, as when misguided adults try to control delinquent children in the street.*

*However, while personal responsibility and shared morality are essential to a good society and the only glue for a broken one, neither can be had just by whistling for them. Both depend on an instinctive sense of a social contract. Conventional morality is meaningless to a boy who has nothing whatsoever to gain by good behaviour. Personal responsibility means nothing if you have grown up neglected, abused and powerless among adults who hardly know what it is and feel powerless themselves.*

Those paragraphs contain crucial moral insights and social observations. Many of those insights and observations would fit just as well with reference to American cities and American youth. One important difference is that a smaller percentage of American boys and young men seem yet to have abandoned the entire social contract.

Then comes Marrin’s key paragraph:

*Morality depends on having something to lose. It isn’t just a matter of learning right from wrong, least of all in a post-religious society. Morality is socially constructed. I will respect your property and your person because I want you to respect mine. We both have something to lose. One does not have to be educated in political philosophy to understand that ancient deal. But if I have neither property nor respect from anyone, what’s in the deal for me?*

With this paragraph she articulates rational choice theory in all of its plausibility and all its inherent limitations. We must admit that much of what we call morality is indeed socially constructed — matters of cultural context and custom. But we fool ourselves if we believe that *all* morality is socially constructed. Rational choice theory must assume that it is, but a bit of serious reflection is enough to throw all that into doubt. The Christian worldview insists that morality depends ultimately upon the character of God.

God’s own righteousness is the ground of authentic morality and His revelation of what is right and what is wrong (as Paul reminds us, in nature, in conscience, in the law, in the Scripture, and in Christ) is our only sure guide.

Minette Marrin offers frightening insights in her important report. These insights should humble the proud, and make us all a bit more aware of just why we “behave” when others do not. A good dose of rational choice theory is humbling indeed. But, at the same time, we must be thankful that this is not where we are left.

The rational choice theorist has little or nothing to say to the boys and young men of Minette Marrin's concern. The Christian church *does* have something to say — the liberating truth of the Gospel. But in order to be heard, we had better first be humbled by the honest recognition that we are not as "good" as we like to think. We are all delinquents — every last one of us.

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.