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Just Peachy

Mixed Media

The exploration of human morals can be terrifying. What do we believe is right or wrong and why? What experiences influence our values? Human life is so much more than just two shades, and yet we tend to see things in only black and white. This creature is something born from this contradiction. Through its hands, it offers two lenses. It mocks those who make the choice to see without colors. But can we really escape from its clutches? How do we learn to see from others' perspectives and make less biased judgements? When we are trapped in the cycle of classifying our world into just two sides, it is difficult to see what really lies around us.

Our stories illustrate this struggle to find moral truth. At the base of the creature, I included questions or quotes related to the complexities of this topic. How do we decide who to be when the world tells us we can only be one of two shades? What happens when we believe in ourselves to the point of fault? Instead of following extremes, it is necessary to ask questions, so that we can slowly chip away at a perspective that is divided into light and dark.

The cloak the creature wears is an unveiled depiction of humanity. It is painted with the primary colors of both the artist's color wheel and the RGB color system; red, yellow, green, and blue. Red is often associated with passion, love, life, or the color of blood. The handprints on the pattern's border convey the vividness of our existence. When we are gone, the mark we leave behind is stories of the life we lived. These cannot be classified into good or bad, only twisted by the perspectives that view them.

The Moral Story:
What is the Human Moral Compass and How
Do Stories Help Us Understand It?



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Writer's Note: This paper explores the complexity of moral thought and feeling. How do humans make moral decisions and what should we be aware of when considering this? What do the stories we experience teach us about the human moral compass? In particular, I focus on stories that have a special place in my heart: the shows with moral messages that I watched growing up with my dad or sister.

I. The Story of a Cowboy

A man rides up a long, dusty road. His horse whinnies as he pulls it to an abrupt stop, a cloud of dirt rising from the ground behind them. He squints in the high noon sun, pulling his legs over and off the horse. In the distance, he hears the faint sound of a woman screaming. The man tenses his shoulders, resting one hand at the gun on his waist. Slowly, and with caution he draws it, adjusting the shiny silver sheriff's patch on his shirt. His brown leather boots creep forward until he stands in front of the swinging door of a saloon. He had arrived in town the previous morning due to a report from the county office. Red-eye Joe, a criminal caught by him two years prior, had escaped three weeks ago and made dealings with the wrong sort of folk. They had only noticed his disappearance on the monthly prison maintenance check, which had found three other vacancies, all similarly linked. Joe and his band of escapees had crept over the mountain ridge west of the prison and made a deal with the neighboring gang of bandits. Though the man had no clue as to the terms of this alliance, he was sure both parties had nefarious aims. They had made moves on a small town two miles away from the top of the ridge. His job, as the county sheriff, was to execute justice and capture Joe, dead or alive. As Joe was a notorious womanizer and drunkard, he was sure he would find him in the town saloon.

The man kicks open the saloon door, causing more than thirty heads to turn. He scans the area wildly, looking for the source of the scream. An older man with a potbelly and a short, silvery beard grabs a barmaid, who is shaking in terror. His eyes are crinkled up in malice, one surrounded by a puffy red patch of skin. It is Joe, though he looks much older than during his capture two years ago. The lines on his face are more defined and his hair has turned a more complete shade of gray. He meets the man's gaze, and unexpectedly, smiles.

It is a trap. The man knows this by now, and ducks for cover. Joe's new allies appear from the second story of the saloon, leaning over the wooden railing with guns in hand. They all sport the rough faces and hard eyes of thieves. But they don't shoot. The man thinks that the guns must be a bluff to scare him. They won't hurt him. Joe intends to talk, and they stand aside and follow his instructions. It doesn't matter to the man, his duty comes first. He still must take them into the county office. Even among the members who had never had a chance to terrorize traveling shopkeepers, helping a criminal was a crime in its own right.

Joe lets out a deep laugh. His voice is low and gravelly. He lights a cigar, gives it a puff, and addresses the man. "I know you're hiding, you should come out," He puts his gun on the floor, and pulls the barmaid closer. "Look, I put down my weapon. I just want to talk. I don't have a habit of injuring innocent townsfolk."

The man is wary, disturbed by the way Joe holds the lady. "Let go of the girl," He says, standing up.

Joe chuckles, "What, you don't recognise her?"

The girl's face turns upwards in a malicious smile. She appears small, yet holds her body confidently. "You should give her more credit, after all she's the one who designed this elaborate ruse."

The man's face twists with puzzlement. "Who?"

"My daughter. I told her revenge was fruitless, I learned that two years ago. But she can't forgive what you did to Liza." He sighs, "I'm getting older, so I thought I could at least help her with one final thing."

"Liza?" The man's face turns dark.

"Yes, your coworker, if I recall. And my niece. You were so focused on the job back then. I tried to tell her not to fall for Jimmy, but she wouldn't have it." His voice breaks. "When Jimmy pickpocketed a lady on third street, you knocked into him so hard, he fell and started bleeding. Still, he refused to return the money, saying he needed it for his wife and unborn child. He was never one to follow the rules. But he loved Liza with all his heart."

The man knows where this is going. He clenches his fists, but lets Joe continue speaking. It is his duty as an officer not to interrupt and let a criminal present his plight. "You challenged him to a duel, told him that if he didn't accept, you would let him rot in prison for five years. So he accepted. When Liza found out, she was distraught. But because it was you, she told me it was fine. You never aimed for the heart. On the day of the duel, you drew first, and shot him in the shoulder. He called you a dirty dog. You grew enraged, pulled up your gun. But she stood in front of him. I don't know if you intended too, but you blew a hole through both heads. They died from the same bullet."

Joe finishes recalling. The man's fingernails dig sharply into his hands. He believes in the justice of the law, first and foremost. "Liza is gone. She helped a criminal, and that's what killed her. You don't have to bring up the dead. Are you coming with me willingly or do I have to drag you from the back of my horse?"

Joe's face turns cold. "This isn't the conversation I wanted to have."

“Then what type of talk were you looking for?” The man smirks darkly.

“Tell me why she had to die. Was it an accident? I thought you were friends.”

The man laughs. “You don’t deserve to know. Are you coming willingly or not?”

Joe’s eyes are on fire. He stands up, his full figure tall and intimidating. “I refuse.”

The man is angry. A gunshot fires. Joe looks down, and staggers backwards. A red spot begins to grow on his shirt. The girl screams. Not a pitiful, weak squeal, but one of uncontained anger. She is heartbroken. She wants to kill the holder of that shiny silver badge. A knife wizzes past the man’s ear. He picks up the blade from its place stuck within the wall. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The girl understands. This man can kill her, easily. Her father’s attempt at a peaceful conversation, man to man, never had a chance of working. Even if she attacks him, he will beat her alone easily. She is too young, too weak. They both know this. The gears in her head began to spin rapidly. Her only chance of winning was outwitting him, but that plan had already shattered. But she could easily find him again to achieve her revenge. As long as he kept the sheriff’s badge.

She orders her allies to retreat. He watches them go. They could probably kill him, and he knows this. But many would lose their lives in the process, both the ridge dwellers and the remaining townsfolk in the saloon. It wasn’t a good idea. She would try again, when she knew she had an advantage over the man. Then she could finally get the answer her father had been searching for.

They leave the saloon, and then the town. Her plots will continue, and thrive in the shadows. She watches the man ride off on his horse into the sunset, Joe’s corpse dragging behind him on a long twined rope. As he leaves her body is racked with sobs.

II. Moral Directions

A moral compass is an internal set of values that helps guide a person in ethical behavior and judgements. Each person's values are different. Some people value honesty, and others success, and we understand each ideal to varying degrees. No one person can say for sure what is right and what is wrong: it is all up to the individual and the society that they live in. One might say that on all accounts, there are certain things that are unethical. Like murder, arson, or killing animals. Then I would point to the top of my page and explain the story of the western cowboy. That man, who is on some occasions a sheriff, kills for "justice" on a regular basis. So the point is, our perception of values changes depending on the situation. We watch a movie where a cowboy shoots up a group of Natives and shows no mercy, thinking nothing of it. Or maybe you do think something of it. Most of the time, we don't notice these contradictions. Why is it okay for a western cowboy to pick up a gun if shooting people is wrong? Is killing okay if the person is truly evil? If there is a line between good and bad, it is often difficult to find. It acts like one of the physics problems my teacher gave me last semester. The problem goes like this:

Timmy can be standing to the left of a schoolgate and Martha can be standing just in front of it. Neither person moves. A blue ball is somewhere around the center of the gate. Timmy says the ball is in the exact middle of the gate, while Martha says it is not. Is either of them right? Where the ball appears to be is relative to each person's perspective. Our moral compass acts the same.

III. History and Evolution of Moral Theories

The study of human morals and their origins began over a thousand years ago, one of its first popular appearances being in the works of Plato around the 4th century B.C. In his writings, he emphasized the importance of reason in human thought and decision making. Emotions were unneeded and unwanted, a struggle that great thinkers had to overcome. Descartes, a philosopher

of the 17th century, continued this trend, his essays becoming one of the rationalist pillars of the European enlightenment. It was only in the mid-18th century however, that a group of English and Scottish philosophers began to question logic as the root of moral decision making. David Hume, one of the leading thinkers of this group, argued that moral judgements are derived from feelings, not reason. We gain moral knowledge from an immediate feeling, not a slow and deliberate logical process. Reason alone cannot lead to or prevent an action, only inform it.

In Avengers: Infinity War, for example, Thanos knows snapping his fingers will kill billions of creatures, but because he doesn't actually care about them, he is unwilling to stop his agenda. Unfortunately, this perspective on ethics was not much appreciated by other philosophers in this period. Kant's theories, tied to rationalism and made partially as arguments against Hume, were far better received.

During the approach of the 20th century, psychologists finally made the jump away from a focus on human reason. Freud, a popular psychologist from this time, theorized that people's judgements were driven by unconscious desires and feelings, which then become rationalized by publicly acceptable reasons. Though some of his ideas were certainly extreme (especially his work describing the link between decisionmaking and sexual inclinations), Freud's theories represented a switch from previous schools of thought.

Nevertheless, with the start of the 1960's Cognitive Revolution, an intellectual era focused on understanding mental processes, Rationalism returned yet again. Lawrence Kohlberg, with his experiments presenting moral dilemmas to a group of people, created a three stage model of intellectual-moral growth. People begin as egotists, making moral decisions on the basis of the positive or negative consequences they bring to the self. Over time, someone's moral identity

begins to take place and they come to rely less on external disciplines and more on internal beliefs. Unfortunately, this model does not always explain one's actions.

Children are born with the necessary conditions to develop morally. They have empathy, the ability to feel another's pain or pleasure. Babies and toddlers cry when they hear crying and giggle when they hear laughter. But this doesn't mean they necessarily understand another's emotions or know the correct way to respond. This must be learned through social experiences. After childhood, the capacity for empathy often stops growing or lessens over time.

Cruelty occurs when someone either refuses to act empathetically or hasn't yet learned the correct social response. When I was small, my uncle came over for spring break. He told me he would miss me dearly once he departed from the airport. I hugged him, looked up to see his sadness, and then told him, "Don't worry. I won't miss you. Gae Gae (what I call my grandma) is coming tomorrow, so I won't be sad." Was this the correct response? Certainly not. I wanted to comfort him, but didn't know how yet. Instead I said something completely insensitive and was scolded by my mother. I cried and apologized over and over. Acting with compassion requires understanding, and at that point in time, I didn't contain it.

Then, my moral identity was still developing. Usually, it takes its form in late childhood. We go through social experiences to grow intellectually and emotionally. I was too young and naive to know the consequences of my actions, but I would understand them later in my development as I began to form a moral heart of my own.

We learn our ideals from our parents, shows we watch, our friends, our society, and the truths we realize in ourselves. This moral identity determines what we think the right course of action is in a given situation. These are not intellectual ideals, but rather emotional ones. Though moral judgements can be made through logical processes, most often they are created by our moral

emotions unconsciously, and then backed up by moral reasoning to justify our feelings. This is the social intuitionist model, a figure first theorized by Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators in the early 2000s. Because our moral emotions are not rational, there are times when they cannot be supported by logic. These are the moments when the only explanation for why we despise something is because “It just feels wrong.” If moral judgements were made completely through logical reasoning, this unexplainable feeling wouldn’t exist.

IV. Willpower vs. Moral Decision Making

But even if our moral emotions are strong, we don’t always have the resolve to act on them. This requires a high level of integration between the self and moral identity. We might believe that in emergency situations, no person, regardless of their age or disabilities should be left behind. Still, when the zombie apocalypse comes, we find ourselves leaving our aging grandparents in favor of our own survival. We might want to save them, but we don’t. In regards to this action, our morals may be strong enough, but our resolve isn’t.

On the opposite hand, those with both strong morals and willpower realize that they end up personally connecting the welfare of the world with their mental health. For them, the only way of existing that brings happiness is living morally. Acting immorally is self-defeating. It chips away at their self respect. They want to live a good life, so these people try their hardest to live up to their powerful ideals. Not all succeed, because we don’t always have the option to live how we wish. As humans, we make mistakes. Or we encounter a situation where we have no better choices. Hard work doesn’t necessarily mean contentment, and tragic accidents can occur.

In stories, these types of characters become martyrs. They might choose to die for their ideals. Thorfinn’s father in the anime *Vinland Saga* is one such man. He is strong, and so is his

resolve. Since his days on the battlefield, he refuses to take another's life. Even when he knows he will be killed, he doesn't pick up his sword. He tells his son what he wholeheartedly believes, "You have no enemies. No one has any enemies." In the end, the man dies in front of his son, arrows poking out of his back like porcupine quills. He lives up to his values, but he also dies for them.

Thorfinn is heartbroken. To heal the gaping hole in his heart, he tries his hardest to take down the man who killed his father. Unfortunately, after repeated failures, he becomes a tool that is only capable of killing. Hundreds fall by his hands, and he feels nothing. When the man he seeks to destroy falls before his eyes, Thorfinn is lost. With his goals crushed, all he has left is the dream his people once had; to find Vinland, a place warm, fertile, and free of the chaos of war. Thorfinn's growth is a reminder that revenge leaves you hollow. The ones who lead a fulfilling life understand the importance and limits of moral emotions.

V. What Stories Teach Us

Can stories such as *Vinland Saga* really teach us moral lessons? Even after developing our moral identities during childhood, our morals can continue to progress, though this acts more as a refinement of what already exists rather than internal growth. We can't change the shape of our soul very easily, but we can smooth its rough edges, cover imperfections, and carve new details. If children watching *Sesame Street* can learn to count to 10, share snacks, or spell simple words, movies too should be able to educate us. Films, TV shows, and books can have messages just as important as famous philosophers and their works. If other people join us in watching, we gain shared experiences with our community of viewers and come to understand both our perspective

and their own. Other mediums too, can have a profound effect on our thinking, if we decide to let them.

In current times, hundreds of species have been driven into extinction by humankind. The most notorious posterbird for this event? A kind of flightless bird that lived on a tiny island in the Indian Ocean, called the Dodo. We have always shook our heads at our ancestors who ate them until extinction. Now when I kill the last Ender Dragon in Minecraft, I'm suddenly a hero? It doesn't make sense. If I had to choose one of the gravest crimes, it would be the eradication of an entire race of creatures. Yet in video games, we do just that. You'd think they were brainwashing us. So are these games responsible for making the thousands of little children playing them into insensitive and trigger happy adults?

Only sometimes. First person shooter games, gory horror movies, and mature material doesn't necessarily inform a viewer's thinking. The person has to care about the content, and perhaps relate to it. If the only type of romantic relationship a person has ever seen is in garbage comics, they might believe real life plays out the same. In that case, they might end up hurt when reality slaps them in the face. Usually though, the person will have had enough social experiences to form a view on the topic. We learn from a young age that killing and violence is unacceptable. A little boy playing *Grand Theft Auto* could blow holes in ten random NPCs and not care about his actions in the slightest. Outside of the game however, he cares for other people and doesn't get violent with his friends. Perhaps, the sole mental effect that carries on from the game is a quick fuse to anger from failing his missions repeatedly.

VI. Moral Oversights

The most dangerous people have always been those with strong morals, not weak ones. They are the heroes in our stories, and also the villains. These people are willing to fight, kill, and die for their causes. Often, the only difference between each one is the values they hold. Though our morality is important when deciding between “right” and “wrong”, it has a tendency to create black and white thinking. We refuse to listen to other perspectives and become inflexible in our thinking. This is human nature. As Tim Dean, a speaker at the 2022 TEDx Talks conference in Sydney explains, Mankind evolved moral emotions to improve the unity of small societies. But evolution doesn’t always create perfect features. The characteristic that made it easy for like-minded people to band together and communicate also created discord between different groups that could not understand and accept each other.

Now, our societies are by no means small. Human civilization stretches across all seven continents, and our cities are visible as sprawling light pricks even from space. We face all types of differences in moral thinking. Gun-wielding police-men shoot down innocent citizens without questioning their actions. Self proclaimed vigilantes appear and bomb protesters, attempting to create “peace”. Why do they create such heartless violence? Once fear is mixed with someone who believes in themselves, no matter the cost, a deadly combination arises. These people are those who have gone down the path of no return, and they refuse to re-examine their moral selves. Many moral dilemmas don’t have a single answer, and in thinking that they do, we make choices that only cause pain and heartbreak.

This topic brings me to a show I began watching a few years ago with my dad and sister, called *Attack on Titan*. The protagonist Eren starts off similar to heroes in other shonen (boy’s action genre) animes. He is weak, young, and has a talent for yelling inspiring speeches. But over the course of the first three seasons, he and his companions experience crippling emotional loss.

To protect what remains of the things he loves, Eren comes to rely on violence to destroy all that oppose him. But might doesn't always create right. His understanding that "An iron bullet is proof of justice / Whenever I shoot I become closer to the hero" (AOT ending song 5) carries contradictions that ultimately destroy him. Instead of saving his companions, he is devoured by the evil growing in his heart, becoming someone they cannot recognise or trust. Although the flags of Eren's degeneration become obvious looking back, his actions represent a greater continuity within other individuals consumed by a black and white worldview. They believe that if they fight for good, those fighting against them must be evil. But morality isn't just two shades. In Eren's case, the Titans he fights against are people of the same country and bloodline, transformed into the bodies of hungry, cannibalistic monsters. He kills them without realizing that perhaps the only thing they wished for was to regain their humanity.

While his friends start to see the ugly truth, Eren continues to reject what he comes to realize. He trusts that, "Even if this is a mistake, I don't doubt it / What is right is believing in myself strongly." (AOT ending song 5) Because Eren never questions, by the time he glimpses into his own heart, it is already too late. He laments, "Behind justice, instead of sacrifice, there is a child of Evil inside my heart." (AOT ending song 5).

Eren's story informs us that there is little difference between a hero and a villain. We should have the confidence to believe in ourselves, but we cannot be blind. Asking questions helps us grow. Being yourself is important, and so is accepting other outlooks. By learning to be curious and examine others, the world around us, and ourselves, we can have the foresight to avoid choosing a path of pain and sorrow. We must strike a balance between being true to ourselves and growing to understand our impact on the world.

Legoshi, a character from the anime *Beastars*, also faces this conundrum. He desperately tries to find his true nature in a gruesome world torn between the ideals of being kind and being oneself. Legoshi wonders, “To live a good and honest life / To live without causing any sorrow / To stay on the straight and narrow, no missteps / Is that how you live without making mistakes? / Is justice about living as you are or / is justice about faking through life / Need to know what I should be / Who is my true self?”(Beastars opening song 2). While he sorts through his increasing inner turmoil, the perpetrator of a tragic murder that took the life of one of clubmates is closing in, attempting to recruit him or kill him as someone too close to the truth. But the killer is not a mindless beast, instead they turn out to be someone who took “just be yourself” a little too literally. In their view, one should follow their desires and embrace what lives inside them, no matter the consequences. They deem self love as most important.

This show embraces the struggles people face deciding how they want to live. Do we dedicate our lives to ourselves, the world, or our loved ones? How do we bring joy to others? How do we find the greatest happiness ourselves? The killer decides to stop hiding from their insecurities. They feel self- liberation even with bloodstained hands. But can we really be content to just follow our own heart? What about the consequences for those we hold dear? There is no best way to live.

VII. An Ending of Sorts

We return back to the man on horseback and his story. What are his morals, what makes him act the way he does, and what moral issues does he represent? That man, who I will conveniently name Thomas, is the stoic sort, a sheriff that holds onto his beliefs and follows them unquestioningly. He never considers another’s side of the story. Even if a man is arrested on false

charges, Thomas determines their nature by the report he is given. Because he realized that Liza was in a relationship with Johnny, a thief, Thomas lost his respect for her. Once he was angered by Johnny's provocations, he killed both. He feels no guilt, for he justifies his actions on the basis that both parties were unlawful. Liza, an officer, had betrayed the office, and Johnny was a notorious (if kindhearted) pickpocket. By following his ideal of a lawful society, Thomas loses sight of why he became an officer in the first place; to protect his community. Instead he transforms into yet another paranoid, violent police officer.

Joe is a tired and unlucky aging man. He was put in jail two years ago for assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest. At the time, he was consumed with grief for Liza's death and had drunk himself dizzy. When he saw Thomas walk inside the bar he frequented, Joe had pulled out his pistol and shot the man. Because his vision was blurry, he only succeeded in wounding Thomas's leg. Quickly, and without regard for his injury, the officer had dragged the struggling Joe back to the station to face his punishment. Not only did his revenge fail, but Joe's reputation worsened as well. He has given up the idea of vengeance, as he has seen his friends in jail die for it. Joe doesn't wish to follow their example. Instead he wants to know the reason for Liza's death. Why did the officer feel she needed to die?

Joe's daughter wants to kill the sheriff with all her heart. Liza acted as her older sister, and she is heartbroken over that loss. Now she only has her father left. The girl is young and fiery. She carries great love for her family and will do anything to keep their honor. In her mind, this means using her great intelligence to lay the plans for revenge. Originally, the idea was to ask the sheriff of his reasons, and then kill him when they had gotten answers. Because of Joe's death, the girl was afraid of losing anyone else if she could not succeed alone. In her mind, winning the battle

would have entailed accomplishing her goal with few casualties. She knows that there will be other chances to kill Thomas in the future, so she chooses to retreat.

Do any of these characters approach their situation in an ideal way? Probably not. Thomas is blinded by his good intentions and becomes someone willing to do anything to achieve them. To prevent themselves from causing harm, a person needs to have limits. Almost anything is damaging in extremes. Meaning well doesn't always mean doing well, and we must learn to understand our actions from other perspectives. Joe and his daughter are also naive. Joe, when he is not under the influence, is a reasonable man. All he wants Thomas to do is realize the weight of his actions, and he does not want to resort to violence if it is unnecessary. He never considers that Thomas will disrespect his wish for a peaceful talk. Because of this, he cannot predict his own death. Joe's daughter, though quick witted and intelligent, is blinded by rage. As a moral tool, revenge is useful for discouraging harmful behavior. It acts under the assumption that if you hurt me, then I hurt you. In its actual application, however, revenge usually fails to bring closure to those that commit it. They don't always have their burning questions answered, and are instead faced with regret for stooping just as low as those they wanted to take vengeance on. Unfortunately, one only realizes this after the act is done.

So who is the villain in this story? And who is the hero? I wrote this tale as a reflection on the twisted way cowboy stories represent justice. A gun does not create peace. Nor do weapons. They should be used as a last resort or not at all. So why do the protagonists of our stories use force to accomplish what they want? Why do we fight wars with bullets, not words, if all it creates is further conflict? I couldn't say. I leave the interpretation of this narrative up to you. What did you learn from this story?

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