

# Morality and Personality

*Edited English transcript*

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*Editorial note: This readable transcript was reconstructed from the Oxford audio and its automatic captions. Hesitations, repetitions, and obvious recognition errors have been silently corrected; the sequence, argument, and examples of the spoken lecture have been preserved.*

My topic is morality and personality. But suppose, for a moment, that my topic were money and personality. Would the lecture be substantially different? At first the comparison may sound almost ridiculous. Surely money and morality are radically different. Yet, if we look at their histories and at the roles they play as social institutions, we discover some striking similarities. Both make very different things commensurable, both establish distance, and both aspire to rules that apply regardless of the particular individuals involved.

Let me begin by clarifying my three central terms: money, morality, and personality. By money I mean not merely coins, banknotes, or credit cards, but the complex social institution upon which the modern economy of trade and exchange rests. Money enables us to compare and exchange the most diverse things. We may buy a car, an airplane, a horse, or something entirely different; the same money, suitably converted, can be used in different countries and with people whom we have never met.

Money not only makes things measurable and exchangeable; it also establishes a distance between us and things, and between one person and another. You give me the goods I want and I give you money or my credit-card number. The transaction is complete. We may have been strangers before it and remain strangers afterward. If one word captures the institution of money, a good candidate is “having” or “possessing”: you have it or you do not; you own it or you do not.

By morality I mean, initially, a system of social rules, norms, and prescriptions that regulate behavior. They tell us what is right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, appropriate or inappropriate. From the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments onward, moral norms are not intended for one particular personality. They claim equal validity for every human being: male or female, English or Serbian, young or old. Morality is principally concerned with action, including refraining from action. If someone insults me, I may refrain from striking back or even from answering. That restraint is also an action in the morally relevant sense.

Personality is the most complex of these terms. A person is not the same as an individual. Following Herder, I propose a provisional definition: personality means “being human in your own way.” Both parts of that formulation matter. You are a human being and belong to humanity, with its capacities, expectations, and obligations. But you are also human in your own

way. This uniqueness should not be suppressed or overlooked; it should be preserved, nourished, and cultivated.

Personality also entails development. We expect a personality to grow. It would be disturbing if, at forty or sixty, a person saw the world exactly as at twenty. Being a person is not a possession completed once and for all. It is a task extending through life. These two features—uniqueness and development—will inevitably generate friction with morality, whose rules claim universality and relative stability.

We should also distinguish personality from the merely personal. Treating someone personally means recognizing that person as a subject rather than an object. I do not treat a human being as I treat a pen or notebook. This recognition and respect already belong to the kind of morality I hope to defend.

Let us return to the relationship between money and morality. Here I am indebted to Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, published in 1900—a difficult but extraordinary book. To simplify a complex history, I will distinguish three stages in the development of both the money economy and morality: organism, organization, and agency.

In the first, organic stage, the individual is not sharply separated from the community. Imagine the traditional extended family, with several generations living and working together. The family is a community resembling an organism: when one member suffers, the whole suffers. Each person is part of a larger whole, continuing shared practices and traditions. Money has only a limited role, and morality is embedded in the customs of the community rather than formulated as an independent universal system.

The second stage is organization. Subject and object become more sharply separated, institutions become stronger, and there is an increasing drive toward objectification and universally valid rules. A currency should be valid throughout a country and, through conversion, throughout the world. Similarly, a moral principle is expected to be valid whether one is in Britain, Japan, China, or Madagascar. Kant is one of the great representatives of this stage. He seeks a rational organization of morality, grounded in principles that any rational person should be able to understand and justify. As with a scientific experiment, we expect the same principle to hold under relevantly similar conditions wherever it is applied.

The strength of this stage is universality, rationality, and order. Its danger is that the individual person may disappear behind the rule. A large institution—the state, the church, the university, or another organization—defines goodness and happiness, and the individual is expected to obey. Be a good boy or girl, follow the rules, and the institution promises that all will be well.

The third stage is agency. During approximately the last century and a half, the individual has reacted against impersonal institutions and claimed increasing independence. Trust in political, religious, legal, and economic institutions has weakened. The message becomes: you know what you want; it is your money and your life, and no one else has the right to decide for you. Amazon is a visible symbol of this stage: tell us what you want and we will deliver it.

This sounds liberating, but it creates new problems. Frequently, when the package arrives, we are already unsure why we ordered it. We may not open it for days, or may turn our attention

to something else. The ability to choose gives us a sense of control, but it does not guarantee that we know what is genuinely good for us. We have moved from the authority of the institution to the sovereignty of preference, without necessarily becoming wiser.

Morality, meanwhile, is in crisis. We disagree about what is right and wrong and often decide according to what seems advantageous now. We have many individuals but little community: loneliness, separation, and a longing for meaningful relationships, together with an inability to reestablish them. Money increasingly dominates because there are very few things that cannot, at least in some form, be bought.

Personality must not be confused with either competence or rebellious individuality. A competent person can perform a function perfectly while remaining inwardly undeveloped—like someone who repeats one task on an assembly line. Nor is personality simply the adolescent declaration that nobody will tell me what to do. Such rebellion may be a healthy moment in development, but it becomes immature if one never learns to take seriously the needs and claims of other people. Genuine personality involves creativity and independence, but also responsibility.

Here the conflict with morality becomes visible. Universal rules demand acceptance and obedience from everyone, whereas personality asks us to consider the uniqueness of the person and situation. Suppose a parent's children are starving. The rule says that stealing is wrong; responsibility for the children may appear to require stealing bread. The personal interest at stake is not necessarily selfish. The parent confronts two genuine responsibilities, and mechanically applying a rule may itself be irresponsible.

A second conflict concerns development. General morality typically judges the action without attending sufficiently to the stage of development, personal history, trauma, transformation, or vocation of the person acting. Yet becoming a person is something we struggle with throughout our lives. We pass through stages: early dependence, adolescent self-assertion, concern with what benefits us, identification with family or profession, attention to consequences, and, perhaps, recognition of goods that are not merely instrumental but intrinsically valuable.

At a more mature stage, we understand that what benefits us in the short run may harm our family or community, and that what benefits one group may harm another. We learn compromise and practical judgment. Beyond that, we may recognize intrinsic goods: truthfulness, fidelity, justice, love. We try to be faithful not only because fidelity produces desirable consequences, but because faithfulness is good in itself. We try to be truthful even in a society in which truthfulness is not rewarded.

Majority opinion and institutional approval cannot settle every moral question. During the wars connected with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, I knew that, had I remained there, I might have been called to fight. As a conscientious objector I could have been imprisoned, but I would not have gone to war and killed people merely because authorities or a majority considered it right. At certain moments we must answer to our deepest convictions and to what we regard as ultimately important.

Why, then, do so many approaches to moral philosophy speak almost exclusively about actions, rules, or consequences and so little about persons? Who we are, how we became who

we are, and what we may become cannot be disregarded. We need a new stage in which morality and personality are reintegrated rather than opposed.

My first suggestion is that we should move from a minimalist to a maximalist conception of morality. Minimalist morality is necessary: every society needs standards of decency, prohibitions against violence and crime, protection of rights and property, and rules that make peaceful coexistence possible. But morality should ask more of us than preservation of the status quo and mutual noninterference. Ancient philosophers understood ethics as a question of how we should live and what kind of persons we should become. A maximalist morality asks: How can we become the best human beings we are capable of becoming—both genuinely human and faithful to our distinctive individual lives and dispositions?

Such morality requires sensitivity, responsibility, and accountability. What is good for one person may not be good for another; what one person is ready for may be destructive to someone else. Respect for uniqueness does not abolish morality. It makes moral perception more demanding.

My second suggestion concerns our desires and our relation to nature. Before we decide what is good for us, we must ask whether our preferences are arbitrary and transient, like an impulse to buy something that looks attractive online. How do we distinguish what is truly good for us from what merely appeals to us at this moment? We need desires and commitments capable of continuity, able to survive three days, three months, or many years, and able to shape a life as a whole.

This leads to a fundamental metaphysical question: Is there continuity or discontinuity in nature? Modern thought has often represented nature as primitive, instinctive, irrational, and in need of control, while representing personality as something socially constructed or programmed. I want to recover a continuity between nature and personality without reducing personality to nature. Nature has the first word, but it does not have the last word.

We do not choose our place of birth, parents, native language, bodily constitution, skin color, or many other conditions of our lives. Nature and history give us the initial material, for better and for worse. But this material is not a completed destiny. There is work for each of us to do. We must form a personality from what we have been given, while remembering that our individuality never removes us from humanity or from our responsibilities toward other human beings.

I will conclude with two questions, which are really two sides of the same coin. First: What is the moral cost of being who you are? Perhaps your family expects you to continue the family business, while your deepest vocation leads elsewhere. Following that vocation may injure or disappoint people to whom you owe much. There is a moral cost to becoming yourself.

But we must also ask the opposite and perhaps still more important question: What is the moral cost of not being who you are? What is lost—to you, to other people, and perhaps to the world—when you fail to cultivate and realize the personality you were capable of becoming?