

Common Ground v. Common Good: Can the Afterlife Modify Right from Wrong?

Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), a Christian anarchist for reasons pragmatically understandable but theologically disagreeable, thematically touches this concept in his grand piece of literature *War and Peace*. Why does an assigned executioner who desires not to kill his fellow man still fire his gun? Tolstoy suggests it is out of fear for his own survival the individual does not stand up for what he or she believes – whether that is social survival in times of peace or physical harm in moments of combat. He highlights that the systematic separation of aristocratic commonwealth and peasantry, similar to our modern centralized government and lower class, is perpetuated by that self-imposed will to survive at all costs. Tolstoy vividly illustrates a cyclical pattern in society, one that circulates an unconscious looping social system that immobilizes the individual from acting upon their conscience. He underscores the ‘system’ is driven by an acquired appetite for landscapes over law, for goods over good. This system inevitably causes war, death, and suffering.

What ought to strike us wrong is the lack of accountability the individual is left holding. Where is our conviction and courage to do what is right? Or better yet, from whom does right geneses? Is righteousness a matter of salvation or survival – a thing of soul or state? In either case, a firm contextualized belief in the afterlife enacts a weighty counterpart in the decisions we make to live today.

Even more so now individual survival is upheld as a greater virtue, and not just for *physical survival*, in the Western world *social survival* is among the most dominant concerns¹. There seems to be a strong correlation with deepened insecurity in the afterlife, or the lack of context for that life, and a more pronounced moral exclusivity. That is to say, the weaker the belief in the *probability* of life after death, and that decisions in this life consequentially affect the next, the stronger the desire for an exclusive subjective moral law or a self-defined constitution circulates. This is culturally stimulated via all kinds of communal dialogue: social media, memes, blogs, vlogs, talk shows and so forth. The ‘morality-is-of-my-own-making’ belief is popularly rehashed as ‘#YOLO’, ‘be true to yourself’, ‘truth is cultural’ and ‘everything is a matter of interpretation’ paired with statist rhetoric such as “We the people”. When blended these ideas pungently insinuate that the immediate culture defines what is right from what is wrong; if moral law is exclusive to the individual *per se*, the only democratic solution of handling things is to permit a majority ruling to determine what is right for everyone.

Now I must be clear before moving onward: It is not just any afterlife that makes one modify character, habit, and behaviour for ‘good’, it is strictly the context of that life after death that encourages and motivates perpendicular conduct. And I suppose what I am attempting to articulate is that the will to be *in the right*, to enact it, must source from somewhere: Self, State or God. On top of all that, I must refrain from making this a doctrinal essay, since the nature of this topic touches liberty, equality, justice and other matters of State, I’d rather pinpoint one area, in particular, to concentrate upon for leisurely listening.

Without a God who judges mankind for their thought and action after death, what then should be the trajectory for human cognition and conduct to be *in the right*? Without an

¹ Consider the sharp statistical rise in suicide rates in the last thirty plus years for not ‘fitting in’ or the drastic number of school shootings sourced from the same motive. These are but two instances that highlight how the effects of sociality compound into life-or-death situations.

intrinsic moral law that is extrinsically demonstrable to direct individual autonomy, how should someone be 'righteous' if God is impotent, lacks omniscience or is simply not at all? – *How does one be right?*

Righteousness is betwixt self and state, where the state sanctions law for obedience and justification and any who desire to be *in the right* must follow such protocol; the individual who inaugurates a god-state surrogacy as the foundation of 'true' moral law, social order, ethics, and authority is an advocate of *Statism* (contrary to anarchism). In short, moral justification sources from obeying state law and the popular demand of "We the people" is the authoritative source for that law. By these standards, it is not a stretch to suggest that the undercurrent of being *in the right* is not only a judicial affair but more poignantly a social concern – juxtaposing the self to the state, 'do my beliefs align with what other people believe'. Although this may retain its moral exclusivity, it is far less subjective now isn't it? People modify their belief linearly to the culture. In one sense this brings into view Tolstoy's proposal for how that unconscious looping social system initiates and directly affects that communal ethos and the citizen's conscience – in everyday living, sociality governs morality.

And yes, of course the 'system' plays a major role in our social development, but that is precisely the issue at large. It is a matter much more intimate and significant than our civil constitution – it is what predicates it. Where are the individuals with reverence for *true moral law*? Since the time of Tolstoy, with the rise of industrialization and secular bureaucracy, it seems many if not most in the Western world have abandoned any hope for substantiating objective morality. Without God, should we expect anything more in a place where morals are merely proposals? It is after all a place where more goods *is* good, etiquette *is* ethics, comfort *is* a virtue and convenience rules our conscience. As long as we be left alone, "my belief is my belief, your belief is your belief" alongside "all is opinion", then we can live our lives in whichever manner we desire, irrespective of the consequences.

Then something horrific happens... Our comfort and security is in danger of reproof. Our conscience urges us to step up... but will we? Has there ever been a real just reason to stand up before? Our lack of will to be *in the right* beyond state provision weakens our integrity when it matters most. Instead of listening to that inner voice we take the path of least resistance and follow the people around us.

Some even self-victimize and blame their culpable liabilities on military, economic or societal conduct, isolating the 'role' in that particular system as the key problem. To paraphrase the usual responses, "society made me do it" or "I was merely following orders". As obsequiously expressed by German field marshal Wilhelm Keitel working directly under Adolf Hitler, imprisoned post-war for crimes against humanity, "How in heaven's name can they accuse me of conspiring to wage aggressive war when I was nothing but the mouthpiece to carry out the Führer's wishes? As Chief of Staff I had no authority whatever – no command function – nothing. All I could do was to transmit his orders to the staff and see that they were carried out."² Recently Associated Press and Bloomberg News covered German prosecutors charge against Oskar Goering, a ninety-three-year-old guard of Nazi Auschwitz death camp, co-responsible with 300,000 counts of accessory to murder, "Goering has openly talked about his time as a guard and says while he witnessed horrific atrocities, he didn't commit any crimes

² Nuremberg Diary. Introduction, Wilhelm Keitel. X.

himself.”³ It is an imperative and frightening subject to magnify. If society replaces any sense of a) true moral law and b) the thoughts and actions of this life affect the next life, with a surrogate set of law and belief, the only option a person is logically left with is to *live right now no matter what he or she ought to do*. What is right is to survive – socially and physically – that’s it, there is no morally. Remorse, regret and repentance are simply illusory indoctrinations peripherally soaked up from a trickling Christian culture.

It is worth wondering whether we would see a reduction in horrific actions, if a greater population adhered to the works and teachings of Jesus Christ: “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it. What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:24-27)

Lest we forget the atrocities revealed in the Nuremberg Trials⁴, a worldwide event that broadcasted the rules of moral engagement for what it meant to live without God’s moral law. All that was televised was an updated instruction manual for how to play the game without any real rules. The winners of the match earned the right to rewrite the manual with what the rules ought to be, not what it must. Once again, conscience was circumferenced by state legislation – barely different from the losing team – and the cycle continued. The Nazi regime justified and sanctioned their concentrated attempt to annihilate an entire nation under the authority of sovereign state law. When the world’s most intelligible judges prosecuted the Nazi regime for *crimes against humanity* they were largely unsuccessful as Nazism was compatible and *justified* in accordance with their own state-made law. Under these preconditions, Hermann Goering rationalized a cynical but valid formula, “The victor will always be the judge, and the vanquished the accused.”⁵ The Nuremberg Trials were at best an abysmal failure.

If we extract judgment after death from moral law, then our only subjective indicator for any kind of righteous code and conduct remains within state boundary lines. *Morality is a matter of inches!* No different than a sport. —Oy vey! We necessitate a higher moral platform above governmental authorization otherwise moral law is demarcated by a *game of territorial superegos*. In light of the evil that is caused by war and suffering, Jesus Christ calls us to follow His constitution over our own, to shadow His moral character over the social conventions and cultural attitudes of our day. Moral justification, in the Christian sense of things, is being *in the right with God*. A righteousness that is liable to judgment after death, not just before it, encourages moral accountability and a fortified conscience. Once we finally start prioritizing *salvation* over survival, *soul* beyond the state, then and only then will common good conquer that ‘need’ for common ground.

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³ 93-year-old Former Auschwitz Guard: <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/09/15/germany-chargers-93-year-old-former-auschwitz-guard-with-accessory-to-300000-murders/>

⁴ Harris, Whitney R. (2006). "Tyranny on Trial—Trial of Major German War Criminals at Nuremberg, 1945–1946". In Herbert R. Reginbogin; Christoph J. M. Safferling. *The Nuremberg Trials: International Criminal Law Since 1945 / Die Nürnberger Prozesse: Völkerstrafrecht seit 1945*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. pp. 106–114. ISBN 978-3-11-094484-6. Held between November 19th, 1945 to October 1st, 1946, the Tribunal attempted to try twenty-four of the most important political and military leaders of the Third Reich. Justice requires the unrighteous a fair trial.

⁵ Nuremberg Diary, Hermann Goering, 4