



Black & White, or Gray?

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One widely encountered idea today is that there is no black and white when it comes to morality, only a kind of “gray area.” This is often taken to mean that we really can’t know with certainty what is right and wrong, allowing us to “push into the gray” as we make certain moral decisions that at first glance might appear to be immoral.

The behavior of the semi-legendary figure of Robin Hood is sometimes mentioned as an example of this “gray area” phenomenon, since he was a character who would steal money (morally bad) for the purposes of helping the poor (morally good).

By focusing on our good intentions, and by arguing that morality is ambiguous and mostly “gray,” a person can more easily justify morally problematic actions. When we begin to scrutinize the claim that morality is “gray,” however, we encounter significant problems and contradictions.

The romanticized exploits of Robin Hood, for example, end up providing little more than a “veil of gray” that quickly dissolves when we place ourselves in the first-person situation of being the victim of his thievery, having our own windows broken and our own goods plundered. Those who have been robbed of their possessions will

often describe afterwards, in vivid detail, the sickening feeling of personal violation, the loss of their feeling of security, etc. In these circumstances, we see the moral problem with Robin Hood’s depraved actions, and appreciate the direct, black and white character of the universal moral injunction against stealing.

Universal moral prohibitions are clearly at the heart of any discussion about the “grayness” of morality. Many human actions, when freely chosen, will always be unacceptable. These actions, referred to as “intrinsic evils,” are immoral regardless of circumstance. Adultery would be an example of an intrinsic evil. Regardless of how much a married man may desire to be with a new romantic flame, and regardless of how terrible his current marriage and sex life may appear to be, the decision to have sexual relations with someone who is not his spouse will invariably constitute an act of moral depravity on his part. Every wife who has suffered infidelity on the part of her husband, and every child who has seen the betrayal of their mother by their father can attest that there is no such thing as a “gray zone” for adultery. Many people who recognize that an action may

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be black may still be tempted to think that because their intentions are white, a "gray" action may be done. But good intentions can never bleach the blackness of such deeds.

Acknowledging the existence of intrinsic evils and recognizing the binding character of absolute moral prohibitions is an important part of our own moral growth and awakening. Indeed, morality itself, as an inner determinant of man's character, is not fundamentally "gray" at all, but is, by its very nature, a code of black and white. In the final analysis, the cult of moral grayness is too easily a revolt against fixed and essential moral values.

Although fixed moral values must always guide our decisions, correctly applying a general moral principle to a particular situation will often require specific knowledge of the circumstances and details of that situation.

For example, I might have to grapple with the question of whether I have a moral duty to get out of bed and go to work in the morning. Whenever a particular set of circumstances prevail (I am healthy; today is a workday; my employer expects me to be present at the workplace; my vehicle is functioning normally), then

I would reasonably conclude that I have a moral duty to go to work because of the objective moral commitments I have made as a company employee — and, of course, the other employees who would have to "take up the slack" would resent my absence. Meanwhile, if I am very sick, I might reasonably conclude that I do not have a moral duty to go to work. Deciding to stay in bed all day out of mere laziness, on the other hand, would constitute an objective failure in terms of my moral duty. The question of my moral duty to go to work, then, is not a "gray area" at all, nor a matter of relative morals, but rather a question of careful discernment, weighing of variables, seeking to do the good, and so on.

In sum, the objective lines of our moral obligation may sometimes be difficult to discern, and may even appear gray on first glance, but when we sort out the relevant details and seek to purify our own motives, and when we become willing to submit to the binding character of absolute moral prohibitions, the gray haze can dissipate, and we can see the real moral lines that were there all along.

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