

Auguste Rodin - *The Thinker*, 1904

Coffee and tea, for instance. The distributors of such products guarantee that the workers who produce them receive a fair wage and work under humane conditions. In addition, these days products of all sorts are subject to evaluation based on the effects of their use on the environment. So we are becoming used to the idea that there is a “moral” dimension to our decisions about what to buy.

Of course, on the whole, decisions about what to buy are based on one’s personal interests and often on the desire for “value for money.” I well remember how impressed I was decades ago when I discovered the magazine *Consumer Reports* and realized that an entire organization was devoted to helping the public make rational decisions about products to buy. Now I always look for “best buys” when shopping for myself.

I also remember my first inkling that there might be aspects of moral thinking that did not rely simply on the teachings of “authorities” but might be based instead on the nature of human beings and human societies.

The first steps in making a purely personal decision and making a moral one are the same: consider the available alternatives and gather facts about each. Naturally, there are limitations. Only a finite amount of time is available to us to explore and evaluate alternatives. Waiting too long means that the opportunity to choose may be lost altogether.

In addition, our ability to determine the facts is limited by factors other than time. Consumer organizations often point out that the long-term reliability of new products is difficult to predict. Many of our decisions in today’s world concern the new and relatively untested – a point especially important for those of us interested in new technology. Still, despite our limitations, we often must do *something*. In the end, with personal decisions and with moral ones, it is up to us to make up our own minds.

Making up one’s mind can be difficult – and yet it is an essential aspect of our life. Moral decisions, especially those involving conflicts of duty are especially hard. Can Jung’s ideas help us?

In 1949, in his foreword to Erich Neumann’s *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, Jung wrote:

[M]oral law is not just something imposed upon man from outside (for instance, by a crabbed grandfather). On the contrary, it expresses a psychic fact. As the regulator of action, it corresponds to a preformed image, a pattern of behavior which is archetypal and deeply embedded in human nature. (p. 15)

Because morality is “a psychic fact ... embedded in human nature”, it cannot be ignored. But how do we begin to understand this?

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung wrote:

The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his

Decisions, Decisions ...!

John Granrose

Perhaps there was once a time in human history when individuals had fewer decisions to make. There was once less scope for personal choice. Today, however, we need to choose every day.

Sometimes our decisions are relatively minor and primarily affect us. For example, buying groceries or a new home appliance. Sometimes our decisions are more serious or affect many others. Moral decisions are typical examples of this. Although there may be a continuum here, let us think of purely personal decisions and moral decisions as two general types.

It strikes me that there are many connections between these two general types of decision. Buying groceries, for example, can have consequences for the workers who have produced them. Here in England there are many so-called “fair trade” products.

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wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life. (p. 193)

These images of the unconscious demonstrate that our conscious ego is not all-powerful, that there is “more to us” than what is immediately obvious, for good or ill. Our primary means of understanding these images is working with our dreams and paying close attention to our inner life in general. In addition, our *symptoms*, bodily and psychological, can alert us to what is going on in our unconscious, with some *unease* in the mind expressing itself in a *disease* in the body.

Jung’s conviction is that we will miss the full meaning of our life if we shirk this task. And yet how do we get from these general observations to a decision about something important?

In my former career I taught philosophy courses, especially ethics. Often we studied the ethical theories of famous philosophers, such as Plato or Aristotle. Some of the time we discussed practical issues, such as the ethics of mercy killing or of war. Always, however, there was an undercurrent of feeling that the big theories failed to answer the specific moral questions facing my students in their daily lives.

Reading Jung in recent years has helped me understand why this was so. Decisions of all kinds, including moral decisions, require a deep understanding of *context*. The most obvious factor here is the outer circumstances of the situation, the factor to which typical moral argument calls attention. Jung, however, also stresses the individual’s inner life, that is, “the images of the unconscious”. When we deny essential aspects of our personality (our typology, for example), we are at serious risk of later collapse or inner misery. We all know persons who have pretended to be something they were not. And perhaps we have seen the results.

A further, but related factor is the “stage of development” reached by a particular person. In “Good and Evil in Analytical Psychology” (C.W. 10, para. 866) Jung wrote:

As a therapist I cannot, in any given case, deal with the problem of evil philosophically but can only approach it empirically. But because I take an empirical attitude, it does not mean that I relativize good and evil as such. I see very clearly: this is evil, but the paradox is just that for this particular person in this particular situation at this particular stage of development it may be good. ... If it were not like this everything would be so simple – too simple.

Jung’s view is that something that is evil in one context might be good in another. This sort of “relativism” does not deny that there are valid moral principles in the abstract, only that their application to a particular case can be a problem. There is a certain presumptuousness, Jung argues, in claiming to know for sure what one should do in a situation where values conflict. He writes,

Where do we get this belief, this apparent certainty, that we know what is good and what is bad? “Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” Only the gods know, not

us. ... We are all only limited human beings and we do not know in any fundamental sense what is good and bad in a given case. We know it only abstractly. (C.W. 10, “Good and Evil in Analytical Psychology” para. 862.)

How should one begin the journey to an important moral decision? First, as mentioned earlier, one needs to reflect on the alternatives open to one. Often we suffer from a kind of tunnel vision and fail to consider all the reasonable options. Friends (and therapists) can often help us here. Then we need to gather facts. But the facts required are not only about the external situation but also about the “inner” situation, that is, about our conscious and our unconscious needs, desires and commitments. We need to ask seriously both, “What is going on here?” and “Who am I?”

Next, we need to reflect on the values and moral principles which might be involved. Often the good and the bad consequences of an action will have to be weighed against each other. Here the maxim from traditional medical ethics is relevant: “Above all, do no harm.” In general, non-maleficence has been regarded as a more stringent duty than positive beneficence. That is, harming one person to help another is typically condemned. However, even within the area of non-maleficence, there is the issue of harming *others* vs. harming *oneself*. Even though ethical egoists may claim that one’s only duty is to oneself, most of us would reject such an extreme position. At the same time, however, we realize that we know ourselves and our needs better than we know others and that, therefore, we are in a much better position to avoid harm to ourselves – and to benefit ourselves – than others.

Finally, there is the issue of other moral commitments, for example, to honesty or to fairness. Difficult moral decisions typically involve conflicts between all these factors. Otherwise, as Jung wrote, it would all be “... so simple – too simple.”

So what should one do when faced with a difficult moral decision, one involving conflicts between incompatible values, needs and commitments? Jung recognizes that such decisions must be taken seriously if one is to avoid “a painful fragmentariness” in one’s life.

Intelligent decision making requires reflection on alternatives, facts and values of all sorts. However, suppose the decision still is unclear. There may be several alternatives that are clearly *wrong*. But sometimes we say, “There is no one right answer.” It is here, I believe, where Jung’s concept of individuation can help. According to Jung, the goal of life is to become a “whole” person, one whose life somehow integrates one’s unconscious as well as conscious aspects, not a person who has ignored one’s inner life and its needs. Although it is frequently not easy, one must ask oneself, “Who am I, really? Where do I choose to take my stand?” rather than expecting a simple moral answer. We need to take responsibility for such choices and accept the consequences. As Martin Luther said, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

Jung, I believe, did this in his own life. May we imitate him here – and may God help us make good decisions. Amen ■