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Morally Adaptive or Morally Maladaptive: A Look at Compassion, Mercy and Bravery

by Alec Dorner

(Philosophy 1100)

It happens in every action movie. The hero saves the girl he loves, and tells her to go on without him while he keeps some evil person or thing occupied. In pondering such scenes as this, I find myself contemplating whether this is a wise choice. Should he potentially put himself in harm's way to save her? Is this an adaptive decision? I believe it is.

The terms adaptive and maladaptive are typically employed in the context of psychology. In psychology, the term adaptive is used to describe a trait picked up through evolution that increases a species chance for survival and reproduction. Maladaptive is referred to as a trait picked up through evolution that decreases chances for survival and reproduction. Now, if you look at it psychologically, sacrificing yourself to save the girl is a very maladaptive thing to do. If you save her and you end up dying, you obviously have ended your chances for survival and reproduction. Also, you left the girl, and if she gets attacked, she may very well die as well ending her chances for survival and reproduction. This is very black and white, and an evolutionary biologist would say case closed.

I wish to take these psychological terms listed above and give a philosophical connotation to them, so I will rename them as *morally adaptive* or *morally maladaptive*. In this paper, I would like to change the meanings of these terms to fit a philosophical context. In doing so, I will create new meanings to be used within this paper. The term *morally adaptive* is, in my definition, a trait that furthers and promotes human flourishing. This would of course mean that a *morally maladaptive* trait would be one that hinders human flourishing. I also need to define what I mean by the term "human flourishing." By using the term human flourishing, I look at it as the moral and intellectual advancement of the human being. An intellectual advancement mainly refers to, but is not limited to, the advancement of knowledge of the virtues, for knowledge of the virtues is necessary in the process of making moral decisions. A being must knowingly act in a virtuous and moral way because if the act is done, but the being is unknowing of the virtuous and moral weight of the decision, then it cannot truly be considered moral because they are acting in ignorance.

My original thesis is that compassion, mercy and bravery are *morally adaptive* traits needs support because, as a metaphysical query, it does not hold merit alone. My first branch of support for this stems from my past definition of human flourishing. I would like to focus on the moral aspect of this definition. It seems clear that an act of bravery should be considered moral. A virtuous action such as an act of bravery is considered moral based on the definition of bravery itself. There are many different examples of bravery, but I am going to focus on the following definition because it suits my paper best. Bravery is knowingly putting yourself in harm's way (mental, social, or physical) to come to the aid of another. Also, understood within the scope of bravery should be the idea of conquering fears. Now, I do not mean that you cease to fear these things all together, but to act in a virtuous way despite the effects of these fears.

An act of compassion or mercy is on a bit shakier moral ground than an act of bravery. An act of mercy entails the knowledge that your 'enemy' would most likely not show you the same kindness in the opposite position, and knowledge that this act may come back to bite you later (as it did Dante in the Divine Comedy when he chose to spare the woman's brother). If you carry out an act in aid of your enemy, despite this knowledge, then that act can be considered an act of compassion. If you looked at a strict Biblical moral structure, this is one of the highest instances of

morality that a person can have. This is not only true in a Biblical state of mind though. Compassion is different. Compassion is aiding someone who is either unable to aid themselves, or has very little ability to do so. Also, encompassed in compassion is being provided the opportunity to further your survival, social status, or socio-economic status, but, instead, aiding another. This is like if a person hunts a deer, and kills it. If acting out of pure survival, the person should keep every bit. An act of compassion would entail them offering some to another, or helping another to hunt a deer of their own. An action that is considered to be the opposite of an immoral act would be in fact moral. For instance, if you were aiming a gun at someone, then the obvious inherent evil or immoral action would be to pull the trigger and kill that person. This means that the clearly moral thing to do would be to do the opposite, which is not to shoot that person. This is an act of mercy and compassion because it fits the criteria that I stated above, and this would be considered an act of clear morality because you possessed full knowledge of an immoral action, and you performed the opposite action willingly. It is my conclusion that bravery, mercy and compassion inform moral actions, and thusly they further ones knowledge of morality through practice of moral behaviors. This, in turn, advances that being's morality, and is considered to be a promotion of human flourishing.

Compassion does not only further the morality of the being that shows compassion. It also furthers the understanding of morality for the individual receiving the compassion. A man who is spared by another will think twice before taking the life of another man. He will think back to the compassion that was offered to him, and will see the opportunity to offer that compassion to another because of his new awareness of morality through compassion.

Now that I have analyzed the morality of compassion and bravery, I must now go further into the intellectual advancement offered through compassion and bravery. I will begin with bravery. Bravery may not seem like a very intellectual thing to do if you possess the knowledge that man is mortal, but man would not possess most all knowledge he has today if not for bravery. It is bravery that pushes a man to his limits. If man did not possess bravery he would not climb mountains, or explore unknown areas. Most exploratory actions performed by humans require bravery. This a primary benefit of bravery through intellect. Another benefit that would be considered to be a secondary benefit offered by bravery through intellectual advancement would be the ability to look through an objective lens at the situation at hand. Only through bravery can we take an objective look at anything. We must have the courage to step back and attempt to remove ourselves from our thoughts. This requires bravery because if a man attempts to remove himself from existence in his own mind, he may go mad. The knowledge that you are almost unimportant in the universe is terrifying knowledge, and every man knows this deep down, so a man must have bravery to even extract this knowledge from his own subconscious. Only through bravery can we take an objective stance on the universe, and an objective view of the universe would yield such a renewal of knowledge, that it would advance intellect passed subjective and sense driven knowledge into the realm of the objective.

If man was crippled by fears, then nothing would be accomplished. A man fears almost everything because fear is the response elicited by something detrimental to human existence and almost all things have the potential to be detrimental to human existence. Bravery is the breaking of that fear and it takes intellect to perform acts of bravery. For an action to be considered brave, the being performing it must be fully aware of the dangerous implications that may arise from the action. This requires past experiences, and intellect grows from past experiences. Also, if a brave act is to be executed correctly, there must be knowledge of action possessed by the individual performing the action. Knowledge of action is an analysis of the situation to find the best way to act. If the human did not possess knowledge of action, then he would not know what to do, and would not even know that there was a situation that needed solving. This in turn means that bravery is a *morally adaptive* trait through analysis of its benefits offered to human flourishing because a furthering of intellect is required to successfully perform brave actions, and humans strive to perform under these pressure

filled instances. Therefore the more problems that arise, the more the intellect needs to be advanced to solve these problems, and that's where bravery lies in the intellectual grasping of the virtue.

Compassion also needs to be analyzed under the lens of promotion of advancement of intellect. Compassion requires judgment of a situation because you must analyze the choices you have. Going back to my analogy about the gun aimed at someone's head, you must have knowledge of the right thing to do and the wrong thing to do. You must also possess the intellect to get past the initial emotion and sensate data, and look deeper. This will be my focus. If someone has wronged you, it takes more intellectual will power to forgive and forget, then to act wickedly towards that person. You must have the intellect to analyze the situation and realize your own emotional skew. This requires knowledge of the self, and knowledge of your emotions, which is harder than one thinks. Knowledge of the emotions can often be skewed by the emotions themselves. You very rarely, or never, have an objective look at how your emotions are changing your perception of a situation. To stand aside and evaluate your emotions, on the other hand, is very plausible. To do this, you would need to stop your action, and then analyze whether your reaction to a situation is sensible, or if it is being skewed by the emotions that were elicited as a response to the situation. If you possess the intellect to analyze your emotions, you can better judge the rationality of a decision. A compassionate gesture or action is very often skewed by emotions, so it takes a high intellect to knowingly act with compassion. Therefore, just as emotions get stronger in situations, so must intellect, thus causing the necessity of compassion to be a truly intellectual being.

Considering this is a fairly novel thesis, I am merely going to address some critiques that I expect would arise from this thesis and the proofs that I have provided. One critique would be similar to the Cartesian critique called the problem of other minds. This critique would go a little something like this: Because we are unable to see into other people's minds, could an act of compassion or bravery that saves another not turn out to be a terrible mistake? Could the person saved have horrible motives, and you allowed them to live and play out these motives? If you save a man from drowning, but the whole reason he was drowning was that, unknown by you, he was attempting to drown another. Would saving him really promote human flourishing? My answer to this critique would be that because you are unable to see into another's mind, we can also make the assumption that you cannot manipulate their thoughts directly. Now, you could by chance alter their way in which they think by acting in such a way as to promote human flourishing yourself. Your actions could cause a change of heart in this individual and cause them to adopt your choice in lifestyle as their own because there's a change in their understanding.

Consider the teachings of Jesus. Often non-believers were swayed into believing through one action performed by Christ. This same instance could be affective through the actions of one's compassion or bravery. An opposition would most likely come back with the idea that another man may not act based on the compassion that was shown to him. He may not think twice about the act of compassion shown to him, and may shove it off and never contemplate it in his future dwellings. This would of course mean that the act of compassion did not promote knowledge in the other man. First off, it would promote intellect and morality in the person performing the act, and that is in itself intrinsically valuable. Building of one's own psyche is very important because the more your intellect and morality are fortified, the more you'll be able to do to help others. Secondly, and to address the critique more thoroughly, the man's understanding of the compassion shown to him will be deepened. With deeper knowledge of compassion and mercy, this man would gain a further ability to process his decisions through belief of compassion. Considering my thesis is that compassion is *morally adaptive* he will feel more anguish if he follows through with an evil action because he would have knowledge that the action hinders human flourishing. I think an example will assist in explaining this a bit better. Say a man kills another man because he needs to eat, and he doesn't know that's not the right thing to do. If he sees a hungry man that he knows could kill him, then you would feel immense fear. If the other man knowingly does not kill you, and this happens multiple times,

you would get the feeling that it isn't right to kill another man. If you did kill another man, you would know it's wrong and would feel immense anguish.

Another critical stance that relates to my argument is the instance when someone wishes to die, and you prevent it. If an old man is begging you to pull the plug and let him move on to the other world, and you do not act in this way out of compassion, are you not inhibiting human flourishing? My counter to this critique would be that pulling the plug would not be an act of compassion. This is in itself an act of bravery. If you do not let this person give up on themselves, then you are repelling the cowardice that they are showing. As I view it philosophically, the act of wishing death upon oneself is an act of cowardice because the action, itself, hinders human flourishing. If you end your life, you are completely denying your ability to advance morally and intellectually. And considering that bravery is *morally adaptive*, this would, in turn, be cowardice. By denying the cowardice they portray, you are allowing them to possibly get a second outlook on life. Hope is the tool of bravery, and in hope you can find novelty and purpose in the world. One day you may feel anguish and misery beyond your thoughts of repair, but the next day you may wake up enlightened. Taking this opportunity away is not moral, it is not brave, and it is most certainly not compassionate. In conclusion, it is my belief that compassion and bravery are *morally adaptive* traits. A *morally adaptive* trait is a trait that promotes human flourishing. Human flourishing is defined as the advancement of intellect and morality. Both bravery and compassion advance intellect and morality, so both should be considered as *morally adaptive* traits in human beings. If all of man-kind was able to see the importance of acting in a way that promotes intellectual and moral advancement, society would flourish as a whole because all of the cogs (citizens) of the machine (society) would be in place and moving well.

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