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Jaret Kanarek

Illinois Wesleyan University, jkanarek@iwu.edu

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The Tortoise And The Hare: A New Moral For An Old Fable

Jaret Kanarek

Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare* is a prominent moral fable in American cultural discourse. Having originated in ancient Greece, the fable has varied over the years, but the basic elements remain the same. The story, as it is generally told, involves a tortoise and a hare as its two main protagonists. The hare is arrogant; he continually boasts about his speed and picks on the tortoise for being slow. The tortoise grows tired of the hare's boasting and questions the hare's claim of being the fastest creature. In retort, the hare decides to challenge the tortoise to a race in which he feels sure that he will be victorious.

The hare begins the race by going as fast as he can, establishing a significant lead over the tortoise who is, in fact, much slower than him. To demonstrate the full extent of his confidence, the hare decides to take a nap during the race. All the while, the tortoise has been moving at a slow and steady pace. Ultimately, the tortoise clinches victory over the Hare, primarily due to the hare's recklessness in taking a nap.

In one sense, it is no surprise as to why the classic moral of the story is that, "Slow and steady wins the race." In concrete terms, this is what takes place in the fable; the tortoise did move slowly and steadily, and did win the race. In another sense, it is perplexing as to why this is the moral lesson of the story, considering there are many other scenarios that could serve as equally valid grounds for a moral lesson of this type. The hare could have moved steadily at any pace faster than the tortoise and would have won—a feat of which he was most certainly capable. Thus, "Fast and steady wins the race," or more specifically, "Racing faster and steadier than your opponent wins the race," could also serve as a moral to the story. Additionally, "Napping during a race will cause you to lose it," "Don't challenge someone slower than you to a race," et cetera, are all potential morals.

What characterizes these supposed moral lessons is that they are based primarily on *nonessential* facts. Each of the morals, and their evidentiary support, are equally superficial and unimportant—each lacks any

sufficient reason for it to be preferred to another. Cognitively, the analysis required to derive these morals begins and ends at the perceptual level. The perceptual level is limited to direct awareness—it does not include abstraction from that which is perceived.

A parallel situation to that of *The Tortoise and the Hare* would be that of a child deriving as a moral lesson, “Buying a lottery ticket every day guarantees you will win the lottery at least once,” after observing his father purchase a lottery ticket everyday and eventually winning the lottery. This lesson is based on actual observations, but it has no universal application. A person could buy a lottery ticket just once and win, or he could buy ten everyday of his life and never win.

In deriving morals, the fact that the dad bought a ticket every day implies equally as much as the fact that the tortoise happened to move “slow and steady.” That implication, at most, is the ability to say these things happened. This perceptual level treatment of morality results in, “Slow and steady wins the race,” to be considered a *moral* lesson.

Morality, by its nature, cannot remain grounded at the perceptual level. Morality is a concept and as such it subsumes infinitely many concrete instances. As a concept, it necessitates the understanding, differentiation, and integration of countless percepts. It necessitates the defining of *essential* factors and conditions under which it applies. Abstraction from concretes to broader concepts is a necessity. As such, it operates at the conceptual level. It is precisely at the conceptual level, i.e. the level of abstractions, that morals are able to gain any sort of efficacy.¹

For example, take the moral principle, “One should be honest.” Stated simply, this moral says that a moral agent should be honest in each and every situation. Faced with the question of whether he should lie to his friend to make the friend feel better, the moral agent has a principled starting point to address such a scenario. The same holds true if the moral agent

1 Of course, this does not mean that one should do away with concretes. Concrete instances are necessary to establishing a morality if it is to remain applicable to reality. What is crucial is context. For instance, a runner who is looking to improve his performance will consider certain foot placement and abdominal exercises essential information. However, police departments seeking to find a criminal who escaped on foot will properly have no concern for the criminals running technique and abdominal routine. Context matters, and this remains true in the realm of morality.

is faced with the choice of telling his boss about skipping out on work, or being honest with his wife when she asks him whether her dress looks good on her. The abstract nature of morality, i.e. the fact that it is a concept and operates at the conceptual level, allows man to utilize it throughout his life.

A moral grounded at the perceptual level is useless, as is demonstrated by the following example. One evening, John's wife asks him if her new green dress makes her look fat, to which John is honest and replies in the affirmative. John's wife values his honesty in this instance. From this, John may derive the moral principle that, "I should tell my wife the truth if she asks me if she looks fat her new green dress." Of course, this moral is problematic in its applicability to other situations. When his wife asks him about her new red dress, or her new pants, or her new haircut, the moral offers John no guidance. His earlier perceptual level moral is impotent in such situations. In turn, he could create a new moral for each of the infinite number of situations that could arise, but it would be impossible to retain the cognitive content of this magnitude.

Turning back to *The Tortoise and the Hare*, this is exactly why the moral to the story cannot be, "Slow and steady wins the race," just as the principle of honesty cannot be, "I should tell my wife if she looks fat or not in her new green dress." Morality cannot be treated as a set of concrete commandments ordained from a point of omniscience.

Yet, as is evident by interpretations of *The Tortoise and the Hare*, this is exactly the way morality is often treated. Not surprisingly, ethicists have caught on to the flaws of this view of morality. In philosophy, entire works are dedicated to proving the impotence of morality. Examples upon examples of moral dilemmas are created to demonstrate the inapplicability and limitations of morality in man's life. One such example is the lifeboat scenario. In this scenario, there are various people on a lifeboat with too limited of resources or space necessary for survival. The dilemma arises in choosing whom to save and whom to sacrifice, to which the morality critiqued offers no readily available or intuitive concrete answer.

In short, morality *per se* is shown to be unable to ascribe men a specific course of action. It does not provide man his answers on a silver platter and for this reason it is oft rejected. Thus, morality is regarded as inapplicable to man's life precisely because morality is expected to be what it

cannot be. The consequences of treating morality in such a manner are far reaching, and have played a large part in the rejection of a secular morality.

There is, however, a moral that can be derived from *The Tortoise and the Hare* that does not subject morality to a concrete-bound perceptual level status. What *The Tortoise and the Hare* does offer is a case for principled action. Note that the hare acts in a completely capricious manner. Just as he challenged the tortoise to a race on a whim, so too is his choice to nap on a whim. His actions are not chosen in accord with his specified goal of winning the race, causing them to be superfluous and costly. Through and through, the hare acts on impulse, losing him the race and his self-esteem. Conversely, the tortoise acts methodically and in accord with his goal of winning the race. Not only does he choose and maintain a sustainable pace for his own ability, but also he remains focused. Unlike the hare, he does not stop to boast nor think myopically. All of his actions are goal oriented and long-term. In sum, the tortoise acts in a principled manner while the hare acts on whim. It is clear which mode of action proved victorious, and it is from these facts that the moral of the story should be derived.

The moral lesson—“thinking long-term and acting on principle is necessary to success”—applies to myriad circumstances, goals, and actions. It does not denigrate morality to a concrete-bound mentality but opens up the possibility for wide integration.

Whether someone runs or walks, is a doctor or a truck driver, seeks money or happiness, is of no consequence to the efficacy of the moral lesson at hand. The fact that man’s life ranges decades, that he requires certain conditions to live, that he is a conceptual creature whose means of survival is his mind, that he must produce to prosper, all necessitate thinking long-term and accordingly acting on principle. This moral lesson for principled action finds itself perfectly situated at the intersection between the fantasy of *The Tortoise and the Hare* and the reality of man’s life.