

# Does moral action depend on reasoning?



Aref Ali Nayed

## No, it does not!

Rather, moral action depends on compassion. Parents need no reasoning to nourish their children in loving-kindness. Children need no reasoning to lovingly care for their aging parents. Neighbors need no reasoning to warmly welcome strangers to the neighborhood. Human beings need no reasoning to help other needy humans and creatures. All we truly need, for moral action to arise, is compassion. Compassion is the necessary and sufficient condition on which moral action depends.

Yes, compassion often gives rise to, and involves, a kind of compassionate discernment, especially when difficult choices have to be made in a complex world teeming with conflicting demands. But such discernment is fundamentally a spiritual movement of the heart rather than a calculative choice. In such cases, we weigh matters in our hearts, and we exercise our actions in the directions to which our hearts happen to tilt.

Of course, if challenged about the particular ways our hearts happen to tilt, or if we are trying to convince others to tilt the way we tilt, we may be clever enough to come up with reasons for tilting this or that way. Such reasons often appeal to utility, cost/benefit analysis, or considerations of reciprocity. Sometimes the appeal is made to the imperatives of rights, duties (categorical and specific), and values.

But the actual tilting happens mostly through prerational and precalculative *spiritual* moves that spring from the very depths of our compassionate humanity. Our compassion seems to be endowed not only with an inner intentionality that always gives it *directedness*, but also with an inner sensibility that gives it *selectiveness*, in cases of competing demands, so that the right compassionate choices are made.

True moral action fails to make much sense if judged on purely utilitarian, practical, or reasonable grounds. Actions are most truly moral when they spring from so deep in our compassionate humanity that they

defy merely calculative logic. Just as we are capable of exercising moral action, we are also capable of detecting moral action exercised by others. The most prevalent and impressive characteristic of such actions is compassion.

Calculative and deliberative reasoning can pretend to make sense of moral actions, but in their very roots, such actions take place before we sense. They are not exactly senseless, or nonsensical, since much sense can be made of them after the fact. In their foundation, however, moral actions precede sense itself.

Moral actions impress us the most, and we cherish them the most, when they are clearly selfless, generous, and gratuitous (that is, done without expecting compensation or return). Actions that do not focus on benefitting oneself and one's interests, but that clearly manifest compassion toward others, are truly moral.

Striving to understand moral action entails striving to understand the compassion that is so deeply ingrained in our humanity. What is this compassion? From where does it spring? How does it work? How can we nourish it? How can we live it? How can we teach it? Ethics, moral philosophy, and moral theology must address such questions once again.

The analysis of moral and ethical language, with its typologies of rights, duties, and values, is indeed important. And so too is the task of addressing the practical issues that arise because of new technologies and new ways of life. But more important than all of that, and in order to ground such work, we must come to appreciate the font from which all moral action springs: compassion.

The two great teachers of compassion are God and our mothers. If there is one fundamental teaching regarding action in all true religions, it is compassion. From the Buddhist "seeing with the eye of compassion," to the Hindu *kripa*, to the Jewish *rachamim*, to the Christian *agape*, to the Muslim *rahma*, the world's great religions have systematically and emphatically reminded humanity that compassion is the foundation of moral action and noble living.

Mothers are the best teachers of compassion. A mother's love for her child is the paradigm of compassion. It is utterly pure and selfless. When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) wanted to

explain how compassionate God is, he resorted to saying that God's loving compassion is more than a mother's loving compassion for her child! He thus pointed to the clearest example of compassion known to humanity, and then pointed out that God's compassion is even more profound.

If one is challenged to define compassion, therefore, one better not try to provide a rational definition. The best strategy is to say, "Compassion is what you felt in your mother's arms!" We literally drink compassion in our mothers' milk. It grows in our hearts as we grow in our mothers' nourishing love. That is the creaturely source of our compassion, and the source of our deep pre-understanding of it.

This deep pre-understanding is often reinforced and broadened through the many spiritual "mothers" or "teachers" we encounter along the way to our ultimate destiny. Prophets (peace be upon them), saints, guides, and teachers all partake in motherly compassion and manifest it with varying intensities. For me, as a Muslim, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the most intense and perfect human manifestation of compassion as such.

There is also a metaphysical source of our compassion and our pre-understanding of it. After all, there is no fundamental, intrinsic reason for us to exist rather than not to exist. There is no intrinsic tilting principle in the cosmos that tilts it, and tilts us with it, from non-being to being. Such tilting can happen only through a principle beyond being and more fundamental than being itself. Such a principle is divine compassion, manifested in all that is, as cosmic compassion.

Moral action consists in tapping into this cosmic compassion, the spring at the center of our being. The ultimate expression of gratitude for the divine compassion that grounds our being is the sincere exercise of compassion. Ultimately, truly moral living is living in mutual compassion, with all of God's creation. Moral action depends on compassion, comes from compassion, consists in compassion, and manifests itself as compassion.

God, the Compassionate, knows best!

---

*Aref Ali Nayed is the director of Kalam Research & Media in Dubai. He lectures on Islamic theology, logic, and spirituality at the restored Uthman Pasha Madrasa in Tripoli and serves as a senior advisor to the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme in the United Kingdom.*

## JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

SUPPORTING SCIENCE ~ INVESTING IN THE BIG QUESTIONS

THIS IS THE SIXTH IN A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS AMONG LEADING SCIENTISTS, SCHOLARS, AND PUBLIC FIGURES ABOUT THE "BIG QUESTIONS."  
JOIN THE CONVERSATION AT [WWW.TEMPLETON.ORG/REASON](http://WWW.TEMPLETON.ORG/REASON).