

MORALITY STORIES:
Dilemmas In Ethics, Crime & Justice

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*This book is dedicated to
Susan, Matt, Eric and Gregory*

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FOREWORD

I read the twelve short stories in this collection over the course of three evenings, while I sprawled comfortably on the living room couch. To my surprise, I found that I was taking the themes of what I had read to bed with me, staying awake longer than I cared to and wondering about the likely outcomes of the various stories, pondering what I thought was the “correct” resolution, and then imagining what I myself might have done—or not done—had I been faced with the same set of conditions. The events portrayed in *Morality Stories* hold a real fascination for persons concerned with human goodness and human evil as well as their own goodness and evil. The book’s moral is translucent: “An evil act doesn’t necessarily make a person who committed it evil,” the authors declare in a thematic statement. “In the end,” they add, “we want our lives to make sense.” For the reader, the task is to see what happens to the people in these stories or what you think will happen to them and to extract lessons that make sense. The stories are exceptionally good reading, and they cover an extraordinarily broad spectrum of human behavior.

I was intrigued by the fact that in a number of the stories it is the throwaway observations of strangers that sets in motion reactions from those who hear their words and then reflect on how they apply to their own condition. A waitress, adept in jollyng customers, suggests that “sometimes you gotta do something risky to make sure you’re still alive” and her homeless customer, down and out, makes a move that at least holds some hope of turning his dreary life around.

These are not generally O’Henry stories with surprise endings, but well-constructed portrayals of people who come across as real folks with real problems and, for some, immediate ethical dilemmas that

require immediate resolution. The authors sometimes tease us by stopping just short of the point where the protagonist makes up his or her mind regarding what they are going to do. It was my own wrestling, in tandem with that of those characters about their moral conundrums, that cost me sleeping time.

There sometimes is a change of pace in the stories with the recital tending toward understatement, such as in the moving description of the prison inmate who receives a gift from a totally unanticipated source. The donor is asked why he did what he did: the question puzzles him (as it puzzles us too) and he can offer only a laconic uninformative response before uncomfortably dropping the subject and moving along.

The prison stories are a sub-group of tales, in which the moral lesson is more straightforward. These stories are marked by an exceptionally clear-eyed rendition of the aura and the undertones of life on a cell block and the verbal thrusts and jabs of the prisoners. The lesson they convey is that even among those who seem to be the worst of us (but not all of them) there are many who are decent, even admirable human beings. In several instances, prison guards, who have daily contact with inmates, come to understand their humanity and to forgive the awful behavior that brought them to where they are. "The Mercy Seat," the concluding story in the book, demonstrates that the death penalty can catch in its awful embrace human beings who have earned the opportunity to remain alive. The story brings to mind the wisdom of Winston Churchill who wrote: "The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country. These mark and measure the stored up strength of a nation and are proof of the living virtue in it."

I would be hard-pressed to decide which story made the deepest impression on me. Each in its own way set me to thinking, but I suspect it was the riddle of the grandfather who refused to open doors for others or to allow them to open doors for him that made the deepest impression. The tenderness between the old man and the boy grandchild, his namesake, is conveyed with great sensitivity, and the moral power of the story leaves indelible memories on the reader. Life is made up of choices and those vital ones that we make, however

limited we believe our options to be, will mark us for the remainder of our lives.

Science and morality at times have been said to exist in distinctively different realms, with a wall the height of Anapurna separating them. Science seeks objectivity and presents a facade of detachment and neutrality. That facade of neutrality has been satirized by one scholar who wondered whether, if her husband and a grizzly bear were locked in mortal combat, she was required to say: "C'mon husband, c'mon bear."

Nonetheless, it was long held that the application and consequences of what a physicist or chemist learns is somebody else's business, perhaps one of those feely-touchy people who deal with fuzzy concepts such as goodness and decency. Such ideas, however, faded in the wake of the discovery of the atomic bomb. Many brilliant scientists who had unraveled the mysteries that led to the bomb's production began to wonder what they had unleashed and how much responsibility they ought to assume when their invention was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, producing a grisly harvest of thousands of civilian corpses. The horrors of the unleashing of the two atomic bombs in 1946 were brilliantly brought home to the world not by sterile medical reports of the casualties or elegant longitudinal research into the long-term health outcome of persons who had been exposed to the radiation released by nuclear fission. The subsequent fictional and non-fictional portrayals by talented writers, such as Nevil Shute (*On The Beach*) and John Hersey (*Hiroshima*), provided much starker, compelling, and in an important sense, much more realistic accounts than the medical and the social science research probes. Similarly, to read the opening pages of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is to experience the Italian army's retreat at Caporetto during the first World War in a way that no scientific inquiry would be able to convey. In the same vein, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* tells us more about what it was like to fight in the American Civil War (though Crane never did) than all the battle scenarios that historians have produced.

The stories that follow, written by Michael Braswell, Joycelyn Pollock and Scott Braswell, are like those classics. They put you in touch with important life experiences of people, often like yourself, who are

confronted with situations that require moral and ethical courage. This book allows you to share their experiences, and to debate within yourself and with others the issues that are raised as they relate to your life and your hopes, ideals, and expectations, and to theirs.

Gilbert Geis
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