

White Hats vs Black Hats – a moral dilemma

The confident lecturer stands tall at the lectern and views the packed hall.

'Did you notice in the old Western movies,' he says, 'that the good guys wore white hats and the bad guys all had black hats? Now the gracious amongst you would say that was just to make the roles clear for the viewers in a world before the *talkies* could add more subtlety to the screen ... but I would say it was another expression of soft caricaturing – the building up of heroes and putting down of villains. And it goes on in so many ways today as it has throughout history.' His voice rises steadily as he prepares to unleash the catalogue of injustices that he sees being present in the world.

The journalist in the front row winces – as she wonders why she has been sent to cover this event. Not another sermon about how the world would be sweeter if everyone would just obey the laws. She doesn't disagree with the impact of caricaturing but this is repetitive preaching – soapbox style. It's as if the sanctity of the moral wisdom has been written from above and passed down for all of us to obey. Over-simplified solutions ... and it seems that we, in our naivety, must have it explained to us, again and again.

She nudges the old man in the next seat to see his reaction. He has a questioning frown as he rubs his white goaty beard... but he doesn't acknowledge her nudge.

The lecturer has moved onto the range of *put-downs* that he notices – subtle contempt that can condition general public thinking – some people feeling superior and showing it by digs at the "inferiority" of others. *Isn't that precisely what he's doing now? Does he assume we are all stupid? Or maybe, his reading of the audience is that he needs to preach to the converted.* Now he's onto more movies about how Americans won the war ... indeed were winning everything.

The speech finishes with an exhortation for stricter laws and harsher punishments – *same old, same old.*

Will he take questions? she wonders.

With a strong exhalation of achievement, the lecturer gathers his notes to leave the lectern ... when the old man with the goaty beard asks, 'What is morality?'

'What?'

'Who decides what is right or wrong? I'm not arguing with your examples of disrespect but I'm wondering what the moral rules are and who decided them? And I'm wondering why your oft-repeated solutions don't seem to have worked very well so far – because the problem still exists?'

The lecturer coughs and then says, 'Well, that's a presentation for another time. Thank you for your question, sir.' And he quickly leaves the stage.

As the crowd leaves, the old man stays seated and the journalist remains beside him, her interested eyebrows raised. This may be not the story the editor was looking for but ...

'That was a good question,' she says, willing him to say more.

He turns to look at the young reporter. She is smiling, alert ... like many before her. 'Do you have an answer?' he asks quietly.

'No. But I think you might ... if you are willing to help me understand. Can I buy you a coffee while I listen?'

He slowly stirs his coffee and starts. 'The rules of morality have been created by humans ... and those rules are often conflated to mean justice.' He peers at her, gauging her understanding as he speaks. 'While there are similarities, they are not the same beasts. Both concepts are about establishing guidelines for correct, proper, acceptable behaviour ... but the contexts change, depending on the lens through which you view the guidelines. I am interested in those lenses, as well as the outcomes of all this human endeavour.'

She encourages him to sip his coffee as she asks, 'What is your background?'

'I have lived. I have experienced discrimination, injustice, detention ... and I'm also conscious that I'm like most other humans – no saint, with many faults. In other circumstances, I could be violent, could bully, could *put down* others who are different. What stops me, you wonder. Stay with me! Patience. Listen not just to my words but to the meaning behind them. Who writes history?'

She smiles. 'I think that would be the victors.'

'Precisely. Historical narratives are told through the lens of victors, not the victims. That comes from power – the ability to control the way information is received ... and then to influence the way people in general might think.'

'But that's not to say that victims don't have stories ... they write and tell them too ... it's just that their stories are not included in the national narrative. They are often squeezed out of libraries, bookshops and public discourse ... indeed sometimes burned by the people in power.' He smiles. 'Shall I continue?'

She nods. 'I'm listening.'

'Now ... justice? Who determines what laws will govern our community?'

She answers like a cheery robot. 'Politicians in elected democracies. Dictators in autocratic governments.'

He smiles ... again. 'And what does justice mean? Strict or merciful? Black and white ... or are there shades of grey?'

She is rising to the baited questions. 'That's why we have judges to determine cases on merit ... fairness.'

'Ah ha! Merit. Fairness. A perceptive Irish judge at the end of the 19th century, said, *In England, justice is open to all – like the Ritz Hotel*. You get it ... different rules for those with power, money and authority.'

'Now, morality? Decision-making where there are no right answers. Medical triage in a war zone – who do you treat first? The first in, the wealthiest, the most likely to live, the most likely to die without help, the loudest or most persuasive?'

'Then, there is the lifeboat scenario with spaces for 50 people but there are a 100 people in the water who will drown without assistance. What criteria do you use to choose who to save ... who will be accepted into the lifeboat? Ah, decisions. That's a favourite 1970s management-training exercise.'

'In war, there is another different context, related to survival. It is hard to switch codes from protecting life to deliberately taking life ... killing enemies – *moral wounding* is now recognised in combat personnel with PTSD.'

'So, laws are necessary to minimise overt discrimination and vilification ... and there should indeed be social consequences to deter aberrant behaviour ... but the subtle stuff still continues. Why? Tough laws really only deter the law-abiding ... not those who regularly ignore the social norms. Alienated people find ways round laws – as do the powerful.'

She is attentive and gestures for him to keep explaining.

'Values are important. But what are those much-vaunted principles? The USA holds that they had a *manifest destiny* to expand across a continent while removing the native population. Their culture had more money, more people and

bigger weapons, so its values and principles reigned supreme. Colonisation, similarly, was sold to decision makers as *bringing civilisation to savages* while, quietly bringing vast wealth through its home-country trading companies. The colonial armies ensured obedience. Values and principles? What do you think?

She nods. 'I'm not arguing. We know all this. But we are not in power.'

The old man concedes. 'It's important to build awareness though. People can check the evidence. But preaching,' he gestures back to the hall they have left, 'is a relic of an age where the general population had little access to information. Many could not read. Mass media broadcasts, even radio, are relatively recent in human history – so people had to learn from the wise *educated* people. I'm not against people speaking their views – that's why I sat in the audience. But I'm against implying that there are simplistic solutions to multi-layered human behaviour. Putting people into categories, stereotypes, defined either by praiseworthy or pejorative language is as if no-one has the ability to be an individual ... unable to think for themselves, to disagree ... to be different. One man's terrorist or insurgent is another man's freedom fighter and a hero against injustice.'

She laughs, despite the seriousness. 'Yeh. We live in a very divisive world. Intolerant! But I'm still waiting for your multi-layered solution. I get that we often put people on that pedestal box as idols or inspirations or pop-stars (often literally as statues or pavement stars) and others with post-nominals like BSc, OAM, MBE ... or pre-nominals (Dr, Sir, Dame, Honourable, Reverend, Worshipful, Saint) or medals for bravery, honour, service. Sometimes, the reverence extends to documents like the USA Constitution, religious texts and practices. I get all that. So, is the accepted argument that those heroes are all **white hats**? They have done no wrong and so should be revered?'

'You are a perceptive lady,' he says. 'Even the talented are like most of us, with many flaws, having made many mistakes and hopefully having learned from them. But the processes you describe are also about pushing a narrative of belonging, deifying some while simultaneously ostracising any not fitting the mould ... and that, in the long term is dangerous.'

'Okay. Why?' she asks.

'Because it sends the subliminal message that some are *others* – not like us, lesser. And language is then used to scare ... even to the extent that normally

sensible people are so fearful (or emboldened to champion a cause) that they behave in anti-social, discriminatory and abusive behaviour. That language is a trigger for the later actions. That's where and how the real banishment and violence starts.'

'So,' she smiles, 'the solution to breaking that cycle of fighting, grievances, outrage is ...? Tell me!'

The old man sighs and sips the last of his coffee. 'Okay. This is an opinion. Check it. Argue against it ... but don't dismiss it, out of hand. No! You are too aware to do that. Could I buy **you** a coffee this time?'

He catches the eye of the waitress to order another two cups. 'Simplistic solutions seldom work for longer than the jolt that they create in societies. The challenge is to get beyond looking for the magic bullet and understand the multi-layered complexities in the self-righteousness of most morality crusades.

'Mostly, the crusaders are well-meaning, well-intentioned people. They are searching for inspiration, leadership, the excitement of a cause but, in reality, they're having the long-term impact of butterflies flitting from one outraged experience to the next.

'Their dilemma is in their belief that values are absolute – and moral values are a subset of that. But humans set what those values should be. So it comes back to power and control of information and, frankly, the victims feel alienated.

'A more productive value might be to show the benefit of being content with sufficiency, to manage the reproductive capacity of the human population, to learn to recognise and respect other cultures that are different, to live in harmony with the ecosystems around us.'

The coffees arrive and she asks, 'How do we do that?'

'It needs a significant improvement in the public rhetoric – to resist the urge to claim supremacy as an ideal ... or to try conquering by more division. It needs the jingoism of nationalism to be left to the sporting fields as a release for that sort of fervour. A **whole-of-society ownership of the important priorities** is needed to live on a finite planet. It will take an end to a view that there is some pre-ordained rightful destiny to be achieved at the expense of everything else.'

He gives a sad laugh. 'And that is like turning around a super-tanker ship in a confined space – an enormous change to ingrained attitudes, strongly held *beliefs*, the tradition of cultural and family heritages ... all within a mass-

information availability never before seen, along with technological advances beyond the wildest imagination of even a few decades ago.

'But families and social institutions still have a valuable role to play – education and re-education of the young and the entrenched older people through teaching critical thinking skills rather than preaching to partisan followers. Lots of information is now available on tech platforms and social media. No editors are controlling that output but there is a need for the young to be aware and to learn the skills of logical reasoning. It's really just like being a detective – learning to sort the valid testable evidence from fictitious distracters.

'Now, the philosophers in the Renaissance distilled the essence of morality to be about the greater good for communities rather than self-interest. That tends to go against many current practices ... and ideologies – such as capitalism, whose focus is about personal growth and business expansion.

'We are not born with values. They are learned largely from the perspectives in the home environment, in the social institutions and pre-adult experiences. But there is so much information on the internet now that there is little that can't be learned and checked on-line. Positive opportunities abound – along with showing the vulnerable how to be safe from damaging influences.

'Punishment consequences can play a role in changing aberrant behaviour and protecting society. Fear can play a role too – not by marginalising other groups but more by demonstrating how hard it can be to survive without the technological supports of the 21st century.

'Observe the challenges of war-torn countries or in the aftermath of natural disasters. Take away electricity, water supply, working sanitation, silicon-based cyber technology, hospitals and the availability of transported food ... and we are living in humble huts, off the land, without most of the passed-down skills for survival. Suddenly, the lens through which morality and justice is viewed will be much more about very fundamental needs rather than vilifying or deifying others. **People have to own this changed approach.**' He leans forward. 'So what will your story be about?'

'About an old man's observations of life.' She bows her head in appreciation. 'No more white hats and black hats ... but more about forming a persuasive action plan that could work and be owned by everyone – before it is too late. My editor will run with this!'