[[home]](http://folksongcollector.com/index.html) [[List of Essays]](http://folksongcollector.com/writings/essays.htm) [[about miriam]](http://folksongcollector.com/miriam.html)

**WHAT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO?**

Essay

December, 1976

Ethics. Ethics and Morality. These topics were the focus of the November Bulletin (of the Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends). Over and over in these articles I detected a note of fruitlessness to the inquiry, that there could be no definitive, incontrovertible, certain answer to the question, What is the Right Thing To Do? (Several years ago a discussion group to which I belonged took a poll on a list of forty or more possible themes for discussion, rating each on a scale from 1 to 6; the title of this essay received the highest rating.)

For myself I have come to feel that "right" and "wrong" are merely matters of agreement (except possibly in the fields of arithmetic and algebra). The terms "good" and "bad" or rather "good" and "evil" are also matters of agreement since what is Good or Evil at one time may be the other at another time. However, the lower-case terms "good" and "bad" are not so variable because they do not pretend to be all-encompassing in time and space as to their applicability. This means that, in any situation, it is possible to consistently assert that one choice is better than another although two persons may differ on which choice they consider better; in the last analysis this is all we have, the situation of the moment and the possibility of making a decision one way or another. In order to make a determination of choices each person may choose different variables or use different criteria, and thus may arrive at a different choice; but each makes the "best" decision according to his or her lights. Even when a person finds himself or herself not acting in accordance with that which they regard as their "best" decision, it merely means that some variable or factor carries heavier weight with them than they may realize or admit, or be able to cope with. Thus, I may continue working for a boss who exploits me or other employees or discriminates because of doubts about being able to find another suitable job soon enough if I quit; or I may respond harshly or unlovingly to a person whose behavior annoys me because something in me keeps me from seeing "that of God" in them. I may even react violently if sufficient pressure builds up on me and I become unable to maintain the tranquillity one needs in order to respond gently and lovingly; but such a reaction does not mean that I believe that to be the "best" or wisest course of action, merely that I did not have sufficient "life skill" at that point to act in accordance with what I considered to be the "best" decision or principle.

This essay did not start with the intention of proving the relativism of ethics and morality; rather I began it with the intention of asserting that I believe that there is an absolute basis for making decisions about what is "bad" or "immoral". That basis I can state simply as: That which is harmful to others is immoral or bad; and by elimination that which is not harmful is not immoral, although that does not mean that there are actions which must be asserted to be "moral", since the absence of "immorality" is merely equivalent to the absence of harmful acts to others. The most "moral" thing I can do, therefore is to avoid acts which are harmful to others; no basis can be found for asserting that there are acts which are positively and definitely "moral" save for that one thing. For example, consider a possible statement: That which is helpful to others is moral; it should be clear that such a statement cannot be insisted upon since there are many actions which might be helpful to another and it would be meaningless to say that not doing any of them would constitute "immorality", unless of course such abstinence would result in harm to that person. But there is still a difference between an act which positively harms another person and a non-action which indirectly results in harm to another, because in the first case you have the choice to abstain from the harmful act but in the second case there may be no action which you could take, or at least no obvious action, which would not be harmful to someone.

Someone may be inclined to disagree with my premise That which is harmful to others is immoral, on the grounds that an action which may be harmful in one way may be beneficial in another, more important longer range way. Thus, you may spank a child in order to (try to) teach it not to run into the street; or you may speak harshly or insultingly to someone because (you think) that is necessary to shock them into more awareness of you or some aspect of the situation which (you think) they are not aware of. In both of these cases it is doubtful that your actions are "really" harmful to those persons; perhaps there is some other case in which a really harmful act is beneficial to another person, but personally I think it constitutes the null set (i.e. there aren't any).

Another person may want to argue that sometimes refraining from doing something that will be harmful to another person will be harmful to yourself, and harm to yourself is as undesirable as harm to another person. There need to be two categories sorted out about this: the case where you are personally threatened and the harm you would directly cause to another would be from preventing harm to yourself, and the case where you are not personally threatened but by doing what you perceive to be the best thing for yourself would indirectly cause harm to another. To measure these situations you need to be clear on what your alternatives are and what you commitments to any of the possibilities are. Thus, it may be better for yourself if you leave someone you have been living with, even if you know it will hurt them; or it may be better for you to stay in a job which you find a strain or debilitating because of its contribution toward some future goal which you may have. Or it may be more important for you to continue to live with someone when the relationship seems to be hampering your own growth because the cause of your problems is something in you which you would not change by running away; or it may be more important for you to quit a job you disprefer even though it means a setback to your more distant goals.

In conclusion, I need to state that I really believe that the premise should be stated as, That which is harmful to others is harmful to others, and I prefer not to do things which are harmful to others. But even if I did prefer to do things which were harmful to others whenever the circumstances seemed to warrant that, it would still be harmful to them and therefore in some absolute measure "bad" for me to do those things.

*(originally published under the name of John Fitz)*

**LAWS WERE MADE TO BE BROKEN**

Essay

February, 1965

The concept of "rights" is literally devoid of meaning.

On the one hand, they have been interpreted as some unalterable, inviolable properties of being human, or of being a social being.

On the other hand, "rights" have always been subject to violation, alteration, reversal by common agreement of enough people.

Can we discover what they really are, if anything?

It may be taken as axiomatic that all actions are possible for an individual. The evidence for this is in the meaning of the words: all actions, except impossible ones, are therefore possible.

It may also be taken as axiomatic that all rules or laws are essentially arbitrary. The evidence for this is in the fact that all rules or laws may be changed.

Putting these together it appears that an individual has the ability to do anything from those things which concern himself to those which concern other people. Such circumscription as may be imposed by the society may introduce unfavorable consequences over which he has no control, but can not change the inherent possibilities of his actions, and are therefore only essentially arbitrary pseudo-limitations from outside the person they are neither basic nor fundamental. I conclude then that a person has the "right'f to do anything he chooses.

Am I arguing for criminality, for immorality? No, for I assert that concomitantly a person has the responsibility to place limitations on his own actions. These can be the only true limitations, coming from within him.

What does such responsibility entail? It includes recognition of the direct consequences of the actions one takes, the effects and results on people and things; inclusion of those direct consequences as determinative factors in his decisions about actions; and willingness to accept those consequences. It may include: recognition of the indirect consequences resulting to a person from the essentially arbitrary rules which may exist concerning the action; and inclusion of those indirect consequences as determinative factors in the decision.

And I suggest further: Laws were made to be broken. If man possessed an infallible jUdgment a superior conscience, we might trust his laws but he has not evolved to this yet, and so our laws and rules should be recognized only as approximate guides to actions, as cumulative human evaluations of actions, manifested however only in the indirect consequences which they specify. Laws can never include all possibilities; they may guide us, but should not enslave us.

There are fundamental laws for human actions perhaps; the Golden Rule may be an approximation. It puts together in the same statement the two principal impulses in man's behavior: selfishness and altruism, apparently opposite, but equated in the rule. It places the evaluation of the direct consequences of one's actions in a light which makes it most possible to make them a determinative factor in one's decisions.