

## **Topic 1: the goodness of human nature according to Mary Wollstonecraft**

“It may be confidently asserted that no man chooses evil, because it is evil: he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks. And the desire of rectifying these mistakes, is the noble ambition of an enlightened understanding, the impulse of feelings that Philosophy invigorates,” thus states Mary Wollstonecraft in her letter *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* to Edmund Burke.

In stating this, Wollstonecraft displays a particularly positive and hopeful view on mankind and human nature. She claims that, while people may choose to do wrong, they never do this in the full knowledge that their actions are evil, rather they confuse evil for good. This means that humans are, at their core, all good beings, since they exclusively act in ways they think they are good. When an evil act is carried out, the problem is by consequence not the actor's morality, but the knowledge of the action they possess. The philosopher then goes on to claim that our willingness to correct our mistakes is what proves that we, in essence, are good: when we learn we have made an evil decision, we try to correct it.

I share Wollstonecraft's opinion on the confusion between good and bad, as well as the fact that humanity shows goodness in correcting mistakes. I, however, do not agree with her on several other points. I believe her claim to be too general, leaving little room for nuance. I also do not agree with the notion that no one would knowingly carry out evil acts, as I believe that humans are not good in essence. Rather than this, I think it is circumstantial factors that influence our decision making, the main factor being hope,

Firstly, I will discuss the confusion between good and bad and why it is integral to human nature to feel confusion towards these moral subjects. I will also explore how goodness has an evolutionary advantage. Then, I will explain which elements of Wollstonecraft's quote I disagree with, starting with the nature of morality and whether it is taught or not. I will also discuss why Wollstonecraft's claim is too general and why people are, in fact, capable of acting truly evil. After that, I will discuss how the largest factor in determining whether someone chooses to act good or evil, is hope, as well as exploring why hope is so important and how it can be acquired specifically. Lastly, I will discuss how hope can then be used as a moral tool.

### **Goodness and evil as a human tool for improvement**

The confusion of good and bad is an issue for most humans, since the very concepts of good and bad are difficult to navigate for us. We, the human species, are – at this moment in time– the only species that has any proven concept of morality, which puts the enormous weight of moral responsibility for our actions on our shoulders. When we want to act good, we cannot grasp the full amount of consequences our actions will have on others, leading us to experience doubt when making moral decisions. This doubt, however, should be seen as a positive element from a moral point of view, as questioning the goodness of one's actions is what can lead to improvement and moral enlightenment. Mistakes play a big part in feelings of doubt and self-questioning. Most people realise, upon receiving criticism after they have made a mistake, that their decision was the wrong one to make. This usually leads to improvement and a better assessment of moral situations. These benefits are exactly why mistakes must not be demonised, but rather discussed and criticised in an honest, but kind manner.

While I do not believe that human nature causes us to act good, contrary to Wollstonecraft, I do believe that most of us prefer to act good over evil. People who knowingly commit evil acts are thus naturally an exception. This is because there is an unspoken, but generally understood rule amongst humans that good actions have good consequences. If a person helps their neighbour, for example, this neighbour will likely be willing to do something good for them in return. We can thus state that good acts have an evolutionary

advantage in humans, rather than being an integral part of our nature: since we are a social species, living in communities, doing good for others usually helps us as well. As a consequence, good actions cannot be seen as a sole moment of kindness, rather they are part of a complex web of interpersonal exchanges of goodness. Even though Wollstonecraft has a different view than I on why humans act good, we have a rather similar opinion up until this point. I will now discuss on which points our opinions differ and give arguments to defend my view on the subject.

### Morality as a guideline rather than a rule

Contrary to what Wollstonecraft claims, people are not born good, neither are they born with the intent of committing evil. At birth, humans are merely blank slates, and any concept of morality is determined by their surroundings. Babies cannot act in a good or bad way, as they have not yet gone through the process of acquiring moral judgment. Children, on the other hand, have learned to act according to the values they have been presented with and taught. It is thus nurture, not nature, that installs a sense of moral judgment in humans.

Next to that, it must be noted that Wollstonecraft's statement is too general of a claim. It is generally risky to claim something affects *everyone* or that *everyone* shares a certain characteristic. In this case, while I believe that what she says is true for most people, Wollstonecraft falsely assumes that all humans want to act in a good manner. To explore this aspect of her claim further, we must first define what is seen as evil. Before we do this, it is important to note that the definition of evil is extremely subjective and may change drastically from person to person. The concept of evil is seen by Wollstonecraft as actions having negative consequences (negative meaning that something causes harm to oneself or others), but never negative intents, as people mistake evil for good. This means that all actions must be done out of a positive intent.

I, on the contrary, disagree with the notion that there is no such thing as negative intent. While I think it is true that most people operate under positive intentions, some like to commit evil acts simply because this gives them some sort of sadistic joy. One could argue, in such a case, that Wollstonecraft is right; meaning that sadists must confuse evil with good. I believe this to be false: sadists knowingly commit evil acts, and the very fact that their acts are evil is what gives them joy. In this case, we cannot speak of a hidden search for happiness or good.

One might then wonder why anyone would wish to commit evil acts, when goodness has such positive consequences, as I explored earlier. The answer to this is that, when someone is in a situation which they feel is hopeless, they will commit evil out of helplessness, as a way to distract themselves from their unbearable negative feelings: when no other distraction works, people use evil as a form of escapism. An excellent example of this can be found in George Orwell's book *1984*, a dystopian novel exploring life under a totalitarian, ever-watchful regime. In Orwell's book, the two main characters, Winston and Julia, have a sexual relationship, which is forbidden by their government. The two continue their relationship, not only in spite of the government forbidding it, but exactly *because* the government forbids it. Their main reason for having a relationship with one another is a feeling of helplessness against the regime that oppresses them. One could argue that their act may be evil to the government, but can be seen as good when it is viewed in a context of rebellion and activism. Orwell, however, makes it clear that Winston and Julia never even have a slight chance of actually rebelling against the regime, of actual activism, and they themselves know this. Both of the lovers are well-aware that their actions will not affect the system they hate deeply, and will only cause them harm in the end, but they pursue their tragical romance nonetheless. This makes their act evil against themselves, meaning this is a case of people who knowingly carry out an evil deed. In cases such as this one, evil is used as a tool when all other hope is lost. When there is still any hope, escapism through evil is not necessary. Rather than focusing on whether human nature is fundamentally good or fundamentally bad, as is often done in philosophical discussions, we should be focusing on hope,

because this is what causes us to act either in a good or bad way. Now that I have concluded that hope is essential in morality, I will explore what exactly the advantages of hope are and how it is possible to acquire hope in multiple different ways.

### Advantages of hope

Although all humans go through some sort of moral learning process, we do not always act accordingly. As stated before, humans can carry out evil acts, whether it be knowingly or not. This is why hope plays such a big role: because it can be seen as the ultimate medicine against evil. In this case, I will define hope as a positive view on others and on the world in general, as an encouraging source that causes us to believe in ourselves and others. We can even go as far as to say that hope is the main pillar of society: hope is what keeps societies adaptable, what causes them to keep improving and working towards a better future. A society without hope is a society that no longer grows, a society from which people flee, a society that cannot survive. Understanding that hope is such a crucial element in regards to the managing of a society is essential in our attempts of understanding society in general. Hope itself can be given to people in many different ways, which I will now explore.

The popularity of religion is a strong indicator of humanity's ever-lasting search for hope. A lot of religions' attractiveness lies in the fact that they give their followers hope: hope that a better life is possible through prayer, hope that their god will free the earth of evil, hope for an afterlife in paradise... These elements are precisely why people take refuge in religion during hard times: the aspect of hope gives them a strong sense of consolation. This concept is explored in many literary works, such as the children's book *Oscar et la Dame Rose*. In this book, the main character is a child who suffers from cancer and knows that he will soon die. This is when he begins to cling to religion, even though he was an atheist before: because religion manages to give him, above all, a sense of hope in an extremely challenging situation.

Next to religion, philosophy may also give a sense of hope to many. While philosophy may not necessarily promise a glorious afterlife as religion does, it serves as a way to understand humanity, our world and our cosmos. Some philosophical views are able to console their followers, thanks to their hopeful nature. Although philosophy is not necessarily hopeful at core, the search for answers to fundamental questions can give people a strong sense of hope and purpose.

Philosophy and religion are very obvious factors which can give hope to many, but there are also many other tools one can use to acquire a more hopeful lifestyle. Simple pleasures such as entertainment and physical activity can also give us a sense of hope; entertainment by relieving our sorrows and showing us the pleasant aspects of the world, and physical activity by the wish of improving oneself to become more athletic, thus creating hope for becoming an improved version of oneself in the future. Not only physical activity but hobbies in general create a more hopeful mindset for many people.

Having discussed the role of hope in society and how to create hope, I will discuss the way we can apply this information to the making of moral decisions.

### Hope as a moral tool

While I do not agree with all aspects discussed in Wollstonecraft's quote, the quote itself serves as a perfect example of how hope can be used as a moral tool. As discussed before, hope can cause us to change the way we act, but it is also capable of changing the way we are as humans; it can change us more fundamentally. Wollstonecraft's quote gives an extremely hopeful view on human morals, which can thus actually change the way readers of this quote act in real life. Since they feel that someone believes in them

and their innate goodness, they feel motivated to start acting better themselves, as well as seeing the good in others. This can then start a chain reaction, which leaves many more people making better moral choices and feeling more hopeful.

It is of the biggest importance to apply this quote practically, of course, so let us look at some specific ways hope could improve our society. In the medical sector, doctors try to give people who struggle with mental health or chronic diseases a sense of hope in order to ease their struggles. In our prison system, on the other hand, there is a drastic lack of hope, meaning we should begin to make more efforts to show prisoners our hope in their ability to change, causing them to have a higher chance of actually changing for the better. Right now, the number of prisoners who commit crimes again after they have been released, is painfully high. Not only is this a personal crisis for both the criminals in question and their family, it is a crisis on a societal level as well. This showcases why we need a cultural shift in our mindset regarding criminals, and underlines the importance of giving people second chances. In our relationships with other people, whether those relationships be familiar, platonic, or romantic, the granting of second chances is equally essential. We cannot expect anyone to be perfect, as it is merely human to make mistakes and act immorally from time to time, which is why we must aim for improvement by giving others hope that they can change for the better. This is why we can state that the most efficient tool for moral improvement is hope.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that most people try to act good, but that this goodness is a difficult thing to achieve, since morality is a complex concept. Furthermore, I think goodness is a tool which humans have developed in our evolution and gain many benefits from. I do, however, think that it is possible for people to act in an evil manner, meaning that they are aware that their action is evil and choose to continue acting in such a way deliberately. I believe that the reason someone may opt to do this, is because they feel no hope. Hope is, in my opinion, the main factor in our moral decision making: the presence of hope causes us to act in a good way, while the absence of hope has evil as a consequence. This is why it is important to acquire hope in some way, so that it may be used as a moral tool. Hope is, above all, a tool for moral, and thus human improvement.