

The importance of knowing what is good



If morality is the discernment of what is good and consequently the ability to choose between what is good and what is bad, then we have clearly lost our moral compass some time ago. It seems that we don't really know anymore what is good for us. And this starts at the most basic level of food and life-style.

Our children start losing their healthy instincts about what is good for them early on. They are fed too much sugar, salt and processed food. They grow up indoors because it is 'safer' and spend hours in front of screens, which makes them generally more overweight and unfit than their parents' generation at the same age.

As a result, their bodies are no longer able to distinguish between what is good and what is not. 'Good' is certainly not just what tastes nice for the brief moment we have it in our mouths or what entertains us and relieves us from boredom. Good is what is good for us in the long run, what creates a healthy flora in our gut, boosts our immune system, energizes us, feeds our body, soul and mind. Good is being aligned with the laws of nature. Long-term health and general well-being undoubtedly rest on laws of nature. Everything in excess will leave a trace in our system and accumulate over time if repeated.

I think that food is a great analogy for our general lack of discernment about the good. The question about what is 'good' is a very profound one and trying to formulate an answer obliges us to think long-term and to see the bigger picture, which is the opposite of our current "I want it now! and live-in-the-moment" culture. Good is what helps us to truly develop our potential and makes us happy in a more lasting way because it is related to our purpose and our values. Good is also what is good for all of us, not just the few.

Legislation is no substitute for morality. To pass more and more laws cannot replace the lack of moral awareness. Without an inner disposition to behave morally, people will inevitably find loopholes and try to bend the law to their own selfish ends. We can see this clearly in our modern labyrinth of legal restrictions that baffles even legal specialists. As the Roman politician, historian and writer Tacitus observed: "The more corrupt the state, the more numerous the laws."

It makes sense and has also been written about many times, that civilization must rest on a moral foundation. Many people say that the great crisis that exists today in the world is not economic or social, it's moral.



What can we do about this global moral failure and how can we regenerate our moral foundations? Whatever the answer, education has to be a part of it. We need to revise profoundly how we educate our young people. Our modern education is not concerned with educating children to become moral beings in the sense of being able to choose with their own inner compass what is good. We emphasise academic excellence, but this need not stand in the way of moral excellence. We need to talk about moral values and virtue again. A moral value is something we can understand. A virtue is something we can do, we can live. A virtue is the practice of moral values. This might even help with our current mental health epidemic. Because, as Aristotle already understood 2,400 years ago: “True happiness comes from the practice of virtue.”