

5

DO THE RIGHT THING

If only we knew what that was. Or rather, if only we knew how we knew what that was.

Consider an action such as feeding a helpless hungry child. Everyone agrees that that is a morally good thing to do. But now if you were to witness someone doing this, what would you see? You'd see the person feeding and the child fed; you'd see the food, the chewing, perhaps you'd see the child smile. But here's something you wouldn't see: the actual goodness of the action. "Goodness" is not the kind of property which is literally visible.

Our eyes see only light and color, after all. But good and bad and right and wrong are not equivalent to light or color so of course our eyes can't see them. And more importantly, what our eyes see at best is how things actually are at a given moment. But moral properties are about how things *ought* to

be. To say that feeding a hungry child is good is to say that one *ought* to do it. And our eyes are just not equipped for seeing that sort of thing.

It's easy to overlook this fact since we reach our moral judgments so quickly. If you witnessed a murder you'd be so immediately aware of its wrongness that you wouldn't realize that its wrongness is not something you can actually see. But now you might wonder: if you don't know about whether an action is right or wrong by your senses, then how *do* you know it?

So you might be pretty confident you know which actions are right and wrong. Feed that hungry child; be kind; don't steal donuts. You might even be confident in your moral beliefs about more controversial issues. But unless you can say a little more about *how* you know what rightness and wrongness are, you ought not be so confident about what it is you're confident about.

RELATED CHAPTERS: 12, 20, 23, 26,
29, 39, 45, 49, 54, 57, 58, 59

SANTA AND SCROOGE

Some people, looking for an inspiring role model, turn to religion and ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" But it seems to me that Jesus himself probably wouldn't ask that. So what about the next best person: Santa?

Well, generosity is a good thing; I'm not questioning that. But we never learn just why Santa gives, and we cannot morally evaluate him without knowing his motivations. According to some, the actual historical source of the Santa legend originally gave only to the poor. That's admirable, but there's a long way between that and rewarding every little brat on the planet, including the rich ones. And with respect to today's Santa—who rewards those who behave and punishes those who don't—well, if children behave well only to get the latest video game then we're hardly teaching them genuine morality. And if Santa is the key enabler there, so much the worse for Santa.

OK, let's give him the benefit of the doubt. Suppose we simply grant that Santa gives out of his pure and natural generosity. Would that make him an ideal role model?

Maybe. But there's another possibility. Consider Dickens' famous character Scrooge. Scrooge is not exactly a generous person. He is, well, a real scrooge. But let's alter the details of the story a bit. By the end of his experience he remains the same basic character he is: grouchy, unpleasant, and decidedly ungenerous. But now the philosopher within him has reached the conclusion that being generous is a good and admirable virtue. Unlike Santa he doesn't *feel* like being generous, and he has to overcome something within him in order to be generous. But he does so because he is now guided by what is right rather than by how he feels.

So now who is more admirable: the generous person who gives easily, naturally, or the person who has to overcome even his own natural antipathy in order to act generously?

I wonder what Santa and Scrooge would say.

RELATED CHAPTERS: 5, 12