



Inside Moral Judgement

LEONIE KLOOSTER

We often describe things by saying what they are not. We often define things by defining their opposite first. BLACK is not white. When something is wrong, it cannot be right. But who are we to judge? This chapter of **INSIDE BLACK** is an exploration of the moral concepts wrong and right, that somehow and somewhere in human history got tangled up with black and white: a misconception that lies at the root of the negative judgement of BLACK, and contributed to the racial inequality, violence and trauma the world is (still) facing today.

We judge daily. We judge our enemies, we judge our friends and family. We judge people we don't know (and have never even met): celebrities, politicians, neighbors. We judge our parents and grandparents, and if we are not too ashamed to admit it, we even judge our children for making us feel old and disrespected. But we probably judge ourselves the most. The self-actualization industry is booming. Coaches, books and magazines, influencers and inspirational speakers, are waiting in line to teach us freedom-seeking individuals, how to love and liberate ourselves, and be free from harmful beliefs and judgements. We have entered

a cultural paradigm where being vulnerable and authentic are among the highest (personal) virtues and (shared) values.

When your yoga teacher tells you to be compassionate towards every human being, you may judge yourself for being judgmental; a very uncomfortable contradiction to breathe through. You may think it is less spiritual to carry judgement than it is to be free of judgement, for judgement creates too much karma and you are walking your path towards enlightenment. Judgement is a heavy load, so drop it! Live and let live is a very sympathetic imperative. And a certain critical attitude

towards the evidence judgement is built upon, cannot be anything but wise and ethical, for we are only human, and humans can be wrong.

The most confronting example of the fallibility of (human) judgement is probably the unjustified execution of innocents on death row. An American website with information on the death penalty lists 167 cases of wrongful execution in the United States, between 1973 and 2019. The most frequent errors mentioned are: 'mistaken witness identification', 'false or misleading forensic evidence', and 'inadequate legal defense'. Which makes us wonder if we, human beings, are competent judges at all. Isn't it arrogant and foolish to think we possess all the information and the right parameters to make life or death decisions? Religious opponents of the death penalty might argue that we (human beings) should not put ourselves in the position of God.

Judgement is often linked to power and oppression; and power to inequality. Inequality leads to segregation and misinterpretation, and misinterpretation leads to harmful judgement. The suffering in this vicious circle is most intense when judgement is solely based on appearance or external characteristics, like gender, sexual-

ity, religious background or skin color. If there is anything that makes us feel unseen, misunderstood, unloved, lonely, hurt and repudiated, it is when we are judged for who we appear to be, instead of who we really are. The image that gets projected onto us never matches the mysterious, complex, and dynamic beings that we are.

If judgement is such a burden, aren't we better off without it? What if judgement is an insidious, yet essential part of human growth? Something we ought to practice in order to support evolution? Being able to judge wrong from right is a skill we need to survive. It is common sense that if we cannot tell the difference between warm and cold water, we might freeze when taking a swim. If we cannot judge whether an animal or another human being is coming to cuddle or kill us, we are dead meat. Judgement as a skill of differentiation or discernment is very helpful and necessary when we need to make decisions like what to eat, how to dress for the occasion or the weather, who to trust, or what project to invest our time or energy in. It is an innate tool, sharpened by experience, trial and error.

On a spiritual level, judgement can be a facilitator for the experience of deeper

meaning. It helps us answer the question whether our actions are in line with our highest values and core beliefs. Do we 'walk the right path'? There are many different ideas and interpretations of what that path looks like, where it leads to, which spiritual leader, book or practice guides us there, and how to avoid the distraction that leads us astray. Walking the right path could be living your full potential, being good to others, giving up addictions, decreasing your ecological footprint, or raising an extensive polygamous family in the Spirit of the Lord. You might devote your life to yoga practice or tantric healing, AA meetings or a monastic order.

Some spiritual practitioners renounce alcohol, drugs and sex, whereas others believe these to be essential instruments to meditate, find unity, wholeness and self-fulfillment. But whatever practice, doctrine, guru or support group you choose, walking the right path is never easy. It is, in fact, this inner struggle that Muslims named *Jihad*. The interpretation of *Jihad* that we know as the armed battle between believers and sinners culminating in acts of terrorism and religious wars, is usually referred to as the 'small' or 'lesser' *Jihad*, and inferior to the 'greater' *Jihad*. As Omar Nahas explains in his book

'*De andere Jihad*', *Jihad* literally means 'making an effort', 'committing' or 'going for something'.

Isn't this *Jihad* similar to the struggle everyone encounters, within or without religious contexts, when the desire to cheat sabotages the will to do good? When you want to lose weight, but can't resist the cheesecake with raspberry topping. When you want to quit smoking and keep telling yourself this is your last cigarette. When you know that a certain man or woman is not right for you, but you just don't feel strong enough to walk away.

Changing behavior in order to get to and stay on the right path is not easy. It requires a straight back, a functional social support system and a lot of courage. But most importantly, it starts with a clear and reliable judgement between what to label as right (or functional) and as wrong (or dysfunctional) behavior. Judging is a skill we can practice, and though human judgement is fallible, it is worth trying to improve this skill. Unfortunately, and to many a believer's dismay, the answer to the question what is right and what is wrong, is almost without exception, relative to the situation we are in, the goals we set ourselves, the language we are using, the time we

are living in, the people we are sharing our space with, and each of their individual backgrounds.

The challenge that comes with improving our judgement skills, is to be flexible, without being indifferent and to reach out for the truth, without trying to dogmatize it. It may be the hardest thing to grasp that morality is not a static, unambiguous thing, only understood by keepers of the law or those who read the bible. It is a fluctuating field of shared values, a collaboration between consensual meaning and individual efforts to speak up, take a stand and adjust (and sometimes let go) when new facts appear.

Of course, there is a difference between judging in terms of differentiation and judging in terms of condemnation. This is also true for discrimination. There is no harm in discrimination, if it only means observing and naming (not framing) different skin colors, sexes or age groups. But there is definitely something wrong when certain privileges are based on these characteristics. How does differentiation, or judgement as a skill lead to doctrines and ideologies that demonize and subordinate whole groups of people based on external features? There is no simple an-

swer, but it helps to try and understand a bit of the psychological complexity of how experiences turn into belief systems and moral doctrines.

My favorite source to read into these dynamics, is the *Weltanschauungslehre* by Wilhelm Dilthey. It is a thorough and detailed disquisition on the relationship between inner experiences and outer events, where seeing (perceiving), feeling and willing (acting) are the three main protagonists. Their collaboration explains how, for example, grief over the loss of someone dear and the unbearable pain we experience when this happens, can lead to a negative judgement of death and the moral conviction that death should be avoided at all times. The perception of a loved one dying, forms the scheme for the worldview that 'everybody dies someday.' Feelings like pain, grief and anger model the general judgement that 'it is wrong when people die because it hurts.'

The will to act upon our feelings, creates the basis for a moral guideline or conviction. In this case, 'death should be avoided at all times'. A subtle change in the mix of perceptions and feelings might affect the outcome drastically. We can comprehend that death is part of life, and feel

grateful instead of resentful for the people that passed away. We can adapt the conviction that the most valuable thing to learn is the art of letting go. Developing one's world view, or personal philosophy (*Weltanschauung*) is a very individual process. Nobody has the exact same response to their environment, and no two belief systems are identical. Even if we are surrounded by the same people and live in the same house (like siblings that share the same parents, home and upbringing), we perceive different aspects of that reality, resulting in different feelings and judgements.

"The fact that, in society, some values and belief systems have grown dominant over others, has nothing to do with how true they are."

We might experience a whole spectrum of emotions when someone dies (anger, grief, loneliness, empathy, identification, misunderstanding, fear, belonging,

awe, humility, love), but choose to identify with one feeling only and marginalize the others, because we find contradictions confusing and uncomfortable. Perhaps we adapted the conviction that life should be comfortable and cohesive at all times, from previous experiences. The feelings we choose to marginalize and suppress cause their own little chain reactions on a subconscious level, resulting in all sorts of unconscious behavioral patterns. The fact that, in society, some values and belief systems have grown dominant over others, has nothing to do with how true they are, and everything to do with power and social dynamics.

Contrast or contradiction?

Contrast makes visible. In the visual arts, contrasting colors, shapes and forms, movements and concepts are used to emphasize each other and attract the attention of the spectator.

When two opposite poles are presented together, we experience friction and completion at the same time. Consider the magnetic attraction between feminine

and masculine. Although a man can be, feel or act feminine and a woman can be, feel or act masculine, the masculine itself will never be feminine and vice versa. They balance and complete each other, yet remain opposite poles. (Author's note: I am not referring to Gender Identity but to the concepts of Feminine and Masculine Energy or Characteristics.) Is this the same for right and wrong? Are right and wrong contrasting principles, completing each other like masculine and feminine?

We learn and judge by contrast. How do we know we are on the right path if we were never led astray, and have never learned from the consequences of our choices? Contradiction occurs when the wrong choice becomes the right choice, for how it taught us an essential lesson. We know contradictions like this are part of life, but we often find them hard to accept. The most confusion is probably experienced in love. If it feels so good, why does it hurt so badly? If someone we once trusted betrayed us, we conclude that he or she must always have been unreliable.

The Dutch expressions *kleur bekennen* (to reveal color) and *zwart/wit denken* illustrate how we connect having opinions and ideas to showing our true color. Are you left- or right-wing? For or against

Zwarte Piet (Black Pete)? Vaxxer or anti-vaxxer? If you don't show your true color, you are either hiding something or you're a coward without an opinion. Moderation gets out-voiced by extremes, even though most wisdom and growth is found in the middle. Either-or thinking simplifies and feeds the illusion that life is controllable. But it overlooks the subtleties that make us human and forgets that control is an illusion deeply inspired by fear. However much we like to believe that science replaces God, it does not give us the either-or answers we are looking for. The amount of contradiction found in scientific discourse indicates that there are still more areas unexplored than areas conquered. Science is the beautiful, multifold reflection of our ever-expanding universe and the endless quest for knowledge and meaning.

I couldn't write a chapter about moral judgement and the origins of belief systems without including Etty Hillesum; a young Dutch-Jewish woman who decided to volunteer at the Westerbork concentration camp during World War II.

She believed that where people suffered the most, she could be of best service and live her full potential. From Etty's diaries, published long after her death in Ausch-

witz in 1943, we learn that her motivation to not go into hiding was the conviction that giving in to fear is like taking away your own freedom before others do. Hate and fear, the 'diseases of the soul', are our true enemies. It is not the question whether her choice was heroic or foolish that makes her work interesting or worth mentioning here. It is what she writes about overcoming contradictions and healing depression.

Etty found clarity, meaning and purpose by learning to focus less on her reasoning and more on her intuition. Through metaphors inspired by nature, she described that everything comes and goes and makes sense in its own way. High tide, low tide, day and night, there is something eternal and comforting in the rhythm of changes, and there is beauty and bliss to be found in acceptance. Acceptance of the German oppressors as fellow human beings, as well as the acceptance of (even the most cruel) death. I am not saying that Etty Hillesum's choices were right from every perspective. I do believe that by curing her depression she could do what was right for her, and therefore inspired many others, including myself. Her diaries have given me a poetic, conceptual language that resonates with the desire to express both a spiritual

humility or awe, and a critical, intellectual questioning. Etty Hillesum helped me to build a firm bridge between intuition and reason.

Representations of Good and Evil

How do right and wrong relate to their metaphysical equivalents, good and evil? The concepts right and wrong are mostly used to judge behavior, opinions and choices. They are not static; if your behavior, speech or judgement is wrong, you can still change it (and be forgiven). Good and evil however, are more problematic, as they are believed to exist outside of the reality that human beings created. They cannot be made subordinate to social consensus or forgiveness. If you are evil, you were probably born evil. A strong will (or psychiatrist) cannot help you. The community can only pray that God will save your soul or a priest or shaman will expel the evil power or demon that possesses your spirit.

In myths, evil is represented by *djinns*, evil spirits and demons. Not many people know that the character of Zwarte Piet has been portrayed in literature like a bogeyman looking like a black Moorish

page, and was identified as a representation of the devil. He first appeared as the scary-looking servant of Sinterklaas (the Dutch version of Santa Claus) in 1850, 13 years before the (official, not actual) abolishment of slavery. Whoever denies the historical origin and reference of Zwarte Piet to racial inequality, is ignorant of the history of white world domination and black as a representation of evil. Ever since European countries started to lay hold on the rest of the world, 'white bias' and the general judgement that black is primitive, ugly, barbaric, and inferior to white, legitimized the exploitation of people with a darker skin color, that has been going on for ages and has still not been eradicated.

Black as a representation of evil however, is much older than the European conquests in the 'Golden Age'. Both Gnosticism (1st century) and Manichaeism (2nd century) teach a dualistic cosmology, where the

"Some people believe that, just like the symbolic narratives of dreams, fairy tales have a deeper psychological meaning."

light is at constant war with the darkness. The light is the origin of good, it is the spiritual world where our souls have descended from and will return. The darkness is evil, connected to the world of matter, where our souls are held hostage by our bodies, physical needs and desires. The duality of dark and light as taught by Gnosticism and Manichaeism (and Zoroastrianism) is considered to have been very influential in the evolution and spreading of Christianity. In the present time a similar duality can be found in (New Age) spirituality, be it with a more positive evaluation of the darkness as the mystical subconscious, and the physical as a temple or holy vessel.

The White Bride and Black Bride

Many references of white and black as representations of good and evil can be found in European fairy tales. Traditional stories which carry a lot of symbolism in general and were not just meant as bedtime stories. They expose the moral values that were dominant in the time these tales were told and documented.

Some people believe that, just like the symbolic narratives of dreams, they have a deeper psychological meaning. The White Bride and the Black Bride fairy tale is one of many with references to black as evil and white as good, but probably the most inviting to racist explanation or interpretation. In this tale, God himself punishes the bad characters for their misbehavior by making them black and ugly, whereas the good character is made to appear white and beautiful.

The White Bride and the Black Bride was a traditional saga recorded by the brothers Grimm somewhere between 1812 and 1822. It tells the tale of a witchery woman, her daughter and stepdaughter, who encounter a man on their way to work on the land. The man asks them how to find his way to the village, and the mother answers that he will have to figure this out for himself. Her daughter adds, that if he is scared to go there on his own, he needs to bring a guide. The stepdaughter is kind enough to show him the way and accompany him on his trip. 'The man, who appears to be God in disguise, punishes the woman and her daughter for being rude, and turns their skin black. The stepdaughter is blessed and made white (and 'fair as the sun') and rich.

When they all come home, Reinier the brother of the stepdaughter is stunned by the beauty of his sister. He decides to paint a portrait of her to take with him to the royal courtyard, where he works as a servant of the King; the Queen has recently died and the King intends to remarry. The King sees the painting of Reinier's sister, and insists on meeting her. The (now black) witchery woman and her (now black) daughter are angry and jealous of the stepdaughter, and when a royal carriage comes to pick up the bride-to-be, they sneak into the carriage with her.

On the way to the palace they push the white stepdaughter out of the carriage into a pool, and dress the black daughter up with the white stepdaughter's veil. The moment the white stepdaughter drowns in the pool, a white duck appears. When the carriage arrives at the palace, the King sees his ugly black bride. The King is furious and Reinier is put to jail. The black mother however uses her witchcraft to mislead the King, until he decides to marry the Black Bride anyway. Then a white duck comes flying through a window. The duck starts having conversations with one of the cooks in the kitchen, who tells her everything that has happened. After the white duck visits three times, the King

hears about this 'talking duck' and gets angry. He cuts off the white duck's head and the white stepdaughter reappears. The King falls in love with his White Bride and punishes the black mother and her daughter; they are put naked into a barrel with nails and dragged along by a horse.

If we see this fairy tale in the light of skin color-based discrimination, it reads as a cultural/historical endorsement of racism, that we might want to consider to ban from our heritage for good. But as I said before, fairy tales can be seen as analogies for psychological processes and personal transformation.

Looking at the Black Bride White Bride story from this angle, it gives us an understanding of how black could have (wrongfully) been associated with the concept of evil. When we know where it went wrong, we can also 'untie the knot.' The first part of the story that builds up to God's judgement over the "Brides" is crucial here. Why is the Black Bride (and her mother) rejected (by the man/God)? And why is the White Bride accepted and praised?

From a psychological point of view, every character in the fairy tale is an aspect of our psyche. As black symbolizes the night, the darkness and everything that can't be

perceived with the naked eye, it is not hard to imagine that the Black Bride in this story represents our sub-consciousness. White refers to the day, to light and to everything visible. Hence, the White Bride most likely represents human consciousness. The archetype of the mother is connected to the feminine, the moon, nature and intuition, and I would identify the mother in this story as a symbol for our emotions: all her actions are driven by emotional responses (like anger and jealousy). The archetype of the father (the man that asks directions, God in human form) is connected to the masculine, spirit and the sun, and symbolizes the rational mind. Just like the man in this story wants to know the way to the village, it usually is our rational mind that asks questions and 'wants to know the way,' whereas emotions just desire to be acknowledged and flow freely from their source without judgement or questioning.

The village represents our destiny in life, home, the 'end of the previously discussed 'right path'. The way to the village symbolizes the path itself; what steps to take, choices to make, who or what to follow, whether to go left or right. Our rational thinking can obsess with these kinds of questions. It wants to decipher the for-

mula and control every step of the way. The rational mind does not like to get lost.

Why does the man, or God in disguise (rational thinking) get angry at the mother (emotion) when she doesn't answer his question but tells him to 'figure it out for himself?' Emotions don't need directions the way the rational mind does, they just flow. The Black Bride/daughter (representing the sub-consciousness) however, does answer. She suggests that if the man is afraid, he could 'bring a guide'. We can read this as a suggestion to follow (subconscious) intuition, probably the best guide there is. All it takes is to trust our gut feeling. The White Bride (consciousness) however offers to help and walks the man to his destination. She is therefore acknowledged and praised. Just as in real life, consciousness gets the credits for knowledge that was subconsciously already present in the intuitive shadows of our being. But as long as our rational mind feels entitled to decide what is right and wrong, we only trust the visible.

A lot of decisions we make are initiated by subconscious processes. As explained in Jonathan Haidt's article in Psychological Review, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail', we usually act out of emotions

first, and reason 'why we did it' later. Our desire to control our thinking and decision making, tricks us into thinking we made a well-considered choice before we acted, instead of the other way around.

There lies great mysticism and potential in our subconsciousness, but we simply trust our consciousness more because we think we know it better. Labelling or judging black as a representation of this dark unknown subconscious 'evil,' is an attempt to distance ourselves from everything our rational minds cannot explain or understand. We forget that the unknown is in fact a deeper known, that we have access to the moment we stop thinking and start feeling.

I agree with the statement that fear of the unknown lies at the basis of a negative judgement of black. When we acknowledge the darkness of the subconsciousness and everything that our rational mind does not grasp, we don't need God, a guru or Holy Scripture to guide us. Following our intuition does

not mean we need to discard everything rational either. We need subconscious intuition and conscious reason to work as a team, in balanced completion of each other. If we understand that good and evil are nothing but projections of our desire to tell right from wrong, we can also see that we have to stop looking for guidance outside of ourselves. We are the only ones who can reach out to the darkness of our own subconsciousness and untie the knots of unjust judgement, heal trauma, debunk dogma and let go of all that no longer serves us.

Why not get to know the unknown, connect with it on a deeper level. It is your darkness, it is your potential, it is your mysticism. Own it. When we have learned to confront ourselves with the contradictions that we are, we are ready to transform and free ourselves, and our fellow human beings, from the burden of moral judgement and inequality. For we will have discovered that we are in no way different, rather in every way unique.



Leonie Klooster is a graphic designer (*KloosterVision*), musician (*bomberleo*) and teacher. She graduated with a Master's degree in Religion, Science and Ethics at Leiden University, with a MA thesis on the moral philosophy and spiritual growth of Etty Hillesum. Leonie searches for the connection between morality, creative entrepreneurship and self-realization, and believes that in this triad we have the chance to experience the meaning of our very own existence.

Images: stills from video *Consequences of our Nature*,
© bomberleo/KloosterVision