

Thesis
The Paradox of Moral Conflict
Stephanie Blank

BACKGROUND

A seven year old me once said, "Mama, you know what I think? I think the reason there are all these different religions is because God comes to people in ways that they can understand him, but it's all the same." One can imagine what was going through my mother's head as she watched me eat my breakfast. Thoughts such as: *what kind of Seven year old thinks of these things?* and *shouldn't you be playing with your Barbie's?* But instead she just said, "you know what sweetie, I think you're right." My mom has always been very supportive.

Although I grew up in a catholic household (not the most open minded of Christian faiths), I noticed similarities between religions at a very young age. Although Catholicism instilled the fear of God in me; a more logical side questioned why the world would be set up in such a way that created different cultures and religions if we were all meant to believe the same thing. I understood the concept of free will, but to me, God was not an angry man sitting on a throne, separating cultures by oceans so he could later reap havoc on the people of the world for their uncontrollable differences.

I later found discrepancies between teachings and doings in religion. Although most religions teach the same basic moral values, I realized that religious disagreements across cultures cause the very hate and animosity each one teaches us to avoid. This led to my questioning of the morality of religion in general.

Throughout history, there have been many underlying motives for religious practice. In fact, religion itself is a fairly new concept. Humanity was not always categorized by differences in belief systems. Church and State were not always separated. Different governments worldwide used religion as a vehicle for power. Targeting people's beliefs served a simple way of establishing control over the country. The morality of this was clearly questioned by authority figures within the religions, given their efforts to distance practices from the government.

I now question the purpose, not only of religion, but of separation of religions. It is clear to me that most religions are used to establish moral concepts within the minds of people; to bind people to their conscious by taking a certain amount of control from them; to make people feel small yet connected with the rest of the universe. The thought that there is a higher power that won't necessarily control each step you take, but will have the final say of your fate once your time on this earth has come to its end, is the driving force for conscious moral decisions within religion.

Personally, I think religion is good for humanity in many ways. Humans are complex creatures that need purpose and motivation for their actions. Philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, believed that humans are selfish by nature; that they always act out of self-interest, and even behavior intended to benefit others isn't altruistic. This is called Prosocial behavior. Religion may only be practiced out of the fear of God and morality

may only be considered in order to ensure a pleasant personal fate. There wouldn't be very many great people on this earth if everyone believed that being selfish, or making poor choices, or treating other people badly didn't matter because all you had was this one inconsequential lifetime: you live, you do your best to survive, you die, and then it's over. Why would anyone even slightly inconvenience him or herself if they truly believed that? Perhaps to make ally's to ensure their survival or to avoid getting in trouble with the government, but if not for religion and morals, who knows what the government would base their laws off of. Not to say that all governments or aspects of government are fair now. Then again, not ALL people are moral, but if religion didn't exist, would the majority even care about morals? Without religion, not as many questions of morality would be raised and society would certainly be more primitive.

That being said, I return to my first point: Although most religions teach the same basic moral values, religious disagreements across cultures cause the very hate and animosity each one teaches us to avoid. Though, bound by their beliefs, most of the world's religions strive for their perception of morality, people are straying away from the core values associated with their religion. Instead, they are alienating and persecuting others that don't worship the same god, forgetting that judgment should be in the power of God alone (whoever that may be.)

CONCEPT

The above concept is where the idea for my project stemmed from. My concentration will be on the exploration and exploitation of social and political paradoxes in contemporary society. I will be using the seven deadly sins, not to outwardly exploit religion, but as a tool to guide my project. This idea, however, is meant to question the morality behind each subject. It is also meant to show that whether or not we are religious, we all "sin." We all do things that we are not proud of or that society would deem as wrong. We live in a society built upon morality and ethics.

I will take each of the seven deadly sins and interpret a social or political issue in which someone fights the sin with the sin that is being fought against to explore and exploit the hypocrisy happening in today's society. This will be the first paradox in every project, but as I continued to study and dig deeper into each topic, I found more and more paradoxes that go beyond the broader sense of the subject matter.

Gluttony will explore addiction and be depicted as a heroin addict attempting to fight his addiction by replacing it with alcohol: another gluttonous act. In turn he just created a new addiction.

Wrath will be exploiting the death penalty. A murder may have been committed out of wrath, but the loved ones of the person that died want the murderer convicted out of the same vengeance. They are allowed to watch as the murderer is punished with the same crime he or she committed.

Pride will be depicting the scar that the holocaust left on the country of Germany. By asserting their white supremacy in the past, they have killed their own pride for the future. Germany will always bear the burden of the holocaust: A haunting

and devastating occurrence that they as a country would never be proud of today, or could ever be proud of again.

Envy tackles the cause and effect of eating disorders. In this project, the eating disorder is created out of envy for a certain body type in hopes to attain that image and in turn, become the source of envy [in others].

Lust deals with adultery and the struggle to prevent an unfaithful relationship. It portrays a woman fighting to hold her lustful partner's attention by becoming more provocative in order to keep his wandering eye focused on her.

Greed is meant to exploit dishonest charities that keep the majority of the profits for themselves. Although they are "fighting" greed by collecting money for a greater cause, by keeping most of the profits, they are stealing from the community with the same greed their image seems to be preventing.

Sloth will explore technology and the media, concentrating on the irony of television and video games and its effect on our future generations. These "activities" may be an easy option of entertainment when one is bored, but you're still not actively doing anything. As more and more children settle for this lifestyle, social and behavior issues become more prevalent in our society. Some of the negative effects include child obesity, detachment from nature, and dissociative disorders caused by lack of social interaction.

CONTEXT

Each piece will be constructed within a household item (for example, gluttony, within a window; envy, within a mirror; lust, within a blanket; greed, within a bedside table, etc.) The viewers experience of invading the spatial secrecy of a bedroom will reveal to them the "skeletons" in someone's closet and make them aware of their own secrets as well, which forces them to approach the problems from a non-judgmental perspective. We all have our "skeletons," we are all guilty of "sinning." These problems are prevalent in our ordinary, everyday lives. They need to be recognized and brought to life for the viewer.

CONTENT FOR THE SHOW

I only had time to complete four of the seven sins in time for the IP show. I also chose to make a reaction piece because a large part of working on this project was about my personal resolve and conclusions I was led to in the process. The artist statements for the pieces I created are as follows:

Gluttony- *the window*

Inside the window, you see the constricted pupil in the eye of the addict. Teardrop shaped crystals fall from the eye and slowly transition into a crystallized form, which fill up the spoon on the windowsill. The crystallized form, of course, represents heroin. The

ribbon that travels from the syringe into the martini glass is a representation of blood. The rim of the glass is lined with wax, symbolizing sweat from heroin abuse. The wilting rose and falling petals represent his mental breakdown. I meant to create the metaphor that his blood, sweat, and tears were transferred from a heroin addiction into alcoholism. Neither act is moral, but the viewer may question if it is better to choose the lesser of two evils in a time of immense struggle.

Envy- *the mirror*

I have painted a girl standing and looking at her body in the center section of the mirror. Taped in the left section of the mirror, are pictures of models she aspires to look like. All these models have either struggled with, or died from an eating disorder. The right portion of the mirror represents her transformation into this body image. I have done this by echoing each picture from the left with the anorexic girl instead of the model.

Greed- *the nightstand*

The bedside table symbolizes "The Giving Tree." I have cut two sections of a walnut tree trunk and built a cage in the middle, surrounding the circumference. Inside the cage are walnuts. This is meant to represent the tree's act of keeping its own offerings.

Lust- *the bed*

The quilt on the bed depicts the woman transforming into a mermaid (a symbol for prostitution and provocative behavior). One hand is chained to her partner's heart on the pillow while the other is chained to a pearl (a symbol for purity). She is torn between the love she has for her partner, her desire to keep him faithful and the value she places on her morals.

Discovery- *the chandelier*

This last piece (the chandelier) is not one of the sins. Throughout this project I had striven to and answer questions of morality within the minds of humanity, but there were discoveries in the process of completing these works that had not been adequately shown. Each of these projects are about people I know and respect. Trying to truly understand the things they had done and the struggles they had been through brought me to a place of acceptance. I discovered a strength and beauty in these individuals that I never imagined this project would lead me to. The most dynamic and interesting people are not the ones that have led a flawless life. Instead, they are the individuals who have made mistakes, that have experienced trauma, that have been broken, and

that have been forced to glue the pieces back together. It is absolutely astounding how the mind can cope with regret, recovery, and in doing so reflect a positive light back onto the world.

EXAMPLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT PROCESS

I realize the number of arguments that are going to be made in regards to this project and I welcome them. Though it would be impossible for me to write about each and every one, I will address some that I view as particularly important. This will serve as an example of the type of philosophical questions of morality that I am thinking about when making the projects; and the types of questions I am expecting and encouraging the viewer to raise. I want to make people aware of, and question, their beliefs. The purpose of this project is not to make blatant attacks or statements, but to present one of the countless possible scenarios associated with each issue in a way that people may not normally think of.

A topic that specifically interests me is addiction. There is a certain lack of control that people have when dealing with an addiction whether that be food, alcohol, drugs, etc. Heroin addiction is a particularly paradoxical issue when questioning morality and one that I will choose to delve into to show just how many questions and controversies are associated with each of these projects.

As we all know, people aren't perfect. They make mistakes. A quarter of the people that make the mistake of trying heroin, even just once, have un-willfully given heroin control over their mind and future decisions/mistakes from that point on. ¼ of the people who experimented even once with the drug will eventually become addicted. Imagine the percentage of hope left for those who try it two or three times, or those that refuse to believe they have lost control until they are so physically addicted they become "dope sick."

Heroin causes physical changes in the brain that lead to chemical dependence. "Dope sick" is a term used to describe heroin withdrawal symptoms. When in this state, an addict is unable to inject him or herself because of low blood pressure. They can't find their own vein. They need someone to "jug" them or shoot heroine directly into their jugular. Addicts need to shoot up at least twice a day to prevent muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhea and even death. An overdose causes the brain to forget to keep the body breathing. Heroin is the deadliest drug on the face of the earth.

From a philosophical standpoint, these facts raise a number of questions. 1st of all, its hard to say that experimenting with a drug is a morally based decision especially when the person may not be fully aware or thinking about the loss of control they will soon face over their future moral based decisions. Ignorance seems to serve as a widely accepted excuse for many different moral issues.

Gary McCarthy, police director in the Chicago area, says, "Narcotics is not the crime. Shootings and burglaries: those are the crimes. Narcotics is the problem. It's a social condition that needs to be corrected on a social level." Despite his bad grammar, I tend to agree with McCarthy. The act of putting a drug into your one's own body is not

of any moral relevance to the rest of society. The crimes committed under the influence and in spite of the drug are, but to a certain extent, even those crimes aren't morally based decisions for many addicts. Heroin changes and controls the mind of an addict. A crime may be committed to prevent withdrawal and possibly save their life. It could also be committed while strung out. Many addicts fail to even remember their actions during the high. Either way, heroin takes real control over the chemical, physical and psychological states of the mind. Even though some may say the decision is no longer up to the addict; that heroin is now in control, does that make the situation moral? I don't think so, but I also don't know how to blame the addict. Some may say the initial decision to try the drug, whether aware of the consequences or not, hold the person responsible for their future actions. Whether or not you agree with that statement, an opiate addiction is not always the decision of the addict.

In the *Drugs Inc.* documentary on Heroin, an addict named Leanne was first introduced to opiates by her doctor, who prescribed her unusually high amounts of morphine. She claims he "wired" her up "more than any heroin dealer would ever." Because an investigation was started by his fellow physicians and surgeons, her doctor immediately cut her prescription, leaving her with severe withdrawal symptoms. At that point, opium had already taken control of Leanne's mind. It is difficult, if not impossible, to blame Leanne for her addiction. In this specific instance, the responsibility lies with her doctor.

Now we must question the rest of societies moral obligation to preventing addiction. The drug industry should certainly take some responsibility, but where do we start? Do we blame the dealer? He may be supplying, but he's not forcing the addicts to shoot up. Do we blame the broker? One (Eugene from Chicago), justifies his actions with the statement "If your brother was an addict, you don't want him getting drugs at all, but if you must get drugs, get drugs from me because I'm gonna insure that you're safe. I have an interest in you that nobody has. That is my role in the environment." Do we blame the trafficker or the harvester of opium poppies in Afghanistan who's families would die of starvation if they made any less money than they do extracting and transporting opium?

I don't know if any or all these people are to blame, but I do know that given the circumstances, the drug industry isn't going anywhere anytime soon. This leaves the rest of society and the government torn on how to solve as many issues associated with addiction as they can and, as if that burden isn't enough to bear, doing it in a non-controversial, moral manner.

McCarthy believes the government should take out larger organizations from top to bottom to limit the supply of narcotics. Greg Scott, Chicago's research director of recoveries, doesn't have as much faith in the government, or the addict, for that matter. He sees the 50,000 addicts in his city as victims in need of treatment, not criminals. Instead of wasting his time preaching to them about how wrong their addiction is or trying to rid the city of heroine addicts, he finds it more beneficial to see to it that they are safe. He provides addicts with clean syringes, hepatitis tests, and Naloxone (a heroine antidote which reverses heroine's effects by blocking its path to the brain) to prevent some of the issues caused by heroine addiction: disease, overdose and death.

“Insite” is a government run facility in Vancouver whose objective is much the same as Greg Scott’s. They provide clean needles and a safe place for addicts to use. This, of course, is also a very controversial issue. Although statistically, this method saves more lives, society should rightfully question whether it serves as a means to enable addicts to continue using more easily by preventing the consequences that follow an addiction. This could potentially increase the number of people using heroine, the number of crimes committed on behalf of the drug, and supply the drug industry with even more of a profit by increasing the demand for heroine.

Switzerland found a different solution. What is now considered one of the richest and most conservative countries in Europe, suffered dramatically in the 1980’s and 90’s from a “heroine plague.” The government treated addiction as a medical condition and developed a revolutionary program for addicts, courtesy of taxpayers.

Christoph Burki runs such a clinic in Switzerland that dispenses heroine like medicine. Patients receive a controlled dose of 100% pure heroine. Burki is under no illusion of why his patients come to the facility: to get high. But through that motive, he not only attracts a type of addict he could not get in touch with before (one on the streets), but makes other things in the life of his patient an issue for them and starts concentrating on their mental health. His patients claim he has turned their lives around. They are able to maintain relationships, a job, have hobbies and concentrate on other things rather than the haunting worry of not being able to get high or scrounging the streets and committing crimes to get heroine.

At first thought, it seems outrageous for a government to be providing addicts with their drug using the money of the taxpayers, however, there has been a 60% drop in felonies by his patients and the overall societal cost per addict has been cut in half. Disease is also prevented along with the spread of disease to the rest of society. The lives of addicts and victims of their crimes are spared. Safety is ensured. With the governments legal, pure supply of heroine, the drug industry suffers and along with it’s demise, goes all the crime associated.

There are 11 million heroine users worldwide. Heroine trade funds terrorism, international crime, and domestic gangsters. It takes lives. Society literally and figuratively pays for the destruction left behind. We have to ask ourselves, is it more moral to support an addiction than to let all of society suffer the consequences of its addicts? Is it better to create the lesser of two evils, or is it more important that we don’t enable addicts to keep using? Is addiction in itself morally wrong or is it simply a medical condition?

These are the types of questions that will be raised by thinking about the initial paradox of addiction and other issues. That is what each piece of my project is meant to do. It is not, however, meant to preach about each issue. In every other project, raising these questions will be left to the viewer. They will decide for themselves what is important to ask and what they believe.

