6.5 Find Your Moral Compass

Accept reality but simultaneously develop a clear sense of direction.

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In certain spiritual circles, it's commonplace to subscribe to the idea that there's no good or evil, no one should be judged, and it's impossible to do wrong. While this can be a very freeing perspective, it can also lead to a lack of responsibility. If life is perfect, why should we do anything? If there are no mistakes, why fix a leaking roof? If everything is good, why earn the money to put food on the table? Why not steal whatever we need?

The answer might lie in a famous Buddhist quote, which says: "There is no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." This is perhaps a more comprehensive worldview, one that recognizes the need for a moral compass to guide our behavior and the potential to become better versions of ourselves.

An internal sense of values provides clarity and meaning in your life. A strong moral framework gives you a foundation you can refer to whenever you need to make a decision. The consequences of your behavior may not always unfold as you would wish, but that's okay. Whatever the outcome, knowing that you've acted in accordance with your moral compass can bring you a sense of peace.

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- A strong moral compass guides you to make wholesome choices that not only benefit you but also make the world a better place for everyone to live in.
- Referring to a deeper system of values can help you resist short-term temptations and stay aligned with your moral code.

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- There is no single right way for everyone to behave, so identifying and following your own moral compass will likely require recurring introspection.
- At times, it can be tough to remember big-picture considerations, and the easy route can appear very alluring.

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We do not exist in a vacuum; everything we do touches someone else, and the ripples of our choices create long-lasting consequences (see Tool 3.6). It's important that we work on learning to accept and live happily in the present, but equally, we should understand that the choices we make will affect others, and in turn, the consequences will loop back to us. Therefore, it's important that we determine a set of principles that fulfill these conditions:

- They bring you happiness in the present.
- They improve the well-being of future incarnations of yourself (you in a day, a week, a year, etc.).
- They increase the happiness of your family, friends, humanity, and eventually the entire universe.

Crafting these principles can be challenging, and, ultimately, the journey may never end. Some are simple—as children, most of us learned to be kind, not to steal, not to intentionally hurt other people, etc.—whereas others are more complex. When, for example, is it appropriate to tell someone a hard truth they may not want to hear?

The development of an ethical framework, however, is one of the most satisfying endeavors we can embark upon. It acts like an internal anchor, ensuring that we behave in accordance with our true values.

There are several ways to develop a moral compass. You can read and ponder the works of ethical philosophers or listen to the values espoused by society or religion. You can take the time to meditate on or journal about challenging circumstances in your own life and determine the best path forward. Alternatively, you can rely on your intuition to tell you how to behave. Whatever approach—or combination of approaches—you choose, ultimately, your moral compass must feel like your own so you can rely on it to anchor your decisions.

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- Jordan Peterson, 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos (Random House, 2018).
- Religious texts (e.g., the Bible's Ten Commandments, Buddhism's Five Precepts, etc.).
- Sam Harris, The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values (Free Press, 2011).