Ep #269: Moral perfectionism

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With Your Host

<u>Simone Grace Seol</u>

I Am Your Korean Mom with Simone Grace Seol

Ep #269: Moral perfectionism

Hey, I'm Simone Seol, and *I Am Your Korean Mom.* This is a podcast that cuts through all the shitty bullshit about marketing, shines a bright light on the being of embodied leadership, and invites you to show up with all of your humanity, perfectly, imperfectly whole, just like you are.

Hey, friends, I want to talk to you about a concept that I've been teaching to my clients for a long time. I want to share it with you today. That concept is called Moral Perfectionism. My definition of moral perfectionism is when you stop yourself from taking action, to the point of paralysis, until you can make sure that your action doesn't harm anyone, offend anyone, or is 100% on the "right" side of moral calculations.

I think people who have good, kind, compassionate hearts, especially struggle with this in business. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. I think more good-hearted people should be wrestling with this, because God knows, a lot of people don't give a shit and they're not wrestling with any of it. Right?

But what hurts my heart, is that these good-hearted entrepreneurs don't let themselves move forward, until they can be sure that every action they're taking can be guaranteed to be making the world a better place.

Now, I've got to tell you, I did some research on this idea of moral perfectionism and I found out that this actually, as a concept, was first developed in Greek philosophy by Aristotle. I'm like, "Oh, yeah, that kind of rings a bell," from that one time I took ancient Greek Philosophy in college.

I don't remember much, but bolstered by the research I did, here's what I can remember and tell you. In classical philosophy, moral perfectionism is an idea that has to do with becoming the best version of yourself morally. Cultivating virtuous traits in yourself over the course of your life, so that you, over time, develop more characteristics like courage, wisdom, justice, and compassion.

Aristotle was really big about this idea of cultivating your moral traits. That sounds wonderful. Love me some Aristotle. I'm 100% for that. But that's not

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really how a lot of us approach ethical perfectionism, is it? I'm using this word in a similar way to the way we moderns talk about regular ole' perfectionism. For example, in our work, in our creativity, and in our daily life. Which is something that actually holds many of us back.

Let me quote one of my favorite quotes from Elizabeth Gilbert, in her book *Big Magic*, which I've alluded to 100 times in this podcast. Where she says, and I quote, "I think perfectionism is just fear in fancy shoes and a mink coat, pretending to be elegant when actually it's just terrified. Because underneath that shiny veneer, perfectionism is nothing more than a deep existential angst the says, again and again, 'I am not good enough and I will never be good enough.'"

See, that, to me, gets at the heart of moral perfectionism in the way that I'm talking about it, which is different from the way Aristotle talked about it. Being committed to being a good person, a moral person, is about wanting to develop into cultivating more virtuous characteristics.

Being a moral perfectionist, in my definition of it, is less about the focus on your own character development, and more about the fear that no matter what you do or how you do it, it's probably not enough. It's probably bad, you're probably hurting somebody, it's not okay, it's not good enough, it's not good enough, you're not good enough.

When you think about your own moral quandaries, if it feels like the way you're thinking about it is coming from a place of 'you're not good enough, it's not good enough, you'll never be good enough, you'll never get this right,' that's probably a sign that it's not really about perfection. It's more about fear, in the way that Elizabeth Gilbert is talking about.

So, I want to tell you today that moral perfection is an impossible standard. And that chasing it might leave you exhausted, full of doubt, and depleted, too depleted to help other people, rather than making you a better person.

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Moral perfection is an impossible standard because, for one thing, human beings are fallible and imperfect by nature. And guess what? Human society is also fallible and imperfect by nature.

For one thing, morality is subjective, and it varies across cultures and societies and individuals. Different people have different moral frameworks and values, making it difficult to establish a universal standard that satisfies everyone. Right?

I am Korean and I'm American. I know that morality in Korea means something, and in the U.S. it means something else. Of course, there's commonalities, but there's definitely cultural differences.

Even amongst the same group of American people, or the same group of Korean people, individuals will disagree about what the exact, perfect moral action should be taken in a given circumstance, right? That means that something you think is highly moral might be considered the opposite in a different culture.

To me, understanding that isn't about being cavalier, but it's about having an essential humility about the limited nature of human beings, and the limited nature of the world on Earth. And knowing that, you can only do your best but it will, by definition, never be good enough for absolutely everyone in the world. So, let yourself off the hook a little bit, right?

Furthermore, moral decision making involves navigating complex ethical dilemmas where multiple values and principles may come into competition and conflict. Situations may arise where there is no clear cut or universally agreed upon answers. Making morally perfect choices in these situations can be difficult because, again, of different ethical considerations competing with each other.

If we lived in a world that was super simple, this would be a different discussion. But we don't. There are literally eight billion people on Earth, a planet with finite resources, and people with all kinds of different cultures

and ideas about how to best allocate and use those resources for the good of all.

People don't even agree on what 'the good of all' means. People disagree about what it means to 'live a good life.' Having humility about all of this means that knowing the best you can do is, well, doing your personal best, and not putting yourself up to the standard of meeting everyone's definition of best.

Now, let's also consider that humans are prone to making mistakes because we are fallible, because we have limited knowledge, we have limited understanding, we have limited judgment. Remember, we're humans, not gods. We are influenced by biases, emotions, personal interests, which can cloud our moral judgment.

It's unrealistic to expect flawless moral decision making from people who are inherently imperfect. This is what I mean, a lot of us use this idea of moral perfectionism against ourselves, because we expect ourselves to be like gods.

"If I just tried hard enough. If I just knew more. If I just was more thoughtful, then I would be a god who can know everything and anticipate everything and have perfect hindsight and foresight." That's impossible.

Can we all stop trying to be gods? Can we just let ourselves all be human? Because last time I looked, no one succeeded in becoming a god. And those who felt that they had succeeded had serious problems, and we don't want to go near them. Right?

I am sure you can recall many, many instances in your life where you were 100% convinced that something was the absolute right and moral thing to do. And then later, you look back on it, and you were like, "Wait a minute, maybe that wasn't so good. I didn't know, back then, what I know now."

I'm sure you can also recall the opposite. Times when you were like, "Oh, I'm not sure this is a good idea." And then, looking back, you're like,

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"Actually, that decision really did a lot of good. But I couldn't have possibly known what I know now, back then."

Humility is about acknowledging that we always have limited information and limited human perception, cognition, judgment. Limited by our own filters. Limited by our humanity. And giving ourselves the grace that the best we can do, is to guess and to be open to learning.

Now, let's talk about the fact that moral perfection also assumes that there are no competing ethical priorities. For everything in human life on earth there are competing ethical priorities. For example, in business there may be conflict between, let's say… I know a lot of people think about this, right?... giving people as many free resources as possible, giving people scholarships, lower prices, etc. And also, being able to pay yourself, and maybe even the people that you employ, fairly.

I think it's amazing how many people feel so strongly, and rightly, that workers should be paid a fair wage. But all of that goes out the window when we think of ourselves needing to be paid fairly, as well. What happens when we don't get paid fairly, and we end up having needs that we can't meet ourselves? Then we become dependent on others.

Now, I am not saying that that's a bad thing at all. Over the course of my life, I've had to depend on other people economically, emotionally, spiritually, and in many ways, I still am. That can be a beautiful thing. I really believe in the necessity and beauty and the spiritual need of interdependence.

But if it's an option between giving everything away, and potentially being dependent on others in a way that might endanger your safety. Versus giving yourself what you need in order to be able to serve at your highest capacity. And make the most thoughtful decision to benefit society around us, from a place of being fully resourced. What is the more immoral thing to do? There is no perfect answer to this question.

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Because once again, there's competing ethical priorities where we just have to make a decision. And it's never going to be simple enough, at least not on planet Earth, right? So, winning, in terms of morality, in one area might mean compromising in another, and that is the case in so many situations.

The last thing I want to remind you regarding this, is that moral standards change over time. Standards evolve over time, as we learn and progress as a society. At least, I hope we learn and progress as a society. What might be considered morally perfect in one era might be seen as flawed in another.

Moral perfection implies a static and unchanging standard, which is not really reality. I think both morality and the world are dynamic; always changing, always shifting, multilayered. So, I want to let you off the hook for moral perfection, having said all of this.

Because like I said earlier, any kind of perfectionism, in the modern sense, is more about you not feeling good enough. It's more about your sense of inadequacy and fear than actually wanting to improve. It's not about perfection, it's about fear, as Elizabeth Gilbert said.

That said, I think we can still all agree that morality is important. Actually, the reality is that far too many people disregard even thinking about it carefully, and throw their hands up in the air and say, "Well, it's complicated. What can you do?" And they just don't think about it.

Our actions do impact others, especially in business. We want to make sure that we're making decisions that really reflect our values, and the kind of world we want to create, to the best of our ability. So, when it comes to actually pursuing better ethics in your business, I want to offer you the following guidelines to think about.

Ask yourself: When you're thinking about morality, does it feel like a quest to become better? To develop yourself and your own virtuous characteristics, like courage, wisdom, justice, compassion, so that you

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become the highest expression of yourself over the course of your life? Feel into what this feels like.

To me, trying to develop my own virtuous characteristics, so that I grow to my fullest, highest expression of who I am in life, this feels like a generative thing in my body. It feels like being pulled towards something good. Where I am looking at growth, I am prioritizing growth, and I am building myself and building my work toward my values, in a way that feels like progress and dynamism. That's how you know you're thinking about morality in a way that's actually useful to you.

When you're thinking about it in a way that's less than useful, moral perfectionism probably feels like a fear, of fear of failure, fear of judgment, fear of inadequacy. That nagging feeling of no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, it's probably not good enough. It also feels and tastes a little bit like shame.

That version of moral perfectionism would rather not try, than get some things imperfect and learn and improve. That version would rather avoid judgment altogether, than critically consider judgment in order to discern what, if anything, you have to learn from it.

This version demands perfection now, rather than acknowledging that perfection is impossible, and striving to grow in your virtuous characteristics over time.

I guess I can look at it almost like having a growth mindset in ethics, right? Do you have a growth mindset in ethics, or do you have a fixed mindset where you feel like you have to get it all "right" today, otherwise, you're a terrible person.

Another way I think you can tell, is that when you think about you being your most moral self, ask yourself: Does this feel like an internally motivated, subjective standard that really comes from what you believe? Or does it feel like external pressure, in terms of what you think other people think you should do to be a good person?

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Because external motivation is limited in terms of its efficacy, and it's also not that sustainable. Also, it ignores the fact that, once again, moral standards differ from culture to culture, from subgroup to subgroup, and from one era to another.

So, unless you are guided by an internal standard, trying to be perfect according to external standards is going to be like this never-ending pursuit that never goes anywhere. It just leaves you frustrated, because you will never succeed at meeting every single external standard.

In a nutshell, I encourage you to drop perfectionism. Know that human life and moral decisions are inherently and endlessly complex. That human beings, yes, including me and you, are fallible. Give yourself grace, and give everyone else grace, as we all strive for the betterment of the virtues that are important to us over the course of our lives.

As opposed to having to get everything right today. As opposed to being so afraid of messing something up, hurting someone, that you don't put yourself in situations where you can learn.

So, I hope that this episode helps you to shed some of the unnecessary guilt and paralysis that I see holding a lot of good-hearted entrepreneurs back. The world needs you. The world needs your work. The world needs you going out there and making decisions, making waves, and then learning and then doing it again. And then learning and doing it again.

We all want to go back to the Aristotelian definition of world perfection, which is really about striving for us to all become more virtuous over the course of our lives. Have courage, believe in your own journey, and in your ability to contribute more good to the world, by being more of who you are.

There's so much goodness in being who you are. Give yourself grace, and go out and take some action. And as long as you commit to being curious, and being willing to learn and grow for the rest of your life, I think you will be somewhere in the vicinity of the right path.

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All right, I'll talk to you next week.

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I got countless emails from folks who downloaded it, saying, "This free resource is worth more than all these courses I paid thousands of dollars for." So, what are you waiting for? Go grab *The Simone Starter Pack.* The link is in the show notes. I can't wait to see what amazing results you'll get from it.