* **Morality/Moral actions:**

The person performing the action…

* + must understand the difference between right and wrong
  + must have a good intention for performing the action and communicate it to others
  + must demonstrate equal concern for self and others
  + must have the freedom to choose what to do

Morality involves beliefs about what is right and what is wrong behavior. For an action to be considered moral action, or the morally right thing to do, it has to meet the following criteria: the person performing the action must a) understand the difference between right and wrong, b) have a good intention and motive and communicating it, c) demonstrate equal concern for self and others, and d) have the freedom to choose what to do.

The first criterion for moral actions is that they involve understanding the difference between right and wrong. This understanding is not innate; we are not born knowing the difference between right and wrong. We need family, social interactions, and experience to develop an awareness of right and wrong. In The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates, author Wes Moore describes a moment from his childhood: three-year-old Wes is playing with his ten-year-old sister Nikki, a game that always ended in a chase, which Nikki always won. On this particular day, however, Wes catches her, and uncertain about what he should do, he punches her. His mother walks into the room at that precise moment and yells at Wes, “ ‘Get up to your damn room. I told you, don’t you ever put your hands on a woman!’ ” (5) Wes’ father hears his wife yell at Wes and says, “ ‘Joy, you can’t get on him like that. He’s only three. He doesn’t even understand what he did wrong. Do you really think he knows what a woman beater is?’” (6) At only three years old, Wes had not learned about right and wrong behavior, concerning how to treat women. On the other hand, someone could argue that this is clearly an instance of immoral behavior because by the time a child reaches three, children have learned that they should not hit their brothers and sisters. Wes knew that he should not lash out and beat his sister, but this was different: they were playing a game. “At the time, I couldn’t understand my mother’s anger. This wasn’t really a woman I was punching. This was Nikki. She could take it.” (8) But his father provides a different perspective. “ ‘Main Man, you just can’t hit people, and particularly women. You must defend them, not fight them. Do you understand?...Mommy loves you, like I love you, she just wants you to do the right thing.’” (11) Wes’ father serves as a role model for young Wes. This conversation provides the necessary opportunity for Wes to learn how he must treat all women, including his sister, and this moral lesson stays with him for the rest of his life. This situation exemplifies the first criterion: our capacity to distinguish between right and wrong develops over time and is shaped by our experience.

The second criterion for moral actions is that the person must have a good intention and motive for performing the action. Chester Southam designed scientific studies in his effort to determine the cause of cancer. This seems like a good intention and motive for medical research. Southam was widely respected for his work and was the chief of virology at the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research. However, his research methodology—how he conducted the studies and what he communicated with his subjects—does not meet this criterion. In his first study, he injected the HeLa cells, cells taken from a woman who had died from a severe case of cervical cancer, into patients already diagnosed with cancer to see how their immune systems would react. But he never said that he was injecting them with cancerous cells, nor did he remove the nodules that had newly formed where he had injected the cells in all of his patients. In The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot writes

He repeated this process with about a dozen other cancer patients. He told them he was testing their immune systems; he said nothing about injecting them with someone else’s malignant cells. Within hours, the patients’ forearms grew red and swollen. Five to ten days later, hard nodules began growing at the injection sites. Southam removed some of the nodules to verify that they were cancerous, be he left several to see if the patients’ immune systems would reject them or the cancer would spread… (128)

It might appear that Southam had good intentions, since he was trying to determine the cause of cancer. These patients had already been diagnosed with cancer, so what harm was there in observing the way their bodies reacted to cancer cells? But he did failed to explain what he was doing to the patients. He communicated the purpose of the study, that “he was testing their immune systems,” but he said nothing about injecting them with cancer cells. He did not give the patients a choice, and the evidence indicates that he compromised their health. Therefore, Southam’s work fails to meet this criterion for moral actions.

The third criterion for moral actions is that the person performing the action must demonstrate equal concern for self and others. In another study, Southam injected HeLa cells into patients who came to Sloan-Kettering’s Memorial Hospital for gynecological surgery without disclosing the truth of what he was doing. On page 130 of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot writes

If he explained anything, he simply said he was testing them for cancer...during hearings about his research, Southam wrote, “It is, of course, inconsequential whether these are cancer cells or not, since they are foreign to the recipient and hence are rejected. The only drawback to the use of cancer cells is the phobia and ignorance that surrounds the word *cancer.*” As he would say, “To use the dreaded word ‘cancer’ in connection with any clinical procedure on an ill person is potentially deleterious to that patient’s well-being, because it may suggest to him that his diagnosis is cancer or that his prognosis is poor…To withhold such emotionally disturbing but medically non-pertinent details…is in the best tradition of responsible clinical practice.”

One could argue that Southam demonstrated equal concern for himself and the subjects of this study. He did not want to upset patients by mentioning the word cancer. He believed that he had already proven that it would not do the patients any harm because if they already had cancer, their bodies would reject the HeLa cells more slowly than healthy patients. After all, he is a doctor and is conducting research in order to discover the cause of cancer, and the ends (finding the cause and cure for cancer) justifies the means (what patients do not know cannot hurt them). But he intentionally lied to the patients. He did not communicate his intention or his action to the patients, and he did not have their best interest in mind. As Skloot writes, “Southam wasn’t their doctor, and he wasn’t withholding upsetting health information. The deception was for his benefit—he was withholding information because patients might have refused to participate in his study if they’d known what he was injecting.” (130) Southam’s conduct clearly does not meet this criterion for moral actions.

Finally, moral actions require a choice. One must have the freedom to choose what to do. In his memoir Night, Elie Wiesel provides a detailed account of his experience in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, two German Nazi Concentration and Extermination camps. He describes the night of his father’s death and the moral dilemma that he faced. The Blockalteste, the block leader, notices that Elie’s father is on the verge of death and reminds Elie that they are in a concentration camp. On page 110, he says, “ ‘in this place, it is every man for himself, and you cannot think of others. Not even your father…stop giving your ration of bread and soup to your father. You cannot help him anymore. And you are hurting yourself...you should be getting *his* rations.’” Whether to offer his own ration of bread to his dying father or keep it to himself and fight for his own survival is a nearly impossible choice. Someone might argue that the moral act would be to offer bread to the father. The father does not have long to live, and the offer of bread is a demonstration of love. It is only a piece of bread, after all, and Elie surely could survive without a single piece of bread. The joy it could bring to the father is greater than the hunger Elie would momentarily suffer. However, Elie does not truly have the freedom to choose. The Final Solution was devised by the Nazi Party as a plan to carry out genocide. Neither Elie nor his father have any reason to believe that they might survive, having already witnessed the deaths of countless fellow prisoners. Elie offers his bread to his father. But no matter what he chose to do, he had to do so while facing death. He did not truly have freedom of choice, and we have no right to say what he should or should not have done.

What is the right thing to do? It can be difficult to decide what we should do in a given situation. Moral actions require understanding the difference between right and wrong, having a good intention and communicating it, demonstrating equal concern for self and others, and having the freedom to choose what to do. We might not always make the best decision, but we can learn from our mistakes. The important thing is that we realize we have a choice.