



Moral Complicity with Evil

Moral complicity with evil is culpable association with or participation in wrongful acts. Evil is defined as anything immoral or wrong based on various religious texts. Questions about moral complicity with evil can arise in regard to an individual's relationship to or involvement with past, present or future evil.

Moral complicity may occur with the use of information, technology or materials obtained through immoral means. This complicity may involve using, rewarding, perpetuating, justifying, or ignoring past or present evil.¹ Moral complicity may involve enabling or facilitating future immoral actions of patients or professionals.²

We must strive to never commit evil ourselves, nor should we participate in or encourage evil by others. While it may be impossible at times to completely distance ourselves from the evil actions of others, we are responsible to determine whether our action is appropriately distanced or inappropriately complicit. In the absence of clear moral teaching, this determination is based on conscience recognizing the innately fallible nature of human reason and prudence.

Applications

1. Intent. Our motives must be always to promote good, never evil.
2. Magnitude. Some evil acts are so heinous that any association with them is unacceptable.
3. Timing. Passage of time may diminish complicity with prior evil acts, though it does not diminish the evil nature of the original act.
4. Proximity. A greater degree of association with an evil act increases culpability.
5. Knowledge. Knowledge that an original act was evil and knowledge that a subsequent act is associated with that act are both required for culpability.
6. Certitude. A greater degree of certainty that the original action was evil increases complicity.

Conclusions

The American Academy of Medical Ethics (AAME) believes moral complicity with evil does not exist when all the following conditions are satisfied:

1. Our intent is for good;
2. The association with the past or present evil is sufficiently uncertain, or the act is sufficiently distanced from the original evil act; and
3. The action does not reward, perpetuate, justify, cooperate with, or ignore the original evil.

References:

¹For example, the potential for moral complicity exists in the use of (a) research data from unethical experiments, (b) textbooks or drawings made using tortured or executed prisoners, (c) vaccines made from aborted fetal tissue, etc.

²For example, enabling a patient to engage in immoral activity (sexual immorality, suicide, drug abuse, criminal activity) or facilitating an immoral procedure by another professional (cloning; genetic enhancement; referral for or assisting in abortion or unethical reproductive technologies) may involve some culpability.