

# First, Do No Harm

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The aphorism, "*First, Do No Harm*," is typically associated with the ethical code of medicine contained within the Hippocratic Oath — a pledge undertaken by all medical professionals at the onset of their being granted full authority to practice medicine. The origins of the phrase go back much further, however, far into antiquity.

Even today, the meaning and implications of the aphorism are under some dispute. Some people interpret the phrase as a blanket injunction, where anything that might cause harm is prohibited. In the day-to-day practice of medicine, such an absolute injunction is effectively impossible. No doctor can guarantee that a particular course of treatment will result in no adverse effects. Others who are less inclined toward absolutes regard the aphorism as a kind of fulcrum, the balance point to be considered in pre-judging the likelihood of "doing good" versus "doing harm."

My concern, and my use of the phrase as both the title and subject of this commentary, is not with medical ethics, although that's almost always how the phrase is applied. Instead, I want to consider the aphorism as a guiding principle for every human activity we undertake that impacts ourselves, others, and the world around us. Perhaps a better title would be "Minimizing Harm," but that doesn't have quite the same resonance as the well-known aphorism.

Suffering is inevitable in human life. Nothing we do can eradicate it and insure perpetual happiness and joy. But the suffering inflicted by humans on themselves and others is tragic. Reducing this unnatural suffering is what minimizing harm is about.

For me, attempting to minimize harm is not a "spiritual" level of concern, but a wholly pragmatic and practical recommendation. While it certainly can be interpreted spiritually, my interest here lies mainly in the real world — the material plane — of ordinary, animal life, and most especially with three distinct but interconnected realms of human activity: personal, interpersonal, and collective/ These translate as what we do primarily for ourselves, to satisfy our self-centered wants and needs; our intimate concerns for partners, family, and friends; and our civic contribution to larger, more impersonal kinship groups,

such as community or nation, which includes conducting commerce and business in the public marketplace.

Minimizing harm in what we do for ourselves means to me considering the possible results or likely consequences of our actions *before* we undertake them, in effect acting out of mindfulness rather than rash impulse. We may not always know what is good for us, but too often we don't even think about it. We want or need something, and action follows directly and immediately. In effect, we act out the emotional urges of our limbic brains. Choice may enter into the equation, but mostly it's compulsion: We let our feelings drive our behavior. Sometimes that's fine. Sometimes not. Learning the difference takes a lifetime.

Minimizing harm in our interactions with others requires care and mutual respect — respect for ourselves and respect for them. Others are not objects or mere characters in our dreams. They are real people, and how we behave with and toward them matters.

To minimize harm in the ways we conduct ourselves in the world means transcending the limited perspective of self-interest. While collective concerns do not cancel nor invalidate personal wants and needs, they call forth a different perspective, one based on shared experience in group solidarity.

A primary application of our collective impact can and should occur through commerce, but this is too often not the case. In America especially, business is regarded as an extension of personal desire. Success and money are the bottom line both literally and metaphorically. But what of the greater good? Oh, don't worry about that, the invisible hand of the market will take care of it. No, it won't. I'm not suggesting that success and money are irrelevant, only that they shouldn't be the only values considered.

Every situation involves all three perspectives. When they are in harmony, knowing what to do and how to do it are, if not always obvious, at least straightforward. Our actions may or may not produce the desired outcomes (since positive results can never be guaranteed), but our motivations are clear, as are our consciences.

Two different conditions of disharmony complicate the picture. The first happens when the three perspectives are unbalanced within us, with one of the three being either over- or under-emphasized. The other disharmonious condition occurs when the actions dictated by the three perspectives are in conflict, where choosing one perspective seems to imply failing in another.

These are different conditions, but in real-life situations they often appear identical or at least very similar. Examples are endless and custom-tailored to our individual life-journeys, psyches, and circumstances. I'll cite just a few possible scenarios to keep this from being too abstract or theoretical:

In the unbalanced condition, if self-interest is our sole or dominant motivation, we risk causing harm to others or the community. Reducing the costs of a business by dumping toxic waste may increase the owners' personal wealth, but it poisons the environment and threatens the public welfare. If our family is our only concern, we increase the chances of harming ourselves by taking on too much responsibility. Working three jobs to pad a child's college fund may eventually cause exhaustion or illness for the parent. In the realm of conflicts, what our spouse wants may not be what we want or can provide, and yet we feel we must please our partner. In business, regulations and labor costs may put the firm's success at risk, costing the owners money and threatening the livelihood of the workers. Or taking a low-paying job at an Amazon warehouse or as an Uber driver just isn't a living wage.

When the three perspectives are unbalanced or in conflict, as is so often the case, it's up to us to re-balance the perspectives and reconcile the contradictions inside ourselves as best we can. This reconciliation may be difficult and perhaps time-consuming, but it is the necessary precursor to right action.

I don't expect anyone to be "saintly" in these considerations, for sainthood requires martyrdom. Denial or self-abnegation is not naturally part of the process of minimizing harm, although patience and the ability to delay gratification are necessary elements.

As I wrote above, our efforts to minimize harm are not ideals. Instead, they are a measure of the achievement of responsible adulthood. They are significant among the hallmarks of maturity.

As a culture, America seems to have lost that understanding. I don't know, maybe we never had it. Perhaps the American experiment in personal freedom and social justice was always underpinned and sullied by the lurking shadows of selfishness, greed, and cruelty. Lord knows, American history provides more than enough evidence of that. Whatever the judgment, though — whether our heritage is beloved or questioned — I am less concerned here in this commentary with what we were than with what we are now and what we're becoming.

Whether charismatic or competent, no leaders can save us. It's up to us to save ourselves by growing up. No marching in the streets or civil disobedience are required, although both of those may be more necessary as time goes on. This is the inner work of maturation, invisible but meaningful, one person at a time.