



*What Are  
Morals?*



## Chapter 1

“THE PROBLEM with the Nazis,” Ethelbert says to Hildegard, “is they had no morals. They treated people like animals.”

Two people are walking down the street in what was once the industrial district of the city. It is chilly. There is an empty factory on the right and what must have been an office building on the left. The building’s windows are still mostly there.

“Do animals not have morals?” Hildegard asks.

“No, I said the *Nazis* had no morals,” Ethelbert replies.

“There are still Nazis today.”

“Well then they *still* have no morals,” retorts Ethelbert as the two cross a side street.

“But we treat people like animals, and we have morals.”

“How do we treat people like animals? Are you a cannibal now?”

“No, I didn’t mean us,” Hildegard says. “I meant our society.”

Ethelbert looks suspicious. “You think our society is cannibals? I mean, ‘are cannibals?’”

“No, I meant, like, we kill people.

Executions.”

“The death penalty, you mean,” offers Ethelbert.

“That thing. Yeah.”

“I don’t think that counts as treating people like animals. There’s no cages. And we don’t eat them for dinner or make them wear leashes.”

Hildegard looks at Ethelbert. “You have no idea what a prison is, do you?”

Ethelbert scowls. “That’s different. We put people in prison because they deserve it. The Nazis put people in concentration camps just because of who they were, just like we keep pigs and chickens in pens because of what they are.”

“I still don’t think you actually know what prisons are like,” Hildegard replies. “It’s pretty easy to stay out if you’re white, but if you’re black, they lock you up just for being what you are.”

Ethelbert sighs. “So, what, we’re just as bad as the Nazis now? That’s what I was saying about them having no morals. At least we *do*. We know when something is wrong, even if we . . . I don’t know. Even if we still do it, at least some of us know it’s wrong. And we protest. Not the Nazis, though. They just all went along with it.”

Hildegard and Ethelbert stop at an intersection, and wait for the light to change.

“Why do you think the Nazis did it, then?” Hildegard asks. “If they didn’t have morals, how did Hitler convince them to treat the Jews and Gypsies and gays and Jehovah’s Witnesses like they did?”

“I don’t know, man.”

“I’m not a man,” Hildegard interjects.

Ethelbert squints in irritation. “Sorry. Look, all Hitler had to do was appeal to their anger. And greed. Throw ’em all in a concentration camp and you get rid of them, but also get to take their stuff.”

“And you don’t think he had to justify that?”

“How could you justify that? It’s theft and murder. That’s, like, the exact opposite of justified.”

“So, what, you think every time someone does something wrong, they know they’re doing something wrong? Nobody ever makes a mistake?”

Ethelbert stares at the ground, thinking. Hildegard nudges him to get him to start walking. The light has changed.

“Well, okay,” Ethelbert finally says. “People

make mistakes. But what the Nazis did was too big to be a mistake. You don't do that kind of thing because you accidentally thought it was the right thing to do."

"What about the U.S. putting all the Japanese Americans in concentration camps out west? They thought they were doing the right thing. 'Maybe they're spies for Japan. We better lock 'em up to keep everyone safe.'"

"What are you talking about?" Ethelbert is confused.

"During World War II," Hildegard replies. "Our government locked up a bunch of Japanese Americans in camps, just like the Nazis did to the Jews. And they did it because they thought it was the only way to keep America safe from traitors."

"But they were wrong!" Ethelbert exclaims.

"Well sure. But they thought they were being moral. They thought they were doing the right thing, even though they were making a huge mistake."

"But *did* they think they were doing the right thing? Maybe the government just had a bunch of anti-Japanese racists in it."

"And you don't think racists have morals?"

Ethelbert stops, staring at Hildegard in

disbelief. Hildegard continues walking for a few steps before she realizes Ethelbert is no longer beside her. She turns around and asks, “What?”

“You think racists have morals,” Ethelbert replies.

“Yeah. The wrong morals. But morals.”

Ethelbert shakes his head. “The wrong morals?”

“Yeah.”

“So, like, morals that are bad.”

Hildegard shrugs. “Sure.”

“But bad means ‘not moral’. So they have morals that aren’t moral.”

Hildegard looks surprised. “Huh.”

“I’ll grant you,” Ethelbert says, “that maybe even racists think they’re doing the right thing. Protecting their kids, maybe. Or whatever. But that’s not morals because it’s not moral!”

Hildegard seems to snap out of her surprise. “Well, look, okay, no, they’re not moral. But that’s because they have the wrong morals, not because they have no morals at all.”

“That’s still a contradiction,” Ethelbert says, exasperated.

“No, look,” insists Hildegard. “We have the right to freedom of speech, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And that means we have the right to say whatever we want.”

“So?”

“So, that means we have the right to say racist crap if we want.”

“So?”

“Saying racist crap is wrong, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So we have the right to say something wrong. We have the right to do wrong. Is *that* a contradiction?”

“No. The right to freedom of speech is a political right, not a moral right. And racism is a moral wrong. So it’s two different things.”

Hildegard walks for a while with her hands in her coat pockets, thinking. “You think there’s a difference between political rights and moral rights.”

“Yeah,” Ethelbert replies, taking his hands out of his coat pockets to gesture more freely. “Like, we have the right to an attorney. But that’s just a political thing. It’s not, like, a moral rule. That’s just our Constitution in America, not, like, the Bible or something.”

“Okay, but is the right to freedom of speech

like that? Is that just an American thing? Doesn't everybody have freedom of speech?"

"Not in most countries," Ethelbert replies. "Pretty much only in America. Anywhere else, and they could throw you in jail even for saying racist stuff."

"No," says Hildegard, "I meant: doesn't everyone have the right to say whatever they want? Their government might not acknowledge they have that right. But they still do. It's just their government is stupid."

"Yeah, but then that would mean they have a moral right to do a moral wrong. And that's a contradiction."

"No, but 'right' doesn't mean 'good'," Hildegard insists. "It just means nobody else is allowed to stop you. If you have the right to do it, nobody can stop you, even if it's wrong for you to do."

Ethelbert shrugs. "Maybe. But why would you have that right? If you're doing something wrong, why can't someone stop you? That's what you're supposed to do to people who are doing bad things."

The two continue walking, but neither speaks for an entire block. At last, Hildegard replies, "It's



better for people to be allowed to say what they want, without throwing people in jail just for talking. It's better to run things like that. It's not good for the people who say racist things to say that, but it's better to let them say it then not."

"Why?" Ethelbert asks.

"Because if you start throwing people in jail for talking, you eventually end up throwing people in jail for saying good things, just because you don't want to hear them. So, it's better for everybody in the long run if you just don't even start."

Ethelbert ponders this. "You're saying it has good consequences?"

"Yeah. Like, it's not good to just say anything, but the consequences are better if you give people the right to say anything. Otherwise, you end up with oppression."

Ethelbert and Hildegard wait for a car to turn left in front of them, and continue down the street.

"I always thought rights were the opposite of consequences," Ethelbert says, picking up where they had left off.

Hildegard looks over at Ethelbert. "What's that mean?"

"Like, I have rights. And that means you can't

just take all my internal organs, even if you could save ten people.”

Hildegard frowns. “What?”

“Like, if ten people are dying because they needed organ transplants. You can’t just kill me and take my organs.”

“Oh. Yeah. So?” Hildegard asks.

“So, even though it might have good consequences, my rights trump that. The good consequences of saving the people are good, but it’s bad to violate my rights. So rights and consequences are opposites.”

“But wouldn’t it be . . . I don’t know,” Hildegard searches for the right word, “. . . like, at least generous of you to sacrifice yourself for the ten people?”

“Well, yeah,” admits Ethelbert. “If they’re worth saving. But nobody can just take my rights away from me. I can give them up, if I want, but you can’t just take them.”

“What do you mean, ‘If they’re worth saving?’” asks Hildegard.

“I mean, like, if they’re not Hitler and a bunch of Nazis. Then they can just die for all I care.”

“Like a bunch of animals?”

Ethelbert sighs. “No, like a bunch of immoral

Nazis who have no morals.”

“You don’t think Nazis have the right to live, just like you.”

“No!” Ethelbert exclaims. “They gave that up by becoming a bunch of fascist murderers.”

“So, you think they have less value than you. Everyone’s not equal to God?”

“I’m pretty sure God sends Nazis to hell.”

“They were pretty sure God sends Jews to hell.”

“No they weren’t. Nazis were seriously confused about what religion they were.”

“Maybe,” admits Hildegard. “But I still say they had morals. Bad morals. Wrong morals. But morals.”

Ethelbert shakes his head. “You *can’t* have immoral morals. It *doesn’t make any sense*.”

The two enter the city’s main square. People are sitting on benches, here and there. Trees dot the square, surrounded by short fences made to keep dogs away. Pigeons are poking about hopefully, especially near the people on the benches.

Hildegard’s face brightens. “No, look, I got it. What I mean is they had opinions about morality. But the wrong opinions. That’s what morals are.”

“*What’s* what morals are?”

“Opinions about morality. About what’s right and wrong. They just had the wrong opinions. Immoral opinions.”

Ethelbert considers this. He points to an empty bench and asks—just by raising his eyebrows and lifting his chin a little—if that’s where they want to sit.

“Looks good to me,” Hildegard responds. They sit, and spend a moment looking at the people around the square.

“It’s like values,” Hildegard says at last. “Your values are what you value. You value freedom and justice and truth, or whatever. Those are your values.”

“Okay,” Ethelbert nods. “So?”

“If I say you have values,” Hildegard continues, “I just mean you have opinions about things. You think some things have value. That’s all your values are: your opinions about what has value.”

“But my opinions might be wrong?” Ethelbert offers.

“Yeah. The things you think are valuable might not have any value at all.”

“Valueless values,” Ethelbert says.

“Right,” says Hildegard.

“That’s not a contradiction?”

“No. It just means your opinions about value are wrong. You think something has value, but it actually doesn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure the things I think have value are actually valuable,” Ethelbert grins.

Hildegard put her hand on Ethelbert’s arm to reassure him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean *you*. I meant ‘whoever’.”

“Well, if that’s all you mean by morals,” Ethelbert says, leaning back, “maybe the Nazis had morals. Maybe.”

“I just have a hard time believing that Hitler could have motivated so many people to do so much crap without at least appealing to ideas like justice and duty and security and all that. Moral stuff.”

“You don’t think greed and hate were enough motivation?”

Hildegard shakes her head. “Not without adding the excuse that you deserve the things you’re greedy for. And not without believing the things you hate really are bad and evil.”

“What about Scrooge and Wall Street bankers and the KKK?”

“Even Scrooge had his justifications,” Hildegard insists. “And Wall Street bankers think they have a duty to their shareholders to make as much money as possible.”

Ethelbert shrugs. “But the KKK are just racist bastards.”

“How do you know that?” Hildegard objects.

Ethelbert slumps with weariness. “Hildy, you’ve got to stop playing devil’s advocate on stuff like this. One day, someone who doesn’t know you will think you’re serious.”

“I’m not playing devil’s advocate,” Hildegard insists. “Frankl said even some of the Nazi prison guards were good people. You can’t judge a person by their group.”

“I’m pretty sure I can judge someone by their group if the group is the KKK. The Nazis could draft people. The soldiers had commanders bossing them around. But nobody points a gun at you and makes you join the KKK. You’re there because you want to be. And if you want to be in the KKK, you’re messed up.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean, ‘maybe’?”

“I mean, have you done a sociological study of life in the South? Do you know what the dynamics

are? What, like, the social and economic pressures are?”

“No. I’ve never even been to the South, and have no desire to do so.”

“So, for all you know, it could be like living in Nazi Germany where people will kill you if you don’t cooperate.”

“I have a hard time believing it’s that bad. This is America.”

“Then why don’t you want to go there?”

“I have no desire to hang around a bunch of racist rednecks. That’s why.”

“You do realize that ‘redneck’ is an ethnic slur, don’t you?”

“No it’s not,” Ethelbert objected. “It’s a cultural slur. Their necks are red because they’re sunburned, not because of their genes.”

“Yeah, but they’re sunburned because they have pale skin. If it was a cultural thing, any ethnicity could have it. You could have Indian or black rednecks, like you have Indian Christians and black Christians. But you don’t have Indian rednecks or black rednecks. Only white rednecks. So it’s still an ethnic thing.”

“Just because only whites participate in the redneck culture doesn’t mean it’s ethnic. Other

ethnicities could live in trailer parks and drink cheap beer and do meth and hate black people and listen to country music. You don't have to be white to do that."

Hildegard ponders this. "Maybe. But shouldn't you find a word for the culture that doesn't have a color and a body part in it? It makes it sound racist."

"I can't be racist against whites, Hildy. I *am* white."

"You've never seen *The Believer*?"

Ethelbert tries to remember. "Not that I can remember."

"Ryan Gosling movie. He plays a Jew who becomes a Neo-Nazi."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ethelbert objects.

"Sure it does. People hate themselves all the time, for all kinds of reasons. You just have to feel ashamed of yourself, and then get sick of having to feel ashamed. Then you get angry, and you turn the anger on yourself, because you're ashamed of yourself."

Ethelbert thinks about this. "Well still. I'm pretty sure I'm not racist against myself."

"You've never been ashamed of being white?"



Hildegard asks.

After a pause, Ethelbert says, “Sometimes. Yeah.”

“And isn’t that why you hate rednecks so much? They embarrass you. They make you ashamed of being white.”

“I don’t hate them, Hildy,” Ethelbert objects. “I’m . . . they just give whites a bad name. And that makes us all look bad.”

“See?” Hildegard responds, “the problem for you isn’t their culture. It’s that they’re white.”

“No, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being white. I think what’s wrong is their culture!”

Hildegard is silent for a moment. “So, all cultures aren’t created equal.”

“No way. Nazis had a culture, and it was messed up.”

“If they had a culture, they had morals. You can’t have one without the other.”

Ethelbert sighs. “Okay. The Nazis had morals. You win. I wish I never brought it up.”

“We agree then,” Hildegard smiles.

“I have no idea if we agree about anything. What I do know is I want coffee.”

“Sounds good to me.” The two stand up and head to the coffee shop across the square.