

ETHICS OVERVIEW

Ethics and morality, justice and values, are related terms. Ethics is often applied by popular connotation, to right and wrong in the business or professional world, morality to ones' personal life. In the same way, justice seems to apply to politics and the world at-large, while values and righteousness are personal.

Dictionary definitions don't distinguish clearly between ethics and morality. "Ethics is the study of morality's effect on conduct, the study of moral standards and how they affect conduct." (Encarta World English Dictionary).

Ethics, then, may be viewed as the study of morality—the practice of right and wrong. It can be imprecise, however, and a cause of moral impotence if we press these emphases too far. One cannot properly say, "I am an ethical person, but not very moral." What hurts oneself, another, the community, or the world is wrong. At least most of us, when we get to thinking about it, are inclined to agree that what helps is moral; all that inflicts injury (of any kind) is wrong. Further thought forces us to make exceptions for remedial action that hurts. (Tough love may be described as the willingness to hurt and be hurt for another's healing, growth, and welfare.)

But in a general way, we seem forced to agree: all that tears apart the human fabric, destroys harmony, injures human dignity, and limits growth is wrong. Healing and reconciliation, the promotion of growth and service—in individuals or communities—are right and good.

Albert Schweitzer is known for his guiding principle expressed in *Civilization and Ethics* (1949):

Ethics, too, (is) nothing but reverence for life. This is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil.

Ethics and morality are part of many fields of human thought: philosophy, literature, theology, social sciences, economics, politics and more. Each may define terms and supply principles differently.

Ethics and morality have to do with good and evil. Part of the discussion involves the relationship of morals to truth, beauty and happiness. The Greeks (through their art and playwrights, and especially in Plato and Aristotle) made "the good" the most important thing in life. Rigorous intellectual effort is needed in pursuit of the good, and to know good is to see truth and to do good. Religious systems all see the moral life as the good life and the true purpose of human life—and tend to bring love (loving relationships) into the equation. Christian thought adds an emphasis on grace in achieving moral fulfillment.

Thinking about ethics and acting ethically are obviously related, but can, under the pressures of life and human weaknesses, get separated. Religious faith ought to lead to a theology of justice—as the Jewish prophet Micah put it: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Spike Lee caught the essence of ethical living when he used the phrase: "Doing the right thing."

The Singers (see their *The Moral of the Story* in *Ethics: Resources*) use a selection from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Part 1, Book 2, Chap. 6) to question the relationship of ethics to religion.

If there is no God (Ivan stated), then it is rational "even honorable," to be egotistical because you know that you won't be punished for any wrongdoing. In saying this, Ivan is expressing a widely held view that without religion there would be no ethics. Yet atheists and agnostics are often highly ethical. What reasons do they have for living ethical lives? Could they simply be compassionate and sympathetic people who do not like to see others suffer? Or is it, as some philosophers have argued, that when we properly understand our interests, we will see that it really is in our interests to act ethically? Other philosophers have sought to defend morality independently of self-interest, as justifiable in terms of reason. And of course, it is possible to take a skeptical view and hold that acting ethically is simply not rational at all. (Singers, p. 594-595)

The great ethical debate centers on the ultimate standard of right and wrong. Perspectives of scientific positivism, secular humanism, and monotheism differ greatly. If we consider the holocaust of W.W.II, for instance, we can see how these philosophies must attempt critique on different bases: survival of the fittest, common human consent, and transcendent law. Although they may come to similar conclusions, each perspective has used different criteria.

In pluralistic societies and in a global village, it becomes important for us to understand various perspectives and principles of moral choice and behavior. On what bases, for instance, can the world judge suicide bombers to be wrong in taking innocent lives? How does this differ, and most think it does, from the killing of combatants or innocents in war?

When does pornographic material become "wrong?" On what moral basis can we condemn what might be considered consensual sex between an adult and very young person? How do scientific Darwinists, secular humanists, believing monotheists, Jews, Christians and Muslims make moral judgments about suggestive commercials with children as sexual objects, about materialistically and hedonistically extreme life styles, and about promiscuous sexual activity? How do "liberals," "conservatives" and "moderates" within these groups think differently about such situations?

How is the hierarchy of good and bad moral values different in different cultures and subcultures—religious and secular? Why are private ethical issues more important to some; social ethics more important to others?

The complications of ethics lie in cultural assumptions and the complexity of human life and society. We often deal with the lesser of evils and the higher of goods in situations that are more gray than "black and white."

Today's world adds a great challenge to our consideration of ethics: it has become a matter of human survival, whether we think of the AIDS crisis, terrorism, a nuclear holocaust, or the environmental survival of the planet itself.

Famed survivor of the concentration camps, Elie Wiesel, provides this wisdom from his experience:

I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological, or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only through human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How important is the consideration of ethics to you personally? Why is this so?
2. Does having religious faith make one think and act more ethically? Why or why not, and with what possible exceptions?
3. Have you ever considered your own ethical journey or moral development?
4. An interesting ethical question personally or in discussion with others might be the following: What do you think more important for yourself and society: to save the whales, lives of the unborn, or lives of children at high risk of death?
5. Do you think others in the world, other religions and cultures, should be encouraged to think about these things with us? In other words do we need a global discussion about how we are hurting one another and what makes things right or wrong?
6. What creative ways could you come up with to help us all become aware of our moral blind spots or failure to think ethically?
7. What is the best way to get a family, a group of friends, or a classroom, talking about morals and the ethics of different situations?
8. To what degree, do you have ethical hope for the world?

IMPLICATIONS

1. If there are any forces that, for whatever reasons, selfish or otherwise, are against human welfare, they certainly would want to limit ethical discussion.
2. In the United States and around the world, we see great ethical breaches—in politics, in business, in athletics, and in our religious institutions. We are so used to hearing about unethical conduct and proceedings that we become desensitized to them. Instead, we ought to be about clarifying these offenses against the common good and doing something to correct them.
3. Where we disagree religiously, theologically, politically, or in any other sectarian or social ways, we must learn to discuss vital, controversial issues from an ethical perspective. Where it seems to be missing, we must strive for some kind of ethical agreement. We must learn to agree to disagree and live without hurting one another.
4. Sadly, although ethical issues are important to young people, too many go through history, English and even civics' classes without rigorous debates. And I know many youth groups who don't consider difficult ethical issues. Discussion of ethics is critically important in educating young people and curriculum for youth programs.

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