

DOING THE RIGHT THING AND OTHER MORAL DILEMMAS

For some reason I have been thinking about ethics. Actually, it started with a seminar I took last month. I thought you might be interested in knowing that the major national economic education organization has developed two sets of curriculum that is being introduced nation-wide to teachers for use in their classrooms. One is on Globalization and the other is on Ethics. Also, my interest in the topic of Ethics is the result of comments that have floating about such as “we need to teach morality in the schools.” Others have come back with “no, we just need to teach people to be ethical.” A few years ago I was sitting in the congregation of a mega-church in Houston (30,000 members on four campuses). The sanctuary was so large that the senior pastor had to be viewed on a large TV screens high on the wall. In his sermon he inferred that “moral consciousness was the result of the rise of Christianity.”—ie-- moral values really did not exist before Christianity appeared.

First, I had the question, what is the difference between morality and ethics anyway? My dictionary (Webster’s) says that ethics is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad as well as with moral obligation. Ethics are a set of moral principles and/or values. (I think of them as universal truths.) Morals, on the other hand, are rules of conduct that conform to ideals of right human conduct--virtue. A slight difference here—one might think that what is moral might change with the culture and/or value system of the time. For example, here in the U.S. a woman is no longer considered immoral if her ankle or even her leg is in view. On the other hand, if a unmarried women in Saudia Arabia sits in a car with a man who is not a relative, she is considered immoral and deserves any punishment she receives.

Some would say that all you have to do is to follow the Ten Commandments. My favorite comic strip in the Richmond-Times Dispatch is Non Sequitur. This cartoon had Moses up at the top of the mountain presenting the tablets containing the Ten Commandments to be scrutinized by the Legal Department. The resident lawyer says after much deliberation: “Well, despite the imposing title, only two of these could be actionable.”

In looking at the history of ethics, although wise men of antiquity such as Pythagoras (582-500 BCE) and Confucius (558-479 BCE.) proposed various moral truths and principles, they did not do so in a philosophically systematic manner. It is generally felt that ethics, properly so-called, is first met with among the Greeks, i.e. in the teaching of Socrates.

Socrates (470-399 BCE) the ultimate object of human activity is happiness, and the necessary means to reach it, virtue. Since everybody seeks happiness, no one is deliberately corrupt. All evil arises from ignorance. Virtue can be imparted by instruction.

The definition of Virtue being a conformity to a standard of right (chastity) **we will call it doing the right thing.**

Plato (427-347 BCE) a disciple of Socrates thought that the bottom line (my word) consists in the perfect imitation of God, the absolute Good, an imitation which cannot be fully realized in this life. Virtue enables man to order his conduct according to the dictates of reason, and acting thus he becomes like unto God. (Interesting to note what God he was talking about!)

Aristotle, (384-322 BCE) a disciple of Plato, is the real founder of what is termed systematic ethics. While observing the life experiences around him, he set out from the point that all men tend to regard happiness as the ultimate object of their endeavors. This happiness cannot consist only in external goods, but in the activity proper to human nature. Happiness, as a reward of virtue, can only be attained by a man's own individual exertion.

Through the changes and refinements in philosophies that followed such as Hedonism, the Cynics, Stoicism, Skeptics, . the common denominator appears to be the role of virtue in achieving happiness although it did run the gamut, for example, with groups such as the Cynics teaching that pleasure is an evil.; Thomas Hobbes writing that all were to be subject to one common will; Spinoza—that the instinct to self-preservation was the foundation of virtue.

With the dawn of Christianity, ethics takes a more religious bent, with the writings of Paul who teaches “God has written his moral law in the hearts of all men, even of those outside the influence of Christian revelation. At this time the concept of “a day of reckoning” is introduced.

Adam Smith, before he wrote his famous “Wealth of Nations,” wrote The Theory of Moral Sentiments, published in 1759 during his tenure of the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. He made a analogy of human society as an “immense machine,” and celebrated virtue as the “fine polish” on its wheels. He characterized vice as the “rust” that causes the wheels to “jar and grate upon one another.”

There is a good reason for the new curriculum on Ethics. A renewed interest in ethics actually began after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it became clear that simply unleashing markets, without first creating a workable system of justice, would fail to create conditions for social development. In addition, the scandals in the major energy, health-care, and other firms highlighted the destructive power a few unethical managers can wreak on a company and on a market.

As part of the workshop on Ethics that I attended was a panel of business leaders who talked about the importance of trust among employees and management. All their companies have value statements that outline behavioral expectations for both the employees and management. They talked about how they had developed these statements—all of them had included input from all levels of the company

Here is an example of one they shared with me.

Our Values - From Enron

They expressed the opinion that it is much worse to have a value statement that is not lived up to, particularly by management, than to not have a value statement

The educational, as well as business communities nationwide, are interested in teachers including ethics in their classroom instruction because they understand the importance of training ethical employees, ethical employers—ie ethical human beings. The workshop I attended took place at Hamilton Beach headquarters in Henrico County. The CEO talked about the situations he ran into when he was a manager in Italy. One dark and stormy night, a truck showed up at his house. Because it was stormy, he allowed the truck to park in his garage—wherein they began unloading cases of what appeared to be a very expensive wine sent by a client. He had a dilemma here—should he accept the wine when he felt it was not good company policy, or should he keep it and just say his thanks. Not keeping the wine would definitely offend the client. One of the bottle's label started to peel off. Under the expensive label, was a label of a much cheaper wine. He soaked several bottles to find they all peeled down to the cheaper label. He decided to just keep the wine—it was not an expensive gift. His judgment call. Was it an ethical one? He said he helped set his company policy in the U.S. that, in cases such as this, to generally to allow employees to keep a bottle of wine, but not a whole case.

One of the problems he continually faced was how to deal with such a situation in different cultures—that there was always that “fine line” to walk. He said that his company had opened a factory in Saltillo, Mexico. I asked how he dealt with the fact that just about all business conducted in Mexico involves a “mordida,” a bite or a bribe. He said he did not pay bribes and noted that they eventually closed that factory. Vern and I had experienced situations, while living in Mexico, in which you either paid a mordida or spent a few hours in the hot sun waiting for a some official to decide your fate. One occurred when we drove through a small town on our way to the border. We were following the route signs that indicated that we were to turn left at the intersection. As soon as we did so we heard the whistle of a local policeman who was standing on the side of the road. He said left turns were not allowed here. We asked where was the sign stating this. He

replied, “There is no sign—everyone just knows that you can’t turn left.” He wanted several pesos to let us pass with a warning or, if we so desired, we could go before the magistrate. Understanding that low-level law officers get very meager salaries, we decided to go ahead (after some negotiation) and pay the bribe. (In Mexico, they are way ahead of the U.S. in doing away with paperwork—they simply remove your license plates to make sure you will turn up in court) In thinking about it afterwards, **we wondered if we adding to the problem or simply bowing to cultural norms?** Vern’s company’s trucks were occasionally stopped for some “infraction” with the understanding that the perishable product they were carrying would spoil in the hot sun if they opted to not pay a mordida. It did not only take place in Mexico, something similar happened when we crossing the Panamanian border into Costa Rica where the official said the paperwork would go a lot faster (they weren’t sure they would allow a car with Panamanian registration to leave the country) if we would cross his palms with some Balboas. Also, we might have to return to David, a city several miles in the direction that we had just come, to get another seal on our passport. We decided to go back to David, have them look over our passports again, and then returned to the border. It still took over four hours to cross the border. This is a real problem. American companies in Latin America often face ethical dilemmas in which they must conform with local customs and, at the same time, U. S. Laws.

The panel of business leaders at the workshop had a number of questions posed to them included ones such as:

- What if you had a star employee of five years and you just found out that he/she had lied on their initial application about having the educational credentials required for the job? Would you fire them? The panel agreed that they probably wouldn’t fire this person but would certainly have a heart-to heart conversation with him or her letting them know that a certain level of trust had been breached. You might say that the importance of credentials would depend on the job undertaken—for example, a doctor absolutely cannot practice without a medical license, and a law student certainly can’t charge for his legal services until he has a law degree. In the final analysis, each person has to decide how they feel about a person who had lied about such an important fact.?

- What if your son or daughter called you from college to tell you that they had written a major paper for a friend and that paper had been submitted for a grade? Afterwards, they had second thoughts because the school had a very well-published honor code and such an infraction would be tried by the honor council. How would you advise him or her? There is a possibility that, if they reported themselves, they would be asked to leave the school—and this might impact their lives and careers from that time on.

Dilemmas comes into play when the choice one must make is particularly difficult—no alternative is really desirable. Very tough decisions have to be made—there are some dilemmas in which the stakes are very high. Most religious and philosophical traditions ask “Do the ends justify the means?” and “Are there duties that people should uphold, regardless of consequences?” Our answer to these questions has a direct impact on the choices we make.

Some of the dilemmas we face as a society are ones that were not even considered a few decades ago (because we did not have the technology) but are much in the news today. An example of this is the issue of organ transplants..

The sale of transplant organs is illegal in the United States. People may donate organs but not sell them. In other words, the price of transplant organs is set at \$0. This is called a price ceiling and price ceilings generally cause shortages (think rent control in New York City). At this \$0 price, it is found that people will supply approximately 20,000 kidneys a year—people make these donations for altruistic reasons. At the same time approximately 80,000 people need kidney transplants—a shortage of 60,000. Suppose the federal government removed the ban on the selling of transplant organs? If this were to happen, some people awaiting kidneys would be willing to pay for an opportunity to improve their chance for living a normal life. Economists (based on these figures) calculate that the price for a kidney would rise to about \$30,000 on an open market. This would be the price that the number of people willing to supply a kidney (50,000) would be matched by the 50,000 people who are willing and able to buy a kidney. People who were willing to pay \$30,000 would no longer be on the waiting list—they would have their kidney!. However, there would still be people needing a transplant who could not afford to buy at this price and they would have stay on the waiting list.

The question then: should people be allowed to sell one of their kidneys?

On one hand, a much larger group of people would have the opportunity to live normal lives.

On the other hand, of course, there are arguments against allowing the sale of kidneys including:

- poorer people are the most likely to sell their kidneys
- poorer people who need a kidney transplant would be priced out of the market by wealthier buyers.
- Donations of kidneys for people still on the waiting list would more than likely decrease.

By the way, before it was stopped, bidding for a kidney on eBay reached \$5.7 million.

How do we resolve a dilemma where the means of saving thousands of lives is available, but ethical, moral, and legal restraints deem that this is just not the “right thing” to do at this time? We can only hope we will have the answer to this in the future.

As part of the human experience we have all faced dilemmas in our lives. As Unitarian Universalists, we have some guideposts to aid us in meeting these challenges. We always try to keep before us our goal of “doing the right thing.” We are a caring congregation. Our first two principles states that we believe in

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations

So we continue to strive to balance our principles with the difficult choices we face in the future. If you feel comfortable in doing so, I hope you will share your thoughts, experiences, and possible solutions in dealing with dilemmas you have faced.

UUFR Program delivered by Barbara Haynes
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