

Ethical Misapprehensions

Preliminaries

The purpose of this brief guide is to provide, in mostly straightforward language, a basic understanding of ethics which is convincing; (it is intended to ring true). It also has the purpose of providing defences against commonplace fundamentalist approaches to ethics. Its starting point is that we are different, and therefore the responsibilities we assume for ourselves or attribute to others must also be various. No-one is responsible for everything, but everyone is responsible for something. On occasion, even, each of us may be bound, on pain of dereliction of duty, to hold another, or others, to account.

Many of the ethical problems that arise for reflective people..., - and you must be such a person if you are reading this, - ...many ethical problems come from confusion. We grow into the world learning various informal moral codes and ways of thinking about morality, and these are sometimes contradictory. Even as adults we find ourselves confounded, confounded indeed by both opinions and people - often opinionated people - that are fundamentalist in nature, but we are unsure how to react.

Talk about ethics is often used by superficial or manipulative people in order to exercise power, but

failure to reflect on ethics can equally lead to well-meaning people causing harm and hurt, notably when they apply moral categories where they do not belong. Sometimes, though, it may be right to hurt.

Whereas many who speak or write about ethics like to emphasise principles and rules, or else talk about values, the approach taken below is to make distinctions while also noting the fluid - the *ad-hoc* - nature of many distinctions. Whereas others often focus on the rightness or wrongness of particular acts, without regard to who is performing those acts, here the focus is on the whole way of life of different people with their different - and changing - strengths and weaknesses.

Life should not be made out to be an ethical obstacle race. Nor, indeed, an endurance race.

Even many people who might be thought to be educated still fail to distinguish between the law of the land, the rules of everyday courtesy, and the domain of ethics or morality. An action may be wrong in law, but in given circumstances entirely justifiable. An act or an omission may be permitted by law, but be morally reprehensible. On occasion it is right to be discourteous.

I suggest, therefore, that the subject matter of ethics should be understood as the realm of conduct towards other people that is not adequately governed by law or by custom (i.e. the rules of etiquette, or of

courtesy). This is not a precise or perfect definition, but it serves well enough as a correction to anyone failing to acknowledge the necessary distinctions between ethics, law and custom.

Some people like to distinguish between morality and ethics, and it would be a useful distinction to make if others had not meanwhile confused the two almost beyond redemption. The word Morality would denote customary behaviour considered in a given society to be appropriate & proper, whereas Ethics would refer to reflection on morality.

There is an awkward ambiguity about the word *ethical* in particular. It might describe the nature of a consideration or argument, as when either is ethical as opposed to being, say, legal or Machiavellian or insincere. But it is often used as a term of approval as, for instance, in the phrase *ethical business*.

The heart of the matter

Most of those who raise their voices in public discourse on matters of ethics and morality leave out of account one essential aspect, and that is the matter of motivation. In response to an appeal to behave ethically or morally, or more morally, or less unethically, one can always ask, though better in private than in public, why one should comply. In the case of the grand scheme of the law, it may be prudential to comply, seeing that otherwise one may

be found out and punished. In the case of custom, when one oversteps the bounds of convention others in one's peer group are likely to impose their own punishment. But when the law has become so intricate that it has more loopholes than it holds out threats; when no-one - or no-one powerful - is looking to observe our indiscretions; then an explanation is needed as to why anyone should comply with an appeal to their supposedly better nature.

Sometimes an answer is given in terms of conscience; you will feel wretched or have nightmares. It should be noted that some people suffer these afflictions without ever having committed a felony or a serious indiscretion.

Sometimes an answer is given in terms of divine intervention, or a severe demotion in a reincarnated life. Obviously, these replies only work for people with the relevant metaphysical convictions.

The short answer why we obey the law and why we behave ourselves most of the time is by force of habit. Of course, habits can be broken, and sometimes it is good to be rid of a habit.

None the less, the short answer takes us further than we might suppose, for we are in no small measure composed of our multitudinous habits such that without most of them we would be someone else. Habits persist even when they seem to have been

jettisoned. Thus there is honour among thieves, such that the ancient institution of the promise and an implicit sense of obligation of *quid pro quo* still count for something even there.

Look at how habits are composed.

Slowly. Layer by layer, all through a childhood and beyond. They are so numerous and deeply embedded, one cannot even count them. It is possible to target and combat a handful of habits, but not all of them, nor even many all at once.

If, for example, you have acquired a habit of being generous, or brave, you might find yourself failing to be mean or quiescent when this is what circumstances command. You would have to practice, or remind yourself, rather than behaving unreflectively according to your second nature. You would have to learn how to spring over your shadow, and partly unlearn the self you have become.

There is, though, a more comprehensive explanation of what may motivate us to behave in a way that would seem to be disadvantageous while being, on another reckoning, the right thing to do. It has to do with one's sense of self; of rightful pride: what sort of person am I? That is, with a sense of identity.

But to understand how this consideration can have real rather than merely rhetorical force, an appreciation of social dynamics is needed. This is

what is left out of account by those who advocate obedience to a moral law without further elaboration of why it should be obeyed (or, indeed, of what its contents precisely are). Such advocates (and such they are: incipient lawyers)... such advocates imagine a kind of universal sameness where there is, in fact and blessedly, nearly endless variety.

Society is only necessary, and only functions, by virtue of our differences, and differences not only in terms of a variety of skills, but also because different roles and situations require varying moral strengths and indulgences.

Take it as axiomatic that no-one can possess all moral strengths and no weaknesses (nobody is wholly virtuous). Thus even in the moral life, each person is assigned or else, best, seeks out a niche, a unique positioning. It is this positioning that is your personal guide on how to conduct yourself. In the intricacies of social interaction, others must behave differently. It is a psychological truth, and possibly a logical one, that the individual exercise of some moral strengths is inconsistent with the exercise of others by the selfsame person. At different times, different people must come to the fore. *No-one is responsible for everything, but everyone is responsible for something.*

However, some people - diverse kinds of free-rider - dodge responsibility. They do this ingeniously

and disingenuously. They pretend to contribute, or do so only when under observation. It is pointless appealing to their consciences or sense of common purpose. The way to deal with the manipulative is to confront them; stand in their way; make it clear that their calculation will not be tolerated. On occasion, an ethical stance involves a readiness to be unpleasant and to incur wrath. This is holding people to account, and it is an essential aspect of social dynamics. How often and when and exactly how, are separate issues.

Alongside the sense of identity that may result from assuming specific responsibilities, a further source of motivation may be found in an expanded sense of self. This happens most frequently when a person regards their closest kith and kin as extensions of themselves, assuming or forging with these others a common purpose. Note that here our commonplace notions of egoism and altruism are upset. It could, paradoxically, be said that individuals who are commonly regarded as egoistic are, in fact, people with very small egos, because their sense of self barely extends beyond their own present confines, whereas greater souls encompass something of their fellow men.

No absolute answers

These responses to the question of motivation are not definitive. There is more to be said, and more is said

elsewhere on this and related websites. It is possible to query any response; that is, it is possible to imagine scenarios where any intuitions we have about what drives us, about right & wrong, or about good, bad & evil, are unsettled or upset. Contemporary moral philosophers have been skilled at provoking such discomfort. This may be appropriate if those addressed are embarking on an education in moral philosophy. But it is counter-productive if the need is to provide a rough-&-ready framework so that reasonably intelligent and sensitive people can see their way clear and be given some defence against bogus claims on their consciences.

...Because much of the mischief in speech about ethics comes about when a rogue saying (precept, maxim) is introduced into the dispute. Suddenly an idea from a different moral code - the joker in the pack - is presented as self-evident, valid and relevant. This is where someone who is seriously educated in moral philosophy can help to counter the mischief.

Whereas in academic circles there is a tendency to obscure matters, by, for example, manufacturing new and ever more complicated meta-languages, or by referring to age-old positions by the name of the advocate or upstart who is fashionable (but the fashions are provincial and changeable)...whereas, in order maybe to protect their status as experts, some intellectuals pursue obscurantism and irrelevance,

the main contemporary threat to ethics comes surely from fundamentalism.

Beware of those who present ethics in terms of a moral law, as if mandated by a godlike legislator. Beware, too, of those who present values as if these were absolutes, like guardian angels or saints, rather than stars that we might, at night on the high sea, consult in order to navigate through troubled waters to a haven.

Beware of grand words. Few of those who use them are able to spell out what they involve or to counter criticism. We do sometimes, though rarely, need large abstractions, but they need careful handling. For example, the omnipresent talk of values is largely meaningless, whereas talk of priorities, and the need sometimes to juggle priorities, would make a little sense at least. For example: Freedom is not itself a value; it is a precondition of value. Only by exercising choice do we bestow value in one place rather than another.

Beware of golden rules and categorical imperatives. These cover either too much or too little, and again fail to take account of socio-dynamics. Adherents of these are easy game for manipulative types. Many vocal people are eager to claim respect and have their rights upheld, but are remarkably reluctant to accord respect that goes beyond lip-service, and similarly reticent when it is their turn to

assume responsibilities. Real respect would mean holding people - including such people - to account, and possibly doing so in no uncertain terms.

Beware, finally, of a confusion that is both innocent and common. In discourse about ethics, one word that gives rise to much contention is Relativism. Everything is relative, say some, while others insist on absolute values. This is too intricate a matter for a brief treatment here. Suffice it to say that there is a world of difference between the refusal to agree to a generalisation and a refusal to pass judgement in a particular case where one is duly informed about the details of the matter. The insistence on absolutes masks the fact that generalisations are contentious once the detail is addressed. Some people - bless them - are wary of grand statements, but are perfectly willing and able to form a considered opinion in a particular case. You do not have to be a grammarian, indeed you do not need to have studied linguistics, in order to know how to form or recognise perfectly grammatical sentences. Similarly, unusual and complex cases aside, you do not need to be articulate about ethics in order to utter judgment where judgment is due. But neither should you roam the virtual countryside to seek out targets for your judgment.