

Fundamentals of Ethics

The nation faces a perilous future on uncharted seas as we face the threat of non-state terrorism. As the most diverse nation on earth, we must maintain national security while ensuring individual freedom and privacy as guaranteed by the Constitution; we will have to walk a fine line and this will not be easy. In the final analysis, social order, domestically and internationally, will be achieved through common values and moral conduct that reflects those values. Unless we understand the critical role of trust and confidence in our relationships—personal, professional, and among nations—we will rely more and more on force to maintain social order. Conventional force will have limited utility in fighting terrorism, and indeed may be counter productive. Similarly, as we build the national will and cohesion necessary to solve our domestic and international problems, we must understand the moral dimension of this effort.

This course is designed to be a common sense, pragmatic introduction to the study of ethics. The material discussions will be straightforward and will require no special educational background to understand. The study of ethics, of course, is a complex subject and in many ways, this course is oversimplified; however, I will do my best to represent accurately mainstream thought on ethical issues. One should not expect to find courses of this sort in academic philosophy curricula, where students can spend weeks examining abstract and metaphysical theories and concepts. Rather, the purpose here is to provide a general framework useful for people who want to make ethical decisions in their personal lives.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that focuses on that dimension of human interaction which is judged in terms of “right” or “wrong”; “good” or “bad”; “moral” or “immoral”; “ethical” or “unethical” (the terms moral and ethical will be used interchangeably in this course). There are many ways one can approach the study of ethics, as you will see as we go through the course. In order to set the context for those discussions, however, let us make some common sense observations. When one pauses for a moment and thinks about human behavior, an obvious question that has puzzled social philosophers (or inquisitive people for that matter) throughout history, presents itself: Given the wide divergence of individual needs (economic, social, sexual, individual freedom, etc.), inherent conflicts, and the scarcity of resources to meet those needs, how is social order possible? How do we avoid human interaction governed by the “law of the jungle” and survival of the fittest?

Some obvious answers come to mind. People are usually organized into groups with authorities to make rules and enforce them (political/legal order). An alternative explanation is that people are by nature social animals with an inborn sense of what is right and wrong and they will generally do what is right. Even if they are not kind and compassionate in their natural state, one might argue, people realize that they depend on each other to have a good life. By reasoning together in a rational manner, they will develop rules of conduct, and with mutual trust and confidence, abide by those rules as a matter of honor (moral order). Or, is it some combination of political and moral order?

A series of follow-on questions might be: Which of the approaches has been the most dominant in the history of man? Why has this been the case? If you were able to choose the nature of the social order in which to live, which of the modes (legal authority

or moral authority) would you choose to emphasize for your family? For your religious group? For your workplace? For the business community? For your nation? For the international community? Notwithstanding your preference, which approach is most compatible with “human nature” for each of these groups? If you think through these questions, you will summarize much of the central questions of social science. Men of goodwill, and equal intellectual power, have arrived at different answers.

The underlying foundation for the analyses and conclusions regarding the above issues is often the assumptions regarding the basic “nature” of man. Some see the basic nature of man as being selfish and aggressive and argue for a strong sovereign ruler who can make laws and enforce them. Otherwise, they say, there will be “...war of all against all, and life will be solitary, nasty, brutish and short...” These are the words of Thomas Hobbes, who held a rather pessimistic (some would argue, realistic) view of human nature. Others saw the same kind of selfish man in his “natural state”, but believed that such natural selfishness could be modified. Most social scientists, for example, argue that the socialization process, if done properly, can turn hedonistic, selfish newborns into kind, compassionate adults. John Locke, a contemporary of Hobbes, believed people were inherently somewhat selfish and fallible, but that they could be socialized to be reasonable and respecting of the rights of others. Therefore, people would reason together and agree on some basic values and rules of behavior that reflect those values. As a practical matter, Locke said, people will accept that there has to be give and take and for the most part, they can trust each other, as a matter of honor, to abide by those agreed-upon rules. Others argue that the set of rules must be based on divinely revealed dicta, or commandments.

Others saw man as good in his “natural” state, but corrupted by environmental forces. If those forces could be removed, man would return to his pure “state of nature” and everyone would live in harmony. For example, Karl Marx believed man to be inherently virtuous, but alienated from his natural state by private ownership of the means of economic production, i.e., Capitalism. His solution to return man to his virtuous state: return ownership of the means of production to the people. Jesus Christ also believed man to be inherently virtuous, but “original sin” had caused him to deviate from that state of nature. The solution: repent and accept the teachings of Jesus and you will return to your original state of virtue. Most great religious leaders followed that line of thought. In each case, other than Hobbes’ view, a necessary condition for moral order is that people have a conscience/moral gyroscope that will ensure compliance, for the most part, with societal norms of behavior. It is a moot point whether some of this moral conscience is “inborn”; all agree that much of it is learned or strengthened.

Basic Requirements for Moral Order

If we are to have social order based on moral, rather than legal/political, authority there are certain fundamental requirements that must be met. First, a society must agree on some basic values. What do we want out of life, what are our goals? Next, what behavior reflects these values, what are the norms of conduct? How do we ensure that these norms are internalized by members of the group so that they will comply as a matter of honor? Obviously, we cannot rely totally on moral authority; some political/legal constraints will be necessary. The goal should be, however, to minimize

the necessity for such political constraints. Moreover, we can expect people to disagree on many issues, e.g., abortion, public welfare, affirmative action, and indeed, the role of government in meeting the people's needs. Honorable men can, and do, differ on these matters.

Ideally, people can agree on procedures to resolve differences in a peaceful manner. In the realm of laws, the Constitution establishes those procedures. In the realm of morality not covered by laws, people must agree on certain rules for resolving differences. Hopefully, these rules will emphasize civility and peaceful resolution, but this is not always the case. We will explore this in more detail later. The one essential ingredient of any system of social control, however, is trust and confidence in each other and in the leadership of a group. As the noted author Sissela Bok has said:

“...Trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breath or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse.

...Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain...”

Lying, 1978

Reflect on Bok's dictum as you consider the state of public trust in our American institutions--our justice system, our business community, our health system, and most alarmingly, our political institutions and leaders.

Questions to be addressed in the course

- What should/does mankind value most of all? (does this necessarily include transcendental issues, such as divinely revealed laws?)

- What are the best ways to balance individual values/needs against group values/needs?

- Assuming that ethical codes [written or unwritten] are rules of behavior [means] designed to achieve what is valued [ends], with the goal of balancing the individual and group needs, where do we get the rules: Divine revelation, intellectual elite [philosophers], common man reasoning together, tradition, or some combination of these?

1. How does a community reconcile conflict about what values should be common, and what the rules of behavior should be, e.g. abortion?
2. Can ethical codes be valid without being based on divine revelation?
3. Should the rules in a code be absolute and allow no exceptions, or general guidelines to be used by individuals who interpret them to fit specific situations? (in this regard, identify an absolute rule that should never be violated).
4. Should values and ethical rules be universal, applying to all mankind, or should groups have their own to fit their special needs?
5. Should nations be judged by their behavior as we judge individuals?
6. Should nations attempt to impose their values and ethical standards on other nations?

7. Do professional groups have a higher ethical obligation than ordinary citizens?