Ethical Principles & Practices: A Two-Edged Sword

By
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> I want to believe – and so do you – in a complete, transcendent and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, findable rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe – and so do you – in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves, individually and as a species, what we ought to be. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it.

Those are the insightful, provocative and true-to-life words of the late Duke University Law professor, Arthur Leff[1]. Leff's words adequately sum up the delight and dilemma of human existence in the area of ethics – deciding on what is right from what is wrong. It would be delightful if we were all free, as a group or as individuals, to determine what is right or wrong without having to bother about what God requires of us. In other words, it would be delightful if we had ethical autonomy, the right and the ability to determine, with finality, principles of rightness and wrongness. It would indeed be sheer joy if we could live as we wish without any obligation or necessity to consult the Bible, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Mormon or any other holy book!

And yet, because of the reality of conflicting ideas and desires in life, we all seem to be searching for principles of rightness and wrongness that come from a deity. The dilemma here is that if our principles of rightness

[1] "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law", Duke Law Journal 6 (December, 1979): 1229

and wrongness are derived from a god, then instead of having ethical autonomy, we are limited behaviourally because of ethical accountability. This struggle between ethical autonomy and ethical accountability is evident both in our personal lives and in our ethical discourse. Hence, the Humanist Manifesto II states,

> We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction.[2]

On the other hand, the late Evangelical philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, states,

> If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.[3]

Though written in popular publications, these two quotations are representative of major scholarly approaches to the grounding of ethical discourse.[4]

Anyone who has been involved in serious ethical discussion will appreciate the difficulty in determining defensible ethical principles. For that reason we regard ethical principles as constituting one edge of the two-edged sword.

Having felt that sharp edge of the sword, one still has to grapple with the much more difficult issue of living consistently with the principles agreed on – the other edge of the sword. There are two broad approaches to the determination of ethical principles which we will now highlight

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[2] See Paul Kurtz (Ed.), *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1973), 17.

[3] Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Flemming H. Revell, 1976), 145.

[4] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, (Notre Dame, Indiana: 1984) and David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984).

and illustrate. The one approach is **ethical relativism** and the other **ethical absolutism**.

Ethical relativism is the belief that, since no absolute moral code exists, the rightness or wrongness of an act or intention is relative to the situation, circumstance or context surrounding that act or intention. As Joseph Fletcher argued, "... rights and wrongs are determined by objective facts or circumstances, that is, by the situations in which moral agents have to decide for the most beneficial course open to choice."[5] What does this ethical relativism mean in practice as we try to decide on a multitude of issues?

Basically, it means that one does not begin by knowing that any act or intention to act is intrinsically right or wrong, but that it becomes so depending on the situation. So any traditionally outlawed act or intention, be it lying, pre-marital or extra-marital sex, stealing, etc., could be right depending on the situation. There is a delightful flexibility and fluidity about ethical relativism and it appeals to the basic desire for ethical autonomy that we all register at the core of our beings.

If the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by me, then I become the final court of appeal concerning the ethical value to be put on that act. That is delightful in principle and practice, or so it seems, and the relativist would appear to be one who could handle the two-edged sword with very little loss of ethical blood. Nevertheless, despite appearances, ethical relativism encounters problems on both edges of the sword.

As a principle of ethical decision-making, ethical relativism is not much good before one gets involved in an act or sustains an intention. Ethical relativism can be invoked only during (or just immediately prior to) an act or while one is sustaining an intention to act. Its value for deciding on the ethical status of any act or intention has to await examination in process or in retrospect. This is so because ethical relativists do not regard any act or intention as having intrinsic value that can be evaluated minus an existential situation or context. For ethical relativists, the value of an act or intention – just like the meaning of a word – derives from its situational context.

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[5] Cited in David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, (Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1991), 203.

Declaring as true what one knows or suspects to be false, that is, lying, has no intrinsic ethical status for the consistent relativist. The existential context in which one declares as true what is known or suspected to be false is what allows a value judgment to be made on the declaration. Converting to one's use and benefit funds belonging to another, without the authority or permission so to do, that is, stealing or fraud, has no intrinsic ethical status for the consistent relativist. The existential context in which one does the act is what allows a value judgment to be made on the converting. Likewise, pre-marital, extra-marital or homosexual sex has no intrinsic ethical status for the consistent relativist. The existential context in which one engages in sexual intimacy is what allows a value judgment to be made on the act of intimacy.

Ethical relativism as a principle of ethical decision-making thus suffers from two defects: firstly, no act or intention can be defensibly evaluated prior to its happening in a given context; and secondly, any act or intention could possibly be right, ethically, depending on situation or context.

At the level of ethical practice, ethical relativism is delightful to *live on* but uncomfortable to *live with*. If I am ethically free to indulge my desires then every other person is entitled to that luxury, even to my detriment.[6] If ethical relativism is defensible, then the consistent relativist could not instinctively or belatedly experience or express outrage at any so-called "wrong" because it could be right depending on the context in which it happened. One could rob the relativist, rape his wife, sexually abuse his son, lie on him in court, etc., and he would be forced to grin and bear it because any such act *could* be right. If relativism rules, why the ethical furore over non-transparency in the awarding of hefty governmental contracts? Why the moral outrage concerning unapproved fat salaries, contract murders, cheating in exams, customs evasion, multiple-taxation laws, sex for promotion, etc., if relativism rules and is defensible as a theory of ethical decision-making?

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[6] This is strictly true only if ethical relativism is seen as normative ethics, that is, as having to do with participating in moral decision-making and in following principles. It would not be true if seen as an exercise in observing and analyzing the participation in moral decision-making, that is as meta-ethics.

There are negative societal spin-offs of ethical relativism. There is no easy way of seeing how ethical relativism can curb human desires that are or could be detrimental to a community. Nor is it conceivable that ethical relativism could inculcate a sense of ethical duty or the sense of "ought" in humans. Even relativists recognize and admit to this defect in ethical relativism. Humanist and ethical relativist, Paul Kurtz writes,

> ... the humanist is faced with a crucial ethical problem: Insofar as he has defended an ethic of freedom, can he develop a basis for moral responsibility? Regretfully, merely to liberate individuals from authoritarian social institutions, whether church or state, is no guarantee that they will be aware of their moral responsibility to others. The contrary is often the case.[7]

What then might one say concerning ethical absolutism, the other broad approach to the determination of ethical principles? Ethical absolutism is the view that, though the ethical status of some acts or intentions may depend on situation or context, there are others that are either always right or always wrong irrespective of situation or context and further that there is an objective moral order that can be appealed to for guidance concerning absolutes.

But what could one mean by an objective *moral order* given the diversity of ethical practices across cultures? Several things need to be borne in mind here:

1. Morality is objective in that as Paul Copan argues, it "isn't a function of individual or cultural preferences, opinions, or responses. Morality is objective in that it is *recognized* and *discovered* rather than *invented* by humans."[8] The basic sense of ethical value, that sense of rightness or wrongness – call it a moral norm or a moral motion – is universal even though some

[7] Cited in Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, 206.

[8] See his "True For You, But Not For Me", (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 44. I am indebted to Copan for the ideas in this numbered section.

expressions of that sense of ethical value may differ from culture to culture.

2. Objective morality "includes the notion of *obligation*, a duty to comply with what we *ought* to do (the good) and to avoid what is forbidden (the bad)."[9]
3. Objective morality is possible and detectable because of the existence of the infinite-personal God whose character is the absolute standard of goodness and in whose image and likeness humans are created.

What does this ethical absolutism mean in practice as we try to decide on a multitude of issues? Basically, it means that one does begin by knowing that **some** acts or intentions to act are intrinsically right or wrong irrespective of situation or context. Some things are always right and some other things always wrong. These are absolutes. There is a certain ethical rigidity and lack of flexibility about ethical absolutism which tends to run counter to our basic desire for ethical autonomy. Additionally, the notion of ethical *obligation* that comes with absolutism creates, sustains and heightens the sense of ethical accountability or "answerableness."

Ethical absolutism, as a principle of determining rightness and wrongness, is not appealing, yet it provides benefits at both edges of the sword – at the edge of principle as well as that of practice – that are not available from relativism. At the level of principle, one can evaluate the intrinsic value of an act or intention prospectively, before engaging in the act or sustaining the intention to act. It is psychologically reassuring and beneficial to an individual as well as a society if everyone adhered to truth-telling as an absolute and thus in all declarations tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. If some things are always wrong, then one can denounce them whether one does them, has been the object of them or knows that they are being done. If some things are always right then moral responsibility can be encouraged by promoting such things.

At the level of ethical practice, ethical absolutism is delightful to *live with* but very demanding to *live on*. It is in this regard that the absolutist

[9] Copan, ibid.

is faced with some awkward questions. Why should one *strive* for an "ought" when conduct (what is and is beneficial) is radically different? Should ethical behaviour be idealistic or realistic in essence? Does one begin to operate from the ethos of practice or the ideals of principle and why either way? These are by no means unanswerable questions. The absolutist may respond by saying that noble principles or ideals **plus efforts at living out such ideals or principles** are necessary in the cultivation of mature moral rectitude. This should be understandable because the idea of a stretch factor plus efforts is used in life generally to foster maturity in different areas.

However, there is yet another issue. If we concede ability differences in academic or athletic performance and never, ever seriously contend an equality in academic or athletic ability, on what basis do we argue against the possibility, at least, of inequality in ethical ability? May it not be that if God is so necessary for ethical ability to do consistently what one ought, then minus God (or even with God) some people are at a disadvantage in terms of ethical ability to do the ought and therefore have a plea of diminished responsibility? What should our comment be on repeated failure to do the ought despite strong determination and sterling effort? Why is the usual comment "do the best of your ***ability***" or "do the best you ***can***" seemingly applicable in all or most areas of life, but not in the arena of ethics?

The answers to these awkward issues will come to mind only after serious reflection. It is my hope that they will indeed foster such reflection and a deeper appreciation of the real existential difficulties of handling the two-edged sword of ethical principles and ethical practices, without being wounded.

At the level of principles there is a recognized chasm separating the relativist from the absolutist. The meeting of the ways happens at the level of practice. The relativist will find it difficult, if not impossible, **in principle**, to live consistently on or practice relativism. The absolutist will find it difficult, even if not impossible, **in practice** to live consistently on or practice absolutism. It may be cold comfort for humans in community, but it would seem that, though absolutists like relativists will fail in practice, a community would be better off with a group of absolutists than with a group of relativists. How so?

To modify Ravi Zacharias' words, the relativist is bereft of any objective point of reference for **predictably** wholesome behaviour and any relativist who happens to live an ethically commendable life lives better than his or her philosophy warrants.[10] The absolutist, especially if Christian, has an objective point of reference in the Bible for **predictably** wholesome behaviour and even after failure can, through confession and repentance, resume, by God's grace, an ethically wholesome life.

The restoration of morals that our society needs and lacks will not happen until most, if not all of us, can be relied on to display whole-hearted, abiding fidelity to wholesome abiding principles. That cannot, in principle or in practice, result from ethical relativism, but is a natural outflow from ethical absolutism.

[10] See his *Can Man Live Without God*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 32.