Rights and Wrongs

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, discusses the true source of ethics.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

During a recent meeting of college educators at Harvard University, Cornell President Frank Rhodes rose to address the issue of reforms, suggesting that it was time for universities to pay "real and sustained attention to students' intellectual and moral well-being." Immediately there were gasps, even catcalls. One indignant student stood to demand of Rhodes, "Who is going to do the instructing? Whose morality are we going to follow?" The audience applauded thunderously, believing that the young man had settled the issue by posing an unanswerable question. Rhodes sat down, unable or unwilling to respond.

This interchange between university president and college student hits at the most basic question in formulating any and every system of ethics, namely that of identifying the *basis* for determining the standards we humans designate as "right" or "wrong."

What is ethics?

Ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning, "what ought to be," or, "a place of refuge," such as a cave, solid and absolute. The dictionary defines ethics as

(1) the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment, or

(2) the system or code of morals of a particular philosopher, religion, group, etc.
Dr. Albert Schweitzer defined ethics as "the name we give for our concern for good behavior."

Human Ethical Universality

No human lives without the ethical dimension. Statements like, “That’s not fair,” or “You promised,” reveal the common ethical assumptions humans have come to expect of one another. This is not to say that each human always acts responsibly toward his fellows. In every culture we find individuals who choose to ignore the commonly held standards; they choose to rape, to steal, to kill. Breaking established standards is therefore a *relative* issue; that is, some do, and some don’t. But an *absolute* is also involved: no one likes to be raped, robbed, or murdered.

OPTIONS FOR VALUES

One can say that every ethical value involves some standard of behavior, and every standard is defined in a *prescriptive* manner. Ethical standards are expressed in terms of “ought” and “should,” or “ought not” and “should not.” They transcend the language of *description*, speaking not only of “what is,” but rather “what should be.” Where do we find such standards? What kinds of foundational possibilities are available to us upon which to build an ethical system? The options are as follows:

The Natural Ethic (Nature)

> “All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
> All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
> All discord, harmony not understood;
> All partial evil, universal good;
> And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,
> One truth is clear, *whatever is, is right.*“

Alexander Pope
Definition: “Oughts” are derived from what “is.”

Mortimer Adler called this an attempt “to get conclusions in

the imperative mood from premises entirely in the indicative mood." This view presupposes the origination of value is found in the facts, the observation of nature.

"What is ethically right is related *in some way* to what is materially true" (G. G. Simpson). Example: A man runs a red light. He cannot draw a conclusion of whether or not to run the red light without having an earlier presupposition or standard in place concerning that ethical choice: "One shouldn't run red lights."

Implications:

To have true moral values, people must get them from somewhere other than the actual world of description.

This view destroys the very concepts of good and evil, because "what is" contains both. To speak of good and evil becomes nonsensical. Charles Manson said, "If God is one, what is bad?" Baudelaire lamented, "If God exists he is the Devil."

This view does not answer the question of predatorial/survival life in nature. All that we call "human" would be destroyed if people practiced this natural ethic consistently and universally.

Not many hold this view seriously. T. H. Huxley admitted that though evolution is "true," it leads to bad ethics. Even evolutionists choose not to live in such a world. Instead, they philosophically smuggle Christian ethics arbitrarily into their system and hold it *romantically* upon their naturalistic base.

If we are to have ethics, we must find them outside the natural realm.

The Consensus Ethic (Majority Rule)

Definition: Whatever a cultural group approves of is deemed

right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong. In America, we find the most popular expression of cultural relativism demonstrated in the opinion poll (e.g., the Clinton Scandal).

Implications:

The grand result of the Kinsey Report on American sexual ethics in the 1950's was that people bought the idea that if a *majority* of citizens accepted something as right or wrong, it was.

Cultural relativism claims to be based on a scientific view of morals. Admittedly, statistical analysis of human behavior is the true and proper task of sociologists. But within the discipline, unfortunately, there is, by design, or by inference, a strong tendency to make value judgments about the results of research. Sociology exists *only* to tell us *what* people are doing, not what they *should* be doing. True values must be found somewhere else.

Ethics by majority may actually have little to do with morality. A society can become corrupt. In New Guinea, for example, the tribe of Papuans have a 100 per cent majority in their view on the virtue of cannibalism. Does their unanimous consent on this issue make it moral? By such reasoning, if 51% of the German people assented to the extermination of Jewry by Hitler and his henchmen, then their actions were "right," and other cultures should have withheld any criticism of German sovereignty in their own internal affairs.

Cultural relativism is really "status-quoism," providing no strong motive for social change. It is also capricious over time. For example, in 1859, slavery in the United States was socially acceptable and abortion was illegal. Today, the reverse is true.

Those who prefer this ethical foundation must face one very dangerous fact: **If there is no standard by which society can be judged and held accountable, then society becomes the**

judge. When that happens, no one is safe—minorities, the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, and perhaps even the blond-headed or the left-handed!

The Arbitrary Ethic (Power)

A teenager complains to her mother, "Why can't I go out tonight?" Mom replies, "Because I say so!" No reason is given, other than that of the mother imposing her will on her daughter. This is the arbitrary, *de facto* use of power: "Might makes right."

Definition: An individual or elitist group sets itself up as arbiter of values and uses the necessary force to maintain these values. Democratic consensus rules from below; arbitrary absolutists rule from above.

Critique:

The arbiter can be a dictator, a parliament, a supreme court, a political party, or any elite configuration which has the wherewithal to impose its will upon the populace.

What is enforced is based solely upon what the arbiter decides will be enforced. Emperor worship of the Roman Caesars brought persecution to Jews and Christians who refused to practice it. Plato's Republic would be governed by its philosopher kings. The Catholic Inquisitors summarily tortured and executed unrepentant heretics. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* utopia would be carefully managed by beneficent planners through total environmental control and behavior modification. Soviet Russia was ruthlessly governed by an all-powerful Central Committee and its KGB enforcers.

It is important to remember that such arbiters can make something *legal* but not *moral.* The 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion is the most pertinent contemporary example. The judges, choosing to ignore medical, legal, and religious precedents on the true humanity of the unborn, made

an arbitrary, pragmatic decision. This ruling was legal, but not necessarily moral.

The great flaw in this approach is that it presupposes great trust in those who govern. History has not confirmed the wisdom of placing such confidence in those who wield absolute power. The balancing of power in the U.S. Constitution between the various branches of government reflects the wariness of its Framers to give undue authority to any sole federal entity.

“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It leads to despotism, tyranny, and bondage.

The True Absolute (Transcendence)

> “There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea . . . if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another’s way; and secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. “But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to. . . . And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.

> "Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonizing the thing inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for? What course the whole fleet ought to be on? . . ." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Definition: C. S. Lewis has here identified the "three parts of morality," the first two of which humans are well acquainted with: internal moral deficiencies and conflict with others through ethical choices. It is the *third* part for which all humans desperately need and long, namely, some *objective* standard to which all humans must adhere. Such a standard necessarily *transcends* the world of description. It presupposes that God exists and has spoken, or *revealed* such standards. The true absolute contends that the Creator of man AND nature has given such values that are commensurate with the way He made us and appropriate to people's problems and aspirations.

Example: The Ten Commandments provide the boundaries for the definition of humanness; any act contrary to this true absolute is a violation of our humanity. Further, these standards are not merely *external* principles, but rather the very essence of the nature and character of God.

Implications:

Some things are **right**; some are **wrong**, and objectively so. This ethical system is based on *normative* principles rather than subjective, *utilitarian* ones.

It also provides a basis for conviction: what was right yesterday will be right today. The individual is protected against the *whole* of society—wicked kings, pragmatic judges, corrupt politicians, and decadent populace.

There is also a true and legitimate motive for fighting evil,

an objective basis for social change.

ETHICAL SYSTEMS BUILT ON THE ABOVE

Natural Ethic

1. Behaviorism

All of our actions are the result of either our genetic make-up (see Probe articles "Human Nature" and "Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality") or our environment.

Premises:

This system presupposes that nothing exists beyond the material realm.

What is called **mind** is reduced to physical and chemical reactions.

We cannot act upon the world; rather, the world acts upon us.

Critique:

There can be no human responsibility for actions.

And yet, behaviorists themselves appeal to a standard of justice when wronged.

Contrary to the contention of the behaviorists, there *are* both philosophical reasons and scientific evidence to support the belief that we do possess an immaterial substance.

2. Darwinism

3. Marxism

Humanistic Systems

1. Cultural Relativism, consensus (See above)

2. Arbitrary Absolute (See Above)

3. Situation Ethics

This system seeks to use the rules whenever they are useful, but it discards them if they happen to conflict with *love.* Joseph Fletcher is the chief proponent.

Premises:

The sole arbiter of morality in any situation is love; it is the *only* absolute, according to Fletcher.

Love should be defined in utilitarian terms. William James said, “What works is right.” Actions should be judged by whether or not they contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number (lifeboat ethics).

The end justifies the means.

Critique:

Everyone may have a different opinion of what is loving or unloving in a given situation. If “love” is an absolute, humanity has a very difficult time in applying it to real life. Thus, morality is reduced to a matter of personal preference: “It all depends upon your point of view.”

If morality is based on the consequences, we have to be able to predict with accuracy these consequences if we want to know whether or not we are acting morally. In short, one would have to BE God in order to always do the loving thing ahead of time.

4. Emotive Ethics

In this view nothing is literally right or wrong; these terms are simply expressions of personal emotion and as such are neither true nor false.

Premises:

When we speak of good or evil, these remain simply expressions of our own subjective feelings about what we have encountered or experienced.

We can **des**cribe, but we cannot **pre**scribe.

Thus, all actions are morally neutral.

Critique:

The most an emotivist can say is, "I don't *like* other ethical theories. I *like* my own opinion on this issue."

Emotivists cannot verify their assumption that the only meaningful utterances are statements of factual or personal observation and preference. Some other meaningful system for true moral acts may exist beyond their experience and myopic world view.

5. Hedonism

Hedonists, like emotivists, are individually directed along the lines of their personal choices and desires. The hedonist (or Epicurean), however has a goal in mind: the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) believed that there were two primary choices in life—to experience either pain or pleasure. His philosophy is based on avoiding the former at all costs and relentlessly pursuing the latter with no consideration given to the consequences upon others. This, "If it feels good, do it," mentality fits well today in a society which stresses that the individual (me) is most important.

6. Pantheism

The ethical system which flows out of pantheism and new age thinking is similar to both emotivism and hedonism, and is really more *humanistic* than *theistic.* While Christian theism is God-centered, and naturalism is man-centered, pantheism is world-centered. But the focus is still upon man, and the world becomes god. In pantheism, man and nature become one, and

together become the only “god” which exists. Man thus becomes his own god; he *is* god, or at least a part of god. Ethics becomes, then, those choices which keep one in harmony with the “cosmic oneness,” and salvation comes from looking *within* to maintain that harmony. This process, like all Eastern Mysticism, tends to blur reality and the ethical distinctions of “right” and “wrong.”

Inadequate Absolutes: The Moral Dilemma

In summary, there are two reasons why man, acting autonomously, cannot establish a valid and satisfying moral theory on either naturalistic or humanistic moral theory.

The scientific method is limited.

Science can collect facts, but these pieces of information cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. It ignores the very real possibility that something real exists beyond the natural world, and it is thus doomed to look *within* its own self-defined “closed system” for an adequate ethical base. Unfortunately, none honestly exists, philosophically, except the natural law of nature, “red in tooth and claw.”

Relativism is always self-contradictory.

Although relativism disclaims the existence of absolutes, it must assume the existence of an absolute by which other theories can be judged. The problem today is that society has abandoned belief in a transcendent, absolute truth, a morally binding source of authority that is above our rights as individuals. To modern man, then, there is no absolute other than perhaps the belief that “there are no absolutes,” which is itself a contradiction.

It assumes there are no intrinsic values, yet it must assume that intrinsic values exist whenever it gives guidance in making moral decisions.

If ends and means are relative, regardless of the ethical system preferred, ones own point of reference must also be in flux.

FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL ABSOLUTES

1. It is based on an authority higher than man (Creator God) and *revelation*, rather than human experience, both individually or collectively.

2. The absolute standard for morality is God Himself, and every moral action must be judged in the light of His nature.

3. Man is not simply an animal, but a unique, moral being created in the image of God.

4. God's moral revelation has intrinsic value; it is *normative* rather than *utilitarian*. If the above is true, a homeless person possesses the same God-given worth as the president of the United States.

5. Scripture is accepted as morally authoritative, the Word of God, being derived from God.

6. In the Scriptures, law and love are harmonized, and obedience to God's laws is not legalism.

7. God's moral revelation was given for the benefit of humankind.

8. These moral principles are timeless, having historical continuity, and humans—individually or collectively—experience the common grace of God whenever and wherever they are adhered to.

9. True Christian morality deals with intentions, as well as actions, seeks the glory of God instead of pleasure and self-gratification, and encourages service to others, rather than

serving self.

God alone knows all the goals, determines all morality, and allows us to "play the game." But he does not allow us to make the rules. Modern and postmodern man, seemingly loosed from such transcendent restrictions, has chosen to make up his own. The folly of such a reference point for life is everywhere apparent.

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