What is Ethics?

Issy was the proud co-owner of the local dry cleaners. One day, during dinner, whilst he was finishing his chicken soup, his 9year old son Sam asked, "Dad, what's ethics?" Issy thought for a while, put down his spoon, looked at Sam and replied, "Okay, let's suppose someone comes into my shop and gives me his business suit to dry clean. Then suppose I find a £50 note in his trouser pocket?" Sam looked expectantly at his father. So," Issy said, "to answer your question, Sam, do I tell my partner I found the money? That's ethics".[1]

Ethics is about how we decide what is right and what is wrong and involves every aspect of our lives. Everyone lives by some kind of moral code, even if they are unaware of it. Even thieves have a moral code. This would not include respect for other people's property but it may well include not letting your mates down.

I will use the words 'ethics' and 'morals' in an equivalent way.

Outline of Talk

Tonight, I will outline some of the systems that people have used to decide what is right and what is wrong. There is a tension between basing our judgements on:
- Feelings or Facts
- Principles or Practical outcomes
- Casuistry or Character

Then I want to discuss whether there is any common ground for making ethical decisions – or whether it just depends upon one's culture and upbringing. Finally, I will discuss whether religion, in particular Christianity, has anything to offer to ethical decision-making – or whether, in the words of philosopher Simon Blackburn, we have to get rid of God in order to clear the ground for our own system of ethics.

How do we decide what is right and what is wrong?

Feelings or Facts

Some years ago, I was at the British Association of Science Festival at Leeds – I was helping to organise a session about science and religion. But being passionate about science I attended some of the other sessions. One of the main evening lectures was on Xenotransplantation, that is using organs from different animal species to transplant into humans. The reason medics want to consider this is because there is a shortage of organ donors. For example, there is the possibility of using a pig's heart in a human.

Our initial reaction may be "Yuck!"; "No way"; "That is definitely wrong". This reaction is often called the "Yuck" factor and is based upon how we feel. How we feel is a result of many different factors, many of which are subconscious. These include:
- Our genes. Our genetic make-up is a result of evolution which has ensured our survival. Our survival a species has depended – and does depend – a upon us making

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[1] From website www.awordinyoureye.com/jokes41stset.html

the right decisions: about hygiene, what we can eat and also moral choices such as cutting our carbon emissions.
- Our culture, our upbringing and our experiences. These influences include the media and our friends.

We often have a gut feeling about what is right and wrong even if we have not thought through the issues. Fifty years ago many of us would have thought that homosexual practices were wrong. Now many of us don't because we have friends and colleagues who have admitted being homosexual, or we have seen homosexual celebrities on TV. It may be that prohibitions about homosexuality arose because of the health risks associated with some practices before the availability of condoms.

Although we have to be careful about basing our judgements upon feelings along, we shouldn't ignore them, but consider them alongside the facts of the situation. In the case of Xenotransplantation, the facts include the following:
- There is a shortage of heart donors and those requiring a heart transplant are dying.
- There is a possibility of retro-viruses crossing the boundary between pig and humans and, if the person then has children, of those viruses entering into the genetic pool.

In making ethical decisions, the facts are always important, even if we recognise that facts are never value free. We cannot make sensible decisions about, say, stem cell research unless we know the facts involved in the research, and also realise that we will rarely know all the facts and those we do know will be seen through our own cultural eyes.

We may also have particular principles which govern our ethical standpoint. In the case of using a pig's heart for a human, we need to ask, Are we using pigs as a means to an end rather than valuing the life of the animal in itself?

This leads us on to the next two ways of making decisions.

Principles or Practical outcomes

I am Chaplain at Bolton University. A couple of years ago I went to a meeting of the Christian Union, which comprised mainly of Nigerians. The speaker talked about being honest and truthful and was thinking about the principle that "You shall not bear false witness", one of the Ten Commandments. We were asked to consider the following scenario: A gang of people were at the door asking if your father was at home because they wanted to kill him. Do you tell them the truth and say that you father was at home or tell a lie?

ASK the group what they would do?

Response from the Nigerian Christians: I would tell the truth and say that my father was at home. I still find it difficult to get my mind around how they could see this as the correct way to behave. But what they were doing was to take a particular principle – in this case we always have to tell the truth – and regard that principle as absolute.

If we think there are absolute standards of right and wrong then we should be able to discern the principles behind them and apply those principles in every case. For example, if we thought that killing is always wrong then it follows that war is evil and, depending upon the status of a foetus, that abortion is wrong – whatever the situation. This approach to morality is called the *deontological* approach" and is the basis of Immanuel Kant's system of ethics. For Kant, doing what is right is about doing one's duty.

But, as we have seen with my first example, there are problems about a system of ethics which is only based upon principles – whatever those principles are whether the 10 Commandments or some other set of rules.
- Principles take no account of the consequences of the actions. Telling the truth may result in the death of my father. Take a more complex example of railway workers who cause a train derailment, not deliberately but out of incompetence. They may not have

broken any Commandments or moral rules, but we may still want to judge them as morally guilty.
- The other problem about using principles is that they may conflict with other principles. Telling the truth to those who wanted to kill your father is breaking another Christian principle of honouring your father and mother, or even loving others.

Some criticisms of Christian ethics are based upon the assumption that all Christians (I focus on Christianity because that is my faith) imagine ethics simply to be about following arbitrary commands set by God and communicated through special people, priests for example, or special writings such as the Bible. We may come back to this, but all I want to say here is that this is not what is taught to those training to be ministers and priests in the mainstream Christian traditions.

Instead of basing our ethics on principles, many people today make decisions based upon the likely outcome. Here we are in the realm of "Consequential Ethics" of which Utilitarianism is the most common.

Ethical theories which judge an action on the outcome or consequences of the action and not on the intention, are called consequentialist theories. So, we judge whether something is right or wrong depending upon whether the outcome is good or bad. For a consequentialist it would be right to murder Hitler because the outcome would be a better world. For the consequentialist, the end justifies the means. For a consequentialist, there is an equivalence between what is good and what is right; between what is bad and what is wrong – whereas for those who see principles as absolute, what is right is to follow those principles even if the outcome is bad.

There are a number of different consequentialist theories, but the best known is Utilitarianism which was set out systematically by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and refined by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism is based upon the assumption that the ultimate aim of all human activity is, in some sense, happiness.

DISCUSS IN GROUPS. ASK: is this true? Do all humans desire to be happy? Is this the ultimate goal of most people? What about the Buddhist monk?

Utilitarianism is also known as hedonism. So, when we have a decision to make, we should choose whatever course of action will bring about the *greatest happiness of the greatest number* of those affected by our action. This is sometimes called the Greatest Happiness Principle or the Principle of Utility.

One advantage of utilitarianism over some other approaches to ethics is that it can be adapted easily to include animals within the realm of moral concern, assuming that animals experience pain and pleasure.

However, there are problems with the theory:
- It is impossible to predict the consequences of our actions. Insulting people usually makes them unhappy; but a masochist may take great pleasure from it.
- It is extremely difficult to measure happiness or to compare the happiness of different people. Who is to decide whether or not the pleasure experienced by a sadist or a child sex offender outweighs the victim's suffering. Mill suggested a distinction between the higher and lower pleasures. So, for example, he argued that it would be preferable to be a sad but wise Socrates than to be a happy but ignorant fool on the grounds that Socrates' pleasures would be of a higher kind than the fool's.
- The theory can justify what we may regard as immoral acts. For example, if executing an innocent person reduced violent crime by acting as a deterrent, then it could be justified in utilitarianism terms.
- 'Happiness' can now be had by drugs.
- Breaks down trust between people because utilitarians would calculate the probable happiness involved in keeping or breaking promises, so you never know if you can trust someone.

Casuistry or Character

By 'casuistry' I mean reasoning based upon principles but which also considers the particular situation. One example is 'Situation Ethics' proposed by Joseph Fletcher. Here, rules are guidelines which are modified in the particular situations. For those following the ethical system of Situation Ethics:

- The proposed course of action is judged on the basis of love and will depend upon the particular situation.
- The particular situation will always give rise to exceptions to any rule or law.
- People come first, not abstract principles.
- Nothing is good except practical love and justice which is not based upon feeling.
- Such love demands freedom and personal responsibility. Simply not doing wrong is not enough.

All this sounds good but there are problems with this approach.

- First, a loving motive can lead to a bad action. For example, we may think we are loving our children if we always give them what they want.
- Second, it is not easy to determine the consequences of a loving action.
- Third, there is a danger of judging a situation from our own point of view which may well be a selfish view. That person needs my help, rather than that person needs the help of a professional counsellor.
- Finally, there is the danger of crossing boundaries which then become acceptable to cross. We have heard in the news of situations where someone has helped their lover commit suicide and we may think, yes that is what I would do in that situation. But then what about helping a person who was mentally ill to commit suicide?

So, do we have any answers to these systems which all have problems.

Well, rather than ask questions such as "What should I *do*?", we could ask the question, "What sort of person ought I to *be*?" or 'What sort of person do I want to *be*?'. This is the realm of Virtue Ethics.

TAKE A STRAW POLL: Is there a connection between violent videos and violent behaviour in young people? (Bowker, p101ff).

> "In 2004, a case came to court involving a ... savage murder of a 14-year-old by an older boy. It was claimed by the parents of the victim to be a direct consequence of the older boy's obsession with the video game 'Manhunt', in which players are rewarded for inflicting the most brutal deaths they can. The game was immediately withdrawn from sale by some retailers, but the director-general of the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association responded: 'There is no substantive evidence in this case to link this tragic event to the fact he was playing a game. The police have confirmed that they found Manhunt in his room, but there was no mention of it during the court case.'" (Bowker, p102).

Rarely can a direct influence be shown – even if we may instinctively think that there is. From the evidence, we may conclude that violent videos are neutral, since many people watch them who never commit a violent act. But this way of thinking misses an important point – the difference between cause and constraint. All research and court cases usually focus on causes. However, if we focus on the *formation of character*, we could look at the situation in a different light. We form our character in a particular society at a particular time in history. What we see and read will influence our character and will constrain or not particular acts.

When we talk about the formation of character, we can talk about particular virtues which are qualities of the character. Virtue ethics is interested in moral character. We ask the

question in virtue ethics, 'What sort of person do I want to *be*?' In this case my choice of action flows from my character but also my character is formed from previous choices.

In J K Rowling's book, "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets", Dumbledore said to Harry Potter, 'It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities'.

Virtue ethics starts with **Plato** (c428-347 BCE) who listed what he thought were the most important virtues, called the Cardinal Virtues:
- Courage
- Temperance: by which he meant that all our drives and instincts are held in the right balance and properly controlled reason.
- Practical wisdom (in Greek phronēsis) or the capacity for sound judgement about practical moral matters.
- Justice

To be virtuous for Plato was not a matter of displaying one of these virtues but to have them all in the right balance. All the virtues in different degrees would come into play when making decisions.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) added to Plato's ideas the idea that humans have a goal in life. That goal is *eudaimonia* – which is translated as human flourishing or fulfilment. Virtue theory was developed by **St Thomas Aquinas**, who continues to be influential in the Roman Catholic tradition, and recently by philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre** (b1929).

We have now covered the main theories that people have used in deciding what is right and what is wrong. Do they bring us closer to making good ethical judgements? One problem is that in many ethical debates people are using different systems for their judgements. So we ask the question:

Is it possible to agree a common ground for ethics?

Alasdair MacIntyre has been very critical of today's ethical debates which, he says, never resolved problems as there is no common ground among those arguing. He states that the essential problem of ethics stems from the Enlightenment in the 17th century, and is critical both of Kant and those who base their ethics on rule based systems and also critical of utilitarians. The problem, he says, is that we have not inherited a single ethical tradition from the past.

If we look at different cultures, it is clear that they have different rules and ethical systems. Perhaps there is no common ground for ethics and it is simply a matter of convention. Perhaps ethics is just like driving a car on the right or left hand side of the road – we can't say which is right or wrong but there must be agreement otherwise chaos ensues. In a society we need some norms about telling the truth, about standards restraining violence and killing, about regulations concerning sexual expression, about appropriate ways of treating strangers, children, the aged and so on (Blackburn).

Let's continue the metaphor. When we drive to France, we have to drive on the right hand side of the road. We may think driving on the left is better (certainly better for cars built with right hand drive) but we have to conform and be tolerant of the French way of driving on the right. Similarly, tolerance of other ethical systems and beliefs can often be seen as good trait. But should we be tolerant of slave-owning societies, of "societies that tolerate widow-burning, or enforce female genital mutilation or systematically deny education and other rights to women"? (Blackburn p21). There are limits to seeing ethics simply as convention or ethics as completely culturally relative. What is the way out of this problem? We can't impose our own system of ethics in an authoritarian imperialistic manner – that would not be ethical.

Today there is an extreme form of this cultural relativism which we call individualism. To an ethical argument, individualism responds, "Well, that's just your opinion", but gives no

argument and no reason for their own view. This brings all ethical discussion to a dead end and is to follow Friedrich Nietzsche who said that morality is dead, along with God. Morality, said Nietzsche, was an invention of the weak to weaken the strong. This is a very pessimistic view which we need not accept. Blackburn states that "There must be a course between the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism." (p26).

There are more common values around the world than perhaps we realise. Blackburn states that we have quite a bit of certainty: that happiness is preferable to misery, dignity better than humiliation, and so on. But MacIntyre believes we can do better than just finding common values; we can find a common basis. We can build upon Aristotle's ethics and affirm that the basis of ethics is that which serves our mutual flourishing or well-being and which provides an idea of a meaningful life. This necessarily involves reflecting, among other things, on what a human person is and what a person needs.

If we all agree that ethics concerns what serves our mutual flourishing or well-being, this doesn't solve all our ethical problems and dilemmas but it does give us a ground from which to argue. Our arguments will necessarily involve the different ethical systems I have outlined – as well as other systems not mentioned. But the arguments would be subservient to a set of virtues which concern ourselves in terms of finding a meaning in life and raise questions about a good society. The arguments will point to areas of life which form character and our character is formed through our relationships – with each other, with other creatures, with the earth and, for religious people, with God.

Communities of religious people [and humanist groups?] have an important part to play because it is in these communities where people are given a vision of what a good person is, what a good society is and given a goal to work towards. This goal of goodness acts as a constraint over behaviour and an incentive to work for the well-being of all.

Bibliography

Blackburn, Simon (2001) *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP