

Ethics and Morals

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2000

The only basis for a claim of special consideration for philanthropy is that it is the principal means by which our ethics and values shape the society in which we live. To put it another way: politics and government are about power and the legitimate use of coercion; economics and the market are about wealth, about the right to acquire, use, and dispose of property according to our own choice; philanthropy draws on power and wealth as best it can, but its essential defining term is morality. Philanthropy is about morality because philanthropy means intervening in the lives of others for their benefit, not merely for our own.

I use the word morality because of an important distinction once drawn between the word ethics and the word morals. "Ethics is the science of morals; & morals are the practice of ethics." It is possible to act morally with no ethical understanding, and possible to claim to be ethical while acting immorally. Morals is about a certain kind of behavior; ethics is thinking about that behavior.

As children we are given rules of behavior - not striking one's neighbor, being allowed to run and shout on the playground but not in church, perhaps being told to save five cents out of the first 25 cents' allowance for the poor. Behaving in such ways is moral - it reflects a certain accommodation to others and a restraint on oneself - but it is not yet ethical.

Becoming ethical is a gradual process. It is not a smooth and even pattern of progress from ignorance to light. Being ethical is taking moral behavior into one's heart and mind - coming to understand why it is right to behave in a certain way that respects the rights and needs of others, and developing a capacity to put oneself imaginatively in another's place.

The difference between ethics and morals is of course more than a simple dichotomy. We do not suddenly move from a state of being rule-driven to a state of autonomous decision. We may become more clever about being rule-driven; we may become clubhouse lawyers who see morality as a game to be improved in our own interest by reinterpreting the rules in our favor. Or we may move from rule to ideology: we don't grow beyond the simple to the complex, from the black-and-white to the ambiguous, from the absolute to the contingent. Ideology may best be understood as moral rules accepted uncritically and expanded into a rigid worldview to be imposed on everyone else.

Ethics assumes that moral problems are complex, and that the common experience of a conflict between good things or a forced choice between bad things requires judgment. Ethics requires assessment of situations and alternatives, judgment of the consequences of action or inaction, weighing the claims of others along with one's own interests and desires. Morals is about following the rules.

During my lifetime I have been a participant-observer in the efforts to reform civil rights, especially the civil rights of racial minorities and women. The language of the law at the national level was sometimes considerate of the rights of African-Americans and women but the reality of behavior in the communities and neighborhoods where people actually lived and worked was not.

The prevailing injustice of the society in which I grew up was widely accepted and for the most part unchallenged. People who rejected the idea of racism yielded to racist practices when they traveled to other parts of the country.

My own racial awakening took place when I discovered swing music. At age eleven I attended a concert at the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee by the

Benny Goodman Orchestra. That day I became enchanted by swing music. I also became unconsciously aware that the musicians featured as soloists were black musicians Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton as well as white musicians Gene Krupa and Harry James. Music for me was raised above racial considerations; by the time I was sixteen I played a few times in a small band with a middle-aged black trumpet player who couldn't read music but whose musical abilities far exceeded my own. I went to nightclubs and even to the basement of the black Baptist church - I took my trumpet and traveled with a friend to search for jazz music to play and to listen to on the famous and notorious Indiana Avenue in Indianapolis. There was news of racial tensions, even "race riots," in those days in the middle of World War II; I assumed my trumpet case was symbolic evidence that I belonged wherever music was as important to others as it was to me.

But in the Army in the Philippines I remember the black troops assigned to the Quartermaster Corps and the racist assumptions loudly expressed that blacks were neither brave enough or smart enough to serve in the combat infantry or to be paratroopers.

My father shared many of those bigoted opinions. He was himself an uneducated man. He was self-educated after leaving school in the seventh grade; he had to go to work because his father, a fireman, had been killed in a fire (and my father's brother had been killed in the same fire). In the 1920s it was easy for such a man to be drawn into the racial theories being expounded by the Ku Klux Klan (my father may have toyed with membership at one point). My mother, although born and brought up in a small Texas town (Bonham, Sam Rayburn's town), was a more tolerant person, because her father, an immigrant to Texas from Indiana, didn't share the prejudice of his adopted state. My mother's education ended at high school (except for a year of "business college," which meant a place where women learned secretarial skills) but she had been given a respect

for education and knowledge by her father that she passed on to her children..

The lower middle class neighborhoods where we lived while I was growing up the Middle West were not integrated, the schools were not integrated, the churches were not integrated. Protestants did not live among Catholics and Catholics often went to their own schools, rather than to the "public" schools. In the 1930s the prejudice against Jews was everywhere except in music. It was the Jew Benny Goodman who integrated his orchestra - and the point got through to me. A Jewish friend of mine played classical music on the clarinet - and seemed to me obtuse about jazz and swing. He was a friend of mine, I thought, but he and I found different groups when we went from elementary school to high school.

Women were in two classes: they were either mothers or they were sex objects. One owed respect to the former and was permitted to lust after the latter. In my culture, sexual harassment was perfectly all right; rape was out of the question. Marriage was supposed to harmonize sex and love. We understood neither. Such "maturity" as we were to find in our social relations was a set of rules. In some primitive way we began to behave as if we knew the difference between right and wrong. My moral progress between ages five and twenty-five was slow, uneven, often ill-advised, subject to internal as well as external sources of confusion and deception.

By cultural accident my progress towards an understanding of civil rights was faster than that of my friends - music, not baseball; Benny Goodman, a decade before Jackie Robinson, helped me "toward an enlargement of the circles of empathy beyond one's clan, beyond even one's class, sometimes even beyond one's country as well."¹ My point here is that I did not move from darkness to light in one great bound; I did not move from immaturity to maturity, from emotion to reason, from rashness to

prudence, from self-centeredness to concern for others as effortlessly or responsibly as in retrospect I would have liked.

The path from morals to ethics is long and circuitous and arduous as well, or at least it was - has been and continues to be - for me.

The personal experience illuminates the social one. Correcting a bad social habit is like correcting a hitch in a tennis backhand; once learned, habits are hard to break. The moral rules of a racist household lead children into lives of error and misunderstanding that only those who have never known error can be glib about. (By the way, instead of lumping such errors under misunderstanding we should try to think of disunderstanding, akin to the difference between misinformation and disinformation, the intentional implantation of error into the minds and behavior of the innocent.)

Learning that one's society and nation are not perfect is similar to the shock of discovery that one's parents and teachers are not perfect. Once those faults have been revealed, it is easy to turn to new friends - to other role models and to other cultures and social systems that seem superior. The new model may be superior - a society that struggles against racism and other forms of discrimination is a better society than one that attempts to make them a virtue. The new model may also be a false friend - like the faux amis of French grammar, a word that looks the same but means something else.

We struggle to move from morals to ethics; we often think we have arrived at ethical judgment before we have actually done so. We may be ideological victims, fooling ourselves that we know the Truth when the Truth is merely the parochial set of rules imposed on us and that we would impose on everyone else given the chance.

It is ideology - morals as uncritical behavior -- to attempt to impose American political structure on African tribalism or on the states of the

former Soviet empire. "Democracy" means many things, not merely the two-party system; the free market can be organized in many ways - not everyone must be governed by the Federal Reserve System. Ethics is about enlarging the circles of empathy, to seek common ground among divergent morals and beliefs, to find human qualities that transcend local variations.

The move from morals to ethics has its parallels in philanthropy: we give first because we're taught to do so. We're taught - or should be taught -that it is good to be concerned, as Jimmy Stewart once said was his basic lesson in life, "to look out for the other fella."

¹ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, New Haven: Yale University Press, abridged edition, 1961, p. xxi.