

The Basis of Ethics

What is Yours?

By

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August 7, 2020

This morning's message is the first in a *Perennial Problems* series I'll be giving over the next several weeks using philosophy to explore questions of ethics, reality, truth, meaning, and reason. How we respond to these questions is fundamental to the ways we live our lives, though none of them can ever be wholly answered. Understanding the difference between right and wrong, grasping reality, knowing what's true, discovering and pursuing our own meaning and purpose, and thinking well, I'm guessing you would agree, are essential to almost everything we do.

Yet how many of us have ever considered these recurring problems with intention? How many have explored them deeply enough that we can thoughtfully explain the reasons justifying our daily, even momentary, behaviors rooted in our personal beliefs about ethics, reality, truth, meaning, and reason? Most, I suspect, have never intentionally explored these matters, let alone repeatedly, given that they are perennial questions that we should repeatedly ask of ourselves and others. This is so because our societies prefer to provide the answers for us, beginning as early as possible in our lives, and discourages us from questioning them through both positive and negative reinforcement. Every child begins life as a philosopher by incessantly asking that primal, hollowed question that must both proceed and follow all our answers, *Why?* They need to know the reasons for things. They want explanations.

If they are lucky enough to hear "I don't know" from the adults around them, more often than, "Stop asking so many questions," or, "Because I said so," they may keep and foster their innate philosophical nature. If not, they will need to and hopefully rediscover the lost questions to their enforced and reinforced answers. That's why the titles of each message in this series includes the question, "What is yours?" It's not a question asking you to explain *what* you believe about ethics, reality, truth, meaning, and reason. It's asking you to explain and justify the *reasons* for your beliefs, their basis. Any fool can spontaneously express one's beliefs about a whole variety of matters that one has never thought about before. But philosophizing requires that we go deeper by asking that hallowed question most of us lost early on: *Why? Why* do you believe what you do? *Why* do think it true? *Why?*

The fool may provide an eloquent and certain sounding explanation of what she or he believes, but will likely sound the fool when laid bare before the divine *Why?* The fool then stammers and struggles for inadequate explanations that thoughtlessly spill from flapping lips that are only making it up they go along. For it is not only money, as the old adage goes,

but the fool's own lips that are soon parted. As Abraham Lincoln is claimed to have said, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

I do not mean to jest about jesters, but our society has become foolish, so the word is apropos. We have a fool in the White House, resulting from foolish voters who, for more than a generation, have gotten foolish information from foolish pundits dressed as journalists on Faux News and BSNBC. The 24-hour news cycle requires them to keep flapping their jaws even when they've run out of things to say, even when they don't know what they're talking about. So they resort instead to inuendo, *ad hominin* insults, personal opinions and personal outrage, along with speculation and mindreading, to deflect viewers from recognizing the obvious, they don't have the objective facts necessary for us to draw our own conclusions, rather than relying upon their foolish opinions.

Today we live in a foolish "This I Believe" society in which it is enough to just believe without explaining *why* we believe. In our post-modern world, all truth is considered subjective, while science, reason, and facts are being discarded by those of all ideological persuasions to the dustbins of history. The President of the United States has no shame in publicly praising the medical advice of a charlatan who believes illnesses are caused by having sex with witches and demons in our dreams, and that alien DNA is being used to make modern medicines, rather than just admitting he's been wrong about the health benefits of drinking bleach.

On the other end of the political spectrum, foolish illiberals who fancy themselves social justice warriors have decided that all opinions are equal, which, as an issue of equality, means the right of every person to have their own unchallenged opinion must now be protected from any criticism coming from anyone with different opinions. Even in Unitarian Universalism, once the world's most liberal religion, we increasingly hear those positioning themselves to be our church authorities, telling us not to ask questions of marginalized people's marginalized beliefs because doing so is microaggressive, harmful, tiring, and oppressive. And, with no more shame than Trump's boast about receiving medical advice from a witchdoctor, they are openly denouncing logic and free speech as classic forms of injustice and oppression. In other words, "Stop asking *why* ... Because I said so."

In light of this tragic milieu, this philosophical crisis our nation and much of our world is in today, I've decided it is my ethical responsibility to help reawaken the suppressed inner-philosopher within those willing to listen, by asking you to examine the basis of your own responses to the perennial questions of life, and to consider if that basis is sound and worthy of maintaining, or if a philosophical readjustment might be necessary. And what better problem to begin with than the question of ethics. How do you know the difference between right and wrong? What is the basis of your morality? Is it based upon what someone else told you long ago? Is it based upon beliefs you discovered on your own but have not since questioned? Is it based upon what others expect of you and the fear of being ostracized?

When the going gets tough do your ethics get going, or do you look to see what everyone else is doing? Do you cling stubbornly to the strict rules you've been taught, no matter the outcome? Or do you figure out what outcome you hope for then simply adjust your moral decisions to fit the situation?

We don't usually examine the basis of our ethics by asking such questions because most of us react unconsciously to the events around us, justifying our moral decisions with whatever reasons we can think of as we go along. Developmental psychology tells us there are three stages of moral growth, described by Lawrence Kohlberg, for example, as the *preconventional*, during which our morality is based on simple dualistic extremism—black and white, hot and cold, right and wrong—and is punitive and authoritarian. Morality, that is, is based on what an outside authority dictates to us, and whether or not we will be punished for violating those dictums. If we don't get stuck, or fixated, at this earliest and most immature moral stage, which should normally end about the time we enter kindergarten, we enter the *conventional* stage, during which our moral senses are based on the expectations and rules of those around us, which is why the root of the word *moral* is the same as *mores*. This can lead to a strict "law and order" society, but also to an egalitarian and cooperative "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" society.

But social conventions can become damaging if they aren't fairly applied to everyone, which is often the case. This leads to the final stage of moral development, the *post-conventional*, in which morality is based on categorical imperatives and principles that are to be pursued in all circumstances and situations so that no one is left out of their benefits: friend or foe, majority or minority. Freedom, justice, compassion, are among those all-encompassing principles our morality might be based upon at this stage. That's the best that can happen if we rely purely upon unconscious processes, although there is much to get in the way of achieving our fullest moral potential, not the least of which is that society depends upon the compliance of its citizens to customs, laws, and conventions. So we are culturally pressured to base our morals on the expectations of others, on doing what is expected of us if we want to fit in and remain part of the tribe. Even worse, often those conventions remain rooted in dualistic, punitive, and authoritarian instincts of the most immature kind of moral thinking. As a result, most people will have trouble getting past stages one and two to achieve their fullest moral potential.

So it's best not to leave our moral development up to unconscious forces when social forces are determined to keep us from achieving our best. We need to be responsible for our moral decisions by remaining conscious of our moral positions and understand our reasons for them. *Why?* And this is where philosophy comes in because philosophy has been consciously and intentionally exploring the meaning and nature of morality for over two-thousand years, beginning with Socrates, who first shifted its emphasis on physics to ethics. As A. C. Grayling explains in *The History of Philosophy*, Socrates "was prompted by the indecisive, indeed fruitless, quest to know reality, a waste of energy when the far more important question of

'how one should live' goes unanswered."¹ And, as I've been arguing, it goes unanswered because it usually goes unasked to begin with. True to Socrates' style, he never adequately answered the question, which is perfectly fine, because the whole point of philosophy, at its core, is asking the hallowed question, *Why?* Rather than going through life with a false sense of certainty—causing us to think and act delusionally—philosophy reopens our minds to the wonder of living. As Bertrand Russell once said, "In philosophy, what is important is not so much the answers that are given, but rather the questions that are asked."²

Nevertheless, many philosophers since Socrates have asked and attempted to answer his question about "how one should live." His student, Plato, had a somewhat conventional ideas of ethics inasmuch as he asked, "What is the best kind of life, and the best kind of society?" as one question. I won't go into more detail, other than to add that Plato, like many philosophers to this day, defined humans as social animals, which means whatever we do, especially our ethics, is always tied to our relationship with and responsibility toward others. Plato's famous student, Aristotle, answered his teacher's question by determining "the best kind of society is one whose individual members live the best kind of lives."³ That may sound straightforward enough, but if you really consider its meaning, it implies a healthy society is based upon strong, autonomous, contented individuals. It's not a society based on conventional groupthink, but upon the humanistic ethic of freedom and fulfillment.

Aristotle considered the highest good *eudaimonia*, the Greek word meaning "good spirit," usually translated as "happiness," but, as Grayling points out, is more accurately translated as "well-being" or "flourishing."⁴ In other words, an ethical society is a society in which individuals are flourishing. It's a two-way street: we are social creatures, which means we are ethically responsible for the welfare of others and our communities, but it also means our society is responsible for our wellbeing. A society in which all of its citizens don't have a real opportunity to flourish as individuals is an unethical society.

These days, in my own ethical evolution, I'm more aligned with the stoics who were inspired by Socrates's emphasis on the virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation. Stoicism emerged about the same time as Cynicism and Epicureanism, when a depressed and disenfranchised post-war Athenian society wanted to know the secret to *eudaimonia*, the secret to happiness, the secret to flourishing. The Cynics believed it would be achieved through ascetism, not simply through austerity and self-denial but by living as naturally as possible, in the wild, like other animals. Cynicism comes from the Greek word meaning, "dog." It meant living like a dog, or, perhaps, a dog that has freed itself from its domesticated existence and is no longer the leashed pet of another master.

Epicureanism, by contrast, argued pleasure is the secret to achieving *eudaimonia*, not in the eat-drink-and-be-merry way we think about it today, but by achieving higher pleasures: friendship, reason, and empiricism, being among the greatest. Even the revered stoic philosopher and Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, though far from a hedonist, valued

Epicurus's teachings about tolerating pain, given both philosophers lived for a time with near chronic pain before their illnesses killed them. As Donald Robertson writes in *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*:

Although he was in poor health, Epicurus didn't complain or dwell on his symptoms. In fact, he used his illness as an opportunity to converse in a dispassionate manner about how the mind can remain contented while the body suffers terrible pain and discomfort. He simply carried on doing what he loved: discussing philosophy with his friends.⁵

So it's inaccurate to let our cultural prudishness and two-thousand years of inherited Catholic guilt lead us to misjudge Epicureanism, also called *Hedonism*, as the mere gratification of our physical appetites. Even so, Stoicism stands out as unique in its moral response to the quest for human flourishing. Unlike Buddha, who faced the same dichotomy between asceticism and aestheticism, austerity and indulgence, to finally settle on the Middle Way, all things in moderation, the stoics said morality has nothing to do with the avoidance of pain or the pursuit of pleasure. Pain and pleasure are indifferent, so long as avoiding or pursuing either doesn't prevent us from living according to our virtues, those things like wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, that make life worth living: "so long," as philosopher Massimo Pigliucci says, doing so does not, "compromise one's integrity of character."⁶

This is an important point, for until now I've been using the terms "ethics" and "morality" almost interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. *Ethics* is the umbrella under which our morality dwells. Morality, as in *mores*, refers to the external customs, rules, duties, etiquettes, etc., etc., that we adhere to as citizens and ethical persons. Ethics, on the other hand, from the Greek word, *ethos*, means "character." Our ethics reflect who we are on the inside, a consistency we demonstrate whatever our circumstances, whether we are alone or in public. Morality is what we do. Ethics is who we are. Morality is behavioral. Our ethics, our character, is that which drives our behavior.

So when you think about the basis of your ethics, understand you are thinking about something integral to who you are. Determining your ethics is about determining who you are going to be in this world. Without ethics, without character, that is, our decision and behaviors are random and inconsistent and without integrity. The Stoics believed, as Robertson says, "Foolish people ... vacillate, driven by contradictory passions, which flutter from one thing to another like butterflies."⁷ Rather than developing an ethic, which, again, means developing a quality character, they rely on what Bertrand Russell called *emotivism*: when one's ethical judgements are merely disguised expressions of one's feelings about an issue that flutter about inconsistently.

Stoic ethics, on the contrary, remain the same no matter what circumstances we're in, or what the outcome may be for us, pleasurable or painful. Doing what we believe is right, even in the face of adversity or at our own personal expense, doesn't matter. When, at the very

start of my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, I write, “I must say what I believe is true and do what I believe is right, even if I’m wrong, and even if doing so isn’t going to be fun,” I was speaking as a stoic.

Since Stoicism, philosophy has given us much else to ponder about ethics, but it all breaks down to two kinds of thinking, *deontological* and *teleological* ethics. Kant’s *categorical imperative* is a good example of deontological ethics, referring to something we must do in all circumstances, no matter what. This does not, however, refer to simple rules, like “always obey the law.” As we’ve seen throughout history, sometimes disobedience itself is imperative in the face of unjust laws. If we’re not careful, deontology can be reduced to a rigid and oppressive legalism. A categorical imperative, rather, is based upon a universal principle, akin to what the developmentalist were getting at when discussing fully evolved morality being based on things like truth, justice, and compassion. Erich Fromm’s humanistic ethic is a good example: “*the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*”⁸ and “that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities...”⁹

Teleological ethics are a kind of consequentialism, meaning our moral decisions are based upon outcomes, often criticized as “the ends justifying the means.” But as my philosophy professor, Wallace Roark used to ask, “If the ends don’t justify the means, what does?” Surely the consequences of our decisions matter, especially in regard to how they impacts the welfare of others, which gets us back to Kant’s categorical imperative and Fromm’s humanistic ethic. If we’re not careful, teleological ethics can descend into anarchy.

For me, the problem of ethics can be reduced to one question, “Are we to do the right thing or the best thing?” Are we to always follow the rules, no matter the consequences, or are we to do what brings about the best outcome, even if it is the lesser of two evils? This is why, in the end, deontology and teleology are circular. Where we start on the circle doesn’t matter as much as the character who embarks upon the ethical journey. But keep in mind that as you embark around its vast circumference, your ethics should evolve and change, because the problem of ethics is perennial and can, thus, never be wholly resolved. It’s a question you must keep asking yourself. Questioning our values, our morals, our ethics is never a settled matter, but a way of life that should make our lives and the lives of those around us better in the process. Determining the basis of our ethics is ongoing. None of us can know for sure we are doing the right thing, which is why we must respect and listen to those who may differ with us on ethical issues, even as we persist in doing what we believe best. What more can we do?

The Roman stoic philosopher, Seneca the Younger once said, “So long ... as you remain in ignorance of what to aim at and what to avoid, what is essential and what is superfluous, what is upright or honorable conduct and what is not, [you] will not be traveling but

drifting.”¹⁰ The question of ethics, of our character, is too valuable to simply drift through life without asking, exploring, and responding to. The basis of ethics—what is yours?

¹ Grayling, A. C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 115.

² Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books Inc., Rathone Books Limited, London, 1960, p. 19.

³ Grayling, *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵ Robertson, Donald, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*, St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, 2019, p. 162-163

⁶ Pigliucci, Massimo, *How to be a Stoic*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2017, p. 238.

⁷ Robertson, *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁸ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1969, p. 189