

Strive for Honor: 'Thinking about ethics'

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During the last few weeks, readers of The Daily Toreador have seen a series of columns presenting ethical dilemmas. The dilemmas, presented and discussed by faculty in various disciplines, were aimed at stimulating thought and encouraging a campus conversation about ethics.

For example, in "Just Say When," a hypothetical engineer faced a conflict between loyalty to a friend, obligations as an employee and obligations regarding public safety. In addressing the moral questions here, the author pointed out that morality sometimes demands more of us than the law does - in this case, the law does not obligate the engineer one way or another, but morality certainly seems to.

In "Security Payments," a business faced conflicting obligations to protect employees, obey the law and maximize profit. There the protection of employees seemed to require both violating the law and subsidizing the murder of other innocents through the support of a paramilitary group. The dramatic dilemma here was that saving some innocent people could require the deaths of others. And the issue of legal obligation gets raised here as well, with a company director asserting that ethics sometimes requires disobeying the law.

Indeed, in reflecting on ethical choices, one quickly realizes that moral and legal obligations are not coextensive. Not every right action is required by law - consider promise-keeping - and not everything dictated by law is morally right - consider South African apartheid or our own Jim Crow laws.

One reader responded with a complaint about the use of hypothetical cases at all, claiming such cases had little relation to real life. Abstracted dilemmas like these, the reader commented, never provide enough information and contain too many variables to allow us to make a decision.

But I am inclined to think that it is precisely the moral tensions and uncertainties that dilemmas represent that make them especially useful for ethical reflection. After all, life itself is often morally messy, and rarely do we have the luxury of acting on the basis of complete information or the luxury of kicking the moral decision upstairs to a supervisor, like the subject of the third scenario might.

Hypotheticals, when they work, are abstract enough and complex enough to force us away from relying on reassuringly intuitive bromides, like "First break no law" or "First do no harm." Because our intuitions conflict in these cases, we are pushed to reason through moral problems and not just rationalize some preconceived conclusion. The dilemmas can force us to dig more deeply and see the limits of relying on our conventional assumptions of right and wrong. We have to think about an issue from multiple perspectives and then start to think about how to

weigh these considerations reasonably against one another. And that is what real life ethical reflection ought to be about.

After all, something one can say with certainty is that some moral view we currently take for granted likely will be overturned radically in the not-too-distant future. Some of today's conventional moral assumptions will seem silly or even morally repugnant to more enlightened future generations, just as today we look back with disdain or indignation on popular morality of a century ago. Our reason has helped us progress from some of the worst expressions of racism and sexism of previous generations, but we are clearly far from being fully morally enlightened.

So here is an intellectual challenge to take up after finals are over: Let's search our own beliefs to find some mistaken, but comfortable, moral position we carry within us today. Then let's try to find a way to fix it.

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