

Guest Ethics Column: Where is ethics in relation to your life?

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Extended conversations, historical and current, address the question of “what is ethics?” What is ethical and what isn’t? How you know if something is ethical or not?

A colleague of mine once remarked, “When we talk about ethics we talk about ‘doing the right thing,’ but there is much confusion and often little talk about what the ‘right thing’ is.”

As human beings, we have a need to do the right thing. Perhaps this need comes from a sense of what Rudolph Otto and C.S. Lewis refer to as the “Numinous.”

Perhaps, as another colleague of mine noted, “We want to do more than just metabolize during our lives.”

Perhaps the need is a response and recoil to what happens when people do not do the right thing (e.g., systematic annihilation of Jews in WWII, 9/11 and terrorist events around the world, corporate scandals, political scandals, religious scandals, climate scandals, research scandals, academic scandals, business scandals, etc.).

For whatever reason, we want to have meaning in our lives and to accomplish good — to make a positive difference. We like those around us to want and do the same. Hence, we continually ask, and well we should, “What is ethics?” This is a discussion that must be dynamic and must continue from generation to generation.

An inquiry equally important, if not more so, is the issue of: Where is Ethics? It is a different angle on ethics but indeed, such an important one. Where is ethics in relation to where you are? Is it above you? Is it at the same level with you? Is it something beneath you?

There are many long, lonely, level lengths of dual-lane road in West Texas and New Mexico that traverse countryside where few opt to travel. When these vehicular trails converge at right angles in uninhabited realms, sentinel stop signs silently announce kinetic expectations (societally endorsed as orderly, right, good and needed), for solitary motorists who encounter such isolated junctures.

Those who hold the spirit of — the ethics of — driving virtues above themselves will respect traffic codes and stop at the stop sign, even if there is not another car around for 300 miles. It will not matter to them if it is only the big, beautiful, bountiful sky, some coyotes, some scrub brush and some vultures who see them do it.

Those who hold driving codes below themselves — subject to personal whims, short- and long-term desires, self-serving sign interpretations, whether it seems needed or not, whether it is convenient or good for self, or dependent on whether or not anyone is there or watching — will blow right through the stop sign and intersection at accelerated rates of speed.

The issue to be considered here is not whether individuals should conform themselves to rules or should conform rules to themselves. Instead, the issue is whether or not individuals are willing to disciple themselves to principles and virtues that are higher than themselves — to consciously choose to embrace and embody codes and patterns of behavior that are above themselves.

This is a mere traffic example but the same consideration can be applied to how someone writes a term paper, how research is done, how business is done, how law is practiced, how one treats a neighbor, how one communicates and on and on. Holding ethical principles at your level or below you will tempt you to revise your own “standards” each time you get in a bind and when holding to them does not seem to be in your immediate self interest.

From a divine, transcendent, humanistic, naturalistic or other perspective, where do you place ethics? Is ethics something above you that you aspire to, that you reach for, that you hold in esteem and practice above yourself? Or is ethics something at your level or below you that you choose to use as it suits you at a given time?

We all will make mistakes at times and violate ethical principles. Let us be encouraged, however, to make a practice, a habit, a life of pursuing ethical purposes and standards that are higher than ourselves. May we seek the good of virtue and of others above the good for ourselves. May we become a part of something bigger than ourselves. This is our ethical calling.

What is ethics? Where is ethics? Your answer to these questions will affect who you are, how you live, and the difference you make in the world.

Comments

3 comments

Anonymous

Thu Mar 25 2010 13:30

Eclectic perspective. I like the point that it might not be ethics if it bends and conforms to suit the situation. That would be the definition of ethics as a moral code-- a principled way of acting. I like to think though that even if I don't stop at those tumbleweed intersections, this is not evidence that my ethics doesn't do all the way down!

Anonymous

Thu Mar 25 2010 10:24

Joel points out that this piece never answers the question what ethics are, but I don't think the purpose of the piece was to answer that question. I think Dr. Roach's intention was simply to inspire students to consider their actions more carefully, which is something we all could stand to do.

Joel Norris

Thu Mar 25 2010 00:38

This entire piece is a horrible. It presupposes a Platonic form of ethics. It never defines what ethics are. It never gives a reason as to why we need ethics. It's just a bunch of rambling. I'd like to know why you think that Platonic ethics are the proper means of measurement.