

ETHICS: The Topic Of The Day

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Preview: Dr. Cox lays the groundwork for a better understanding of why our society is suddenly talking about ethics and morality. In addition, he provides a true case study that demonstrates the complexity of today's issues.

Ethics Defined

In light of recent newspaper and magazine articles it appears that the topic of "ethics" is the topic of the day. William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, a book that basically is popularizing the classical concept of virtue or character formation, is a best seller. There are many reasons for the resurgence of talk about ethics, but I think the main reason is linked to the meaning of the term "ethics." Let me explain what I mean by taking you on an etymological journey.

"Ethics" has a Greek root, the noun form of which is *to ethos*. The parallel term in Latin is *mos*, from which we derive "mores," "morality," and "morale." *To ethos* originally referred to the shelter or dwelling place for animals. This shelter or dwelling place was a location of protection or nutrition. In other words, the stall meant sustenance and security. If the animals were going to be able to develop and feel safe they were going to need a place where they experienced stability. Thus, the "stable" offered "stability."

The word *eiōtha* is the Greek verb form of "ethics." This word means "to be accustomed to," a parallel of *mos* (mores or customs). One of the oldest meanings of "morality" is "behavior according to custom." Customary behavior does for society what the stall does for animals: it provides stability, security, and sustenance. To switch metaphors, morality is a kind of cement; it is a social cement. Morality holds society together so that people can go about living without feeling like everything is up for grabs. Thus, whenever a society becomes morally unglued it searches for moral repair. In

fact, when a society becomes drastically unglued it will seek repair so desperately that it will accept an infringement upon liberty just to receive stability and workability à la totalitarianism.

In casual and unreflective usages, "ethics" and "morality" tend to be interchanged as though they were synonymous terms. The confusion between the terms was due to the fact that the relationship between stability (ethics) and custom (morality) seemed to easily understood as a basic datum of human experience. For it was really the primary office of custom to do in the human arena what the stall did for animals: to provide security and stability. As reflection upon the stability and security fundamental to human behavior continued, a certain distinction came to be made between "ethics" and "morality." "Ethics" came to be concerned with the foundations of human behavior and "morality" referred to the actual practice or behavior based on those foundations.

Furthermore, the word "morality" eventually evolved into "behavior according to custom" and the word "ethics" meant "behavior according to reason" or the reflection upon the foundations and principles of behavior. The German language recognizes this distinction between ethics and morality in the words *Sitte* and *Ethik*. *Sitte* means custom and *ethik* refers to the more reflective consideration of the foundations and the guidance of behavior.

Although there is a distinction to be made between behavior according to custom (morality) and behavior according to reflection (ethics) one can still see that both

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terms witness to the fact that a basis for human behavior and society is necessary. Thus, this abbreviated account of the meaning and use of the word ethics points to the germinal idea that ethics is concerned with that which holds human society together. For just as animals need shelter and protection so do people. There needs to be an establishment of security and stability so that one can live and act.

So why is our society caught up with ethics? Our society is taken by ethics because -the members of our society no longer feel secure, stable and protected. In other words, people either reflectively or intuitively have come to realize that there is no shelter because both ethics and morality are gone. Thus, there is a resurgence of both conventional morality (traditional values) and ethics (reflection on what we ought to and what we ought not to do).

What I would like to do in future articles is discuss various aspects of ethics. In fact, in coming issues we will discuss the relationship between ethics and religion and the nature of ethical dilemmas as well as other ethical topics. To whet your appetite for further journeys into the world of ethics let me leave you with a case study. As you read this case study reflect on how you would resolve it. By the way, it is a real life situation.

Case Study

Janet P., a practicing Jehovah's witness, had refused to sign a consent for blood infusions before the delivery of her daughter. Physicians determined that the newborn infant needed transfusions to prevent retardation and possible death. When the parents refused permission for these transfusions, a hearing was conducted at the Columbia Hospital for Women to decide whether the newborn infant should be given transfusions over the parents' objections. Superior Court Judge Tim Murphy ordered a guardian appointed to sign the necessary releases, and the baby was given the transfusions. During the hearing, Janet P. began hemorrhaging, and attending physicians said she needed an emergency hysterectomy to stem the bleeding. Her husband, also a Jehovah's Witness, approved the hysterectomy but not infusions of blood. This time, Judge Murphy declined to order transfusions for the mother, basing his decision on an

earlier D.C. Court of Appeals ruling. Janet P. bled to death a few hours later. Her baby survived (Washington Post, November 14, 1974).

Pertinent Information: The belief of Jehovah's Witnesses regarding transfusions derives from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15, verses 28-29, in which Christians are urged to "keep abstaining from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication." Similar passages in the Old Testament appear to describe only a dietary restriction against eating meat that has not been bled and cooked. However, in Hebrew doctrine, blood is identified with the soul of living things, and respect for life has fundamental importance. Thus, Jehovah's Witnesses view not "eating blood" as an obligation dictated by respect for life. They believe that the importance of this rule is confirmed by its mention in conjunction with other essential Christian obligations, such as the duties not to worship false gods and to avoid fornication. Because blood transfusions involve nourishment with the blood of other living things, they believe that the biblical injunction against "eating blood" applies to blood transfusions as well as the blood of raw animal meat. Moreover, since the injunction is discussed in the context of other obligations whose violation may result in the loss of one's soul, Jehovah's Witnesses hold that acceptance of blood transfusions will result in eternal damnation.

Response: What are the issues involved in this situation? What sort of decision would you have made as the judge and why? Are there any ramifications for Christians in this case study?

Reading in Ethics

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