

# Navigating Through Ethical Ambiguity

Often our first experiences with ethics involves navigation through difficult or even dangerous situations and we attempt to make our decisions without the tools to do so. These situations come up in daily activities, but they can also arise in occupational settings where training events are conducted under the title of 'ethics'. Much of what businesses call "ethics training" is delivered in a normative way, through groupwork in case studies that imitate situations in which employees must make decisions that reflect the values of the business or profession and further the accomplishment of the corporate mission. Rarely do such training events address the three primary schools and Aristotle's virtue ethics or practice the tools of decision-making beyond the intentions of the corporation.

The result is that most people must make their choices without good skills, and we all know people who have made weak or even tragic decisions. There is a whole lot more to ethics than merely knowing what the corporate leadership would want you to do. Those decisions reflect what people care about deeply, the training they have received in other contexts, their feelings and emotions, loyalties, and their desires and lusts.

If ethics were merely applied subjectivism, everyone could just do whatever they want and take whatever they desire from each other. They could just plunder and pillage with no more justification than, "I want that." What kind of world would that be? Dangerous and chaotic! And what ethics would be governing? None at all!

## Dealing With Dilemmas

Dilemmas are a special genre of problem solving. They are perplexing and stressful. Dilemmas are difficult partly because of their form and partly because most people lack the ability to work within them and apply skillful analysis to them.

In a world like the one Thomas Hobbes will describe further down this Week 3 Lecture, where we want everything and yet cannot have it, we must make tough choices. It is not a pun that the Week 1 reading article by Kidder was titled "Tough Choices." Many of the ethical dilemmas in this course and in our lives illustrate that there is more demand than there is supply to meet the demand, so difficult and painful decisions must be made. In other words, people want and must compete for what they want when there is not enough to go around. If there were plenty for everybody and we could have everything we want, all would be easy and there would be no need for ethics.

The nature of dilemmas is governed by three realities:

- We cannot have everything we want and must make choices among imperfect or unclear alternatives that are not completely satisfying.
- In choosing one alternative, we give up the availability of the others.

- We cannot turn back the clock and change our minds when we make mistakes. This makes living difficult and even painful, and it is the arena for ethical decision making.

## Ethical Language

From the presentation above, language is conducted in three forms that relate to the verbs in sentences. Learning to listen to what is said or written and learning to communicate yourself are among the enduring and valuable outcomes of studying ethics.

\* **Descriptive language** is the language of science, and the key words are forms of the intransitive verb to be. This is why the sciences can describe the world in analytic detail but cannot yield ethical decisions about how the world "should be."

\* **Imperative language** is characterized by requirements and orders, and the key word is must. What "must be" can be no other and involves no choices.

\* **Prescriptive language** is characterized by ought and should (treated as synonyms). There are real and viable possibilities for choice, and not all people will choose the same possibility. The merit of each choice will not be clear. The ability to revisit the choice may not be available. The pressure to make a choice may be severe.

Most people face ethical choices daily and lack the means to make strong and good choices. Many people are also unable to realize that those who call on them to make choices and speak persuasively and rhetorically will skillfully move from one form of language to another without being found out. There is a lot of vulnerability here for those who do not listen or read critically!

Ethics is also conducted in other forms of language. Among the most common are these: "Is it right/wrong...?" "Is it best/worst...?" "Is it justified...?" "Is it okay...?"

## Universal Moral Sentiments

Aristotle taught that all objects have a purpose. The idea continued in language from what the purpose "is" to what the purposeful action "should be."

St. Thomas Aquinas taught how reason discloses natural law and ethics in such a way that people should make their ethical decisions in accordance with what is true in the natural law, which then discloses the God who created the natural systems. Good decisions coincide with the natural law.

The Scientific Age generally affirms that ethical claims of right and wrong cannot be determined by reason or by the nature of the world. That is why the empirical sciences are written in descriptive language and cannot by their own standards move into prescriptive language of what should/ought be in the world. The sciences generally claim their analytic nature to arise from their agenda of being free of values. What proceeds from such a value-free claim is a restriction from speaking in the realm of values--the realm of ethics. Connecting to what is said about language above: Science is conducted in descriptive language of "is" but cannot move beyond to

prescriptive language without compromising its status of being value-free, or what is sometimes called being dispassionate.

David Hume, in the 18th century, looked at the constitution of nature and observed that people really do care about themselves and what they value; then, beyond themselves, they connect with other people. This caring is emotive; it is active in the heart and bodily reactions. For Hume, it is in our reactions, reflexes, sentiments, and affections that moral thoughts arise.

Moreover, these morals arise at a universal level; they involve everybody. Hume spoke of "universal moral sentiments" as precisely what he describes. They are **universal** in the sense of appearing and acting in all persons of sound mind. They are **moral** in that they prescribe ethical action and in the language of should/ought. They are **sentiments** in that they arise in emotions and feelings rather than through rational thinking.

Hume's morals impact human actions by the affections of the people who accomplish them. Moral sentiments excite passions, which drive choices and actions. Humans are too close to their sentiments to act through reason, so rationality is not dependable for making ethical choices and taking action on them. Within the Ethical Subjectivism that Hume described, those who affirm rationality and use reason to make their choices are wrong.

## Is/Ought Dichotomy

Hume's observation about authors is that they write with an almost imperceptible shift from the rational language of description to the moral language of prescription. The shift may be so subtle that even the authors do not realize what they do. It could also be an intentional rhetorical shift to persuade readers.

Called the **Is/Ought Dichotomy**, David Hume identified an issue that reaches through all ages and cultures. Authors, like anybody else, respond reflexively to their own feelings and affections. Without even realizing it, affections drive the morality of authors so that their language shifts from the descriptive "is" to the prescriptive "ought/should" in a disingenuous way. Hume catches even the most rational writers slipping into this mistake. This is worthy of attention even in daily living through what we read and hear in our activities and through news outlets.

If morality arises and consists of emotions and feelings, and if the emotions and feelings of competent minds will generally be the same beyond individualized personal considerations, then there is a universal morality that is not discovered by reason. It will be found in universal moral sentiments--universal in applying to everybody everywhere, moral in that it is prescriptive in language, and sentimental in that it arises from feelings and emotions and sentiments. The most powerful sentiment will be that of approbation, the feeling of approval and satisfaction.

## The Social Contract

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are the seminal figures for Social Contract Theory and the ethics that proceed from it. They, like any of us, deal with our view of the world and how we will live within it.

Social Contract theory is detached from religious teachings and religious obligations to know or obey God. Beginning with analysis of the State of Nature, the ethics of a Social Contract are driven by a quest to live in safe and productive harmony with neighbors.

Let's visit with Hobbes and Locke to see what they have to say about that.

# The Social Contract Transcript

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## Emergence of the Modern Era

### NARRATOR:

Reaching back to the 17th Century takes us back before the Modern Era begins by quite a lot, but there is a need to talk about why we govern our societies the way we do. An element that reaches throughout our course and even makes the Modern Era possible is that our lives are lived within societies with orderly ways of providing safety for people and government for the common good. But government does not just happen – it takes a lot of effort, the consent of people to be governed, costs to be paid – and what if it were to all break apart?

We meet English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in a dramatized discussion, and with them we begin to discuss something called the Social Contract. The course will continue with the reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and then a number of others. For this point, understand that Hobbes was born 42 years before Locke. They were both English but grew up in very different circumstances.

### HOBBS:

Do you realize, Locke, the kind of danger we would all be in if our government all fell apart? Between my violent and drunken father and the English Civil War, we were lucky to survive.

### LOCKE:

Really now, Hobbes, I have read my history on those decades back before I was born, but you talk like it was a barbarian time. You don't give people enough credit, and you give far too much credit to the King.

### HOBBS:

Oh, it was horrible here in London. Civil War was raging, we had that terrible London Fire, and the King was executed. It was absolute chaos!

I call it the "state of nature." The cavemen must have lived this way. Everybody thought that they had a right to everything, so all of us did whatever we needed

to do to survive and just took whatever we wanted. It was like a permanent state of warfare, and this was a very dangerous place to be.

Perhaps you saw how I described it in my 1650 book *The Leviathan*. Quoting myself, I called the State of Nature a place where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Yes, violent and short. We all lived under a cloud of constant danger.

### **LOCKE:**

Settle down, Old Philosopher. Something must have been terribly wrong with people 40 years ago. They are not just like that at all. People just want to live safely in civilization, and it is so natural that they do so. In the natural state people are bound by their conscience and their sense of good will. They want to live in peaceful safety and be left alone to mind their jobs and families. They just naturally organize themselves and find a way to govern and be protected.

### **HOBBS:**

Not at all, Young Locke. Without loyalty and submission to our Monarch, we would steal each other's' possessions and land and then fight to the last man standing. Only His Majesty can and should hold all the authority except over our own ability to remain alive – he along can handle all the civil, military, ecclesiastical, and judicial system. That's what the Social Contract needs to be – enough to keep the barbarianism that lurks within us at bay. Don't forget, "nasty ... brutish ... short."

### **LOCKE:**

You know, with all due respect to my elders, the world is different now. Go read my book *Two Treatises of Government*. It will settle your nerves. You will find that people understand that they really are equal and independent. Yes, self-interest drives everybody – natural enough – and so we live peacefully under our restored monarchy and give up only what need to give up for the common good that allows our self-interests.

### **NARRATOR:**

And so begins an understanding that would live through the restored monarchy and be expressed through the many forms of government that appear in our course.

This was a dramatization, of course. For our purposes, it shows the issues involved in the common safety and security of governed peoples and their relationship to

whoever will govern them – what they yield to their governor in exchange for the ability to go about their lives and businesses. People live in safety when they honor an informal and implied Social Contract – they let others live and prosper in exchange for confidence that others will let them live and prosper as well, and they give us whatever they must in order to enjoy that safety.

Especially with John Locke we will find the concepts that came across the Atlantic Ocean with colonial settlers and filled the minds of the famous personalities of the American Revolution. Some even say – maybe as a joke and maybe as an insight – that John Locke was the most influential person but was not actually in the room at the American Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was the first to write out a detailed account of a combined social contract anthropology and ethical system. His concern was very much driven by his youthful experience of living in a time of social and political chaos and in a troubled household, which taught him that the world was a wild and dangerous place.

Driven by self-interest, social contract morality requires an agreement on how to get along--not a formal contract negotiated at a conference but an operative morality that allows personal self-interest in exchange for the protected self-interest of others. The goal is to establish and maintain the conditions for a peaceful society and all the aspects of it.

Looking at the right of people to use their power to preserve their own lives and possessions (jus naturale), plus the responsibility to not do what is forbidden and destructive to life (lex naturalis), Hobbes arrived at the contractual ideal that people would lay down some of their rights to all things in exchange for others' laying down claims to what they own. There is reciprocity here; a peaceful coexistence can be achieved among self-interested people by their relinquishing of claims upon each other.

The Doc Sharing tab contains an excerpt from chapter 13 of Hobbes' book, *The Leviathan*.

## **Our Natural Rights**

The Social Contract theory was developed through the work of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson. Doc Sharing also includes an excerpt from John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government, Book II*.

John Locke's contribution was to move Social Contract theory toward application, and his work was foundational to the establishment of the American Government, though he did not play a personal role in creating it. Locke's concept of a State of Nature was that of perfect freedom in which people naturally cooperated for the common good, enjoyed personal rights, and honored the rights of each other living together as a commonwealth. What the State of Nature did not grant was a state of unlimited license against other persons or their possessions.

The ethics of a commonwealth were that equally free and independent people ought not to harm others or their possessions; therefore, there would be no subordination of people and that rights of self-preservation were to be protected.

## **Summary Points**

Ethics is conducted in language, and language carries issues of ambiguous meaning and intention.

Most people never study ethics directly but instead receive training in normative applied ethics through other elements of their education or occupational training.



Dilemmas are difficult and painful because they involve imperfect choices in which all that is desired cannot be realized and in which the participants lack the ethical theories and tools to help their deciding processes.

Ethics is most commonly conducted in the prescriptive verbal forms of "should" and "ought" and in a few other formats. Knowing these formats and how to use them is a powerful outcome of studying ethics.

Not all ethicists have agreed on the use of rational thought for conducting ethical discussions. Hume is a notable exception who determined that ethics arises in the emotions and affective feelings and that this phenomenon operates in all people.

Great care is needed in study, reading, speaking because authors and speakers will shift imperceptibly from descriptive language to prescriptive language--sometimes through inattentiveness and sometimes for their own rhetorical and manipulative purposes.

The Social Contract schools of ethics and politics developed from the need to support forms of government in Europe and America. The ethics of the Social Contract call for decisions that support the stability and safety of the commonwealth for the self-interested benefit of all people.