

The Difficult Ethical Questions of the 21st Century

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Last Sunday when the sign-board out front was in the process of being re-lettered to advertise today's sermon title, it became apparent that my original title was too long to fit. So I shortened it from what you read in the February newsletter to "Difficult Ethical Questions." It had been, and is again today, "The Difficult Ethical Questions of the 21st Century." In truth, there is a difference between the two, and my intent is to talk about both the ethical questions that have been around since the dawn of the "sentient" human AND the new breed of ethical questions that are arising in these unique times. Every time is, of course, a unique time, but ours has the distinction of new discoveries in the fields of genetics and medicine, new and deadlier technologies in warfare, and ongoing changes in our understanding of how our brains work, or how disastrous the effects of global warming might actually be – each of which brings up its own ethical challenges.

I remember once having to write a paper about a town in the Northwest where a Unitarian Universalist minister was in the middle of a conflict between the environmentalists in her congregation who were trying to save a certain rare species of local owl from extinction due to over timbering, and the other people in the congregation who worked for the lumber company and would be the ones losing jobs if the owl was to be saved. I can't remember what I wrote in my paper, but it was probably something about offering pastoral care for everyone involved and new skills training for the unemployed.

You can magnify this particular debate to any level you want, and it will still be the same ethical question. Is the long-term viability of our planet (strengthened by bio-diversity of species) more important or valuable than the jobs and livelihoods of the people who will be affected? In a similar vein, how quickly can we reduce our dependency on oil, how soon can an infrastructure of mass transportation be implemented so that people can get to their jobs without having to drive their gas guzzling cars, how many jobs will be lost, how many jobs of a different type might be gained, in the race to reduce our burning of fossil fuels that is fueling global warming? No pun intended. On an everyday basis, to what extent do individuals have moral obligations to contribute to protecting the community or the public good or the environment?

Here is a question I heard at a Chautauqua lecture some years ago now: Should starving populations in arid regions of Africa be continually saved by emergency shipments of food, or should we face the reality that there are too many people living in inhospitable places on our planet? And dare I mention the hundreds of thousands of people in this country living on flood plains in hurricane prone states?

Should men and women with terminal illnesses be allowed to choose the means and time of their own deaths? At what point is life merely biological, and at what point do we either become, or stop being "persons," human beings in relationship?

These questions are very hard to answer, partly because they bring up other underlying ethical questions: Is there more value to saving human lives than the health of the earth? Or the dignity of an individual? Is human life more important than anything else, including all other forms of life and the resources of the earth? Utilitarian ethical thinking would have us ask what is best in the long run, but are we asking what is best for the most people in the long run, or should we be asking what is best for life on earth in the long run? When the United States does not sign on to global initiatives for environmental change we are saying to the world that it is the oil industry and the automobile industry in our country that are the most important?

A huge question many in our country are dealing with these days is the question of whether this war in Iraq is ethical. Can any war be ethical? Just War Theory proposes five basic questions that must be asked before any consideration of war.

Is there just cause?

Are we entering into this with the right intention?

Is this war being approved by the legitimate authority?

Is this war our last resort?

Is there a reasonable expectation of success to this war?

There is a second aspect of Just War Theory that has to do with the morality of war once it has begun. These are “proportionality” (are our actions proportional to the problem at hand?) and non-combatant immunity. Just War Theory does not itself talk about the use of torture in interrogating prisoners, but this is another big ethical area of concern for us in this country today. Do the means justify the potential ends?

There is a big reason why most serious ethical questions are difficult – and that is because they involve emotionally laden issues for most of us, and our emotions are hard to get past, if getting past our emotions is something we should be trying to do. As you can see, when it comes to ethics, there seem to be new questions at every turn of our thinking. That is why situational ethics is so difficult. Every situation has its own special set of possible outcomes. But better we attempt to think through the situational, than to base our moral and ethical decisions on a set of hard and fast rules (the Ten Commandments, for example) for which there are no extenuating circumstances. It’s much more complicated than that!

For the past year or so I have been subscribing to the magazine *Scientific American Mind*, and the issue that arrived just this past Monday had an article about our moral minds, called “When Morality Is Hard to Like.” It’s a very interesting article about how our brains unconsciously juggle the facts and our emotions in making moral decisions. What the research showed is that quite possibly the best (most utilitarian) ethical choices, those favoring aggregate welfare over the welfare of fewer individuals, are made in the absence of our pro-social emotions of guilt, compassion and empathy.

The authors did this by presenting an ethical question to both normal people and people with damage to the part of the brain known to be most active in moral sentiment. The question was “Would it be okay to push a man in front of a moving train if you knew the resulting stoppage would save the lives of five workers down the track?” Those respondents with damage to part of

their brain responsible for “pro-social sentiments” were significantly more likely to say this was an okay thing to do, while the normal people were mostly abhorrent at the very idea.

In a sidebar to the main article, David Pizarro writes “Imagine you are in charge of fashioning a new species of human like-creature from scratch. Would you strip this new species of the brain regions and emotional reactions responsible for our non-utilitarian tendencies, ensuring they would have no problem sacrificing a few for the sake of many? Even for utilitarians, this notion can be disturbing. As one of my economist colleagues put it, if you know a man who is perfectly fine with the notion of tossing someone off a bridge (even if it is for the greater good), it is a pretty good bet that he is not the kind of person [you would want as a roommate].”

Pizarro continues, “Utilitarianism may, in the end, be the right moral theory. But we want people who are utilitarians not because they are emotionally blunted (such as sociopaths and brain-damaged patients) but because they have decided that their warm, tender emotions should be set aside in a few specific cases. Maybe some people are capable of this subtle emotional regulation. But for most of us, being good utilitarians would require sacrificing emotions that, although their absence might make us morally superior, it would also make us jerks.”

And so, the decisions necessary in the previously mentioned circumstances will remain difficult ones for almost all of us. Here are a few more ethical questions, ones that may very well become reality in the near future. What if saving the rest of the world from a fatal virus of pandemic proportion meant sacrificing one town or city by siege? Quarantine. Or a question more personal perhaps: Who will get the limited number of vaccines or alternately, the limited number of doses of a cure for that same viral pandemic? A question already viable today: Who gets access to the best medical technology available? Will it soon be only those people who can afford to pay for their own medical expenses as insurance companies place more and more limits on treatments in order to curb their own costs – and insure their own profits?

Peter Singer is an ethicist I admire for his courage in tackling issues that seem repugnant to those emotional parts of our brains I was just talking about. Singer describes our times as in need of another Copernican revolution – one which will revolt “against a set of ideas we have inherited from the period in which the intellectual world was dominated by a religious outlook.” He adds “Because [this new outlook] will change our tendency to see human beings as the center of the ethical universe, it will meet with fierce resistance from those who do not want to accept such a blow to our human pride.” Here is how Peter Singer has rewritten some essential assumptions about life and death in our society. (all from Writings on an Ethical Life, p. 211-222)

First Old Commandment: Treat all human life as of equal worth.

First New Commandment: Recognize that the worth of human life varies.

Before you jump all over me for saying I admire this man’s ideas, let me reassure you that he is not talking about “inherent worth and dignity.” Singer is talking about brain function, the ability to be in relationship, quality of life issues. If we can accept his first new commandment, then “we overcome the problems that arise for a sanctity of life ethic in making decisions about [children born without brains], patients in a persistent vegetative state, and those who are declared to be brain-dead by current medical criteria.

Second Old Commandment: Never intentionally take innocent human life.

Second New Commandment: Take responsibility for the consequences of your decisions.

The absolutist nature of the old commandment leads to such teachings as “it is wrong to kill a fetus, even if that would be the only way to prevent both the pregnant woman and the fetus from dying.” It also leads to the common understanding by physicians that in the case of those in vegetative states or with terminal illnesses, the only allowable action to hasten death is no action – withholding or omitting treatment is allowed but not the opposite. Many doctors and hospice care professionals find ways, fortunately, to help patients and their families out in these situations. They just stay quiet about it.

The new commandment would ask doctors to discern “whether a decision that they foresee will end a patient’s life is the right one, all things considered.” Singer admits this new ethic has its own problems, but is still more preferable than the old one.

Third Old Commandment: Never take your own life, and always try to prevent others from taking theirs.

Third New Commandment: Respect a person’s desire to live or die.

Fourth Old Commandment: Be fruitful and multiply.

Fourth New Commandment: Bring children into the world only if they are wanted.

Here’s a little of Singer’s thinking on the subject of embryos, potential personhood, and abortion. He refutes the potential person argument against abortion by saying that “The fact that the embryo could become a person does not mean that the embryo is now capable of being harmed. The embryo does not have, and never has had, any wants or desires, so we cannot harm it by doing something contrary to its desires. Nor can we cause it to suffer. In other words the embryo is not, now, the kind of being that can be harmed, any more than the egg is before fertilization.”

Fifth Old Commandment: Treat all human life as always more precious than any nonhuman life.

Fifth New Commandment: Do not discriminate on the basis of species.

Here is a controversial proposal for a new ethic! Singer’s explanation is complicated, and if you want to read it I will loan you the book. But basically he is proposing that “the rejection of speciesism, and the rejection of any difference in the value of different living things are quite distinct. We can reject speciesism and still find many good reasons [why] there is nothing wrong with pulling up a cabbage. To uproot a cabbage does not frustrate its conscious preferences for continuing to live, deprive it of enjoyable experiences, bring grief to its relatives, or cause alarm to others who fear that they too may be uprooted. To shoot the next person to ring your doorbell is likely to do all of these things.” I think his final comment on the subject is quite telling: “Not all members of the species *Homo sapiens* are persons, (that is capable of meaningful relationships) and not all persons are members of the species *Homo sapiens*.”

I've probably raised more questions for you than I have answered this morning. The priestly aspect of ministry is about comforting the afflicted – raising our awareness of the beauty and grace possible in this world. The prophetic side of ministry is about afflicting the comfortable – that is raising our awareness of the sad realities of life and living. The sad reality today is that there are always going to be ethical questions to be pondered. We will always be left wondering if we have done the very best thing that could have been done, but I would rather be left wondering than not to have thought about my actions at all. I would never not want to care about doing the right thing, even though I know in some cases, and suspect in others, that I did not make the best choices.

I promised in my newsletter description of this service to explain the difference between ethics and morality. What I found is that many people, these days, do not distinguish between the two, and I have used them somewhat interchangeably in this sermon you may have noticed. But some people do make a distinction and here is what they say:

“Morality is about the SELF, and about attaining high levels of spiritual or other kinds of perfection. Ethics is a quality that marks SOCIAL interactions.” (<http://ethics-matters.blogspot.com/2006/08/difference-between-ethics-and-morality.html>)

“I draw no distinction between ethics and morality. For me, the difference between the two terms is simply the difference between Greek (*ethos*) and Latin (*mores*).” (<http://maverickphilosopher.powerblogs.com/posts/1113001885.shtml>)

“The terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably and can mean the same in casual conversation, but morality refers to moral standards or conduct while ethics refers to the formal study of such standards and conduct. For theists, morality typically comes from gods and ethics is a function of theology; for atheists, morality is a natural feature of reality or human society and ethics is a part of philosophy.” (<http://atheism.about.com/od/philosophybrances/p/Ethics.htm>)

And that will lead us into my next sermon, February 24th, on “Godless Morality.”

Ethics is a part of our lives much more than we probably realize. The difficult ethical questions are not only the big ones, they are also the every day decisions we have to make from which the results may create ripples further than we might imagine.

Reading – from Writings on an Ethical Life by Peter Singer

Some people think that morality is now out of date. They regard morality as a system of nasty puritanical prohibitions, mainly designed to stop people from having fun. Traditional moralists claim to be the defenders of morality in general, but they are really defending a particular moral code. They have been allowed to pre-empt the field to such an extent that when a newspaper headline reads BISHOP ATTACKS DECLINING MORAL STANDARDS, we expect to read yet again about promiscuity, homosexuality, pornography, and so on, and not about the puny amounts we give as overseas aid to poorer nations, or our reckless indifference to the natural environment of our planet.

So the first thing to say about ethics is that it is not a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. (p. 7)

Second, some people think that ethics is inapplicable to the real world because they regard it as a system of short and simple rules like “Do not lie,” “Do not steal,” and “Do not kill.” It is not surprising that those who hold this view of ethics should also believe that ethics is not suited to life’s complexities. In unusual situations, simple rules conflict; and even when they do not, following a rule can lead to disaster. It may normally be wrong to lie, but if you were living in Nazi Germany and the Gestapo came to your door looking for Jews, it would surely be right to deny the existence of the Jewish family hiding in your attic.

Third, ethics is not something intelligible only in the context of religion. (p. 8)

Ethics is everywhere in our daily lives. It lies behind many of our choices, whether personal or political or bridging the division between the two. Sometimes it comes easily and naturally to us; in other circumstances, it can be very demanding. But ethics intrudes into our conscious lives only occasionally, and often in a confused way. If we are to make properly considered ultimate choices, we must first become more aware of the ethical ramifications of the way we live. Only then is it possible to make ethics a more conscious and coherent part of everyday life. (p. 263)