



Plato and Aristotle [detail]

Raffaello Sanzio's fresco
The School of Athens (1509)
Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican

<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/stanzas/S2-Segnatura.html>

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

Jim Reardon

What does the word “ethics” call to mind? For most of us the word suggests a set of limits, placed by religion, law or convention, on the range of means that can be legitimately chosen in the pursuit of a given end. It is unethical for a student to cheat, for an author to plagiarize, for a psychologist to disclose confidential patient information or for a business executive to intentionally misstate earnings. In short, most of us think of ethics as a set of boundaries that limit what we can reasonably do while we’re taking care of the primary business of life.

Given this set of common associations, is it any wonder that the study of ethics has been relegated to the “back burner” of contemporary thought and education? These boundary conditions are important, of course but, after all, aren’t we all more concerned with mastering the essential stuff of life? Furthermore, to discuss means, or ethical limits on means, absent a defined and agreed upon end is a meaningless exercise. Attempt if you would to define and defend ethical limits for a lawyer or businessperson without first defining what it is that a lawyer or businessperson ought to be doing in the first place.

If today’s common understanding and use of the term “ethics” fully encompasses the topic, then it deserves roughly the attention that it is currently receiving. Properly, and historically, understood, however, ethics is about much more than boundary conditions. Properly conceived, it seeks to address the one question that must precede all other questions, including questions of proper boundaries or limits to action. Simply put, this question asks what it is that we, as human beings, ought to aim for? What is the proper goal of a human life—the *indispensable* and, hopefully, well chosen end that must serve as the guiding principle by which we choose between mutually exclusive alternatives over the course of finite lives? Should a man seek pleasure above all else? Should he seek wealth, or power, or glory, knowledge or love? Should he seek some combination of these ends and, if so, to what degree should each be sought? This is the question that belongs to the study of ethics and *this* question, to understate the point considerably, deserves our attention.

My goal in writing this essay is not to propose or defend an answer to this question. Others have already done so and have done so in a manner that I am unable to add to or improve upon. My goal is more modest. I aim over the course of the next several pages to convince you that 1) an answer to this question is demanded of each of us—an answer that cannot in any way be avoided, 2) that given the necessity of answering, our only choice is whether we will answer well or poorly and 3) that reasoned choice is both possible and essential to answering this question well. I will also provide a few thoughts on where you might want to begin the search for an answer to this most compelling of questions and some brief commentary on what may be required to act in accordance with your ideal, once articulated.

The foundation of ethics is choice. Everything that follows is based upon the presumption that Man possesses free will—the ability to choose and the ability to act upon these choices. This is no small presumption. It ought to be viewed with a sense of wonder that, in a universe ruled by physical laws and cause and effect relationships, this creature that we call Man is autonomous - a “maker of laws”.

Let me also state, categorically, that, if free will is illusory, all discussion of ethics is stuff and nonsense. To discuss the ethics of actions which are completely determined by natural laws would be equivalent to asking whether or not the waves, in crashing upon the shore, are choosing well. There could be no question of “right” choices or “wrong” choices. Ethics is a suitable topic for, and only for, choosing animals and Man is presumed to be just such an animal.

Now think back to childhood and forward into your old age and contemplate the vast array of choices that you have made and must, in the future, make. The specifics of these choices vary with our natural endowments and the circumstances into which we are born, but choices are and always have been required of human beings in all places and at all times throughout history. Even in the most extreme of circumstances, a Nazi concentration camp, Viktor Frankl observed that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: The last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

What way ought we as human beings to choose? An answer to this question *cannot* be avoided. You, as a choosing animal, are blessed with a mind and a will and, therefore, must answer. Your unavoidable and undeniable response is simply and emphatically stated by

the set of choices that you make throughout the course of your life as measured against the various sets of choices that are available to you—for it is self-evident that your choices reflect what you believe ought to be chosen given a specific set of circumstances and alternatives. If this were not so, you, as a free being, would certainly choose otherwise. In short, you are and must be a moral philosopher. The only open question is whether you will philosophize well or poorly.

While ethics is little discussed in contemporary society, the great idea of “freedom” has been and remains an extremely popular topic. It has famously been called an inalienable right of all human beings and individuals, who agree on little else, agree that Man ought to be free. But freedom, as important as it may be, is not an end in itself. Freedom is simply an enabler of choice and the greater the degree of freedom, the wider the range of required choices. Put another way freedom provides choosing animals with a broader set of options to be considered in the pursuit of happiness, but in and of itself it offers no guidance as to how this increased latitude might best be employed.

Wealth, while considered by some as an end in and of itself, is, in another sense, a means or an enabler of choice. The choices available to a man who must struggle from dawn ‘til dusk in order to feed himself and his family are limited indeed. To the extent that the productivity of labor in a society is increased through the division of labor and the employment of capital, a man’s time can be turned from constantly fending off starvation and directed towards other pursuits. Science and invention are capable of extending our lives and freeing us from the drudgery of menial tasks. But again, the time and choices gained cannot be viewed as ends but rather as means. In fact, if the opportunities gained by freedom, wealth, longevity and the benefits of technology are not better, (note the ethical term), for a human being than slavery, poverty, drudgery and an early death, why should these things be valued?

So here we stand in America today. We enjoy a freedom to choose that is without precedent in human history. These circumstances lay before us a vast swath of potential choices and yet, this cornucopia of options contains within it no advice as to what path ought to be taken. How will we decide? How will *you* choose?

It is remarkable and unfortunate that a vast expansion in the range of available choices has coincided with a precipitous decline in the discussion of moral philosophy—the only branch of knowledge that is capable of providing the reasoned principles that are re-

quired to guide our use of these choices. Choice without criteria is a prescription for madness and if you're searching for the root cause of the generalized anxiety that plagues modern society, you need search no farther.

Human beings employ a variety of approaches in attempting to deal with the, once again, unavoidable need to choose in the absence of a well thought out ethics. One extremely popular approach is to follow the direction of others both living and dead. We do so when, without thought, we obey long-standing custom, widely adopted cultural values, the dictates of parents or choose those paths that evoke the admiration of friends. Another approach, popular with adolescents but carried by some into adulthood, is to, again without thought, act contrary to a parent's wishes, societal norms, etc.

It may, in fact, be possible to live an entire human life by following the spoken or implied dictates of others. However, since human beings are, by nature, able to choose between alternative courses of action, the choice to abdicate this right/responsibility is, nonetheless a choice. Your answer to the question asked by life would be summarized by the assertion that, "a man ought to live as friends dictate" or "contrary to what his parents dictate" as the case may be.

Long ago, Socrates recognized the unconscious, other-directed lives that most men live and famously declared such lives "not worth living". The alternative to a thoughtless life is, of course, a directed life—a life directed by reason.

There are those, however, who, while recognizing man's responsibility to choose, deny that reason is capable of providing guidance. Reason must proceed from undeniable first principles, which, they assert, are nowhere to be found in the normative domain of ethics. Lacking this foundation, there can be no discussion of "right choices" and "wrong choices" and that which man ought to seek becomes a matter of personal taste. The above stated worldview is sometimes referred to as "relativism" because it claims that the definition of "right" and "wrong" choices is *relative* to one's unique point of view. It is critically important that the implications of the relativist view be clearly understood both because it is widely preached in contemporary times and because, once accepted as true, it renders the search for a valid ethics futile and absurd.

Man, from a relativist perspective, is deemed to be a creature that, while conscious of his responsibility to choose, lacks the ability to exercise this responsibility in a manner that can be rationally justified either to himself or to his fellow man. In the absence of valid standards, words such as “right” and “wrong” become meaningless and all criteria and value systems become completely arbitrary. Imagine a lifelong trek along a featureless desert highway with numerous unmarked forks. In such a world, the only “valid” approach to choosing a route would be to follow the dictates of numerous coin flips. This image, applied to the choices of life’s journey captures the essence of relativism.

Relativism is a remarkable phenomena. On the one hand it has attained a substantial measure of credibility, especially in contemporary academic circles. On the other hand, it is absolutely inconceivable that an individual could live in a manner consistent with its dictates. First, consider the internal workings of a relativist’s mind when facing the need to decide between the mutually exclusive choices “A” and “B”. An ethics or value system is called for in order to make this choice and, since the relativist refuses to acknowledge the possibility of any valid system, he has no rational means available by which to make this choice. In order to live in a manner consistent with his convictions, the relativist must choose in a value independent manner; i.e. the coin flip. The moment that the relativist employs any criteria whatsoever to assign a value to A that is greater than B, or vice versa, he has made an ethical statement.

Some relativists acknowledge, as they must, that they do in fact employ a value system in making choices but deny that their a value system has any validity for other human beings. I have two observations that I would like to make with regard to this position. First, imagine a group of human beings and avowed relativists is asked to independently reason to a set of general principles that represent, for him as an individual human being, an answer to the question of what it is that *he* ought to seek over the course of *his* life. This individual will, of necessity, start from some consideration of his nature and its needs. For example, as an animal bent on self-preservation, this individual will reason to the principle that he, as an individual human being ought to seek some means of physical sustenance; i.e. food and water. In order to maintain that an ethical prescription thus reached can hold for none of the other participants, the relativist must deny the existence of a common nature. Since all participants in the proposed thought experiment are members of the species *Homo sapiens* and since a species is,

by definition, a collection of individuals sharing a common nature, such a denial results in a logical contradiction.

Second, it is inconceivable that a true and consistent relativist would ever offer an opinion to another human being with regard to what human beings ought or ought not to choose. For a consistent relativist, any sort of dialogue entering upon the domain of moral philosophy could only be seen as contradictory and meaningless. Now, I ask you, is it your experience that those who most ardently claim the mantle of relativism are lacking opinions on ethical or political topics?

I remember taking a one-semester philosophy course in college wherein I encountered the idea of relativism. I was deeply bothered by the implications of this worldview and based upon my extensive, (several month), review of the entire philosophical literature at the wise old age of twenty, I saw no alternative. Somewhat distraught, I approached the professor, who was clearly sympathetic with the relativist view, and asked how one could reasonably live without valid principles to guide choice. He offered empathy and told me that he understood my angst. Then by way of advice he suggested that I devote my life to projects designed to benefit mankind. I remember looking at him with dismay. After claiming to endorse a relativist view, he was offering me an ethical prescription. He was saying that a man ought to aim at a goal of service to other human beings. On what grounds could he, in a manner consistent with his philosophical views, defend this advice as anything but arbitrary?

In summary, while relativism receives a great deal of attention today and is held up as a valid philosophical view, I can honestly claim to have never met a relativist and I am quite certain that I never will. Human beings need an ethics to guide their power of choice. Choosing animals must *choose*. This unavoidable duty is demanded by their nature and the very concept of choice is meaningless without criteria. An ethics, (some ethics), must provide these criteria. For those who have rejected blind imitation and thoughtless non-conformity, this ethics must be founded in reason and, in the end analysis, it is only the development of a reasoned ethics that can both guide the directed life and serve as a final and definitive refutation of relativism.

The raw material of ethical reasoning is the common experience of life as a human being and the only required instrument required to parse this raw material is the human mind. So, congratulations. In

addition to being required by nature to philosophize, you are qualified and hereby certified to do so. But where to begin?

You could find yourself a comfortable armchair in a quiet place and begin thinking matters through. Assuming that you are equipped with sufficient time and raw intellect, there is some probability of success in this endeavor—after all philosophy had to start somewhere. For those of us, however, who possess less time and intellect than Socrates, a different and more effective approach is called for.

The good news is that choosing animals have existed on this planet for quite some time and some of them have thought long and hard on the questions raised above. A small number of these individuals have committed their thoughts and conclusions to writing and a portion of these writings have survived to the present day. These preserved documents, some of the greatest achievements of human thought, are an indispensable starting point for the human being that aspires to a life deliberately and rationally lived.

Some of these writings are difficult and demand that, like Jacob, you wrestle with them through the night in order to extract the truth contained within. In my experience, both the direct encounter with the mind that created the work and the struggle are essential to making the knowledge one's own.

If I were to recommend one book as a starting point for your investigations, I would recommend Aristotle's *The Ethics*, based on the great philosopher's notes from the 4th century BC. If you are at all like me, the work will, at first, strike you as odd, disorienting and even off-topic vis-à-vis the subject of ethics. Aristotle approaches ethics in a way seldom encountered in modern times and, as such, it requires a period of acclimation.

You should read it at least twice, (and like all great books it could and should be read many, many more times with profit). Read it through the first time rather quickly and don't worry about deciphering the full meaning. Then, return to the book and read it through again. This time, work hard at following the logic and extracting the author's meaning. Do not, I urge you, read whatever contemporary introduction accompanies the book. Encounter the work directly and form your own opinions. *

Step two is discussion. Dr. Adler once advised that "solitary reading is as undesirable as solitary drinking. To enrich one's understanding of what one has read, one must discuss it with others

who have read the same book, with or without the guidance of someone who is a better reader than most of us are”. Following this advice can be a challenge in a world wherein the classics are little read and even thought itself seems out of fashion. But as all journeys must start with a single step, every movement must begin with a single individual. Take the first step yourself and then convince a friend to join you. Perhaps that friend will convince another and, who knows, before long the local Starbucks may come to resemble the storied cafes of Paris.

The aim of your labors is a set of general principles, grounded in reason, abstracted from time and circumstance, and, therefore, valid for all men at all times throughout history. These principles represent the compass or navigational aid that we so desperately require. They also provide a truth-based platform from which rational prescriptions to questions that are time and circumstance dependent can be deduced.

What you will not find in your study of ethics is a list of rules that dictates exactly what selection should be made in each of the myriad of circumstance-specific choices that you will encounter over the course of your life. Such a rulebook would be constantly made out of date by changing and unforeseen circumstances. By way of illustration, ethics provides the universal principle, which states that all human beings, ought to employ some means of protection against the elements, (i.e. clothing), in the interest of promoting physical health. It is clear, however, that the individual human being living at the edge of the Arctic circle and the human being living in the Tropics will be required to reason to an application of this principle that is specific and appropriate to their individual circumstances. Thought is required to move from universals to singulars and the good news, I think, is that the art of “living well” will never be reduced to computer code - a series of if-then-else statements.

One must also not expect more precision of ethics than it is capable of offering. As Aristotle pointed out, “our account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject matter allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions...we must be satisfied with a broad outline of the truth; that is, in arguing about what is for the most part so from premises which are for the most part true we must be content to draw conclusions that are similarly qualified.”

Finally, there are many choices to which ethics can provide no guidance. Many choices do in fact come down to matters of taste.

Continuing the example above, while ethics can reason its way to prescribing protection from the element, it is completely at a loss when it comes to helping you decide whether to wear brown or black shoes with your blue suit—a choice, I might add, that has always caused me difficulty.

Thus far, our discussion has focused exclusively on the intellectual dimension of ethics—the need for a rational set of principles that guide choice and action. Possessing a complete and thorough grasp of these principles would allow one to develop a general and well reasoned plan of life. Such a plan is absolutely essential but it is far from sufficient. It is critical that one not only understand, intellectually, what it means to live well, but also that one possess the self-discipline required to act in conformance with this plan. This requirement is apparent when you consider that your answer to the question posed by life is ultimately answered not in words but, rather, in deeds.

I wish to make a few brief points with regard to self-discipline and ethics. First, it is absolutely clear that one can be both an intellectual master of ethics and, at the same time, far less than perfect when it comes to living as one ought to live. While ethical lapses are, by definition, to be regretted, I worry about the modern tendency to dismiss, as the worst sort of hypocrite, those who would take and champion an ethical position prior to achieving a state of complete moral perfection. Put another way, if moral perfection is a prerequisite of ethical debate and discussion, such discussion may lack, after a thorough screening of all humanity, the required minimum of two participants. Furthermore, in the absence of discussion among imperfect beings, it cannot be hoped that ethical ideals will come to be understood or even widely aimed at, let alone practiced to perfection.

Second, it should be clear from the above discussion that the study of ethics must address not only the development of right principles but also some practical means of living in a manner consistent with these principles. For those of us who have experienced something of life and who have often failed to act in a manner consistent with what we know to be right, this practical dimension of ethics will appear, with some justification, as the more challenging of the two endeavors. Lest you give up the task as hopeless, I ask you to consider another idea that has lost much of its power in recent times but which was once accorded enormous and, in my opinion, deserved respect—the idea of “habit”.

Aristotle called habit “the mother of Virtue”. Montaigne referred to it as, “a violent and treacherous school mistress. She establishes in us little by little, stealthily, the foothold of her authority; but having by this mild and humble beginning settled and planted it with the help of time, she soon uncovers to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes.”

Finally, consider Hamlet’s advice to his mother, the Queen of Denmark:


“...go not to my uncle’s bed
Assume a virtue if you have it not.
The monster custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives frock or livery
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either master the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.”

Throughout the ages, the awesome power of habit has been seen and respected as a critical link between thought and practice, between the ideal and its realization. It’s powers are completely value neutral but, once they are recognized and aimed at the proper end, can become a powerful aid towards enabling an individual to, in fact, choose as he ought to choose and live as he ought to live.

In closing, I hark back to Milton’s Paradise Lost, wherein a forlorn Adam stands, after the fall, with the archangel Michael and contemplates a suddenly uncertain and challenge-filled future. He wonders aloud whether death should be sought as a release from his anticipated tribulations and the messenger of God replies with words of advice:

“Nor love thy Life, nor hate; but what thou livst
Live well, how long or short permit to Heav’n”

The divine admonition to live well echoes through the millennia and speaks to the present-day sons and daughters of Adam. Those of us blessed with life are given this charge and our choices, however long or short our time on earth, represent our best attempt at fulfilling the requirements of its mandate. If we are to truly live

well, freedom and the time gained through wealth and technology can but add colors to our palette. Wisdom and virtue must guide our brushstrokes if we are to create lives worthy of our natures. Let us begin, as a society of free individuals in the pursuit of happiness, to seek them out. 

* These are just a few of the guidelines offered by Dr. Mortimer Adler in his best-selling classic, *How to Read a Book*. I cannot recommend it highly enough for those that would seek to extract knowledge and understanding from the classics.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Center Member Ron Wild, invites you to examine his Great Authors TimeLine map online at:

<http://www.1-900-870-6235.com/eLearning/GreatIdeas/TimeLineMap.htm>

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