

Ethics from the ground up: Lecture 4

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Personal ethics: How to begin thinking about personal decisions - controversies in morality: lying and euthanasia: the “good life”.

Social ethics is heavily concerned with justice, which is directly based on the worth of persons. The difficulties lie more in deciding what will work (e.g. regulation versus deregulation) and how to organise so as to have an effect on something as big as “society”.

With personal ethics, we need instead to develop the basic “worth of persons” perspective by asking more about the nature of *persons* – so we understand what is good for them, what actions are really harmful to them (psychologically and spiritually, that is – what is harmful physically is easy enough to work out). This is a task for both moral reflection on ordinary life and for psychology/psychiatry, which can either confirm or correct “common sense”. (The phrase “natural law” refers to both perspectives – the basic worth of persons and also what’s “natural” to persons – which doesn’t mean arguing “if God had wanted us to fly he would have given us wings.”) It’s also, in practice, a matter of being sensitive to the individuals one comes across. “Listening skills” are not just for job interviews...

1. Lying

We normally don’t like being lied to, but why not? What is actually wrong with it? Let’s not rush into asking “Is it all right sometimes, if there are excuses?” - let’s get straight first why it’s wrong normally (if there aren’t excuses). We mean actual lies (not social niceties like the answer to “Does my bum look big in this?”), but we don’t necessarily mean ones that have harmful effects like frauds. Just lies as such.

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

2483 Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error. By injuring man’s relation to truth and to his neighbor, a lie offends against the fundamental relation of man and of his word to the Lord.

...

2485 By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity. The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray.

2486 Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships.

The essence of this is that a fundamental aspect of human beings is their orientation to knowledge and truth. That’s why depriving children of education is a grave offence against them – they naturally want to learn and learning is essential to becoming fully human. (I take it you agree with that, which is why you’re here.)

Aquinas believed that lying is such an offence against nature that it is always wrong: “For as words are naturally signs of intellectual acts, it is unnatural and undue for anyone to signify by words something that is not in his mind.” That is taking natural law ethics to extremes, since there may be important reasons to lie, such as in the classic case of a would-be murderer asking if there’s a knife.

A special kind of lying is **hypocrisy**, the putting on of a false appearance of virtue or religion: Jesus's personality is not easy to work out from the Gospels, but a feature of it was his special anger about hypocrisy:

Matt 23:25-8: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

People still do find hypocrisy very offensive (e.g. in the seat of Parramatta in the last federal election), despite it being normally fairly harmless – and it's even been said "Hypocrisy is a tribute that vice pays to virtue."

2. Sex:

A course on Catholic ethics wouldn't be complete without it...

Geraldine Doogue read this passage from my chapter at Michael Whelan's book launch for his *Issues for Church and Society in Australia*:

Let us take another example where reasoning from what is natural for humans is strong. Consider what advice you would give to a daughter of yours who told you she was considering starring in porn films as a career. (True, the scenario is not very realistic, since a daughter with an adequate parent is probably not thinking of that particular career.) She says she has found a recommended place of employment, the Occupational Health and Safety guidelines are in place, and she asks what is wrong with simulated sex for money. What would you say (after you'd recovered)?

You might reply along these lines:

"That is not looking after yourself. Sex is too close a part of the personality to be exposed for money. It is just the nature of sex that it is a way of giving yourself very one-to-one and privately. That's why rape is worse than an assault of similar physical severity and why we're especially concerned about sexual abuse of children: it is because the sexual part of the personality is close and private that a violation of it is serious. For the same reason, doing something else that doesn't suit it, like trading it for money, is harming yourself even if you consent. It is like staying deliberately ignorant by refusing to learn anything at school – doing that harms the intellectual part of the personality, and it's wrong whether you consent or not."

Class discussion on other sex issues?

3. Euthanasia:

A minority of deaths are now due to acute events, so most readers will need to consider, sooner or later, the decisions to be made at the end of their own lives. Euthanasia is an ethical issue that most will not be able to avoid.

Is the intentional ending of innocent life permitted, if a patient is in a sufficiently bad state? It is extraordinarily difficult to discover the real positions of both sides in the euthanasia debate on this basic question. Both sides speak in ways that are misleading. It seems at first glance that those against euthanasia maintain there is a "sanctity of life", an irreducible worth of life that may not be intentionally violated, while those for euthanasia generally believe in some naturalist world view which does not include any such metaphysical entities, and take their stand on liberty: "Whose life is it anyway?" On the one hand, supporters of euthanasia do not usually believe in a general right to suicide, as is implied by the stand for arbitrary liberty: normally, they would not assist a healthy teenager planning suicide, and many would be unhappy about assisting in the deaths of old people who requested death while suffering nothing worse than loneliness. They require at least a serious illness to justify euthanasia, apparently implying some weighty preference for life which the seriousness of the illness has to balance. On the other hand, opponents of euthanasia almost always permit the administration of drugs to ease pain for dying people, even if they will hasten death. According to traditional Catholic morality, "there is no clear obligation to endure what is morally beyond the limits of human fortitude", and pain relief may be administered as necessary even if it has the side-effect of hastening death. So both sides allow the administration of drugs that will shorten the patient's life, if the patient's condition is sufficiently bad (but not otherwise). What then is it that they are arguing about, exactly?

There have been attempts on the anti-euthanasia side to explain the matter in terms of intentions – one may not directly intend death, but permit it as a side-effect to pain relief if necessary. The distinction between directly intended effects and side-effects may be meaningful, but it is hard to see that it has answered the primary question about the ethics of euthanasia: when can the needle go in? Rules about intentions say nothing about where that point is. The difficulty is to explain why the intention of others should be the deciding factor in what can happen to the victim. To decide on whether to discontinue aggressive treatment, or increase the dose of painkillers to a level that would hasten death, one must reach the conclusion that death is a more desirable state of affairs than the alternative, in all the circumstances of the case. If it is, how can it be wrong to bring about that state of affairs? There is no way, in the end, to avoid the necessity of drawing a line after balancing evils.

4. Conscience:

There has been a lot of angst about the role of “conscience”, with Cardinal Pell and Bishop Anthony Fisher taking positions that some have thought were dubious because of their strong emphasis on obedience to the Church. Let’s take Fisher’s recent speech ‘Struggling to Recover a Catholic sense’ (<http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=103903>) He says conscience is not like a GPS navigating system in a car, a disembodied voice that issues instructions. Instead it is continuous with reason and, according to the Second Vatican Council, “conscience is experienced as an inner sanctuary or tribunal, rather than something external, yet it mediates a universal and objective moral law that is given rather than invented”. He complains that since the 1960s certain flaky people have used the phrase “primacy of conscience” as a “code for pursuing personal preferences over and against Church teaching, especially in sexuality, bioethics, remarriage and communion.” You must follow your conscience, but it must be well-informed, which in his view means in large part accepting Vatican pronouncements.

Surely the basics of this are correct: Compare your duty to follow your risk assessment when it comes to crossing the road. Of course you have to follow *your* assessment, but you must ensure it’s well-informed. That includes taking notice of signs written by those whose business it is to study risks on the roads.

However, the speech avoids mentioning the possibility that the existence of objective principles of ethics means there could be sometimes a mismatch between objective principles and what the Church leaders have said. Moral law is inherent in nature and so is not subject to Church fiat. Church leaders have admitted getting it wrong in a few cases, such as usury and religious freedom.

Brief comments on a couple of requests that we didn’t find time for:

Has “tolerance” got out of hand and led to abuse of the concept of “fairness” to allow all sorts of abusive “alternative lifestyles” and crazy ideas?

Probably it has, though again, toleration is an important form of respect for others. It’s even breaking out in Ulster...

Why are Christian schools so popular?

Parents prefer simplistic ethical views for their children?

5. The “good life”

Hopefully natural law theory and its vision of human nature would give some positive guidance on what to do with a healthy life while we have it. Everyone admits that preventing harms is a good use of life – a career in medical research, for example, or as peacemaker. But there must be more to a vision of life than merely preventing harm – what positive vision of life should we aspire to, if all harms and problems were, for the moment, under control? If we had our wishes, what would we wish?

John Finnis (in *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 1980), suggests a list of seven “**human goods**”:

- Life (“every aspect of vitality that puts a human being in good shape for self-determination”, so including health)
- Knowledge (especially, for its own sake). (Lying is an offence against the human need to know)
- Play (performances “which have no point beyond the performance itself, enjoyed for its own sake”)

- Aesthetic experience
- Sociability (friendship) and community (“community is a form of unifying relationship between human beings”)
- Practical reasonableness (“being able to bring one’s own intelligence to bear effectively ... on the problems of choosing one’s actions and life-style and shaping one’s own character”)
- Religion

(From summary at http://www.stmarytx.edu/mcnair/content/student_research/luna/natural_law.pdf)

What is the relation of these to a human that is emphasised by many recent writers, autonomy?

The 128th Psalm is a picture of the successful man in later life:

Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways.
 You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours.
 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
 Your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.
 Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.
 May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life;
 May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem,
 And may you live to see your children’s children.
 Peace be upon Israel.

Evaluation...