Introduction to Ethics

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Ethics: A Briefer Introduction

Last Thursday, you went out for lunch with an acquaintance from class, a nice-enough fellow but not a candidate for lifelong friendship. As you were wolfing down your last bite of cheeseburger, you suddenly gulped and flushed: you realized that you had forgotten your wallet. You were flat broke. Embarrassed, you entreated your classmate to lend you five dollars, which you would, of course, pay back on Tuesday. Today is Wednesday; you forgot.

Now you are doubly embarrassed, for having had to borrow the money in the first place, for having then forgotten to pay it back when promised. You are tempted, momentarily, to ignore the entire awkward situation, just to assume – what may well be true – that your classmate has forgotten about the loan. (After all, it is only five dollars.) But maybe he hasn’t forgotten, or, at least, he’ll remember it when he sees you. For an irrational instant, you consider dropping the course, but then you realize that would be ridiculous – the five dollars just isn’t that important. It is highly unlikely – it would be very embarrassing for him – that he would actually ask you for the money. Any way, you aren’t close friends and don’t generally talk to each other. So what’s the difference?

But now, small hints of large doubts start interrupting your day. You’ve made up your mind. You are convinced that no harm will come to you. The fellow knows none of your friends and it is hardly likely that he will announce to the class or put a personal ad in the paper that you are a “deadbeat”. And yet, it’s ruining your day, and it may well ruin other days. “If only I could get rid of this guilty feeling”, you say to yourself. But it is not just a feeling; it is a new and wholly unwelcome sense of who you are. A voice inside of you (sometimes it sounds like your own voice; occasionally it seems to be your mother’s) keeps whispering, “deadbeat”, “deadbeat” (and worse). Already distracted from your work, you start speculating, “What if we all were to forget about our debts?” Your first response is that you would probably be washing dishes at the Burger Shop, since no one would ever lend anyone money and your classmate would never have lent money

to you. Your second response to yourself is that “everyone doesn’t forget”, but this argument doesn’t make you feel any better. It reminds you that in a world where most people pay their debts, you are one of the scoundrels who does not. You start rationalizing: “After all”, you say to yourself, “I need the money more than he does.” In a final moment of belligerence, you smash your fist on the table and say, in part to yourself and in part to the slightly surprised people sharing your library table, “The only person I have to worry about is me!” There is an embarrassed silence. Then you walk over to the bank of phones and dial: “Hello, Harris? You remember that five dollars you loaned me?”

This point of this little scenario is to capture the day-to-day nature of ethics. Even such a simple situation involves conflicting interests, profound moral principles and the nagging voice of conscience, culminating in a quiet but nevertheless telling conclusion concerning the sort of person you are. This case does not involve any of the more notoriously difficult social problems and life-or-death decisions so vehemently debated today, such as the abortion issue, the legitimacy of war, the plight of the homeless in a land of affluence or starving children in a world awash with surplus food. But, ultimately, the considerations that enter into our debates on these global issues reflect our habits and opinions in the most ordinary circumstances. Our politics express who we are and what we believe, and even our most abstract ideologies reveal (although often in a convoluted and even reactionary way) the principles and prejudices of everyday life.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics is that part of philosophy which is concerned with living well, being a good person, doing the right thing, getting along with other people and wanting the right things in life. Ethics is essential to living in society, any society, with its various traditions, practices and institutions. Of course, those traditions, practices and institutions can and must themselves be assessed according to ethical standards, but they themselves determine many of the rules and expectations that define the ethical outlook of the people living within them. Ethics therefore has both a social and a personal dimension, but it is not at all easy, in theory or in practice, to separate these. Moral judgment is both the product of society and one of its constitutive features. What we call our “personal values” are not the most part learned together and shared by a great many people. Indeed, those values we consider most personal are typically not those that are most idiosyncratic but rather those that are most common, and most profound, respect for human (and animal) life, outrage at being the victim of a lie, compassion for those much worse off than yourself and an insistence on personal integrity in the face of adversity.

The word “ethics” refers both to a discipline – the study of our values and their justification – and to the subject matter of that discipline – the actual values and rules of conduct by which we live. The two meanings merge in the fact that we behave (and misbehave) according to a complex and continually changing set of