The Moral and Ethical Judgments of Dr. Laura

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ABSTRACT: All the contents of the following article were gathered from the radio talk show of Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Her judgments of what is the right or wrong thing to do were heard—and overheard, too were some of the reasons on which she based these judgments of human conduct. Often she spoke of obligations and rights. Some of the values and disvalues behind her judgments were disclosed in her judgments.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger is one of the most listened-to radio talk-show hosts in the country—some say more than Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy. She is heard on 450 stations, with an audience of twenty million. Despite a style of contradicting, criticizing some behavior as stupid, correcting, scolding, screaming and shouting, she manages to answer her callers’ questions about what the right thing to do is and what the wrong thing. Her show, changing over the years, has moved from giving advice, from marriage counseling, to its stated purpose of telling callers what is right and what is wrong behavior. Repeatedly she denies it is a therapy show.

Single source of morality

She touches morality and ethics in her pronouncements and denouncements on right and wrong human conduct, on her own authority. Her authority may be compared to that of an umpire witnessing the argument of players of opposing teams about whether a pitch is a ball or a strike. Finally, the umpire says, “It is neither a ball or a strike until I say that it is a ball or a strike.” Her morality originates in her authoritative judgments and implies the morality of obey me.

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Dr. Laura draws only on her capacity to make moral and ethical judgments and apparently on no other source of morality outside herself. Since she grew up without any moral training in her home, she admits no foundation in those growing-up years on which to base her moral and ethical judgments. She does not allude to the teachings and writings of moralists and ethicists down through the centuries. The history of civilization reports moral education as occurring in every century and in the contemporary world in numerous homes, churches, and schools. She refers to the bible not as a source of morality, but as support for the judgments she has already made. Dr. Laura admits the existence of a body of enacted laws—the world of the legal—but does not acknowledge a body of moral-ethical laws whose violators are like the breakers of the Golden Rule.

Usually Dr. Laura limits herself to declarations of right and wrong acts but occasionally she backs up her answers to the dilemmas presented. The reason given why the act is right or wrong is that the act does or does not damage or harm another person, that it is socially acceptable, that it is the best way of coping with a situation, that most people are in agreement about its morality, that the person needs to do it, that one really intends to do it, that one feels deeply about it over a period of time that it is right or wrong. Obligation is also frequently appealed to as the sole reason why an act is right. Many events are justified as right by enveloping them with elements of obligation. While she may say a few words of comfort to make her answer more easily accepted by callers periodically, she denies that hers is a therapy show. Frequently she points to values as the basis for her moral and ethical judgments.

She attaches her own meaning to words like obligation, responsibility, and forgiveness. These meanings she apparently derives from the particular actions she is judging, not from concepts contained in the history and literature of these notions. She speaks of forgiveness as something a person earns, thus in a sense seeming to prevent forgiveness coming from God and human persons until her requirements are met.

After declaring her judgment she may give a single reason (actually she often gives different single reasons) instead of appealing to all three determinants of the morality of an act—directionality, instrumentality and circumstantiality. Directionality answers the question what?—the built-in design or structure of the act—and considers the natural purpose or goal of the act. Instrumentality answers the why—the motive or intention—and considers the agent’s reason or conscious purpose in the act. Circumstantiality embraces the who, where, when, how, how often, to whom, by what means, and considers the dimensions of the context of an act.

Obligations and rights

Dr. Laura’s discovery of the realm of obligation resulted in her mid-life conversion to a personal, moral, ethical, and religious life. She makes the appre-