

On Values, Ethics, Morals & Principles

By
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I am frequently asked, "What are the differences between values, ethics, morals and principles?" My short answer to the question is usually, "**Values motivate, morals and ethics constrain.**" In other words values describe what is important in a person's life, while ethics and morals prescribe what is or is not considered appropriate behaviour in living one's life. Principles inform our choice of values, morals and ethics.

"Generally speaking, value refers to the relative worth of a quality or object. Value is what makes something desirable or undesirable" (Shockley-Zalabak 1999, p. 425). Through applying our personal values (usually unconsciously) as benchmarks, we continually make subjective judgments about a whole manner of things:

...we are more likely to make choices that support our value systems than choices that will not. Let us say that financial security is a strong value for an individual. When faced with a choice of jobs, chances are the individual will carefully examine each organisation for potential financial and job security. The job applicant who values financial security may well take a lower salary offer with a well established company over a higher-paying offer from a new, high risk venture. Another job seeker with different values, possibly adventure and excitement, might choose the newer company simply for the potential risk and uncertain future.

Values, therefore, become part of complex attitude sets that influence our behaviour and the behaviour of all those with whom we interact. What we value guides not only our personal choices but also our perceptions of the worth of others. We are more likely, for example, to evaluate highly someone who holds the same hard-work value we do than someone who finds work distasteful, with personal gratification a more important value. We may also call the person lazy and worthless, a negative value label. (Shockley-Zalabak 1999, pp. 425-426)

What then of ethics? Ethics are the standards by which behaviours are evaluated for their morality - their rightness or wrongness. Imagine a person who has a strong value of achievement and success. Knowing only that this value is important to them gives us a general expectation of their behaviour, i.e. we would expect them to be goal oriented, gaining the skills necessary to get what they want, etc. However, we cannot know whether they will cheat to get what they want or "do an honest day's work each day". The latter dimension is a matter of ethics and morality. Take another example, a person has a high priority value or research/knowledge/insight. They have have a career in medical research. In fact, knowing their value priority we would expect them

to have a career in some form of research, however, we do not know from their value priority how they are likely to undergo their research. Will the person conduct experiments on animals, or would they abhor such approaches? Again, the latter is a matter of ethical stance and morality. Johannesen (cited Shockley-Zalabak 1999, p. 437) gives further examples which help distinguish between values and ethics:

Concepts such as material success, individualism, efficiency, thrift, freedom, courage, hard work, prudence, competition, patriotism, compromise, and punctuality all are value standards that have varying degrees of potency in contemporary American culture. But we probably would not view them primarily as ethical standards of right and wrong. Ethical judgments focus more precisely on degrees of rightness and wrongness in human behaviour. In condemning someone for being inefficient, conformist, extravagant, lazy, or late, we probably would not also claim they are unethical. However, standards such as honesty, truthfulness, fairness, and humaneness usually are used in making ethical judgments of rightness and wrongness in human behaviour.

Clearly our values influence what we will determine as ethical; "however, values are our measures of importance, where as ethics represent our judgments about right and wrong" (Shockley-Zalabak 1999, p. 438). This close relationship between importance and right and wrong is a powerful influence on our behaviour and how we evaluate the behaviour of others.

Now let's move to another level. How does one go about choosing what ethics are right? In the next section I describe the approach to answering this question I believe best suited to today's society.

The Principle Centric Approach to Behavioural Choices

'Principle' is defined in Nuttall's *Concise Standard Dictionary of the English Language* as, "n. the source or origin of anything;...a general truth or law comprehending many subordinate ones;...tenet or doctrine; a settled law or rule of action;... v.t. to impress with any tenet; to establish firmly in the mind".

In this Millennium, perhaps more than ever before, I firmly believe that we need to reformulate a set of principles to guide us. There are two main benefits of taking a principle centric approach to guide all human action: (1) knowing a set of principles concerning 'the nature of things' enables us to make informed choices and judgments as we would know, with a high degree of certainty, the likely outcomes of our actions, (2) knowing even a few principles helps us avoid information overload. On the latter point, Birch (1999, p. 44) says:

One way in which drowning in information is overcome is by the discovery of principles and theories that tie up a lot of information previously untied. Prior to Charles Darwin biology was a mass of unrelated facts about nature.

Darwin tied them together in a mere three principles of evolution: random genetic variation, struggle for existence and natural selection. So we do not need to teach every detail that was taught to nineteenth century students. A mere sample is necessary to illustrate the universal principles.

Before you raise your voice in protest, "What do scientific principles have to do with informing what constitutes ethical and moral human behaviour?" Stop for a moment and ponder the what has been institutionalised into Western society all in the name extolling the virtue of progress through unencumbered evolution - i.e. guided by the principles made evident by Charles Darwin. We push for free trade; level playing fields, argue that cloning interferes with natural selection, push for de-regulation so that competition prevails and only the fit organisations should survive, etc., etc.

But what if we've got Darwin wrong? What if the principles instead were: survival of those who cooperate for the greater good, selection guided by a *moral sense*, etc. We would have a completely different society from that which we have today. ***Understanding and internalising the principles that comprise 'the nature of things' is perhaps the single most powerful determining factor in the shaping of the society in which we live.*** It is vital that we maintain a continual dialogue around principles so those we internalise and institutionalise are up-to-date and are our current best shot at the truth.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that Darwin believed in the evolution of a *moral sense* which provided both the core drive and structure for mind (Loye 2001, pp. 127-128):

Go the next step then, and we see that beyond ourselves he is writing of the moral impact of the evolving mind of humanity as a whole upon the shaping of ourselves, and upon all else that constitutes the human world.

Alas, that this should be so difficult for us to see this! But having for so long lost the language or the social encouragement to know ourselves and the meaning of life this way, it is asking for mind to step out into the unknown. But we must try for the future hangs on the effort.

Defining the Good and the Bad

The following extract from the work of David Loye (2001, pp. 128-130) is used to illustrate the use of a principle centric approach to the formulation of a morality to guide us into the 21st Century:

An increasingly critical problem that Darwin can help us with is defining what good is *not*. It is clear, for example, that it is *not* the use of "morality" by rightist and authoritarian religious and political interests as a club with which to try to beat - and even in the extreme kill - all who might in any way disagree with them.

Large buildings, even hundreds of people, are being blown up; people trying to check a potentially disastrous population explosion globally and save rape victims are being machine gunned; being poor is being relabelled evil; our right to bear assault rifles is being defended as a holy cause; whole villages are being slaughtered down to the last woman and child; and, via the booming persuasion of the media in all its forms, political character assignation and actual assignation is becoming an advanced art - all in the name of Jesus, Allah, or some other supposedly unquestioned source of "moral" law.

This is *moralism*, not morality. And how may the difference be defined? If we examine closely what the Darwin in his own time and we in ours find appalling, we see that *moralism* can be defined as a false, fake, or hypocritical self-promotional 'morality.' generally designed to put down, intimidate, or terrorise rather than be helpful to others. But what then is morality?

...Darwin's central concept of the *moral sense* is what today we would call *moral sensitivity*. As he makes evident in the warm wonder and all the ins and outs of his tales of goodness at work in the so-called animal world, but also more abstractly at our level, this is the ability to emphasise, to feel sympathy for, to care for, to resonate to, to want to nurture, or heal, or help - in short, to be *morally sensitive* to others. But what his exploration makes clear is that he is writing about considerably more than moral sensitivity.

If we are morally sensitive to another we may resonate to their needs or plight with mind and heart - or cognition and affection. This, however, doesn't necessarily mean we are going to get up out of our easy chair with book or watching television to do anything to help them. This depends on courage and all the other components of what we call the *will*, or in psychological terms, conation.

Throughout Darwin's explanation of how the moral sense developed and operates both in animals and humans, we can see that what holds everything together - advancing the individuals over its lifetime and the species over aeons - is the more active involvement in the fate of one another. It is the drive of *moral agency*.

An agent acts *on behalf of another*. Moral agency is then the force of action on behalf of moral sensitivity and of another. A *moral agent* is then the person who acts in such a way.

This is why Darwin's is actually a theory of moral agency rather than of the moral sense, which carries only the more passive meaning that the old philosophical term conveys.

And what is *moral intelligence*? Out of the grand sweep of the second and third levels for his theory of the moral agent, the evolutionary picture Darwin provides is of the drive of moral sensitivity. Through inspiration and education, this drive is given the edge of *moral agency*. Then comes what builds true wisdom for our species. Out of the thrust of moral agency comes *learning experience* that builds within us the core to higher mind of *moral intelligence*.

And what of *morality*? It is the codes, the programming, the human software of whatever evolutionarily prevails at any point or place in time. It is the huge inbuilt user's manual that provides the guidelines for human-to-human and human-to-prehuman behaviour.

It is everything that, based on the experience of the past, we have collectively agreed to be ruled by. It is the norms, the rules, the customs, the laws, the commandments whereby out of the power of caring, the power of reflection, the power of language, and the power of habit, we establish social expectancies for moral sensitivity, moral intelligence, and moral agency.

Ethics is then all the sub-booklets in mind, the sub-routines or more finely-tuned differentiations, of how these codes are to be applied in specific situations.

The 'moral sense' for Darwin and more broadly considered is all this. *But still it is more*. Yearning for comfort and reassurance, sensing a transcendent reality and source of meaning, for the sake of a word that might bring this concept to earth, for thousands of years most of us have called this 'more' God, or earlier and again increasingly in our time Goddess.

For many of us - including at least four of the greatest Asian spiritual visionaries, Gautama, Lao Tsu, Confucius, and Mencius, as well as Darwin historically - this has posed difficulties. However, this may be, more important than what now or in the future this Greater Force may be called, it is something that is more felt than named, and seems to me undeniable - and here, too, groping in this direction can be detected in Darwin.

Out of something that is timeless and larger than ourselves, embracing the future as well as the present and the past, there works within us something else that additional to our experience of the past also seems to speak to us in the shaping of all moral codes. It is simply there. Out of the evolution of the cosmic mystery that is both within ourselves and that surrounds us, unknowable by that part of our self we think is our mind, yet at times most surely felt within all our being, there seems to be this voice that quietly but persistently urges everything emergent on this earth, including ourselves, to be the best that is in us.

The old theory encourages us to just sit back and enjoy the medium. For supposedly the message is settled. Having been scientifically worked out and certified by people much smarter than we are, who are we to question what we have been and will again and again be told? Oh, sure the message may not be what we want to hear, but the old theory affirms that this is the grim reality we must each - as best we can - *adapt* to.

The new theory tells us that the message is open-ended and eternal, stretching out of the dim past into the mists of the future for our species. It tells us we have a voice in the shaping of the message - but that this message needs a great deal more nurturance, and understanding, and the assignment of much more of the power of the media to its spreading. Above all, it tells us we are not just what we more or less dutifully adapt to. Much more importantly, ***we are what we refuse to adapt to.***

Concluding Comments

Whether we are prepared to accept it or not, science has had a profound impact on our world-view and our understanding of 'the nature of things'. Many of the principles from science we unconsciously use to inform our morality and structure our society today are in desperate need of revision. Our blind acceptance of the old interpretation of Darwin, with its emphasis on competition and survival of the fittest is leading us into troubled waters. Likewise the materialistic model of Newton is still powerfully influencing us today - with its emphasis on forces and objects.

If our morality and the way we structure society today were to be informed by the principles of today's science, what a different world we would live in. That society would be based on: cooperative relationships rather than competition; a concept of evolution which includes moral agency rather than blind adaptation to the environment through random selection; emphasis on the subjective ahead of the objective; fields and energy would be structured to enable flow in desired directions rather than a focus on objects to be manipulated through the application of force.

References

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