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Ethics: diverse traditions, diverse foundations

I want all to know how to live ethically; for human communities cannot exist if only some know about justice and how to respect each other.

—based on words ascribed to Zeus in Plato's *Dialogues*

As we live in groups (tribes, clans, cities, villages, etc), people always have needed guidelines (rules, principles, etc) about how they should interact with each other and how an individual's actions should be modified (constrained) because of their effect on other people, i.e. how the good of the individual is balanced against communal benefits. Naturally, people have wondered precisely what these guiding principles are. Are there moral (ethical) absolutes? Most agree there are, but not necessarily about what these absolutes may be. Much of the formalism of ethics explores what these absolutes might be, how we know, and why we should bother to observe them anyway.

Some of the oldest traditions about ethics are discussed below to introduce some key ideas.

DISCLAIMER: This is an overview. It necessarily simplifies. I hope it doesn't oversimplify.

from Indigenous Australia

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Australia's Indigenous cultures are arguably the *oldest of all living cultures* on Earth. They include many different cultural (language) groups, but the following is generally the case.

To understand how an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander resolves questions of ethics, it is first necessary to understand something of how they think of themselves and the world around them. For Indigenous Australians, self-identity is defined in terms of connections to Life-Giving ("Mother") Earth itself. This informs how the person fits into the world (community, ecosystem, etc.) and simultaneously defines how the person should relate to the world, to animals and plants, to place, and to others. These connections give meaning to a life. This 'identity-in-terms-of-others' is why kinship and *skin-name* is of such fundamental importance to Indigenous Australians. They define where one is from and how one is connected to everything else and, thus, form a shared basis for knowing how people are expected to act toward each other.

The starting point, then, for acting rightly is asking two complementary questions. "How is this Other connected into the World? What is my connection to this Other?" Ethical actions, thus, are those conforming to the requirements defined for and needed by the relevant connections. The right thing to do is *context specific*, based on the details of the connections, rather than any simple, universally applicable principle. And since these connections include more than people, Indigenous ethics are *holistic*, including environmental considerations in its very foundations.

These ethics do **not** require an apparently consistent behaviour towards all others but, instead, consistent awareness of what different Others require. The Other does not receive what all get, but what the Other needs. This focus on the Other has similarities with rights ethics. For example, *avoidance relationships* (i.e. not directly communicating) are not an injustice towards someone, but the opposite, as the details of that person's connections means they should neither expect nor want direct interaction. All virtues are relationship-based, and relationship-limited. Some virtues may be the same in all connections, but such consistency is incidental, not a primary consideration. An Indigenous Australian has a very formal, complicated list of connection-specific expectations about how to behave with people and the natural world. This list may very closely prescribe what to do and—equally—what not to do. An individual's list may be unique. Although the *duties* follow from the specific connection, this is **not** role-based duty ethics. Within Indigenous thinking, obligations arise from the Other and these obligations then define the role, not the other way around. For example, a child requires someone to do certain things and it is doing these things that defines (and thus identifies) the 'parent.' On one level, being so well codified makes 'the right thing to do' very clear, but it does not easily provide for flexibility in the face of unexpected changes to a person's network of connections. Serious problems result if a person is in an unfamiliar context and, thus, unable to act using previously learnt behaviours. Although this awareness of connections, i.e. knowing one's place, has similarities with the idea of keeping to one's place within a social class-structure (caste system), it is not the same thing.

What Indigenous ethics intend is the regulating of one's private and public selves, resulting in a civil and coherent community in which people belong and share. In effect, one should understand one's self and how one belongs in one's surroundings, and so should know how to act rightly while living life. General happiness and fulfilment follow from enjoying right connections with the world. Knowing how to be in the world is thus an understanding of the world we live in.

The Indigenous community recognises special people as having expertise on specific topics and consequently gives them (referred) authority-leadership. Such authority is not necessarily age related. Knowledge that is respected is about what to do and how to do it. Ethics are no exception: a community has ethics leaders. Their knowledge comes from their predecessors and is passed on through a very close mentor-protegé relationship. There is rarely any public profession of knowledge or teaching. This is not consistent with humility.

For protection of the community, knowledge about how to do some things is restricted—another reason for it not being publicly available. Traditionally, the 'ethics leaders' would intervene in disputes to make rulings, and particularly to remind people about how they were expected to behave.

It is important to realise that Australia's Indigenous cultures involve *oral transmission of knowledge*, rather than written. This is one reason their ethics are often neglected. Discussion of ethics theory favours traditions with written texts. Analysis is not as easy with spoken ideas which necessarily don't permit the same importance and precision to

be given to individual words as you are familiar with. A word only exists in the context of a sentence. Indigenous Australians use narrative to convey knowledge of the way to interact with different others. For example, the dreamtime stories explained how to relate to animals, but they were also symbolic of other connections, too. The oral tradition is supplemented by the pictorial. As engineers, we are familiar with the power of art, i.e. using a diagram, to represent the relationships between things, the starting point for their ethics.

from the Fertile Crescent

The *earliest surviving 'texts'* on ethics are over 4600 years old and come from Egypt. They consist predominantly of unsorted lists of adages giving practical advice about living happily, avoiding trouble, and advancing one's own interests, but they also do contain sections recommending general principles of behaviour, e.g. rulers should treat people justly, judge impartially, and help them prosper; those with money should share with those without; one should not laugh at the blind or dwarves. Motivation for behaving in this way is *enlightened self-interest*: one will eventually benefit by being fair (c.f. "honesty is the best policy"). Lists of precepts are not philosophical treatments of ethics because there is no discussion of any fundamental principles that could provide a systematic understanding of ethical behaviour. For example, although justice implicitly receives prominent attention, there is no consideration of justice as a theoretical ideal or of how to decide what actually is a just action. Nor is there any discussion of how to resolve dilemmas caused when two precepts conflict. However, some writers did discuss doing good for its own sake, i.e. that making people prosperous and happy and being kind to the poor are good acts in and of themselves, and not simply self-interest

The same emphasis on practical advice is found in Babylon's *Code of Hammurabi*. Although this is often considered to be based on the principle of *retributive justice* —"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"—it doesn't show this principle consistently. Often it prescribes the death penalty for offences that do not themselves cause death, e.g. robbery or accepting bribes. Retributive justice only applies if the victim is an aristocrat; if a commoner, the punishment is merely a fine. Such inequities get no explanation.

from the ancient Hebrews

According to tradition, the detailed ethics (and civil laws) in the *Torah*, which includes the *Ten Commandments*, were carved in stone by God (i.e. supreme, creator being or deity) and given directly to Moses (*fl.* 13th century BC). The Hebrews' ethics, then, are an example of *divine-command ethics*: an action is good precisely if it agrees with the revealed intention of God (the divine will) and goodness itself is defined to be an innate, unvarying characteristic of God. To behave ethically, people simply need to fulfil their primary *duty*, which is *to obey* or conform to this revealed divine will. Such a system of ethics simply presents requirements as instructions without any need for reasoned arguments. As explained in Solomon's *Proverbs* (10th century BC), "The fear of God is the origin of wisdom."

The Hebrews' ethics required them to be *holy*, i.e. distinct from other nations and dedicated to God, and to demonstrate this distinctiveness by actions, specifically by conforming to God's ideals. "Be holy because God is holy." Some distinctiveness was symbolic, of which their food laws are amongst the better known examples, as a means of explicitly showing an identity different from those of other tribes (nations). Within Hebraic thought, then, right behaviour towards others was *part of their religious observances*. They were duties owed simultaneously **both** to God and to others. The *Ten Commandments* differ markedly from other nation's laws in that they include explicit religious duties and these are listed first. Approximately half the *Torah* was concerned with personal and collective interactions with God and associated religious ritual. (There may, of course, be other 'practical' explanations for some of these requirements, too.) Specific requirements, codified as a set of duties, regulated the interaction of people with each other and with God. Morality was *only defined in such a context of relationships*: because of their relationship with God, people had *rights* (those of the poor being mentioned most frequently). Justice meant arrangements in accord with the divinely created order of the world. That the world was unjust was obvious to all. Ethical acts were those which promoted justice, moving the world closer toward God's ideals. Calls for greater social justice was a popular theme among Hebrew writers. They went further and talked, too, of *mercy* again connecting this to God's character. "Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Some writers suggested possible reasons why a person should actually obey God: to avoid His anger and judgment; to show appropriate respect to Him as creator; to please Him and, perhaps, thereby get a reward; or to fulfil the actual purpose of human existence.

The Hebrews lived between the Egyptians and Babylonians, and their laws have some similarities with those described above. Hebraic law, though, is more equitable than Babylonian law, e.g. it does not recognise social classes although in a few cases foreigners (i.e. those not included in God's people) get less rights than Hebrews. Surviving Hebraic literature includes proverbs resembling the Egyptian ones in having no systematic principles, but these extend beyond the Egyptian by promoting justice and advocating mercy (i.e. concern for the weaker), e.g. pay workers promptly; give slaves a day off; don't refuse to lend to the poor. The abstract ideals of both justice and mercy are described as pleasing to and consistent with the character of God. The essence of such concerns was summarised by the duty to "love your neighbour as yourself," the positive form of the Golden Rule.

The Hebrews' ethics have had a very wide influence, extending beyond the Jews, to other monotheistic traditions.

from the Subcontinent

Ethics are integral to the philosophical-religious speculation about the nature of reality in the very oldest of 'Indian' writings (the *Vedas*), which date from *c.* 1500 BC and may be *the very first writings about the principles* of ethics. The *Vedas*, however, are really religious poetry and their 'gods' are really manifestations of ultimate truths. The basic principle of the universe, or ultimate reality on which the cosmos itself exists, is *ritam* (source of the word 'right'). There is a fundamental belief that the right ethical order is part

of the universe' structure and, hence, truth and right are tightly linked. To understand *the ultimate truth of human existence* is equivalent to understanding what is right; to be enlightened is to know what is real and how to live rightly. These are not two separate activities but the same one.

Although the ethical system comes from the very essence of the universe itself, it still has practical applications. These are based on four ideals about life: prosperity, satisfying desires, moral duty, and spiritual perfection (i.e. liberation from a finite existence). From these desired outcomes certain, specific *virtues* are derived: honesty, rectitude, charity, nonviolence, modesty, and purity of heart. Falsehood, egoism, cruelty, adultery, theft, and injury to living beings are condemned. Given that one, true, eternal, moral law is part of the universe, then to act rightly is to act in harmony with the universe and this action will be rewarded. Furthermore, once the true nature of the human-self is understood, it follows that any wrong action is self-destructive.

The basic principles underwent considerable modification, especially in a body of literature dating from *c.* 800 BC (the *Upanisads*). In this, the caste system's intricate rules, about what the members of each caste may or may not do, is also taken to be part of the structure of the universe. Ethics themselves, however, are not regarded as a matter of conformity to such rules. Instead, the desire to be ethical is considered an inner desire and is *part of the quest for spiritual perfection*.

from the ancient Chinese

Laozi (*fl. c* 6th century BC) is traditionally identified as the first writer about the *Tao* (i.e. 'The Way' or 'supreme principle'), which is based on the traditional *virtues* of simplicity and sincerity. He decided that the things prized by the world—rank, luxury, glamour—are based on arbitrary value judgments and so are empty and futile when compared with the ultimate value of the peaceful inner life. Hence, he emphasised gentleness, calm, and non-violence; e.g. "It is the Tao ... to recompense injury with kindness." By returning good for good and also good for evil, Laozi believed that all would become good; to return evil for evil would inevitably lead to chaos. Following the Tao is **not** about obeying any list of rules. His text doesn't describe any principles to guide behaviour, but rather a detached, passive ethics, stressing *what not to do*. At its centre is the idea of *wu wei*, i.e. non-active action. Laozi argued for a simple life, being honest, humble and true to oneself, avoiding distractions, and seemingly in harmony with nature and others. Motivation is the search for a peaceful, self-contained life.

Kongzi (Latinised as Confucius, 551-479 BC) was more practical. Living in a time of social chaos, he saw ethics as a *foundation for social and political order*, and was more concerned with social and political reform than the underlying nature of reality. He started from the *human condition*, not human nature. Rather than seeking to establish a new moral order, he simply sought to promote the social institutions which, he believed, had supported community peace and prosperity in previous centuries, e.g. the 'family.' Kongzi did not organise his recommendations into a coherent system of ethical thought. His sayings,

which survive only in the writings of successors, frequently suggested how to become a better person (i.e. a 'superior person' or 'sage'). From many examples, this is implied to be someone humane, thoughtful, and motivated by the desire to do good instead of by selfishness. But the concept is not discussed in detail.

When asked for a single word to guide all behaviour, he said, "Reciprocity is such a word. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." This negative form of the Golden Rule is oft quoted throughout Confucian literature and may be considered its fundamental ethical principle. However, other behaviours are not derived from it; nor is it used to resolve conflicts between more specific duties.

Confucian thought identified *self-discipline* as the foundation of social order and thus civic stability (peace). Authorities should begin by improving their own personal conduct; i.e. "lead by example not force." Government is responsible for providing security, food and education. Law and punishment are the lowest needs; the higher goal—social harmony—is reached only by *virtues* (excellence of character) expressed through rituals (i.e. shared actions that improve mutual understanding). Kongzi saw filial loyalty (piety) as the first step toward moral excellence: "To place the family in the mind and heart is to move beyond simple self-centredness." It is not unconditional obedience but respect for the source of life; it enables the well-being of both parties. One is humbled by receiving from the previous generation, and has concern for the needs of the next. He defined the process of becoming human as "conquering yourself and returning to ritual." Confucian thought identified five key virtues: reciprocity between friends, a form of justice (*yi*), 'appropriate' respect for others (*li*), loyalty to existing (state) authorities (*zhong*), parent-child/child-parent loyalty (*xiao*), and benevolence (*ren*). Indeed, *ren* was seen to include all the character traits of the ideal person: reciprocity, dutifulness, courtesy, reliability, and hospitality towards strangers. It is important to note the duty to assume and accept one's place in a hierarchical society, which was, in turn, considered to correspond to the natural moral order.

Kongzi did not explain why the sage would be motivated to be good rather than rich. This question was discussed subsequently by Mengzi (c 372-c 289 BC) who claimed that humans naturally want to do what is right. Evil is not in human nature but the result of either poor upbringing or ignorance. In contrast, Xunzi (c 300-c 230 BC) said that natural behaviour for humans is to be selfish and jealous of others and that the rules of morality are designed *to avoid the strife* that would inevitably follow from its being unrestrained.

Confucian thinking has had extensive influence throughout east Asia.

from the ancient Greeks

The earliest Greek literature celebrated the deeds of heros who were identified and assessed solely on the basis of their victories, but had little to say about good and bad behaviour generally.

It was only after 500 BC that thinkers (the Sophists) began questioning the *intrinsic nature of the individual person*. They spread the idea that what was to be admired, and hence

copied, in a man (women did not count) was not innate ability, but knowing what should be said and done in any particular circumstance, i.e. wisdom. The highest good was being able to convert others into supporters of one's own position. For them, actual truth or rightness did not matter; behaviour was *selfish* and ambition celebrated. Indeed, some contended that it was impossible for anyone to know any absolutes about goodness. They argued that what was right was simply that which agreed with the current, local laws and that *self-interest* was the proper guiding principle for each and every person.

In contrast, Socrates (c 469-399 BC) challenged people to seek absolute truths. So that everyone might know what was being discussed, he introduced a novel feature (very appealing to the engineer!): "the universal definition." This is the first step towards being able to share knowledge: once there is a clear definition, then all can know what is and is not being considered. He questioned repeatedly to first identify and then refine the real meaning of ideas like justice and friendship. Although he believed they existed, Socrates made no claims to know the specific details of the absolute truths of ethics. At the centre of his teaching was the concept of *areté* (i.e. *virtue*) defined as the evidence of a person's true *psyche* (i.e. inner character). To act rightly was to act consistently with, and so look after the health of, this inner self (echoing some thoughts of modern mental health). This emphasis on the individual self meant that ethical actions were independent of the Other, leading to completely consistent behaviour. It was also self-centred. Ethical failings came from ignorance, i.e. an educational failing (hence this course!), and so his admonition to all was, "Know yourself." By perfecting this self-knowledge, one would necessarily act rightly. In other words, Socrates promoted *moral autonomy*: each of us must make our own decisions about how we act and then bear responsibility for that choice. Of course, to those in power, this was a very dangerous, new idea. It cost him his life.

His student Plato (c 428-354 BC) attempted to formulate universal fundamentals about how people should act, so that it would be agreed they were acting rightly. He believed that, like all absolutes, morality was encoded into nature and that the abstraction of acts was the ideal which formed part of the universe. For him, a virtue was that action which looked after the health of one's inner self, not a sign of its condition. Group governance meant looking after the health of everyone's inner selves simultaneously. Plato claimed that one should live a life (act) guided by four virtues (later termed the *Four Cardinal Virtues*): fortitude (or patience), moderation (or temperance), wisdom (or prudence), and justice. Here, justice included not only fairness but honesty and integrity, too. It was the highest virtue and implied everything being in equilibrium and balance with everything else. These virtues were chosen because they could curb the excesses that he saw as being inevitable in unrestrained human nature. Hence, a virtue was defined to be exactly that pattern of behaviour which is necessary for and allows the perfect functioning of a person, both as an individual and as part of organised society (*utilitarian* perspective). Being able to apply these virtues in a specific context, though, was not easy and certainly not for the uneducated. He advocated that people should defer to specialist ethics philosophers ('moral guardians') to tell them how to behave, i.e. that, in matters of morality, an organised structure should be obeyed without question.

His student Aristotle (c 384 BC-322 BC) argued that living ethically was the fundamental purpose of humans and that right actions are those motivated by the pursuit of happiness, a happiness that comes from fulfilment and not from pleasures. Virtues were defined as a balance between extremes of behaviour, with the extremes necessarily self-destructive. This led him to identify the "contemplative life"—detached, peaceable, philosophical—as the ideal. But Aristotle's consideration of ethics moved closer to a study of psychology. The true successors of Socrates were the Cynics, Epicurians, and Stoics.

Greek ideas long remained the benchmark in European philosophies of ethics. Much of the subsequent discussion searched for a compelling, rational basis for how we know which virtues (or duties) are 'correct.'

from modern biology

In recent decades behavioural and evolutionary biologists have taken an interest in ethics and puzzled about whether an awareness of ethical principles is genetically based [e.g. 1]. Why is a knowledge of honesty so widely instinctive to all people, everywhere? Why do people ever engage in altruistic behaviour, i.e. when it doesn't benefit a close genetic relative? (Social insects such as ants exhibit high levels of co-operation with genetic clones.) The basic argument is that we inherit a preference for and ability to engage in co-operative behaviour because being able to function successfully as a member of a group confers an evolutionary advantage on such an individual. These biologists interpret ethics as that which *facilitates mutually beneficial co-operation* between individuals and, thereby, give a *utilitarian* perspective to right actions.

Preliminary experiments suggest that some other social mammals (e.g. dogs, apes, elephants), too, display patterns of interactions showing empathy and also 'punish' (e.g. by banishing) group members, especially young ones, which display unco-operative behaviour.

Caution should be exercised with all these results and interpretations, since the connection between biology and ethics is a very new area of study.

References & further reading

1. Young, Camprodon, Hauser, Pascual-Leone, & Saxe (2010), *Proc Nat Acad Sci*, **107**, 6753

While encyclopaedic surveys are useful, there is no substitute for reading original sources.