

# ETHICS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY - A HERO'S JOURNEY

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How can I be good? How can I be good in the 21st century? An ethics that works for the 21st century needs to look different from its forebears. The ethics of the 20th century made possible the most appalling human behaviour our species has ever seen.

Ideological and utopian ethics gave permission to an autocratic few to dictate to the people how they should behave and what their societies should be like. Witness the dictatorship of the proletariat and the insistence on racial purity that characterised communism and fascism respectively.

Individualistic ethics allowed people to live impeccable private lives while ordering the mass extermination of whole ethnic groups. One German architect of the Holocaust, Eichmann, prided himself on following Kant's categorical imperative every day of his life.

The ethics of toleration and understanding were too weak to withstand the onslaught of ideologies that swept personal scruples aside. The Protestant church in Germany in the Hitler years, with noble individual exceptions, went into moral collapse.

The ethics of religious gentlemanliness lacked intensity. The Church of England, after the second world war, offered the same affable diet of inoffensive church services it had always provided. Unsurprisingly, war-weary, emotionally exhausted people were looking for more meaning and spiritual depth and experience than their dreary churches offered, and flocked to numerous new religious movements, influenced by eastern philosophy. Some of these qualified as cults in their ability to take over lives and infantilise the moral and spiritual consciences of their adherents.

The nay-saying ethics of traditional religion, which looked strong, were found to be profoundly wanting. Witness the frozen dogma of traditional Christian teaching on

women, marriage, family, embryos and homosexuality, unable to respond to scientific and social developments except by continuing to say 'you may not'.

And the horrible realisation as the new millennium dawned of our ignorant plundering of a finite earth through greed and the modern project of growth without limit and without any purpose save that of continuing to grow. What ethics were we espousing that permitted us to become fat and rich at the cost of two thirds of the human family and the health of the planet itself?

So we have to go back to our moral philosophical drawing boards.

To get in the mood for doing some philosophical thinking, let's consider what a human life is worth. Does it have relative worth?

Aeroplane story.

In the first ten years of my professional life my approach to moral philosophy was necessarily intellectual and very cerebral, because I was working in the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics at King's College London, where our philosophy had to be academically rigorous, teaching members of ethics committees how to determine whether medical research projects involving human subjects were ethical or not. We created an intellectual framework for ethical analysis that was robust and rigorous. We said, take the three main ways in which philosophers have answered the question: How can I be good? and combine them. Each of the three approaches has a rightful place in our moral thinking, it seemed to me. Following Ronald Dworkin and Sophie Botros, I called the approaches goal-based, duty-based and right-based.

Goal-based moral thinking concerns itself with ends. This approach takes the moral worth of an action to depend upon the rightness of its outcome and does not concern itself with the content of the action. Its classical formulation is that of utilitarianism. An action is right if it maximises happiness, and wrong if it does not. Jeremy Bentham, the famous 18th century proponent of utilitarianism, argued that people wish for pleasure and hate pain, so therefore the moral law should reflect that governance, rather than trying to invent more fanciful principles that could be disputed in a way that the general wish for happiness cannot be. He wrote:

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do... By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.”

Whilst it is difficult to argue that happiness is not a desirable goal, and true and substantial happiness is a positively morally acceptable goal, the goal-based approach taken on its own presents real moral problems. It can positively require an agent to do evil that good may come. That is to say, if my action will result in greater happiness for all concerned, and if refraining from acting will result in less happiness, then I must act and am morally at fault if I do not. Moreover, I am bound to regard my action as right, since it meets the one moral requirement I set myself, to maximise happiness. For utilitarians, then, there are no tragic choices. An example of this is having an abortion. No one argues that having an abortion is in and of itself a good act. The decision to have an abortion is based upon the calculation that not having one would lead to worse consequences than having one.

Duty-based moral thinking takes the opposite approach, so that rather than thinking about where my actions are going to end up, I consider what the action itself involves and, usually by reference to some pre-existing moral code, I decide whether the action is right or not according to that code. Duty-based morality is what we might consider to be traditional morality. It is the morality we might teach our children. Taken on its own, duty-based morality is defiantly anti-utilitarian, in that it will refuse to perform certain actions regardless of the possible negative consequences. A thorough-going duty-based moralist will in all likelihood not have an abortion even if the predicted consequences are dire. Examples of duty-based morality include the Ten Commandments and the Categorical Imperative, coined by Kant:

“Act according to a maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law.

“Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.”

An example to explain the Categorical Imperative is that of the lying promise. Suppose I need a sum of money which I know you have, and I know that you won't give it to me unless I promise to repay you, and I know that I won't fulfil that promise. So I am proposing to lie to you in order to get money from you. Now if that maxim - lying in order to gain money - were to become a universal law, I wouldn't get money from you, because you would know that I was telling a lie. So the proposed action fails the Categorical Imperative because it is neither capable of becoming a universal law, nor can I possibly will that it should become a universal law, because I wouldn't get the money.

As I mentioned before, Eichmann, one of the architects of the Holocaust, famously boasted that he lived according to Kant's Categorical Imperative every day of his life. Like goal-based morality, duty-based morality isn't enough on its own to determine the rightness of an action. And it can leave us concentrating on our own moral health, complacently securing our own seat in heaven, to the possible detriment of others affected by our actions.

Right-based morality shifts the focus of moral attention away from the agent and on to those most affected by his/her action. It is based upon the assertion of one right in particular: namely that people have the right to self-determination, hence the right to be consulted about actions which will affect them. Rather than trying to work out whether or not my morality allows me to perform certain actions, right-based morality asks that I consider and consult the wishes of those whom my action will affect. Kant wrote:

“So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, and never as a means only.”

In medical ethics, this shift from duty-based to right-based thinking is reflected in the fashion for respecting patients' autonomy rather than paternalistically giving doctor's orders. Undoubtedly such a shift is healthy. Fewer incorrect assumptions are made. On the other hand, right-based morality on its own is rather flimsy. For what are our wishes based upon? Do they constitute a valid basis for morality? If I were to ask someone to stab me to death, would my wish, on its own, be enough to make the

action moral? If I were to decide to stab myself to death, would my action be moral on the sole grounds that it was what I wanted? These questions cluster around the euthanasia and assisted suicide debates, among others. And what happens when the people who are equally affected by the same action differ in their wishes in respect of that action? Would it be a matter of taking a vote to see democratically whether or not to act? What about respecting the wishes of the minority?

Taken on its own, none of these moral approaches is sufficient to offer a valid means to make decisions. Taken together, though, they go a long way towards ensuring our actions are moral. A sound, rigorous moral decision-making process would take each of the approaches in turn and thoroughly think through the implications of each. It would clarify where there might be conflict between the different approaches, and come self-consciously to a view on where to lay the emphasis: goals, duties or rights. A challenge to the decision could be answered by explaining how it was reached. Others might not agree, but they couldn't assert that a sound process of decision-making had not been followed.

This robust approach worked when you had a group of people, such as the ethics committees I taught, sitting around a table with a common goal of scrutinising a moral dilemma and coming to a view about the right course of action to take. But it wasn't any good to people who weren't sitting round a table, calmly, with like-minded others, wrestling with a problem intellectually. It wasn't any good to the mother, sitting by the bed of her child in hospital, her heart desolate, faced with the choice of withholding or withdrawing treatment from her dying child; nor the woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy, terrified, with no idea of what to do about it; nor the man facing a life without his legs, and so on: the myriad diverse dilemmas that people face in healthcare settings that their minds can't get around because their emotions are, rightly, so very involved and, understandably, so very turbulent.

The second ten years of my working life involved advising the Church of England on ethical issues in medicine, science, technology and environmental issues, and in creating an Institute for Ethics at St Paul's Cathedral. In these necessarily religious contexts we had a language of the heart and emotions that could be articulated and included in moral debate. We could talk about the spirit being stirred; I could, in trying to make the Church take environmental issues seriously, appeal to the bishops'

religious and emotional wish to care for a creation that God loved so much. But, of course, I was preaching to the converted. The people I was dealing with wanted to be good, it was just a matter of deciding how to be.

What would inspire people, many of whom no longer look to the church or other institution for their moral references, to be good, and to be good in a way that adequately faces the challenges of the 21st century? The three approaches method robustly scrutinises our moral decisions, and religious sensibilities offer valuable pastoral and spiritual insights and can give voice to the inarticulate cry of pain in suffering. But we have to want to use them, and we have to use them in a way that serves the needs of the 21st century.

21st century ethics cannot ignore what has been learned about human nature, society, the earth, different species, the atmosphere. Heroes of the 20th century stood out against the mass of humanity, and saved us from ourselves; we know their names, they are people like Gandhi, Mandela and Churchill. But there is no single person, however good and brave, who can save us from the challenges of the 21st century. That is because we now know how interdependent we all are. The economic and environmental crises have demonstrated that my neighbour is as much the person on the other side of the world as the person living in the house next door. The enemy isn't someone else, it's potentially all of us. And, beetles matter as much as bishops. James Lovelock story.

The third iteration of ethics I am now working with tries to address this. It's a combination of virtue and communitarian ethics, and it is based on story-telling. It acknowledges that everyone's life story is unique to them and could be uniquely valuable to society. For paradoxically, with the realisation that we are all interconnected and that beetles really do matter as much as bishops, comes the realisation that each and every one of us is different - there has never been anyone like you, ever before, and there will never be anyone like you, ever again. You are unique, and so is every blade of grass, feather on a bird's wing, pebble on the beach, snowflake. And it is my conviction that in being fully who we are, happily and forgivingly inhabiting our own characters and personalities in all their uniqueness, with all their warts, we become able to be of tremendous help to others. I see young people (and not just young people) behaving in crashingly selfish ways because they

don't believe what they are or have is anything that anyone is interested in or needs. Society's response to them generally supports their view and the thing becomes self-fulfilling.

So - think of your life as a film. It's a DVD called *Life of Your Name* and you are the star. No one else can be the star of the film called 'life of (your name)', they can have big parts in your film but only you can be the star. And you have parts in other people's films but you are not the star of their life stories.

Now, what kind of a film has your life been so far? Romantic comedy? Tragedy? Thriller? And what kind of hero have you been so far? Are you enjoying yourself? Are you challenged, or are you bored? Are you open to new possibilities? Do you know what or who you want to be? Is there something that sets your belly on fire? Or do you not feel like that? Do you feel as though you are treading a well worn path through a thousand weary days of getting dressed and going to work, feeding the family, a slave to the daily calls on your time and your purse, with no clear idea of what you are doing or where you are going? Or do you feel even more of a victim than that? Are you bullied? Are you physically or mentally challenged in some way that makes you feel you are being held back from doing what you have always wanted to do?

What would you do if you were not afraid?

In the story of the hero's journey – a plot you find in most films, plays, epic poems and folklore, and indeed in your own life – there's a stage called the ordinary world, which is where the story begins. It's your platform. It can be a comfort zone, a familiar place where you know everyone, everyone knows you, you know what is expected of you and you do it – but you're not fulfilling your potential and you know there's more to life than this. Something in you is calling for a bigger world. The ordinary world can be a place of great disadvantage, or victimhood. Or it can be a place where you know what sets your belly on fire, but no one seems to understand you.

So, next, the hero hears the call. It might come from inside you or outside. It's undeniable, and, it's often unwelcome. And the next step on the journey is often

refusal. You know you should take the step, make the commitment, decide that you are going to embark on your journey (think, for example, of deciding to change your job; deciding to do something more worthwhile; deciding to get married; deciding to move country; deciding to run the marathon) but you just don't want to. You get scared of what you are about to do. It's a step into the dark, you know it's going to present difficulties and you don't know if you are up to dealing with them; it's a move out of your ordinary, safe, comfortable world. So you refuse the call.

But then, as you sit around in your by now profoundly dissatisfied state, thinking of all the hundreds of reasons why you shouldn't start, you meet someone who knows what you are capable of, believes in you and in the vision of your journey, and knows how to help you take the first steps. You meet your mentor. This empowers you to commit to the journey, knowing it is a step into darkness, and you set your face forwards.

The journey takes you on many adventures, trials and tests of character. You face crises and overcome them. You learn to work with other people: learn who your allies are, and who are your enemies; which obstacles are real and which imaginary. And in all the good hero's quest stories, there is a time of real darkness, when everything goes wrong, your mentor dies or disappears, your friends lose faith in you, you lose heart and think you can't go on: the darkest hour that, of course, comes just before the dawn except you can't see the dawn. All you know is you've gone too far to go back and all you can do is keep going, which, if you're going through hell, is advisable. When facing the darkness, the heroic action is simply to keep on putting one foot in front of the other.

Then the hero has to undergo the transformative ordeal that is really the culmination of the journey. The battle, the race, the examination, the job interview, the performance, the giving birth to a baby, whatever it may be. You get through it, and you claim your prize.

And, paradoxically, though you are proud of what you have achieved and know that you have earned your prize, and you're glad the journey is over, you also experience anti-climax. Once the quest is fulfilled and you've had a bit of a rest, what gets you out of bed the *next* morning? The answer is that you have a return journey to make,

back to your ordinary world. But your return is very different from your departure because you have changed. All the trials and tests and friendships and allies and enemies and darkness and ordeals that you have been through have strengthened you and made you realise that you have inside you a strong moral compass, capabilities that you can rely on because you've been tested and not found wanting. You know you are strong because you've proved to yourself that you are strong. And you are also much more aware of the world around you. You've had to work with other people. You've learned that no one can undertake their hero's journey without the help of others, and you've learned that others need your help.

The tenth stage of the journey is critical, called a new level of life. And a new journey begins, to bigger worlds with broader horizons, and you step forth again. The journeys aren't at an end till your life ends.

Humans have told stories to each other since the dawn of time. They are a brilliant way to teach. And, as Christopher Booker emphasises in his 2004 work *The Seven Basic Plots: why we tell stories*, the stories that society tells itself determine the sort of society it is going to be. The ethics I am teaching now tells the story of the hero's journey, and people are responding by acknowledging that they themselves are heroes and they themselves have something unique to offer. And that the really valuable things in life don't come easily or quickly, and the so-called happy ending is really just the beginning of the next journey.

That's what 21st century heroes need to understand, ladies and gentlemen, and every single one of us can. And we will need to, because we can't rely on a few brave individuals this time round. The greed we thought we could allow ourselves and the narrowness of our awareness have to be transformed into self-conscious restraint and universal awareness so that our actions do as little harm as possible and maybe even do some good.

Right at the end of his very long book, Booker concludes:

“Wherever possible, I have tried in this book to supply the original thought behind all the terms we use when we are talking about stories: hubris, nemesis, denouement, catastrophe. The only words for which no dictionary seems to provide the original

root idea are in a way the most important of all: those words ‘hero’ and heroine’ themselves. But, after many years working on this book, I am convinced that, lost in the mists of history, they must be closely related in some way to our word ‘heir’. In other words, the hero or the heroine is he or she who is born to inherit; who is worthy to succeed; who must grow up as fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before.

“Such is the essence of the task laid on each of us as we come into this world. That is what stories are trying to tell us.” (p. 701)