

Practical Ethics

H.Narayanan,

EE Department

IIT Bombay, Mumbai

(Text of a lecture delivered on 16th Oct 2012)

A dilemma faced by young people, usually at the stage when they leave home for the first time, is that rules that they have lived by thus far seem questionable. On the one hand the impulses that tempt and torment them seem natural while on the other, breaking rules that the parents have taught them in their childhood seems very wrong. Further, those who break their shackles are in danger of going completely overboard with nothing sacred anymore. This could lead to deep unhappiness later. This article is about an approach to handling the problem of formulating a very personal but practical ethical code. The actual, detailed, solution to the problem is personal and not addressed here but the factors which need to be kept in mind are. Also some simple 'dos and donts' are described.

Ethical code: need and strategy

First, should one have an ethical code at all? Why not play life by the ear?

A personal ethical code is a strategy for choice of action in situations encountered commonly by an individual. It limits the choice and thereby reduces the stresses involved in constantly optimizing according to objectives which might vary with time and circumstance. If the choice is made according to a code, it is usually thought of as a duty carried out and therefore leads to lesser feelings of guilt, dissatisfaction with outcomes, fear of punishment etc. There is often a sense of satisfaction of having performed one's duty when one has acted in consonance with the code.

What strategy should one use to design an ethical framework that is suitable for oneself while conforming broadly to universally accepted norms?

First study the condition of the individual by him/herself and in relation to others. Then look for generally agreed 'universal principles'- as few of them as possible. Finally match the two and work out details.

The individual and his/her relationship with others

The individual at a particular point of time may be regarded as having started with a certain nature, including potentialities such as breeding capability, which has been modified by 'education'. This latter could be regarded as a general term for upbringing, conditioning through the environment, schooling etc. Feelings such as greed, envy, guilt, anger, anxiety, fear, cruelty, which could be thought of as control mechanisms, had good 'survival value' (i.e., increased the chances of breeding) in a certain environment which would have existed for tens of thousands of years. They are not against survival even now and are therefore *natural* to us. On the other hand we have been *taught* that we should think before we act, that negative feelings which can lead to our harming others are wrong... Persons who have been brought up in traditional households would have been taught the use of prayer, gratitude to a supreme being etc. While the influence of nurture on the present state of the individual may not be as strong as his/her nature it is still strong enough that one has to take it into account while formulating one's ethical code.

Next, in studying the nature-nurture characteristics of the individual in relationship with others, it is clear that these depend strongly on the nearness of the others to the individual.

The way one behaves with one's siblings (initial competition followed by the formation of a strong bond) one's mates (possessiveness, jealousy, protectiveness), one's progeny (possessiveness, protectiveness) has probably come about largely through evolution. With friends and

acquaintances, the way we behave has more to do with culture and education. With more distant others it is entirely culture and the current society norms which are significant.

Fuzzy ethical rules

1. Individual should aim at long term personal 'happiness'.
2. Individual should not 'hurt' others (i.e., make them unhappy), should preferably be invariably kind.

It is possible to argue that the second rule could contradict the first, but broadly most of us would agree with the spirit of these rules. We however need a working definition of 'happiness' to proceed further.

What does happiness mean?

For most of us, happiness more or less means the following: the sense of present mental and, to some extent, physical, well being, not being unduly concerned with future (no serious anxiety), or past (guilt, regret, anger within reasonable limits); a feeling of freedom (the feeling that I can do what I please but I do not choose to do what is 'forbidden' by custom or legalities); a feeling that one is good and competent and a feeling that the universe and 'others' are benign and indeed like or love the individual.

Nowadays we tend to talk in terms of one's mood. Mood could be thought of as an indicator of the state of mind related to how we perceive ourselves in relation to the present environment, past actions and future prospects. We say the mood is elevated if we perceive positively and depressed if we perceive negatively. Excessive mood elevation could lead to inappropriate behaviour with adverse consequences. So happiness could be regarded as *mild* mood elevation.

Control of mood

Since our basic rules speak of long term personal happiness, it is pertinent to speak of possible ways in which mood can be controlled and made mildly elevated. Mood can be controlled temporarily and in the long term by many techniques. The safest is to control through routines related to sleep, mental or physical exercise, relaxation, diet, social interaction, through deep involvement in activities and through change of scene. Somewhat more subtle methods involve control through modes of thought which modify belief systems, thinking and behaviour, improve self esteem and help perceive others as benign (eg. rational emotive therapy, cognitive therapy). These are slow and time tested. The last several decades have seen substantial advances in control through altering the biochemistry of the brain. But this should only be done with professional help.

If one accepts that one must aim at long term personal happiness, it follows that one must do one's best to maintain physical and mental health. Organs, particularly the brain, should be kept in good health by using good routines related to sleep, food, exercise. Uncontrolled use of mind changing substances such as recreational drugs or even alcohol, should be avoided. The above could be thought of as keeping the hardware in good repair. In addition, it is necessary to exercise self discipline in order to feel free and to train the mind to focus largely on the present, perceiving others and the universe as benign. Anxiety, anger, dwelling on imponderables (who am I? what is the purpose of life?) cannot be fully avoided but must be within control. Use could be made of religious feelings, which are natural to everyone, and religious routines, that one has grown up with.

Thinking benignly of the entire human kind is good for one's own mind as it reduces suspicion and fear and increases the sense of well being. However, in interacting with others we do recognize their 'nearness' to ourselves. The degree of loyalty to and the trust one has with others would naturally

depend on this nearness. To one's family one has a natural affection and also special responsibilities. Then comes the community that one comes into contact day to day, and so on. The average individual acts keeping in mind these first. This is probably the way it should be. If one thinks benignly 'globally' but ignores local responsibilities, the reactions of those closest to the individual would be negative and hurt one's mood. However, it is natural for all of us to have in our mind a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them'. There is a great diversity in 'us' but 'they' are usually monolithic, mostly something simple like 'cunning' (for instance, the way Indians and Pakistanis think of each other). In order to think benignly globally, it is therefore necessary to practise constantly to think tolerantly about 'them' recognizing the existence of good and bad in them and the presence of persons amongst them who might be inclined to think benignly of us.

Interacting with others

Interaction with others can take the form of communicating with them or performing tangible actions on them. In the former case, one should be truthful as far as possible. Lying is natural, is not totally forbidden (in the sense that what one speaks may not be literally correct, eg. white lies) but should be avoided in all essential matters. A simple rule is that one should not gain substantially by it. Practically speaking, truth is easier to remember than the infinity of possible lies. Excessive lying is noticed by others and the individual is branded as unreliable. Also (and *this is very serious*) lying affects one's own view of external reality, and one starts believing one's own lies. Practically speaking, perhaps one should use three valued logic - truth, falsehood, silence.

The actions that one performs on others are related to one's own feelings about them. In most everyday situations, thinking benignly about others is beneficial to us and negative feelings towards them cause us active harm. Excessive suspicion builds anxiety, anger, and hurts physical (for instance, raises blood pressure, constricts arteries) and mental health and is visible to others by one's reactions to them. While greed and envy are natural, they do not appear to be essential for survival currently and lead to personal discontent and reduction in self esteem. They are also noticed by others. Whenever others feel an individual can hurt them, their reaction leads to a strengthening of the individual's own negative feelings. All negative feelings should therefore be hidden to a lesser or greater extent from others -- depending on their nearness to oneself. Attempts must also be made to reduce these feelings.

Conventional mechanisms for hiding one's feelings about others use the rules of politeness and 'good manners'. One makes oneself 'small' (example, bowing to show respect), one shakes hands using the right hand ('my right hand cannot hurt you'), one uses muted facial gestures if one is annoyed ... A general policy is to appear 'normal' and therefore non threatening. Further, when one disagrees with another person, unless it is explicitly required, one does not voice it or even if one does, the disagreement is with the view expressed by the person and not the person himself/herself.

Reducing negative feelings

In order to reduce negative feelings one could act positive, try to help others, to be kind. The reaction to such acts will usually be positive and thereby reduce one's own negative feelings. As a general rule one could look outward and be concerned with others' well being. Taking care of one's family or one's pet is better than worrying about oneself since one's own aches and pains are very interesting to oneself and one can get obsessed with them. But taking care only of 'near and dear' ones also has some of the disadvantages of thinking only of oneself. An extraordinarily effective therapy for building one's self esteem is to devote a certain portion of one's time to caring for people whose well being does not impinge directly on oneself. One could call this the 'Mother Theresa' method, but ofcourse practically every civilized religion preaches it. It gives one's life a purpose towards which one can work and increase one's long term happiness.

Religion

Throughout the course of history, religion has played an important part in shaping human thinking and therefore human life. Religious feeling and 'religious experience' may be regarded as a part of human nature. The former is exemplified by the sense of awe when we are confronted with the grandeur of nature. By the latter, we mean the sense of exaltation, accompanied by an utter certainty that what is experienced is the 'ultimate truth', which comes to many people either naturally or through stress. That this is natural is clear since we see similarities in the experiences of 'mystics' all over the world. These are personal and truly sacred for all of us. One can use these to get a feeling that the universe is benign and indeed that one is a part of the whole.

Organized religion has at its root individuals ('saints') who have had intense religious experiences. But the conversion into an organization is usually done by disciples of saints who are convinced of the 'truths' seen by their master but are also very practical. Organized religion is useful in defining a community to which one belongs and to which one is responsible. It is useful in making the individual less self centred. As is well known, rituals improve mood. It is, however, evil when it breeds hatred or contempt towards 'others'. Unfortunately, this appears to be a natural course for most religions to take unless conscious steps are taken by the members. History is replete with instances of enormous misery brought about by this hatred.

Dealing with Laws

One should avoid violating 'laws' as far as possible -- even the letter, but definitely the spirit. One could of course independently struggle to get unjust laws changed. But while they are there, an individual would do well to stay within the limits imposed by them since punishments and the threat of punishments will reduce personal well being or the sense of well being. On the whole, personal rules should be stricter than laws so that one feels free.

Ethics in scientific activity

For an individual, as a way of life, being a research worker has some great advantages and some serious difficulties. Doing research allows the individual to 'escape life' in a relatively safe way. When one is involved in it, it is often exciting and keeps the mind occupied, essentially allowing one to forget oneself. When a difficult problem is solved, there is a relatively safe mood elevation that can last a long time. Since it requires serious mental effort, one naturally tends to get back to day to day living after some time. So the dangers of being cut off from reality are usually not serious.

When research is not going well, such as when one is stuck at a problem for months, or, additionally, in the case of experimental work, one is beset by equipment malfunction or shortage of funds, negative feelings come to the fore. In serious cases, the individual can get clinically depressed. Sometimes, even when research is going well, sleep can be disturbed to an extent that affects both physical and mental well being.

Freedom in doing research

A research worker is not entirely free unless he is a theorist with independent means. Even in this case, since most research workers would like acceptance by the community of scientists in their area, by being able to publish their results, there is the constraint of 'going with the flow'. Modern professional research, at the mundane level, has acquired a quantitative bias for its figures of merit. Researcher is 'good' if he publishes many adequate papers in journals of acceptable standard rather than a few papers tackling hard problems. Papers are 'good' if they are cited often. Many middle level awards depend upon quantity rather than quality. The chances of acquiring a middle level award, and even how well an experimentalist is funded, also depend on how many such awards one has obtained in the past. Quite naturally, a research worker's professional

advancement depends on the above figures of merit.

Since there are substantial benefits if a research worker scores high in the 'research figure of merit', there is a natural tendency for any research worker to aim directly at 'appearing good' rather than to concentrate on his/her work and treat 'appearing good' as a byproduct. When this is within limits, only the quality of research and the researcher's own mental state deteriorate. When it is out of control, the code of scientific ethics can be violated.

Scientific Ethics: Rules

1. When you state your results, do not knowingly utter falsehood.
2. Give credit where it is due.

The results of a paper can sometimes be wrong even when the author is a great scientist. For instance, statements of theorems may not be fully correct - sometimes even fully wrong - because of a flaw in the proof which has misled the author. Experimental results can be completely wrong because certain important factors affecting the outcome of the experiment were overlooked. The above are not unethical and no author is punished by the system for committing these errors. Scientific endeavour does not suffer greatly because of them. Indeed, usually something is learnt because of these errors, if the author or someone else, while pointing them out, also analyzes them.

In theoretical work, people usually would not knowingly publish a wrong result because, if it is interesting, others would attempt to understand it and discover the error. It would be interpreted by the community that the author was not skilled enough to notice the error. This would damage the author's reputation.

In experimental work, deliberate falsification is very difficult to detect since repeating someone's experiment is time consuming and expensive. But the author is deliberately misleading the direction of research the entire community is undertaking. Therefore, in the rare instances where falsification is proved, the system deals very harshly with the perpetrator, essentially terminating his/her professional career.

Giving credit

Scientists deserve credit for their work. When it is correctly accorded, the person concerned is motivated to continue doing research. When a deserving scientist is denied credit, usually the person would become bitter and get sidetracked from continuing the involvement in research. It is in the interest of the community that whenever new research is reported, the work on which it rests is described with care and fairness and due credit is given to these earlier workers ('Do unto others as you would have them do to you').

Plagiarism

This is the second most serious violation of scientific ethics. Here one is robbing others of credit. When it is committed, it is very easy to detect and the punishment is certain and harsh. Some alleged plagiarism only violates the letter not the spirit, but even this gets punished currently. So extra care has to be taken to see that one is not committing 'inadvertent' plagiarism. Whenever a material (text, table, figure, photograph ...) is taken from a source verbatim, the source should be immediately stated and also the fact that the material is verbatim.

Beyond the code

The researcher should actively resist the temptation to 'appear good' rather than concentrating on being 'good'. It is better to adopt a personal code which enables one to do this. This could be regarded as working towards long term personal happiness.

One's natural tendency is to grab as much credit as possible for oneself or for one's immediate group and 'damn' others' contributions 'with faint praise'. However, all of us appreciate generosity in others even if we ourselves have difficulty in being generous. So active efforts must be made to be generous as far as possible (eg. Einstein's generosity to Bose).

Established workers should always be on the lookout for detecting and nurturing talent, particularly among the disadvantaged. When such talent is discovered the entire research community is inspired (eg. Hardy discovering Ramanujan).

Desiderata

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.

But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.

Especially, do not feign affection.

Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings.

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be,

and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.

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