**Excerpts from *Moral Inquiry*, By: Ronald F. White**

Whatever Truth is, we do know that our beliefs about it have a tendency to change over time. I used to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and governmental efficiency. Scientists used to believe that the earth is the center of the universe, and that bloodletting cures insanity. Based on the flow of history, it is safe to assume that most of what we believe to be true today will eventually be regarded as either imprecise or false. We also know that human beliefs concerning Truth vary between individuals, groups of individuals, and between cultures. Generally speaking, we deal with this cognitive dissonance by summarily dismissing beliefs that conflict with our own. Our beliefs are true, theirs are false.

Human beings also believe that some human behavior is good and praiseworthy, and that other behavior is bad and blameworthy. It is true that human beings murder each other, steal from each other, drive too fast, and fart in elevators. Under most circumstances, none of these behaviors are considered to be good or praiseworthy, although there may be particular circumstances when they might be. Farting is a perfectly natural phenomenon open to descriptive inquiry. It can be explained in terms of the laws of human physiology, (the production of nitrogenous waste) and the laws of physics: our knowledge of both sets of laws change over time. Killing and stealing can also be explained in biological terms. But many philosophers argue that there is a difference between inquiring into whether something is true and/or whether it is good.

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All moral theories address the questions of what is Good, why it‟s Good, and where the Good is located? If there is anything “easy” about moral inquiry it‟s the fact that there are only three basic kinds of prescriptive moral theories: teleological theories, deontological theories, and virtue-based theories. Unfortunately, they often (but not always) provide different and mostly conflicting answers to these basic questions.

TELEOLOGICAL ETHICAL THEORIES

Teleological moral theories locate moral goodness in the consequences of our behavior and not the behavior itself. According to teleological (or consequentialist) moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends. Moral behavior, therefore, is goal-directed. I have ice in my gutters right now. I am deliberating about when and how to get that ice out in order to prevent water damage inside the house. There are many strategies (means) that I might employ to remove that ice (end). Should I send my oldest son, Eli, up on the icy roof today? After careful deliberation I finally decided not send him on the roof because it is slippery and he might fall. How did I decide? Well, I took into account the possible consequences. There is nothing inherently wrong with climbing on the roof. What made roof climbing the morally wrong thing to do at this particular time and place were the possible consequences. The issue has moral significance in so far as it affects persons. So from the teleological point of view, human behavior is neither right nor wrong in and of itself. What matters is what might happen as a consequence of those actions in any given context. Thus, it is the contextualized consequences that make our behavior, good or bad, right or wrong. In the case of roof climbing in the winter, I decided to climb up on the roof myself, because it‟s dangerous. Eli might fall off and get hurt. If that happened, my wife would blame me and so would the community. But if I fell off the roof, I would be judged to be imprudent, but not necessarily immoral.

From a teleological standpoint, stealing, for example, could not be judged to be inherently right or wrong independent of the context and the foreseeable consequences. Suppose I am contemplating stealing a loaf of bread from the neighborhood grocery store. Many moral theorists would argue that morality requires an analysis of my motives (or intent) that brought about that behavior. However, from a teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of the act. What really matters lies in the potential pains and pleasures associated with the short-term and long-term consequences. If my children were starving, and if stealing a loaf of bread would immediately prevent them from starving, then I might seriously consider stealing. But I‟d have to know if the consequences would significantly harm the grocery store? What would be the odds of getting caught? If I got caught, what would happen to me? Would I go to jail? Get fined? If I went to jail, who would take care of my children? Therefore, even if my motive (preventing my children from starving) was praiseworthy, the act of stealing might still be wrong because other actions might be more cost-effective in bringing about the desired consequences. Perhaps I‟d be better off signing up for food stamps or asking the storeowner to give me day-old bread. On the other hand, suppose that there were no other options and that I invented a foolproof system for stealing bread. Would I be wrong for doing it? If you think about the consequences of your actions when you make moral decisions, you are applying teleological moral theory.

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DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES

There are many philosophers who reject the entire teleological agenda by arguing that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and or consequences. Deontological theories are by definition duty- based. That is to say, that morality, according to deontologists, consists in the fulfillment of moral obligations, or duties. Duties, in the deontological tradition, are most often associated with obeying absolute moral rules. Hence, human beings are morally required to do (or not to do) certain acts in order to uphold a rule or law. The rightness or wrongness of a moral rule is determined independent of its consequences or how happiness or pleasure is distributed as a result of abiding by that rule, or not abiding by it.

It's not difficult to see why philosophers would be drawn to this position. In ordinary life, we often encounter situations where doing our duty toward others does not necessarily increase pleasure or decrease pain. In early nineteenth-century America, many members of the anti-slavery movement argued that slavery was wrong, even though slaveholders and southern society in general, economically benefited from it. Suppose, also that the slaveholders were also able to condition the slaves to the point where they actually enjoyed living under slavery. From a teleological perspective, slavery might appear to be an ideal economic institution. Everybody is happy!

A deontologist, however, would argue that even if the American government conducted a detailed cost/benefit analysis of slavery and decided that it created more pleasure in society than pain, it would still be wrong. Therefore, deontologists believe that right and wrong have nothing to do with pleasure, pain, or consequences. Morality is based on whether acts conflict with moral rules or not, and the motivation behind those acts. An act is therefore, good if and only if it was performed out of a desire to do one's duty and obey a rule. In other words, act out of a good will. Hence, slavery is wrong, not because of its negative consequences, but because it violates an absolute moral rule. The problem here is: "How does one distinguish absolute moral rules from mere convention, prudence, or legality…?”

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VIRTUE-BASED MORAL THEORIES

In the Western world (and the Eastern World) there is a venerable system of moral reasoning based on the idea of virtue. Let‟s call those various systems virtue-based moral systems. In the history of Western moral theory, there are two different types of virtue-based systems. The non- secular line of inquiry relies on divine command theory in order to discern moral virtues from vices, as illustrated by the Judeo-Christian moral tradition. The secular line of inquiry relies primarily on reason and experience, and not divine command theory. It goes back to the ancient Greeks, via the writings of Homer, Hesiod, Plato, and Aristotle…

All virtue-based moral systems focus on big questions such as: “What is the „Good Life? And “How do I go about living the „Good Life?” Therefore, they tend to focus on how to live one‟s life, over the long run, rather than how to address particular issues that pop up at any given time. In short, virtue-based systems focus on character development within harmonious communities. These systems also tend to rely on moral exemplars, or role models. Once a person has internalized the virtue of kindness, then that person will exemplify that virtue in his/her actions.

All virtue-based moral systems differentiate between virtues (good behavior) and vices (bad behavior). Ultimately, non-secular virtue-based theories differentiate between virtues and vices based on religious authorities, usually traced back to the authority of the Bible and/or its official interpreters. The Christian authorities have identified faith, hope, and charity as its primary virtues. If you pursue these ideals over the course of your lifetime, you‟ll lead a “good life.”

Aristotle believed moral virtue consists in choosing the mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency within any given sphere of action. The vice of excess consists in choosing too much of a good thing and the vice of deficiency consists of not enough. Excellence is found midway between the two. For example, the virtue of bravery can be found midway between the vices of cowardice and foolhardiness.