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ETHICS: THE WE AND THE I

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When we hear the term "ethics" we usually think of that which is moral or that which is legal: religion or law. We also are aware of the fact that various disciplines have a "code of conduct." The code specifies the actions and the goals of the practitioners in a specific discipline, for example, law, medicine, engineering. Ethics, as defined by the discipline of philosophy, is a careful examination of the foundation upon which such codes are based.

Religion and law do engage in the examination of their own bases but usually as a means of clarifying a specific rule for their adherence to the foundations of religion and law. The foundations themselves are seldom called into question. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, deals primarily with the foundations of such systems. Ethics also has a foundation of its own: it is based on the fact that human beings do not exist as isolated, or solitary, beings. They exist, except in rare and unusual circumstances, as social entities. Ethics is based on the fact that human beings exist in social environments; it deals, primarily, with the sense of the "We" rather than the sense of the "I." A creature that truly leads an isolated and solitary existence has no need to take into consideration the relationship between itself and the other.

In the West, codes of conduct are based on the concept of the individual as the "bargaining unit." That is, there is a fundamental description of the human being as essentially an individual which is potentially autonomous. The term *autonomous* is, in this sense, described as making reference to an individual that exists isolated and solitary. The term implies, also, the notion that this individual can act in such a manner that he can become a law unto himself: the "I" is conceived as containing the capacity to be "self-determining."

A code of conduct, however, can be based on the description of the human being as a social being; that is, he exists within the confines of the "We." The adjustment of his behavior in the company of others is necessary for the continued existence of the individual. In other words, if there were no others, or if the individual were truly autonomous, there would be no need to adjust one's behavior in order to maintain membership in a group.

Between those who would define the proper behavior of human beings toward others as based on the We or the I lies a tremendous difference. The societies based on the principle of the I as the essential bargaining unit see the individual as being "at war" with each and every other individual. The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) best outlined this view of the individual; he saw individuals, also, as existing in a state of competition - one against the other - for a limited supply of those goods essential for the survival of the individual. ("If you won't attack me at the watering hole, I won't attack you.") Even in a Christian, or religious, sense this view of the individual is not uncommon in the West. In the religious version, individuals are separated from other individuals through their adherence to a particular set of beliefs; they come to be a group in order to make alliances between believers and against unbelievers. The Christian god sets the stage for this view of humans in groups: the god makes a distinction between those who follow him and those who do not. The believers are "saved"; the unbelievers are condemned. In both the religious and the "natural" (in the Hobbesian manner) Western definitions of the human being, the actual and undeniable existence of humans in groups must be explained or justified.

This view of human beings is very different from that of the Greeks who are seen as the secular forefathers of the West. Aristotle observed that a "man alone was either a god or a beast." A human was, for Aristotle, a social being, first and foremost. The Greeks were not offended when they heard of a comparison between themselves and bees and ants. These creatures shared with humans an inherently social nature. The West, both Christian and secular, is, in general, offended when humans are compared to bees and ants. The vision of a human as a naturally social being calls up images of "the mindless herd" or "the mass mind" or "the unthinking masses" which can be swayed by a powerful leader. To say to a man of the West that humans are "animals of the herd" is usually seen as an insult. Others would understand this statement to say something "true" or "real" about the species. (To say to a Western person, for example an American, that he is "not like other Americans" is usually taken as a compliment, whereas in other cultures to single someone out as a being "unlike" others of his group can be a cause for unease.)

The heroic figure in the Greek world (despite misinterpretations by the post-Christian West) is that figure who sacrifices his well-being and sometimes his life for the good of the whole. In the West we have an entirely different "hero": the lone figure who stands against the social whole in the name of his own individual perspective. Socrates, so often depicted as a Western hero, in actuality drinks the hemlock and refuses the offer to flee Athens for the good of the society which he has so annoyed. He has a dream in which he converses with the personification of the laws of Athens: he has been duly charged, according to the law, and found guilty, again, through every means

provided by the law. He has a right to defend himself against the charges and he even has a right not granted in the West: the right to propose alternative punishment for his act. The personification of the laws reminds Socrates that a society without laws cannot remain a society for long. "The law" reminds Socrates how he has benefited from that very law: his parents have received sanction from the state, thereby granting Socrates legitimacy as a citizen; it has given him an education, and, of his own accord, he has chosen to remain a citizen of Athens. Socrates does not die because he discounts the group, or its laws; he dies because that is the course determined for him by the law. The law and the group have precedence over the whims of an individual, no matter how well-intended.

My "interpretation" of Socrates is rarely encountered, but then who but Westerners are allowed to give interpretations of the Greek works? The Western "hero" tends to be the defiant individual - someone who stands up to and against the group or even the law. We find here a curious situation where both "evil" heroes as well as the "good" exist in the Western context: Jesus Christ and Billy the Kid. Jesus stands against his own people, the Jews, as well as the intruders, the Romans. Billy the Kid, even in Western psychological studies, is a psychopath. Both figures are kept alive through myth and legend in the West. The hero, as well as the anti-hero, appear to those from a different society to bear equal weight in the West.

In a group that defines the individual as a social being, ostracism, exclusion from the group, is a dreaded and extreme form of punishment. In a group that defines the individual as autonomous, ostracism might be a tragedy but never the ultimate punishment. The ostracized is, after all, left with his life. Ostracism, however, in the West, could be as severe as in other societies, if the individual was ousted from all of the Western societies. Socrates sees this clearly when he understands that being ousted from Athens would bring him no honor in other cities/states: one who was deemed threatening to the social order in one city would be so in another as well. He chooses to die for Athens.

Indigenous Americans, just as did the Greeks, found their codes of conduct on the premise that humans are naturally social beings. Humans exist in the state of the "We." Indigenous peoples exist, however, within a colonial structure that adheres, not only to a different definition of what it is to be human, but to the very different social and moral codes that are based on that different definition. From an Indigenous perspective, Westerners are also a conglomeration of the We. The West simply seeks to deny this fact about human existence. Hence the difficulty encountered in the West in explaining or outlining social behavior.

Professional ethicists cannot agree on what constitutes a "right" action because they cannot agree on a foundation from which to derive their pronouncements. Religion is certainly not the answer. Religion, in actuality, has nothing to do with ethics. The religious relationship is between an individual and his god. If the individual commits "good" acts, they are incidental to that relationship. He acts "good" according to his god's standards in order to gain a reward from his god. If his god wishes him to "love his neighbor" he will do so but only until his god commands him to "slay every man, woman, and child." In a supposedly secular society there is no measure of one's actions

against the wishes of a god but there still remains the focus on the individual as the source of moral or legal behavior. The West prefers, overall, to believe that all human acts are a *choice*.

The ramifications of those choices, however, are tied to a set of rewards and punishments. Virtue as a reward in itself is not sufficient in the West as it was for the Greeks. Aristotle's *Ethics* are a prescription for the *internalization* of law or of proper social behavior. He offers no rewards and punishments for following or breaking the law. The West, on the other hand, both secular and Christian, bases its moral and legal foundations on the *externalization* of law or social behavior.

The law that is external is an artificial constraint placed on someone's behavior and enforced through the threat of punishment. An internal law is one that has been so assimilated into the individual's character that he is "a law unto himself." An example of internal and externalized laws can be drawn from one's actions at a traffic light. If one approaches a traffic light that requires one to stop one's vehicle at, say, 4 a.m., and one stops even if there is no one around, then one can see an internal law in action. The internal law says: "It is proper, rational, and good that individuals driving cars stop at traffic lights that so signal." Not to do so would probably not bring about immediate retribution from an external source if no one is about. However, the result of breaking one's own internalized law is guilt and shame. The external law, on the other hand, can be broken without any mental anguish: "It is stupid," could be the reaction of someone who adheres only to external laws, "to stop at a traffic light when there is no one about. What difference does it make?" Or, "Who cares?"

Aristotle's *Ethics* offers a recipe for the development of the *internal* law. He would have us develop this sense through the process of *habituation*. If, for instance, one wants to become an honest person, we become so through practicing honesty. Eventually one need no longer *practice* honesty; one has become *habitually* honest. Honesty becomes part of our character. In the beginning it is presumed that one had a role model for honesty or at least been taught the social definition of honesty.

Ultimately, the foundation for fostering the *internalization* of rules for "proper" social behavior is the assumption that (1) humans are social beings by nature, and (2) humans want to remain in the social group. Internalization of rules is a means of teaching social behavior used by those who subscribe to the sense of the human being as a *We*. Those who define the individual as an *I*, separate and apart from the group of which he is a member, use another form of maintaining social harmony: the threat of punishment brought about through the inability, or choice, not to follow the rules. This latter method of bringing about social harmony is also based on two essential assumptions: (1) that the individual is not "naturally" a social being, and (2) that a social identity, as well as social behavior, is artificially imposed upon the individual by others, that is, that such an identity or behavior is "unnatural."

The Native American, like the Greeks, relies on the internalization of rules for proper conduct; but unlike the Greeks, the Native American adds to the *We* definition of human beings the idea of *equality*. Many outside commentators on Native American lifeways have commented on this notion of equality – that it extends to children; that it

promotes an emphasis on consensual decision-making; that it extends even to an individual's actions toward the planet and its many life-forms.

Aside from a recognition of the *We*-factor in a Native American society, and the accompanying foundational beliefs of humans as wanting to remain as a part of the human society to which they belong, there is one more factor that accounts for the ethical system which the Native American once had as the dominant source of his actions (and in many cases still practices). He recognizes that he is a part of the Earth. He acknowledges that he is a part of a natural process that has led to his existence as well as to the existence of all other things, "animate" and "inanimate." (The terms are not relevant within a Native American context; all that exists is seen as participating in a life process.) The Native American recognizes his dependence on the Earth and the Universe. He recognizes no hierarchy of "higher" and "lower" or "simple" and "complex," and certainly not of "primitive" and "modern." Instead of hierarchies he sees *differences* which exist among equal "beings" (mountains, as well as water and air and plants and animals would be included here). The equality is based on the notion, often unstated, that everything that is, is of one process. The Native American, in other words, has a more inclusive sense of the *We* than others who share the sense of humans as *social* beings.

The combination of defining the human as a social being and denying any hierarchical systems, and a recognition of humans as a part of a greater whole, leads to a complete ethical system. This "complete" system includes not only one's behavior toward other individuals and to the society as a whole but toward the planet which has produced one and upon which one is dependent. For those who would raise objections to the validity or the durability of such an ethical system, it must be pointed out that Native American societies existed for tens of thousands of years and have not perished. Despite territorial wars and skirmishes between adjoining groups, when the European arrived on the American continents there was a vast diversity of peoples and languages. Had the Native Americans been as reckless as they are depicted there would have been less diversity. Even among those groups found to be existing in some form of hierarchical system (slave and free, which seemed to be practiced among the Aztecs and the Incas) there were highly ritualized rules for undertaking conquest and conduct in war. The Aztecs went so far as to set the boundaries for gains and losses by each side before going to war. Slavery in such societies was very different from that practiced by Europeans; under the Aztec rules of conduct in war, he who was free today could be a slave tomorrow, and vice versa. The rules of behavior also prescribed a method of dealing with the stranger: no early European colonizer could have survived without the hospitality and lessons in agronomy provided by the Indigenous peoples.

Just what, then, is this ethical system?

Each new human being born into a group represents an unknown factor to that group. The newborn does not come fully equipped to deal with his membership in the group; he must be taught what it is to be a *human* being in a very specific group. "He has never been here before," I have often heard in explanation of why the newborn must be taught. The newborn is at first merely *humanoid* – the group will give him

an identity according to their definition of what it is to be human. The primary lesson that is taught is that the individual's actions have consequences for himself, for others, for the world. The newcomer's *humanness* is measured according to how he comes to recognize that his actions have consequences for others, for the world. Usually an infant was accorded "human" status through a naming ceremony around the ages of 8 or 9. (Many anthropologists "explain," mistakenly, the naming ceremonies as a result of a low survival rate; that is, the infant was not given a "real" name until he appeared to have survived infancy.) It was at or around this age when it became obvious to the group that the infant had come to recognize his place as a member of the group. (A naming ceremony without some knowledge of the child's character would be somewhat premature given that names usually depicted character.)

The lessons included an enhanced perception of the needs and emotions of others as well as a keen perception of where the child was in the world (a sense of place). In a society of equals a proper perception of others is necessary. The term *autonomy* takes on a whole different meaning in this environment. In a society of equals no one can order another about. No one can be totally dependent upon another, as that would create an artificial hierarchy (the dependent and the independent) with all of its accompanying ramifications such as authoritarianism and lack of individual initiative. The autonomous person, in this environment, is one who is aware of the needs of others as well as being aware of what the individual can do for the good of the group. "Autonomy," in this case, would be defined as self-initiative combined with a high degree of self-sufficiency. For example, a simple but unstated rule of behavior is that I cannot ask another to do for me what I can do for myself. Another is that if I am not perceptive enough to discern the needs of another and that other is required to ask something of me, then I have somehow diminished the other's worth. If I tell another what to do or ask the other for something then I have diminished us both.

In a cross-cultural context this training leads to some misconceptions: a native student who is failing a class never asks the white teacher for help because it is obvious to the student that both he and the teacher know that he is failing but the teacher has failed to offer assistance. The teacher, in the student's view, may be seeking to punish the student's failure by forcing him to ask for help. Having to ask for help, on the other hand, diminishes a sense of self-sufficiency on the part of the student; it also puts into question the student's "place" in the group. "She knew I couldn't understand it and she ignored me!" The fact that the teacher is not a product of the same ethical and cultural system as the student does not occur to the student.

A heightened perception of the other as well as an awareness of the consequences of one's own actions is enhanced by offering the child choices. He can choose to bring his mother, who is busy gardening, a glass of water. His father may ask, "Shall we take her a glass of water?" The child must make a choice; he is aware of having made the choice; and he will be aware of the consequences of that choice for his mother and perhaps even his father. His parents (or aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents) may point out possible consequences of particular actions. An example from my own childhood shows this "pointing out" accompanied by "choice":

When I was a child my sister and I slept in a large old-fashioned bed with a high brass headboard. When my parents left the house we often used the bed as a trampoline (accompanied by my brother with whose welfare my sister and I had been entrusted). One day my father came home unexpectedly and stood in the doorway to watch our antics as gymnasts. During the first lull in our jumping he proceeded to come into the room to show us how the bed was constructed. He showed us sharp metal angles, narrow ledges which held up the metal springs underneath the mattress, and the seemingly small joints that held the bed together. He then proceeded to tell us about the consequences of falling on the floor as the bed collapsed. After pointing out all of the bed's features, he remade the bed and left the room. We three sat on the edge of the mattress thinking about what we'd been taught. My sister and I gave a few sitting jounces to the mattress. My brother took a practice jump. Wordlessly, we decided that we could find another form of entertainment.

My father forced a choice on us. If we continued to jump on the bed and it broke, it could not be replaced. If we fell we might suffer injury. There would be no sympathy accompanying that injury because it would have been "self-inflicted." I would be ashamed in the face of my father because "I knew better." I would, if I were injured in the face of all that information, be the only one responsible for my own condition. Choices and consequences.

By the time my own children reached their early teens I saw that they had absorbed a lesson that I had unconsciously taught them: that they are responsible for their choice of action. Once one of my sons tossed a basketball into a garage window when he was in the process of putting his things away so that we could go out for pizza. He proceeded to get a broom and began to sweep up the broken glass. "Just leave it," one of the younger children said to him. My son's reaction was to say that we were to go on without him. "My share of the pizza will pay for the glass pane," he said. Now his honor was at stake; no one dismissed his comment. I heard, instead, quiet murmurs from the other children. As recognition of my son's honorable action we saved him a piece of pizza and offered to help him replace the glass. "I will earn the money," he said. The situation ended there and he did fix the window.

My son's action was an illustration of what is meant when a Native American uses the term "autonomous." It is also what is meant when we apply the term "responsible." Or, when we are taught to be aware of the consequences of our actions on others. Going out for pizza was an expensive venture in my household at the time. The price of a broken windowpane was another expensive venture. My son's action — a careless toss of a basketball — had consequences that affected his family. No one would have thought of inflicting punishment on him; there was no need to. He was a human being; he knew what he had done, the consequences of what he had done, and he knew what had to be done to negate those consequences. There was no need for recrimination from any other quarter.

One often encounters a description of Native American cultures as being based on "shame" rather than "guilt." Actually both shame and guilt are a part of the internalization of rules of conduct. One experiences shame in the face of those who knew that the course of action would bring about specific consequences. One experiences guilt

when one confronts oneself. Shame and guilt, in a Western system of conduct, are emotions that are to be overcome. In a Native American society they are what call us to action.

Another description of the Native American is that "he has no conscience" (usually the judgment of Christian missionaries). The Western notion of conscience appears to be a lingering sense of guilt or shame. If that is the case then there is no conscience: unintended or unforeseen consequences as well as those seen and pursued demand reparation in a Native American ethical system. Once reparation has been made and acknowledged there is no need for lingering shame or guilt. If conscience, however, means something that calls us to action then it is wrong that Native Americans do not have a conscience. I know few Native Americans that would pursue a "successful American lifestyle" without the accompanying guilt that results because they have more than others. Western conscience appears to have more to do with personal matters than with concern over the consequences of their actions for others. A good example of this is the current concern over "environmental ethics."

Americans agonize over the continued destruction of clean air and clean water, over the diminishing forests, over rising suburbanization. They do not agonize over the fact that their own "superior" technology and their own "needs" have created that condition. The rising misery of people in the so-called Third World is largely the result of people displaced from a once self-sufficient lifestyle. They are displaced because their own government has chosen to appropriate the land so that goods might be produced for the "developed" world's needs. The Brazilians do not cut down the rain forest for their own needs; they cut it down for the needs of "modern" societies. One official from a developing country explained to me that if they did not cut down their own trees (or mine their own ores, or create modern enclaves) the developed nation would take over the country and do these things themselves with perhaps greater misery imposed on his country's people.

"Environmental" ethics, in the West, is about "respecting" the rights of trees, and lions, and future generations. It is not ever about a concern that the cheap cup of coffee is purchased with the misery of a coffee plantation worker. Or that the displacement of peoples from rural ("undeveloped") areas into overcrowded urban areas is not "progress" except for a very few. The peoples of the developed nations are quick to see the profit in a global economy but discount the possible dire consequences to the laborers in the plantations and *maquiladoras* that are drawn off their land to produce for the wealthy. They can discount these consequences because they are convinced that it is better for Natives or peasants to have "jobs" than for them to persist in lifestyles that have allowed them to survive for thousands of years without destruction of their lands, water, or air.

In a Native American ethical system, the actions of an individual are like the pebble dropped into a pond. The pebble creates far-reaching ripples throughout the entire pond. The American prefers the analogy of human beings as people aboard a ship in a vast sea. The ship is held together, we can assume, by a single authority – the captain. The "ripples" of the ship proceed, in this analogy, into infinity. There are no consequences, if only people would just take orders. The greatest accomplishment that has resulted from the entire ecological movement is the development of what is called the

"environmental impact statement." The impact statement is an attempt to understand that there are far-reaching consequences to one's actions. Unfortunately, what the impact statement forbids in one place is usually wreaked upon another. But it is a start.

The greatest advance that could be made in ethical systems in the West would be a recognition of the We-factor. If one imagines the We in a circle of its own unity surrounded by circles maintaining their own unity, perhaps the concept of human action as a pebble dropped into a pond would have more meaning. No pebble can be dropped into a pond without its ripples encountering other ripples and those ripples having other consequences through their encounters. Instead, the I-society prefers to picture itself as the captain in the single ship superior to and disconnected from all other things.

The idea that the planet requires a certain degree of "biodiversity" for its well-being has captured the imaginations of scientists and laymen. The fact that the diversity of human lifestyles might also contribute to that necessary biodiversity has not sunk in yet. The planet can afford to have one group maintain a self-absorbed society (the I-society) but only if others are allowed to survive that follow other lifestyles. The I, in other words, can survive and persist only if there is a recognition that it is not isolated from the others.

The I-society imagines the construction of a massive singular, "monocultural," society made up of only Is each pursuing their own individual interests in "healthy" competition with all of the other Is. Carved, as if in stone, on the inside of the foreheads of Western peoples, I imagine the words, "Each man acts so as to enhance his own self-interest." Carved inside my own forehead are two simple letters, W and E. And that WE can be either exclusive (Apache; Native American) or all-inclusive to encompass the many and diverse peoples and their particular homelands. The I-society has no homeland. It sees itself as owner of a lifeless planet, without boundaries, without limitations.

The definitions which humans assign to unknown processes are not meaningless intellectual acts. The definitions seem to predicate or dictate certain and unavoidable behaviors. If I believe in, for example, and act on, the definition of a human being as "that which acts only in its own self-interest," I will proceed to act on and treat others based on that slogan. Definitions tend to be self-fulfilling. They are so because they serve as the foundational justifications for all subsequent actions. The We and the I produce different lifestyles, different ethical systems, different worlds.