The Nature of Ethical Systems

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In most ethical decision-making one person judges from one bias against another person with their bias. That is, I begin by assuming the correctness of my own thinking and evaluate all contenders using the standard of what seems right to me. This biased approach usually is simply a naive assumption. But philosophers have refined this approach in technical ethical studies and sociologists use the same approach in social theory. It is referred to as personally warranted belief or utilitarian egoism.

In social relations this often results in the question "whose pressure or arguments do you agree with?" It does not often result in a unitary framework for teaching to children, since agreement is rarely reached on a very widespread basis.

A special case of this fragmentation is deconstructionism via Derrida, Foucalt, and Rorty (1982). In deconstructionism no bias is taken except to be critical of all biases, believing there is no foundational value or truth possible. This critical approach often is useful to show weak points in arguments, but it is no help in building a positive case.

What is needed is a point of objectivity wherein our minds encounter a real world. There have been many claimants to have found such a point. Some people think the best alternative is relativistic pragmatism. This is the position of many contemporary philosophers, although only a few are consistently ready to say there is no right or wrong. Most who claim to be relativists still wish to avoid harm or pain and wish to live under a system of social law. Thus, they are cultural or social relativists. Of course the exact ethical base may change from person to person or society to society in this approach (Gutmann, 1986 - State of Families). In modern terms this form of social pragmatism is called post-modernism.

Other people think there is something more objective on which to base ethics but still use social or legal bases for their determinations. This could result in a cultural pragmatism or national regulation

which says "this is right in this time and place, although it may change tomorrow or elsewhere." Most countries of the world have a national educational curriculum and a central educational authority. This may be the most consistent position with the current legal processes of the United States.

A variation on cultural regulation is to think that the regulations are based on some absolute, whether that absolute is thought to be simply a matter of fact, a metaphysical truth, or a spiritual truth. This is where many people appreciate Kohlberg, for he thinks there are ethical absolutes with which people with sixth stage moral thinking have come into contact.

This position raises once again the question of "how do you know which is the real absolute?" Kohlberg uses the factual approach of looking at the common ethical assertions of the best respected people of history: Socrates, Jesus, Buddha, Gandi, etc. But this just raises the questions of why choose these people, and why use a "great minds" type of consensus. Kohlberg offers little to defend his choices.

However, Power and Kohlberg (1986) suggest that schools must do more than transmit values. They must become just communities which demonstrate via the hidden curriculum (built in values of the school system) that moral standards exist and must be followed. This takes the discussion beyond the question of which values should be taught to actually expecting positive moral behavior from the students and teachers.

Another approach within the absolutist group is to see if social consensus is possible. Is there some set of truths or ethical thoughts by which all people would be willing to live? This approach is found in some of the great religions of the world and in the United States and United Nations founding documents. But this is hard to apply to local settings and, because of its wide spread social foundation, is usually inappropriate to develop much depth.

Finally, there are many people who believe that there are ethical absolutes and that we can know these absolutes and hence derive a workable system of ethics, whether we come to know them through divine revelation or by natural law. They think that some agreeable base can be developed which is compatible with U.S. law.

The great questions for each system of thought, excluding the deconstructionists who offer no system, are:

1. can you offer a description of your ethical system which seems to make sense and to fit our intuitive choices;

2. can you articulate a theory of axiology which gives the foundation for the ethical system; and

3. can you give criteria which will result in justification or warrant for your system?

The criteria given for such systems will vary in keeping with the nature of the system offered, which in turn depend on philosophical values or axiology. In this way, the method of value assessment depends on the choice of world view or philosophy.

Defining a system thus depends on philosophical conclusions or a description of a mutually acceptable world view.