g into a moral thicket without such reliable guides.
o like to acknowledge Frank Lynch, whose adroitly organized
ohnson Web site <*http://www.samueljohnson.com/*> is a great
ack down an elusive bit of wisdom from the Great Cham. And
yself lucky to work with my agent, David McCormick, who
pe not just the sale but the book itself.

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# Why Ethics, Why Now?

*He that is most deficient in the duties of life makes some atonement for his faults if he warns others against his own failings, and hinders, by the salubrity of his admonitions, the contagion of his example.*

SAMUEL JOHNSON: *RAMBLER* #14 (MAY 5, 1750)

## Why Ethics, Why Me?

I am an accidental ethicist.

I do not have a doctorate in philosophy. I've not taught ethics at any university. I have no ethicist credentials. I am a writer whose essays and fiction have appeared in many magazines and several books. I've written for *Late Night with David Letterman* and other television shows. I studied music in college, attending graduate school as a composition student, a field for which I am singularly unsuited.

None of this deterred the editors of the *New York Times Magazine,* who, early in 1999, asked if I'd like to discuss a weekly feature to be called "The Ethicist." Note that this is the title of the column, not the profession of its author. The idea for the column, now carried by many newspapers, as "Everyday Ethics" originated at the magazine. I believe that when the editors were planning it, they discussed several people who might write it, some of whom were true professionals, university professors mostly. As I understand it, they concluded that, in a democracy, ethics ought not be a specialized field, but should comprise a set of questions every ordinary citizen can—must—address. I think I met their definition of an "ordinary citizen," and one who might make the discussion illuminating, the analysis thoughtful, and the prose lively. At

least, that's what I try to do, and if I can present the questions in a way that lets the reader see them afresh, I'm pleased. (And I take some comfort in reminding myself that *Cat Fancy* magazine is not written by a cat.)

Several candidates were invited to audition for the job. We were each given the same three letters to respond to. Here is the first test letter:

> As I was dropping a memo on a colleague's desk, I glanced—inadvertently, I promise—at her computer screen and saw my name. She had written an e-mail to our boss deftly attributing the failure of a recent project to me. That was a rash overstatement, but how can I defend myself without acknowledging my inadvertent e-mail read?

It's a cunning problem, raising issues of privacy, deceit, and self-interest, all faced by a person who'd already acted imperfectly. I found it intriguing to try to devise an answer that could balance conflicting ethical principles and personal desires. (To see my reply, go to page 72.)

I would, of course, feel better about the job if I had a Ph.D. (And a nicer apartment. And one of those neat little sports cars. It may not be directly related to the work itself, but it couldn't hurt.) It is always better to know more. However, one function of such credentials is to help a prospective employer predict how well one will do in the job, much as the SATs are meant to assist college admissions officers by predicting how well a student will perform freshman year. Once one has been on the job for a couple of years, such credentials may no longer be germane. In fact, looked at with perhaps excessive generosity, there is an unexpected advantage to my lack of formal training. The reader must consider not my credentials but my argument, and be persuaded—or unpersuaded—by that. I can make no appeal to my own authority.

It is also true that ethics is not physics. While the latter has a body of knowledge and a methodology accepted by all practitioners, the former does not. Every physicist must know mathematics, general science, and the history of his own field. Every physicist must practice the scientific method. However, any discussion of ethics will come down to the values of the writer and how clearly and persuasively he can articulate those values and apply them to the particular scenario under discussion.

That is to say, ethics is an ideal subject for the general reader and the gen eral writer, and perhaps that is what the *Times* editors concluded whe assigning me the column.

Or perhaps there was some kind of clerical error.

Or perhaps writing for David Letterman is not such unlikely train ing for writing about ethics as it might first appear. A case could be mad that *Late Night* was an essentially moral enterprise, one that encourage its writers to subject their work to ethical scrutiny.

To begin with, *Late Night* was based on a coherent thesis: You childhood has been bought and sold for profit, and as a consequence yo grew up in a world of witless pop-culture junk. If the show was abou anything, it was a critique of that culture, especially television. The shov was built around a sense of right and wrong, and its mission was to ar ticulate the difference between the two (sometimes through the use o glamorous actresses and trained circus animals).

This task was to be undertaken in honorable ways, governed by im plicit guidelines for the writers. Most comedy attacks; the importan question is whom do you attack and why? Dave intended the show t assail the wicked and powerful, not bully their victims. It was his polic that we attack someone only for what he does (e.g., his inept acting), nc for what he is (a guy with a big hideous nose). That is, we are free to at tack that which is volitional but not those things over which a person ha no control.

If Dave, and the show, sometimes fell short, well, so do we all, bu his moral intent was always present. Dave lived in a moral universe. H saw the show, and its staff, as subject to moral scrutiny. And while I can really know the source of his values—he was my boss, not my pal— seemed that he would have felt ashamed to do anything that would hav disappointed his mother. Like most of us, he tried to live the values o which he was raised.

And so perhaps I am, despite myself, a highly trained, albeit inad vertent, ethicist, lucky enough to have an opportunity to see what eth ical questions are on the minds of readers and to grapple with thos fascinating problems. The column and the correspondence it generate have given me a vantage point from which to observe the moral land scape. This is how it looks from here.

# What Ethics? The Most Frequently Asked Ethical Question

That a newspaper feature about ethics has become popular is gratifying if somewhat mysterious. My first thought was that ethics is popular for the same reason antique furniture is popular: One sees so little of it. But as I continued in this work, it became apparent that those writing the letters had a sincere interest in the question of how to be good, not as an abstract matter, but in deciding how to respond to the conundrums of daily life.

The query I receive most often by far is "Do You Tell?" in all its variations—about the infidelity of a friend's spouse, the kickbacks extorted by a coworker, the shoplifting of a granny in a grocery store. These sort of Duty to Report questions are of continuing interest to my readers. They are tough questions, forcing one to find a balance between the socially beneficial effects of minding one's own business, so essential to a tolerant society, and the deleterious effects of ignoring wrongdoing, which can lead to a corrupt society indifferent to the suffering of others.

While laws vary—and I should say, not for the last time, that I am not a lawyer and do not purport to give legal advice—an ordinary civilian is seldom legally obliged to report a crime. Some professionals do have an affirmative duty to do so: Physicians are generally required to report a suspected case of child abuse, for example. But most people, in most places, have no such legal obligation.

The legal and the ethical are not necessarily synonymous—as I say, not for the last time—but the law is often worth noting as a guide to certain kinds of officially sanctioned behavior. And there are surely times when one has an ethical duty to call the cops—to avoid future wrongdoing, for example, particularly when it might lead to harm to another person. (If you saw someone heading for my house with a bomb, I hope you'd pick up the phone.)

Yet our culture seems ambivalent about this question. The whistle blower is a heroic figure, particularly in a David and Goliath story (particularly if David is Julia Roberts with her fabulous teeth and lingerie), the honest little guy takes on the big corporation. But much as we admire the whistle blower, we hate the squealer, the rat. "The Informer" is never a term of approbation, as Victor McLaglen discovered to his peril in John Ford's 1935 movie of that name. In part, this comes from a distrust of authority: We don't trust the cops; we'll settle this among ourselves. But it's more complicated than that.

These questions raise issues of loyalty, that dubious virtue. (Loyal to whom? Loyal to what?) We admire the courage of an undercover cop making war on the mob, but only as long as we see him as an outsider opposed to a despised group. We don't—*I* don't—admire the undercover FBI agent who "infiltrates" the civil rights movement.

And the cops (at least movie cops) certainly don't admire an undercover cop who is investigating them. In cop movies, no matter how pervasive the misdeeds in a corrupt precinct, no matter how sincere everyone's disdain for a crooked colleague, the Internal Affairs officer called in to investigate is treated with contempt; the blue wall of silence is sacrosanct. (Everybody was so mean to Al Pacino in *Serpico*.)

Perhaps the interest in these "Do You Tell?" questions reflects an admirable willingness on the part of my readers to grapple with tough questions. Or perhaps it is evidence of a nation that's grown too lazy to commit crimes of its own, instead wringing its hands over other people's chicanery. It's so much easier to watch than to do.

A pessimist would say we Americans have lost the gumption to get out there and have an affair or rob a convenience store. But I am not a pessimist. I know we are a vigorous people, and my mail confirms this, sometimes in frightening ways, via the next most common class of questions, rationalizations. Some people describe behavior they almost certainly know is wrong, hoping that I—or more precisely, the *New York Times*—will endorse their bad behavior, thereby absolving them. The typical letter begins, "I'm planning to get liquored up, steal a car, cram the trunk with illegal fireworks, and head for the beach at an excessive rate of speed and shoot a guy." Then come the mitigating details. "But lots of people do this, and I'm much more handsome than they are, plus I'm kind to animals and I really need the money, so isn't it okay?" Well, no. Still, it is a heartening trend. If more people would ask for the okay of the *Times* before doing wicked deeds, the world would be a tidier place. For one thing, that whole Watergate mess could have been avoided.

# Ethics and the Just Society

The mail sent to "The Ethicist" offers an impressive picture of people sincerely struggling to be good. But if these letters exist in the foreground, they imply a background of action without inquiry. For every question posed, there are many more that are never asked at all. It would, of course, be impossible to pause and question the propriety of each of our actions. Such constant analysis would be immobilizing, or at least so time consuming that we'd never get out of the house, stuck by the closet door as we pondered the acceptability of leather shoes. Rather than subject every decision of daily life to moral scrutiny, most of us act as our culture directs, behaving no better and no worse than our neighbors. In his profound and moving book, *The Face of Battle,* the British military historian John Keegan considers the question of why, when faced with the horror and suffering of combat, most soldiers don't simply run away. He concludes that they are motivated not by high ideals of patriotism, not by ideology, not by anything one would identify as ethics. Keegan sees these soldiers standing fast so as not to be the least worthy among those assembled. And by that he does not mean the entire army, but those few men nearby. Keegan suggests that even under the most extreme and appalling conditions, most of us will behave about as well as our neighbors.

Something similar has been observed in the early careers of police officers. If a rookie cop is assigned to a corrupt station house, he stands a good chance of being corrupted himself. Put the same young officer in a clean station, and there's a very good chance he'll turn out to be an honest cop. His or her personal ethics hardly come into it.

In *Fast Food Nation,* his muckraking book on the fast food industry, Eric Schlosser makes a related observation. He reports that a high percentage of the robberies committed against McDonald's and similar joints are perpetrated by former employees. Schlosser attributes this to a reaction to low pay, poor working conditions, the lack of a chance to advance, and union busting. He sees these crimes not merely as the perfidy of a sociopath who works the deep fryer, but as a predictable response to a deplorable (i.e., unethical) work environment. Schlosser cites a study by Jerald Greenberg, professor of management at the University of Ohio, an expert on workplace crime, who reports that "when people are treated with dignity and respect, they're less likely to steal from their employer. 'It may be common sense,' Greenberg says, 'but it's obviously not common practice.' The same anger that causes most petty theft, the same desire to strike back at an employer perceived as unfair, can escalate to armed robbery."

This is not to depreciate individual virtue, but we are unlikely to understand any behavior if it is seen only as a matter of individual moral choice detached from any social context. And we are unlikely to significantly increase honorable behavior if we rely only on individual rectitude. There is a kind of ecology of ethics. No matter how much you hector them, most Spartans will act like Spartans; most Athenians will act Athenian.

Just as individual ethics can only be understood in relation to the society within which it is practiced, it is also true that individual ethical behavior is far likelier to flourish within a just society. Indeed, it might be argued that to lead an ethical life one must work to build a just society. That is, if most of us will behave about as well as our neighbors, it is incumbent on us to create a decent neighborhood. Every community is dynamic—Sparta or *Late Night.* We not only live in it, but by our actions we create it. And as important, our community exists not only in the world but in our minds. It forms our values even as we shape its structures.

Sadly, the very idea of civic life is increasingly out of favor, superseded by the values of the marketplace, privatized. The idea of public life is generous, encouraging you to see yourself as living among other people, and to identify yourself as one of those others, with common purpose and problems. The marketplace is where interests clash: The buyer's low price is the seller's lost profit. Privatization is a world of antagonists at worst, of autonomous, isolated figures at best. But in an age where all of our lives are interconnected—in our economy, our infrastructure, even in our health—this notion of the lone cowboy is a fantasy.

Civic life is a public park, paid for by all of us, enjoyed by all of us. Its ethical necessities demand that we act in ways that make other people's happiness part of its use. Private life is a walled pool in your backyard. You need consider no one else, you need compassion for no one else: You can fill it with piranha if you like.

## My Ethics

When I respond to readers' queries, I work from this premise: Ethics is the rational determination of right conduct, an attempt to answer the question "How should I act now?" Ethics is not just knowing; it is doing. And so it is necessarily a civic virtue, concerned with how we are to live in society; it demands an understanding of how our actions affect other people. There can be solitary sin—you can sit at home alone and covet your neighbor's ox—but there is no solitary unethical behavior. If you want to be unethical, you've got to get up, get dressed, get out of the house, and actually try to con your neighbor out of his ox. That is, ethics isn't ethics until other people are involved.

In considering an ethical question, whether concerning the right conduct of an individual or the society within which we function, I refer to a set of principles I cherish as profoundly moral. This constellation of values includes honesty, kindness, compassion, generosity, fairness. I embrace actions that will increase the supply of human happiness, that will not contribute to human suffering, that are concordant with an egalitarian society, that will augment individual freedom, particularly freedom of thought and expression.

It can be difficult to satisfy any one of these principles without neglecting another. To answer an ethical question placed before me, I must mediate among them as if they were quarreling factions, each with its own demands. This is an approach to ethics that requires something like diplomacy among the competing principles. My challenge is to devise a course of action that best serves all of these clamoring constituencies. Is there such a course? What behavior comes closest? It is ethics as problem solving.

## Other People's Ethics

There are, of course, other ways to make ethical choices. One such method, transparency, advises us to act as if everyone in the community could see what we were doing. In a letter he wrote at Monticello on



May 21, 1816, Thomas Jefferson recommended this to his young friend Francis Eppes:

> Never suffer a thought to be harbored in your mind which you would not avow openly. When tempted to do anything in secret ask yourself if you would do it in public. If you would not be sure it is wrong.

This approach, tenaciously adhered to, would no doubt eradicate much bad behavior (and many naked aerobic workouts, if one were literal about the phrase "see what we were doing"). A limitation of this method is its essential conservatism. It does not encourage a rational system of decision making; it demands only that we live according to the conventions of our society. If you were a Hun and you indulged your taste for slaughter on horseback, Attila would love you, and your Hun buddies would admire you, but a thousand years later, you'd come in for a lot of criticism from many Americans. There is nothing in this approach that would stimulate reforms in Hun culture.

A system more amenable to reform is that of the heroic model. When in a quandary, ask yourself this: What would Lincoln do? The benefit of this strategy is that it makes possible the transformation of society. Lincoln was able to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. The unfortunate thing about this system is that Lincoln is never around when you need him. Lacking his profound moral understanding, it is difficult to know just what he'd say about your perplexing circumstances. And even if death were no barrier to some kind of phone call, Lincoln doesn't drive stick, or trade stocks on-line, or for that matter, know how to use a telephone. Would he be able to apply his genius to your particular problem?

We see a vivid example of the heroic model—albeit a fictional one—in Atticus Finch, that magisterial figure of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. In the book, and even more so in the movie where Gregory Peck's very tone of voice radiates compassion and understanding, Atticus Finch is presented as a thoroughly admirable man. He is wise. He is good. He is kind. And if everyone acted like Atticus Finch, segregation would still be the law of the land. His ethical behavior is applied only to the most immediate personal exchanges, the narrowest social encounters. It provides

him with no way to challenge the status quo. If an injustice is enshrined by custom, Finch accepts it. It is then called a way of life, and he treats it with the respect it requires to endure forever. Thus Finch might bravely represent the defendant at a trial steeped in racism, but he is unable to seek any real reform in the society that demanded this trial. We find in Atticus Finch the limitations of an ethics based on the heroic model, of transparency, and of an ethics divorced from politics.

Another ethical tool many people find helpful is the categorical imperative: Act as if everyone were to do as you do. It is, alas, not entirely reliable. If everyone followed your lead and went to the beach today, it would be pretty crowded. If everyone kissed your wife, you'd have to buy an enormous supply of Chap Stick. And yet kissing your wife, even at the beach, does seem a benign activity.

Some people employ the test of utilitarianism: Seek the greatest good for the greatest number. However, even if hanging an innocent guy in town square each day would deter crime, and thus do enormous good for the entire community, that hanged man is likely to object. People can be so selfish.

Unsurprisingly, the system of moral thought referred to by most of my correspondents is that of the religion in which they were raised, Christianity or Judaism more often than not. For many of these folks, there can be no ethical thought divorced from religion; the two are nearly synonymous. And while I was raised in an observant household (suburban Reform Judaism) and am undoubtedly affected by the experience, my approach to these questions is, at least overtly, resolutely secular.

## Mafia Ethics

Unlike these ethical systems, some make distinctions not on what one does but on who one is. The most familiar version of a moral code based on the actor not the action is Mafia ethics. Or at least Mafia movie ethics. The code runs like this: It's okay to lie and cheat and kill those outside the family, those who threaten the family, but you must be honest to those in the family. It's not what you do; it's to whom you do it.

The most glorified and revered version of this system is nationalism. Thou shalt not kill, except the enemy. And while even war itself has, to some extent, been regulated by a code of conduct proscribing particular actions for all, such efforts cannot eradicate the us-vs.-them assumptions that underpin nationalism.

The pettiest version of this system is at play on many a TV talk show. I worked at one such place where a writer was called on the carpet by the show's host for "offending the child of a celebrity." It wasn't that the writer had done anything particularly unpleasant, it was whose feathers he ruffled. Here is an ethic where the determining factor is not what is done, but who is doing it. If you kill a guy, it's bad. If Barbra Streisand kills a guy, it's magnificent and—in a just universe—Oscar-worthy. Unless she kills Steven Spielberg, in which case it's an unimaginably painful moral crisis, an unanswerable ethical question, and any talk show staff member who tried to resolve it would probably burst into flames.

Such deference to an aristocracy is strikingly un-American, in principle if not in practice. Equal protection under the law is a cornerstone of our society. Our legal system is meant to enunciate acts not actors. Robbing a bank is illegal for everyone. It doesn't matter who the robber is. Similarly, one does not consider who is acted upon. It is just as wrong to rob your grouchy next-door neighbor who runs his power mower at six in the morning as it would be to rob that attractive and amusing Cameron Diaz. Ethics considers actions.

Of course, we do have a persistent aristocracy of money. The rich get to do much more under our legal system, not officially but in fact, if only because it is they who can afford better attorneys. If we are going to operate this way, let's at least create an aristocracy worth having, not rich layabouts, not pretty-boy actors, not the feckless children of genuinely accomplished parents. In Japan, an adroit practitioner of an important art or craft can be declared a Living National Treasure, the human embodiment of a valued cultural heritage. Surely we could try something like that here. What this would mean is James Brown gets to run his car over anyone he likes: The man recorded "Cold Sweat" and "Got the Feeling" and "Sex Machine." He'd get a free pass. And while there are certainly disadvantages to such a system—particularly to the person who finds himself beneath the wheels of James Brown's Cadil-

lac—it represents a kind of moral progress from the current, nudge-and-wink system of a money aristocracy.

We are hardly the first culture to employ a two-tiered system. In ancient Mesopotamia, Babylon, Hammurabi's code made distinctions of social class and gender, writes Gerald LaRue in his essay "Ancient Ethics": "Personal injuries to members of the aristocracy called for the *lex talonis*, an eye for an eye. For injury to freemen and slaves, fines sufficed, and in the case of injury to a slave, the fine was paid to the master as recompense for damage to property." (*A Companion to Ethics.* Peter Singer, ed. p. 32)

## William Bennett's Ethics

In "Responsibility," the third chapter of *The Book of Virtues,* perhaps the bestselling book of ethics of the past several decades, William Bennett takes another approach as he explicates The Three Little Kittens:

> Children should learn early the practical lesson that responsibility leads to reward, which leads to further responsibility. We must keep track of our mittens if we expect pie, and then we must wash them if we expect ever to have any more dessert.

By "practical" Bennett seems to mean "profitable"—not so much right behavior as behavior that will get those kittens what they want, and by dint of their own kittenish efforts. It is a curious notion of "virtue," although any kitten raised according to the stern precepts of this book will make an excellent employee someday. If I ran a mitten laundry, I'd hire that kitten.

It is interesting to read Bennett's book eight years after its enormously successful publication because in many ways, it is a precursor to "The Ethicist." Both *The Book of Virtues* and "The Ethicist" discuss the ethical implications of brief stories: the latter in the actual accounts readers send me, the former in the diverse moral tales Bennett has anthologized. Both apply to these particular examples general rules of conduct, and both reflect the very different values of their authors. In Bennett's case, the values are Victorian and the tone is cranky nostalgia. In just the first few pages, he mentions "time-honored tasks," material that school homes, and churches "once taught" and that "many no longer do." H wistfully invokes "a time—not so long ago."

Bennett admires his own courage as he knocks down modern stra men: "I know that some of these stories will strike some contempora sensibilities as too simple, too corny, too old-fashioned." He sniffs at th newfangled soft target, television, asserting that "Nothing in rece years, on television or anywhere else, has improved on a good story th begins 'once upon a time . . .' " So much for all contemporary literatur drama, film, and some quite terrific stuff that's run on TV.

As Bennett notes, there are various lessons to be drawn from an story, and it is often interesting to see which one he emphasizes. For in stance, to him John Henry is a story of courage and pride. But while would have gladdened the heart of, say, Andrew Carnegie, if each of h employees had seen it that way—choosing in the face of dreadful work ing conditions not to petition for improvements, but to work harde even to work themselves to death—the United Mine Workers, for ex ample, might read this story differently.

But then, Bennett's heart is with the boss not the worker (unless th worker is working himself to death), with the general not the troops. I his chapter on courage, Bennett presents an excerpt from the last lette of Robert Scott, the British Antarctic explorer: "The causes of the dis aster are due not to faulty organization, but to the misfortune in all risk which had to be undertaken." Scott led his party to ruin; every man o his push to the Pole died. (Amundsen's expedition not only beat Scott t the Pole, but every member survived.) That Scott possessed physica courage cannot be denied, but is this the lesson to draw from his story Might one not learn about inept leadership, a cavalier attitude towar other people's lives, and a nearly criminal vanity?

One can't quite shake the feeling that Bennett is inviting us readers t think of ourselves as courageous people who'd do well in a crisis. Such flattering image allows us to go about daily life less scrupulously than w perhaps should, like an out-of-shape boxer who ambles through the earl rounds, confident that he can make it all good with a knock-out in th tenth. However, real virtue lies not in heroically saving poor orphar from burning buildings but in steadfastly working for a world where or

phans are not poor and buildings have decent fire codes. *The B of V*'s hero is Horatio at the Bridge; "The E's" is Horatio at the Office Filling Out His Time Sheets Honestly Even When His Supervisor Is Not Around.

Citing only ten virtues, Bennett still finds room for Loyalty, that quality so prized by dog fanciers and Richard Nixon. And while Bennett mentions that one can be loyal not just to a person but to an ideal, his stories tend to celebrate personal loyalty—Castor and Pollux, Penelope and Odysseus, the Little Hit Man That Could Have (But Did Not) Rat Out His Capo (I may be misremembering that last one). And if loyalties occasionally clash, he is sanguine about how easily such conflicts can be resolved: "The times when one cannot stand both 'for God *and* for country' are rare indeed." This curious assertion would startle those Americans who opposed the Vietnam War, or the abolitionists in the early nineteenth century, or those fighting for women's suffrage in the early twentieth.

Of course, the virtues Bennett wishes to instill in the young are fine things. We all honor work and honesty, compassion and friendship. However, we do not all see virtue as an accretion of cowboy qualities, practiced by solitary and disconnected figures. For "The Ethicist" virtue resides in how we behave among others; it is a quality not just of individuals but of the societies they create. *The Book of Virtues* is the champion of individual rectitude. "The Ethicist" sees honorable behavior reflected in, affected by, and helping to bring about an honorable society. But I do want that pie, and so I will wash my mittens.

## Law Book Ethics

Many ethical systems, both secular and sacred, delineate good conduct as a list of do's and don'ts. This sort of moral rule book is seen in most professional codes of conduct—medical ethics, legal ethics; even interior designers have a formal code. The rule of law is itself based on this approach. When it achieves nobility and grandeur, our legal system is not just the codification of self-interest, it is a guide to right conduct with a coherent moral base.

This approach, too, has its limitations. For one thing, it is impossible to stipulate every possible human action. If such a taxonomy of behavior attempts to regulate every conceivable interaction, it become unwieldy and overly specific. If it articulates more general laws, it ca end up so vague as to become less a guide to good behavior than a stimulus to disputation.

Another limitation, the proscriptions are specific, the prescription are vague. Thou shalt not kill is about as clear as can be. However "lov thy neighbor as thyself" is so vague as to be useless, ordering merely general sense of: Be compassionate. We're provided with clear order about how not to be bad, but we're given little specific informatio about how to be good. Neither law nor theology includes many injunctions as direct as this: Thou shalt mow thy neighbor's lawn if he's laid u with a bad back because he slipped a disc when he tried to move a piano himself because he was too cheap to call a real moving company.

Consider that most often invoked code of conduct, the Ten Commandments. Given the frequent call to post this list in the classroom, i is a curious guide to student behavior.

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness.
10. Thou shalt not covet.

The first four Commandments—40 percent of the list—consist o God talking about himself. (You'd think being God would give Hin some confidence, but no; despite His widespread popularity—people d

worship Him—He's as jittery and insecure as Marilyn Monroe.) Surprisingly, for a code so central to several monotheistic faiths, the first Commandment does not ban other gods, just assigns them a secondary rank: no other gods *before* Him. Surely this is, if not an invitation to, at least an acknowledgment of, polytheism. These are interesting strictures, but not all that useful to a student wondering if it's okay to download a prewritten essay from the Internet.

Number seven, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," presumably has little relevance in the third grade, what with so few of the kids being married.

Number ten, "Thou shalt not covet," is less a guide to behavior than a recommended attitude: Don't be jealous. Easy to say. Certainly a worthy goal. But can it be achieved as an act of will?

The fifth Commandment, honor your parents, if read to refer to all those in authority, does have something to say to a student: Treat your teachers with respect. As do numbers six, eight, and nine. "Thou shalt not kill." "Thou shalt not steal." "Thou shalt not bear false witness." Certainly these four precepts would be endorsed by most of us. Indeed, so broadly are they accepted that we hardly need a biblical injunction to embrace them. One wonders why there is such determination to see these ideas expressed as religious doctrine.

By articulating general ethical principles, the Commandments provide rather a meager guide to right behavior in school. What about treating your fellow students with civility? Valuing learning for its own sake? Being kind? Or these modest but nonetheless useful ideas: No hitting? Do your best? Seek the truth? Don't be a bully? Be kind to even the least popular kids? Easy on the sex and drugs until you get a little older? Don't make a big mess in the cafeteria for others to clean up?

Perhaps its enthusiasts wish to post the Ten Commandments on the classroom wall not for pedagogical but for symbolic purposes, as a statement of American values, much as we display the American flag and the image of George Washington; not to instruct but to declare. But that other American value, the separation of church and state, might encourage us to find a more secular expression of these ideals.



## Relationships and Obligations

Regardless of what system of ethics one employs, it will be severely tested by the behavior of actual human beings, who seldom behave as systematically as the code by which one strives to assess them. For one thing, our sense of ethical obligation is very much affected by relationship of the people involved. You have a different set of responsibilities to your children than you do to your boss or to a customer in your shop or to a stranger on the street. These obligations are often unspoken, and hence we may not all agree what they are, leading to confusion and conflict. Further, these relationships, and their attendant obligations, are often multiple and hence contradictory: They overlap or clash. Your boss is also, to some degree, your friend. The shopkeeper's daughter goes to school with your son. In many situations, it is hard to know whether to kiss or to kick.

It is not the ethicist but the novelist who most skillfully limns the complex and subtle relationships and the unspoken obligations that bind people together. The ethicist is obliged to provide a concise and direct answer to the questions put to him, one that applies a broadly applicable principle. This means employing the approach of the lawyer, invoking the proper general rule—a rule that could be applied to every similar case—and so necessarily advising: You shouldn't shoot the guy. It would, however, be more congenial to me to employ the methods of the novelist, seeking not for the general but the particular. To do this, the column would have to be much longer, not so much for my answers, but so the questioner could present a more richly detailed picture of his situation. If I knew more about the complicated people involved, their long and tangled history, the mitigating circumstances and painful emotional blows, the financial pressures the cousin was under, the medical problems of the aunt, the romantic betrayal of the brother-in-law, the hundred ameliorating circumstances and exacerbating conditions, maybe the most honorable advice I could give would be: Shoot the guy. But you can't do that in four hundred words. That's why we read novels. And have gun control laws.

And so, considering one particular relationship, should you not have

the same ethical obligations to any child you see on the street that you have toward your own? You have no more right to treat a strange child unkindly, but clearly you feel a more tender attachment to the child you know. Not necessarily a bad thing. You do indeed have a particular responsibility to that child. While it is fitting—indeed, inevitable—that you would feel a profound affection and sense of obligation to your own child, one must also deal honorably with strangers. One must be wary of an ethics that is based not on what we do but to whom we do it.

## Is Ethics Etiquette? Is Ethics Politics?

Some forms of etiquette can be seen as ethics practiced on the small scale—in the number of people involved, in what's at stake. Much that is dismissed as mere etiquette does indeed have a moral foundation. (I take up this question more fully in the chapter "Social Life.") One way to understand right conduct is to imagine it on a continuum—etiquette, ethics, politics. And indeed, sometimes the column has been criticized for conflating ethics and politics. But I maintain that the difference between the two is artificial, if indeed there is a significant difference at all.

Sometimes, as with etiquette and ethics, the distinction is a matter of scale. If one guy robs you, it's ethics, but when 435 people rob you, it's politics—or the House of Representatives is in session. But surely the deliberations of that body are subject to an ethical analysis.

Politics can be a necessary expression of ethics: Often the only way to achieve an individual ethical goal is through group endeavor, i.e., politics.

Some political questions are not essentially ethical but a matter of two competing interests each with a morally legitimate claim. For instance, there is that cowboy movie classic: Should the land be used by the cattle herders or the sheep herders? There is a kind of partisan politics that an ethicist should, of course, eschew, no matter his personal feelings about cows. However, it is also his job to point out that the land belongs to the Navajo, and both the cattle and sheep herders should get permission before any grazing takes place. That is where what some call politics is quite properly a subject for ethical scrutiny.

An ethics that eschewed such nominally political questions woul
not be ethics at all, but mere rule following. It would be the ethics of th
slave dealer, advocating that one always be honest about a slave's healt
and always pay his bills promptly. But surely any ethics worth discussin
must condemn the slave trade absolutely, not quibble about its busines
practices.

## Ethics and Incompetence

Much of the world's misery can be traced not to a lack of virtue but t
a lack of ability—not wickedness but ineptitude. The transportation sys-
tem that mires you in traffic for an hour while thousands of cars spev
pollutants, the leaky pipe at the nuclear power plant, the witless sitcon
are not the work of evil people but of maladroits. And this is a sad thing
To be a great villain requires intelligence and skill and clarity of vision
qualities in short supply. Shakespeare's Richard III was a man of mag-
nificent towering wickedness; Captain Joseph Hazelwood, the skippe
of the Exxon *Valdez*, was a doofus. Great evil is achieved by few, bu
bungling is accomplished by many. Fortunately, we live in a natior
where one must not choose between these two qualities; indeed, w
sometimes find both within a single person, often with a Washingtor
address.

It is possible for ineptitude to become evil. When you realize tha
you are not likely to excel in a position of responsibility and seek it ou
of vanity, your fumbling is transmuted into iniquity. Incompetence is un-
ethical when it involves the casual use of duct tape in a bypass operatior
because somebody sipped malt liquor and dozed through key lessons ir
medical school. Persisting as a foul-up heart surgeon is not merely inept
it is wicked. To fulfill certain obligations one must perform ably or ste
down.

There are other times when one must allow for innocent error
rather than pounce on them as an opportunity to make a few bucks
When you notice someone drop his wallet, you don't swipe the cash
When you get the wrong change, you inform the cashier. This is not jus
a matter of ethics but of civility. It would be exhausting to live in a worl

where one slipup meant death or replacing all your credit cards. Living an ethical life obliges us to tolerate imperfections in others (and to hope others will tolerate our own).

## Ethics and Intent

No one deliberately sets out to become incompetent, but ethically, would it matter if someone did? Well, yes. In ethics intent counts. (This same principle appears throughout our legal system, where, for example, a distinction is made between negligence, manslaughter, and various degrees of murder, distinctions all having to do not with the act itself but with the intent of the actor.) There is a very different ethical meaning if I accidentally drop my bowling ball out the window than if I deliberately hurl it from the window to smite James Brown walking below, so angry am I at what he's been doing with that car of his. Although why I was bowling in my apartment to begin with is a reasonable question, and one my downstairs neighbors frequently ask. Samuel Johnson put it this way:

> The morality of an action depends on the motive from which we act. If I fling half a crown to a beggar with intention to break his head, and he picks it up and buys victuals with it, the physical effect is good; but, with respect to me, the action is very wrong. So, religious exercises, if not performed with an intention to please God, avail us nothing. As our Savior says of those who perform them from other motives, "Verily they have their reward."

This view is not universally held. Samuel Butler argued against it in *The Way of All Flesh:* "The more I see the more sure I am that it does not matter why people do the right thing so long as they do it, nor why they may have done wrong if they have done it. The result depends upon the thing done and the motive goes for nothing." (as quoted by Singer, p. 93)

And certainly, it may matter little to the recipient of charity what motivated the donor. Did she contribute a vast sum to build a new hospital out of piety, out of vanity, out of remorse for her tobacco company wealth, in pursuit of a tax break? To the utilitarian—or the patient—th[e] important thing is the act itself. The motives are between the donor an[d] her conscience and perhaps her therapist and accountant. Indeed, muc[h] of our legal system is designed to encourage or discourage particular acts. It doesn't matter to a state trooper if you obey the speed limit out of [a] sense of civic obligation or out of a fear of getting a ticket.

Even Johnson himself is oddly contradictory on this question, as w[e] see in this conversation with Boswell about the social harm wrought b[y] the writings of Rousseau:

> BOSWELL: I don't deny, Sir, but that his novel may, perhaps, do harm; but I cannot think his intention was bad.
>
> JOHNSON: Sir, that will not do. We cannot prove any man's intention to be bad. You may shoot a man through the head, and say you intended to miss him; but the Judge will order you to be hanged. An alleged want of intention, when evil is committed, will not be allowed in a court of justice. Rousseau, Sir, is a very bad man. I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation, than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years. Yes, I should like to have him work in the plantations.

So where does that leave us? Doing the right thing for the wrong reason? Doing the wrong thing for the right reason? It leaves us with the ethical obligation not to be a boob. It is not enough to be well intentioned; one must strive to put those intentions into action in a capable way. One must consider the effect his actions will have on others. Looked at like this, to persist in ignorance is itself dishonorable.

## Ethics and Dr. Johnson

Perhaps it is because I operate without reference to a formal system of ethics that I am drawn to a great moralist who did likewise, although it is true that what I sometimes do out of ignorance Samuel Johnson did

out of inclination. Still, Johnson wrote from no particular system, although a strong and coherent sensibility emerges from his writing, particularly in his two series of essays, *The Rambler* and *The Idler.* He is informed by a knowledge of life, an understanding of the human heart, a love of sociability, a generosity of spirit, and an intimate awareness of life's hardships ("Human Life is everywhere in a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed"). It is a bleak view of life for so wise and good a man. ("The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure but from hope to hope.") And if from our point of view, 250 years after his writing, he appears to be wrong at times, he is right as often as any person can be. While I cannot hope to be like him, this immortal genius, I can be grateful to him and strive to learn from his writing and his example.

Articulating no formal system, Johnson is very much a man of his time. He is informed by his Christianity, and shares the devotion of many of his contemporaries to an inflexible social order, a society dominated by a hereditary aristocracy, what Johnson called "subordination." However, his openheartedness and beneficence everywhere prevail. Despite his conservative leanings, he was quick to recognize the merit of others. And while he reveals a lamentable double standard about sexual behavior, finding adultery tolerable, albeit regrettable, in men but anathema in women, it is also true that he delighted in the company of women of accomplishment. Unlike his friend and biographer, James Boswell, Johnson took genuine pleasure in bluestocking society. For all Johnson's conservative—and sexist—proclamations, he treated people as individuals and was proud of his ability to converse easily and pleasurably with all whom he encountered.

It is Johnson's kindness and vitality that make him so appealing. He was bursting with life: While in his sixties, he joined some school boys in rolling down a hill; when quite elderly he stood up at a dinner for Captain Cooke to demonstrate the locomotion of a kangaroo by hopping around the room. He was, above all, the most sociable of men. "I consider a day lost," he said, "when I do not make a new acquaintance." As a consequence, his contemporaries didn't just respect him as the great moralist of his day, they loved Dr. Johnson.

To Johnson, matters of morality were not abstractions, they were



immediate questions of how to live among others, and he enjoyed applying his prodigious learning and intelligence to the practical problems of daily life. There are narrower people who practice ethics without affection—little, crabbed people who need to be in the right, who adhere to social rules to feel themselves superior to others, who enforce moral precepts to avenge themselves on their antagonists or to air a grievance in disguise. But to Johnson, ethics was an instrument of benevolence and civility, an expression of our humanity.

## Ethics and Authors

> *Be not too hasty . . . to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality; they discourse like angels, but they live like men.*
>
> SAMUEL JOHNSON, *RASSELAS*