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Ethical Living in an Unethical Empire

by Jacob Albaugh

(Philosophy 1110)

ABSTRACT

M*orality. Ethics.* We are categorized by ideas. Whether our lives are lived in ignorance of these concepts, in denial of these concepts or in constant pursuit of them, we are categorized by these ideas. It has become more apparent as I have taken my Ethics course this summer that I want to live in a way that allows me to live a good life. This specific Ethics course has made me think, and most importantly, it has made me think about my thinking. I chose the topic, “Ethical Living in an Unethical Empire” because it is something I have currently been wrestling with during my personal time, often spent alone with my brain in my bed, or with select friends on a porch, with a beer and with a (un-ethically) smoldering cigarette.

Three questions have emerged from my thought patterns of late:

How am I supposed to live ethically in society if it is an unethical beast?

Am I required to be the fuel of an unethical engine?

Can fuel be ethical while stimulating an unethical machine?

We are categorized by these ideas: *Ethical, Unethical, Moral, and Immoral*. I have some opinions about being categorized, but that is for another essay to describe. In this essay, I will establish the importance of realization in regards to the ethical state of one’s habitat. I will then clarify the unethical state the United States of America reside in using various moral theories. I will finally, in hope of optimism, establish a general method by which one can attempt ethical living within an “Unethical Empire”.

IMPORTANCE

Most importantly, we must first decipher the importance of understanding our environment before we can live ethically. I am not referring to the Al Gore environment, rather the ethical state of the *machine* we fuel. For example, the animal kingdom. A wild bear, being forced into an unfamiliar environment, would go through several thought processes. The first (aside from, “Where is the jerk that shot me with the sedative?”) would most likely be, “Where am I?”, followed by, “Where is water, food and shelter?”. This questioning, would most likely be followed by an exploration, a *getting to know you* of sorts with the new world it exists within. There would be no thinking of, “How should I feel about being placed here?”; that is until, for example, the bear discovers there is no water, or if the bear discovers that it has been placed in a supermarket meat section. At that point, it’s thinking would be, “How do I operate in this scenario?” The bear goes in search for water in the former. The bear eats himself sick in the latter.

We are “bears”, in an ethically unfamiliar environment. How we live ethically is affected by our environment. Until we examine our surroundings, and decipher the ethical state we inhabit, we cannot bring ourselves to live completely ethically. This is the most appropriate response for someone wishing to live ethically in a society.

In this paper I will discuss the unethical state of our country, not because I feel a hatred for it,

but the things we are doing correctly I find relatively obvious, and, they are not the things that need to change. I find that pointing out the unethical state is a task more patriotic for it encourages growth. It is easy to become stagnant when you focus on what you do correctly. Our responsibility as citizens of a country is to better it, to fight for it, not to remain quiet. This is a paper written out of love. Now that we know the importance of realizing the ethics of our social habitat, let us get to know the ethics behind the society we fuel.

TORTURE

“Washington, Dec. 8 - The Bush administration based a crucial prewar assertion about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda on detailed statements made by a prisoner while in Egyptian custody, who later said he had fabricated them to escape harsh treatment, according to current and former government officials. The officials said the captive, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, provided his most specific and elaborate accounts about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda only after he was secretly handed over to Egypt by the United States in January 2002, in a process known as rendition.” (Jehl 2005) According to Newsweek, “Al-Libi recanted these claims in January 2004 after U.S. interrogators presented to him ‘new evidence from other detainees that cast doubt on his claims’.” Aside from being an example of torture failing as an interrogation method, it is a relatively recent example establishing torture’s presence in the way our country operates.

Torture is often argued for using an utilitarian principle, “Always act in such away that you bring about the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people.” However, the act of torture is an inhumane task in and of itself. No one would argue that a country that can torture a man would be a country representing Kant’s, *Good Will*, with *Good Will* meaning, “The unique human ability to act in accordance with moral rules, laws, or principles regardless of interests or consequences.” (Thiroux 1998)

It is not a matter of whether or not the act is justified within a certain situation. It is a matter of the ethical value of the act itself. I would argue for instances like these, involving human sacrifice, that if it is an act that is obviously *unethical* when it involves completely innocent people, and is done with no ulterior motive, it is always unethical. For example, if someone was to take a random audience member from a baseball game, and torture them to determine which bar they went to the previous evening, and the person gave in telling them they were at a local bar down the street, we would not deem that as an ethical way of acquiring information. If we save innocent people by torturing a bad *man*, we can rest assured we chose the lesser evil to prevent a greater evil. However, that is not the basis for determining whether or not an action is ethical. It most certainly is not. If we choose to torture, we act un-ethically regardless of motive. It is the nature of operation in this global society as well. We live corruptly to prevent corruption.

This brings us to an example of corruption that does not bring about nearly any good.

CORPORATE GREED: ADVERTISING

Corporations are our representatives world wide. Most opinions of our Nation are determined from our corporate influence and agenda. International business is more present now, due to the age of technology, than ever before. We are all consumers, and we are all affected by business. The defining feature of a corporation is the legal independence of the corporation from the founders of the corporation. This is important, because we must look at the moral implications of a corporation’s actions as indicative of the corporation’s ethical values, not of the persons within it. This is important because if we can establish the ethical priority of a corporation as being unethical, we can then observe how the people operate within it, for it is an example of the topic of this text, fueling an unethical machine, on a smaller scale. I am not saying the United States of America are a

corporation, but the parallels of how people act within a corporation are an insight into how citizens act within the United States.

According to the book, *Ethics and Manipulation in Advertising*, by Michael J. Phillips, there are three types of subliminal advertising. The first is brief visual messages, the second is accelerated speech, and the last is the embedding of images or words in pictorial material. They are subtle pleas to the subconscious. I would argue that any advertising that panders to the unconscious human in any example is maltreatment and a disrespect to the mass audience. If I were to subtly convince a man I encountered on the street, to give me his wallet and keys, using the power of suggestion, most would argue that action to be stealing. I ask, "How is a plea to a subconscious any different?"

The fact is that subliminal advertising encrusts our streets, homes and workplaces. Everything from the colors green and yellow (environmental colors) at a gas station, to the suggestive billboard along the highway, is screaming at us. And they scream at us louder and more influentially than if they simply spelled out, "We are environmental" or, "Our beer is sexy". Association is destructive, and the most *useful* method of advertising.

This goes completely against a Utilitarian perspective. It is more of an ethical egoism. We see it frequently. The standing upon *good* principles, for example, advertising how environmental your establishment is, in order to appeal to a certain audience. Now, your establishment may very well be more, *environmental*, and you may even suffer repercussions from deciding to be more, *environmental*. For example, you may spend more money on attaining recycled material. However, if you advertise yourself as being *environmental*, you are not doing anything different than, for example, a grocery chain that advertises, "We aren't natural, just cheaper than everyone else" to appeal to a specific audience. This alludes to a sense of polarity and identity that our culture cultivates.

POLARIZATION OF IDEAS AND IDENTITY

Due to the advertising to certain demographics, and the depiction of specific types of people (attractive people drink our products, all real business men use our paper products, etc.) we, as a culture have established a necessity to determine what kind of human we are and what groups we fit into. From there, we determine what people look like in this specific group, who this group votes for, the products this group buys and what this group values. We fabricate icons for ourselves, who we want to be, and then foster a necessity within ourselves. It all perpetuates this cycle as we buy into it. *Red States. Blue States. Mac. PC. Coffee. Tea. Myspace. Facebook.* Everything from churches to yacht clubs, from businesses to gymnasiums, we find our identity in the people we surround ourselves with.

This implies that most citizens that participate in this form of identity searching would fit in Lawrence Kohlberg's *Theory of Moral Development* as a Stage Three individual. Out of six stages, Stage Three, according to *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, is the stage in which the individual behaves as a *people pleaser*. They are concerned with conformity and living up to the expectations of others and are attempting to fit in with a group.

We find identity in identity. We act to belong. We seek to be classified.

Political parties utilize this as well. Knowing full well the tendencies of the masses, they back specific ways of thought. Just think about what most republicans stand for, and think of what most democrats stand for on certain moral issues, and you will come to know the reality. This is completely un-American. In a country that proclaims freedom and democracy, there is no real democracy. Democracy is defined by *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* as, "A system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through freely elected representatives" Now; the heart of democracy is majority rule. Our *majorities* are predefined parties, most commonly Republican or Democrat, that offer just enough *open*

mindedness to be able to say, “We represent the people”. The reality is, this way of governing or representing does not truly allow for the expanding of ideas, because it is more based upon stances towards specific issues. It is either black or white. Most often, in key trials regarding certain issues, gray areas are used to fight a certain view. They are debated, often for long periods of time, because of the fact that black and white stances do not work for these specific cases.

Since the polarized masses are more consumed with a right or wrong stance, they miss the ideals that can possibly govern gray ground. We argue sides, not morals. That is why we like Batman more than the police department. Real justice. It is a moral justice, not a lawful justice.

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

We must start with realization. Unless, just as illustrated earlier, we realize the ethical state of the habitat we are in, we cannot live completely ethically. Also, community cannot be stressed enough. Our natural inclination, as described earlier, is to become who we surround ourselves with. However, if the people we surround ourselves with encourage thinking for oneself, we can use that natural tendency for our benefit.

It is also important to constantly be aware of how we take in information. Our minds are awfully capable of predisposing us to certain trains of thought. Until we truly begin to think for ourselves, we cannot possibly begin the process of an ethically focused way of life. This brings us to self-purification. Like it or not, most of our views towards values are based upon predisposition. Whether it is religious, or whether it is a political issue, often times our opinions are decided by the way our parents raised us, the way our life-long friends feel, or the way our favorite teacher spoke about an issue, our opinions are often determined by the way we feel about other people. We must train ourselves to think for ourselves, to reason for ourselves. Now, I am not saying that we should not listen to our teachers’, parents’ or friends’ opinions, most times, they know more than we do and they are useful influences. I am saying that rather than accepting at face value, we should look inward, and really figure out what it is that we do believe in, why we *really* want to do certain things, why we *really* do not want to do certain things, and based off of that, determine *individual* ethical guidelines for how we live our lives.

In this essay, I established the importance of realization in regards to the ethical state of one’s habitat. I clarified the unethical state the United States of America reside in. I established a general *method* by which one can attempt ethical living within an Unethical Empire. We looked at three different unethical practices, *Torture*, *Corporate Greed: Advertising* and *The Polarization of Ideas and Identity*. Each of these issues reflect a different piece of the social pie. Torture is a characteristic of our government; the ethics mentioned within *Advertising* mainly focused on corporate and business actions; *The Polarization of Ideas and Identity* mainly focused on the ethical state of the masses, while hinting at the political side as well.

We are capable of influence. As stated above, and frankly, throughout this paper, humans are impressionable. We should use that in a world of ignorance. We should influence the way others see ethical issues by presenting logical arguments, asking questions, growing in thought with others. The day we stop questioning and contemplating the way we live our lives is the day we cease to live our lives.

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