

Dana Bell

December 21st, 2021

What Is Ethics? And What Is *Ethical*?

I define Ethics, *in concept*, as an analytic guide for justifying human behavior and developing an appropriate metric to subsequently guide future behavior. It is, for all intents and purposes, a wholly objective tool used to produce subjective claims; *Ethics* is not necessarily *ethical*, but what is *ethical* in any given situation can be determined by using *ethics* as an analytic guide. Ethics is neither benevolent nor evil, but after a thorough review of ethical theories and their application in both historic and modern contexts one can arguably view “ethics” *in practice* as a socio-political tool of control. Phenomena and noumena are perhaps fitting representations for this distinction: Ethics as a concept (the “thing itself”) is objective, but recognizing it in practice as being more-often-than-not farcical and ulteriorly motivated is a detrimental step toward avoiding the dangerous conflation of “*ethics*” and “*ethical*” that so often occurs in discussions of the former.

The main source of this conflation can be identified using the story of The Ring of Gyges: For as much as Socrates is correct in there being two interpretations of ethics, that it is either intrinsically or instrumentally valuable, neither interpretation suddenly disproves Thrasymachus’s claim that the “powerful” use ethics instrumentally as a means of control. Even that which we consider “intrinsic” in ethics is merely a symptom of its instrumentalization. Nietzsche would agree that every new ethical interpretation of how and why we could, should, or ought to live is merely a revaluation of the given values we know to exist.

Sedimentation, a term mentioned in our final class which I immediately took a great liking toward, justifies this interpretation of Ethics: For if one is to agree with science that every effect has a cause, then whatever "Ethics" are born in the imagination of a theorist are simply causal after-effects of their socio-political conditioning. It is unfortunate that all new ethics are either a result of (or a reaction to) the status-quo of its given age, and as such, nearly all ethical theories are predicated on ancient, underdeveloped moralities.

The best proof of this is found in the necessary feminization of nearly any ethical theory to apply to women's specific ethical issues: Feminist Marxism, Feminist Existentialism, etc., all exist as a *reaction* to their otherwise exclusionary (femi-less) predecessors; Why would Marx need to consider the ways in which capitalism *freed* women, why would Nietzsche bother to consider his *will-to-power* in a sexual context? The answer is that they did not and were not expected to, for the ethical systems which incubated their beliefs were not concerned with the female, nor did they consider her rational enough to care. Even where Marx promises the "liberation" of women he fails to consider their oppression pre-capital, fails to identify its causes, and thus fails to create a truly effective, universal ethics.

Marx ignores the ways in which capitalism has liberated women (as it defined money as power and allowed women to earn it), and falls into the trappings of his own ethical systems theory: communism can not be our savior, because our oppression occurred before capitalism became our reality. The patriarchy is not bound by the economic era it resides within, but the socio-political one (which began long before the red scare). This potential was not lost on Marx, however, as he wrote in the Communist Manifesto that it is the fault of the bourgeoisie to assume that communal property results in a "community of women," as the "bourgeoisie" views his wife as property and thus assumes women will be subject to further oppression. Now that communism

has been given time to settle, however, we find communist societies still subjecting women to the role of the second sex. In Asia, this role is justified by the male-dominated values of Confucianism and its emphasis on “harmony.” A common joke I have seen is “Right-wing men view women as public property, and leftist men view women as public property.” It seems that the constant is not the bourgeoisie, but *male domination*! As long as patriarchal values exist, any “role” based system of ethics, from Aristotle to Confucius, will find a role based on the value of sex, and if not in the workplace, then in culture and socialization. We have entered the beginning of Marx’s theorized “next phase,” but we do not find the liberation he promised; something else greater is still waiting in the wings (on that front, Marx is correct!).

Issues of the “male gaze,” the “white gaze,” etc. are also confounded by the concept of sedimentation—how can we possibly create a universally effective ethics if our “ideal” is shaped in relation to our oppression? These adaptive preferences, as they are often called, are still ideas formed within a confined space provided to us by straight, white male supremacy. An example: I take great issue with calls for prostitution to be legalized, which usually claim that it is the “right” of a woman to sell her body. The emphasis on “right” in these arguments undermines the significance and implications of “sell.” Faced with the reality of Capitalism, such arguments are forced to be framed in an economic sense. Even still, they remain unethical. By contextualizing the issue of prostitution using the ethics of Egoism (recognizing that one’s sole desire is survival), and acknowledging that Capitalism transforms money into a *means* of survival, it’s hard to find an argument for prostitution’s legalization that does not implicitly accept Capitalism as an eternal inevitability.

Ultimately, women are not utilizing any “right” when *selling* their sex other than their right to make money within a Capitalist system. Conversely, the legalization of prostitution

dually confirms the “right” of men to “buy” women and is equally undesirable. The historic oppression of minority groups necessitates a great deal of insight when considering the ethicality of any decision, and a certain degree of distrust with one’s own perceived rationality. Considering this, Liberalism is also apt to fail and (d)evolve into illiberalism or neo-liberalism, as the “rights,” “duties,” and “obligations” of any given civilization as determined by a governing body acting *in loco parentis* is subject to be infected by the values and character of the most powerful, who then govern and legislate according to their own ethics.

Failing to create a universally effective ethical metric, however, is by no means an obstacle toward those who wish to claim they have (here is where *ethics* descends to become synonymous with *ethical*): Religion, though not listed as an “ethical issue,” is to me one of the most pressing ethical issues to-date, namely because it intentionally conflates “Ethics” with “ethical.” A better understanding of “Ethics” can be seen by the fact that no religion is considered an “ethical theory,” and they can not be, because they inherently presume themselves to be *ethical*. The Problem With Religion (The P.W.R.), as I refer to it, can be seen as the conglomeration of multiple misuses of “Ethics” that force its descent into subjectivity. Considering both Nietzschean and Kantian philosophies allows us not only a road of escape from this underdeveloped morality, but an answer to those issues which are only “issues” in religious eyes (i.e. abortion).

Nietzsche can be credited for alerting us of God’s death, but Judeo-Christian morality (JCM) can be credited with “His” birth. Claims from the Nietzschean philosophy are correct in asserting that religion (and prescribing to its dogma) is a form of inauthenticity, but there is one specific claim from our course reader that ignores the motives of Judeo-Christian morality: that “authenticity” is for “one [to] actualize their freedom by transcending the world and creating

themselves (as opposed to letting the world create them).” But what is this sentiment if not the foundation for the incentive behind Judeo-Christian morality? God’s birth marked the death of the one true form of objective Ethics: natural law.

By “reversing the ontological ordering,” JCM injected all the “good” of human nature into a male sky-god and called “Him” the source. “God,” man’s first imaginary friend, is credited with the power of creation. “His” greatest power, namely, is the possibilities of the female human anatomy. Souls form in “His” hands, and no longer her womb. To be born is no longer a gift of nature but a gift of a sky-god, so to die is no longer a return to nature, but a return to the “Kingdom of God.” This pseudo-transcendence allowed men to escape from nature, and credit their image with all its power. How better can one avoid claims of inauthenticity than by redefining what is “authentic”? How better can religion seem anything other than farcical than by reversing the value systems present in nature?

The reversal of natural values would also lead one to believe Hobbes is incorrect in his assumptions about the “state of nature” when they are applied to religious dogma: that there were no enforceable “rights” or “wrongs” pre-politics. The Abrahamic religions spit in the face of this assumption, not only reordering the origins of nature in direct contrast with true natural law, but very much “enforcing” it as well. Nature may not have had a voice to defend the defenseless, but God’s thundering voice certainly gave power to the power-hungry. Hobbes is correct to call life in nature brutish and short; it explains why the religious find comfort in the mythos of Abraham: Jesus walking on water was no miracle—it was the conquering of nature by man. Water, Woman. Moses parts the Red Sea. God must burn the bush he speaks through, so man must conquer the earth made for him (an ironic metaphor for our tendency toward indifference when it comes to ecological issues, as well!).

Moreover, The P.W.R. stems beyond its destruction of nature; Kant's first categorical imperative provides us with an Ethics that highlights both gender-specific and genderless interpretations of religion as unethical. He states: "The only actions that are permissible are those acts which treat other individuals as an ends-in-themselves, wherein people are respected for their inherent autonomy and therefore not to be treated as a mere means or tool for accomplishing some particular end." With this logic in mind, there is no worse perpetrator of misethics than the Christian dogma, whose book recalls women's instrumentalization with great attention and attaches to it great value. Mary was never asked permission to carry Jesus, and she never said "yes" to God (more on this later, for it disproves any and all religiously-founded arguments against abortion). Eve, the "helper," was both created as a means to Adam's ends and rhetorically instrumentalized in their story (it was Eve who brought Adam the apple, and ate before him, but only after *he* ate did their eyes "open"). The Bible, that book of fables, institutionalized women's status as a *means*.

Beyond this feminist interpretation of the Bible, however, there stands to be acknowledged an even greater, even more insidious, understanding of religion's instrumentalizing properties. Religion, particularly all those considered Abrahamic, encourage (if not coerce) their audience into a most dismal state: one in which they *must* view their existence as a means. This is true even by their own logic: Life is a means one must walk to reach the ends of the afterlife. What follows is the most fearful herd ever created, a herd that believes its actions and existence is all to serve some higher power.

Religion ignores that life *is* the end, and creation is the means. In Nature, the means lie in the womb, but in religion it is God. God, should he exist, surely did not create us for the purpose of dying. Analogously: A painter spends seven days creating her greatest work, and on the

seventh day the painting comes alive. The painter, having spent days creating this oil-based being, turns to her creation and says “Go! I created you to be alive. My hands were the means to your existence.” The creation wanders a bit, then replies: “What happens when I die? Surely it must be better than this!” Then, the painting leaves its artist and spends 2,000 years writing a book about why it would be good for it to die, and promises itself a reward should it live a certain way. I would abandon my work, too, if it asked such a disrespectful question. Religion tells its users “*You are not living yet, but on the road to eternity. So act accordingly, lest the loving God sentence you to damnation!*”

Regarding Mary, here-in lies the answer to religious objections to abortion: How can one agree that creation is a God-driven act while restricting and forcing it upon individual beings? To those who claim that women seeking abortion are “playing God,” I say this: Playing God includes when you add a life, we learned that in the Bible before Frankenstein; *or did you not read?*

With that, I find myself wanting to acknowledge one of my favorite lessons from the course reader: “You can only show the people the light by giving them varying alternative perspectives and subtle criticism which serve not to tell people what to do, but rather, to force them to reflect on themselves so that they may come to liberate themselves and choose to develop their inwardness.” This statement is best paired with my mind’s definition of *comedy*, which embodies Ethics without necessarily creating it. Comedy strives to push its audience to reflect upon itself, more often by imitating reality than by critiquing it. Nietzsche, that madman, is a master of this medium. Other existential philosophers recognize this art’s contribution to Ethical analysis, too: Kierkegaard said “Wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present.” So if the presenter is able to provide her

audience with the comical, she can only hope they follow its breadcrumbs to discover the contradiction that inspired it.

Comedy surely evolves generation-to-generation, but I would also argue that the internet has skyrocketed the present population's access to comedy in an unprecedented way, and allowed that authentic sense of solidarity to connect oppressed individuals on a mass scale. Comedy has arguably become a tool of ethics, used not to define but to *expose* the unethical. This transformation has resulted, in my view, in the soon-to-be death of Neoliberalism at the hands of Gen-Z.

In an ultra-connected world, the “powerful” are no longer determined via their geographic proximity to our homes: Elon Musk and I use the same Twitter; a sly joke from the official Wendy's fast food chain finds itself nuzzled between pictures of my sister's breakfast and my high school friend's ultrasound. Their power, thanks to the internet, is omnipresent to all (like God!), and so likewise is our awareness of our status, our own oppression, ever-present in our minds. Naturally, Gen-Z has identified itself with nihilistic humor: critiques of power and society that also acknowledge our inability to do anything substantial about their problems. I have personally been on *two* debate teams that needed a sit-down talk about using the phrase “I want to kill myself” for comedic purposes.

Where does Neoliberalism fail in this world? With nihilistic comedy and Kant! Beyond tokenizing minorities in minor roles, corporate entities have attempted so far as to imitate Gen-Z's comedy, which is characterized by nihilism, absurdity, and non-sequitur statements. The new generation is lacking in care for the long-dying traditional “values” of religion and

conservatism, and instead sees entertainment as the escape. So what do these brands do? Witness for yourself in the figure below!



While Zoom was not the only branded account to respond to this egregious advertisement of a tweet, theirs embodies the curse of corporate inauthenticity quite succinctly. Like described in the course reader, Kant's first imperative helps us to recognize the inauthenticity of this phenomena, and why it comes off as, well... "not right." Zoom, joking about itself by using jokes commonly made about its own telecommunication service by its users, is embodying the inauthentic nature of the current corporate strategy: when you must appeal to an audience whose main directive is to criticize your actions, you must walk a careful line of self-deprecation and self-sabotage. But Gen-Z is committed to sabotage (the "revolt" of our solidarity), so brands reveal their

inauthenticity by continuing to protect themselves. Essentially, they just don't commit to the bit enough for it to be believable. Comedy is an art, and art imitates life, but corporations merely imitate comedy and are left with no trace of the original life that inspired it. By remaining inauthentic, neoliberalism can never succeed in a comedy economy fueled by Existentialism.

All things considered, it's safe to say that this paper contains a great deal of radical claims and anti-religious sentiment. Such is the beauty of Ethics, however: the reader is free to disagree. I have done nothing but take theories of Ethics and apply them to what I believe to be

ethical issues, and concluded with whatever findings presented themselves to me. This is, after all, the purpose and definition of ethics: a tool, neither “good” nor “bad,” used to analyze a given action or set of actions as being “good” or “bad” (or “just” or “unjust” or “right” or “wrong,” etc. etc.). Ethics can not be disproved, nor can it be proven; It merely proves and disproves. “Ethics” is the means, “ethical” or “unethical” the ends. Ethics serves as a brush to paint a picture, and like any utensil, it requires an artist to control it. *We* are that artist. What we choose to create with ethics is as endless as the artistic mind. *Paint carefully!*