



THERE 'S ONLY ETHICS

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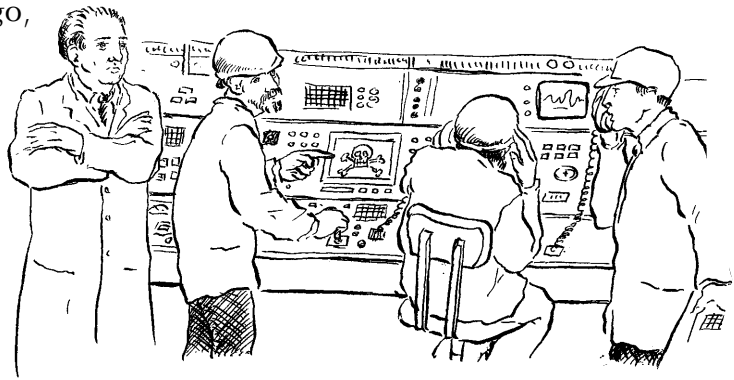
The following is based on a speech given by Dr. Rushworth Kidder.

ETHICS IS ESSENTIAL TO SURVIVAL

Ethics is not a luxury or a choice. It is essential to our survival. To support that point, let me give you three statements, two definitions, and one conclusion.

STATEMENT ONE: We will not survive the 21st century with the ethics of the 20th century.

Why do I say that? Well, many years ago, in 1989, I visited Reactor Number Four at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union. Three years earlier, in 1986, the reactor had exploded, causing the worst nuclear disaster in the history of the world.



Looking back later, I discovered that I was probably the first Western journalist ever to get that close to

Chernobyl. I was taken there in the company of two of the engineers who had come in right after the accident on April 26, 1986, to help clean up the mess.

The radioactive fallout from that disaster was detected in hundreds of countries all over the world. The explosion and its aftermath killed thousands of Soviets.

Why did it happen? That night in 1986 there were two engineers in charge of the control room. It seems they decided to "play" with this gigantic nuclear reactor. As they continued to experiment, they ignored six separate computer-driven alarm systems. Each system would come up and say, "Stop! Don't do this! Terribly dangerous!"

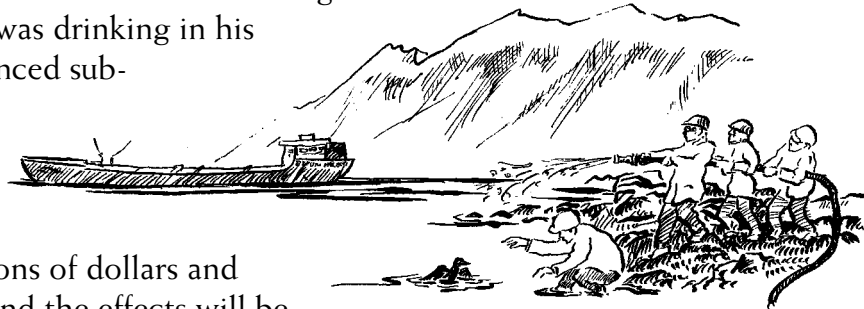
But instead of shutting off the experiment, they shut off the alarms.

When my friends got in there, they discovered there were valves padlocked in the "open" position to keep them from shutting down and turning off this experiment. That is how deliberate this whole thing was.

Now, the question to me is, what was going on in the minds of those engineers? Obviously, these were bright people. Jobs at Chernobyl go to the very best Russian students. These two engineers were well educated. Why did they decide to do something so terrible?

I think their consciences had to shut down before the alarm systems could be turned off. They must have known the possible consequences of what they were doing. What blew up Chernobyl was not a lack of knowledge. It was a lack of ethics.

That's a very important point for the 21st century. There is no machine you could have put those individuals in front of in the 19th century and said, "Do the worst thing you can with this machine," that would have produced the damage of Chernobyl. Or, to change examples, let's think about the 1989 disaster caused by the American oil tanker Exxon *Valdez*, a large ship that hit bottom in dangerous waters while the captain was drinking in his cabin, with a less experienced subordinate left in charge.



The oil spill from this ship killed thousands of animals and took millions of dollars and many years to clean up, and the effects will be felt for decades. Ships as big as the *Valdez*, carrying millions of gallons of oil, were not in use just a century ago. Back then, no one imagined that such enormous destruction might, one day, be the result of one person's thoughtless behavior.

Or consider the "I Love You" virus. Designed and executed from the desk of a 23-year-old man in the Philippines, this malicious computer virus spread through the world's Internet system affecting millions of computers around the globe and prompting hundreds of copycats within days of the original virus's release. How in the 19th century could a few young people in Manila have developed a computer virus and launched it into the world to do an estimated \$10 billion in damage?

The point here is that the very scale of our systems, the scale of our technology itself, is multiplying the importance of ethics in brand-new ways. Whether the people making decisions are the decision makers at the top or the people who work for them, our increasing reliance on technology almost guarantees that every worker will face many more difficult challenges today than were faced in the past. And what is going on in the consciences of those individuals directly determines the use of that system.

In the 21st century, Chernobyl and the Exxon *Valdez* will seem small. Consider, for example, the current and future possibilities of genetic engineering or cyberspace. Then consider the ethical sophistication needed to manage them.



Not only will we need to learn complex new technologies that demand intelligence and expertise. We will also need to develop the ethical awareness to avoid the misuse of such systems, because ethical mistakes could lead to large-scale disaster.

That is why it seems to me we will not survive the 21st century with the ethics of the 20th century. Something significant has to change.

READING THE MORAL BAROMETER

STATEMENT TWO: While we know we need to make some changes in our ethical behavior, we are not in good shape to make those changes.

Why? Well despite some good signs, many surveys point to some unsettling trends. Before looking at those trends, what are the good signs?

- When the Gallup Organization asked the U.S. public to identify the "most important problem" facing the nation in 1999, "ethics, morality, and family values" came out at the very top for the first time in 50 years that Gallup has asked that question.
- A 2000 annual survey of high achievers published by *Who's Who Among American High School Students* identified "moral and social breakdown" as today's greatest national crisis, as well as the biggest problem facing the teen generation.

In other words, there is increasing interest in the question of ethics, and increasing evidence that we want stronger ethics. But even though we are more interested in ethics, there is a serious question about whether we're doing anything about it.

Consider these statistics:

- In a 1999 Public Agenda Survey, only 13 percent surveyed said that "teens who treat people with respect" are "very common." Thirty-four percent said they were not common at all.
- Seventy-eight percent of teens surveyed in the 2000 *Who's Who Among American High School Students* admitted to cheating and say that consequences are virtually nonexistent.
- In a 2000 poll sponsored by the Horatio Alger Association, 34 percent of 14- to 18-year-olds said that their idea of the American Dream involved possessions and their career, and 30 percent said it involved monetary gain and comfort.

You may think we are only talking about students. We're not. We are talking about America's middle managers in the year 2020—and about the top business leaders, the senators and representatives, the heads of schools and charities in the year 2030.

We are talking about the people who are going to be piloting *your* airplanes while you sit back wondering, "Does this guy really know how to fly, or did he just fake his way through his exams?" We are talking about the people who are going to be managing *your* money.

BUT ARE KIDS TO BLAME?

I don't think so. There was a story reported in one of the New York newspapers a while ago about a ten-year-old child who found on the street a wallet full of money, full of credit cards, and full of identification. He reportedly took the wallet to school, where he could find no one—no teacher, no administrator—willing to tell him what was the right thing to do with that wallet.



Essentially they all said, "Gee, I can't impose my values on you, kid. I mean, if I told you what to do, that would not be right. You have to sort it out for yourself—otherwise it's my ethics and not yours. Besides, you're poor and this guy is obviously rich. Your mother might be mad if I told you to send the wallet back. No, you figure it out for yourself."

What's going on? Why do they feel this way? Why has our educational system delivered us into a situation where even the most basic concepts of honesty, responsibility, and respect for others are not being taught?

WHY ETHICAL RELATIVISM FAILS

That question brings me to **STATEMENT THREE**, which is simply this: The principal difficulty we face is the idea that there are no absolutes, no common values, no standards, no core set of moral ideas out there that can be shared and understood. It is the notion that all ethics is relative, negotiable, fluid, intensely personal.

Let me give you an example of how it surfaces. Let's say that at a school committee meeting, the committee members get thinking about the big issues facing the world in the next century. They want to shape an educational system to prepare students to meet those challenges.

Pretty quickly someone realizes that teaching in schools has been mostly about the facts—about biology, or math, or history. And they realize that that's good, but it's not enough—that we will not survive the next century without better ethics. So someone suggests that we teach values and ethics.



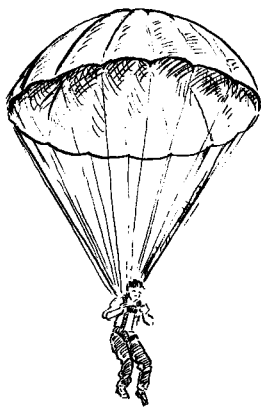
And immediately somebody in the back of the room stands up and says, "But whose values will you teach?" When someone asks this question, he or she may be trying to stop the discussion, thinking, "if you dare to teach ethics, you are imposing *your* values on *my* kid, and I don't like that!"

So let's examine this issue a little more. When people imagine that all values are relative and no standards exist, they sometimes use the famous scientist Albert Einstein to support their arguments. "See," some people are fond of saying, "Einstein proved that everything is relative. There are no absolutes out there in the physical world. So how do you expect there to be absolutes in the moral realm? This is the 20th century: We no longer believe in absolutes and constants."

Einstein would be horrified to hear that his ideas are being used this way. And so would your friendly local research physicist. The next time you see her, ask her what would happen if, when she went into her laboratory tomorrow, she said, "Okay, everything is relative. Today I think we will set the speed of light at sort of . . . well, about here! And I've always thought pi was too large, so let's call it 2.8 for today. And we'll say Planck's Constant is this, and Avogadro's number is that, and the acceleration due to gravity is right about here for today."

Ask her how successful she's going to be in physics if she really believes that Einstein was saying that all things are relative and there are no constants.

Don't believe that argument. There are constants in the physical realm. But are there any constants in ethics? A friend of mine who teaches at Stanford University argues there are constants by using this example: "Okay," he says, "I am going to parachute you into some country, and you don't know where it is. When you get out of your parachute, walk up to the first person you see, take away what that person has, and run away with it. And see what happens."



Unless the person is a Buddhist monk who thinks everything is fated to happen, says my friend, you'll get a strong objection. Why? Because you will have broken a property law. People summarize



it in the Ten Commandments as "Thou shalt not steal." But you will find property laws in any culture into which you drop. Culture by culture, people by people, there is thorough agreement that stealing is wrong.

We need to recognize that there is a core set of moral concepts that can be and must be taught. What are they? We've found one—the idea of not stealing. Are there others? Well, what about the Golden Rule?

We usually think of the Golden Rule as "treat other people the way you want them to treat you." Jesus said it like this: "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

But who said, "That which you hold as detestable, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole law: the rest is but commentary"? That's how the Talmud puts it.

Islam says it this way: "None of you is a believer if he does not desire for his brother that which he desires for himself" (Sunnab).

Or, as Confucius said, "Here certainly is the golden maxim: Do not do to others that which we do not want them to do to us" (Analects 15:23).

And so it goes, down through Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and the rest of the world's great religions.

Common ethical ground? I would say so! Teachable? Certainly!

TWO DEFINITIONS OF "ETHICS"

Now, I promised you two useful definitions of "ethics," so here they are.

The first comes from Lord Moulton, a British lawmaker in the 19th century, who described ethics simply as "obedience to the unenforceable."

He contrasted that idea to obedience to the *enforceable*. That's what law is. And law is an important part, but only a small part, of the reason we behave as we do. Obedience to the enforceable is what usually makes us drive at the speed limit. If we drive too fast, we may get fined by the police.

Obedience to the *unenforceable*, however, is what keeps you from going into a supermarket, and just as an elderly woman ahead of you is about to put her hand on the last shopping cart, you rush up, push her away, grab the cart, and run off down the aisle with it.



There is no law that says, "Thou shalt not steal shopping carts from elderly women." You don't do it because "people don't do those things"—because of the very real but ultimately unenforceable rules of society.

This concept of ethics as obedience to the unenforceable helps explain some of the things we see going on around us in the world today. When I was growing up, we didn't throw litter out of the car window because "people don't do those things." Now you don't throw litter out of the car window because there is a \$500 fine if you do. Why? Because it was discovered that people *did* do those things. As the ethics of not littering disappeared, in other words, the law rushed in to take its place.

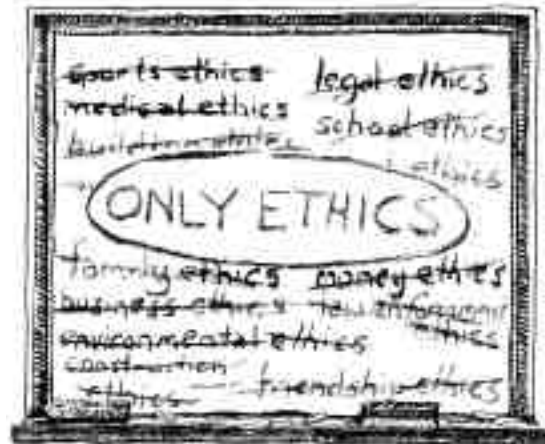
And that will always be the case. When ethics collapses, what used to be obedience to the unenforceable becomes obedience to the enforceable. Face it: We're going to be regulated. Our choice is simple: Will we self-regulate, or will we have regulation imposed on us by outside authority? Self-regulation is ethics. Imposed regulation is the law.

The second definition I want to share with you grows out of our concern over dictionary definitions of the word *ethics*. They usually talk about ethics in relation to the difference between right and wrong. But for most of us, most of the time, ethics is the battle of right versus right. Few people, facing an ethical dilemma, say to themselves, "Here, on one hand, is the great, the good, the wonderful, and the pure thing to do. And there, on the other hand, is the awful, the evil, the miserable, and the terrible thing to do. And here I stand, incapable of deciding which to do."

We don't do that. Once we define one side as evil, we choose the other side. We don't usually get into huge debates with ourselves, for example, by thinking, "I've got this real problem with my friend. Should I talk it out with her, or poison her food?" We talk with her to try to work things out.

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Now, I also promised you a conclusion, so here it is. After all we've talked about, it may not surprise you to learn that there really is no such thing as education ethics. There is no such thing as sports ethics, or medical ethics, or business ethics, or legal ethics, or journalism ethics, either. There is only *ethics*. It should apply in all kinds of ways, and it should apply across the board. It can't be divided up into personal and public categories. Anything short of that is called hypocrisy.



Don't be under any illusion that somehow one can be unethical in personal financial matters, or in relationships, or in academics, but perfectly ethical at work or in one's profession. It may sometimes seem possible, but you can only have one set of values. When people operate with more than one, they contradict themselves and create a double standard. So a corporate executive can't really be virtuous at work, but terrible in family matters. A politician can't really claim, "Oh, that is my private life. You should not take that into account. Judge me as a politician."

The public no longer believes that line of reasoning. It's becoming obvious that who we are in private is who we are in public. It's too easy to spot the hypocrite. It's too easy to tell when someone isn't walking the talk.

There is no dividing up ethics into the compartments of private ethics and public ethics. There's only ethics.