

RSVP Ethics

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As I wrote last week, missing from our discussion of complex social problems is a shared ethical language. While we can easily invoke homilies such as the golden rule -- treat others as you would have them treat you -- and the Declaration of Independence's rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, these shared aphorisms are more often debate stoppers than tools we can use to facilitate discussion.

If someone loves to profit from developing every square inch of land, for example, and would like you to do the same, the golden rule isn't going to be of much use. And good luck convincing a gun lover that tightening controls on his arsenal will improve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But, you may be thinking, more words, a shared ethical language, won't help.

We're too diverse or too capitalistic or too religious or not religious enough to solve problems such as poverty, healthcare, homelessness, inadequate education, gun violence, undocumented immigration, insufficient public transportation, terrorism, and environmental damage. And it doesn't help, many will add, that we're led by a president, governor, mayor or members of various legislative bodies and councils -- take your pick -- who don't know how to represent our interests.

Maybe what we need are not the right words but the right people in office who advocate the right values. Then, this belief goes, everything will get better and our problems will be solved.

Waiting for the savior superstar is, after all, a popular religious and American pastime. On the other hand, it seems more likely



When you find a wallet lying on the ground, what do you do?

that we are governed by people like ourselves, people who mirror our best and worst qualities. As Walt Kelly's Pogo famously observed, "I've seen the enemy, and he's us."

In other words, if we want change, we need to change ourselves, but change is hard. We're adults. We know how to deal with the way things are or at least how to complain about how they aren't the way they should be. Maybe, just maybe, most of us don't want to or can't change.

Changing our students, however, the children and young adults who are our future, is another matter entirely since education is all about change. And as our students change, I certainly believe, so change us. This is why I've struggled in my English composition classes at Solano College to introduce ethics at an understandable level.

Sure my students need to spell correctly and improve their grammar. Certainly they need to develop their sentence-combining skills, which include cause-effect and compare-contrast constructions. Absolutely they must learn how to structure paragraphs and essays to coherently present their ideas. But, in addition, they need a critical-analysis tool like ethics to make sense of an author's ideas.

With a workable understanding of ethics, students can understand why Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is one of the most significant documents in American history and why his "I Have a Dream" speech is a magnificent exploration of what life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness should mean. And a structured approach to ethics can help students write about abortion, stem-cell research and evolution in new, non-clichéd ways.

But teaching ethics in an understandable form is hard. Philosophers have been writing about ethics for thousands of years, and much of what they have to say is turgid, difficult stuff. Like the mathematics of physics, the language of philosophy can only really be mastered by those who dedicate their lives to it.

Happily, though, there are some philosophers like Martha

Nussbaum, Simon Blackburn and Roger Scruton who write about ethics in a way that I can sometimes understand, which means there's a chance I can structure ethics so that my students can use the ideas in their compositions as well. This is not to say that I've found the best pedagogical fit, only that I feel I'm making progress.

The approach I'm refining for the fall semester depends on the creation of a framework that can be easily remembered, that is relatively complete, and that can be used to analyze, step by step, the ethics of an argument. In formulating my framework, I use Roger Scruton's chapter "Morality" in *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy* ([a pdf copy](#) is available at QCounty.com), an essay which I discuss with students in class.

Scruton simplifies his approach to morality, a term I use interchangeably with ethics, by grouping moral arguments into four categories, which I label RSVP for Rules, Sympathy, Virtue and Piety. (Scruton uses Personality for Rules, but I needed an 'R' for my mnemonic.) In what follows I briefly describe each category. Next week I'll expand on the meaning of RSVP and will include examples that demonstrate how RSVP is used in critical analysis.

Briefly put, then, Rules, a process, results in the moral codes that form our ethical personality. We use Rules to determine the ethics of specific codes such as the last six of the ten commandments: honor parents, and don't murder, lie, steal, commit adultery or covet. Rules, then, should be viewed as the process by which reasonable people discuss the morality of these commandments, independent of whether one believes they were handed down by God through Moses or not.

The Rules process rests on the foundation created by Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: "We are to treat rational beings as ends, and never as means only." This profoundly subtle statement, which means that I should not use you to get what I want without respecting what you want as well, implies also that rights must be respected, duties must be fulfilled, and agreements must be honored.

But Rules without Sympathy is like a doctor without a heart

who cures the disease while killing the patient.

Sympathy consists of various emotions like love, compassion and charity that extend the scope of the moral law by connecting us with others on an emotional level. With charity, for example, we put ourselves in others' shoes, suffering when they suffer and feeling joy when they are joyful.

Virtue is the moral need we have to be guided by Rules and Sympathy even when no one is watching, most especially when our ethical actions go against our self-interest. We're virtuous when we return a wallet to its owner, when we don't take financial advantage of someone's ignorance or mistake.

But Rules, Sympathy and Virtue are not enough. We enter a world that existed before us and that will exist after we are dead, which is why Piety, a respect for the past and future, is critical to a complete ethical system. It is because of Piety that we discuss the first four of the ten commandments relating to God, that we understand the importance of Native American Spirits, and that we know that the health of the earth's environment is critical to its and our well-being.

More on RSVP ethics next week.

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