The Little Things

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Moral philosophers have often made a distinction between theoretical and applied ethics. Theoretical ethics concerns itself with uncovering first principles, analyzing key moral concepts, and examining the logical relations between the elements of an ethical system. Applied ethics addresses practical moral questions and tries to determine the best policy or course of action. In principle, the scope of applied ethics is unrestricted; any kind of practical moral dilemma could be grist for its mill. And in recent years applied ethics has been something of a growth industry within academic philosophy, particularly in the areas of medical and professional ethics. However, a glance at a few textbooks on applied ethics reveals a tendency on the part of authors, editors, and anthologists to focus on a few hardy perennials--issues such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, affirmative action, animal rights, world poverty, and so on.

Such issues are obviously important, and we all have a duty to think about them and try to arrive at positions that are reasonable and reasonably consistent. At the same time, many of these problems are somewhat removed from the everyday decision-making of ordinary people. The occasions when a person has to decide whether or not to have an abortion are thankfully rare. Only a few individuals occupy positions in which they can sign or commute death sentences.

Of course, some of the standard textbook topics do relate to everyday living. My views on animal rights may determine whether I choose to eat meat or buy leather goods. My sense of responsibility to the environment may affect the modes of transport I use. But there is another large class of moral questions and conundrums that we all confront quite frequently. I have in mind questions such as these:

- Should I tell a friend some gossip I've heard about another person?
- Should I address a person by their first name or more formally?
- How should I behave when someone tells a slightly offensive joke?
    - If I share a computer with someone, is it wrong for me to find out which web sites they've been visiting?

Questions like these are the warp and woof of ethical life. They may not be earth-shatteringly important, but they probably take up the bulk of whatever time we spend in moral reflection. They also have a significance beyond the immediate, concrete problems they address. Considering some of the ways in which this is so can help to bring out the richness and interest of everyday ethics.

First, we normally judge a person's moral character, and the moral quality of the life they lead, more by how they conduct themselves in relation to these mundane matters than by their theoretical position on the great issues of the day. Within certain limits, honesty, integrity, hospitality, courage, trustworthiness and civility can be found among persons of any political, religious, or philosophical stripe, as can their contraries. Learning that a colleague supports the death penalty or preemptive use of nuclear weapons certainly may affect my overall conception

of the kind of person she is, but not as much as if I find she's an indiscreet gossip or is consistently rude to certain groups of people.

Second, for most of us, our everyday conduct is of greater moral significance than how we respond to situations calling for extraordinary moral heroism. To think otherwise is to fall into what might be called the "heroic fallacy". The fallacy is tempting. We all have Mittyish tendencies. We all like to imagine that we would display medal-winning courage when called upon to resist the fascist takeover or rescue strangers from burning buildings. But in most cases, such thoughts are just self-indulgent fantasies that we can enjoy precisely because we are unlikely to be tested in these ways. True love is not proved by being willing, should the occasion arise, to fight a duel to protect a person's honour, but by volunteering to unblock their toilet. Similarly, a more reliable way of gauging the strength and quality of our moral fibre is to look at how we behave when only a little fibre is called for: for example, when a friend needs to be told that they are out of line, or when some self-criticism and an apology is called for.

Third, common dilemmas in which the stakes are low can illustrate how moral principles may be applied, how they might conflict, their usefulness and their limitations just as clearly as more dramatic moral crises. Teachers of ethics often prefer to use life-and-death examples in order to bring the issues at stake into sharp relief. Familiar cases include the sheriff under pressure to release an innocent man to a lynch mob in order to prevent even greater unlawful violence, the impecunious husband considering whether or not to steal an expensive drug to save his wife's life, and the young man torn between staying at home to look after his elderly mother or going off to fight against the fascists. The example of the sheriff faced by the mob, for instance, might be used to clarify the difference between act and rule utilitarianism. An act utilitarian, judging each act on its likely consequences, would perhaps be more willing to hand the innocent man over to the mob. A rule utilitarian, deciding what to do by reference to general principles that have proved beneficial over time, might be more likely to defy the mob. But the same point can be illustrated just as well with less exotic examples. Teachers who assign grades frequently have to choose between an impulse to help an individual student (the act utilitarian preference) and a commitment to maintaining uniform standards (the rule utilitarian choice). Pirating music from the internet can be justified by appealing to the immediate pleasure it produces or condemned because of its harmful consequences for both producers and consumers of music in the long term.

Fourth, everyday moral problems often illustrate more clearly than the grander sort of dilemma mentioned above the profound complexity of moral life. They bring out the fact that much of the time a moral quandary is not so much a tug of war between two conflicting principles as a meeting with diverse lobbying groups; less like a fork in the road and more like an intersection in Rome. Consider, for instance, one of the most common moral problems that we all have to deal with on a regular basis: Should I tell one person (A) something I know about another person (B).

Let's make the example more concrete. The question is whether I should tell A that B has developed a drinking problem. There are some, of course, who hold that we should always adhere strictly to the Mosaic injunction against gossip (Leviticus, 19: 16); but frankly, this is a rather mindless kind of rigourism that prefers to take refuge in crude simplicities rather than deal intelligently with complex moral challenges. A more thoughtful decision would take into account a host of possibly relevant considerations, such as:

- my relationship to A (colleague, friend, sibling, spouse, stranger . . .)

- my relationship to B (does B have a claim on my loyalty?)
- A's relationship to B (would this knowledge hurt their relationship? Might B use it to harm A? Could she use it to help A?)
    - the reliability of my sources
    - the probability that what I'm saying is true
    - B's wishes
    - A's wishes
    - A's rights (am I breaking a confidence?)
    - A's legitimate expectations concerning my conduct
- My motives (moral smugness; *schadenfreude*; a desire to help B; a concern for other harm that B's drinking might lead to . . .)
- the likely consequences (will A tell lots of other people? If he does, will B suffer in some way? Will B feel betrayed by me? Will my own reputation for trustworthiness be damaged? . . .)

  None of these factors can be reduced to a simple principle or a precise value. Understanding the nature of a relationship, judging the trustworthiness of another person, or fathoming the extent to which one's own motives are selfish calls for a sensitive yet critical intelligence. Grasping how all the various considerations should be weighed in relation to one another is, if anything, even more difficult. Clearly, moral deliberation of this kind cannot be reduced to any simple deduction from general principles or converted into some sort of algorithm. It requires what Aristotle calls *phronesis*, or "practical wisdom". Our ability to exercise this sort of moral intelligence and negotiate irreducibly complex problems, often quite quickly, is truly remarkable. We might compare it to our ability to calculate in a fraction of a second the precise trajectory of a ball thrown towards us. In neither case is our judgement unerring; but it is rarely hopelessly misguided. And interestingly, in both cases, we expect everyone to exhibit a basic competence regardless of their level of knowledge or education. Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to a knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to a knowledge of physics.

  Fifth, although issues in everyday ethics often look like small potatoes, how we handle them will be informed by--and reveal--our broader moral and political outlook. Take, for example, the question of whether it is morally acceptable to smuggle homemade popcorn into a cinema to avoid paying the inflated in-house prices. If you think doing this is wrong, you probably believe that an institution has a right to establish its own rules as it sees fit and that anyone who chooses to be part of the institution has an obligation to abide by those rules. If, on the other hand, you think popcorn smuggling is morally defensible, you are probably less committed to a doctrine of untrammeled rights and more likely to be critical of monopolies that take advantage of their market situation at the consumer's expense. Mundane issues that seem inconsequential in themselves usually turn out to connect up with fundamental questions concerning matters such as individual rights, social obligations, the nature of happiness, the role of the state, the limits of freedom, private property, exploitation, and respect for persons.

  Sixth, just as a person's character is disclosed as much through their small habits as by their grander gestures, so is the character of our moral culture revealed through the way we handle quotidian problems. Take, for example, the question of whether it's rude for a student spontaneously to address a professor by his or her first name. A century ago it would have been unthinkable, and there are still many who would condemn such unlicensed familiarity. This view

could be supported in more than one way, but in most cases it probably rests on the belief that there are good reasons for establishing and sustaining hierarchical relations among people according to such things as age, social position, or institutional rank. In the West, this view may not have been formally codified to quite the extent recommended by Confucius; but it is, nonetheless, deeply entrenched in our cultural traditions. Today, though, most of us are also committed to some form of egalitarianism. We hold that every human being, in virtue of their humanity, is entitled to the same basic show of respect, and anything beyond that has to be earned through accomplishments. Birth, connections, wealth, age, rank, and position do not automatically entitle one to deferential treatment. A growing preference for informal modes of address is one obvious expression of this outlook.

The uncertainty students today may feel over the appropriate way to address their professors arises because of this tension between "Confucianist" and egalitarian principles. A similar form of anxiety occurs in many other social spheres. Understanding the reasons for this should make us more cautious about accepting the common refrain that good manners are on the decline.

I hope that these observations are enough to indicate that everyday ethics provides fertile ground for philosophical reflection. My intention is not to call for a reorientation in applied ethics, but just to point out that there is a somewhat neglected area of moral experience worthy of study. Examining everyday ethical dilemmas can help us refine our normative judgements and achieve greater self awareness regarding both the way we approach these problems and the cultural situation within which they arise.