

## ETHICS AND NONVIOLENCE

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### Summary

This chapter considers the relation between ethics and nonviolence. It first explores the notion of ethics - what ethics is, and what it is not, in the context of Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics*. It then briefly explores nonviolence, and its relation with peace and pacificism, as outlined in Ralph Summy's chapter, before examining the taxonomy of affective objectives developed by Benjamin Bloom. It is argued that this taxonomy provides the best path forward for nonviolence education.

### 1. Introduction

In considering the relation of ethics and nonviolence, the question arises "what is ethics"? This in turn raises the issue of the objectivity of ethics, and hence of the rational basis of ethical argument and why an ethical judgement differs from a matter of taste.

Only then can we fruitfully consider the relation of ethics to nonviolence.

We need then to consider the relation between peace and nonviolence. At that point the foundation is laid to introduce the taxonomy of affective objectives and demonstrate its relevance to advancing nonviolence education.

## 2. What Is Ethics?

Before considering the relation of ethics and nonviolence, it is necessary to raise the prior question; what is ethics? As part of this consideration, it is vital to defend the objectivity and rational basis of ethical argument, and few do it more persuasively than Peter Singer in *Practical Ethics*.

### 2.1 What Ethics Is Not

In his opening chapter, "About Ethics", Singer proceeds by first tackling misconceptions and outlining what ethics is not. Firstly, it is not a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex, on the model of a hypothetical headline of the kind we are familiar with – "Bishop deplores declining moral standards." Secondly, ethics is not an ideal system, noble in theory but no good in practice. On the contrary, an ethical judgement that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the point of ethical judgement is to guide practice.

In this Singer is very Aristotelian – the point of ethics is essentially a practical one, to be action-guiding, and the aim of ethical education is to develop practical wisdom.

Thirdly, ethics is not a system of short and simple rules, on the model of the Ten Commandments. Nor is it intelligible only in the context of religion, but independent of it (though it may overlap with it).

In answer to the view that the meaning of "good" is nothing more than "what God approves", Singer turns to Plato's rebuttal of a similar claim over 2000 years ago, by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them so.

Fourthly, ethics is neither relative nor subjective. It is not relative to the society one lives in. Were this not so, we could not criticize another society – for example, one that practises slavery or apartheid or genocide. And being told what our society thinks we ought to do does not settle our own decision. What of the nonconformist? What of moral progress? What of Socrates, Christ, Luther, Gandhi, Martin Luther King? What of protests against war or for political, racial, or sexual equality?

Nor is ethics subjective, for otherwise we could not account for ethical disagreement. Such disagreement would be on a par with disagreeing with me about my preference for Big M iced coffee. Some form of subjectivism holds that ethical judgements are not true or false because they do not describe anything and are therefore not statements of fact. The Logical Positivists held such a view. C.L. Stevenson suggested ethical judgements express attitudes, and R.M. Hare urged that ethical judgments are prescriptions, more like commands than statements of fact. Both these philosophers give reason and argument a role in ethics, however.

### 2.2 Making an Ethical Judgement

So how do we go about reasoning in ethics? Singer asks what it is to make a moral

judgment or argue about an ethical issue or live according to moral standards. How are moral standards different from other practical judgments? Why does a woman's desire to have an abortion raise an ethical issue while her decision to change jobs does not? What is the difference between living by ethical standards and not doing so?

- Singer's initial answer is that people are living by ethical standards if they believe it is right to do as they are doing. Living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, giving a reason for it, justifying it. Moreover, the justification must be of a certain kind; it cannot be in terms of self-interest, or superior strength, or because today is Tuesday. The notion of ethics carries with it something bigger than the individual. From the ancient Greek Stoics to the Golden Rule of Christianity and Kant's universalisability principle to the imaginary "impartial spectator", "reasonable man" or Ideal Observer, universalisability is the key. John Rawls creatively modified this by deriving ethical principles from an imaginary choice made behind a "veil of ignorance", in which those choosing do not know whether they will be the ones who gain or lose by the principles they select for an ideal society. They do not know whether they will be rich or poor, old or young, black or white, male or female, of this generation or a past or future generation. All they can consider is "What would it be like if everyone did this?" (for example, to eliminate the free rider who benefits from everyone else keeping off the grass but cuts the corners himself; or the tragedy of the commons is another example); "What would it be like if everyone did this at the same time?" (for example, left their bags strewn over library seats so that there were no free seats left); "Would I want to live in a society like that?"

Once I begin to think ethically by recognising that my interests cannot count for more than the interests of others, and that the interests of all affected have to be taken into account, Singer argues, we are led to a utilitarian position as a minimal first base.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Gail Tulloch** is an Adjunct Research Fellow in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Brisbane. She has a BA (Hons) from the University of Melbourne (1963), and an MA (1981) and a PhD in philosophy from La Trobe University (1981). She is the author of *Mill and Sexual Equality* (Harvester Wheatsheaf/Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 1989), and *Euthanasia – Choice and Death* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), as well as numerous articles. Her recent work is in bioethics and the ethical issues around stem cell research, euthanasia and animal ethics.