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Discourse on Ethics: I

What is Ethics?

There are two popular opinions about ethics or morality: one is the view that morality is absolute — “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” “Thou shalt not bear false witnesses”; the other view, quite popular but opposite to the first, claims that all ethical decisions are relative. Each of these views has much to recommend it.

It is obvious that great social harm would result from a wholesale flaunting of the two Commandments mentioned above. The second view, relativism is attractive because it is obvious that making a particular decision is relative to many things. Consider another one of the Commandments “Thou shalt not kill.” Almost everyone would agree that one can kill in self-defense (or in defense of one’s family, or one’s neighbor, or one’s nation?). It seems, therefore, that something can be said in favor of an “absolute” view of morality and of a “relative” view.

However, each view can be seriously faulted. The absolutist must know that an ethical decision is made in a concrete situation. No one is rigidly and always an absolutist. Few people would demand that little Bryan tell his great aunt Maybelle the complete truth when she quizzes him about the beauty of her new hat. An absolutist can, and properly so, defend these little “white” lies, but the fact remains that lies are lies, no matter how one discriminates by color. Other examples are possible, but it seems clear that “absolute absolutism” is not defensible. Neither is total relativism. Such a view flies in the face of everyone’s experience. If a person is a total relativist, then moral monsters like Hitler and

Stalin must be sanctioned. Relativism justified the action of the Watergate defendants. These considerations lead me to think that extreme ethical absolutism and extreme relativism should be buried, even though it might be thought a live burial.

At least there is something living and worth saving in each position. Before deciding what that is, I would like to suggest a way of looking at morality or at ethics. On the day-to-day level, ethics is decision-making about what is truly desirable.

A long-winded philosopher could add or subtract much from this description. However, I would like to make just two points. First, though there are many disagreements about what is truly desirable in particular cases, most of the time the disputes can be settled by an appeal to facts (both ordinary, homey facts, and sophisticated, scientific facts). Second, a viable ethics (on the basis of which practical moral disputes can be settled) looks ultimately to what the true human needs and goals are. These are the basic needs like food, shelter, sex, knowledge, and, of course, self-fulfillment.

This way of looking at ethics can be illuminated by returning to what is right in the two popular views: moral absolutism and moral relativism. Relativists have seen that ethics is about the myriad practical decisions persons make. They make these decisions about what is good and bad amidst varied circumstances. The absolutists see clearly that one needs a standard for making a choice. Standards are provided by a code like the Commandments. These are directives embodying extremely important values, such as truth, life, friendship, justice, love, harmony. It is hard to draw up a definitive list, but the test of whether or not some value should be included will be based on whether or not it is desirable. It is desirable, if it reflects a basic human need.

These values – taken as standards – measure individual, ethical decisions. The two popular, but opposing, views about morality are each correct in their own way. We need absolute standards but the standards have to be applied in relative circumstances.

by

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"LITTLE AMERICA" UNDER A MANSARD CAP

Surmounting controversy within the Cotton Exchange over the size of their new office building, the contract was let to Olson and Lesh on January 8, 1910 for its construction. And on April 1, 1911 the Cotton Exchange moved into the building by way of a motorcade from its old offices.

"This is the magnificent 19 story Exchange building,.... The plans for this structure, which will be the tallest and most expensive office building in the entire South, were drawn by N.M. Woods, Jr., a Memphis architect. Mr. Woods' plans were accepted in competition with a large number of Northern and Eastern architects. The building and site will represent an investment of \$1,250,000."

— The COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Below: The Lobby of the Exchange Building



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**HOMECOMING
BY THE EDITOR**

Again, we make that turn in the cycle of life, when this city's multitudes of expatriates shuttle to this location for a brief embrace with family and friends, to scurry away again, assured of their first departing. Let us count how many we know who under the confinements of Memphis life have painstakingly set new roots, or those who will but dream of doing so.

These persons have, in many cases, lived all of their lives in Memphis, but fall beneath the burdens of family duties and restricted opportunities. What is so charming, yet so irritating about Memphis? Perhaps it is that cherished privacy and immutable rote of her citizens.

Yet, there is an unusual alliance of the young and aged, unbound by filial concerns and impatient, who will either alter the mechanism of this city or abandon it for dead. Would it be too much to ask our experienced exiles to return with their learning, requesting of all, not a longer wait, but participation in opening up and building a community in this city, instead of expecting one ready-made.

Anticipation awaits the footfall
of the princes;
A city drugged in dream
Shelters itself from its own
imagination.

Within its bounds of parkways
and rivers
Stirs the whole of its world:
Design fashioned of a flatland.

Pariah cease your wanderings,
Clutching at a glimmer in the
distance,
Vacating your family houses
to the worms.

Citizens, shake off your slumber,
Space bows before your skills;
Let the alleys echo with gaming,
And the prince in you arouse.

The Memphis Park Commission and the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce will sponsor an old fashion candle lighting and carol sing-a-long program at the Overton Park Shell on Thursday, December 19 at 7:00 p.m. Everyone is invited to attend and participate.

MEMPHIS FILM SERIES

Brooks Art Gallery

January 5 – “The Point”

Jewish Community Center

January 7 – “The Pawnbroker”

Lyceum Film Theatre

January 7 – “Blow-up”

UT

January 10 – “Casablanca”

Calvary Church at Second and Adams has one Friday noontime concert remaining in its series of three. Jane Gamble, Organist and Choirmaster of Grace-St. Luke's Episcopal Church, will play from 12:05–12:20 p.m. on December 20. Everyone is invited. Coffee and desserts will be available afterwards.

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

CLOSED DECEMBER 16 – JANUARY 3

Center City

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