



RONALD FRANCIS

Why I study ... ethics

BEING asked why I chose to study ethics has resulted in an overdue self-interrogation. As Somerset Maugham remarked, life can only be lived forwards and understood backwards — and so it is with one's career.

My specialism is forensic psychology. Although this seems a long way from ethics, the journey is really one that is travelled on the same road. I see intimate connections, as well as contrasts, between criminal and ethical behaviour. They are the obverse and reverse sides of the same coin, or the end marker points of the same dimension — how awful we can be to how good we can become.

Looking back, I think that my interest in ethics was triggered — many years ago — by finding myself in an environment run by professionals who were motivated by malice. Having worked with such agreeable colleagues before (and since), I was disarmed by my own misplaced trust.

Had I known something of the canons of acceptable behaviour, it would have been so comforting. With the wisdom of (20/20) hindsight I can see much more clearly how a better knowledge of ethical precepts would have helped me to make an informed judgement. That skill would have saved me, and several valued junior colleagues, inordinate travail.

I have served on various ethics committees since that time. Issues of professional competence often arise, but seem easier to resolve than are issues of ethical judgement. One might argue that one intervention technique is better than another; one test superior to another; or a business decision well advised or not so well advised.

Breaches of confidentiality, undignified professional behaviour, and imprudence (for example) are more likely to bring odium to a reputation than are matters of competence (such as skill in test administration). On the whole, the detriments of breaching ethical precepts seem to be greater, and more enduring, than are issues of technical ability.

There is a plain need to articulate

ethical principles for professional behaviour, and to do so in a framework that accommodates situations, groups, and even cultures. Such canons are reference points in a universe seemingly riven by immense complexity.

Legalities are of less relevance than are ethical principles. There is a place for law, and a place for ethics — and they are not the same. Once an ethical code is formalised within a profession or organisation, it becomes part of the regulations that govern behaviour within that arena. Placed in such a way, this set of rules then seems to be subordinate to every other form of legal requirement. It is precisely this view that ethics has to counter.

The old questions of 'should ethics be superior to law?' and 'should ethics be the means of resisting unjust laws?' are still timely. Ethics is not a subordinate form of law but, rather, a set of value principles which enable us to resolve issues of professional value that are not covered by law. In this respect, ethics fills interstices in the law. Formalised professional ethical codes have both a significant controlling and persuasive part to play in helping the development of professionals and the professions.

The positive aspects of ethics are many. First, it provides a set of reference

points which help the less experienced psychologist to make sensible social judgements; second, it promotes collegiality; third, it provides a neutral forum for the discussion of values in intercultural settings; fourth, it invites us to think of creative solutions to ethical dilemmas. There is no one perfect solution; and we can go for remedial and informing, rather than punitive, decisions.

It is immensely comforting to know that solutions do not have to be perfect. Although we might try our hardest to resolve ethical dilemmas properly, the least we should do is to leave the situation improved. By such increments we can make substantial ethical gains, a highly defensible position to occupy.

Ethical dilemmas are so rarely boring. Take the case of a judge in a country where bribery is endemic. Having accepted a bribe from one of the parties to an action, the judge was then offered a larger sum by the other side. Does he owe a loyalty to the first bribers (a new twist to the honour among thieves)?

Perhaps my favourite story is the one of an elderly lady who went to a psychologist's rooms for a consultation. The psychologist charged her \$100. The old lady took out her purse and paid with a new \$100 bill. Unknown to her, there was another \$100 stuck to the first one. When the psychologist saw this, he was confronted with an ethical dilemma: should he tell his partner?

For me, psychological ethics has remained intriguing and challenging. For the future, I have the sincere hope that ethics will become truly cross-national and cross-cultural. In this way, it should become one of the means of enriching the quality of life of us all (Francis, 1999).

Reference

Francis, R.D. (1999). *Ethics for Psychologists: A Handbook*. Leicester: BPS Books.

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