

ETHICAL RELATIVISM

UU Church of Olinda,

Rev Conrad Dippel

24 Nov 2024

When asked about Unitarian Universalism, I usually respond that we are a religion based more on ethics than on theology; that we are most interested in how we treat each other as human beings, and about how we treat the world around us, than we are about our relationship with God. And while there are many different individual expressions of our religion, our discussions do tend to radiate around human actions rather than divine actions.

My talk this morning is about ethics, specifically about how our ethical decisions in everyday living mesh with our broader principles, the principles we hope are guiding forces in our lives. My thoughts are really a work in progress, and I hope to raise questions as well as to explore answers. I like to think that this is what we are truly about in Unitarian Universalism; we are about providing a place for safe self-reflection in the context of a community where that self-reflection can be enhanced by the thoughts, opinions and experiences of others.

The seed for this topic began with a conversation I had with strangers, people I met last year in a hostel in Algonquin Park. One woman really wanted to get a dog, but she was conflicted about it, as she felt that the whole pet industry was unethical, and not just the notorious puppy farms, but even the whole concept of breeding animals simply to please human whims regarding size, colour, shape, function, etc. She would never buy from a puppy farm or a pet store, or even a breeder, but would consider the RSPCA or perhaps a dog rescue organization, but even then, wasn't the simple fact of owning a dog somehow contributing to the overall validation of the pet business? But, given all this angst, she still also really wanted a dog.

At the time, I thought maybe her large-scale ethics were getting in the way of making small-scale ethical decisions. What she needed was a stray dog to show up on her doorstep, as was the case with my daughter, and then she would have a dog without having to make her hard decision. But then, unfortunately, decision-making is what ethics is all about. We have to weigh up all of the evidence, all of our notions of right and wrong, even the conflicting ones, and then make the right decision — or the wrong decision, and then perhaps learn something to make a better decision next time.

Of course, the dog was not my decision to make. Personally, and privately, I thought that she should get one on the basis of short-term values: she would provide a loving home, make one animal very happy, keep it from possible mistreatment by others, or from being put down for lack of interest. I could almost have suggested to her that it was wrong not to get a dog. However, I did rather agree with her about breeding for human tastes, dogs with respiratory problems because we like short noses, or with hip dysplasia due to in-breeding, but I just couldn't be as strict as her in interpretation, opting more for some sort of a sliding scale from bad breeding to better. Otherwise, it seemed that by extension, domestication itself, any breeding for any human reason, would end up being a moral wrong.

Now, the dog dilemma may seem rather trivial to some degree, or this woman's anti-breeding ethics may feel a bit overstated to some of us, but the simple framework is there to see — day-to-day ethical decisions are made in the context of our broader ethical principles. I am inclined to think that the larger principles should be used to inform the smaller decisions, not necessarily to dictate them, but this is a relativism some might not be willing to accept. The concern that I am raising here is that if our broader principles of right and wrong are merely tools that we use to help us make our ethical decisions, which is what I am suggesting — if they are merely tools rather than the laws we must live by — will they be strong enough to guide us, will they stand up to our weaknesses of taking the easy way out, or of rationalizing our poor decisions so that we can feel better about ourselves?

This is the work in progress part, as I am giving this opinion about the relativity of our values, the relativity even of our deepest principles, with concerns that I could be weakening them in the process, or even loosening ties which bind us together. But, this is my feeling as to how morality works. We bring our values to the table where the decision is made, they are weighed in the context, and we act accordingly. Such relativity makes the individual decisions more unpredictable and messy, but in the end, perhaps, more heart-felt and constructive. Heart-felt in that in this process, our values are self-consciously being reinforced or sometimes thoughtfully revised. And constructive, in the sense of constructing morality to meet the changing world, rather than memorizing morality and then trying to make the world conform to our beliefs. But relativism is messy, perhaps even dangerous.

The three people I was talking with at the hostel, the dog-wanter and two others, were also vegans. Now here, there was for me, far stronger ethical positions to consider — environmental waste, corporate animal cruelty, chemical additives, bio-engineering — important ethical concerns, and yet somehow I still chose not to be a vegan. Why not? I certainly share some of these larger values, but then I make a different decision, not feeling that veganism is, at least for me, the right way to address these issues. I choose instead to make smaller-scale ethical decisions regarding what food I purchase, where it comes from, and how it is produced, decisions I am content to live by, but which could be seen as mere rationalizations by someone more adamant regarding the larger principles. This is where relativism is messy — it doesn't conform to eternal values. In fact it challenges eternal values, and this is what makes it seem dangerous as well, because it can appear arbitrary

Lasting principles are good things. I want solid ethical principles to guide me, and deeply held values to inform my living. One of the things that we do in Unitarian Universalism is to attempt to define these values — such as in our statements of purposes and principles. This is important ethical work. What I am looking at today is how we use these values once they are defined — how flexible are they, or how rigid. I opt for flexibility, for using these values, not to dictate what we must do, but rather to help us to make the right decision in the moment. Our ethics are defined within community. If the values which we define within a human community are elevated to a more-than-human status, such as eternal principles or God-ordained commandments, then the context within which we make our ethical decisions becomes irrelevant. The context doesn't matter; eternal rules must be applied without exception, and thus obedience becomes of primary concern. This is not our way. Generalizations are actually statements of truth; they tell us about something that is true — most of the time. In the context

of ethics, if our principles are generalizations, obedience takes a second place to thoughtful decision-making. In fact, the easy way out is obedience. The messy journey through relativity is a harder route.

In a simpler world, in the pre-Anthropocene, before humans had recreated the world and altered its relationships, each species took care of itself. There was a food chain in which one species impinged upon the life of another, but always in a general natural harmony. There were no ethics. Most of the violence occurred within species when individuals fought for mating dominance or resource control. And at some point, the human species began creating ethics in an attempt to deal with these intra-species conflicts. We created principles about how we should live with each other, attempting to define the best ways to interrelate, both with people and with our environment. The process was not always benign, as many groups in power created systems of ethics to maintain their power, but the basic principle of ethics, that there are better ways to live with each other, remained a goal. And still remains a goal. Ethics is not a list of rights and wrongs set in stone; it is an on-going process. When there is competition for resources, when there is not enough to go around, what do we need to do to be good people? Of course, this competition, and the values around how we should or should not consume this earth, has become an ever increasing ethical challenge in our times. And set in a political world in which disrespect has become legitimized, ethics has become a pivotal battleground, because how we treat each other is also dependent upon what we think of each other. A strong understanding of ethics is crucial in any model of a progressive society. If we are to be ethical people, we must keep defining and refining our principles and keep discussing the practical ways in which to apply our principles in everyday living.

I read a beautiful book recently, one which I highly recommend. It is called *Braiding Sweetgrass*, written by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is a PhD botanist, with a teaching position at an American university, and in the process of earning that degree and position within the academic world, she needed to ignore her aboriginal roots. She is a botanist, and in love with her profession, but now she is attempting to weave back into her life, and into her profession, the aboriginal perspective of her ancestors, the traditional knowledge left out of the Western scientific perspective, and the native corpus of ethics describing a path towards the living of a good life. This is a both/and book — Western science and traditional knowledge, and, in the context of what I am talking about today, living a good life in the present, and at the same time, reshaping our deeper values. In pursuing a both/and philosophy, there is an inherent relativism in her perspective — she uses the principles that work in trying to do the right thing; she follows the values which feel right, which resonate within her, in order to be the good person that she wants to be. And she constantly examines, questions, and interprets how the larger values, from whichever source, inform the smaller-value decisions in her everyday life.

She is also teaching all of us in her book, teaching us how it may be possible for us to weave new values (or perhaps old values) into our own lives in this new world in which certain Western values, ones that supported colonialism and environmental destruction, are in the process of being replaced by something better, by something more respectful of other people and more respectful of the earth itself. I say, “in the process of being replaced” — because we are not there yet, as the majority of those who hold economic power today, still cling to those old winner-take-all values. Kimmerer gives us some guidance here, not directly in how to

revolutionize society, but at least she gives guidance in how to become more inclusive in our own attitudes. Her scientific approach to botany taught her objective observation, to see plants for what they were without any personal bias; but her traditional native botany included personal relationships to plants in addition to accurate observation. One perspective kept the plants at arm's length, the other opened the arms and embraced them. Western science wasn't wrong, it just was not as inclusive.

Kimmerer describes some of the traditional native ethics involved in foraging and hunting — never take the first one you see, never take more than you need, never take more than half, take only what is offered, and be thankful and respectful because this plant or animal is giving its life to feed you. One thought that really stuck with me was about the depth of our relationship with the natural world. In her traditional ethical teachings, all of the plants and animals were persons, non-human persons, with their own lives and individualities, and all worthy of relationship. The deer that walked into the clearing in an act of offering, was a non-human person, beautiful and generous, a being to be thanked and respected. And I thought back to my conversation with the vegans, and how here, completely different values were being considered in the decision regarding the eating of meat. And this is the point of what may have seemed a digression into a book review, we use our deeper values to inform our daily decisions. But how can we decide? Vegan values are not wrong; native values come from a totally different tradition than mine. In the end, I am left here to make the best ethical decision for today. And it seems to come down to what resonates within, what feels the most right for me, a purely relative moral decision based upon the principles I have before me, and whether the decision is right or wrong depends upon perspective, depends upon what I have or have not been exposed to, and depends, probably most importantly, upon my ability to self-reflect. Ethical decisions are situational but not arbitrary, because they are measured, and must be measured, against our deeply held principles. Does my decision enhance or demean relationship? And how does it measure up against my generalizations of what is usually right and usually wrong? This is the heart of an ethically based religion: it is our responsibility to decide what is right and wrong, our responsibility to make the best decision we can. Wrong is not a result of our deviance from principle. Wrong is thoughtless action, unexamined response, and unquestioned living. Wrong is to give up on ethical growth.

I will close with a brief observation from physics, specifically regarding the theory of relativity. Everything in the universe is in motion, moving at different speeds and in different directions. Any truth stated about the direction or speed of an object can only be made in relation to another specific object. Choose a different object, and a different calculation may have to be made in order to make a true statement. With relativity, physics became more complicated. And today, I offer you this model for ethics as well.