LIFE AS AN INTRINSIC VALUE*

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I. The A Priori Imperative

Every comprehensive ethical system must contain within itself, either implicitly or explicitly, a conceptual skeletal framework for the categorization of every human deed, barring none. Value quotients are then either assigned, or readily assignable, to every action and to every character trait on the basis of a comparison of the deed or trait and its proper pigeonhole in the conceptual scheme. Examination of diverse ethical systems reveals that virtually every system of ethics implicitly recognizes five distinct ethical categories which may be listed and defined:

1. The morally imperative—actions which are morally incumbent upon an individual; actions which are obligatory and mandatory as distinct from those which are voluntary or discretionary. “Honor thy father and thy mother” is an example of a moral imperative recognized as such by most ethical traditions. Truth-telling is another.

2. The morally commendable—actions which are not obligatory or mandatory in the usual sense of those terms; actions which cannot be compelled on moral grounds but which are worthy of approbation. Such actions are recognized as laudatory and praiseworthy not simply on subjective personal grounds but because the ethical value inherent in the deed renders the act commendable. Arguments urging performance of such deeds are usually not compelling in nature; frequently they are

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hortative in thrust. Acts of philanthropy fall into this category. The term “philanthropy” must be employed in this context rather than “charity” because although many systems of ethics recognize charity as being a moral imperative, all ethical systems posit limits to the extent of such obligations. It is at that limit that charity becomes philanthropy: highly laudable but hardly obligatory.

3. The morally neutral—actions which are devoid of moral significance, either positive or negative. Eating spinach is probably as good an example as any. Total abstinence from alcohol, unless one subscribes to a value system which posits teetotalism as value, is a more significant example. Although overindulgence and drunkenness may indeed be odious in nature, imbibing alcohol in moderation is morally neutral.

4. The morally odious—actions which evoke moral disapprobation. Schematically, the morally odious directly parallels the morally commendable. The morally commendable is greeted with approbation although it cannot be commanded; the morally odious is viewed with disapprobrium although it cannot be banned categorically. The conduct of litterbugs falls into this category. Actions which have deleterious ecological effects are usually viewed as being of this nature, although many ethicists now take an even more serious view of such actions.

5. The morally proscribed—actions which are condemned on ethical grounds; actions which are viewed as malum in se, i.e., evil by virtue of their very nature. “Thou shalt not kill” is perhaps the best example of an expression of such an ethical judgment.

This schematization is, of course, useful and applicable only if applied to a specific action evaluated in isolate from the realia of human life. Life would be so much easier for ethicists as well as for ordinary mortals if all issues were black and white. The ethicist may resort to the expedient of creating his own universe of discourse by positing a ceteris paribus clause asserting that “all things being equal” the moral judgment is thus and so.

Real life is, however, quite different. “Honor thy father and thy mother” is a moral maxim which obligates one to provide for the physical comfort of one’s parents. But what if one’s father suffers from chronic emphysema and wishes to be supplied with cigarettes? How does a moral individual react when confronted by a situation which imposes two conflicting moral imperatives? One the one hand, he is obliged to honor his father’s wishes; on the other, he is constrained by the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” not to aid and abet the wanton destruction of human life. How does a person escape from between the horns of a moral dilemma of such a nature while preserving intact ethical commitments?