

Ethics at Work

Recently, I was asked to participate in a panel on business ethics sponsored by the Entrepreneurship Initiative, a program at UMass. The first speaker was a former stockbroker who was sent to jail for illegal activities and wrote a book about his life, warning others not to follow his path. He encouraged young entrepreneurs to behave in a legal and ethical manner or “suffer the consequences.” When asked to comment on his message, I acknowledged that staying out of jail was a fine reason to be honest at work. But I wondered if the threat of punishment was really the best reason we might put forth in support of ethical behavior in the workplace. The following is a summary of my thoughts and remarks.

Aldo Leopold wrote in his 1948 classic essay, *The Land Ethic*....

When god-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls of his household whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence.

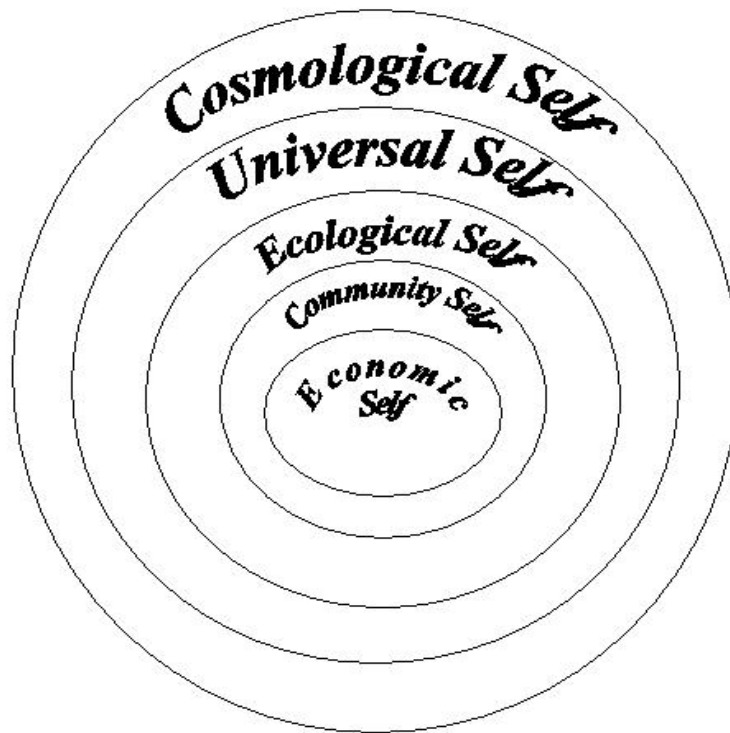
Hanging slave girls would certainly not be acceptable human behavior today (even on Wall Street), so I guess we’ve made some progress. Leopold reminds us that concepts of right and wrong were not lacking in ancient Greece as Odysseus was certainly loyal to his family, but the rights of slaves had not yet been included in the ethical framework of the day. Over the past 3000 years, basic human rights have been extended from the family, to the tribe, to the nation, and in some places on earth to all humans.

This ecological progression of ethics however, does not always move in a linear manner. We live at a time in which extreme relativism has become a social norm in some parts of our culture. There seems to be a belief that what is right and wrong for me may not be right or wrong for you. We get to choose, and at the extreme there is no evil, other than that which I proclaim to be evil for myself. Extreme relativism is based on extreme individualism, which only makes sense if I believe that I am separate from you.

At the same time, the process of rapid globalization has challenged this individualistic framework. It has become clear that many cultures across the human spectrum have common ethical roots. In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis extracted eight principles from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the Koran, the Upanishads, the Tao Te Ching, and ancient Egyptian and Babylonian texts, that express the universal nature of what he called Natural Law. Humans can agree on an ethical framework that holds true for all people. Throughout history our greatest thinkers have spoken of a perennial truth, the law above all laws, that makes us human. Of course, this only makes sense if humans are interconnected beings, not simply isolated individuals.

As separate, individual beings an ethical system that punishes “sinners” surely provides an incentive for right behavior. But it also relies on a social structure that monitors, investigates and catches “the bad guys.” And perhaps if we are truly separate beings, this is the best we can do. But what if we saw ourselves as interconnected beings? What if we looked at ethics as enlightened self-interest, at multiple levels of selfhood?

What if we saw the small “economic self” (the individual) as a subsystem embedded within a larger system of “community self,” which itself is embedded in a still larger system of “ecological-self” (that is all of nature - including humans)? And what if the “ecological-self” was yet another subsystem embedded in a larger system that we might call the “universal-self” (that is everything material in the universe)? Finally if we push this theme beyond the mere material, we might even see the universal-self as part of a cosmological or divine-self. Symbolically, this idea might look something like the following drawing.



This symbolic representation of the “self” reminds us that humans are the result of 14 billion years of evolution starting with the big bang and proceeding forward. And as “stardust come to life” in an ecological process, we are part of something much grander than simply our small “economic selves.”

Let’s look at the implications of this interconnected and expanded sense of self for our work, and specifically ethics at work. E.F. Schumacher wrote in his 1980 text, *Good Work*, that work must satisfy three basic human needs:

- Work needs to provide goods and services for a decent life
- Work needs to provide an opportunity for us to perfect our gifts
- Work needs to help us overcome our inborn egocentricity by working with others in service to some higher calling

For most people in the U.S., our current jobs may satisfy the first two conditions of “good work.” But how often does work support a more expansive sense of self, either at the community, ecological, universal, or cosmological levels? I believe that service to a higher power or higher self is fundamental to being human, and perhaps even necessary to sustaining ethical behavior. Service to a higher self provides me with meaning and purpose. Without a commitment to such service, we are left to find meaning in common distractions like; drugs, alcohol, recreational sex, video games, passive consumption of violent sporting events, and of course our number one distraction – recreational shopping.

Addictive behavior is the story of our culture. We are the people of “more” - more money, more stuff, more college degrees, more shoes, more promotions at work, more gadgets, just more... And in this quest for more, we are hitting a societal bottom that is much like the bottom of an alcoholic or drug addict, or someone who has maxed out their credit cards. While this is a painful experience for individuals and society alike, it is in fact good news because the bottom is where redemption begins.

The story of depravity, suffering and redemption is not only the story of unethical stockbrokers. The line between good and evil passes through every human heart. I believe we are all capable of unethical behavior. But I also believe that we all have the opportunity to experience redemption by serving a higher sense of self, and we may begin whenever we choose. The stockbroker turned author demonstrated that it is never too late.

I believe we can find our way to redemption either through service to community, the earth or perhaps the divine - or we can find our way to redemption through pain and humiliation (for some this means jail). I believe we have a choice. When I see myself as an isolated, merely economic being, then fear of punishment may be an effective incentive for ethical behavior. But when I see myself as an economic, communal, ecological, universal and cosmological being, the result is not only “right” ethics at work, but a joyful and purposeful life.

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