ETHICS AND AMERICAN VALUES: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND PUBLIC POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Ethics raises questions about fairness, justice, social stability, and human well-being, For example, what is freedom? What is happiness? Does public interest trump self-interest? Are humans good or bad? Is doing right also good? Is doing good also right? To ensure ethical behavior, standards and codes of right conduct are erected by institutions and organizations. What the written standards usually mean is that no individual is to seek private gain at the public's or another person's expense. But can individuals in the competitive capitalist system behave in a selfless other directed manner when the basic values underpinning the ideology pit individuals against one another in a struggle for personal success and survival?

INTRODUCTION

The subject of ethics raises many historical questions about social interaction. For example, what is fair and right? What is just? How is a stable social order assured? How is human well-being provided? Is a stable social system necessary for human well-being? Is well-being happiness? Can happiness be legislated? What is freedom? Are human beings basically good or bad? Can goodness be legislated? Is doing what is right also doing good? Or, is doing good also doing right?

 Typically, these questions are addressed on two levels. One level is that of personal ethics. This involves the rightness and wrongness of individual behavior in interaction with other people. In an organization, the focus is the role of individual members inside the organization. The second level concerns the actions of institutions and organizations in society and can be referred to as social ethics. Here, the concern is the role of the individual client outside the organization. (How is the client to be treated? What is fair?). Ethics, then, is concerned primarily with the impact of decisions on people within and without organizations, individually and collectively. Any action which has a present or potential impact on the lives of human beings involves ethics. Human well-being and personal dignity are fundamental ethical concepts. Also fundamental is the responsibility a person has for the human outcomes of any conscious, freely willed act. In sum, ethics is conduct that is fair, just, and right.

But how are people to know what is fair, just, and right? Answers to these questions comprise an individual or group's moral belief system. While the details of moral belief systems may vary, in the West they remain consistent with the Judeo-Christian admonitions of doing justice, having mercy, walking humbly with God, and loving thy neighbor as thyself.

To ensure that ethical behavior occurs, standards and codes of right conduct are erected at various times by institutions and organizations. Because social mores change, these codes are sometimes amended. Even though the specifics may change, their main thrust remains compatible with the Judeo-Christian ethic as presented in teleological and de-ontological ethical theories.