

Can we act ethically ?

This short note is inspired by two things. First of all, the roots of these thoughts are in S. Lem's short story *The Test of the pilot Pirx*. Stanislaw Lem is Polish most know s-f author (*Solaris*, *The Mask*, *The Voice of the Lord*), but one should rather address him as a deep philosopher and psychologists, as his novels are deep investigations of humane soul. Secondly, a few discussions on business ethics during my studies, have inspired me to express some controversial theses.

Can we act ethically? The most intuitive answer is: yes, as ethics shape our everyday decisions. Most of us try to act ethically - whatever it means (in my humble opinion its all about avoiding hurting anyone - as far as it is possible). However, things are not so straightforward. Lets consider the problem of charity. Is it ethical to support e.g. beggars, which many of us used to do (yet mostly during Christmas Time)? I guess no one will object that. Then, let us think: why we consider this ethical? You would probably answer, that it comes from paradigm of equality - all the people are equal, so activities supporting that are ethical.

If you are not fully agreed with that, just think about more clear case. The child is dying from illness, which can be cured by applying some costly medicine. Would it be ethical to spend some of your money to support healing treatment (rather than, say, buying another bottle of whisky)? Certainly. Again, the reason is that we used to agree, that the value of life is the highest in our hierarchy.

All right. But let me remind, that ethical codex is strictly deterministic, it cannot just be a bunch of "if-else" statements. Ethics are clear: when it calls upon us to help ill humans, it calls unconditionally. Keeping this in mind you face the statistical population with literally millions of suffering people. Have you done anything for them? Unless you are Mother Theresa, I doubt. That is: you may have done something - but there are still millions in need. Ethics does not tell you: ok, you have saved one life, you can now rest and pass the duty to help to someone else.

This lead to paradox of ethical approach: you would never have the resources to spend for own pleasure! Stanislaw Lem wrote a small comment on that in mentioned above story, when an rebelling AI evaluate human behavior in a statement (ok, the cite is not strict, as I recall it from my memory):

"The humans are most incoherent beings in the world. They have created something they called 'ethics', which is in fact a set of rules they used to support their herds in the very ancient past. This codex is their funniest invention, as they deeply believe in it (as the mark of their 'humanity'), yet still must face its incompleteness. You can help one man, but you are helpless against the population. Its all about that these 'ethics' are deterministic like Destiny, while the world is statistical like a Cosmos".

OK, I am not here to claim, that ethical codex are useless, but I am deeply stuck by Lem's vision, as it gives something to think of.

by wojmos, 2003