Personal Values

Morals, with attending ethics, are fundamental to personal mental health. While many older cultures have well embedded structures and methods for developing personal core values and beliefs (essentially morals), American society, (and oddly newer “old world” generations) seem to struggle with the sense of self that is intrinsic to core values and beliefs. The reasons for this difficulty are many and varied, but in part arise from the newness of America, and the cultural upheaval caused by the rush of Americanism into older societies.

To begin this venture into your personal beliefs, it is essential to understand certain key terms. Failure to crystalize these words into definitive concepts will cause continued problems in resolving ethical dilemmas.

There are three basic social parameters: Rules, Ethics, and Morals.

Rules:

These are set terms of engagement, boundaries beyond which a given society is apt to imply penalties. A society in this sense ranges from a sports society (rules in a sport), to a country society (laws). Rules and laws are always subject to interpretation and review. For example, it requires judges/juries to determine whether or not an individual has broken a law and referees monitor sports events. How the rules are interpreted or managed is a function of core values and beliefs (morals).

For example it is possible to watch two teams play a sport. Neither team receives penalties yet the audience may believe that one team played “dirty” or “unfairly”. This is the first instance of fairness entering this discussion.

Fairness:

Fairness is generally a measure of uniformity of rule application and interpretation. Also fairness implies a measure of consistency with the reviewers basic beliefs (or understanding of the interpretative framework for the rules in question).

Ethics:

Ethics are behavioral. They define the manner of personal conduct based upon the individuals core values and beliefs (morals). In effect, one determines how one will interpret rules, and how one will treat others, based upon well defined morals. It is not possible to have ethics without morals. Ethics is a measure of the consistency of conduct to morals.

Thus ethics are personal. The judgement of whether or not one is ethical should not be based upon whether or not the judged is congruent with the judge, but rather whether or not the judged is acting consistently with his/her own morals.
Ethics then, are situational. They provide the decision making framework for an individual faced with apparent conflicts of rules. For example, how does one interpret “Thou shalt not kill” when one must eat to live (whether it is animal or vegetable life that is sacrificed is not necessarily the point)? The need for the Torah and the Talmud to co-exist is illustrative of the need to interpret rules situationally based upon beliefs.

Although this article has introduced religious concepts into this discussion, the core values and beliefs (morals) and ethics discussed here are strictly non ecumenical.

Morals:

Morals are the fibers from which all else is made. These are core values and beliefs. Core values and beliefs are fixed, black and white, and not negotiable. They represent your basic, inherent understanding of how things are, or ought to be. They are not situational, nor are they topical - that is, spontaneous upwellings of new beliefs. Morals start from the uterus and are built brick by brick as we grow and mature. At some point in our lives they become fixed.

Morals are the core values of ourselves within society and without. They are not things that we have based upon what we believe about other things. For example, one might proclaim to have certain morals based upon a particular religion in which one has received an instruction set from God or a god. In effect, the instruction set is just that - actually rules. How the rules are interpreted reflect personal ethics. Whether or not an individual may be attracted to a particular religion reflects upon core values and beliefs. Core values and beliefs, as defined in morals, does not refer to beliefs about God, but to personal instruction sets (however those sets have been constructed).

As religion has again entered the discussion, it is necessary to define it as well.

Religion:

A religion is an organized construct of two specific principles:

- A statement about what constitutes the unseen and what is traditionally thought of as the unknown

- A set of rules defining conduct within a particular society.

Thus it becomes evident how such necessary structures affect the nature of personal core values and beliefs.

The level of consistency of one’s personal actions with one’s core values and beliefs is reflected in physical and mental well being. Ethical behavior is action that is consistent with core values and beliefs. Unethical behavior is action that is inconsistent with morals.

Returning to the opening of this article, many individuals today are neither ethical nor unethical.
They are simply aethical. This is because they have not established within themselves a clear sense of what their core values and beliefs truly are. Conflict and personal problems occur when individuals act in manners that are not within the range of their core values. Yet often they are not aware of the cause of their discomfort as they have not sought to understand their own moral fiber and background. It is well worth the investment in time and effort to come to terms with yourself on this matter.