Doing the Asking

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A READER writes to say that he gets into trouble when he sits around with friends talking about ethics. They have the habit of claiming, or, as they seem to suppose, of pointing out, that all ethical values are, of course, relative, and that puts an end to the discussion. Our correspondent asks us to suggest some readings, in texts ancient or modern, that consider the vexing possibility that notions about the good and the bad are only relative.

But he does not need to read the thinking of others. He has made the mistake of imagining that, somehow or other, he ought to *answer* that popular belief with a pre-emptive strike of his own, and he would like some ammunition from authority. But an answer to such an assertion is just a contrary assertion, a feeble mental twitch out of which no understanding can come. It is just so that our politicians "debate", lambasting each other mightily with straws, and proving, conclusively and once and for all, that one believes A, the other, B. Big deal.

What such assertions call for is not answering, but questioning, and that not to test them for truth, but only to find out what they mean, for until and unless we know what a proposition means, we can hardly test its truth. It will, furthermore, often turn out that he who makes such an assertion has no idea what he means, and that is a test of another sort, and entertaining, too.

Thus we advise our friend. When a man tells you ideas of good and bad are, of course, relative, ask him: What, exactly do you mean? Do you mean that there is a land where a man would be ashamed and chagrined to have it known that he once told the truth, and that he would hotly defend himself against such a charge? Or do you mean that there is no truth in any case, and that what is thought a lie in one land is thought a truth in another, as dogs are food in one place and pets in another?

Are you saying that the citizens of Mexico, or of some land of which we may never have heard, admire the corruption of public officials as a virtue, and urge their children to

emulate it? Or are you saying that there are people who envy the success and the apparent immunity of corrupt officials, and would like to get in on the action? Have you heard of some people whose legends and fairy-tales bestow princesses and kingdoms upon cowards and cheaters, or do you rather mean to say that there are plenty of cowards and cheaters in secure possession of our princesses and kingdoms?

Or can it be something more subtle that you have in mind—perhaps the suspicion that our ideas of goodness, even if they are remarkably consistent in principle in so many times and places, cannot possibly be rooted in our nature, but must come entirely from our nurture? It does, after all, seem unlikely that there is a gene for ethics. If that is so, however, do we not discover that it will lead us into questioning how it could possibly have come about that persons beyond counting without any natural ethical propensities at all have ended up forming societies beyond counting in which there is such a remarkable consistency in principle?

Or could you perhaps mean to say that the times change, and we change in them? That there is now more crime than there used to be, or less? That the idea of the moral worth of marriage, for instance, or of such things as a man's "word of honor", is no longer the impulse of behavior that it used to be? And that many deeds that our elders despised, we do not despise, and that much of what they would not tolerate, we have learned to tolerate?

Or are you thinking of the fact that there actually are people, and sometimes in large groups, who do admire such things as cunning and successful aggression, and who feel no contempt for either the inside trader or the arrogant bully, but only envy? In such, do we see a truly relative idea of good and bad, or do we see perversity? Can it be that Epictetus was right in saying that anyone at all, unless depraved, could look about him and discover the good by asking himself, when his own self-interest was not involved, what sorts of deeds he admired in others? Can it be that there is such a thing as depravity, and that there are people who hate the brave and the honest, calling them either fakes or suckers?

Or are you perhaps asserting a fact that might better be called psychological than moral? Are you reasoning from the popular psychology of our time, by whose conclusions we are urged to see self-expression where some might see self-indulgence,

and to admire as a virtue the ambition that the naive are prone to call greed? Do you have in mind the dire warnings of the psychologists, that those who bottle up such natural reactions as wrath and resentment and envy, and the urge to kill, will suffer harm that they might easily avoid by letting it all hang out?

Well, that is surely a mighty herd of questions, and we will probably not live long enough to answer them all, but since we cannot even know what we are talking about unless we do answer some of them, let us choose one and make a beginning. Any answer to anyone of them will lead us to the next questions, and, who knows, somewhere down the road we may find, not answers, to be sure, but some small and surprising revelations, and turns of the path that we hadn't expected. It's going to be a long night, but how better could we spend it than in looking for what we all need more than anything else—nothing less than a way of understanding how to live?

We can promise our frustrated friend that, if he adopts such a line of reasoning, he will (a) learn something, (b) teach nothing, and (c) find himself not invited to the next meeting of that bull-session. Everybody loves an answer, but nobody likes a smartass.

And we would advise him further, not to go to such bull-sessions, and to excuse himself whenever they erupt. The much-praised Socratic method, in which even schoolteachers now think themselves expert, just doesn't work in ordinary life. It needs a long, long time, and unaccountably patient participants; and it also needs an author, a very good one. We should take the Dialogues of Plato, not as models of what we ought to do when confronted by those who believe that they know, but as models of what we should do in our heads when we catch ourselves believing that we know.

But we can still tell our reader what to read. Anything. If only he reads closely enough to distinguish the writers who do the telling from those who do the asking, anything will serve him well.