

Philosophy Group

Notes from meeting Thursday 11th September 2014

Topic for discussion: -

“Would any person behave decently/properly or be law abiding if nobody could see them?”

There was a lively discussion around the topic which included examples of altruistic behaviour as well as some honest admissions of less honourable behaviour. Through these examples we explored how and why we, and others, behave when not observed.

In the most part it seemed we are an honourable group, but that we are willing to bend the rules when no individual will be harmed. We tend to treat others as we would wish to be treated. It would seem that this is largely because of the way that we were brought up and sometimes because of religious beliefs, rather than because we might get caught.

There was a feeling amongst the group that society is now rather more selfish and less likely to behave well to others.

Instances of behaving decently....

Leaving details after damaging another vehicle when no-one has seen - Because it is how I would like others to behave to me

Pointing out too much change to small shop keeper –Because it seems fair to someone trying to make a living

Instances of not behaving decently....

Not pointing out too much change in large supermarket – Because it won't make a difference to a large business

Bribing a senior officer to avoid being sent to Cyprus during National Service – Because of the chance of being killed

Paying a tradesman in cash, when you know it could mean VAT won't be paid – It's down to the tradesman's conscience and we all pay too much tax already

General comments

It might depend if there would ever be a come back

It's a moral thing, it depends how you have been brought up

I don't see how I can ask “the person upstairs” for things if I am not a decent person

If I do something wrong, I find that something bad happens to me soon after

If we are not punished in this world, we will be in another

It is how we make these decisions that is interesting

If we don't respect the rule of law, how can we expect others to treat us with respect?

In Australia and France philosophy and ethics are on the curriculum

Parents have abdicated from the role of teaching moral behaviour and passed it on to the schools

CCTV makes it more likely we will be seen

There is an underlying morality

We each make up our own mind where we will draw the line between what we will do and what we won't

Generally people behave reasonably but bend the rules a little

General remarks on morals less directly related to the topic

Things are not what they used to be. It is morally very different now

Parents use the “naughty step” rather than smacking

The Cray twins didn't attack the elderly and vulnerable

There is a lack of respect by youngsters now
There is no discipline in schools now.
If you don't follow the rule of law you get anarchy
The people making the laws are not affected by them
MPs don't construct legislation, the civil service do
We get the government we deserve. Too few take an active part
The more laws you have, the more people will break them
People would still behave decently if there were no laws

Philosophic ideas on the subject

Thomas Hobbes (16thC) In an anarchic condition ...the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Plato (4thC BC) There will be no end to the troubles of states, or of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.

Garrett Hardin (20thC) Tragedy of the Commons shows that if a resource is held in common for use by all, then ultimately that resource will be destroyed. This means that societies whose members act only in only their own best interests will be less productive and weaker than those whose members act with the interests of others in minds as well.

Daniel Dennett (21stC) in his book Breaking the Spell, argues that ethical behaviour has come about as the result of societal evolution. Societies with beneficial customs and practices survive and flourish,

Plato The story "The ring of Gyges", where a shepherd finds a ring that will make him invisible, illustrates that the only reason people act morally is that they lack the power to behave otherwise.

Native American Proverb Never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins.

Modern adaptation Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes.