

14.3 Moral Miscellany (p. 349)

Do You Have to Be Scum to Get Ahead in Business?

“There are plenty of examples of nice people who did get to the top. Just look around! There’s, ummmm, there’s ... ah, hmmm. Ha ha! I’m sure there are *lots* of examples, and for some reason I can’t think of a single ... *wait!* I’ve got one! Mother Theresa! That’s it! Here’s a very nice person who nevertheless rose to the top of her profession. So the moral is: even in this dog-eat-dog, highly competitive world, you *can* be a decent human being and still attain a career position where you kneel in the Third-World dirt trying to help the wretched and diseased. But if you want to succeed in a large modern corporation, scum is definitely the way to go.”—Dave Barry¹

Killing Bambi’s Mother

A FEW YEARS AGO a colleague of mine was teaching an introductory ethics class, and he wanted to start with an example of a clearly immoral action. “Imagine that someone just went out on the street and killed a passer-by at random,” he suggested.

The students by then were philosophically sophisticated enough to question conventional reactions. “What’s so bad about that?” they asked. “What if the passer-by were a nasty criminal, and everyone would be better off if he were dead?” “What if that person wanted to commit suicide anyway?” “What’s so bad about death?” “Suppose you hated that person and could get away with murder without being punished?” And so on.

These are all questions that deserve an answer, but my colleague wanted to start first with a clear example that seemed unquestionably wrong to everyone. “Well, suppose that the passer-by wanted to live, and wasn’t a criminal? How about if the passer-by were a helpless and innocent child?” More questions and objections. Finally he had an inspiration for an example to use: the hunter’s killing Bambi’s mother in the Disney film. *Everyone* agreed that *there* was a despicable action.

Those cute Disney animals, with their big brown eyes, tug at our heartstrings. Real animals—when they’re cute enough, anyway—affect most of us in the same way. Think of the widespread reaction years ago when Brigitte Bardot held those adorable baby seals up to TV cameras, and then we saw them clubbed by seal hunters. (Big brown eyes again.) Suppose as part of your job you had to exterminate unwanted kittens in an animal shelter. Could you do it?

1 *Claw Your Way to the Top* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1986), p. 32.

What's interesting is how strong these reactions are. Even if we know that those kittens *must* be destroyed, and that it will be done painlessly, it's extremely difficult to get used to the idea.

The 2½-year-old daughter of a friend of mine was caught by her father squashing an ant.

"Katrina," he said, "you should not have done that. That was Tony the ant. Tonight in the anthill, Tony's mum will be very sad because Tony won't be coming home."

Katrina contemplated this for a moment, then her face lit up, and she announced, triumphantly, "No she won't. I killed her too."

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: What is it about certain animals (cartoon or real) that rouses these reactions? It's not at all clear that cuteness has any deep relevance to the morality of ways of treating animals. It has to be just as immoral to squash a cute kitten as it is to squash a really ugly (but harmless) rat. Nobody has any trouble swatting flies: is it because they're not even a little cute? Imagine that flies just happened to look like tiny teddy bears. How would you feel then?

FOR FURTHER READING: The MARK III BEAST is a mechanical contraption that looks like a beetle. It runs around the floor looking for an electrical outlet to "feed" on. It "purrs" while eating or when held. It makes shrill little noises when attacked. It feels comfortably warm to the touch. It's enormously difficult to "kill." This amusing story is told in *The Soul of Anna Klane* by Terrell Miedaner (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1977), reprinted, with philosophical commentary, in *The Mind's I* by Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

The Commodore and the Porn Site

IN JUNE 2001, COMMODORE Eric Lerhe, the fifty-two-year-old commander of the Canadian fleet of warships on the west coast, was charged under the Canadian National Defence Act with conduct to the prejudice of good order and discipline.¹ The range of penalties for the offence is wide, from administrative discipline to a formal dismissal with disgrace from the Canadian Forces to imprisonment for life; but, according to Lewis MacKenzie, retired major general in the Canadian armed forces, even if there is no official punishment, Lerhe will suffer public humiliation and financial losses of perhaps \$300,000 as the result of an unofficial promotion freeze and subsequent pension implications.

¹ The facts about this case, and the arguments, all come from the (Toronto) *Globe and Mail* newspaper: an article titled "Surfed porn sites, fleet chief relieved of duty," by Robert Matas, June 19, 2001; an unsigned editorial titled "The navy's hammer," June 20, 2001; and an opinion piece, "No sex, please—we're Canadian sailors," by Lewis MacKenzie, June 20, 2001.

The reason for this charge was that before he took up command in January, and while he was off-duty outside Canada, Lerhe used a laptop computer that had been provided to him by the Department of National Defence to visit sexually explicit websites that he described as “Penthouse-like.” He did so using his personal Internet account.

Well, let’s look at some arguments about this case.

Pornography changes the way women are viewed, Geraldine Glattstein, executive director of Women Against Violence Against Women, said in an interview. “It’s dangerous for women to be supervised by someone who spends his spare time looking at those kinds of websites,” Ms. Glattstein said. Supervisors who go back to the office after accessing pornographic sites are creating a hostile environment for women to work in, she added. “It certainly does not help make [the workplace] more friendly.”

But an editorial in a Canadian newspaper argues:

It is understandable that the Canadian Forces should be particularly sensitive to the violation of rules governing sexual materials in an age when it seeks to hire and retain women in a climate traditionally male and traditionally dismissive of women in uniform. And certainly there must be particular vigilance against those harassing actions—posting offensive material in shared quarters or offices, forwarding sexually explicit materials to co-workers—that contaminate the work environment.

However, the editorial continues, “None of that is at issue here.” Lerhe looked at those websites in private. Nobody was harassed. His actions are no worse than reading *Playboy* magazine after hours—something some people find distasteful, but surely not meriting judicial action and severe consequences. Lerhe did use a Forces computer for his private surfing, but this is not a really big crime: it’s no worse than typing a personal letter on your office computer after hours.

General MacKenzie argues that it’s “ludicrous” to punish someone for Lerhe’s actions:

Would all senior officers, men and women, who have not visited a strip club during their career please step forward? Hmmm ... small crowd.... Give me a break! I used to read *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, particularly when I was overseas. It did not change my attitude toward female service members from numerous countries who worked for me (and who frequently lined up to be next to borrow the magazines).

But the fact that such activities are widespread doesn't make them morally acceptable. Some people would argue that reading *Playboy* after hours actually would make someone unfit to be a commander in the armed forces. There's a widespread argument that looking at pornography causes increased violence against women and other actions that harm them, but data on this are inconclusive. The real issue here is not whether looking at porn *causes* harm to women—it's whether it *constitutes* harm. How are we supposed to decide whether this is right?

There's a good deal of disagreement on the basic issues here in today's society. Women are more likely to think that there should be more legal restrictions on pornography than men, and people under thirty are more likely to think so than those over thirty. But all those arguments seem to make no difference, once somebody has a set opinion on the matter.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: You probably have some strong opinions on this question—almost everyone does nowadays. You might enjoy having an argument with your friends about this. If you do, see if anyone gets anyone else to change their mind. Ask yourself if it could be that there is no rational way to settle moral disagreements such as this one.

Support Our Troops

EVER SINCE THE VIETNAM War, bumper stickers have urged support for our troops. What sort of support, do you suppose, is being advocated here? Support certainly includes that we not send them into what's often a wretched and dangerous job undertrained or undersupplied, and that we let them know that we haven't forgotten about them and the nasty job they've (nowadays) all volunteered for. They certainly deserve this support. But what's being encouraged is also, clearly, political support for their war. The Vietnam War, and wars since then, have come under a great deal of criticism from the citizens of the major powers engaged in them, and it's implied that this criticism violates our compassionate duties for our troops—that support for them means support for their war. This is a deeply peculiar sort of moral/political argument. All troops deserve personal support, but some wars are not good wars.

That argument can be encountered in places other than car bumpers as well. Political leaders in nations at war sometimes urge continuance or escalation of war efforts on the grounds that the troops currently there need protection. (What's not noted is that they would be much more effectively protected if they were all brought home.) This argument is similarly empty.

Both of these arguments resemble circular reasoning (see discussion of this in Chapter V, p. 113). Both are universal provers. If you allow reasoning to assume as premise what you're trying to prove, the conclusion will always follow. Similarly here: the very existence of soldiers at war is supposed to prove that the war deserves political and moral support. If this sort of reasoning is

acceptable, then every war automatically turns out to be a good war. Universal provers like this always involve bad reasoning.

But, of course, good reasoning is not very common in politicians' pronouncements (or on bumper stickers).

The following is excerpted from a news story reporting the death of a Canadian soldier in Afghanistan:

The latest Canadian soldier killed in Afghanistan reportedly considered the mission pointless.

The brother of Private Jonathan Couturier has told a Quebec City newspaper the young soldier questioned whether anything was being accomplished in Afghanistan.

"That war over there, he found it a bit useless—that they were wasting their time over there," Nicolas Couturier was quoted telling Quebec *Le Soleil*....

Such a strident anti-war message is rare from a family after the death of a soldier in Afghanistan. In the vast majority of cases, relatives say they believed in the mission and that their loved ones died for a worthwhile cause.¹

It's awfully hard to say that your loved one died in a pointless war. It's understandable that so many relatives can't bear to think that death was useless. But, horribly, what they can't bear to think may still be true.

¹ "Slain soldier was due home next month," by Gloria Galloway and Rhéal Séguin, *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto] September 18, 2009: A13.