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Is an ethical journalist simply a competent journalist?

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I remember asking a colleague at UTV what code of ethics underpinned his journalism. And he made what then seemed to me to be an extraordinary remark.

He told me he worked out what way to behave from trying consistently to do the job well. To put what he said in a more abstract way, he thought that by aiming for excellence in his work, a set of principles was revealed to him, which, when put into effect, enabled him to perform to a higher standard.

And it just seemed to me he had got things back to front. The logical way of proceeding is that you develop your ethics first and then you apply it to what you do. Your principles inform your way of working, not the other way round.

By way of interest I then asked him what was this code he had learnt on the job.

Honesty came top of the list. A lack of bias, very important in Northern Ireland, came next. Cynicism about authority, he included, which we might interpret as a healthy scepticism about official statements. But compassion and sensitivity were also rated as key virtues.

For what I felt was a philosophically incoherent approach, it struck me as a remarkably robust and sensible set of ideas. Not only that, since he is one of the very best journalists I know, his strategy clearly worked in practice. But did it work in theory?

The answer is that it does. Whether he was conscious of it or not that my colleague's approach chimed with the ideas of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

Contrary to many modern writers on ethics who believe in essence that you can generate values appropriate for everyday living from the comfort of your own armchair, MacIntyre, though he doesn't put it this way, argues that by doing, you learn the right thing to do.

When you put it like that it should be everybody's modus operandi. And as I've pointed out it's what some people, like my colleague, already do.

But it's not at all what many philosophers think we should be doing. Blame it on Descartes. He encouraged the belief that each of us is composed of a physical body

and a disembodied mind. The body is subject to irrational impulses, desires and emotions but the mind obeys the rules of logic and mathematics.

Descartes' famous saying *Cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I am, exemplifies the view that the body and its senses are not an accurate guide to reality. It's only the mind that can guarantee truth.

It followed from this approach that pure reason divorced from the distorting influences of culture and personality became the key to developing new ethical principles. This conclusion took on greater significance as people increasingly lost their belief in God and their faith in the values that religion upheld.

The new approach rested greatly on the realisation that while people across times and across continents had radically different cultures, each shared the same ability to think in logically consistent ways.

The task then was to find principles, which compelled themselves to all, whatever their background because they were literally so reasonable.

To take two examples: Kant's dictum: Only follow a rule if you're happy that the rule be followed by everybody.

A modern influential philosopher John Rawls has another ingenious strategy. The veil of ignorance: devise rules of justice on the assumption that you don't know what your place in society is: rich or poor, with a disability or without, young or old, male or female.

These sort of ideas strike many people as (a) very clever and (b) as having the potential to produce suitable guides to life. The problem is that I don't know many people if indeed anyone who lives by them.

So the search continues for a philosophical device to sort out good moral principles from bad. A kind of quality assurance machine for ethics. The difficulty is that we haven't yet found such a device.

The upshot is that, without a widely accepted set of moral principles, people are left to create their own individual customised set of moral values. And that squares neatly with the importance that is nowadays put on personal choice. But the result is we don't just disagree with each other in moral debates, we don't even use the same language. While some talk of the right to life, others speak of the right to choose. The terms are incompatible with each other.

MacIntyre's insight into this confusion is that though moral debate appears to have been a continuous process over the centuries with thinkers adjusting their views and those of society over time, in fact the debate suffered a rupture at a point in history. So that what followed looked and sounded like what went before but in fact is completely different.

To obtain a proper perspective on the subject, he argued in effect, that the study of morality should begin with a history of right and wrong. And his scope was truly

wide-ranging. He examined not just writings on ethics but also myths and tales from the so-called heroic age to find out what they revealed about the values held to be important in those times.

In the legend of the Red Hand of Ulster, the race and prize was won by one competitor engaging in a little bit of amateur surgery, severing his hand and throwing onto the shore so he could claim he had touched the land first. To the modern mind, the sacrifice seems not just extreme but also somewhat, if you pardon the pun, underhand. However in Irish sagas, cunning is regarded as a virtue. The approval of sly tactics is not the only and certainly not the most important difference between their world-view and ours. In so-called heroic societies one's duties and obligations derived entirely from one's place in society. To know what you had to do, you simply had to know who you were. It would be literally unimaginable to think: I am soldier but should I fight. Conscientious objectors would bewilder ancient societies.

This Irish and Norse saga would have been understood in Ancient Greece at the time Homer was writing his tales of Odysseus. Whether these tales are a accurate reflection of social realities of the times in which they are set is not really important. What is clear that they a repository of values and provide the backdrop to a more sophisticated consideration of morality undertaken by the major Greek philosophers.

Aristotle would be widely regarded as the most important writer in the ancient world on what constitutes the right thing to do, aside from biblical writers. Though writing well over two thousand years ago, his ideas still have the power to resonate with us.

Nevertheless, his discussion of moral issues can only be fully understood against a very specific background. He sees man as a political animal whose potential can only be fully realised in the context of a city-state. Like other creatures, man is, in a sense, designed by nature to reach for a telos or goal. That goal is eudaimonia or well-being and the virtues are those qualities which help one achieve that aim.

Because both role and goal underpin Aristotle's work, in a curious way his writing makes him closer to authors of self-improvement books than to many modern moral philosophers. I'm taking the point far too far but the functional nature of the morality he espouses means he can be compared to the writers of those airport books like *Seven Secrets of Highly Effective People*. He's producing *How to Guides* rather than some abstract *Why Do Guides*.

It's impossible to apply Aristotle's thinking directly to modern day life. His ideas, rooted in a particular historical context including notions we would simply dismiss as wrongheaded, make his works unfit for that task. Furthermore we cannot easily conceive anyone being able to devise a new and agreed universal goal for mankind with an appropriate set of virtues to point us in the right direction.

Nevertheless his writings have continued to inspire philosophers like MacIntyre who have reinterpreted the way the idea of virtue can be applied in a modern context.

MacIntyre stresses two key concepts: practice and tradition. Both have highly technical definitions. I will attempt to produce two cut down versions. A practice is any co-operative activity whose benefits are realised by aiming for excellence. Virtues

are the qualities that help one obtain those benefits. MacIntyre's classic practice is sea fishing undertaken by crew in a boat. But the production of a newspaper or news programme could easily fall under the definition of a practice. Working out the best way of proceeding is developed within a tradition. Now we tend to think of tradition as some ossified set of rules which meant something to somebody a long time ago but which today means nothing to anybody. But for MacIntyre tradition is an ongoing enquiry into the best way of going about something, which in turn is informed by past experience. Tradition is very much alive and it changes over time in light of new information and new insights.

Even though writers influenced by Aristotle will still disagree on what constitutes an appropriate set of virtues for everyday life, it seems to me in light of MacIntyre's ideas, that the notion of virtue can be applied successfully in the context of certain jobs in which participants are guided by an internally accepted code of conduct rather than a set of externally imposed rules. A trader on a stock exchange will have to obey certain regulations but it's difficult to conceive of them spending time devising a set of values to allow the job to be done better. Indeed I'm not sure what those values would be.

Another way of looking at it is to say that work one would consider a vocation is ripe for the Aristotelian/MacIntyre treatment. Of course as we flit from job to job the notion of vocation is foreign to us. We tend not see any job in that way. That's for those called to a religious life who usually stick with the same role for life.

But journalism is a bit different from other jobs. It may be a lack of imagination but many reporters stick with it through thick and thin. Most of those that I know would be embarrassed to say they were passionate about their work but they do have a different attitude from some other professionals. Your attendance at this conference is proof of that. Being here will probably make you a better and more thoughtful journalist but it won't necessarily improve your income.

To a very large extent then, I agree with the insight given to me by my colleague. The way to become a better journalist is to understand the demands of the job, this vocation we have embraced. Once you've have mastered the role, you will have acquired and developed a set of specific qualities or virtues, the pursuit of which will enable you to do the job better. To a great degree a competent journalist is a good journalist.

I'll give an example of how what I'm expounding translates into good journalism. If you are putting together a programme on the abuse of power, inevitably you will cast round for examples. At some stage you will come across a story that supports the thrust of your report. The temptation is not to probe too deeply into the weak points of the narrative in case you find aspects which undermine the argument you are building. From the practical point of view, it'll also be difficult finding another example and in any case you know that essentially you're on the right track. But however you dress it up, you realise that you're being biased in closing your mind to the possibility that your illustrative example may not stack up.

The right course of action is to ignore the siren calls I've listed and approach your interviewee with sympathy laced with scepticism. You're prepared to believe the

account but, if they don't mind, you need to probe their story more deeply to be fully convinced. The result is that exaggerated yarns are weeded out but strong stories come across much more powerfully as the interviewee rebuts with indignation any suggestion that their tale has been embellished.

Having said all that, it is fairly obvious that ethical journalism cannot rest simply on the pillars of a few virtues no matter how powerful their ability to guide. Life is more complicated than that. There are huge issues where some form of additional insight is called for.

Take for example the problematic relationship between the media and politicians. How far should journalists go in questioning those in government? Are politicians entitled to, if not deference, then a higher level of respect than one might afford others in public life? How far should journalists go in questioning the integrity of politicians?

Frankly I don't think this is as big a conceptual problem as some might think. That's because a journalist is also a citizen. He or she therefore participates in a debate about the role of government as well as the role of a journalist. It simply means that to be a good journalist you require an adequate conception of the role of the state.

Everyone has their views of individual politicians, parties or governments both in this country and outside it. Mine are no more or less valid than anyone else's. However I want to pursue a line of thought that I have found helpful in informing my approach to politicians and the power they exert over us.

In Ireland, especially in the North, we have been absorbed about a debate over which state we should belong to, we have given little thought to the question of what's implied by membership of any state. The world is full of states. You can't avoid being subject to very extensive control by one government or another. It didn't use to be like that. In historical terms, states, which claim complete and exclusive allegiance from their citizens, are a fairly recent invention.

In the early middle ages a person would owe a duty to a variety of individuals. The philosopher Christopher Morris, in his book *An Essay on the Modern State* gives the example of the thirteenth century Frenchman John of Toul who had to honour four different Lords. On top of that individuals would be answerable to bishops, the pope and a king. In that situation there was no clear hierarchy of authority. In time that changed so that each one became subject to a single power be it democratic or otherwise, be it of your choosing or not. This is so pervasive that most people scarcely think about it but it is very odd.

The modern state makes many claims for itself but one of the most debatable is the argument that it enjoys comprehensive and supreme authority over all its members. We need to distinguish here between power and authority. Doctors have authority in medical matters because they pass the following test. Are you much more likely to regain health by following their advice rather than your own. Since you are, doctors possess authority. However they have no power over you. You don't have to do what they say. By contrast a gunman may have power over you but has no authority. He does not provide good reasons why it is in your interests to follow his directions other

than the threat of injury, which may be compelling in the circumstances but is strictly speaking not an argument. The state claims both authority and power over us. It believes it knows what's best for us and can enforce its decisions. One can exaggerate however the degree of control governments enjoy. In the face of widespread civil disobedience, the state in a democratic society is fairly powerless. It's not the exercise of force as such that is worrying but the state's faith in its own authority.

The best argument Morris can find for the state's claim of supreme authority or sovereignty is that it is in a better position to achieve for the individual what he or she wants but is in no position to achieve alone. For example the preservation of law and order is an aim more easily realised by the state than by individuals acting alone or in groups. However the state's claims to authority go much further than peace-keeping and are too wide ranging to be justified. Just ask yourself. Does the state always know what's best for you? If the answer is 'no', then you should be concerned about this assertion of supreme authority.

Incidentally the argument that you somehow assented by words or action to being governed and to be subject to laws the state passes is hard to sustain. Unless you're a naturalized citizen or perhaps a state official you didn't explicitly consent to the sort of sweeping control the state exercises over you. Implicit consent, in this context, is no form of consent at all. Bear in mind that you can't opt out by emigrating to a different country. No matter where we go, we are all prisoners of the state.

Morris believes the state can gain legitimacy by acting in a just and minimally efficient way. But this justification is way short of what is needed to support the state's claim of supreme authority over us.

The crisis over the state's justification of its authority has deepened the more politicians and parties pose as managers competing to offer voters best value for money like a Tesco or Superquinn vying for your business. In the managerial state, what good argument can government offer for asking people to undertake dangerous jobs? Why should anyone risk their life for such an institution? As MacIntyre points out, it is like being asked to die for the telephone company. The more the state behaves like a plc, the less authority it appears to retain.

It could be that we have to update our understanding of what politics today involves. Perhaps politics is mainly about GDP growth and more consumer choice. It may well be that is what most people want. If that is so, then politicians should not be surprised if the electorate becomes more suspicious of the sweeping powers the state seeks to exercise over us. For their part, it is my own view, that journalists should not just be asking the state whether this or that is the right course of action but whether the authorities have the right to pursue any particular course of action supposedly on our behalf. There will be lots of issues where the state is the right agent to make a decision for everyone but the question should still be put.

Meanwhile if the state's claimed authority is at the very least highly questionable, then it follows that the authority of politicians is less than many imagine.

As for motives of those politicians, I am not in the camp that says, the formula for conducting interviews is to ask why this liar is lying to me? Most politicians are both

personable and sincere. They are as a bunch however fairly unreflective about the power they seek to exercise over us. Too often they exhibit great presence of mind and total absence of thought.

In Northern Ireland politics is still dogged by the unresolved disputes over nationality. Now while a love of one's country is as natural to me as breathing, we suffer from an excess of patriotic sentiment. Demands for national self-determination are presented as a solution to the wrongs perpetrated by majorities. But it's an argument I find less and less convincing. To paraphrase Karl Kraus, in politics nationalism is a disease which mistakes itself for a cure.

As should be clear now I am deeply ambivalent about many aspects of the modern state. To my way of thinking, it is moving in the wrong direction, that is towards managerialism, which is deeply worrying because the administration already has far too much power.

These are reflections which have helped me interpret what I report on. I am conscious they constitute a perspective among others. While I believe they offer some form of useful insight I am reminded of what Nietzsche wrote: Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, worn out metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which have lost their faces and are now considered as metal rather than currency.

Ends.