



21 Questions for Ethical Dialogue

by Gary Pavela

One of the best ways to promote ethical thinking is to engage students in ethical dialogue. Appropriate selections from the questions below can be used in many settings, including occasions when students confer with educators on topics like choosing a career.

1. The Declaration of Independence refers to the "pursuit of happiness." Should the word "pleasure" be substituted for "happiness"? Why/why not?
2. The highest happiness for a cockroach probably is _____. The highest happiness for a human being probably is _____. Explain.
3. Could a deeply flawed person lead a worthy life? If so, how? Before answering the question: [a] give an example of what such a "deep flaw" might be and [b] how you define a "worthy life."
4. Do you owe any duties to people in the future? People in the past? Why/Why not? If you recognize such duties, identify those you think most important.
5. Pick a career of interest to you. How might that career shape your character and personality? Explain.
6. What do you want to create with your life? Why?
7. What are the basic components of the scientific method? Can any of them be considered "ethical" in nature? Should any ethical standards associated with the scientific method be applied to other disciplines, including law?
8. The primary aim of education is _____? Explain.
9. If you were managing a group house, would you have any rules? Why/why not? If you would have rules, how would you devise and establish them? Identify at least three rules you would propose.
10. Should there be any general statement of "human rights" applicable across the world--even if it can't be enforced? Why/why not? If such a statement should exist, identify at least three "universal human rights."
11. What qualities do you value in your friends? Do your friends help make you a "better" person? If so, identify the qualities that make you "better." Do you try to help your friends become better people? Why?



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12. What are the basic traits of good leadership. Are any of those traits "ethical" in nature? Explain.
13. Are there people you admire, even though you disagree with them about controversial issues (like politics or religion)? What qualities of character do they have that you admire?
14. Would you pursue the truth, even if doing so caused you to doubt your basic beliefs and assumptions? Why?
15. Do you learn anything about yourself when you're quiet, and alone? What is it? Do you learn anything about the world when you're quiet, and alone? What is it?
16. Do you learn anything about yourself when you experience beauty? What is it? Do you learn anything about the world when you experience beauty? What is it?
17. From an interview with a University of Maryland student:

Q. Is engaging in cheating fair to honest students?

A. I don't think of it like that. I know some students do. But the attitude is generally, this is the way it is. When they work, a lot of these kids, either their fathers work in business, whatever they do, they get a shortcut--the other guy doesn't. That's the way I look at it. If I'm sharp enough to know the right people to get what I need, and he's not, then that's the point of the whole thing.

Agree or disagree with the student's perspective. Explain your answer.

18. Are there any values or virtues necessary for free economies to flourish? If so, what are they? How can they be fostered?
19. How is a good life defined?
20. How will the career you are contemplating help you lead a good life?
21. Assume an "ethics" pill could be devised that would make people kinder and more self-disciplined. If there were no harmful side effects, would you take such a pill? (Consider two underlying questions: Is happiness found in the process of molding a character--learning from failures and mistakes? Would the world be better off if St. Augustine or Malcolm X had taken "ethics pills" early in their lives?).



21 Questions for Ethical Dialogue: Sample Student Responses

Here are selected student responses from University of Maryland honors students, which have been reprinted below with the students' permission.

The Declaration of Independence refers to the "pursuit of happiness." Should the word "pleasure" be substituted for happiness? Why/ why not?

Response by A.C.

The founders were wise in citing the right to pursue happiness as a natural, universal, and "self-evident" truth; a substitution of the word pleasure for happiness would change the sense of the passage considerably. In asserting that happiness is an honorable goal, I wish to define happiness as a search for a balance, for the golden mean, for a combination of satisfaction and self-restraint. It should have greater depth than pleasure usually connotes. Activities that render an individual happy are not necessarily pleasurable--but rather those which add up to a fulfilled life.

Aristotle, dismissing childhood friendships as pleasure-based, implicitly makes a distinction between pleasure and happiness. While seeking happiness is a valid goal of human existence, the pursuit of pleasure is an immature impulse--like those that emanate from the Freudian "id"-- and properly represents a limited phase in the process of maturation.

The founders agreed that seeking happiness is noble and should be protected, while those who are concerned solely with seeking pleasure should not have the backing of the law. At the same time, there is no reason to think that the founders had anything against pleasure per se. It is important to realize the positive aspects of pleasure, as incorporated into the following primary definition of the word in Webster's:

The gratification of the senses or the mind;
agreeable sensations or emotions; the excitement,
relish, or happiness produced by the expectation or
the enjoyment of something good, delightful, or satisfying.

As an example of this type of usage, Webster's cites the following passage from Psalm Sixteen: "At thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."



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Following closely upon Webster's positive definition of pleasure, however, is the following, which might be used as a concise argument for my claim that pleasure would by no means be a fitting replacement for "happiness" in the Declaration:

Amusement, sport, diversion; frivolous or dissipating enjoyment; hence, sensual gratification.

"He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man." (Proverbs xxi, 17)

What the second definition sums up is the effect of a quest for pleasure alone. There are benign aspects of pleasure that can contribute to happiness, but pleasure should not be pursued relentlessly as a goal in itself.

Plato confirms that happiness is the final destination of intensive effort, one which involves restraint and morally good behavior. He has Socrates argue:

we can win happiness only by bending all our own efforts and those of the state to the realization of uprightness and self discipline, not by allowing our appetites to go unchecked, and, in attempt to satisfy endless importunity, leading the life of a brigand. (Gorgias, 117)

While the pleasure-seeker will be reduced to a restless, endless quest to satisfy his appetites, the citizen seeking a happy life will find the virtues Socrates recommends a source of steadiness and of satisfaction in themselves. The role of society in the process of seeking happiness is significant because happiness, unlike pleasure, cannot be found in isolation; it is a journey that requires encouragement from one's fellows. This in turn leads to a sense of coherence and loyalty among members of the community.

The Framers meant that all people have the right to pursue a fulfilling life, one in which they strive for a Nichomachean balance between desire and restraint; they envisioned a meritocratic community in which effort would be rewarded both economically and in terms of social recognition. In the process of striving to achieve the greatest perfection possible, individuals would find the happiness that stems from the virtuous life of fruitful activity.



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From an interview with a University of Maryland student:

Q. Is engaging in cheating fair to honest students?

A. I don't think of it like that. I know some students do. But the attitude is the way it is. When they work, a lot of these kids, either their fathers work in business, whatever they do, they get a shortcut--the other guy doesn't. That's the way I look at it. If I'm sharp enough to know the right people to get what I need, and he's not, then that's the point of the whole thing.

Agree or disagree with the student's perspective. Explain your answer.

Response by L.K.

I strongly disagree with the student's justification for cheating. I hold the student in the same contempt as I did Callicles [in Plato's Gorgias] when he proclaimed that the strong and intelligent had a natural right to dominate the weak and less-intelligent and that morality was simply an invention of the weak in order to be protected from their natural superiors.

Cheating is not fair to honest students. They may be deprived of opportunities and jobs for which they are the most qualified because decisions were made based on incorrect perceptions of dishonest recipient's skills or intelligence. However, I believe that ultimately, cheating does more harm to the cheater than the honest student.

Plato claimed that the worst circumstance for a person was to have one's soul in danger due to the fact that wrong had been committed and had gone unpunished. Even if the cheater is never caught, he must live with the knowledge that he was wrongly attained something to which he has no right. Even if the cheater feels no guilt, he has tarnished his soul . . .

The cheater insults his own intelligence and abilities. By cheating, he is admitting his inferiority to other students and showing that he cannot achieve comparable levels of success. While the honest student can be proud of his achievements knowing that they were earned, the cheater can never experience this satisfaction. The cheater also deprives himself of fully developing his own talents and abilities. By always looking for a shortcut, the cheater will never know what he can accomplish on his own.

The honest student, while wronged by the cheater, is ultimately the happier of the two. The honest student has maintained a clear conscience. In choosing the truth and enduring the wrongs committed against him, he has chosen the most favorable way to live this life and ensured his eternal reward in the next. The cheater wrongly assumed that he was entitled to violate others in order to get ahead. It will be a sad day when he realizes that his perceived success will be the cause of his ultimate disgrace.



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The highest happiness for a cockroach probably is----- . The highest happiness for a human being probably is----- . Explain.

Response by C.H.

The level of happiness that humans can attain and what other animals are capable of are vastly separated. Animals, such as cockroaches, are limited to what Plato referred to as "satisfying basic appetites." Humans, alternatively, experience happiness on a much higher level. Human happiness is not merely "feeling good," as the satisfaction of appetites will achieve, but "feeling good about ourselves."

As Aristotle argued, happiness is "some kind of activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." In my opinion it is virtuous acts, doing things that we believe to be good, that makes us "feel good about ourselves." This requires that we have some concept of virtue or general good. There are many things that go into such a concept. There is moral and ethical good, right and wrong, that constitutes our conscience. There is social good, which involves consideration of others in society. And there is personal good, involving our own interests and goals and those of our family. Therefore, virtuous acts entail doing something in accordance with moral, social, or personal good.

Only human beings have the awareness of self and society that is necessary to comprehend these issues. The vast majority of animals, including cockroaches, act on instinct. Satisfying basic appetites such as drinking when thirsty, eating when hungry, and resting when exhausted is what is instinctual. This is what cockroaches are limited to: they follow their innate instincts, not necessarily aware of what they are doing or what consequences it will have. Human beings still have instincts, but they spend most of their lives in learned activities. Humans grow up learning what is right and wrong. They may even, as Plato suggest, have to discipline themselves and restrain their instincts in favor of what is learned. Only humans have a sense of self and the will power to do this. Having a higher level of awareness than other animals, human beings also have a higher potential for happiness.

The highest level of happiness for a cockroach would be mere pleasure, while the highest happiness for human beings would be true happiness: the pleasure of the soul that stems from feeling good about oneself.



What qualities do you value in your friends? Do your friends help make you a "better" person? If so, identify the qualities that make you "better." Do you try to help your friends become better people? If so, how?

Response by M.B.

The qualities I value most in my friends are loyalty and respect. I consider myself to be a very loyal person and expect the same from those I am close to. Friendship is meaningless if you cannot trust those you share it with. Respect is closely tied to loyalty, but has another element. Having people around me who respect me makes me less prone to do things that would diminish that respect, thus improving myself through my friends. As Aristotle says in his *Ethics* "We believe of our friends that they are good men." (Pg.215) If people believe that of you, why would you try to disprove that belief?

Aristotle writes a great deal about friendships in his *Ethics*. One of the points that I disagree with is his assertion that "friendship of young people seems to be based in pleasure." Though I agree that a good portion of any friendship is the pleasure derived from it, I am not close to my friends simply for that reason. I am friends with them because they respect me, enough even to tell me they disagree with something I am doing. Though being told you are wrong is never pleasant, it is better in the long run. That is why candor is another important aspect of friendship, because a true friend is not a "yes-man." In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates asserts that he enjoys people much more who cause him to question his action and beliefs, because they make him a better person. The same is true of good friends, because good friends will not allow you to make mistakes if they feel they can help you prevent them.

The mere fact of having good friends can serve to make one a better person. [Author] George Vaillant displayed this [in his book *Adaptation to Life*] when he showed that the well-adapted Mr. Goodheart had established several solid relationships, while the poorly-adapted Dr. Tarrytown had none. The benefits of having friends to one's character, however, also depends on whether the friendship is true or superficial. Quality matters more than quantity. Aristotle says that "to be a (true) friend of many people is impossible..." (Pg.269), but I disagree. I don't think there is a limit on how many friendships one can have that are based on mutual respect. Some people have big hearts, with much to give, and these people can be close to many others. There are, though, people who brag about the number of friends they have, but seem to have few people who would be there for them if they needed. Such people are less well-off than those with only a few good, dependable friends; they seem to be concerned more with a "useful" friendship, as described by Aristotle.

I believe that friendship should be mutually beneficial, in pleasure and usefulness as well as the "deeper" friendship based on trust and respect. I try to give my friends the same qualities I expect from them. I make sure that I am loyal, for anyone who would betray a friend is not a friend. I am rarely true friends with people I do not respect; acquaintances, perhaps, but never what I would call friends. The people I do respect and am good friends with, I try to help them be better people. I think I have made a clear previously that I do not believe in pushing one's own beliefs on others, but I will make my opinion known if I disagree with them. I don't think I would be friends with the people I am if these qualities did not exist on both sides. I would like to think I make my friends better people in the same way they make me a better person, but I can't make assumptions. I seriously doubt that they would be friends with me if they didn't feel that I helped to improve their character.



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Do you owe any duties to people in the future? People in the past? Why/ why not? If you recognize such duties. Identify those you think most important.

Response by K.B.

One must realize that he or she is not the first in history, nor will he be the last. Following logically from this premise, an individual is linked, in some fashion, to others both in the past and future. To complete the syllogism, if one is linked to another, he owes duties to that individual, in order to continue the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

Personally, I owe duties to my current family members as well as my future descendants. One of many duties I owe to my parents is to utilize, to my potential, the resources with which they provided me. Through their hard work and determination, my parents were able to provide my sister and I with sufficient resources to not only have a stable and healthy childhood, but to experience additional benefits, such as attending college. It would be selfish of me to waste this opportunity by not achieving to my fullest potential. I owe my parents this duty--my own hard work and determination--to ensure that their own toil will not go without reward.

In addition, I owe duties to my future descendants. Just as my parents provided for me, I must provide for my future family members. If for some reason I should "break the chain", or fail to provide, the future of my family would be in peril. If I provided for my children, then they, in theory, will be able to provide for their children, and so on. This obligation is not limited to my family alone, but rather, again in theory, should apply to the world at large; If many should "break the chain" of obligation, the result would be chaos. Many obstacles do prevent individuals from performing these duties, but the notion that one does in fact "owe" something to others is undeniable.

In [the dialogue] Gorgias, Plato realizes the importance of relationships (and duties) within society:

...heaven and earth and their respective inhabitants are held together by the bonds of society... that is why the universe is called an ordered whole or Cosmos and not a state of disorder...." (pp. 117-118).