

Heilewif's Tale: Introductory Unit

All of the societies we have studied so far have held individual people responsible for their actions. In fact, we could say that ethics is about individual decision making. But, we have also seen big variations in how people look at what's right or wrong. Sometimes this difference comes from a disagreement over which is more important, the individual person or society as a whole. Heilewif's Tale was about a time in history when the good of the group was much more important than the good of any individual. This idea, called **communalism**, holds that what's best for the group is most important and ends up being what's best for each individual.

Before we get started, think about this issue. *Should you try to do what's best for the group you belong to even if it might not be, at least in the short run, what seems best for you as an individual?*

Feudalism

After the fall of Rome, the rule of law disappeared, and Europe became a dangerous and lawless place. People naturally banded together and formed groups for their own protection. The land was divided into many small territories, which were defended by castles. Nobles and knights ruled, while peasants and serfs farmed the land. This so-called feudal system lasted for over a thousand years.

Feudalism's ideas of right and wrong were based on what would best hold together a strong group. We call this idea *communalism*. A commune is a group of people living together and sharing what they have.

In feudal society people freely agreed to be ruled by other people, and to do what they were told in return for protection. To seal these personal agreements, it was common to swear an oath of allegiance. The greatest crime that you could commit was to go back on your word, and not stand by your oath. This was called a felony. The word felony is still used today to describe the most serious crimes.

Let's look at one of these feudal oaths.

I swear before God that I will be your true and faithful servant and be at your command. I will love what you love, and hate what you hate. I will not think or do anything of which you disapprove. In return you will stand by me, and protect me in all the ways we agreed to at the time I submitted myself to your authority.

Composite of several typical feudal oaths.

An oath is like a promise to do something. How important is it to keep your promises? Should promises be kept no matter what?

Thomas Aquinas

During this feudal era, the Catholic Church was very strong, and most of the thinkers and writers were church people. One great philosopher who had a lot to say about right and wrong at that time was a Catholic priest named Thomas Aquinas. We're going to read some of his words, and talk about them because they show the philosophy behind communalism.

Here is how Aquinas put it:

The parts of things exist for the sake of the whole. If a person had an infected finger, and it was threatening to spread and kill the person, then it would be right and good to cut it off. By the same reasoning, the person who is dangerous and infectious to the community can be rightfully killed to protect that community.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II,64 simplified

You can easily see how strong this idea of protecting the group was. *Think about the groups you belong to. How important are these groups to you? Write a short statement about groups in your life and prepare for a discussion.*

One question that puzzled people who believed in communalism was whether a person should make a profit by selling something for more than it was worth. Here is what Aquinas said:

It is wrong to sell a thing for more than its just price because it is deceiving and injuring your neighbor. Buying and selling is intended for the common advantage of both parties. Therefore there must be equality between them.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II,77 simplified

This is different isn't it? Let's look closer at what Aquinas said. First of all he uses the term *just price*. This term means the same thing as fair price. But what does that mean? Well, for people at that time, it meant that if you were selling something to make a living, you could set your price only as high as was necessary to pay your living expenses. In other words, you could expect to live comfortably at the level you were already at. You could not get rich by making big profits. For example, shoemakers had a certain lifestyle, as did carpenters and farmers and so did everyone else. You could sell your goods only at a price that kept you at that level. The just price would change with people and places, but it was always intended to keep people from moving up, or down, the social ladder.

To sell anything for more than it is worth, or to buy anything for less than it is worth, is wrong and unlawful.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II,77

Compare this with the way trade is carried on today.

Thomas Aquinas had a lot to say about right and wrong. Let's see what he says about hypocrisy. Remember that hypocrites pretend to be something they're not.

The seriousness of the wrong will depend on what end the hypocrite has in view. If the hypocrite intends to gain of from it at someone else's expense, it is very serious, but if the hypocrite just enjoys pretending then it's of lesser importance.

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II,111,4

Here again we see that intent played a big role in how actions were judged. *Let's think about this question again, maybe you've changed your opinion. Do you think that the reason why a person does something can determine if that action was right or wrong. For example, what if someone who was honestly trying to help a person injures the person? Or is it only the outcome of the action that counts?*

This is a tough problem for ethics. Let's use this example. Is it always wrong to lie? If not, what makes a lie not wrong? See if you can come up with a rule for when you can lie and when you can't. Then, apply it to some new situation to see if it works. Write your reasoning and conclusions in the space below.

Renaissance

After about a thousand years of feudalism, people began to question some of its basic ideas. This new period in history is called the Renaissance. It was a time of change in the way people looked at their relationship with the community they lived in. Communalism was losing ground to the idea of *individualism*. Individualism stresses the importance of the individual people, and places them above the group. People began to believe that there was nothing wrong with striving to get things for themselves, and they became less concerned about their obligations to others.

The Renaissance was the beginning of what we call modern times. We still live in the modern age, and our society today still stresses individualism. So, this is a very important idea for us to study. It's a new way to look at life, and it changes things a lot.

All through the Middle Ages it was assumed that, for the most part at least, people try to do the right thing. In other words, people were by nature basically good. This was one idea that was seriously questioned by Renaissance thinkers. One famous philosopher at this time was an Italian named Nicolo Machiavelli. He wrote a book called **The Prince** which gave advice to political leaders. Let's see what Machiavelli said about the natural goodness of people.

In general, people are ungrateful, unreliable, false, cowardly and greedy. They will promise you anything, and then turn their back on you if things go wrong. And don't think that the person who is closest to you is more reliable. Friendship is based on obligations, and people break obligations most easily.

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVI simplified

What do you think? Are people basically good or basically bad? Is Machiavelli right?

Now, if you believe that people are the way Machiavelli says they are, your ideas about right and wrong will change.

Machiavelli wrote his book as a guide for the leader of his country. He believed that the government should not have to play by the same rules as ordinary people because the government cannot afford to lose. *Do you think governments should have the same standards of right and wrong as ordinary citizens? What about when governments deal with foreign countries?*

Here is some of what Machiavelli wrote:

Everyone says that the leader should be honest and trustworthy and not be sneaky. But it's easy to see that in the past leaders who get things done have paid little or no attention to this idea. They have simply outsmarted the others, especially those who keep their word. We all know that there are two ways of getting what you want. The first this through the rules, and the second is to take it by force. The leader must do both. The leader should be half lion and half fox. The lion can't see the traps, and the fox can't fight off the wolves. Great leaders don't rely on either one or the other, but use both. Therefore, the wise leaders do not keep their word if it will hurt them or prevent them from getting what they want.

If people were good this rule would not hold. But, because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.

But, it is necessary to disguise your dishonesty and to pretend to be good. People like to think that

they are upright, and they are very easy to trick. You must appear to be virtuous, but only a fool actually is virtuous. Pretend to be kind, reliable, fair, honest and loyal. But be ready to do the exact opposite, as long as you don't get caught. Its always best to stay with the good if you can, but only if it works, if not, you must be ready to change tactics. Remember, people must believe you are virtuous, so never give any hint that you are not. People only see what you show them, not what's really there.

Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII simplified

What was Machiavelli's opinion of hypocrisy?

It seems that winning is the most important thing for Machiavelli. How important is winning in the things that you do? Does the urge to win sometimes lead to unethical actions? Can you give any examples from your own experiences?

Machiavelli seems different from earlier things, but there is a very basic way in which he is identical to all the others. Reread the following sentence. *See if you can figure it out? Why does he tell people to lie and cheat? What basic principle of ethics is he using?*

If people were good this rule would not hold, but because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVIII simplified

My Coat of Arms

Create your own heraldic shield. You must use pictures to tell the story. Only three words are allowed. The drawings may be as simple as long as they mean something to you and you can explain them. Stress the quality of values it shows and don't be concerned with the quality of the artwork. Why pictures? Not only are pictures or symbols the traditional way of telling a story on heraldic shields, but the use of abstract symbols can force you to think beyond words to often hard to express values and beliefs.

You must answer the following questions symbolically on your Coat of Arms.

What do you regard to be your greatest personal achievement?

What do you regard to be your family's greatest achievement?

What is the one thing people can do to make you happy?

What do you regard to be your greatest personal weakness?

What would you do if you knew you had only one year to live?

What three words would you most like to have said about you?