



Creating Opportunities for Meaningful Ethics Dialogue

What Dentists Should Know about Effective Ethics Conversations

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While we think about and discuss ethics a lot, we only occasionally stop to ask what might make conversations about ethics in dentistry more effective. Here, we'd like to offer some ideas for a general framework dental professionals can use to start a dialogue about doing what is ethical or morally correct. These thoughts, though, should be considered presuppositions — that is, basic ideas useful for starting any ethical study or discussion.

Defining Discussion Terms

For the purpose of most ethics discussions, a question is "ethical" or "moral" when it is about what *ought to be done* or what *ought not to be*

done. Because the adjectives "ethical" and "moral" are used so variously, it is important to specify exactly how they will be used in each discussion. These two words are treated (at least by us) as having the same meaning, which allows us to use them interchangeably and focus on the "smallest" meaning they share — that we are discussing what ought or what ought not to be done. If either "ethical" or "moral" was used in any other way in this column or other articles or ethics programs, we would need to explain that clearly in each instance. More complicated distinctions or qualifiers of this general idea that we are associating with the words "ethical" and "moral" should always be stated explicitly so they are clear.

Sharing the Human Experience

There are no experts, in the usual sense, on moral/ethical questions. Objectivity in moral/ethical judgments — or the ability to move away from subjectivity — can be achieved, however, as one's moral/ethical thinking and judgments are grounded in a broader base of human experience. This broadening includes personal experiences, the experiences of others, and our combined experiences shared through dialogue. (Such objectivity is closely parallel to that of natural sciences where the move away from subjectivity is achieved through the experience of many observers, gathered together and compared in dialogue.) This means that all human experience is relevant to the discussion of moral/ethical issues. In this sense, while there are no special experts on ethical matters, every person who reflects carefully on his or her experience has expertise about what is moral/ethical to share with others.

Hindrances to Moral/Ethical Dialogue

There is also an important hindrance to dialogue about moral/ethical matters, which is the lack of a common vocabulary. This is in contrast, for example, to the widely understood technical vocabulary of the natural sciences. Similarly, in contrast to natural sciences, which has the scientific method — a single, widely accepted method of demonstration to resolve disagreements and interpretations of evidence — discussions of moral/ethical issues ordinarily lack a commonly accepted method of demonstration. Even among philosophers, theologians, and others who analyze moral/ethical reflection in a systematic way, there are a number of distinctive approaches to moral/ethical reflection and a number of ways to resolve disagreements about these matters. Because of this, there is no single method that is accepted by all who participate in these discussions. Careful dialogue about moral/ethical issues can begin to correct these hindrances. It can only do this, however, by:

- Developing mutual understanding of the words people use and the experiences their words refer to
- Comparing ideas, assumptions, and methods of moral/ethical thinking and judgment
- Broadening the base of each one's experience through the willingness of all to communicate their experiences and listen respectfully

Mutual respect among participants is key to the success of such dialogue. Each must be willing to share his or her experience of what ought and what ought not to be done, as well as the reasons why, with the others in the dialogue. They must also be willing to learn from the others, since selective listening is as destructive as the refusal to share.

Another hindrance to such dialogue is the view that there are no correct answers to any moral/ethical questions, or rather that every answer is just as correct as every other. The view that seems the most productive, though — as a starting point — is that the matter of whether any answers

to moral/ethical questions are better than any others is an open question. No one has yet demonstrated that there are no correct answers to moral/ethical questions or that one particular ethical system provides all the correct answers to such questions. Therefore, what seems most reasonable to us is to continue the search. We can ask how moral/ethical thinking is done. We can also identify its characteristics (its how and its what), especially when it is done well.

It is important to remember that questions about what is morally/ethically required or permitted are distinct from questions about what is legally required or permitted. The law is sometimes a useful guide to what is morally/ethically correct; it isn't, though, a fundamental determinant of what is morally/ethically correct, for we employ moral/ethical thinking to determine what the law ought to be, rather than vice versa.

In practice, determinations of our strategies of action will have to include questions about the law and its impact on our lives and the lives of others. But the bearing of legal requirements on what is morally/ethically best will always depend more on moral/ethical reflection than on what the law requires. Thus, if we determine that the law is supportive of what is morally/ethically required, all the better. But if we determine that the law hinders or runs counter to what is moral/ethical, this is a sign that the law ought to be changed or that we ought to disobey the law in conscientious disobedience. For our purposes here, the primary focus will be on moral/ethical thinking about the good, not on the law.

Sources of Our Moral/Ethical Views

People learn various aspects of their moral/ethical views and convictions from a number of sources: family members and other important figures in their upbringing, formal education, society, social and occupational groups, religious commitments, and personal reflection. We have to consider all of these sources as equally valuable and irrelevant. Each one of them may have something to offer, but none of them (whether based on reason, feeling, or any other source) can be viewed as a privileged source of answers to moral/ethical questions or as authoritative in its own right.

At the most fundamental level, each discussion of any moral/ethical question assumes that our judgments about what ought and what ought not to be done can have an impact on our actions and our very being. That what we judge ought or ought not to be done really can affect what we do, what we refrain from doing. Most of these take seriously the common sense conviction that humans are able to make choices between alternative courses of action, a capacity often expressed with the word "freedom." For present purposes, we will presuppose that human actions are, in some significant sense, the product not only of acts of judgment about what ought and what ought not to be done, but also of acts of choice and, more specifically, about our efforts to choose what is morally/ethically right to the best of our abilities.

Making Decisions

Each individual who makes a choice — or each group that makes a choice — is the author of that choice and the party who bears the responsibility for it once it is chosen. For this reason, we hold choosers accountable for judging as carefully as they can about what ought to be done, and because of this, each of us as choosers must ultimately make our own best judgment about what ought to be done (or what ought not to be done) in any given situation and about what kind of person/group he or she or it chooses to be. Others will typically be helpful contributors to thinking carefully about such things. And, like every choice, it deserves to be based on one's own best moral/ethical thinking (for example, that this authority figure has given the best advice for the best reasons) rather than merely parroting others' thinking or blindly following others' judgments. In other words, one of the principal reasons for becoming skilled in careful moral/ethical thinking is to be able to take advantage of others' wisdom by being able to assess the merits of others' advice.

The Conflict Resolution and Mediation Connection

Ethics dialogue and deliberation require several forms of interpersonal relationships. It may be useful to compare it with conflict resolution and mediation. In fact, ethics dialogue can function as an important form of conflict resolution, yet that is not the primary aim of ethics dialogue. Resolving conflicts is only a secondary good. The primary aim of ethics dialogue, as previously discussed, is to carefully address questions about what ought/should be done or what ought/should be the policy about some matter within a particular community.

In ethics dialogue, as in mediation, parties willingly talk to each other and, similarly, it is the outcome of their conversation that is the goal. Even parties who are in conflict are directly connected to each other, if they are willing to work for mediation or engage in ethics dialogue, because communicating with each other is the central activity of both of these activities.

Sometimes ethics dialogue might be assisted by an ethics facilitator, but, as in mediation, the role of a third party would be to facilitate the participants in talking to each other. In these cases, the ethics facilitator in the middle of the parties is like a mediator; i.e., not directly related to the parties. Ethics facilitators, like mediators, do not decide a matter like a judge would. The parties decide it themselves.

But, unlike mediation, the primary goal of ethics dialogue is not to settle a conflict or generate peace. It is determining what is ethically correct based on serving an unnamed and common good. The involved parties need to bring their own ethical framework to the relationship, for what their dialogue is focused on should take them toward the best understanding of what is ethically right/correct. And claiming something is ethically right/correct is always about what is right (or wrong) generally, from a broader point of view than that of any particular party.

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In addition, as in mediation, self-assessment is essential to ethics dialogue. But here, self-assessment is not something attended to by each party alone; it is something honestly communicated to the others as part of their search together for what ought to be done. Ethics dialogue also differs from mediation in that its primary focus is neither on what might be done in the future nor on what may have been done in the past, but rather simply on understanding — as clearly as the parties can — what is right. This is why any rights language employed in ethics dialogue will primarily focus on natural or human rights (rather than legal and other contractual rights), because the goal is not to resolve an adversarial situation, but rather to determine what is right in a way that concerns the basic nature of good of human relationships and can be explained to humans generally.

Of course, in most situations, there is no need for an ethics facilitator. Ethics dialogue is something that happens whenever mutually respectful people discuss ethics in daily life. The more formal settings for ethics dialogue are mostly needed whenever ethical decisions become more complex.

With these thoughts in mind, the authors of this article encourage dental professionals to actively work to establish more opportunities for careful ethics dialogue, for it has the potential to draw dentists together and help them address these issues by identifying the good ends they serve and constructing means to secure these ends effectively in difficult social circumstances. The ethical conflicts between dentists today are rarely about a particular person or the power relations between two particular people. They are almost always about the relationship of this professional community to the larger society. So we submit that making commitment to mutual ethical dialogue is a far better path for the members of the dental profession, and, for that matter, all professions and communities, than resorting to the other, less collegial mechanisms that are available involving various kinds of outside settlement agents and clearly is far better than fostering an environment in which those who have disagreements remain in conflict or, worse, at war. ♦

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