

What are

ethics?

Prime Minister

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Mohamad explains
in this interview
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ONE OF the most difficult things to do is to explain why one should do what is

good and should not do what is bad.

At first it would seem obvious that it is good to do what is good. But what is the goodness that comes of doing good.

It is not so easy to clarify this goodness in terms that give it meaning to the individual or even to the community.

And the clarification becomes even more difficult when some sort of sacrifice or initial discomfort or difficulties must precede the goodness that is supposed to be the reward.

As against this the ob-

vious immediate return from doing what is bad.

Take illegal gratification or corruption, for example. Accepting it results in immediate gain. Better still illegal gratification is not easily detected.

The gain is therefore permanent and nothing bad will probably result from it.

On the other hand, if a person refuses to accept illegal gratification, the chances are another person will accept. The first person will lose but the community will still not gain.

Once corruption becomes institutionalised, not

accepting a bribe results in a distinct loss to the person concerned. At this stage illegal gratification becomes almost a part of normal income. The bribery will be quite open.

At this stage too bribery is no longer for doing a favour. It is for avoiding disfavour. In other words, the bribe is given in order to prevent deliberate obstructions and difficulties.

The officer who accepts the bribe is really not losing anything. Indeed he gains. Or, in a very immoral way bribery is good for him.

And as a person is truly

concerned only with his selfish needs, whether good or bad, there is really nothing bad to him if he accepts the bribe.

It is only if he is caught and punished that the badness of bribery becomes tangible to him.

Clearly in a situation where the chances of being caught are minimal or nil, it is "good" for an individual to accept bribe. Morally it is wrong of course.

But morality is not such a strong deterrent. In any case moral scruples can be overcome by reminding oneself that other people will take the bribe if you don't.

So you are not really doing anything good for society by not accepting the bribe. But you are certainly

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doing yourself a "bad" turn.

If bribery is going to be regarded as ethically bad then it must be proven bad for the person accepting the bribe and for the one giving it.

Unfortunately the badness of bribery to the recipient in particular is only felt when bribery has become rampant.

The recipient then finds that he too must give bribes in order to get anything done. Indeed it is possible that what he has to give will not only cancel out what he himself had received but will probably exceed that.

The net result of a corrupt system would then be negative for him. He has made no positive gain.

This is of course the direct impact on the corrupt person. But the deterioration of society would have a very palpable indirect impact on him.

A society that is corrupt cannot function with any degree of certainty, and certainly not efficiently.

No one, including the corrupt, can know the price he has to pay for anything, from the services "provided" by the administration to those provided by business community.

As an example, to obtain a passport a whole series of officials will have to be bribed with no certainty that the passport will be issued.

the cost is the delay, the uncertainty and the constant humiliation that he will be subjected to.

And of course those who can afford more than him will always get preference and precedence over him.

The corrupt society can never be efficient as everyone is busy collecting his bribes and creating situations in order to get offers and better offers of bribes.

Invariably someone along the line is missed or feel that he is not adequately compensated, resulting in deliberate delays.

The cost to society is also great, as every transaction, whether Governmental or not will have to make provisions for bribes.

As bribery becomes more and more institutionalised the provision for bribes becomes greater; 300 per cent or 400 per cent more would have to be paid for everything.

The recipient of bribes will live in this society and

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suffer the inconvenience, the inefficiency and the cost of the corruption.

He will in fact get less than if the society is not corrupt.

Certainly his life would be more miserable and frustrating. He would live without human dignity, having to scrape and bow to every minor official he comes across.

another. Planning becomes meaningless.

In some instances lack of punctuality can cause disaster. In the conduct of war, failure to be punctual will result in lack of coordination between different moves.

The result of such incoordination is to reduce the strength of the whole to that of the component units.

Of course one can say that when necessary one can be punctual. But a habit that is so entrenched is not so easily overcome.

To be punctual really means to prepare ahead. How much time is required to prepare ahead can only be learnt by a constant habit of punctuality. Thus to be at the office desk at 8.00a.m. means really getting up at 6.30a.m. If through lack of experience one gets up late on a day when one wants to be punctual, it will be impossible to keep the time despite a sincere intention to do so.

A society that wishes to be efficient must develop a high value for punctuality. Such a society will be reliable.

In such a society can be expected to deliver on time, a factor that promotes business.

In the Government the benefits of punctuality is obvious. Time is never wasted and time means not just money but everything in Government.

The people will feel the benefits of a Government as dealings can be expected to be attended to. Government becomes extremely effective.

Breakdowns are less likely to occur. The frustrations of the people and of the commercial world will be reduced, which in turn stimulates the economy, re-

is permissible. But that pride must be tempered with modesty and even humility.

The degree of each of these elements in the melange is difficult to quantify but in a society with good ethical values the people should somehow know what is the right degree and the right mixture.

Good qualities are almost universally known. But few in any society practice the universal good quality.

A society can talk about justice and even define it, yet justice can be absent in that society.

It is almost as if the society rejects its own high ethics.

But what actually happens is that individuals as well as society have two sets of values, one for themselves and one for others.

Thus, a person may condemn corruption but would accept a bribe because "if he does not, someone else will." A society may consider it unfair to be discriminated against but would not mind discriminating against others.

Clearly every individual and every society has two different sets of standards. These standards are invariably and obviously contradictory.

But there is not the slightest feeling of embarrassment or remorse as the two distinct standards are applied.

As everyone practices these two standards, only the bad qualities of these

standards show up.

Thus while one expects others to work hard and be honest, one does not work hard and is not honest oneself.

The others also expect

The effect of this alone is visible. There is prosperity and evidence of general well-being.

The perfect society practicing the perfect system of ethics just does not exist. Even the Muslims who have been given the system of ethics are unable to create a perfect society.

Far too many of their good ethics are ignored or interpretations are made in order to confuse good ethics with narrow self-interests of groups wishing to gain control of the Muslim society.

Malaysians can strive for the perfect society but a small beginning is far better than all the pious talks of attaining perfection. Religious and spiritual values should permeate the whole society.

Reversal of ethics can and do occur fairly often.

In the case of a society dedicated to honest hard work, there will be those who will argue that people will become unthinking robots.

These people will talk about class differences and oppression of the workers by the capitalists and the Government.

They would urge withholding work as a means of bargaining for a better life.

That the result of this action is to make people, especially workers, visibly less well-off is ignored.

By making it appear that one can get something for nothing, good work ethics can be subverted and a reversal in the work ethics accomplished.

And of course the end result is a society ripe for a takeover by the unscrupulous purveyors of indulgence.

At best the issue will be much delayed. The total amount paid will be many times more than the official fee. But more than the money involved is the trouble that must be gone through in order to get the passport.

Not only must the "official" be bribed but the applicant will have to be uncommonly nice and even obsequious to them.

Even the office boy will have to have his palm greased and his favour begged for.

Whereas the corrupt officer will get only his portion of the bribe, he will have to pay out numerous portions to numerous "officials" in order to have his needs attended to.

And the number of times he will need these services can be very great.

Considering the number of services that a citizen needs from the Government it is impossible for anyone to be free from having to pay bribes in the course of his life, if bribery has become a "way of life" in a country.

From the time a child is born, when his birth certificate has to be taken out (a most important document for all transactions throughout life), to the time when the death certificate is taken out, an individual in a corrupt society must pay bribes.

The cost to the individual, whether he is an officer or not, will be considerable. But worse than

Clearly then the price to be paid by the corrupt in a corrupt society is higher than the gains that he can make.

Corruption is regarded as "bad" because it is "bad" for everyone including those who "benefit" from corrupting.

The ethics of a society is of course not confined to corruption alone. A whole set of values constitute ethics and generally the "why" of the good ethics of society is obvious and need not explanation.

Sometimes it happens that a certain practice is accepted and even considered good or at least tolerable, when in fact it is bad.

Punctuality is one of them. Many communities do not regard punctuality as being sufficiently important.

In some communities the arrival on time by guests is regarded as bad taste because it reflects a certain degree of over-anxiety or even immodesty.

One should really take one's time and not be too anxious for the feast or for whatever it is that one is invited to.

But lack of punctuality creates undue problems. There will be anxiety for a period at least on the part of those waiting.

The delay throws the programme out of step and creates all kinds of inconveniences.

Work cannot be done as the time may be foreshortened. Everyone is affected adversely in one way or

another in more revenues for the Government and possibly better pay for everyone.

Punctuality of course does not mean merely turning up at the office on time. It means that in every piece of work done by Government employee, finishing on time is regarded as of prime importance.

Planning then becomes meaningful. Programmes, time-tables and schedules can be relied upon.

Wastage of time, money and effort would be reduced. A climate of certainty will prevail, a climate which is conducive for national progress and achievement at all levels.

The nation would be prosperous and powerful and the people will walk tall.

And this brings us to yet another item in the system of values. Walking tall can mean arrogance. But arrogance is not something that is appreciated or looked up to.

Arrogance is a characteristic that does not endear a person to his fellowman. An arrogant person is insensitive to hurt he causes to others.

And because of this, good human relationship is not likely to prevail in any society where arrogance is a characteristic of the people.

Walking tall need not necessarily mean arrogance. A certain degree of pride in one's achievement

other people to work hard and be honest while they don't. Of course "the other" to the others is oneself. But as we know double standard means that one does not practise the good qualities oneself.

If one does not and others do not, then who does? The answer is no one.

So, how does one foster good ethics? One way is of course through imposition.

In an authoritarian who live in fear and have to obey may be forced to practise some good ethical values — such as hard work and honesty.

Punishment will be meted out to them if they don't. Good ethical values will prevail in such a society in authoritarianism is a part of the accepted values of that society.

There are a number of eastern nations which accept authoritarianism.

But in most instances authoritarianism is resented and good values are practised with the greatest degree of reluctance. In such societies good ethics is neither sincere nor durable.

But there can be societies where good ethics are practised because they are genuinely appreciated. Not all the values which make for good ethics would be practised of course, but a sufficient number will.

Thus we find some societies where hard work and honesty are regarded virtues and are characteristic of the members of that society.