

Learning From History with Elizabeth Anderson

Christiane Wisehart: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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Christiane: Slavery is immoral. There's no debate about it these days. But Americans didn't always think that way. The morality of slavery was a hotly contested issue in the 18th and 19th centuries. So how did we get from the point where preachers praised slavery in their sermons to today when no one would ever publicly question the wrongness of slavery? Shifts in moral thinking like this often come about during a process called moral inquiry. The philosopher Elizabeth Anderson argues that the way people went about moral inquiry over two hundred years ago holds important lessons for how we ought to face questions of morality today.

Elizabeth Anderson: We should think of moral inquiry as something we do practically in the world with other people, not as something that we can just figure out all by ourselves in the armchair just by thinking hard about it.

Christiane: Stay tuned for more about moral inquiry with the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson on today's episode of Examining Ethics!

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Christiane: [talk show sound effects] Imagine turning on a talk show and hearing someone say this: "People who own slaves make the world better--they earn lots of money and provide for a better future. In every single civilization, there have been slaves and slave labor, so why stop slavery now?"

You'd never hear anyone publicly making an argument like that these days, because we all basically agree slavery is immoral. I mean, I would hope that's what most of us think. But the idea that slavery actually made the world a better place was totally acceptable to a lot of powerful white Americans before the 1860s. So the question is, how did such a massive shift in public opinion happen? Who decides a thing like that? Who figures out what morals we agree on? But more importantly for today's show, *how* can you get societies to agree upon moral opinions like the wrongness of slavery?

The philosopher Elizabeth Anderson studies how people in the 18th and 19th centuries shifted their views on the immorality of slavery. When society tackles a moral problem together, they undergo a process known as "moral inquiry." When Elizabeth looked at how people answered the moral question of slavery, she found that the process required more than just a bunch of white philosophers sitting around and debating the issue. It took many years and a variety of people for the moral question of slavery to be answered. She also found that moral inquiry could be about more than just talk: it could include action, too. Looking at how society dealt with the moral issue of slavery led Elizabeth to advocate for a pragmatic, practical model of moral

inquiry. In this pragmatic model, moral inquiry is approached more like scientific inquiry, using experiments in living and finding techniques to remove bias.

But before we get to all that, let's make sure we understand just what moral inquiry is. In her work on moral inquiry, Elizabeth focuses on one part of morality: what we owe each other. And she's not talking in terms of what we owe each other financially or anything like that. She's thinking about how people can do things like cooperate and respect each other's rights -- in other words, what we owe each other, morally speaking.

Elizabeth Anderson: Then the question is how can we even know what we owe to each other. And I take a very broadly contractualist perspective on the question. So contractualism is the view that the principles of moral right and wrong are principles that we can will together, that in principle, everybody could sign on to these principles. So, ultimately, moral inquiry becomes an inquiry into what we can will together.

Christiane: When we "will" moral principles, it basically means we're figuring morality out together. We're deciding on the rules of right and wrong, and then making sure everyone else more or less agrees with those rules, too. Elizabeth explained that humans are social beings, so morality has to be social too. We *face* problems together and have to figure out how to *so/ve* those problems together. When societies face big, collective moral problems like slavery, they don't just come to an answer right away. The process that people undergo to come to mutual agreement on those issues is called "moral inquiry."

Elizabeth: I take moral inquiry to be a continuous exploration of what we can will together, what principles of cooperation, of interaction, principles of relating to each other -- what can we will together so that we can solve the variety of problems of social living that we face. Part of that's empirical. Part of it is based on moral psychology, what kinds of things can people really accept.

Christiane: When I first heard the term moral inquiry, I have to admit I imagined a kind of cartoonish scenario where scholars sat around arguing or writing about principles of right and wrong. Elizabeth told me that philosophers do have a role when it comes to figuring out morality. But she says that we need to stop assuming that they're the *only* people who can figure this stuff out.

Elizabeth: What I reject in my work is the idea that philosophers, all by themselves, are able to come up with the fundamental principles of morality that then they can proclaim are valid for everyone. After all, philosophers just occupy a tiny little niche in the social division of labor and are demographically pretty unrepresentative of humanity as a whole. Given that morality consists in what we can will together, that's a partially empirical question and philosophers aren't in a good position to know what other people can accept.

Christiane: Even the *methods* philosophers use to approach moral inquiry can be limiting. Elizabeth explained that the dominant tradition in moral philosophy assumes that we can figure out the moral rules, or principles of morality, ah pree-ori, or out of touch with experience. Instead

of drawing moral principles from specific, lived experiences, philosophers will typically try extract principles from their intuitions. And by the way, philosophers think about intuitions in not quite the same way that most people think about intuitions. For philosophers, intuitions aren't so much gut feelings. They're more like "thoughtful judgments." One of the ways philosophers try to figure out what their thoughtful judgments, or intuitions are about any given issue, is to use weird thought experiments.

Elizabeth: Why should we be even thinking about these bizarre cases? The answer is because the traditional philosophical quest for principles of morality assumes that those principles have to be knowable a priori and are true in all possible worlds. If the principles have to be true in all possible worlds then they have to be true in these bizarre worlds as well. So the whole idea is to test our moral intuitions about these bizarre cases in order to get access to moral truths that we think are true in all possible worlds.

So one of my favorite examples of this has to do with a very famous paper that's commonly taught in philosophy courses by Judith Jarvis Thomson on the morality of abortion in which she imagines that human being propagate by means of people seeds that embed themselves into your carpet. She asks the question, "Suppose you don't want to raise any kids and so you screen up your windows so these people seeds can't enter, but a tiny little tear in the screen undetected by you occurs and some people seeds come embed themselves in your carpet. Would it be okay for you to vacuum them up?" My view is, look, if human beings propagated that way our whole society would be so radically different we have no idea what rules of morality would make sense. Consequently, I don't think that our intuitions about such bizarre cases really have any bearing at all on what we should do or what principles of right and wrong apply to us.

Christiane: Elizabeth explained that it's useful to try and get at intuitions about moral issues. But if you're trying to figure out what is right and wrong, you shouldn't *just* rely on intuitions you get from thought experiments.

Elizabeth: Intuitions play some role in moral inquiry, but in a way, what our intuitions are trying to do is when we imagine a moral scenario, we are imagining what would happen if we did one thing or another thing. And then we're imagining our moral response to the consequences. And then we come to an intuition which says, "No, this is wrong. I couldn't do this," or maybe it's okay and I would do this under these circumstances. Essentially what one is doing in those cases is simulated deliberation. And my view is simulated deliberation can tell you a little bit, but we should recognize limitations of deliberation. Often, we deliberate really carefully about some important decision in our lives. Then once we take it we're surprised and we change our view in light of experience. Often we regret what we decided to do even if we had deliberated with all the information ahead of time. Okay? That suggests to me that deliberation isn't going to lead us to truths that are true in all possible worlds. It often is flawed. And if deliberation is flawed in this way, then simulated deliberation should be even more flawed because there we're deliberating about cases that we aren't even taking seriously as possibilities that we might confront.

Simulated deliberation is less serious than real deliberation so we should take it less seriously. We should take the intuitions derived from simulated deliberation less seriously even than real deliberation so why think it's going to lead us to principles that are true in all possible worlds? It's probably just going to lead us down a lot of blind alleys.

Christiane: So the traditional way of going about moral inquiry involves practices like isolating intuitions through simulated deliberation. Elizabeth decided to put traditional methods of moral philosophy to a historical test to see how well they worked. One example of using dominant methodology comes from an 18th century abolitionist named Nicolas Condorcet. Like many other abolitionists of the time, he used simulated deliberation to think through the issue of emancipation. He decided that slavery should be abolished...but not right away. He thought that if slaves were immediately set free, the economy would collapse and slaveholders would lose their fortunes. So instead of immediate freedom for slaves, he and other abolitionists argued for something called gradual emancipation.

Elizabeth: He imagined a very protracted process under which most of the slaves being born into slavery in his day would have to be slaves for decades before being emancipated. Well, why? If their rights are being violated you shouldn't have that. If you look at how abolition was practiced in the 18th century as it was starting to happen... in most of the countries of Latin America actually emancipated their slaves before the United States did. But most of the countries of Latin America adopted a gradual emancipation scheme. Their reasoning was "At least this is one way you can get the slave owners to go along." You have gradual emancipation so they don't face sudden bankruptcy and you can compensate them along the way on the transition. But it's still awfully neglectful of those poor slaves who are still forced to labor for no pay and without any other freedoms for decades.

Christiane: While Condorcet was right to think that emancipating slaves was a good idea, his solution was terrible, in part because the traditional ways of going about moral inquiry failed him. Elizabeth explained that beyond that, he was also biased in his reasoning. How do we know that he was biased? We know because he also argued for equal rights for women, but not *quite* in the same way that he argued for freedom for slaves.

Elizabeth: When it came to his feminism he said, "Women should get the right to vote and all equal rights immediately, without delay. After all, their rights are being violated. So we should recognize them immediately as having all the same rights as men." But when it came to slaves he did acknowledge that their rights were being grievously violated, but he didn't say, "Okay, so we should emancipate them immediately." So, I think Condorcet then had sort of the right idea but why was he willing to immediately grant white women all the rights that they had as human beings but not African slaves? And I think there's a bias there in his calculation. He wasn't going to accept any continuation of white women's subjection, but he was okay with black slaves' subjection for a protracted period of time.

Christiane: By looking at how society handled moral inquiry around the issue of slavery, Elizabeth found that even incredibly intelligent philosophers and thinkers like Condorcet could get it wrong. They relied too heavily on things like simulated deliberation and were subject to bias. Elizabeth argues that there's a better way of undertaking moral inquiry.

Elizabeth: So on my view moral inquiry involves doing a lot of experiments in living. It's actually empirical, so you can't just spin moral truths out of your head just by thinking really hard. You have to experiment on the ground with different arrangements under which we hold each other under different sets of moral expectations and see whether we can live with those principles. And that requires an inquiry into the actual consequences for human beings of living under one set of principles or another.

Christiane: Her approach to moral inquiry comes from the philosopher John Dewey, who advocated for a pragmatic, practical way of figuring out right and wrong. Dewey argued that in order to correct for things like bias, moral inquiry should be more empirical, like scientific inquiry.

Elizabeth: So instead of thinking that we can spin *a priori* moral principles true in all possible worlds out of our heads just by thinking hard enough he thought, "No, we actually have to experiment and we also have to reflect very carefully on the biases under which moral reflection takes place." The general pragmatist's idea is: stop looking for moral principles that are true in all possible worlds and instead hone up your methodology. You replace the quest for principles of morality that are true in all possible worlds with a systematic method for improving the morals that we have. So you start with the principles we have and you can inquire into what consequences they're delivering and whether those are satisfactory to everyone concerned, everyone who's living under those principles. But it's also really important to ask whether the people who are doing the questioning or engaged in moral inquiry are subject to various cognitive and social biases.

Christiane: Typically, the people who engage in moral inquiry using traditional philosophical methods are going to be relatively privileged and powerful. That's not because underprivileged people are less moral, it's just because the traditional philosophical methods require more time and freedom, and powerful people have that. They also tend to have more power to change -- or not change -- any given moral situation.

Elizabeth: And if they're the ones with the power to impose those moral expectations on others and force others to acquiesce because they don't really have much choice, you can expect that the resulting moral rules are going to be biased very heavily in favor of the powerful and against the interests of the less powerful. So what we need is a set of techniques for counteracting those biases.

Christiane: In the natural sciences, researchers use double-blind placebo controlled trials to correct for biases that come from wishful thinking. Elizabeth argues that moral inquiry needs bias correction tools, too.

Elizabeth: Just as with placebo-controlled double-blind trials, whatever results arise from implementing those techniques we should expect to be more reliable than the moral conclusions that people drew without those techniques. It doesn't mean that they're necessarily true. It just means we should have greater confidence in the output of the moral conclusions we draw having implemented techniques that counteract the biases of privilege and power.

Christiane: One important way to counteract the biases in favor of the powerful and held by the powerful is to tell them when they're doing something wrong.

Elizabeth: The powerful have rigged the system in their interests. And so what they need is experiences of being held to account, being morally criticized, upbraided. And also, held to account in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for them to continue life as usual. People can criticize you but if you can still act with impunity towards those people then maybe you just wall yourself off from the criticism, it doesn't really matter. People need social techniques not only for holding the powerful to account, but disrupting the ordinary operations of the norms and expectations that are in place. They need to disrupt those expectations and make the powerful vividly aware that we're not going along with this anymore. This is not okay. This is totally wrong and we insist on some changes. Now that activity has to come from below.

Christiane: If it's up to people in power, their moral inquiry tends to be just speculation, theory, argument. For example, before the Civil War, lots of powerful abolitionists argued with lots of powerful slaveholders about the morality of slavery. Elizabeth looked at these debates and realized that the arguments about slavery could only go so far because slaveholders were biased in their thinking. A lot of people who owned slaves genuinely thought they were doing the right thing.

Elizabeth: There are endless volumes in which they claim that slaves were happier than so-called wage slaves up North, that they're perfectly content, they were better treated, that the slave holders wouldn't just cast them out when the price of cotton dropped in a recession. So they argued, "So you see slaves are actually better off than the poor workers up North." It was very important for the poor workers up North to say, "Don't be ridiculous. We're better off. We don't want to be slaves. We don't want to be under the thumb of some owner. We want to be able to keep our own wages and decide how we're going to spend it." It's a very important fact that you had a continuous stream of slaves escaping north. You did not have a continuous stream of free workers going south asking to be enslaved. So, this is incredibly powerful evidence that the supposition that slaves are better off than free workers is preposterous. This is really important. Morality, when it's instituted in society, so I'm not just thinking about an abstract set of principles, I'm thinking the moral life of an actual society consists in a set of rules or expectations that people have one another that are actually enforced. Moral inquiry is inquiry into what we can actually accept. And so, every act of slave resistance to slavery was in effect a declaration, "I don't accept this regime." And escaping was one way to do it, but in fact slaves had enumerable ways of resisting the demands that were placed on them. They would walk off

the plantation without a pass. They would break tools. They would take a pig being raised, and kill it, and roast it, and eat it.

Christiane: Elizabeth explained that slave actions like running away and writing testimonies of their terrible experiences contributed to moral inquiry about the question of slavery. Abolitionists also contributed to moral inquiry not just by debating slavery, but also by organizing petitions, criticizing lawmakers, and boycotting sugar. It was through this variety of action both on the part of slaves themselves and abolitionists that lawmakers were persuaded to change the government's official position about the morality of slavery.

Elizabeth: You know, if one or two people say, "I don't like slavery," well that doesn't really show you that it's wrong. But if hundreds of thousands of people organized together and take it really seriously and say, "This is totally wrong. We have to change the way we're doing things." That is very strong evidence that slavery isn't something that we can will together. This is not a set of expectations that is acceptable. We see this in other cases where you see mass oppression of a group of people, that if you just sit around in a room and talk nothing ever happens. So if you look at the civil rights movement, southerners who insisted on the maintenance of Jim Crow segregation and other kinds of oppressive rules, oh, they were happy to set aside a table and have people talk forever, with nothing ever resulting from that. Talk is cheap. It's not serious. What happened in the civil rights movement is, to force real action as opposed to empty talk, you needed disruption of the ordinary modes of conducting business. You have the Birmingham bus boycott, strikes, massing in the streets, blocking traffic. Disrupting the ordinary operation of life, of the rules by which people get on in society is an essential part of making vivid to people that these ordinary roles are not acceptable.

You also had vivid demonstrations of how violent the system was. And so that was televised and people up north start feeling embarrassed by this, and businesses up north thought, "Wow, this is really bad for business. We're going to start pressuring the owners of the southern branches of the big department stores that they have to desegregate because we're starting to look bad from all this. We have to change the way we do business." So this is all action on the grounds vividly demonstrating that the rules in place are not acceptable to masses of people. It's only that that really forces change.

Christiane: In the pragmatic model of moral inquiry, figuring out right and wrong isn't just about talk--*actions* count alongside argumentation.

Elizabeth: In order to counteract the moral biases of the powerful, which make them assume that the way they've rigged things is acceptable to everyone, people at the bottom who find the roles imposed on them unacceptable need to engage in resistance and contention. They have to oppose the roles imposed on them and say that they're wrong, explain why they reject those rules and find them unjust and oppressive. That requires not just argumentation, it requires action in the world. And that action in the world is what I call contention. Contention is a whole range of practices whereby people complain about the status quo, rules that have been

imposed on them, make claims to change those rules, and demonstrate their resistance through modes of behavior that interfere with the ordinary operation of the rules being contested.

Christiane: Elizabeth's argument for a pragmatic model of moral inquiry is compelling because it means you don't have to be some wealthy, privileged professor smoking a pipe to shape morality. In fact, in the pragmatic model of moral inquiry, it's *crucial* for people with less power to participate. In order to answer the moral question of slavery, it was necessary for slaves to actively demonstrate how cruel the system was.

It might be tempting to look back at successful examples of the pragmatic model of moral inquiry and think, "Everything's fixed!" However, Elizabeth made it clear that moral inquiry, especially around issues of race, is ongoing work.

Elizabeth: While the abolition of slavery was an instance of unequivocal moral progress, it doesn't mean that we're done. I think one of the biggest problems we have is that whenever blacks raise complaints about today -- Black Lives Matter, police violence, the criminal justice, hyperincarceration -- the common response of whites is "We did this in the Civil Rights Movement, 1964, it was all taken care of." It wasn't, far from it. The whole criminal justice system, I think, is based on oppression and it needs massive reform. But why is the criminal justice system like this? I think it's just a continuation of the racist attitudes that were born to justify slavery and that still have not been overcome.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Elizabeth Anderson and her work, we'll have links to her articles on our shownotes page at examiningethics.org.

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