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The Law of Ethics

The Heinz's dilemma is a frequently used example in many ethics and morality classes. The most well-known version, tells the story of a woman who was near death, and there was one drug that was believed to be able to save her. It was developed by a druggist who was asking for ten times the amount of money it cost to make. The husband of the woman does not manage to muster up the money, so he breaks into the druggist's laboratory to steal the drug for his wife. Such is the controversially everlasting conflict between written law and moral principles. While laws govern our lives, keeping people in check, and punishing those who break them, there are many instances in which people make decisions where they are clearly going against existing legislations, despite knowing the consequences. In William Golding's, *Lord of the Flies*, Golding tells the story of a group of boys who find themselves alone, stranded on a mysterious island after their plane crashed. During their first meeting, they decide to establish some rules. However, throughout the progression of the story, the reader very clearly observes the conflict between the laws they've agreed upon and the personal ethics that they brought with them onto the island. Their situation shows that people are capable of operating outside of the law if what they are doing feels morally correct.

In the business world, it is often a misconception that if something is legal, it's ethical. In Chris MacDonald's blog about Business Ethics, he explains that "In all legitimate cases of

lawmaking, the law always has a moral purpose—generally, either to make people’s lives better and safer or to protect some important rights.” It is this reason that allows such a misconception to exist and spread so widely. He gives the example of a horrible toxin, that if used for industry, would pose significant health and safety risks to workers or consumers. Should it be banned? He explains that based off the “if something is legal, it’s ethical” statement, it cannot be. According to his explanation, since using the toxin is technically legal, it must then be ethical, and if it’s ethical, it cannot be made illegal. All of this proves one point: not all legal things are ethical, and not all ethical things are legal. Interestingly enough, this is a perpetuating conflict that we observe often in the real world as well as in the book.

This idea is further explored in the novel when Jack and his group decide to go hunting for pigs instead of keeping the fire ablaze atop the mountain. Coincidentally during this time, a ship sails by in the distant horizon. When Ralph finds out about this, he approaches Jack and his crew in anger and discontent. He says, “You and your blood, Jack Merridew! You and your hunting! We might have gone home...I was chief, and you were going to do what I said. You talk. But you can’t even build huts—then you go off hunting and let the out the fire—.” (70-71) What this highlights is the difference between the priorities of Ralph and Jack. Ralph believes it is morally right to build shelters and keep the signal fire going at all times. This way, priority is placed on survival on the island and eventually getting rescued. He is a long term thinker, and his rational thinking allows him to foresee the benefits of establishing a good foundation, which will ultimately help them get rescued. Jack on the other hand, believes it is morally right for the boys to enjoy themselves on the island. He is a short term thinker, whose mind is focused on immediate pleasures. While Ralph and his crew are building shelters, his crew is scattered among

the island, taking baths and eating fruit. When a ship is seen on the horizon, Jack and his crew have already abandoned the signal fire, and are much more interested in hunting down pigs for meat. The main difference between their philosophies is the fact that it was an established rule for Jack's crew to be responsible for keeping the signal fire going at all times. Jack acts upon his own morals and disregards the rules that they have made on the island.

One of the most common places where you will observe this conflict between morals and ethics is, unsurprisingly, the real world. While many real world companies operate on the basis of "if it's legal, it's ethical," there are those that exist who are against this concept. On The Atlantic's article on The Google Case: When Law and ethics collide, it is said that, "A fundamental precept for international companies is compliance with the law of the nation in which they do business." Essentially, if a company wants to do business in a certain country, it must follow the rules of that country. As stated in the article, the recurrent dilemma is "what happens when national law collides with the corporation's global ethical standards?" In this case, it was the state censorship in China versus the basic principle of no censorship for a media company. In order to develop in China, in 2006, Google launched a Chinese language Web site and, "contrary to its global ethical standards opposing censorship," they agreed to comply to the demands of the Chinese government to remove all links in which the authorities found objectionable. However, after repeated hacker attacks originating from China "had compromised its intellectual property and threatened the confidentiality of 'gmail accounts of Chinese human rights activists,'" Google decided to reevaluate its business. They eventually announced plans to no longer comply with the rules of censorship on the Chinese language Web site, even if it would mean that they would have to shut down all of their operations in China. They were unwilling to

standby while personal identities of gmail users were being uncovered. This examples further explores how people, even large companies like Google, can sometimes operate outside of the law as long they they feel what they're doing is right.

This real world example is not the only time that people decide to do things they are not supposed to do in order to accomplish something they believe is morally correct. Not too long after their first meeting, due to disagreement and conflict between Ralph and Jack, the two split up to form separate groups of their own, with Jack having power over a majority of the boys. Sam and Eric, the twins who were originally on Ralph's side, were captured, threatened, and forced to join Jack's group of hunters. When Ralph went to talk to them, they warned him that the boys were planning on killing him, and told him to run away and hide. Just as Sam and Eric were about to get caught, "Ralph felt a chunk of meat pushed against him and grabbed it." (190) Clearly, helping Ralph was against the laws of the tribe. Ralph at that point in the book, was an outsider, the main enemy of Jack. Sam and Eric, since they were originally part of Ralph's group, felt morally obliged to warn him of impending dangers. They clearly cared about Ralph's well-being, as demonstrated when they decided to give up their share of pig meat in order to feed Ralph. Their actions were crimes punishable by unspeakable forms of torture. Yet, when they saw this old friend of theirs, they felt the need to lend him hospitality.

In conclusion, it is often very difficult to distinguish the difference between something being legal and something being ethical, as the foundation of law has an ethical basis. It is even harder to choose whether to act upon what a person believes is ethical if the legal choice is clearly the easier one and poses less risk. As shown in the examples of this essay, when people choose to follow their moral principles, they are often risking punishment from the law for the

actions. Yet, human behavior seems to show that people often disobey the laws that were meant to protect them in order to protect others and what they think is right. This leads us to question the very existence of law itself, and how in some ways, it serves a purpose opposite of what it is meant to.

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