

Giuseppe Arcaro- Four Way Test Essay Contest Entry

How Do We Live Ethically in an Unethical Society?

Living ethically is a challenge all people face. Most people wish to see a better world, but very few make any personal changes to create a better reality. Such a daunting task as removing the unethical aspects of your life can seem impossible when everything from the clothes we wear to the food we eat is produced by unethical systems. It seems modern society is inherently unethical, so how do we live ethical lives in society?

Society is unethical principally because it is unfair. This inequality is present at an international level and within individual countries, industries, and corporations. We in the developed world live lives of freedom and excess while many in the developing world live in poverty and face oppression. This is not a coincidence; the lavish lives of people in developed countries directly depend on the poverty and unfair treatment of poorer countries. Our cheap clothes and practically unlimited access to consumeristic products rely on people being underpaid and overworked in dangerous factories. Our obsession with specialty food products like beef and chocolate relies on the destruction of rainforests to raise livestock and farm workers facing near-slavery conditions growing monocrops. We in rich countries get to breathe fresh air and drink clean water because we export our polluting industries to poor countries. However, this inequality is also present within our developed countries. Even in wealthier countries, rich people get richer off of the labor of underpaid workers. We choose to shop at large corporations for our groceries and buy fast food from companies who pay their employees unlivable wages, all while CEOs and shareholders become exorbitantly rich. When we eat meat, we take part in the torture and murder of animals in factory farms, and we support an industry that uses vast

amounts of resources to produce an inefficient food source while millions go hungry. The unfairness of modern life makes it seem as though it is impossible to live ethically in society.

Some people argue that humanity is inherently bad, that we are doomed and that we should just give up. However, I believe that the answer to the question, *how do we live ethically in an unethical society*, is simple: we have to continue to take part in society and actively make it fairer. To give up, to say we will always live in an unfair and unethical society, is simply complacency in the unethical aspects of society. We cannot sit back and say there is nothing we can do as individuals to help, or that it is not our fault society is unethical so it is not our responsibility to fix it. In doing so, we would be admitting that we are fine with nothing changing, that we are fine with how the world is today. Instead, we should stand up against the evils of modern life, and we should understand that even though we can never remove all unethical aspects of society, it is our duty to improve the world as much as we can— even when we can do no good, it is better to do less harm. The only way to live ethically in society is to build goodwill among all people, to make the world more fair, and to actively work toward a society that benefits all rather than benefiting only the rich.

As easy as it is to say that we have to work toward a better future, how we put it into practice is a difficult question. Obviously, large-scale change is needed. We as individuals cannot end pollution and global warming, we cannot pull entire countries out of oppression and poverty. This is a common argument used to justify complacency in the systems of oppression on our planet— I cannot fix the world's problems, so what is the point in trying to live ethically? The point in trying is that all systemic change comes from personal change. The Four Way Test is an excellent example of how we can inspire personal change and work toward systemic change. By using the philosophy of the test in our decision making process, we can become more ethical

consumers, voters, and members of society. By embracing truth in the things we think, say, and do, we can help to dispel the lies and misinformation in society that keep us complacent, and inspire education about the issues that plague us. When we embrace fairness, we consider how our actions, including our votes and purchases, affect others, and make decisions that are more just for all involved. Focusing on building goodwill and better friendships allows us to see through the division that modern life inspires: rich and poor, worker and shareholder, consumer and producer. It allows us to see how our actions affect others and how theirs affect us, and how we can work together to make the world better for us all. Finally, when we stop to ask if something is beneficial to all concerned, we find the basis of how we can make ethical decisions while surrounded by a society that encourages selfishness. We must make our decisions to benefit as many people as possible. When we embrace these virtues, we are living ethically and we are inspiring change in society, because we *are* society.

Living ethically in an unethical society is a challenge that we all face everyday, with every decision that we make. By embracing the Four Way Test into our lives and our decisions, we can learn to act in a way that helps the world and inspires change from the systems which harm it. It is possible to live ethically in an unethical society, and it is something we must all learn to do, because nothing will ever change if we do not change first.