

## ethikos Volume 34, Number 10. October 01, 2020 On ethics: Alexander Stein, Part 1

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An interview by **Adam Turteltaub**, CHC, CCEP, Chief Engagement & Strategy Officer, SCCE & HCCA. Part 2 of this interview will be published in the November 2020 issue of *ethikos*.

**AT: Let's start with ethics. How much of what we think is either ethical or not is absolute vs. subject to the environment we find ourselves in? Does workplace culture have a great effect?**

**AS:** In all my years advising leaders and boards—the individuals at the top of organizations holding institutional authority, responsibility, and influence—I've never asked anyone, "Are you ethical?" Not because I'm not interested—on the contrary—and not because I'd cynically expect a dishonest reply, but because the answer would be essentially meaningless. Being ethical—living ethically—encompasses a divergent spectrum of meanings and activities, and most people will self-identify as having positive attributes—integrity among them—regardless of ethical blind spots or behavioral evidence to the contrary.

A popular aphorism states that integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching. Integrity, in that idealistic view, is a consolidated characteristic—a moral virtue enabling unwavering honesty, truthfulness, and principled action. But the maxim also gestures toward integrity as performative—a pretense that can be situationally adopted or dismissed at will.

For some, ethics can be a settled code, while for others—an ever-changing pose. But, regardless, it is never static. It's invariably in tension with or even under direct assault in situations that call on each of us to marshal internal resources in the service of making complex and often agonizingly challenging decisions. Even when our own ethical position is clear, ethically navigating the roiling complexity of real-world scenarios is rarely straightforward.

In addition, people and situations almost never simply present in reality as clear cut, and no one person or group has a monopoly on morality or virtuousness. Mafiosi operate within a strict and proudly upheld code of honor. Philandering spouses, tax cheats, pious misanthropes, duplicitous grifters, liars, and sundry other corrupt individuals usually consider themselves—and are often regarded by others based on outward appearances and behavior—as genuinely upstanding and honorable. Denial and willful blindness are among the most powerful forces in the natural world. Human history is a catalog of conflicts—often unleashed with horrifyingly unconscionable amorality—over whose system of ethics or code of behavior is more right. The reasons people manufacture to condone and rationalize their own attitudes and behaviors—no matter how reprehensible, amoral, or unethical—or to condemn others for their ostensible transgressive lapses are nearly limitless.

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