ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE

Ethics has become a particularly relevant topic for discussion and a subject for serious study. It has a very long tradition, of course; but nowadays one hears frequently of the need, because of abuses or concerns, to formulate and adopt ethical codes in various areas or professions. Advances in science and technology resulting in new developments in various fields, including medicine, have presented fresh ethical problems, some of which could hardly have been anticipated. The perception of a loss of moral values in society has sparked off a persistent demand for more ethical training at home, in schools, and in society in general.¹ For various reasons, not all of which are altruistic or disinterested, “ethical,” “responsibility” and “accountability” have become buzz words in present-day society. Ethics and ethical issues do indeed continue to challenge us.

Scholars, educators and practitioners have responded to this need and call by contributing the rich resources of their respective disciplines to the on-going discussion. Consequently, in addition to traditional courses and publications in ethics or moral theology, several more have appeared in specific areas, like bioethics, journalistic ethics, engineering ethics, business ethics and so on. Ethics committees and Institutes have been set up. Various consultancies, conferences and symposia have been organised. Programmes like “Ethics Across the Curriculum” have been offered. All these, and many others, seem to attest to the urgency and relevance of the topic. It is particularly appropriate that the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum has been formed—and it is our pleasure to host its 9th International Conference here at Milltown Institute in Dublin, Ireland.

The felt need for ethics, however, is translated into different expectations or conception of ethics and its challenges. There has always been
a tendency to regard ethics as concerned with rules and regulations. Today that view equates ethics with codes of conduct. As a result, the ethical challenge is identified with the formulation, adoption and implementation of a set of clear guidelines that will regulate and evaluate behaviour or practice. This is particularly true in several professional bodies such as in medicine, science or business. Increasingly, however, this understanding of ethics also seems to underlie the call for ethics among politicians as can be seen in the kind of ethics committees formed for that purpose. Politicians are even hauled before such committees to establish whether one’s behaviour can be deemed ethically appropriate or acceptable. Another common conception of ethics is that it is a matter of taking a position or even having an opinion on specific situations. Many times the debates on euthanasia, abortion, or evolving family structures, come down to this. Behind such a view of ethics is the assumption that ethics is ultimately a subjective judgment or decision that one makes. In some cases, it is even equated with simply expressing what one believes about or even what one feels about the matter. It is an assumption that is at times expressed as “in ethics there are no right or wrong answers,” a statement that results from realising the complexity of arriving at an acceptable ethical point of view, or “in ethical matters, I want to be able to assert my freedom or to have a choice,” a claim that emphasises the subjective nature of the decision. Still another conception of ethics, which has long roots in society, is that it is the general consensus of the individuals composing that society. That view is sometimes referred to as “conventional or the majority view.” One’s behaviour is expected to be in line with what is agreed upon by that society. Sometimes this is equated with the culture of a particular people. Such an understanding of ethics especially comes to the fore as we become more aware of the diversity in the ways of life throughout the world.

But ethics and its challenges, as the papers of this conference show, are much more than that—when we take into account the nature and status of the moral agents and the factors which make up ethical decision-making itself. In ethics, one is simply not talking about asking for directions or guidelines. Nor is the agent merely an implementer of a pre-established rule or guideline. Although in judging what is ethical or not and in deciding which course of action to take, there is greater involvement on the part of the agent, this does not mean that an ethical decision is merely a matter of preference or choice. It is not necessarily the majority view of society or the culture of that society either. Because of our make-up as human beings, endowed with intellect and free will, such
decisions and actions should be characterised with a certain amount of reflection and freedom on our part. It is for this reason that one must distinguish mere instinctive behaviour from human conduct in various contexts and the cultural from the social. Furthermore, exercising one’s freedom is not the same as exercising one’s freedom responsibly.

**ETHICAL THINKING**

In examining the ethical challenge, it is helpful to be reminded of the importance of thinking in ethical matters—a definite contribution that members of the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum make to this common concern. While it would be rather naïve and even mistaken to claim that in the various expectations and conceptions of ethics sketched out above and the ethical task mentioned earlier there is no thinking involved, it is nevertheless true that in some cases the injunction to simply “follow your heart,” “trust your feelings,” or “go with the flow” would convey that impression. The same point could be made with the insistence on “abiding by the code” or “following the laws of society.” Consequently, the need to think through the judgments we make and the decisions we take on ethical situations need to be pointed out. Furthermore, we should investigate more critically the basis of such judgments and decisions. In ethics, as well as in other areas of life, it is important to have an overall vision that should ground, inform and support any judgment or decision we make. Obviously, these claims belie a certain conception of ethics: namely, that ethics is a rational activity that is undertaken by rational agents. That has to be addressed, of course.

Philosophy as an academic discipline, and not just in ethics, has always been associated with this line of enquiry. In fact, philosophy as the love of wisdom is indeed interested not merely in raising questions to advance our knowledge but also, and even more importantly so, in pursuing any answers received in the hope at arriving at a more consistent and defensible point of view. Regrettably, often philosophical thinking—in the view of many, including some philosophers themselves—is seen to be such an intellectual exercise that it is perceived to be divorced from the concrete concerns of ordinary life. Rationality is often interpreted—unfortunately, some philosophical squabbles illustrate this—to mean disembodied thinking! Consequently, as we engage in more serious and protracted thinking—as is done in philosophy and in other disciplines—it could appear more and more abstract. This is inevitable. But hopefully this consequence of the pursuit of wisdom does not lessen the
valuable advantage to our daily lives or restrict our ability to conduct what is really a human exercise.²

THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE OF ETHICS

As has already been mentioned, in ethical matters it is imperative that we engage in serious and protracted thinking if we want to arrive at a more coherent and more defensible judgment of what is ethical or not. Such a step is crucial for enabling us to act on what has been reasonably judged to be the right decision. While engaging in this activity will not necessarily prevent us from carrying out unethical deeds, it will nevertheless point us, and even motivate us to move, in the right direction. Such an exercise in ethical thinking is due to our nature as rational beings, endowed with intellect and free will. As in other situations that we find ourselves in, the more we engage in such rational activities, the more we develop our very humanity.

As many of the papers at this conference show, ethical questions arise in various contexts, some of which may be more urgent and demanding than others, and for a number of reasons. But, irrespective of context and reason, they arise primarily and essentially because of who we are, rather than what we do even if they come to the surface because of what we are doing.³ For this reason they are fundamental questions. Because of their serious nature and the implications of any answers given, it is important to pursue them much more thoroughly than the other questions that we raise and the answers that we receive.

Science and medicine, for instance, are particularly important contexts today because the rapid advances made in these fields have created increasingly complex ethical problems. Keeping pace with the developments is difficult enough; but the newness of any discoveries, which in turn requires fresh ethical thinking, is certainly challenging.⁴ The escalating demand that education adopt the so-called business model in conducting its affairs, including the educative process itself, leaves those of us in this business wondering whether it is really a “fit” since for many educators the focus of education is the human person rather than simply the outcomes. One important ethical consideration is how, in this change in academic climate, can educators continue to live up to the task of educating the moral person, and not just producing the skilled worker or the competent technocrat.⁵ Psychology, a strong ally of education in many respects, has contributed research into moral development. Its methodology and findings are crucial in identifying the relevant factors which need
our attention in our ethical tasks. An empirical discipline and science, it
nevertheless shows how we need to probe into the theoretical underpin-
nings of conclusions reached. An investigation into the foundation of the
empirical studies can throw some light into our understanding of ethics
itself. Religion has been so closely identified with ethics that an important
issue in the debate is whether one can have ethics without any religious
belief or affiliation. The debate has been sharpened more recently with
the allegation that religion actually corrupts not just the mind but also the
conduct of its adherents. Literature provides a channel for expressing
our sentiments. They engage not just our minds but also our hearts. They
provide insights into our very humanity and into our responses, including
ethical ones, to the various challenges in the different concrete situations
that we find ourselves in.

As these contexts—and there are many others—alert us to certain
concerns and challenges, an important response that can be made is to
continue the ethical pursuit by focusing on specific theoretical issues.
Some of the papers at this conference address this point. Philosophy is in
a particularly strategic position to help in this respect since ethics has
been an area that it has explored quite thoroughly. In fact, many ways of
thinking that we have become familiar with as we discuss ethical situa-
tions are echoes, some faint while others are stronger, of philosophical
ethical theories. Philosophers, down through the ages and throughout the
world, have indeed focused on such important and fundamental issues
regarding the good. The philosophical discipline itself can be useful in
negotiating this rather complex, and in some cases unfamiliar, territory.
The problem, of course, is that philosophers themselves are divided not
just in terms of their respective ethical theories but also in what philoso-
phy itself can offer us. So in turning to philosophers and their ideas, one
strategy that can be followed is to enlist their help in our own ethical pur-
suit and in the task of shaping our own outlook on the ethical challenge.
Martin Buber had a particularly apt way of expressing this point when he
said that he merely opened the window to enable his readers to see the
landscape which he was seeing and admiring.

In our ethical thinking, what can we learn from the philosophers?
Here are a few suggestions, which are by no means exhaustive. Aristotle
and Confucius have contributed enormously to the ethical traditions of
the West and of the East, respectively. A comparative study of their ethi-
cal theories raises the question of the goal of moral striving since both of
them were particularly concerned with this issue. The striking similarities
of their ethical teachings bring out a related issue of the universality of
ethics: to what extent can one talk of a global ethics given the enormous diversity of cultures? R.M. Hare, a contemporary moral philosopher, illustrates the direction taken by some philosophers as they see their own task in a different light. Concentrating on the fundamental issue of what we are doing in ethics, Hare supplies us with an ethical theory that has become known as prescriptivism. Ethics, in his view, is about making a moral judgment. It is about prescribing a particular course of action. He therefore shows us that there are subjective factors in ethical decisions since the nature of ethics itself involves the human agent more so than in other kinds of decision-making. On the other hand, an ethical judgment, given that it directs us in a certain way, raises the theoretical issue of the basis for such a judgment. The theoretical issue, therefore, of the moral norm becomes particularly important. Thomas Aquinas has been regarded as the strongest proponent of one such moral norm; namely, the natural law. In turning to his philosophy, one can appreciate the importance of this issue for ethical thinking. At the same time, however, one should be aware of the background against which he formulated his version of this moral norm and ask whether—since a background can radically alter our perspective on reality—there is need to examine the natural law theory in the light of the changed understanding of nature in our contemporary times.

Turning to Martin Buber, we will see a different approach to ethical thinking. He starts with what he calls the “lived life”—our everyday experiences as we interact with one another and with the world. He talks of living life fully (but not in the sense in which this phrase is understood in other quarters). For Buber, living life fully is living life responsibly. It is a life of relations, and the kind of life that we cultivate transforms us. It is a life of responsibility; that is to say, responding with our whole being to all our encounters. Charles Hartshorne, who develops what can be called a relational ethics, supplies us with a metaphysical structure that draws out and develops further the world of relations that Buber speaks of. In dialogue with contemporary physics, Hartshorne developed the metaphysical concept of creative synthesis. It is also a more contemporary interpretation of nature and how it works. In this sense, Hartshorne puts forward an alternative understanding of a moral norm proposed by Aquinas and a metaphysical foundation of the world of relations that Buber speaks of.
CONCLUDING COMMENT

Ethical thinking challenges us to provide a more consistent and more systematic answer. In some cases the answer to the question “What ought I to do?” has to be a quick and even instinctive one. But in the ethical context, one’s answer should be much more thoughtful. This does not mean that every time we find ourselves in an ethical situation, we cannot and should not act until we have undergone a prolonged and thorough process of thinking about the matter. Many cases, particularly medical ones, do not allow us that luxury for every problem. But ethical thinking can be of paramount importance as it can provide us with a “theoretical framework” that enables us to work out an ethical solution to the problem. The basis for one’s judgment, even those done in a hurry, can be more firmly grounded. What ethical thinking does is to expose underlying theoretical assumptions and subject them to a critical evaluation, thus giving us an “early lead” as it were in urgent cases. Ethical thinking thus can be described as bringing to the fore, with a view to scrutinizing more critically, not just the questions we are asking but also and more importantly disclosing the underlying assumptions behind those questions.

Given this challenge to us all and the urgency of the task, this conference organized by the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum deserves a warm welcome and strong support.

Notes

1 There has been much talk of recovering the moral status of a country in the recent American presidential elections.
2 In Philosophy in Context (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006), I develop and illustrate this point.
5 In “Education, the Business Model and the Bologna Process: a Philosophical Response;” a plenary address given at the International Conference on Faith and Reason in the 21st Century, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania (October 10, 2008) I discuss this comment more fully.
7 This is not of course true with every ethical theory, e.g. Aquinas’ natural law theory, insofar as his ethical theory starts with a more metaphysical vision.