

The Next Evolution of Ethics

Tad Dunne

Presented at a Lonergan Workshop, Toronto. August 6, 2004

Ethics Today

Ethics today suffers from a variety of approaches.

Common sense speaks of ethics as equivalent to morality.
"She has no ethics."

Corporations often equate ethics with laws. Corporate ethics officers are usually lawyers, and are responsible for nothing more than complying with regulations.

Many highly principled people equate ethics with an Aristotelian style, deductive science. Murder is wrong. Abortion is murder. Therefore ...

University curriculum committees set ethics along side physics, French literature, and religious studies, as if ethics is just one more field with vague relations to the others.

Since a generalized empirical method promises to find a common approach, I'd like to explore what might be involved.

Generalized Empirical Method and Ethics

First, to get beyond the commonsense blending of ethics and morality, I suggest we think of ethics as theory-based reflection on morality, and morality as the everyday decisions people make. In this approach, instead of saying things like "She has no ethics" we might say, "Her moral opinions could use some ethical reflection."

Second, to get beyond the academic isolation of ethical reflection, we need to abandon the notion that ethics is a specialty. Theory-based reflection on everyday choices already occurs in the sciences, in literary and historical studies, and in art, architecture and drama. So we don't need ethicists. Rather we need psychologists, historians, social workers, city planners

and the like who are trained to think deeply and speak explicitly about the moral dimensions of their professions.

Third, I suggest that *evolution* is a fruitful framework for promoting a theory-based reflection on morality. Now a world design of emergent probability enables us to think of evolution as moral from the Big Bang onward. After all, we can't help but think of the arrival of humans as a summit of a long, slow process of the universe improving. Evolutionary theorists believe their mission is to explain not merely how things *change* but particularly of how things get *better*. They acknowledge dead-ends; indeed, they think of dead-ends as the random variations required by the natural selection process that ruthlessly terminates entities that are least fit for survival and successively produces higher systems out of otherwise unrelated lower systems. They dispassionately portray these higher systems as more complex and, at the same time, more effective in organizing their subordinate systems. And although many scientists are paranoid about moral judgments creeping into their investigations, universally, in their hearts, they believe that these higher systems are worth paying more attention to. Another term for this higher worth is *better*.

We can barely avoid the notion of *better*. It permeates our consciousness. Every day we say things like, "You better take Woodward Avenue. And you better bring your lunch." In quiet moments, when we contemplate our fate, we think of ourselves as fortunate, lucky and blessed -- or unfortunate, unlucky and cursed. In any case, we see all of life, indeed everything in the universe, through a lens of better. If, as Lonergan says, the being of the subject is becoming, so we can say that the goodness of the subject is betterment.

The Evolution of Ethics

Among the many better things that have evolved, one most relevant to ethics is our ability to reflect on our choices. Although our ability to reflect morally advanced gradually and haltingly, we can discern three broad levels in its evolution.

A first level is about action. "What should we do now?" "Should we fight or run?" "Which path is better?" Where the actions of all other animals are unreflective *reactions*,

we are the first animals we know of to experience *questions* about our options, our resources, and our duties. We can characterize this level by the appearance of *should* as the question, How should we act?

A second level is about standards of action. Early Greek philosophers asked whether *should* is just a social convention, which varied from culture to culture, or is a normative standard common to humans everywhere. Going with the idea that the notion of *should* is common to everyone, they developed the concepts of *natural right, justice, order, right/wrong, and virtue*. They proposed principles by which medicine should be administered and republics should be organized. This level may be characterized by the appearance of a new question, What *standards* best represent how we should act?

A third level is about method. The power of conceptualized standards to guide action has its limits. Philosophers have always challenged the rigid manner by which concepts had been translated into rules for living, but in the 17th century, there was a dramatic shift in critical thinking. When empirical scientists developed new concepts such as *mass* and *calories*, they demonstrated that concepts are simply products of the mind trying to manage nature. So some moral philosophers abandoned the project of drawing moral conclusions from presumably fixed concepts and rigid moral standards. The question that characterizes this third level is, How do our minds *create* the moral standards that guide our actions?"

The emergence of these three levels of moral reflection occurs one individual at a time. Many people today think on the level of action alone – children, certainly, but many adults as well. Others are able to conceptualize their problems, assess their options and give reasons for their preferences. They guide their actions accordingly and readily state their moral standards. Most of these, however, are oblivious of the fallible origins of their concepts and principles. Still, there are a few people who think about what goes on in the minds and hearts of anyone who sets moral priorities. They hold their principles lightly and humbly

listen to any voice that helps them refine what they know about being responsible.

We can see these three levels in lively conflict when executives, or politicians, or teachers get together to decide what to do. Activists may use ethical language, but they use the words pragmatically, merely to press their point; they don't understand that the concepts carried by language are meant to express hard-won insights into earlier moral situations. Ethicists, armed with concepts, are reluctant to consider that their strongly fortified priorities may have been built on the shifting sands of history or on the covert evasions of previous ethicists. And even those who expose biases in the underlying methods of moral reflection often do not agree on any positive reform program.

Discover the Inner Norms

In order to effectively promote a theory-based reflection on morality among professionals, a generalized empirical method should help people discover the norms of all moral statements, commandments, and principles within consciousness.

The disturbing, but ultimately liberating, fact is this: All moral norms selected by humans originate in these primary, operational norms to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. Moses would not have noticed God's voice were he not attentive, nor understood God's message were he not intelligent, nor knew the message to be God's were he not reasonable, nor recorded God's Ten Commandments were he not responsible, nor given the Commandments to his people were he not in love.

I say this realization is disturbing because I know that it threatens to undermine the fundamental validity of teachings found in revered scriptures and the lives of virtuous men and women. But all moral teachings and noble examples mean something only to human minds. To understand the meaning of a heritage, it is not enough to read words and hear stories; one has to meet persons, and that involves understanding the prior norms in consciousness by which we understand and appreciate them.

This is why I also say that this realization is liberating. By recognizing the workings of the norms of consciousness in

ourselves, we have the personal equipment to ask the right questions about how the teachings and stories in our moral inheritance were first developed, and how we may apply them effectively today.

Building Foundations

Besides understanding how our finest moral heritages originate in consciousness, a generalized empirical method also uncovers the many ways consciousness can differentiate so that ethicists have a set of precise questions to ask about how people with the same inner norms can come to such different moral positions. These differentiations may occur positively as people move more deeply into the realms of art, literature, scholarship, or science. Or they can occur negatively by any violation of the norms of consciousness – being myopic, stupid, silly, careless, or hateful. The ethics within any profession needs to tell the difference.

Even then, understanding the many ways consciousness differentiates only heightens the need for an ever higher integration. It's not enough to pull down what doesn't work. We also need to build up habits and institutions that foster responsible decision making.

In some ways, we understand this task of integration after differentiation very well. We educate the young into the world mediated by multiple differentiations in meanings and values. We meet the foreigner to discover foreign questions and come to understand foreign solutions. Love, of course, facilitates both education of the young and dialog with foreigners.

But in another way, the task of integration is not well understood, and difficult even when it is understood. I'm speaking of the differences that result from the absence of foundations built on affective, moral, and intellectual conversion. Note that I'm not speaking of the absence of conversions, but rather of the presence of conversion but the absence of foundations based on conversion.

Illustration: Absence of Intellectual Foundations.

Let me illustrate two difficulties in particular. First, the difficulty of resolving differences in the absence of foundations based on intellectual conversion. Consider these three psychologists:

Sylvia listens to her clients with a deep and obvious compassion. She helps them express their feelings about the people and the situations that trouble them. She believes that psychic health comes only by looking very hard at real, concrete situations, and letting one's feelings flow freely. Unfortunately for her clients, however, Sylvia has no idea of how the mechanisms of repression, transference and reaction formation can play a shell game with the original objects of those feelings. Her clients feel refreshed, having unloaded some emotional baggage for an hour, but the feelings they expressed will soon enough attach themselves to some other object whose connection to the originating trauma continues to escape notice.

A second psychologist, Conrad, takes seriously every statement his clients make. He applies his understanding to fit all the pieces together. He expects that all their statements should fit into one of the basic conceptual schemes that he learned in graduate school. Whether he admits it to himself or not, he is committed to the idea that human behavior is always an instance of a concept. "This is a case of obsession." Or, "You have a narcissist personality." He works hard at mastering his craft, but he envisions that mastery as learning all the categories that apply to the psyche. His clients come away with a name for their problem and some understanding of how the dynamics of the named problem works. But they have yet to verify that concepts such as "obsession" or "narcissism" adequately explain their troubles.

Jude, our third psychologist, may seem at first to be rather unengaged. This is because she does not take her clients' statements as true. She takes them as just evidence. She plays with the evidence until she sees plausible connections between the behaviors that trouble them, and she delicately leads them to the same insights. Her explanation usually includes the possibility that her clients are faking some emotions, shading the truth, and compulsively dodging sensitive issues. Should contrary evidence appear, they both reconsider the evidence, looking for a more fundamental explanation. Jude brings a host of concepts to bear – suppression, denial, paranoia, and so on – but she

uses these only insofar as they help her understand the behavior and verbal evidence presented by her clients. Dedicated to insight, she delays mentioning the concepts to her clients until after they get the needed insights into their behaviors.

Now all three psychologists -- more or less -- follow the norms of experience, intelligence, reason, and responsibility. All three make decisions and guide the decisions of their clients. But of the three, Jude is more acutely aware of how knowing means asking questions and getting answers about experience, and how decisions are based on the absence of relevant questions. Jude is also more acutely aware of how little she, or anyone else, really knows about anything, whether in the far reaches of the cosmos or in the deep recesses of the psyche. This is because she does not restrict what may be known to what she can see, or to what she experiences directly in her psyche, or to what she categorizes as a case of something or other. Her spontaneous curiosity thinks of reality as what people verify, not what they experience or think.

Still, Jude may not have wondered what occurs when she or anyone else reflects. That is, her metaphysics may be sound but latent. As a result, she finds it difficult to justify her moral opinions. Moreover, she will not know how to lead the likes of Sylvia and Conrad to integrate in themselves the various processes and criteria associated with gathering data, setting hypotheses, verifying a viewpoint, and making a decision.

As intellectually converted, Jude possesses the foundational reality. But she has yet to complete the functional specialty foundations by verifying in herself the basic set of terms and relations that comprise special psychological categories. When she does, she can express her convictions to her colleagues in terms they can verify in their own psyches – parallel to the theological functional specialty doctrines. And she can express the therapies she plans in continuity with those convictions – parallel to the theological functional specialty systematics.

So a generalized empirical method will require professionals not only to deal with moral issues but also to notice what they do when they deal with moral issues, to understand the processes and name them precisely, and to deliberately raise issues of

method with their colleagues in the course of ordinary moral deliberations. This will mean a change in how they ordinarily try to justify their opinions, persuade others to reconsider theirs, and explain why others convinced them to change their minds.

Illustration: Absence of Affective Foundations

For my second illustration, consider the difficulty of resolving differences in the absence of foundations based on affective conversion. People who love their families and are loyal to their communities find little difficulty in resolving differences. Love tends to heal them of both psychic compulsions and of personal egotism.

Things get sticky when it comes to loving humanity. A love dedicated exclusively to friend, or family or country inhibits an affectivity that by nature has no such boundaries. Still, many communities have overcome this inhibition by deliberately choosing to welcome the stranger, heal the sick, and visit the imprisoned. Moral philosophers of every stripe have always promoted a love that can not only move beyond one's borders but also heal the wounds within.

Today, it seems to me, the most fertile field for resolving differences in moral opinion comes with transcendent love. That territory has been claimed by religions, but religions have tended to keep otherwise mature adults in a parent-child relationship to God. They're obedient and loyal to God as a rule maker, but hesitate speaking to God, to use Ignatius words, "as one friend speaks to another." They embrace the virtues of friendship – loyalty, truthfulness, and company in bad times – because they have insight into how these virtues function to make life better. So too, wherever Lonergan discusses the religious virtues of faith, charity and hope, he explains how they function to dissolve ideology, enmity, and discouragement. But these occur in all the professions, as do faith, charity and hope. The task will be to develop the heuristic categories relevant to how healing works in the particular sciences, in scholarly work, and in aesthetics.

To accomplish this, we can build on the unrestricted nature of our curiosity, which practically every empirical-minded person accepts. We can lead them to discover the similarly unrestricted nature of our desires for the ever better. And we can lead them

to discover the unrestricted nature of our affectivity and how it functions to heal wounded creativity.

Summary

Let me summarize in two brief points, expressed in Lonergan's categories.

The next evolution in ethics will be the emergence of the third stage of meaning.

Ethics will no longer be a field specialty or a subject specialty. Rather it will be a dimension of the foundations for any and every field or subject.

Lonergan proposed that the third stage of meaning requires foundations as he defines it. If so, the next evolution in ethics will not occur unless communities of specialists embrace this kind of self-appropriation.

© 2004 Tad Dunne