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Ethics at the End of the Century: A Mosaic from Genesis to Genetics

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In the past quarter century we have seen a surprising revival in the study of ethics in American higher education. I want to make several points about that revival. First, I want to suggest why the revival occurred. Then I want to discuss its intellectual trajectory; finally, I will say something about the institutionalization of the study of ethics in higher education.

I

Let's begin with some attempted explanations. Why a renewed interest in the study of ethics? This question is of historical interest; it is also relevant to future planning. We must know how we got to where we are to understand where we may go-- or to chart our course for the future.

I call one part of the explanation cultural. There is a widely held perception of a decline in professional probity in medicine and law. Many Americans are cynical about big business or government or both. Trust in the media is at an all

time low. Personal character and behavior seem to be unreliable and/or hypocritical. In this situation many people are looking for ways to mend the world, repair the social fabric. Ethics is appealed to in this connection and although higher education is seen as part of the problem, it also strikes people as a likely tool for its remediation.

These cultural forces are reinforced by intellectual developments in the academy. Higher education in this country started out attached to a moral vision, and that continued through the work of John Dewey and the Social Gospel in this century. But the dominant mood of higher education at midcentury was positivistic. *Science* was identified with serious intellectual work; there was enormous pressure to model all forms of intellectual inquiry on the sciences. The main agenda of philosophers who were concerned with ethics was seen to be to explain how there could be an intellectual respectable field with that name. This was the task of *metaethics*.

At the end of the century the intellectual climate has changed. Zealous partisan advocacy is defined in some quarters as the only honest form of intellectual exchange. Pluralism has replaced positivism as the central descriptor of academic

orthodoxy. Morality is so pronounced that intellectual communication threatens to break down over moral intolerance. Few members of the academic community want to go back to the chilly winds of high-positivism; fewer are satisfied with the isolation and stagnation that occur when serious discussion about moral disagreement is removed from the university. Morality used to be silly to talk about; now it's too important.

Furthermore, colleges and universities, as others in the knowledge business, must be concerned for ethics because knowledge effects character. Changing the way someone understands the world changes the person. If we are effective teachers, we are going to have an effect on character and the important question is what kind of effect.

For example, colleges and universities must stand for honesty because without it the intellectual enterprise is impossible. And for respect. If truth were fully known there would be no need for universities as we know them. To be a member of a university community is to commit oneself to living with disagreement. But the only thing that makes this tolerable is respect. Furthermore, I contend that standing for these

rigorous values is impossible without the existence of a viable and supportive community.

Thus there is a complex set of reasons that higher education has increasingly found itself in the ethics business. Huge gifts have been made to some of our national flagship institutions. A lot has gone on at universities like Western Michigan and Indiana. A new professional association-- the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics-- has come into existence; readers of the Journal of the American Medical Association of the New England Journal of Medicine couldn't avoid ethics if they wanted to; national commissions are formed by professional associations or by governments, companies, or communities.

II

This brings me to what I called the "intellectual trajectory" of the field of ethics. By the phrase "intellectual trajectory" I mean to refer to the forms of academic work that the field of ethics itself values and needs. I will start with an attempt at a descriptive report, segueing into my own recommendations about the direction the field should take.

The ethics renaissance in the United States began with the work of philosophically literate

social critics, some of whom were theologians, some lawyers, some activities, some journalists, some professionals. It received timely philosophical legitimation in the work first of John Rawls and then from others. By the mid-70s philosophers and philosophical lawyers had largely taken over the movement, but we have seen another swing of the pendulum. Literary, narrative, biographical, and case study methods have been most recently featured. I for one celebrate this diversity, but I want to urge special attention to two main topics.

First a caveat. I do not think that any other method can entirely substitute for philosophical reflection. In particular, taken as I am with casuistry--as will come out-- I think it important to bear in mind that viable casuistry must take place in a normative context. Situations become morally interesting cases because of a set of moral spectacles through which we see events. These spectacles may need to be changed or cleaned; when they are, the problem may go away or may be made worse. Principles may need to be revised. But we never really face the choice of cases or principles-- situations or spectacles. We deal with complex set of circumstances and some

of those circumstances are the moral commitments of players and the larger moral context in which they play their parts.

For this reason I think it is essential that persons who have invested their intellectual lives in the study of "spectacles"-- of visions of the world, moral arguments, moral sensitivity-- play a central role in the study of the ethics. Some of these persons will be philosophers-- in the narrow sense of someone who holds the Ph.D. in Philosophy. Others will be theologians, or students of religion, or lawyers. Specialized study of ethics is not a sufficient component of a process of moral deliberation or perception, but it is a necessary one.

With this in mind I offer two general suggestions. First, ethics must work more closely with science in the years ahead. I mean this assertion in two rather different senses.

The first and perhaps the least controversial of these I can illustrate with reference to genetics. The fact is that genetics research is creating some *new problems*. I mention only two.

For one thing we now have the ability to know the fate of some individuals far in advance of

the time anything tangible or visible happens. We can read the book of fate. The news may be good or bad. For example, the child of someone with Huntington Disease [HD] can be told at birth whether she or he carries the HD gene, although in all probability the effects won't show up for decades. This knowledge may have large ramifications for siblings, parents, possible spouse - all of whom will perceive this future as part of the child's present.

Generally, our increasing genetics knowledge makes human interdependence obvious; it raises questions of what should we know and when should we know it, and of what we owe to each other.

At the same time, most of this knowledge will increasingly be knowledge of *probabilities*. Huntington disease is untypical in this respect as the gene is virtually 100% penetrant. If you get the gene you get the disease. Much more typical is the situation with the genetics of breast cancer. People carrying the BRAC1 gene will not be told that they will certainly get breast cancer, but that they have an increased probability, e.g., 78% chance of getting it by age 50. Thus we can expect to know many more probabilities about

ourselves, those we love, those with whom we work, those on whom we are dependent.

I believe the economic pressures, natural human needs for security and happiness, as well as intolerance for imperfection and finitude will push application and development of this genetic knowledge at a rapid rate. I do not fear a new eugenics movement in the sense of the first half of the century; I do foresee large issues of discrimination, inequality, confusion and unhappiness. These are issues that call for clear-headed thought, to be sure, but they call for more than that: for compassion and patience and loyalty. Ethics must be engaged with the analytical and normative issues to be sure, but it must also include problems of community and sensibility and be prepared to have its agenda broadened.

Ethics also needs to work with the social sciences, in particular with anthropology and sociology, but explaining this will take a little longer.

I begin with what I take to be incontrovertible fact that good and effective as much of the work in practical ethics has been it has often completely failed to engage professional workers to whom the writing is meant to be

relevant, even professionals who see the need for reform in professional life. Part of this is an issue of jargon and inability effectively to write for a nonacademic audience. That is easily remediable--at least on principle. But another part arises when moralists approach a life-context with a preconceived agenda, an overly crisp sense of what "the issues" must be. Too much professional ethics writing betrays the fact that the author in some very important ways doesn't know what he or she is talking about.

This takes on methodological bite if we recognize that professional groups usually see themselves to be morally legitimate communities serving high moral purposes. Obviously they often default on this; there is always a gap between profession and behavior. But professional ethics, as an academic field, has not given much time to study of the operative ethic within professional groups, or the extent to which those ethics can serve as a basis for serious criticism.

I became very aware of this last year when I spent three months working in laboratories and attending seminars in a major university's biology department. I was struck by the interplay between ambition and the quest for security, on the one

hand, and intellectual self-discipline, a complex conceptual scheme and the excitement of discovery on the other. The moral world of a biologist ranges from routine to the flash of insight; the moral community is complex, filled with disappointment and death as well as achievement. I was embarrassed to realize how off target many of my prior conclusions or "insights" had been.

I spent that time because I believed, and increasingly I do believe that ethics must rediscover ethnography, that persons hoping to do moral criticism must spend some time immersed in the world about which they hope to write. Moreover this must be done in an interrogative mode-- questioning the world one sees, and questioning oneself. There are professional risks for moralists investing themselves in this kind of work, but I don't see how it can be avoided if the study of ethics is to hope to deliver on even part of its promise.

This brings me to the second main trajectory of work that I think needs to be done in practical ethics: work that deals with religion and ethics.

Although theologians and philosophers of

religion have made major contributions to professional ethics over the years, this work is often ignored by philosophical writers. And the neglect may, unfortunately, sometimes be reciprocated. There may be many reasons for this, but one of them is the fact that philosophers have sought a universal foundation for morality and dismissed religious commitments as a troubling form of particularism, rather like preference in food or music.

This dismissal is harder to sustain if one begins by immersing oneself in the real world of professional practice, and that for two reasons.

First, more than one or two actual professionals are religious in a traditional sense of being members of some ongoing religious community. I make no claims about the numbers of theists in these foxholes except to say that there are more than most philosophers or fellow-professionals suppose. Religion is one of those things seldom discussed in the workplace, but it is a serious mistake to infer its absence or irrelevance. Members of traditional religious communities may have special difficulties relating their identities as religious persons to their professional roles; if they take those religious

identities seriously, they will be the sort of morally serious professionals to whom writing in professional ethics should appeal.

Second, professional communities may function as religious communities for the professionals who work in them. The profession may determine a professional's view of the world, establish the calendar around which she organizes her life, set her political agenda, and provide the best support group a professional has. Professional commitments tend to become total all-encompassing commitments, and they can become what Western theists would call idolatrous. Seeing them in this light makes clear how important it is to study the internal morality of a professional community, how relevant it is to open professional practices and institutions to theological as well as moral critique.

I do not mean to be calling for a religious conversion of professionals, only to be claiming that understanding their religion(s), engaging in serious discussion about the role of religious morality in the workplace, and contrasting professional life with the standards of some traditional religious communities are important parts of the study of practical ethics in the next

few years.

III

This brings me to the last point, which concerns institutionalization of the study of ethics. A common model in the past decade has been the creation of an "ethics center" to serve as a focal point of campus work in ethics. These centers are incredibly diverse, ranging from one started with a 20 million dollar endowment at Princeton to ad hoc groups of faculty on campuses large and small, with places like Western's Center and the Poynter Center somewhere in between. We need to think about the strengths and weaknesses of this model and about its long range viability.

Again I begin with a caveat. The study of ethics in a practical mode requires more support than can be provided by on-campus entities. Indeed the Centers at Harvard and Princeton, to say nothing of the Hastings Center, have major national constituencies. The new APPE, with which faculty here and I have been closely allied, provides another viable form of support. But I want to focus on local development.

And I begin with the observation that in the vast majority of cases campuses have gotten very good deals out of the ethics centers that they

have created. Not only have they led to good public relations, they have reinvigorated teaching, renewed mid-career faculty, brought in external funding, bridged gaps between the university and external communities, and taken a substantial first step in the direction of reestablishing campuses as genuine communities of conversation. This is no small achievement! It has come at a time when higher education budgets are tight and-- I can say as one who is grateful for significant support-- it has come about with comparatively modest reallocation of campus resources.

The question that has to be faced is: how viable is this Center model over the long term? The core of most centers is a group of one to three people who are leading the center at the same time they are attempting to be good citizens of their departments and sustain an independent professional agenda. This can only go so long, and in any case these individuals will eventually die, retire, or move on. Then what happens to the campus ethics initiative? The natural university solution to this problem is to turn the Center into a department with its own faculty lines, courses-- and vested interests. My ambivalence about this possibility is hard to exaggerate.

On the one hand, the genius of what has happened at good ethics centers is identified with their interdisciplinary character. And practical ethics is not a discipline in the same sense as, say, biology or philosophy understand themselves to be disciplines. One comes into the dialogue at the ethics center as a philosopher, theologian, journalist or lawyer. These professional identities are not checked at the door. Moreover, there is a practical political advantage to non-departmental status, as it somewhat lifts the center above the fray of the departmental competition for funds. And finally, one has a happily deescalated relationship with faculty when one is not responsible directly for their tenure, salary, course load and the like.

On the other hand, not all departments are made up of coherent disciplines, e.g., political science, music, religious studies, nor is it clear that methodological diversity is one of their weaknesses. Faculty working practical ethics have diverse foci of interest; they are also commonly concerned with an identifiable body of issues and literature. Indeed they may have more in common than many academic units. Nor are they really above the fray of the budget competition.

Most particularly, departments have remarkable staying power. They are means of perpetuating campus concern with a given topic or subject matter. Thus if we think ethics is a subject of ongoing concern to campuses, and we want that concern to be addressed over an extended period of time, we need to think about the question of departmentalization including the creation of special courses and a designated cluster of faculty.

This is scarcely an exiting point at which to end. I have tried to say that the study of ethics has, as the old commercial had it, come a long way baby. Some of us have enjoyed the ride. I wanted to claim that future work in ethics should involve ethicist getting their hands dirty and be willing to muck around with particularity, including the particularity of religion. And finally I shared some of my worries about the long term institutional support for our field, support that will be essential in the next 10 or 20 years. It was an honor to be asked to share these reflections at this place which has been such a model for what can and should be done.