2009

Ethics Across the Curriculum, or, On Being Bilingual

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Can virtue be taught? What is virtue? And which of these two questions should we answer first? These questions are at least as old as Socrates who, rejecting the ancient notion of Fate, raised questions about individual virtues, about the virtuous life, about education, about the just society, and much more that we now incorporate under the label *Ethics*. His search for answers emerged from the postwar malaise of Athens' defeat at the hands of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and was thus a timely quest of the fifth century B.C.E.   Nonetheless, his questions were such that we are still beguiled by them and drawn to work out plausible, even reasonable answers. The perennial interest in questions of vice and virtue, good and bad, right and wrong thus make them timeless for us as well as timely for Socrates.

Ethics, thus emerging in Athens' Classical Period, developed in the dialogues of Plato, a student and protégé of Socrates, and reached its first great milestone in the texts of Aristotle, whose <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u> was the first book in Ethics in Western civilization. Aristotle followed Socrates and Plato in holding that ethics is central to living well, or being excellent. Indeed, the Greek word for virtue was *arête*, which means *excellence*. Ethics is an eminently practical project, because humans must learn how to live well if they hope to live well.

Ethics was already hundreds of years old when Christianity emerged to offer an alternative view of human life and destiny. Belief in a Creator-God, in a life after death, in the brotherhood of all persons: such basic beliefs could not help but make a difference. Classical ethics based its principles on a philosophy of the person, a being not seen as created and loved by a God, a being not meant for a Heaven. There was no Living Word in philosophical ethics, no incarnate

God, no divine revelation, no theology, and no magisterium. It is safe to say that the two systems were, and still are, discontinuous. The two traditions have developed for over two thousand years along separate paths; one, with a secular pedigree, the other, emerging from a deposit of religious faith and belief.

A plausible analogy with which to put these two traditions to work is language: philosophical and religious ethics are like two languages. They are two conceptual-linguistic frameworks for understanding right and wrong, for improving human life, or for addressing any and all moral questions that come up in human experience. As with two languages, we want both to prosper; both are valuable. Our task is to bring them together so that they can jointly expand and enhance our moral horizons.

The task that has brought together today, viz. pedagogy in Mercy colleges and universities, is one that is urging me to examine both the secular and the religious traditions of moral thinking, or, more specifically, philosophical and Catholic morality. The examination is not to be scholarship alone, pursued for its own sake; rather, it is scholarship with pedagogical needs in view. I do not need to argue for the desirability of moral thinking, or for its place in an undergraduate curriculum; I assume this desirability. Furthermore, I believe that today's moral challenges are such that one or two courses, whether in philosophy or in religion departments, are not up to the task of providing our students with the intellectual and ethical wherewithal to address such challenges. I ask you, then, to consider, with me, the possibility of a large and cohesive vision of ethics, i.e. ethics across the curriculum. If philosophical ethics is one language and Catholic ethics is another, then let us envision the possibility of our graduates being bilingual, i.e. being able to think, analyze, and reason about moral challenges in both traditions; being able to move back and forth, as needed, in and between both traditions; being able to reason in both a secular setting and in a Catholic setting, as does a person speaking two languages with native fluency. This is an ambitious task, one that, to my knowledge, has never been

done before. But the needs are great; *the field is white for the harvest*, and workers are needed. Such a project is not the work of a single person or of a single day, but let us today begin considering, in a preliminary way, what may be possible.

My approach is this: survey the field of philosophical ethics; then, outline some key differences between philosophical and religious ethics; finally, envision how a university that is attuned to both traditions may be able to proceed.

Consider moral thinking (see fig.1) Moral thinking has developed along two paths: philosophical ethics is secular, and the varieties of Christian ethics are grounded in faith. I am delegating to the theologians the privilege and imperative to develop their 'branch' of the tree diagram.

Philosophical ethics is descriptive when it investigates, as objectively as possible, the real ethical decisions made by individuals and groups, thus discovering what the actual issues are at this time and in this place, as well as how people have resolved their questions. By identifying a descriptive area, we can include areas of sociology, anthropology, and any other courses or programs that examine the actual practices of societies or groups. These will offer a spectrum of moral choices and traditions; topics such as pluralism, multiculturalism, toleration, group responsibility, and relativism would be appropriate and desirable. The social sciences are preeminent in such discoveries, especially anthropology, which introduces us to cultures other than our own. The descriptive option also includes metaethics. This is the branch of ethics that surveys and examines the language used by ethicians and includes elements of semantics and rhetoric. Included too is evaluation of the reasoning processes, logic, or deliberation used by various writers and source material.

The prescriptive option opens up the whole area of what is traditionally known as ethics. Most of philosophical ethics is prescriptive in nature. Intuitionism and emotivism are prescriptive, but the most influential area, historically, has been normative ethics. Normative ethics is a set of theories, each of which provides its own vocabulary, assumptions,

view of the person, guiding principles, and patterns of deliberation. There are three points of focus around which a normative theory is established: the action itself, the intention of the agent, and the consequences of the action. Every theory tries to deal with these three points of analysis, but each theory eventually emphasizes one point more than the others. For example, the three varieties of Consequentialism argue that the consequences of an action are the primary determinant of the goodness of an action; Deontologism, on the other hand, denies that role to consequences and emphasizes instead the good will of the agent.

The traditions, schools, and literature of philosophical ethics are rich and complex, and contemporary questions and issues increasingly explore and apply its theories, concepts, vocabulary, and unique reasoning processes. The growing field of Applied Ethics has two subdivisions. One type examines specific issues, e.g. abortion, animal rights, bioethics, the death penalty, environment, euthanasia, gender issues, immigration, justice, racism and toleration, roboethics, technology, terrorism, and war. The second subdivision, professional ethics, develops, examines, and applies principles and codes of behavior appropriate to individual professions, e.g. business ethics, engineering ethics, medical ethics.

Distinct from philosophical ethics, the ethics of Catholicism has a different grounding and dynamic. Religious ethics exists within a religious tradition, emerging from the creeds or beliefs of this tradition. Religious ethics assumes religious faith and commitment on the part of the believers and in turn helps to shape their faith and commitment. What gives religious ethics its authority is ultimately the goodness of God, the Sacred, the Divine, or the Transcendent, however God is imagined and with whatever means of revelation the tradition is formed. Our Catholic tradition is especially complex and rich. In the early centuries, a small number of intellectuals whom we now call *Fathers of the Church* selected philosophical concepts and reasoning processes with which to intellectualize the faith as found in the Bible and as understood and accepted by the early Church. Their achievements established Catholic theology. Church authority,

through the centuries, has selected out, from a broad range of moral theologizing and opinion, a *magisterium* as its official teaching. Accordingly, Catholic morality is one part of a highly-institutionalized religious tradition; its concepts, principles, and patterns of reasoning are defined by institutional authority in areas of faith and morals.

The differences between the two traditions are many, too many for this introduction to the possibility of a cohesive vision of ethics. Still, several contrasts stand out.

Each school of philosophical ethics is grounded on a philosophy of the person, and, within this understanding of the person, the goal or meaning of life is inferred. Such a goal becomes a criterion against which to evaluate actions of the agent as either good or bad. Catholic moral theology is grounded in faith in an Absolute, a Transcendent, a Divine, or God, and this faith is shaped by, or articulated in, a conceptual-linguistic framework of beliefs. The whole collection of beliefs originates in, or is derived from, Scripture; but what constitutes Scripture, and what these Scriptures mean, are decided by Church authority. A person has a special relationship with God, who is his Creator and the goal of his life. (Catholic Catechism, 2258). The life of a person is to know and love God. (Catholic Catechism, l) God, understood as Infinite Goodness, is the ultimate authority for any definition of human actions as good or bad. Thus, the two systems differ in their grounding (philosophy of a person / faith); in their goals or rewards (wisdom or happiness / God); and in their respective definitions of good (what is reasonable / what approximates God).

While there are more than three differences, this outline is adequate to hint at the vastness of the project that I am asking you to envision with me. As academicians, we can be expected to focus our efforts on a curriculum, for designing curricula and teaching classes are what we do. So, if we are to consider this task at all, the arena of our efforts will be the curriculum. Curricula emerge, after great effort, from basic sources, such as academic requirements and traditions, professional needs, and the mission of the university. All of these are eminently sympathetic to "Ethics across the

Curriculum," and so the real challenge has to be a willingness and a creativity to re-see and re-invent what we already do, in order to achieve a comprehensive framework. Or, to borrow an old phrase, to see the forest as well as the trees.

Here are some samples of action steps for consideration.

1. Affirm the mission of the university.
2. Examine the concept *moral thinking* in broad-based discussion. Work for a consensus as to the interpretation of the concept.
3. Establish moral thinking as a necessary condition of living the mission of the university.
4. Conduct an inventory of existing resources, especially faculty.
5. Assemble a "wish list".

    For example: 3 credit courses; 1 credit courses; panel discussions;

    conferences; guest lecturers; film series.
6. Establish regular colloquia for on-going renewal and oversight.

    Sample tasks: 1. adding new components/resources

    2. recognizing and/or identifying interconnections

    among the components

    3. updating; keeping pace with emerging issues.

What will take the most effort and time, I predict, is making the interconnections between the two *languages*. We have all experienced the task of translation from one language into another. We have all wavered, in the beginning, between translating the words literally, on the one hand, and translating the meanings, on the other. Even within one language there are nuances of differences. For instance, I have noticed for some time now that my students never say "You're welcome"; it's always "No problem." "No problem" bears some comparison to the Spanish "De nada" but is very unlike the Irish, "May goodness be returned to you." My students and the Spanish minimize modestly what they have done for you, while the Irish move into a subjunctive realm of blessing. Should we undertake the task of creating a cohesive vision of Ethics across the curriculum, we will probably find that the two traditions are incommensurable in places. For instance, for a philosopher, wisdom or happiness will be the goal or meaningfulness of human life, while, to a Catholic, God alone is this goal or meaningfulness. Ideally, our graduates should see key differences such as this, be at home in both traditions. They should know how to reason in both secular and religious terms, know when both may be appropriate, and know when to employ both systems. The philosophically minded may search for wisdom and happiness, but there are no guarantees that they will achieve such goals or find their lives enriched and made meaningful thereby. It may turn out, then, that virtue is its own reward; one may take comfort in seeing himself as a person of virtue. In a Catholic understanding, though, God alone is the reward, an infinite reward. God is necessary for achieving happiness, and virtue cannot even be understood apart from God.

Our two "languages" are not incommensurable completely, however. In both traditions humans are free to deliberate and to make choices accordingly. They may choose the good or the bad, the right or the wrong; and they are responsible in either case. Decisions affect not only external states of affairs but affect the agent as well; all of our decisions affect us. For instance, Socrates, in the *Apology*, "It is better to suffer wrong than to do it." Compare this to

St. Paul in *Romans 3:8*: "Or why may we not do evil that good may come of it? This is the very thing that some slanderously accuse us of teaching; but they will get what they deserve." Both are saying that we may never do evil, even for the sake of good, not only because we may bring about bad consequences but because we, as agents, may ourselves be degraded by our choices.

Through the centuries both kinds of moral thinking have evolved. One in particular holds special interest for those of us committed to Mercy colleges and universities, viz. the unique rendering of the Catholic tradition as achieved by Catherine McAuley. Hers was a translation that posited mercy and justice as the locus of asceticism and service. However, those who have embraced her legacy in higher education know well the challenges posed by currents of secularism, postmodernism, and even antipathy to organized religion. These trends make the distinction between secular and Catholic moral thinking necessary; each must be embraced, and some intersection should be sought. If virtue is to be taught or 'caught' in undergraduate education, a new approach, even a new methodology would seem to be in order. Athens did not answer the famous question raised first by Socrates (viz. *Can virtue be taught?).* But maybe Athens and Jerusalem together can do so.

Figure 1