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Individual and Group Knowledge

Individual and Group Experience...
We learn from personal experience as well as from the collective experience of groups. The capacity for moral discovery is as unique to the group as it is to the individual. Each has a history that offers a different emphasis on moral experience and each must be tempered by the other. In presenting individual experience and group experience, the point to be made for ethics is this: all individuals and groups are distinct sources of ethical experience, but what is unique and original in their knowing potential is not necessarily adequate. We should always systematically seek to learn from the social sources of moral insight (group experience) and from individual experience. Ethics must blend a respect for personalized original insight with a sensitivity to what is contained in the
common fund of cultural and ethical traditions. It must be critical of what is flawed in either individual or group experience and receptive of what is sound.

When we think, we always start from our social and historical matrix where interpretations of reality already exist. Even when creatively moving forward, we do not start from nowhere. The danger of not realizing our cultural and historical underpinnings is that we can lose a valuable perspective. We are born not only into the world but into a worldview in which reality, with all its specific value assumptions and positions, has been defined and assessed in certain ways. Before we are in a position to step back and gain the necessary critical distance to assess the values that we inherit from our group or society, we absorb and identify with them. If we are not aware of our social and cultural conditioning, we will be locked into it. Group influences, like peer group authority, radically affect us and for that reason we need to be aware of them in order to assess them. Because knowing is rooted de facto in our social reality and history, ethics must urge examination of unconsciously assumed values.

To think that we perceive moral values in anything like the way we see the starry sky above is seriously mistaken. To a significant extent, the "seeking" of moral values is a social experience, and even a creative moral insight is not without ties to the context in which our consciousness is formed. Our sense of reality, the way we think, and our moral outlook vary according to social and cultural influences. Knowing as well as socialization is an ongoing process that occurs in society. The social setting in which our knowing takes place gives it distinctive form, accent, and orientation. Class consciousness and nationalism, for example, are two important shapers of the human mind. One need not be a Marxist but only a realist to be concerned with class and its influence on human development and moral behavior. It would be naïve not to know that persons identify instinctively with their class interests. Those class interests do not always represent sublime levels of morality or even minimal levels. Both the content and the method of our knowing are strongly conditioned by our cultural environment, and that is not a pure success story.

In considering moral issues, we need to get a critical view of the forces that are influencing us. It is chilling to think of the value judgments made by persons past and present. Although the example we now offer illustrates the negative side of group experience, it will serve the salutary purpose of demonstrating the strength that group influences have. After this illustration, we will turn to the positive uses of group experience and to the critical resource of individual experience.

Group experience can be ideological and can provide the basic outlook on life that is passed on through every aspect of the socializa-
tion process. Considered as the morally proper one, this outlook can explode into unimaginable frenzy that can possess the whole group and cause its members temporarily to lose their individual rationality. Group experience may even have catastrophic consequences. The witch hunts in the late seventeenth century in Massachusetts provide us with a vivid example. In her book The Devil in Massachusetts, Marion L. Starkey gives an excellent account of the negative effects of group experience and of how the fears of the group became a source of mass hysteria. According to Starkey the episodes in Massachusetts were not atypical happenings. Through the socialization process, the thinking, the manners, the belief, the political and religious attitudes — in a word, the whole group experience of life — foster the group’s identity. Starkey mentions that the hysteria swept not only Salem but also Massachusetts Bay Colony. “The result,” she says, “was by no means the most sensational example of witch hysteria on record. Only twenty witches were executed, a microscopic number compared to the tens of thousands who had been put to death in Europe and England in the course of similar outbreaks in the late Middle Ages.” Group experience can be so compelling that it affects the mind and judgment of everyone. People think and act under group experience, real or imagined. The condemnation and irreversible death threats against the Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie are a vivid contemporary example of the negative power of group experience.

The absorbing power of our social context is a fact of cognitive life, and ethics must take it into account. Awareness is the first step toward relativizing this power and equipping us to move beyond it to greater moral sensitivity. Systematically taking account of it is part of the wholesome work of ethics and prepares the way for the creative moral mind. The cognitive influences of society must press us to ask where our minds are gripped today. In a comprehensive ethics, we should ask the question: What socially ensconced judgments are leading contemporary evaluations astray?

Many military and political experts say that only two-thirds of our military budget — or considerably less — would meet all our safety needs. Paralyzed group-think is not disposed to consider what those unneeded military expenditures could do if redirected to our needs in education, business, health care, transportation, and benign energy development. Unreflective, stubborn group-think can blind us to our own good.

On Knowing Better Socially...

Given the tendency of human beings to consume unreflectively the value positions of society, we have first pointed out the negative potential of social influence on moral evaluation. Thinking persons,
however, cannot hide from society, and thought is to a substantive degree a social product. Further, we cannot think or evaluate well unless we deliberately appropriate the value appreciations that have arisen in our society and learn from those that have arisen in others. By recognizing that (1) thought is a social product and (2) there are value appreciations in all societies, we emphasize group experience as a positive resource in ethics. Moral knowledge and acuity profit from the trusting appropriation of the wisdom and experience of our own society and from comparisons and contrasts with diverse social experiences. We gain an invaluable perspective from other groups and societies.

It should be obvious that, to a substantial degree, our society shapes us. What this fact uncovers is our finitude and the humanizing exigency of trust. The moral universe is comparable to the physical universe in scope and mystery. No single person can explore it. Even together, our reach is limited. So, naturally and inevitably, we tune in to the knowing processes of others. By necessity, knowing is a shared process. But ethics is not merely charting the necessities but also speaking normatively of what ought to be done. Communal appreciations should be tapped, whether they exist in the present or whether they can be partially retrieved from history. Here group experience relates to what was said about the spoke on authority. Complementarity and reliance are integral to our social being. Trust is an essential ingredient in the process of becoming more human. This trusting pattern is a noble trait of human life. It enters into evaluations and conjoins us to the moral achievements of humankind. The example of the Salem witch trial, an event that illustrates the possibility of mindless absorption into group consciousness, was not intended to supplant trust. Rather, it was used to urge that our trust retain a critical edge, without which it would deteriorate into blind emotion.

Related here, too, is our treatment of principles, since it is through principles that group consciousness and moral sensitivity are significantly articulated. In critically appropriating principles and other moral practices of our society, we are acknowledging that that society, even for all its moral failures, has not been entirely unmoved before the mysterious values of personhood. The comparing of diverse group and societal experiences can help balance one's own cultural value appropriations.

At the present time in the United States, there is a keen interest in studying Japan. The extraordinary economic success of the Japanese signals some better ways of doing things. Some of what is found in Japan is not imitable. Other things, such as attention to job security, better rapport between labor and management, tapping the labor force for ideas, and so forth, contain both business and ethical lessons that may be imitable. Active, intelligent concern for the needs of persons
in the work force is conducive to greater productivity. It is another example of *good ethics as good business.*

Making sense of things is the passion of the mind. Sometimes when we have had some sense-making success, we tend to freeze our insight, forgetting that it is only partial and forgetting too that truth for us is a process of attunement and never a completed product. Cultural absolutism is the blight of sensitive moral intelligence. This freezing into absolutes happens in all fields of thought. The central moral faculty of creative imagination is regularly blocked in every intellectual discipline and in every culture by the difficulty of penetrating unchallenged, long-tenured orthodoxies. Sensitivity to what other groups think or have thought on matters that concern us can be effective solvents of false absolutes. Rather than simply being immersed only in the particular ethical issues that emerge in our society, ethics should press us to look at different kinds of moral presuppositions that emerge in other social systems. The reason is that if you do not check your presuppositions, you may, for example, end up spelling out with punctilious ingenuity the rights and duties that slaves have instead of questioning the institution of slavery itself. Drawing other group and social experiences into view can yield valuable perspective, positive or negative. Some group experiences may affirm or correct our value positions; others, through detailed analysis and comparison, may need to be rejected as morally unfit. But in both cases, group experience is a critical resource that is meant to expand our moral awareness.

For example, how is it that our health care system is beset with some forty million uninsured people? How have other nations avoided this tragic shortfall? The problem here is moral, not material, since we may be the richest nation in the world in material resources. If poorer nations have ways of bringing health care to all their citizens, we should, in this regard, be their ethics students.

In the absence of all contrast, questions about our social and moral conditioning could remain unasked, leaving us incapable of moral criticism. The discovery of such question-breeding social and group contrasts is a necessary task of ethics. In reference to diverse societies and groups, anthropology and sociology have done a major service to ethics by discovering the wide variety within human mores, thus providing us with many contrasts. The experience of variety pushes us to look to the roots of our own standards as a way of moving more deeply into moral truth. In ethics, as in art, contrast heightens perception by giving a different and fuller perspective. Consciousness of diverse group experience in any area of morality can liberate us from the constricting grip of our own biases or can reaffirm the soundness of our own experiences. But fixated attention on only one other historical
experience can easily be a block to moral discourse. (See chapter 16, where we discuss the notion of false analogies.) Like the differences concerning the who? question in the hub of the wheel model, what might be morally defensible for one group or society may not necessarily be morally defensible for another. There is a difference between knowing and knowing more fully. Ethically, to know more fully is to be aware of diverse group experience.

The Pendulum Effect...

We should also take account of the pendulum effect in the history of human thought when discussing group consciousness and diverse group experience. The pendulum is a fitting symbol for human knowing. Knowledge develops in a field of action and reaction. In reaction against certain errors, the pendulum shifts and can easily swing too far in the opposite direction. We can go from Victorian prudishness on sex to unrestrained pornography, from undertreating to overtreating in medicine, from ignoring AIDS to insensitive mandatory testing, and from regulation to deregulation and back again in the world of business. To and fro is the way of human thought and evaluation.

Trust in the established mores and authorities in society can yield to asocial conceptions of freedom and glorification of doing one's own thing. Confidence in the general principles and reliance on that which is commonly true can produce a counterreaction in which only the unique and unrepeatable is championed. Depending on where the pendulum is, rules and exceptions may be on trial. The pendulum can move from one extreme to the other or veer off to new extremes and overreact against overreaction. The pendulum swing can exercise a conservative role of recovery and, if it does not overlook the values in that which it reacts against, its service for group consciousness can be considerable.

Developing an acute sense of the pendular movements of thought is essential to critical judgment. Critical thinkers must always check to see where the pendulum is carrying them with forces that they did not create. Ethics should act as a weight on the pendulum, to keep it from flying off too far in extreme reaction and overreaction. What is needed is a discipline of the mind whereby we force ourselves to consider the values in that which we are reacting against.

The following could be taken as a working rule, not as an absolute principle but as a guiding assumption: If anything has been held by a large number of persons for a long period, it most likely is not completely valueless. It may in the main be erroneous and in need of drastic criticism. However, if we may assume that pure error is unimaginable, there is probably something worthy of retrieval even in highly erroneous group positions. In criticizing or rejecting an extreme, ethics
must look for hidden values and make distinctions between them and the accompanying disvalues that need correction.

The pendulum can swing away from many positions and into new and uncharted areas. Today we can see the pendulum swinging into such areas as genetic engineering, selective abortion or pregnancy reduction of multiple fetuses, surrogate mothering, mandatory drug testing, and psychological screening of job applicants. New technologies offer new freedoms that easily push the pendulum away from former positions. The question for ethics is whether a particular pendulum movement is good or bad.

In Defense of the Living Intellect: Individual Experience...

"An ethical system," John Henry Newman wrote in A Grammar of Assent, "may supply laws, general rules, guiding principles, a number of examples, suggestions, landmarks, limitations, cautions, distinctions, solutions of critical or anxious difficulties; but who is to apply them to a particular case? Whither can we go, except to the living intellect, our own, or another's?" Individual experience and personal responsibility are of great importance in ethical decision-making. "The authoritative oracle, which is to decide our path," Newman continues, "...is seated in the mind of the individual, who is thus his own law, his own teacher, and his own judge in those special cases of duty which are personal to him."

Newman's words introduce our consideration of the unique credentials of the individual discerning subject. This spoke on individual experience overlaps with others in our holistic model of ethical method. That there is shared ground here and elsewhere is not only recognized and admitted but necessary for a complete ethical system that attempts to be critically comprehensive of moral circumstances. In treating creative imagination, affectivity, and authority, for example, the special prerogatives of the individual's knowing capacity have been acknowledged. For this reason, we may treat this particular spoke more concisely. Special status is given to individual experience in order to supply an emphasis that should be corrective of a common distortion. Trust in one's own unique powers of moral knowing is not commonplace. Much of our moral stability is found by clinging to others, and in doing so we end up relying on — and perhaps absolutizing — group experience. Could we not rely more on our own individual experience especially when in our hearts and consciences we may know something to be morally defensible? To work from the original center of our own experiences may be exceptional but it is not impossible. Creative moral leaders who have turned us inside out with their moral vision exemplify the originality and confidence in the experience of the self. Even in less extraordinary and history-turning ways, we all know some per-
sons who exhibit a freshness in their value consciousness that comes from their ability to be something other than faithful mirrors. Still, let us grant the rarity of the purely original mind.

Given our social nature, originality is more a matter of degree. But some minds are almost completely strapped to their social props, and others, less so. This is a point that must be of interest to ethics. Ethics seeks to point the way to value awareness that is fully alive. If persons choke on their own unique perceptive powers and timidly repair to crowd-think, the community of valuing animals is to some degree crippled. Such huddled thinking must yield something of a blur. To hang together it must rely heavily on stereotypes and generalizations. To preserve itself, crowd-think must shy away from the singularity that can be discerned by “the living intellect.”

Two things must be kept in mind in championing the prestige of individual cognitive experience: the first is the uniqueness of the individual and the second is the uniqueness of every situation. It is no poetic license to say that each human being is distinct and unrepeatable. Even physiologically the very structure of our bodies and our brains suggests this uniqueness. Psychologically, too, we are all different and do not fall into exactly the same patterns. Furthermore, no two persons have identical experiences or histories. Nor do any two persons react to the same reality in an identical way. Since affectivity is one of the ways in which we are morally aware, another variable source of uniqueness presents itself.

Moral insight gives a view of reality refracted through the personal experience of a unique cognitive structure. In the conscious awareness that we call knowledge, a vital and multidimensional process of attunement, interpretation, filtering, accenting, and imagining is going on. The process reflects the complex singularity of the knower and this reflection is especially true in the knowledge of values. It has been said that any work of art is reality refracted through a temperament. Any moral judgment is similarly personalized.

Individual experience can actually affirm some group experience because the personal nuances, although different for each individual, do not differ so radically that one’s moral decision is by necessity different from another’s. Individual experience may authenticate or rediscover a lost moral insight of other individuals and of groups, further verifying the growth of the foundational response to moral value.

Attention has to be drawn to the knowledge gained from personal experience because confidence in our own perceptive powers is slight. We fly to that which is similar, unsure of that which is different in us. We fear our own creativity. Socially endorsed positions seem more reliable. One result of this reliability can cause us to lose confidence in our own “common sense.” It is a sad fact of intellectual life that
persons will sacrifice their best insights to the accepted opinions of the group. But we, individually, are the valuing and deciding animal and we shrink from our responsibilities as moral human beings when we place excessive reliance on social sources of insight. There should be a balance between group and individual experience, each adding moral insight to the other.

Like persons, situations are unique and in a state of flux. Ethics swims in crossovers, where new patterns and new problems are always emerging. The established wisdom, drawn from past experiences, may not be enough for judging that which is new. The burden falls on "the living intellect" of the individual. But the responsibility for individual assessment does not extend just to concrete behavioral decisions. It also imposes the burden of evaluating the values that we have inherited from our society, as far as that is possible. We are not destined to be controlled by crowd-think in the same way that lesser animals are controlled by instinct, though it would appear that crowd-think is our substitute for the instinctive apparatus that we would prefer to moral responsibility. There is an irremediable loneliness to moral knowledge and to individual moral decision-making. We are never wholly melted into an unindivuated group consciousness. Group experience should deepen and consolidate our individuality and should not blot out our unique cognitive resources. It is to this end that individual experience as an evaluational spoke is directed.

Religious Experience...
Religion is an important bearer of moral attitudes and judgments. Its moral content relates to both individual and group experience. The literature of the major religions, represented in contemporary societies, abounds in moral teaching. Sometimes this teaching is in very specific terms that easily become dated and encrusted in a contextually insensitive code of conduct. However, religious experience has historically served the "valuing animal" in such wise that theoreticians of ethics ignore it to their own impoverishment. Unfortunately, some philosophical ethicists of our day are inclined to overlook or disregard the moral content and ethical service of religious traditions. Feeling that these sources are tainted with sectarian bias, they, perhaps, believe that religious insights concerning moral value are unreliable and unworthy of the philosophical enterprise. Their attitude is intellectually limited and, from the view of ethical method, unsound. Their enterprise is directed to the critical uncovering of truth, which includes moral truth. Good ethical method is sensitive to all the sources of moral valuation, whether those sources are religiously or nonreligiously affiliated. Good ideas do not need special passports to enter an open mind.

There are two principal ways in which moral insight derives from
major religious traditions. First, these traditions significantly affirm the validity and prerogatives of individual experience in valuation. Alfred North Whitehead points this out in his study Religion in the Making: "The moment of religious consciousness starts from self-valuation, but it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive." One can be eclectic in learning value insights from the religious traditions. There is no long-tenured tradition, religious, political, or other, that is not encumbered with unhappy and even absurd accretions. We can learn from these traditions without becoming tied to their errors. Second, religions are major vehicles of group experience containing as they do a good deal of the moral appreciations and discoveries of groups. The great religions constitute a particular vision or, rather, a number of harmonized (or partly harmonized) visions of what the shape of the moral life is.

The notion of God, in fact, often recapitulates in a poetic way the basic notions of what moral goodness entails, as perceived by a particular people. Each religious tradition was forged on the anvil of an unrepeatable time in history, marked by special challenges. Its moral vision and interpretations will be distinguished by its presuppositions, collective attitudes, geography, history, mood, myths, analogues, symbols, and saints. Different things will be cared about, and, again, caring is intrinsic to knowing. The result is that each religious tradition should be looked to as a unique locus of moral interpretation, where distinctive perceptions of what does or does not befit the mysterious phenomenon of personhood have been achieved. Irrelevancies are also to be anticipated, reflecting the unique aspects of the original experience. But valid insights may also be awaited, wrought from the experiences of a reflective people and enshrined in the literary and oral traditions of that people.

There are certain inevitable dialectical tensions that present themselves to moral understanding. We must all somehow take our stand on the conflicting claims of pessimism and hope, of the individual and the common good, of creativity and conformism, of authority and initiative, of ecstasy and order. We must fashion or assume a conception of what power, justice, and love imply. The various religious traditions have responded to these points in ways that have potentially universal benefit. Each of us, like the travellers in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, has a story to tell, and it is our business to know our story. Because of our story, we can teach what others do not know, and then we can listen to learn something of what we have missed that others have found. This openness can also be commended regarding the various philosophical traditions, but we here stress the religious sources of moral wisdom, since they are so regularly neglected in the ethical treatment of group experience in our secular age.