Ethics as the Strategy of Justice and Love

Ethics is a matter of method. There is a difference between moral and immoral, between Francis of Assisi and Attila the Hun, between a sycophant and a prophet, a conniving coward and a heroine, between professional integrity and moral unprofessionalism. How do you tell the difference in hard cases? Spotting the difference between Mother Teresa and some nefarious robber takes no special method of ethics. But knowing how to reconcile confidentiality and the demands of secrecy, judging the reasons for and against a divorce, knowing the difference between treating or overtreating the terminally ill, distinguishing the rights of the pregnant woman from the rights of the fetus—all these require some helping method. When we discuss morality, we are involved in ought-talk. We are saying what ought or ought not be in view of what persons deserve. To be effective in this ought-talk we need a method.

It might seem that ethics is simple. If we agree that murdering and thieving and lying are immoral, then let us simply cease and desist from them and persuade or constrain others to do likewise. Why tax the mind with ethical inquiry? But ethics is necessary. There are problems that force themselves on us and make us do ethics. The first problem is that there is not always an obvious difference between what is moral and what is immoral. Moral clarity is seldom simple. There is increasingly less agreement on our moral choices and obligations in a complexifying world. Second, even if we become clear about what our obligations are, those obligations often collide. The obligation to stop the spread of a disease like AIDS and the obligation to respect the confidence of the AIDS patient present a collision that requires ethical discernment.

The more that history and communications spread our horizons regarding past and present ethical views, the more divergence we discover. The range of moral beliefs is enormous, so enormous that there is a theory called "relativism," which essentially states that the moral is defined by social custom. There was surprise some years ago to learn
that some Eskimos once viewed marital fidelity differently from us. In
their hospitality, Eskimo men might lend both bed and wife to a visitor.
Also, their elders would perform suicide to ease food pressures. Some
societies look on cheating as a sign of admirable prowess and others
have standards of honesty that would make our society look criminal.
There are some societies that view extramarital sex as matters involving
only the preferences of the persons involved. The fair question arises,
therefore, whether we or they are right.

In our society, consensus on morals is evaporating. We can find a
businessman explaining to his incredulous children that the money his
company pays secretly to foreign officials to do business there is not
a bribe. It is rather like a toll or a surcharge one has to pay to gain
access to an important market. Everyone does it. And then the sons
and daughters try to explain to the parent that the sex they have and the
drugs they take do not signify licentiousness and moral decay, but are
rather the currently acceptable customs of social exchange. Everyone
does it.

However, even when we happily achieve agreement on standards,
they clash with one another. We may agree that we should save innocent
life when it is within our power to do so, and that we should tell the
truth. But what do you do if a person intent on murder asks you where
the intended victim is — and you know? If you give the would-be
murderer misinformation to save a life, you have failed to tell the truth.
If you tell the truth, you have facilitated a murder. Someone who always
told the truth no matter what would be a source of embarrassment
and could never be trusted. These examples illustrate the problem of
ethics. After discovering what we think are real moral values, it is often
a delicate task to see how they apply or which of them applies when
two or more compete. To be moral is to be just and to love well. But
how to be just and to love well amid conflicting value claims is the
problem. Morality needs a method of discernment and that method
is called “ethics.”

Defining What We Are Doing...
Ethics is often misunderstood to mean almost anything from etiquette
to the study of customs, so the first thing we must do is define it.
Ethics is the art/science that seeks to bring sensitivity and method to the
discernment of moral values. It is neither a pure art nor a pure science,
but it is the way we do our systematic thinking about moral values.

Art. Although its focus is not on aesthetic but on moral values,
ethics is like art because it involves the practice and the use of creativity
and imagination, sensitivity and taste. Art is something practiced and
lived, and so too is ethics. It is a way of thinking and living. Just
as sensitivity to beauty cannot be taught in the way a scientific truth
can (although a sense of beauty can be learned and honed through experience and education), so also the moral cannot be easily spelled out or always captured in the processes of "reason."

Ethics as an art is not just a work of uninvolved intellectuality but, rather, is, by its nature, immersed in feeling, in a sense of fittingness, of contrast, and even in a sense of the macabre. It involves a sense of correspondence that can be cultivated only in lived experience. We must make clear, however, that a sense of beauty and a sense of morality are not the same. Tolstoy wrote of the rich who wept at the beauty of the symphony but had no pity on their horsemen literally freezing outside in the snow. Some leading Nazis were perceptive art collectors. Still, the moral sense is comparable to the educated esthetic sense.

Since ethics has often been done too rationalistically, the comparison of ethics to art is important and corrective. Ethics is comparable to art. Like art, it is unlimited and, to a significant degree, inexplicable. As there is no way of giving a full account of all that makes art genuine or great, so it is with ethics. Moral insight is like an inexhaustible work of art. No principle, no ethicist can expend or restrict its meaning. At its deepest levels, morality touches mystery. Modesty, therefore, in complex ethical debates is always becoming.

Science. Ethics can also be compared to science, which is a quest for rational understanding. Like science, ethics collects data, weighs, assesses, analyzes, and studies relationships of empirical facts. Moral values are found in the empirical order where persons dwell. Like a scientist bent on hunting, gathering, and analyzing amid that data, the ethicist has an inductive, fact-gathering, and analytical task. The ethicist's goal is to be complete, thorough, and as objective as possible.

Sensitivity. Emphasis on sensitivity is needed to tune us in on all the diverse, morally meaningful circumstances of a case. The moral dimension is easily sidetracked by other preoccupations. When that happens, we often hear that something is "just a political, not a moral matter" or "just an economic or practical matter and not a moral one." There is pernicious mischief afoot here, since the onus of moral responsibility is being effectively avoided. Part of the role of ethics is to reassert the moral dimension of all human behavior, whether private or collective, so that the sensitivity of conscience will not anywhere be lost.

Method. Ethics is like breathing in the sense that everyone is already doing it, but it is unlike breathing in that we do not all do ethics the same way. Furthermore, our doing ethics is not blessed with the same instinctive efficiency. We can make a mess of it and this can be serious because ethical errors can be cruel and fatal.

There are at least two general obstacles to effective ethical discernment. One is at the level of personality development and the other comes from a lack of theoretical clarity regarding the nature of eth-
ical inquiry. Sophisticated studies in developmental psychology have shown that we may grow from one way of doing ethics to another. At early stages of development we may antiscocially conclude that good is whatever we want it to be. We are likely to be impulse-ridden, opportunist in evaluating, with little ability to distance ourselves from our own interests or to relate properly to moral authorities. Some people may grow old and die at these early levels. Others go on to develop an ability for more sensitive judgment and can respond to principles and ideals in a way that shows a maturely integrated awareness of the value of self and others. If persons are impeded in personality development, they may “know” about ethics but could not appreciate its full meaning.

The obstacle to ethical discernment that concerns us here is the general lack of clarity about how we should go about judging and discerning moral values. This obstacle is the problem of method. Every person is a valuing animal and is involved willy-nilly in some kind of method for making ethical judgments. It would be quite possible to have an extended interview with anyone, to discuss moral matters and cases, and then to show in broad outline the ethical method this person is using. Probably the individual has never mentally clarified this important aspect of personal existence. Probably, too, the person is tied to a number of opinions that would be altered by critical reflection. But so frequently we just lumber along, thinking and evaluating in ways we have become accustomed to.

Most of us really do not have a reflective method for approaching moral issues. We are programmed into certain set ridges of thought and in the face of moral issues we react predictably. We may have been morally trained but not necessarily morally educated to do ethics well. Some persons will have an unrealistic confidence in authority or tradition, whereas others will rely on an almost vertical intuition into the immediate facts and will lack breadth of vision or any sense of continuity and history. Others will trust firmly in principles and group expectations and be unequipped to handle exceptional cases or unable to trust their own feelings and insights. In all these cases the problem — in practice and in theory — is a limited grasp of ethical evaluation. Many revert to biased ethical approaches and become threatened by those who, through the use of critical reflection, are more sensitive to moral meaning. Moral sensitivity is a product of good ethical method and the proper basis of conscience. Our effort here is to offer a complete and holistic method that tries to integrate various personal and cultural processes of reflective evaluation.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain how the value or sanctity of life relates to the definition of morality and how it should relate to the way we approach our environment. Define the following terms: “moral,” “amoral” (“non-moral”), and “immoral.” How can the terms “human” and “moral” be used synonymously?

2. Discuss the nature of the foundational moral experience. How do the terms “affectivity,” “faith,” and “process” relate to this experience? Can it recede? How can we say that this experience is basic to all moral knowledge?

3. How is faith a way of knowing moral truth? How are faith and affectivity related? How can self-love enhance the perception of the value of other persons?

4. How does the supreme sacrifice affirm the meaning of the foundational moral experience?

5. How are keeping promises, paying debts, being truthful, and other day-to-day moral responsibilities expressions of the foundational moral experience? Clarify what is meant by a moral ought.

6. Show how justice relates to the foundational moral experience and to our individual and collective moral responsibilities. Clarify the three forms of justice. Give examples of each form of justice.

7. Define ethics. Explain each term of the definition. How can ethics be seen as a way of loving well?

8. Why does morality need a method?