PART TWO

Routes to Moral Reality

The Hub of Moral Reality
The wheel model represents two phases in ethics: the questioning (or hunting and gathering) phase and the evaluating phase. In the hub of the wheel is the questioning or expository phase where we assemble the facts and ask the questions that begin to uncover moral reality. The spokes of the model represent the nine evaluational processes and resources available to us personally and socially. Theoretically we ask all the appropriate questions contained in the center of the wheel model so that we leave no stone unturned and really know what we are talking about. Then we bring the nine spokes to bear upon what we have uncovered with our questions.

Evaluation, of course, does not stay in abeyance while we run through the expository questions. As we ask the questions we will be doing some evaluating; the two phases interrelate. Still, the goal of the model is thoroughness, to help us use all our evaluational powers
and resources in coming to a moral choice, and to give us a way of establishing and checking out our ethical analysis.

The ethical method presented here gives significant form and consistency to the foundational moral experience and to moral thought and insight. What the wheel model does is call attention to the pluriform possibilities of moral evaluation available to the human mind. This method provides a systematic framework for moral inquiry in private and interpersonal matters as well as in professional, political, and corporate situations. Although there are differences in the way morality is assessed for individuals and for institutions, this model may be accommodated as a methodical framework for moral assessment in both kinds of situations.

The Moral Importance of Circumstances...

The hub, or center, of the method contains a schedule of reality-revealing questions that are designed to uncover the moral situation in all its concrete, unique, empirical complexity. Moral meaning is found not just in principles or theory, although much moral insight is housed there. It speaks to us from the existential order where moral values exist in their actual reality, and where persons and things meet and relate. It is in the experience of real life that all moral intelligence commences. The purpose of the reality-revealing questions is to increase empirical sensitivity and thoroughness. An old axiom states that "there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses," meaning that all intellectualization or abstract knowledge has its source in the data perceived by the senses. Moral knowledge is also grounded in the knowledge of the senses. But for the lazy mind, it is easier to accept generalities than to differentiate within empirical experience where no two things or persons are exactly the same and where meaning-giving relationships are crisscrossing and shifting.

The mind is called to make distinctions when there are real differences, but it can easily shrink from its moral responsibility and prefer false generalization to true and individuated discernment. The following example might clarify this point.

Different groups have been polled on whether they were in favor of homosexual couples adopting children. Approval was uniformly low, running between 6 and 8 percent. Then a story was told about two lesbians who were completing their studies in special education and being trained to teach handicapped children. They considered themselves married and had solemnized their union in a private ceremony with friends. After their studies, they intended to move to another part of the country where it would be legal and feasible for single persons to adopt children. It was their desire to adopt one or two children whose disabilities made them unlikely candidates for adoption and whose lives
would probably be lived mostly in institutions. With the strength of their mutual relationship and with the skills they had in special education, these two women felt they could bring more happiness and development to these children than could be found even in a good institution. As far as their homosexual relationship was concerned, they felt it could either be kept from the children permanently or revealed to them if they reached the possibility of mature understanding.

After the groups knew this story, the approval rate jumped as high as 80 percent. This change indicates that when first asked the question, the respondents were probably thinking of homosexuals stereotypically and in a falsely generalized, unindividuated fashion.

A point of method has to be made here, however you might have judged the morality of this case. Because it is possible to think of actions as generally good or bad, the proper answer to the original question should have been: it depends, or generally yes, or generally no. Of course there are valid and indispensable generalizations such as moral principles which are replete with moral experience and wisdom and from which valuable directives can be deduced (see chapter 11 on moral principles), but we must also be careful to avoid making decisions solely on generalizations because they can be illusory. When the groups polled on this question first responded, they didn’t know what they were talking about because they didn’t know the circumstances that made this case what it was. It is fair to say that both killing and using heroin are generally bad. But this limited generalization allows for individuated differences. Using heroin for pain relief for a terminal cancer patient may be quite moral. Likewise killing in self-defense may be morally good.

It is easier to stereotype than to make distinctions when there are real differences. When that happens the inductive, expository process in ethics is short-circuited, resulting in errors in moral judgment. The problem is heightened by the fact that we are born into a moral universe where pat answers to most moral questions are solidly enconced in our culture. They seem as fixed and eternal as the starry skies above... and as self-evident. But that which is thought to be self-evident usually goes uninvestigated and becomes immune to challenge. Questions go unasked, problems are unsuspected, and growth into the unfolding mystery of humanness is impeded. These are the reasons why the reality-revealing questions in the hub of the wheel-model are really and graphically central. Without a fundamental devotion to questioning, ethics settles for figments or surface impressions and loses contact with moral reality.

The point of ethics we are making is that "human actions are good or bad according to the circumstances," as the philosopher Thomas Aquinas observed long ago. The center of the wheel model represents
the inductive phase of ethics in which we search for the relevant circumstances. This phase is often avoided in practice and slighted in theory; also, it must not be confused with ethical relativism or with a flaccid and normless “situation ethics.” Because circumstances are always changing or are always different does not mean that there is no solid ground in ethics. What it does mean is that one is always more sensitive to the unique moral reality of every case.

Certain circumstances, of course, might not at times affect the morality of an action. Whether you are robbed on a Tuesday or a Wednesday would probably make no real moral difference. Such circumstances may be quite incidental and have little or no effect on the moral status of the behavior in question. But not all circumstances are such. In fact there are circumstances that constitute the moral reality that is being judged. Killing as the only alternative in self-defense is not the same morally as killing while robbing. The circumstances are different and, so too, the morality of the actions. Moral judgment is circumstantial in the true sense of the word: moral judgment always stands within the web of a particular context. You cannot make a moral judgment if you do not know the circumstances that specify and give an action its moral meaning, any more than a judge could decide a case without hearing its circumstances. The reality-revealing questions in the center of the wheel model do just that: they direct us to the morally relevant circumstances.

The Temptation to Taboo...

Actually, this insight concerning the importance of moral circumstances is the fruit of common sense, and most people recognize it and live and judge accordingly. However, what we might call the taboo mindset is hostile to it. While granting that most things are right or wrong according to their circumstances, the moral tabooist holds that certain actions are wrong regardless of the circumstances. These actions are wrong solely because they are forbidden. This moral mindset can be found in people who have considered as wrong, regardless of the circumstances, such things as gambling, contraceptive intercourse, the use of condoms to help prevent the spread of AIDS, remarriage after divorce, interracial marriage, consumption of alcoholic beverages, conscientious objection to civil authority, and a thousand other things. If they judged that all these things were likely to be bad precisely because of the circumstances that attend them, then we might agree or disagree with their assessment of the circumstances, but we could not fault their ethical method. The error in method arises from proclaiming certain activity wrong with no perceived need to consult the circumstances that undergird and constitute moral meaning.

This tendency to judge preter-circumstantially is especially typical
of children. Psychologist Jean Piaget has pointed out that young children do not evaluate intentions and other circumstances in their value judgments. A type of action has a fixed meaning regardless of the circumstances, to use the language of taboo. Thus a very young child will not see any moral difference in breaking a cup accidentally or out of spite. The cup got broken and that is all that really counts. As a child matures, or, we might better say, if the child matures, he or she sees the essential difference circumstances make.

Jean-Paul Sartre, with his existentialist’s aversion both to false generalization and to the lack of specific awareness, can be instructive here. Sartre has said that the greatest evil of which we are capable is to treat as abstract that which is concrete. If we blur unique persons and situations into ill-fitting, abstract categories, or, if we do not seek the empirical specifics of every case, we fall under his accusation. Moral significance is found in concrete situations and actual persons.

If human nature is conceived of as a blueprint from which every moral conclusion can be deduced or as a normative ideal against which every moral conclusion can be judged (and thus judged uncontextually), then there is the likelihood that a particular notion and understanding of human nature is being used for a number of untested assumptions about what does or does not befit persons. For example, it has been argued that a number of categories of human behavior are absolutely and always wrong (such as war, homosexuality, mercy death, capital punishment, nonmarital sex, medical experimentation on humans and animals, abortion, in vitro fertilization, or revealing secrets) because they are incompatible with human nature or, at least, with a particular view and interpretation of human nature. Actually it might be true that all these things are wrong in every imaginable case. However, it would not be because an intuitive insight into human nature revealed their immorality. No abstract idea of “human nature” or anything else dispenses you as a morally responsible human being from the task of searching out and assessing the meaning-giving circumstances of any moral problem. In other words, no human behavior can be judged uncontextually and outside of its actual relationships.

It is possible to say that certain things are generally wrong, and when fully described, they may be seen as so negative and neglectful of creative alternatives that no circumstance could be imagined in which they might be justified. A few examples would be terrorism, genocide, rape, and child abuse. However, things cannot be proved wrong by direct intuition into their radical incompatibility with human nature. They can be shown wrong only by examining all the relevant data of a situation, data that include alternatives, foreseeable effects, motives, consequences, and all other morally meaningful circumstances.

The reality-revealing questions, however, are not of the sort that
mark scientific procedure. The moral is unique and the approach to it cannot be determined by scientific method alone, as the ethical theories of positivism and naturalism insist.

In his book *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Bernard Lonergan writes:

In the ideal detective story the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal. He may advert to each clue as it arises. He needs no further clues to solve the mystery. Yet he can remain in the dark for the simple reason that reaching the solution is not the mere apprehension of any clue, nor the mere memory of all, but a quite distinct activity of organizing intelligence that places the full set of clues in a unique explanatory perspective.

Someone seeking moral understanding is comparable to a detective. This person seeks the “explanatory perspective” that can be found amid the complexities of the case. The reality-revealing questions are geared to make sure that we will have “the full set of clues” without which moral judgment is crippled.

Of its essence, ethics involves us in creative imagination, affective appreciations, faith, insights mediated through tragedy and comedy, and full recognition of the social roots of knowing (as illustrated by the spokes of the wheel model). It is the fully informed, questing and questioning mind that achieves discernment. The goal of ethics is moral insight. The failure of erroneous ethics is incompleteness at the level of empirical inquiry. Morality is based on reality, and if we have not probed the real with zealous questions, our conclusions will be realistic only by accident.

*A Note of Caution: Paradox and Moral Modesty*...

In stressing the purpose of the hub of the wheel model and the need for energetic questioning in the pursuit of moral truth, we must also stress the real possibility that we may not always arrive at perfect moral clarity and agreement. Those who would study ethics must be modest before they can be wise. Moral problems are often complex and ambiguous. Only those who know their limits can be trusted. Simplicity often eludes us. Thus modesty is especially important in ethics and whoever would think ethically must be sensitive to the notion of paradox.

An uncontrolled passion to get everything squared away is a hazard in ethics. Frequently we are left with perceptions that are both true and contradictory. Our sense of hope and our sense of tragedy might convincingly point in opposite directions, and yet we know that we cannot negate either appreciation. Sometimes we will see opposite conclusions or solutions to moral quandaries as reasonable. Sometimes in medical ethics, for example, solution A and its opposite, solution B, might both seem reasonable and morally defensible. Aristotle was wise in saying
that in moral matters we should look for only as much certitude as is available. It may be hard to rest with such a situation, but sometimes we can do no more. Those who look to ethics for a neat code of do's and don'ts will be disconcerted by moral ambiguity and paradox. The desire to escape from the burden of having to decide when troubled by doubt and confusion is understandable. We must always remember that the challenge of moral responsibility is never lacking in human affairs, a challenge that may not be easy.

The undergirding epistemology (theory of knowledge) in ethics must be humble, since arrogance is a blinding force. It would be arrogant to feel that we can always achieve perfect moral insight. Given the excessive certitudes that many folks have about moral questions, we need to be attentive to the need for moral modesty.