The Reality-revealing Questions

Good ethics is characterized by a zeal for knowing what one is talking about. Asking the right questions is as essential as remembering that unasked questions are the source of most moral mischief. The greatest achievable completeness is the goal of the method used here. "The ethical world," observed the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, "is never given; it is forever in the making." To be mentally alert to moral truth, then, is to be vigilant in observing the ethical world in the making. The questions in the hub of the wheel might appear as simple and obvious but they are of extreme ethical importance. The annals of human moral discourse would indicate that the obvious is easily missed. How do we know moral truth?
What? and the First Cognitive Contact...

Ethics begins with the question what, a question that is often bypassed or neglected in much moral debate. In asking the question what, our aim is to uncover the facts that lie beneath figments and arbitrarily imposed meanings that we give to things or that we inherit from society.

The word “what” may seem too ungainly, since it could be stretched to include all the other questions in the center of the wheel model. We do not use it that way here, even though it can be seen as a kind of umbrella question that will be filled out as we answer the others. What fixes attention on the primary data (physical, psychological, systemic) by which we make our first cognitive contact with a subject or case. All knowledge is a process, but the process does not begin until we have some initial picturing, some characterization or grasp of what it is that we must judge. After attaining our first cognitive contact with moral reality, we have to move on to seek to know this reality in greater depth and breadth, but, at least, if we have been initially successful, we will know what we are talking about — we will have a solid first impression — as we set out, and will not be sidetracked from the start.

Moral judgment is about what befits or does not befit the personal situation as it really is. If our judgment of the facts is skewed, the brilliance of subsequent discussion and analysis will be misdirected. The creative ethical mind is always well informed.

Many, if not most, ethical debates result from ignorance of what is being discussed. Some examples will help make the point. A good deal of discussion of capitalism and socialism is maimed from the start by failure to identify what the terms mean. In much that is said about capitalism, according to Professor Robert L. Heilbroner, the explicit assumption is that the United States is the most typical capitalist nation. But, as Heilbroner asks, is the United States the best realization of capitalism? “Could we not argue that ‘pure’ capitalism would be best exemplified by the economic, political, and social institutions of nations such as Denmark or Norway or New Zealand?” Other characteristics such as individual rights and free competition without government intervention may be implied by one’s understanding of capitalism. Our assumptions affect all subsequent analysis of its political, economic, and moral dimensions.

We now know that the development of socialism takes shape in divergent ways. The best example of socialism may be found in Sweden, not in the Soviet Union. The same is true of capitalism — and the two are not necessarily antithetical. Clearly, many critics of capitalism and socialism have been prejudiced from the start in their assessment of what they were talking about. Good moral evaluation (or any evaluation) would not easily follow such an initial misconcep-
tion. However, not all conclusions would automatically be wrong; but the odds are poor. From false premises, anything can follow: *ex falso sequitur quidlibet.*

On the subject of homosexuality, we find serious definitional problems and well established misconceptions at the level of *what.* What we presume it to be, whether something abnormal and deviant or a legitimate sexual alternative, affects our attitude and behavior. Some cultures are very tolerant of homosexuality and treat it as a harmless variation within the richness of human sexuality. Much of the Western culture to which we are heirs is considerably more negative or even phobic. The *what* of homosexuality demands much more research than many people would like to admit. It always seems easier to accept socially conditioned attitudes (erroneous or not) than to seek the truth, especially when these attitudes enjoy prestigious auspices. A major task of good ethics is to know *what* we are talking about and to probe as much as is possible beyond mere cultural conditioning.

Here is another example of how an initial definition can be controlling. The Fellows of the Drug Abuse Council, according to the *Hastings Center Report,* have expressed concern about the consequences in the criminal justice systems of defining drug addiction as a sickness: “drug addiction is defined as a sickness and through the use of criminal sanctions drug users are channeled involuntarily into treatment where the label ‘rehabilitation’ masks the danger of controlling behavior.” The social danger here is even broader than that realized in the penal system. Chemical dependencies of various sorts represent a broad genus and proceed from a variety of causes. If they are defined at the outset as “sickness” and if all responses to them are seen as “medicine,” “cure,” or “rehabilitation,” then we are starting out in a blur. Facts are distorted from the first. Similarly, there is a broad range of possible responses to the problem meriting very different evaluations. Some involve involuntary behavioral modification of the sort that seems not to distinguish between persons and animals. In ethics, the question *what?* presses us to make distinctions when there are differences and to do so from the beginning. Otherwise, subsequent distinctions may be ineffectual.

The definition of death poses problems at the level of *what.* Medically, the situation has been complicated by the discovery that death is not a moment but a process. Some organs may die while others live, and there are differences between brain death and organ death. At what point in the process do we declare that death has come to a person? Beyond these more mechanical questions of death detection, there are deeper questions about what death is. Is it an anomaly to be resisted and fought at all costs? Or is it something natural, like birth, to be accepted on its own terms? C. G. Jung observed: “We grant goal and
purpose to the ascent of life, why not to the descent? The birth of a human being is pregnant with meaning, why not death?” How we characterize the what of death will condition our judgments about it.

Another example, what one defines war to be is ethically critical. Is it merely another act of statecraft, an extension of politics into armed conflict, and a policy option that stands on equal footing with peaceful alternatives? Or is it really the collapse of human statecraft and reasonableness, a retreat from distinctively human modes of communication and conflict-resolution? How or whether one justifies war will intimately relate to how one has initially defined what war is. Here, as in all issues, what explores the truthfulness of our presuppositions and helps us to be as objective as possible. Too frequently there are judgments (negative or positive) inherent within our definitions. The question what? should give us a perspective on the circumstances and not prejudice them.

The what? question points to our power to define reality. We can define reality honestly or we can use our definition as a mask. Defining thousands of civilian deaths in war as “collateral damage” covers over horror and havoc with a term that sounds clinically clean. Our power to define is the beginning of ethical method and moral truth. This is the significance of the what? question.

To say that mercy death and abortion are murder is to direct attention away from definition to judgment. Some words such as “murder,” specify a set of circumstances (in this case, a negative set). Other words, such as “homicide,” give perspective without morally judging. Thus we can speak of “justifiable homicide” but not of “justifiable murder.” “Murder” has a built-in moral judgment and that judgment is negative. It says that this kind of killing is wrong. Most people say that abortion to save the life of a woman is morally justifiable. Thus, to say initially that abortion is murder prejudices all cases of abortion and misses the “circumstantiality” of ethics.

G.K. Chesterton said that definitions fight fairly, and that is true. The what? question is trying to start us off in a promising direction by defining exactly what it is that we are about. If our initial definition is too general, it will be too vague and mean very little. But if it is too specific and restrictive, it may fail to be objective; it will prejudice the issue and supplant all the other reality-revealing questions by rendering them pointless. If you say that “truth telling” is always morally good, you ignore situations where truth telling would violate a confidence. “Truth telling,” unlike the word “murder,” is morally neutral. We need to know more of the circumstances to know what moral judgment of it is in order. The what? question must never preclude other morally revealing circumstances. This question stands at the beginning, not the end, of the expository phase of ethics. No fixed moral meaning can be
established until all the other circumstances have been judged in their relationship to one another.

It should be noted that sometimes the what will reveal more that is morally suggestive than at other times. Without checking on all circumstances we cannot know whether abortion or hastening the dying process is right or wrong, but certainly both do alert moral consciousness more so than eating or whistling would. Having answered what does not mean we know the final moral verdict (unless we have answered it in such a way as to prejudge the case). However morally suggestive the first-stage answers are, the true moral meaning will emerge only when all the questions of the hub are asked and all the circumstances accounted for, as far as that is possible. It is not, of course, completely possible. We will never know exhaustively and comprehensively what we are talking about, for the process of human knowing is never terminated in total fulfillment. Modesty, even when we have done our best, is always in order. As we shall see in chapter 11, universally applicable and absolute practical principles are not to be anticipated.

Why? and How? or Ends and Means...
All the questions in this model for doing ethics are diagnostic tools, seeking out moral meaning and morally relevant information. Why? and How? point to rich areas of moral meaning. Your motive and the manner in which you go about doing something are quite significant in human affairs, as every devotee of detective stories knows. The
questions *why?* and *how?* focus upon these important aspects of moral inquiry. The question *why?* concentrates on the *ends* (the motive, the purpose, the goal) that you have in mind and the question *how?* on the *means* that you use to achieve your goal; *how* focuses on the manner, the mode or the way, you go about doing something.

*Why* and *how* are obviously important to moral inquiry. Two people are rushing into an empty burning house and removing crystal, china, silver, and furniture. One is doing it for personal enrichment, the other to salvage valuables for the absent owner. The *what* is the same for both. The *why* (motive) makes one a friend and the other a thief.

The importance of *how* is equally clear. Supporting one’s family by selling cocaine combines a good *why* with a terrible *how*.

As simple and obvious as they may look, *why* and *how* are the gateway to an enormous amount of confusion regarding ends and means. It is a prevalent popular error among nations, institutions, and private persons to believe that if the intention or end is good, the means to that end are thereby good. Anyone who has experienced the harm done by well-intentioned people should wince at this idea. And yet, because motivation is so important, it is easy to think that a good end (motive) permits whatever means you use to achieve it, as the Iran-Contra affair would attest. In that case, people thought they were serving the nation (their *why*, end, motive) but they did so by deceiving Congress and destroying evidence (their *how*, means). The danger in this idea is that lofty ends can be a heady wine. Indeed, all-enticing ends can have a maniacal potential to cover over many sordid means that are deemed necessary along the road to their accomplishment. The widespread, documented stories of torture in a number of nations of the world are all set against a backdrop of unimpeachably noble goals that these nations are pursuing. Whether one’s end is “to remain profitable” or “to promote the revolution of the proletariat” or “to make the world safe for democracy” or “to make love” — all laudable ends — the means used and the manner of proceeding in the pursuit of those ends are often unambiguously outrageous. In effect, an end conceived as noble and good can even obscure one’s vision of *what* is really being done. If the end is seen also as having a sacred dimension (as is regularly the case in nationalistic matters or with religious groups), it can be completely intoxicating.

The importance of means is emphasized by the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev in his work *The Destiny of Man*:

Man’s moral dignity and freedom are determined not by the purpose to which he subordinates his life but by the source from which his moral life and activity spring. It may actually be said that in a sense “the means” which a man uses are far more important than “the ends” which he pursues, for they express more truly what his spirit is. If a man strives for freedom by means of tyranny, for
love by means of hatred, for brotherhood by means of dissension, for truth by means of falsity, his lofty aim is not likely to make our judgment of him more lenient.

**Confusing Ends and Means...**

Apart from whether the means are more important than the ends, another problem occurs with the tendency to confuse ends and means. That which is a means can readily slip over into the status of an end. A job or a profession should be a means to survival and to personal fulfillment. But it can become the all-consuming end of one's existence, so that family, health, and simple relaxation are completely subordinated — even life itself can be cut short as many premature deaths would seem to indicate. Absorption in the means installs them into a primal position so that you forget your true end. The popular term "workaholic" describes someone who has become addicted to means-made-end.

A similar observation can be made regarding the acquisition of wealth, a quite legitimate means to happiness and well-being. But when wealth becomes an end, persons under its sway will become obsessed with it and forfeit both well-being and happiness. A sure sign of wealth's shift from means to end is the inability to know when enough is enough. Some people die from overworking for wealth and have never taken the time to be happy or to enjoy the wealth they had already accumulated.

There is a fundamental irrationality in transmuting means into ends. When means are absolutized, the originally desired ends are lost along with other human values and are, perhaps, not even missed. The avowed purpose for development and accumulation of armaments is to bring peace and security through the power of deterrence. But there is a fatal flaw in equating arms and safety, and one of drastic global proportions when equating the proliferation of nuclear weapons and security. In his book *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Schell argues insightfully about the incongruity of nuclear deterrence when he says:

If the virtue of the deterrence policy lies in its acceptance of the basic fact of life in the nuclear world — that a holocaust will bring annihilation to both sides, and possibly the extinction of man as well — its defect lies in the strategic construct that it erects on the foundation of that fact. For if we try to guarantee our safety by threatening ourselves with doom, then we have to mean the threat; but if we mean it, then we are actually planning to do, in some circumstance or other, that which we categorically must never do and are supposedly trying to prevent — namely, extinguish ourselves. This is the circularity at the core of the nuclear-deterrence doctrine; we seek to avoid our self-extinction by threatening to perform the act. According to this logic, it is almost as though if we stopped threatening ourselves with extinction, then extinction would occur.
Schell's criticism relates to the confusion regarding ends and means. The only way security will be fully achieved is when there are no longer any human beings. In this case the means literally become the end!

If arms breed fear and thus more conflict and then more arms and more fear, then armaments are means run wild, cut loose from the desired ends. They debilitate the economy and distract from necessary expenditures for other vital programs (including, ironically, those for nuclear waste) and take away from the overall power of a nation. By reaching genocidal proportions, nuclear armaments cannot be rationally used since they would do more harm than good. In effect, the arms race makes its participants (and the citizens of the whole world) less powerful and less secure. The end was security and that is increasingly threatened while the means go roaring on.

By pointing in different directions from one another, ends and means form part of our holistic ethical method and ought not be confused. Yet they are interrelated in such a way that it is virtually impossible to discuss one without reference to the other. “One of the main problems of ethics,” Berdyaev notes, “is to overcome the dualism between means and ends, and make the means more and more conformable to ends.” However, it may not always be possible to have harmony between our ends and means. We may have to be harsh or, in an extreme situation, violent in defense of justice, integrity, and peace. But such a tragic necessity, like war, must summon us pressingly to create conditions that require less drastic remedies. Normalizing means that are discordant with our ends or treating them as part of the nature of things is morally deviate. The purpose, as Berdyaev stressed, is to make the means compatible with the ends.

In one sense then, why is the most obviously important ethical question, but it must not be allowed to overshadow other important aspects of the real moral situation. One must be cautioned against the misconceived and ethically misleading question: Does the end justify the means? An end does not justify a means any more than does a means justify an end. To choose a morally good end does not give one the right to use any means to accomplish that end. Ends and means must be judged in relational tension to one another and to all the other essential circumstances. Only after we have completed every question within the wheel model will we have shown all the dimensions that have to be considered in order to know what a particular situation means morally. The ends and means will be but two of the many elements that constitute the moral significance of the case to be judged. To ask if the end justifies the means really makes no more sense than to ask if the end justifies the effects or the alternatives. In moral matters, insight is achieved when we see how all the circumstances relate to one another — not just the ends and means.
A good *why* does not assure that all is well. The importance of the *why?* question is seen also when, for example, that which seems to be a gift at the *what* level becomes a bribe when the *why* is answered. That which sounds and looks like love at the *what* level might be seen as exploitation when the *why* is known. At the same time, that which may seem awkward and unpromising at the *what* level may be appreciated as delicately and exquisitely human when the intentions are known. What looks like a mercy death might be a murder when we know *why* it was done. No ethics can be done without an appreciation of the human meaning of motive, the reason or reasons *why* someone acts.

*Do We Know Why We Do Anything?...*

Motive is as subtle and complex as it is influential. There is never just one reason *why* we do anything; nor do we fully know all the motivational sources of our actions. Furthermore, the problem of understanding motive is tied in to the problem of understanding freedom, which lies somewhere between complete determinism and exaggerated limitlessness. Psychological freedom is conditioned by many factors: by our perceptions, by our emotions and moods, by our physiological needs and genetic makeup, and by other environmental and social forces that act upon us. There are times when freedom is temporarily reduced to nothing by mental illness, drug abuse, or even by our passions and fears. Apart from certain predispositions or pre-determinations, there are contradictory motivational elements in our behavior. Egoistic and instinctive motives can be found operating in tandem with generous and highly idealistic ones. *Why* we act is a pluralistic mystery not entirely penetrable.

For all its mystery and complexity, a healthy psyche has a power for ordering and fusing its intentions into deliberate meaningful action. Dominant motives can operate and give form to our intentionality; thus moral assessment is possible and fitting. A person who steals, or murders, or pushes drugs, or the businessperson engaged in "crime in the suites," may be so controlled by neurotic, unfree factors as to merit psychiatric judgment. Or this person may be discernibly free to the extent that the moral consideration of motives is in order. The working assumption of our society is that persons who are basically mentally healthy have some freedom and some moral responsibility.

Motive refers to an internal psychological reality that has impact on the external world. Sometimes this impact is obvious, sometimes less so. Motive is more than a purely internal matter and more than an efficient, prodding cause that gets actions going. It is a formal cause that gives behavior shape and distinctively human consistency. The effects
of human actions are personal and not just physical. Because they take place not among interacting objects but among interrelating persons, they are geared to building or disrupting community. As persons grow and develop in what we have called the foundational moral experience (the source of all morally good motivation), community also develops. This developing unity and harmony of human life are sustained by respect, justice, and improving modalities of friendship. Community is something qualitatively better than coexistence. Actions that are only externally good, though less disruptive and not without helpful effect, will not humanize persons into communitarian life. Defects at the foundational level of caring and respect could only be temporarily concealed and only temporarily constructive.

The assessment of motive is not just of introspective importance. Why something is done is partially but essentially constitutive of what is done. Motives that may seem the same when we classify them will always be a distinct manifestation of a person’s moral process. Behavior infected with sexism, racism, favoritism, or elitism will gradually poison any workplace or professional or social setting. Good managers have to be concerned with moral issues or they will not be effective. In some real sense good morals and good business coincide, as do good medicine and good morals. You can’t treat persons immorally and expect efficiency or productivity. Being moral means treating persons with full respect for what they are worth. There is a practical insight here that is missed by many people in authority. It is even missed by parents who discipline their children in a way that insults them. Such discipline produces only short-term gains.

**Shifting Motives**...

Like the foundational moral experience, motive is processual and not static. The motives that move a young couple in a marriage while they are still under the exuberant spell of early romance will not be the same as the motives that may move them in their cherishing old age. In a true sense, it can be said that no couple stay married for the same reasons they get married. This need not be interpreted cynically. There may be better reasons (motives) for staying married than there were for getting married. Some of the same things done later on in a process may be done from motives that tap deeper and better wellsprings of affection. The external sameness will only be apparent. Process, of course, can also go in reverse. What is begun in fear, as Augustine said, may come to be perfected in love. Or, we could add, what is begun in love might come to be maintained only by fear. Love’s lively beginnings might wither or be atrophied in routine. Many of the same things might be done, but the change in motive (and in the relationship) would be substantial.
There Are Motives, and There Are Motives...

Significant moral reality is revealed in responding to the question why? Motives are important in determining the moral meaning of behavior and can range in their moral quality from the superficial to the heroic. The question why? also directs attention to sincerity in motivation. One who wills the end wills the means necessary to that end. However, good motives can often be the mask of hypocrisy. We all know the popular saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Superficially good motives lack the strength needed for follow-through. Yet they can serve a devious purpose by making us feel that our hearts are in the right place. For example, it is encouraging to hear that people are in favor of racial equality and integration. It is suspicious if they then oppose all the means necessary to that end, such as regulated busing, the use of quota systems where all other avenues to fairness are closed, or reallocation of funds to address the problem vigorously. One who opposes the means necessary to an end opposes the end.

The same applies to the will to have children. If one is not ready for the enormous follow-through, then this desire is unrealistic and merely romantic. Likewise, the avowed desire of business management to be ecologically responsible while not willing to spend the necessary time and money represents a motivational failure. All protestations about one's commitment to good ends are hollow if there is no corresponding commitment to the means necessary to achieve those ends. In Latin, there is a distinction made between volitio (volition) and velleitas (velleity). Volition comes from volo, meaning "I will," and velleitas, from vellem, meaning "I would like." The difference is one between the active indicative and the hypothetical subjunctive. Many apparent volitions are merely velleities. Volition refers to what you really will; velleity, to what you would will if things were more to your liking. Many apparent volitions, from "I love you" to "our corporation is committed to improving the environment," are but pale velleities underneath fervid exteriors.

The question how? is linked to sincerity in motivation not only because it points to the means we use (or fail to use) but also to style, which might at first seem nonessential to moral behavior. This bias is due partly to the fact that concern with style is often associated with superficiality. The superficiality comes not from concern with style but from concern with little else, as is seen in those who stress external image and "public relations" to the neglect of substantial performance. The sham of this approach gives style a bad name.

In the terms of our questioning process here, what you do may be morally promising. Why you are doing it may be heroically noble. But the style may make the action decisively immoral. The Irish story of the man who undertook to inform a woman of her husband's death
provides a blunt illustration. "Are you the widow Murphy?" he asked. "No," she replied. "You are now!" he said and departed. It would be hard to criticize what he was doing and why, but the how was an epic of insensitivity. The way people break news (their style) may, like the way they make love, be of the essence. The way people disagree or correct, or the way they reprimand and discipline a young child may make their behavior humanizing or destructive and objectionable. Style is often the heart of diplomacy. A good diplomat is one who knows that being right is not enough, that having military and economic power is not always persuasive, since how you communicate and deal often gives the definitive tilt to negotiations. It shows people what value you put on them. This holds also for persons in managerial positions.

The reason for the importance of style is that it bodies forth the inclinations of the heart. A nation that goes about doing good violently will not be perceived as peaceful in its intent whatever its ideological protestations. Help given arrogantly to poor nations will produce adverse reactions, however needed the help may be. Aid that insults will disrupt. The how is intimately related to the why because how you do something tells much of why you are doing it. The how can strip away the avowed motive and show the real one because how reflects the foundational moral experience of our concern for persons and serves as an index of its development. The insensitive may only see what you are doing and only hear your expressed motivation, but the sensitive will detect your deepest spirit in the how of what you do. The importance of how relates to the above-mentioned fact that interaction among persons is not merely physical but rather a community-building or community-disrupting activity. The sensitivity that specifies our style or mode of acting can easily have greater impact on community than what we do. Good leaders know this. Indeed, this insight has manifold applications for physicians, teachers, managers, administrators, and others whose work is built on relationships with people.

Who? The Question of Person...
The question who? alerts us to the following ethical realities:

- What is right for one person may be wrong for another.
- What is right for a person now may be wrong for the same person at another time.
- In ethical assessment, some persons are worth more than others.
- No two persons are the same.
- Persons are social by nature, not by choice.

To miss the truth of any of these propositions, something that often happens, is to be liable to ethical confusion. Ethics, which is based
on the foundational moral experience of the value of persons and their environment, must be conceived of as a work of knowing what befits persons as they really are in all their relational, social, and historical uniqueness. A person is not just an element among elements or a circumstance among circumstances. The question who? directs us to the centrality of persons.

Like all life, personal life is a process of becoming. A human being is not born with personhood in the way it can be said that one is born with a heart and limbs. These physical elements can grow in size, but in essence they can only be what they are from the beginning. It is not so with persons; they can become more fully what they are. Personal essence is not a static but a dynamic quality expanding life potential. Growth can also be reversed; personal life can become less personal and human than it was. The word "depersonalized" suggests that.

There are two ways in which personhood can essentially grow: psychologically and morally. Psychological growth refers to the development of those emotional and mental capacities that we associate with persons and not with mere animals. Among other qualities, persons are distinguished by their capacity to sympathize, to endure, to share joy and sorrow, to imagine, to create, to be amused, to laugh, to care, and to love unselfishly. Moral growth presupposes some psychological growth but it refers specifically to the development of human values and character. Moral decisions make us virtuous, or heroic, or just, or they make us exploiters, or liars, or villains, or a little bit of each. Moral decisions make us what we are as persons. They flesh out human possi-
bilities and carve the shape of our personhood. Moral growth, then, is the gradual fulfillment of personal essence.

Both psychological and moral growth occur in the context of interaction with others. The who cannot be understood apart from its sociality. And since no two social matrices are identical, there is something unique in every culture and in the impact that a culture has on every individual. Thus, it is easy to see the reasons for the propositions that open this section on the question who? That which is moral befits and enhances the humanization of persons as they are, and in many significant ways persons are unique and different, especially as their social context and relationships change. What befits one may not be right for another, and what befits a person now may not be good for that same person later. No two persons are the same, nor is any one person the same forever. A doctor who has a hard-nosed policy about “laying it on the line” immediately with all patients who have terminal illnesses will make mistakes. Every who will vary and no uniform policy will meet the needs of each patient. No sensitive ethics will bunch disparate persons under one understanding.

Sensitivity to the who leads to the conclusion that persons are not of univocal value in ethical assessment. Clearly, such a statement is problematic, having an undemocratic, not to say, immoral ring to it. The statement, however, is based on the fact that persons are not just physical or metaphysical entities but are constituted by their relationships with others. For example, in the pressures of a situation of triage where there is not enough medical aid for all the claimants, some are selected while others are left to die. The very young might be treated before the aged, or a surgeon who could save lives in the crisis might be preferred to someone who lacks that skill. Such is triage. In this case, decisions are being made about who is worth more in a relational context.

Similarly, in a case where inadequate medicine cannot save both mother and unborn child in a problem delivery, it may be arguably moral to save the mother by procedures that are fatal to the unborn child. In such a case, a decision is made about which one of the two is more deserving of life. To say that some who’s are, in ethical assessment, worth more than others is to say that moral worth has been decided through ethical evaluation of all the circumstances and not superimposed from without.

We are not contradicting the basic equality of persons in the sense that all persons are alike in having fundamental human rights. What is meant is that persons are judged in the context of their sociality. In neither the triage nor the childbirth example is there an individualistic competition going on about who tops the other in worth. The assessment is relational. Given the relationship of the mother to her other children, she may be judged more deserving of life in this either-or cri-
sis. No human rights can be conceived of outside of reference to other human rights. To do so would be a denial of our intrinsically social nature. The fetus who is sacrificed to save the mother is not morally violated, for it does not come into the world with absolute rights that are unrelated to others. (In the question of early fetuses, there is the unresolvable question of whether you are dealing with a who, a person.) The question who? addresses significant personal reality and the social-relational value of persons as persons.

When? and Where? Questions of Time and Place...

These reality-revealing questions may turn up essential and specifying circumstances. Cleaning a shotgun might easily be defensible at the level of what, why, how, and who, but if it is being done at the back of a crowded bus, the where becomes decisive. Making love in public is significant at the level of where, given the intimacy and privacy that most people in most cultures associate with sexual exchange. In other cases, however, where something occurs may have little or no moral import.

When something is done may be important especially if the timing shows an awareness or unawareness of process. The desire to impose democratic forms on countries that are not prepared for them shows an inability to assess the dimension of time or readiness. Of course, an alleged concern for the proper and due time might represent a refusal to meet the moral demands of a situation. In this sense, justice delayed might be justice denied. For example, some are still saying that
the implications of the Constitution of the United States are not yet applicable to African Americans or to women.

Breaking the news to a patient about her condition as terminally ill requires exquisite attention to the *when* question. How much news should be given and when and how? Here we become aware of the intuitive dimension of ethical judgment. Not all of ethics can be put into tidy rules. The intuitive judgment of the sensitized conscience will be called upon to discern what the person involved may bear and when she may bear it. Ethics can only point out the importance of recognizing that different persons in different circumstances demand "special handling" and "personalized" care. There isn't always a guideline to discover the right *when* and the right *how* or *where*.

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**The Link with the Future:**

*The Question of Foreseeable Effects...*

David Ben-Gurion sagely said that there are no experts on the future. Both theory and history confirm his observation. His insight also points to a problem in ethics. The future is unavoidably present in moral action. Our decisions go beyond present time and space. Sometimes the effects of certain decisions are felt for centuries. But in subtle ways all actions reach out beyond the present and enter into the future. When we say that human actions are right or wrong according to the circumstances, we face the fact that some of those circumstances that decide moral behavior are in the future. Morality is based on reality, and the reality of our moral conduct has future implications. Moral
responsibility requires that our knowledge follow the impact of our behavior as far as possible. Personal responsibility must extend to the full reality of what we are about. To limit our responsibility to the present is morally unrealistic and ethically incomplete.

Consequences, or foreseeable effects, are of major significance in ethics. In fact, they are so intrinsic to moral meaning that there is an ethical theory called "consequentialism," which makes consequences all important. In this view, actions are right or wrong primarily or exclusively according to the intended consequences. Medical experiments that are done without attention to the informed consent of the subjects might produce valuable medical information, but they are immoral for other reasons. Effects are not enough. The theory of consequentialism is excessive because there are other morally important circumstances to which the reality-revealing questions refer us. One reason the neutral term "foreseeable effects" is preferred here is to avoid any confusion with this inadequate theory of consequentialism that, in effect, shrinks moral reality.

Consequences are a focal point of essential moral meaning. Sometimes this is obvious, as when we irresponsibly allow a very drunk person to drive a car. At other times, it is only by hindsight that we know the morally critical meaning of effects, as was the case with the Challenger tragedy in January of 1986.

When we act (by deliberate commission or omission), we commit our initiative to the future. We may act again and, if fortunate, repair harm or enhance good, but the danger is that when choices become a practice, for an individual or for a society, there arises a momentum that is potentially immune to reflection and evaluation. Choices having become practices can run away with us. Good ethics must allow for a contemplative pause. In one way, the effects of our actions are out of control as soon as we act. We can go after those effects with other actions, but the effects, unlike faulty cars, are not subject to recall. Human action is an amalgam of power and impotence. There is the power to touch and shape the future through the consequences of our acts and, simultaneously, the impotence to control those consequences. Hence the centrality of concern for consequences in ethics.

Our sense of the future is undergoing a qualitative change in modern times. In the past, as Professor Hans Jonas writes, "The good and evil about which action had to care lay close to the act, either in the praxis itself or in its immediate reach, and were not a matter for remote planning. ... The long run of consequences beyond was left to chance, fate or providence. Ethics accordingly was of the here and now." Jonas notes that the maxims that came to us from the ethical systems of the past involved others who were "sharers of a common
present.” Thus: “Love thy neighbor as thyself”; “Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you”; “Treat others as ends, never as means.” In all these, the ethical universe is composed of contemporaries and the horizon of the future is constricted. Now, with nature no longer immune in its immensity as it was previously, our technology can destroy the ingredients for future life. Suddenly, posterity is the neighbor whom we must love as ourselves if the future is to have a chance. Interhuman responsibility has swollen to planetary size and reaches thousands of years into the future. Never before has the present tense had the ability to preclude the future, and never before, therefore, has moral responsibility for consequences been of such proportions. Never before have not-yet-existing persons and their environment featured so prominently in our ethics. Because the future is an extension of our natural sociality, we must be heedful of ethical concern for effects.

The Problem of Unwanted Effects...
The effects of technology touch upon the physical possibilities of life, and they can often change our attitudes and the way we value ourselves and others. For example, the process of genetic purification must go on, but it will go on humanly only if we are morally sensitive to the effects it will have on our sense of acceptable normality. In a genetically purer world, how will we feel about those who slip through our clinical dragnet? How will we cope with imperfections for which science has no cure? How much wiser will we be in coping with tragedy and inevitable limits, and especially with the ultimate limit of death? With moral sensitivity, science must go forward into the expanding range of effects. And, at times, again with sensitivity to foreseeable effects, science and technology must hold back, brake their momentum, and accept a reflective moratorium. A can-do-must-do mentality, for all its prestige and power, must be seen as what it really is: mindless. We are more responsible for more effects, and for more lasting effects, than we used to be. This new moral fact of life must be faced openly and ethically.

The effects that flow from our activity may be many, varied, and not all desirable. Some, in fact, may be positively disturbing and undesired. Thus ethics must also address the problem of unwanted effects. The decision to remove a cancerous uterus early in a planned and desired pregnancy is an example of wanted and unwanted effects stemming from the same action. The decision to give a strong painkiller to a patient is another example of mixed effects presenting a moral dilemma. The physician might know that the painkiller will shorten life as it eases pain. A business that is planning some new system of automation looks ahead to the good effects of improved productivity and better compet-
itive standing, but also faces the undesirable effect of laying off a large number of faithful, long-term workers.

The question that arises is whether we have moral responsibility for the negative or bad effects of our actions. The answer, of course, relates to foreseeable effects that are part of our moral responsibility. Human actions are good or bad according to the circumstances, and effects (both wanted and unwanted, long-term and short-term) are among those circumstances. They have to be weighed in relation to all the other circumstances. It might be necessary for the factory to automate in order to stay competitive, but moral imagination must function and provide new opportunities, in cooperation with the government, for the displaced workers. It is not enough to look only at the competition-related effects and dump the workers as though they were waste material. That would be to refuse to treat persons as persons and that is the essence of all immorality and injustice.

*Effects and the Principle of Proportionality…*

Something further is illustrated here about the nature of ethics. Ethics must weigh and balance. Because human behavior finds itself amid values and disvalues, the morally good choice is the one that is the most humanly valuable. The reality-revealing question concerning foreseeable effects makes us face the delicate challenge of balancing goods and bads. When the bads are considerable, we have to judge whether the goods are proportionately greater. If the good effects are proportionately greater, they may outweigh the unavoidably unwanted elements entailed in our behavior. Operating here is the *principle of proportionality*. In one sense, it may be said to be the master principle in ethics because ethics is always weighing and balancing values and disvalues to come to the most morally valuable choice in a complex world. There are always likely to be disvalues in the foreseeable effects of human choices and a judgment that value proportionately outweighs disvalue is not uncommon in a moral decision.

Again, a high number of good effects does not justify any kind of causal action. Insensitively pressuring workers to get more productivity may have the desired short-term effects, but it is still immoral and likely to be counterproductive in the long run. Treating persons immorally is ultimately not only wrong, but inefficient.

There must always be the proportionate weighing of values and disvalues in moral discourse. The whole of ethical method must be involved. All the essential circumstances, not just the effects, are to be weighed and balanced in a comparative judgment. The alternatives (which we discuss next) are important especially when considerable disvalue is involved and when serious disharmony seems to exist between short- and long-term effects.
An Example...

An affirmative action quota system, used to establish a balance in society, is a case where a comparative judgment must be made between value and disvalue, and between long- and short-term effects. When a medical school is required by law to admit a certain percentage of women and minorities, specific desirable effects are envisioned. An ingrained and unjust pattern of white male monopoly is being corrected. But there is a marked disvalue involved and some short-term inequality. As a result of the quota system, some nonminorities who would have gotten into that school will not. A quota system modifies admission practices. Temporary preferential advantages are used to correct social injustices that have been perpetuated over the years and to create long-term effects that introduce greater moral sensitivity.

The essential moral question here is the following: Is the overall good done by this quota system proportionate to the harm it does to some individuals? The whole ethical method needs to be included when answering that question, and we must remember that it is not just a matter of weighing the immediate good and harmful effects. As a brief illustration and not an exhaustive study, we would begin the argument this way: At the foundational level of ethics it could be pointed out that we are social beings by nature, not by convenience or contract. The foundational moral experience of (1) the value of self; (2) the value of all others, and (3) the connection between 1 and 2 sets the stage for such a discussion.

Justice fills out the minimal implications of the foundational moral experience. We are not atomistically segregated individuals who only owe interpersonal debts (individual justice). We also owe debts to the social whole (social justice) and may have to sacrifice equality temporarily to bring social fairness. We are constitutionally, not optionally, committed to the common good. That commitment may have to be expressed in the sacrifice of one’s life, as in the case of collective self-defense, or in the surrender of one’s property in eminent domain, or in the surrender of some job or admission opportunities through affirmative action. Social justice may require temporary decisions that are not to the benefit of all. If there can be such a thing as a just war, many would judge it fair though unequal to draft some and not others to fight and die in it.

As to circumstantial analysis of a quota system, one would have to understand first what discrimination is in the United States. All the other reality-revealing questions and evaluative processes would point up aspects of the case. Special attention would be due to the foreseeable effects of allowing things to go on without change, leaving the entrenched white male monopolies in place. Also, the alternatives would be enormously important. Whenever there are undesirable ef-
effects such as temporary corrective inequality, moral imagination must
strain to find alternatives so inequalities can be minimized. An increase
in the number of students attending medical schools along with the
quota system would expand opportunity generally. Temporary correc-
tive inequality may be justified not because the one can be sacrificed
for the many, utilitarian-style, but because social persons may, in the
absence of alternatives, have to yield some of their goods to maintain ba-
sic fairness in human society. If white males do not have a monopoly
of talent, then a white male monopoly stifles a society. Alternatives
should always be pursued to make any inequality unnecessary. But in
the interim of a verified absence of alternatives, short-term unwanted
effects can be morally tolerable. There can be proportionate reason to
impose temporary inequality to achieve balance and to promote the
common good.

What Are the Viable Alternatives?...
In situations where many alternatives are open to us, it is a mournful
fact that our tendency is to see but a few of them and then feel that
these few circumscribe reality. Accordingly our moral decision will be
based on that segment of reality that our semi-atrophied imaginations
allow us to envision. Sloth seems to be at home in most of us, imped-
ing the imaginative powers from discovering moral alternatives. It is to
this problem that the last of the reality-revealing questions is addressed.
If we do not alert ourselves to the question of alternatives, many re-
alistic possibilities will be missed, to our resultant moral detriment.
A rule-of-thumb estimate would be that in a situation where there are fifty existent viable alternatives, we normally perceive only about six of them. Good ethics should press us to realize alternatives and the possibilities open to us.

Not until recently, for instance, has there been any serious commercial interest in alternative energy sources. The sun and wind are nonpolluting and superabundantly present; yet these sources are not being fully developed as alternatives. Among other significant factors (such as environmental and cost), they pose no threat of nuclear accidents like those that have occurred at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Insensitivity to systemic alternatives is a weakness with potentially lethal effects. People rightly complain about the high cost of doctors’ fees. Partly this is because doctors begin their careers deep in debt. Few are able to finance their own medical training. Dr. Uwe Reinhart of Princeton University suggests that we make all medical education free. This would not even constitute a comparatively major government expense but it would guarantee that talent, not wealth, would determine who gets into this important field. It would also eliminate one large argument for high doctors’ fees. Is this a viable alternative? Why? Why not? However we answer these questions, we are doing ethics the way it ought to be done by looking for viable alternatives.

As a species, we have been creative in many areas. Technological and scientific inventions have certainly grown. Inventions have poured out, and the new world that springs from them requires alternate modes of management. A substantial change has occurred in the social and material conditions of the earth, but this change is not reflected in creative managerial and governmental response. Our moral concerns seem to be lagging far behind our technological inventiveness. Several decades ago, General Omar Bradley, chief of staff of the United States Army, alluded to this fact when he said in Boston on November 10, 1948: “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.... Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

There are other areas that show signs of inefficiency and neglected alternatives. Hunger, for example, affects a quarter of the human race, and yet national economies throughout the world are absorbed in developing and deploying kill-power. Swollen military budgets are symbols of despair and imply that security ultimately comes from killing people and not from nourishing them.

Whatever our skills are at the level of inventions, at the level of morals we seem to be lagging behind. The moral world, which involves caring, expressed in justice and love, must always be discovered anew. It involves more than scientific and technological skills. Human
skills need to be developed and moral meaning given to our creative inventiveness. As human beings we must discover alternatives to destruction and create the possibilities of caring and loving. If there is a defect at the level of caring it is that we "moderns" are more advanced in handiwork than in the humanizing sentiments of the heart.

Because the human mind has the capacity to perceive the possible, it has the capacity to perceive alternatives. Human knowledge is distinguished by its ability to know not only what is and was but also by what might be. We are not imprisoned in the regimen of the current state of the real. The human mind has creative freedom to bring more and more of the actual out of the possible. It has been waggishly said that whoever has no alternatives has no problem. In some ways, life would be simplified if there were only one choice. But we live in a process of expanding alternatives because we live in a process of change and development. Not only is the world unfolding in its material possibilities, but our consciousness of what it is and what it can be is unfolding with it. Reality is broader for us and steadily broadening, leaving us less and less restricted. It has become normal to see the undoable done, and the impact is felt in morality, art, philosophy, religion, in the social sciences, and wherever else human reflection transpires. Little is deemed beyond challenge. In this sense the atmosphere is favorable to the discovery of alternatives at every level of existence and thought.

Since morality is based on reality, ignoring realistic alternatives makes for deficient ethics. In fact, ignoring alternatives can be detrimental to any kind of analysis. Preoccupation with our creative potential is a characteristic of good ethics. Only a cultivated habit of creativity intent upon the discovery of alternatives can drive sloth and inertia from their tenured positions in the imagination.

Some examples can illustrate the result of sensitivity to alternatives. The initial success of the civil rights movement owes much to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who continually insisted on the use of nonviolent direct action in overcoming segregation and racism. His was not only a politically realistic alternative to the violent means that others frequently suggested but also a moral one. This alternative stems from the perception of the value of all people. Another example of sensitivity to alternatives that enhance human dignity and purpose can be found in sheltered housing programs for retarded adults. With some assistance, these adults are capable of functioning meaningfully and with some independence in society in ways that institutionalized living could never permit, and so they have a chance to reach their full potential as human beings. It is also less costly to society. Cost is also a fact to be considered in moral evaluation.

In bypassing moral alternatives, the state of the question is actually defined, or, better, artificially defined. We do not deal then with what
is but with what we have decided to deal with. Within this artificially defined state of the question, brilliant minds can operate, but they operate in self-inflicted darkness. The felt gain here is obvious. Returning to the adage: When you have no alternatives, you have no problem. The mind, as rascal, can easily blind itself to alternatives in order to have “no problem.”

There is another element about alternative-shy thinking. It is related to insensitivity to effects. Effects and alternatives relate in two principal ways. First, sensitivity to the broad scale of foreseeable effects and sensitivity to alternatives are both horizon experiences. They stretch our vision toward a fuller understanding of the reality in question and represent depth and breadth perception. They also run counter to the desire of the mind to make quick decisions. The mind’s natural hunger to make sense of things makes us susceptible to premature judgment. We are easy prey to the facile answer and to immediacy, the thinking that bars the door to the possibilities and broader ramifications of the situation. With the mind’s craving for “quick fix” knowledge, we can become prisoners of illusory, short-lived satisfactions. Good ethical analysis works against this indigenous weakness by stressing long- as well as short-term effects and by urging us to pry open our angle of vision so as to be aware of more of the alternatives actually available to us. The desired result is improved reality-contact and better ethics.

Second, effects and alternatives are dynamically related because a pattern of thinking within the arbitrary limits of short-term effects slackens our need to think of alternatives. Overcome by the apparent ease of short-term thinking, the need for the alternatives that are out there vanishes. Similarly, blindness to alternatives works against the perception of effects. When we become aware of the other viable alternatives, a process of comparison must begin that will inevitably involve a study of foreseeable short- and long-term effects. If we fail to see alternative energy sources, we are less likely to be aware of the effects of the currently dominant forms of energy. If we exclude the possible, the actual takes on a certain inevitability and is thus likely to evade critical judgment. In the knowing act, foreseeable effects and existent alternatives are linked even though effects refer to the future and alternatives refer mainly to the possibilities of the present.