Ethics in Dialogue

From Value Vacuum to Value Source...

The relation between alternatives and effects is illustrative of what can be said of all the elements to which the reality-revealing questions direct us. By the necessity of analysis, we will have to dwell on the various factors of reality separately, but in moral insight and judgment all the factors will intersect and relate, just as all clues come together and link in the conclusion of the detective. Solving the case occurs when the mind can relate all the clues meaningfully. The same is true in ethical judgment.

Moral judgment, however, is not identical with the judging process of the detective. This comparison, like every comparison, falters. In its distinct way, ethics involves affectivity and imagination as well as analytical reasoning. It is a judgment that comes together in meaningful coalescence. The reality-revealing questions point us toward all the empirical data. The ethical judgment expresses the humanizing (moral) or dehumanizing (immoral) implications of how those data relate in value questions. Before going on to the distinctive way in which ethics moves to judgment, represented by the spokes of the wheel model, it should be emphasized that moral value relates to all that we do as human beings. Moral responsibility is coextensive with humanity and must not be evaded by stratagem.

Many disciplines, such as those found in the sciences and the social sciences, greatly affect the matrix of moral meaning and introduce new moral issues, although they would appear to be doing purely neutral research. When human beings are involved, there can be no pretense of moral neutrality. The ethicist can clarify the nature of moral value, delineate the moral dimensions of other disciplines, and offer a method of moral evaluation. Disciplines, of course, have their own distinctive methods but conversation can blend the contributions of each. Ethics, however, is not just one discipline among others. It views the whole of human conscious behavior and is less circumscribable than other disciplines. Yet ethics does not pretend that its art/science is independent of them. To do its work it needs to be in dialogue with everything that relates to human meaning.
In a university, ethics ideally would be done in what could be called a Center for the Study of Moral Values. This center would relate formally to all departments so that moral evaluation would proceed in an interdisciplinary way. Lines of communication with experts in all areas would further the multidisciplinary study of moral values. The ethician would provide the theoretical framework in ethics (method) and would facilitate conversation among the disciplines on moral value questions. Realistically, many formidable vested interests stand against the hopes for any such creative structuring.

From Hub to Spokes...

The hub of the wheel model is the questioning and expository phase where ethics begins to uncover all the empirical complexity and to learn about that which is being judged. We have thus far been gathering information about moral reality and, theoretically, not evaluating it. But, in fact, we have been doing a lot of evaluating as we moved through various cases. In the face of a moral issue, the mind instinctively begins to evaluate. We do not unfold reality with our questions and then, as if by signal, commence evaluation. The wheel model, like any other model, is abstract but it is also functional. It provides a systematic defense against intellectual impatience in value issues. The initial evaluative reaction to a moral situation is usually impulsive, partial, and impatient.

By stressing and stretching all the reality-revealing questions and by interrelating them, we attack myopia and undue reliance on figments and surface impressions. The spokes of the wheel model represent systematic concern for the shape of our evaluative response to the reality our questions have disclosed. If response can easily be partial and biased, ethics seeks to make it more sensitive, objective, and complete. The spokes of the wheel model help us conceptualize the possibilities of our personal and social resources. They focus upon the highly complex ways that we can approach moral truth. By systematically exploring our evaluative capacities, we may be able better to avoid “top-of-the-head” or “top-of-the-culture” responses to moral questions. We must be open to the manifold ways in which moral meaning emerges. Concern for knowing how we know is the beginning of wisdom in any subject.

Notice that this wheel model for doing ethics is geared to produce better reality contact so that sound ethical judgments can be made. The model could also be adapted as a managerial method for realistic and efficient administration. Unasked questions plague all areas of coordinated human activity whether in business, government, medical centers, or the practice of law. This model, therefore, has many applications. Our concern here is to apply it to the production of sound and sensitive moral judgments. But this dimension, too, has practical
import to all who work in management, government, or the professions since, as we have said, from a long-term perspective, good ethics is good business, good medicine, good law, and so forth.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What are the two phases in ethics represented by the wheel model? List and explain the reality-revealing questions. Why are circumstances morally important? Explain how the wheel model relates to the foundational moral experience.

2. How do paradox and moral modesty tie in to ethical method?

3. Why is the question *what?* so important? The question *what?* should lead us to the awareness that distinctions must be made when there are differences. Explain how misconceptions on the *what* level can adversely affect our assessment of moral circumstances. Give some examples of definitional problems on the *what* level; for example, give morally relevant definitions of mercy death, homicide, murder, socialism, and capitalism. Are there some “socialistic” things in capitalistic systems and some “capitalistic” things in socialist nations?

4. What do the questions *why?* and *how?* focus on? How do they differ? How do they relate to one another? Are means and ends separate entities or interrelated aspects of a moral situation? How can *means* become *ends:* What is the danger with an overemphasis on *ends:* Discuss whether *ends* can ever justify *means:* Explain how the question *why?* can alter the *what?* question.

5. Define motive. Are motives important in determining the moral meaning of behavior? Give some examples. How can motives be seen as an ongoing process? Are some motives dominant or more operative than others? Give examples of this.

6. How does the question *who?* relate to the foundational moral experience? Clarify what it means to grow as a person. Why is it that what is right for one “who” might be wrong for another?

7. There seems to be an apparent problem with the phrase “some persons are worth more than others in ethical assessment.” How does ethical evaluation of a particular situation disclose the worth of some individuals over others? Suppose you can save only one person in a burning building, an infant or an old woman. Whom would you save? Why? What if you know that the old woman is a Nobel laureate and is on the brink of a major breakthrough in AIDS research? How is moral worth evaluated? If artificial hearts became available in limited numbers, how would you devise criteria for distributing them? Should they be free, paid for by the government, or should they command whatever the market will bear? What justice issues are involved here?

8. Do all citizens really enjoy “equal rights”? How can the *who?* question relate to social justice?
9. The questions *when?* and *where?* refer to time and place. The *when?* question can be extremely important in cases of oil spills. *When* the clean-up operation begins is morally crucial. Give other examples. *Where* an embryo resides — frozen in a lab or growing in a womb — obviously makes a moral and legal difference.

10. Discuss the importance of *foreseeable effects* in moral evaluation. How is the future part of moral circumstances and how can effects change one’s attitude toward moral reality? Explain and give some examples of moral cases where effects are *the* critical circumstance?

11. Show how the principle of proportionality relates to the responsibility that we have for good and bad effects. Discuss the morality of adoption of children by single parents stressing the foreseeable effects. Give other examples of areas where effects have moral meaning.

12. What is the nature of alternatives? Why are alternatives morally important? Explain how alternatives and effects are related. How do technological and scientific alternatives create new moral issues? An example: artificial insemination for surrogate mothering. Give other examples.

13. Explain how three forms of justice relate to the questions of alternatives and effects. Apply these questions to preferential affirmative action that seeks to break up white male monopolies.

14. How would an Ethics Committee function in a hospital setting? In business? In government? In a law firm? In a financial center? In a university?

15. Science is working on techniques for pre-selecting the sex of your child. If a successful method were developed, allowing you to conceive only the gender you choose, would it be moral? Analyze the situation using all the questions of the wheel model.

16. In what sense is it true that good ethics equals good business, good medicine, or good government?