

THE REAL WORLD OF ETHICS
TOWARDS AN EMPIRICAL & PRACTICAL ETHICAL THEORY

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*Everything Flows. Heraclitus.*

**The Problem: No Theory Works**

The work of MacIntyre and Hampshire has shown that there is no single cogent and systematic descriptive, explanatory and/or normative ethical or meta-ethical theory, despite academic theory's attempts at careful definition and consistency. That has to be taken as the default assumption today. There is no single overriding, generally compelling theory of ethical value systems, conduct, or norms. But logical concerns do not suffice for empirical science, natural or human. More to the point there is no shared technique or method by which one theory of ethics can be shown to be superior to any other competing/opposing theory in any generally replicable fashion. But this is necessary if ethical theory--and philosophy--is to remain an intellectually interesting form of inquiry that goes beyond academic paper shuffling, personal preference, ideological / cultural sensibility, etc and does not fall into pure relativism.

**Hints to Solutions**

I wish to advance some views on what the requirements for any interesting theory of ethics might be. By 'theory' I mean a methodologically careful set of assumptions and hypotheses which are in the broadest sense empirically testable by other inquirers. They would follow some commonly acceptable method which enables different views to reach agreement in a way that is significantly independent of interests, prejudices, personal agendas, etc. The theory would be empirical in the broad sense of arising from and returning to empirical data, realities, structures, patterns of behaviour, value systems, etc. It would be practical in reflecting, illuminating ethical conduct and value systems as lived and would be oriented to ethics as lived as its testing ground and as guidelines for maintaining / improving ethical conduct.

This does not imply positivism or any narrow view of the sciences, natural and human. One may and should take the broadest view of the sciences, from cultural anthropology and history to

ecology and information theory. They are in no way restricted to mathematical physics--which is not even an interesting paradigm of method in today's world of proliferating life, information and human sciences and professional knowledges. In this broadest and most catholic of senses however one would expect an interest of inquirers in empirical data, explicit assumptions and controlled definition, understanding (verstehen) of sayings, texts, and symbols in the senses intended by speakers, etc. Tests concerned with empirical data, practical applicability should involve agreed on techniques.

However there is no generally agreed on empirically based / practically tested or oriented ethical theory. And to be a valid theory it would have to be both testable and generally agreed on as a paradigm of inquiry. Nor do I have any such theory to offer. I wish merely to share some suggestions about what such a theory would involve, based on a few years of work in sectoral ethics, especially concerning value questions relating to business, the economy, the media, environment and technology. It is on such work rather than any academic theory that I would rest the following considerations, each of which is admittedly tentative, ill-defined, and unproven. Nonetheless I would hope that they be accepted as clearing a path to a more open, methodical, empirical and practical approach to ethics and to defining a community of inquirers working within a shared problematic/paradigm.

What I have to say is not remarkable. I wish merely to suggest that we first consider ethics to denote actual human practices, as found and lived in the everyday social world, from interpersonal relations among friends and family, to institutionally defined decision making within organizations, to communication and intercourse among persons and groups who hold quite different value systems; and where change in value systems, often sudden and turbulent, is as common as continuity. Such, I believe, describes our world, the diverse and turbulent global village of contemporary social life. In some respects, namely, the predominance of change, variability of values, and diversity of value systems, it is not unlike that of the Sophists, whose groundbreaking inquiries laid the foundations of philosophy in the west.

### **Heuristics of an Empirical and Practical Ethics**

Any interesting contemporary ethical theory would, one hopes, fulfill the following requirements. Together they constitute a 'heuristic structure' of the theory (see Lonergan, Insight): the unknowns which well-structured inquiry should help transform into knowledge. I will state them in terms of the assumptions involved.

An empirical and practical approach to ethics might find the following assumptions helpful regarding various areas of inquiry (as noted in the subtitles):

### **Ethics And Values**

As one form of life on the earth humans live in relatively organized social groupings. Such groups share at least one culture and language. The human species has emerged within the supportive matrix of the planetary ecosystem and cannot live without some such supportive matrix. Human value systems emerge and develop only within such relatively organized social groupings. Ethical beliefs and norms are a subspecies of a larger genus, values. Not all values are ethical (some are

aesthetic, religious, etc); but all ethical beliefs and norms represent values. Ethical values are rooted in both socio-cultural convention and in human nature.

### **Social Groupings and Values**

Individual persons are members of organized social groups. Ethical value systems, like languages and cultures, are held by spatially, temporally and culturally bounded organized social groups, not only by individuals. The values of individuals for the most part reflect those of the social groups to which they belong. Ethical value systems and practices function at different levels and in different modes in social life: eg, surface / depth, articulate / inarticulate (cf Taylor), verbal / performational, espoused / real, doable here and now / aspirational ideal, etc Ethical value systems and practices operate at conscious, articulate or explicit levels. The 'real' ethical values of a group or person are demonstrated in their ongoing behaviour and deeds more than their thoughts or words. (cf Aristotle's *Ethics*). There are variable, diverse models or paradigms of a good 'way of life' (cf Hampshire). They vary with different social groups.

### **Value Systems**

It is necessary to study ethical value systems and practices as disclosed in human conduct, only part of which is verbal. It is possible to study ethical practices and value systems empirically, eg, by interpretive observation. Value systems are a common feature of ordinary social life throughout the world and history. Each value system is appropriate to those cognitive contexts in which it emerges and functions successfully. Each value system includes norms to distinguish practices, etc, which fit / violate its values. It is necessary to study ethical value systems in relation to the possible practices they imply/prescribe, etc. Norms for distinguishing ethical / unethical practices etc, are a common feature of ethical value systems. It may often be illuminating to measure ethical practices and performance (eg, re employment equity, pollution control, health and safety, violence, honesty, property management and exchange, design reliability, etc).

### **Variability And Commonality of Values**

Humans live in a world of widely diverse cultures and ethical systems. Most modern societies are pluralistic, with diverse ethical / social value systems. Diverse value systems are found in / appropriate to different social spheres: religion, politics, family, school, business, profession, personal background, etc. Diversity and changes in values and value systems vary with social spheres, persons, situations, times, etc. Ethical value systems and practices are subject to such variation. Commonality / similarity and constancy of values is assumed to be as common as Variability in values. Neither Commonality or Variability is assumed to be more important than the other to the truth of validity of any value / value system. Values vary --often systematically-- with differences in numerous other factors: general situation, specific context, place, time, group, individual, culture, motive, purpose, function, information, perception, aims, means, etc...

Alongside high variability one is nonetheless likely to find some degree of shared ethical values among diverse ethical value systems. The mix of Variability and Commonality in ethical value systems and practices is the starting point of methodical ethical inquiry. Difficulties of interpretation, translation and reconciliation among variable / diverse ethical values and practices

do not of themselves entail a complete or partial lack of commonality, or incommensurability (ie, untranslatability without significant loss and therefore significant non-commonality).

### **Ethics, Knowledges And Practices**

Values are beliefs directly related to practices and their maintenance/improvement. There are many different types of valid belief, or knowledges. Each knowledge is appropriate to those cognitive contexts in which it emerges and functions successfully. It is impossible and unnecessary to directly know another person's 'mind'. It is however possible to 'read' another person's 'meaning' as evinced in some form of action, behaviour or conduct. The situations in which ethical values are lived, or implemented (eg, in making decisions) typically involve limited (rather than 'perfect') information, scarce spatial, temporal and resource conditions.

### **Empirical and Practical Knowledges**

Knowledges are affected by values (cf Critical Theory); and values are affected by knowledges. They interact all the time. Knowledge of some values, practical and theoretical, is possible, both in life and theory. To claim: 'The practice of nuclear war is morally inexcusable.' probably is a cognitively valid, evidence warranted, justified assertion. Theorizing about ethics is to theorize about norms distinguishing better / worse human practices, eg, their maintenance and improvement, within complex social settings. Any Moral Theory, not just utilitarianism, positivism or social engineering should accept quantitative data and performance measures. Quantitative data and performance metrics are no more foreign to ethical theory or moral practice than they are to other forms of intelligent, informed behaviour.

Ethical theory may be to ethical practice something like medical theory is to medical practice, or consultancy advice is to actual management, or psychological (in the broad sense) theory is to professional counselling, whether therapeutic or technical. Theories about ethics, like the human sciences, have a reflective dimension not found in theories about inorganic systems, where 'reflective' means that the meaning of the assumptions and concepts is defined and interpreted by the subjects whose practices, etc, are studied by the theory. Their interpretations of such notions may affect the validation of the theory. Thus the articulation and validation of ethical theories is affected by the work of articulating and validating ethical theories; where 'affected' does not preclude either articulation or validation. Theories about ethics may be empirically descriptive, systematically explanatory, and/or normatively practical. Fragments of ethical theory, or theory segments, may enjoy limited range of descriptive, explanatory or practical validity without entailing acceptance of any totalizing theory or 'ism'. [Talk of convergent, overlapping interests or justice often makes sense in the economic and political spheres, without invoking contractarianism; notions of responsibility or duty are common amongst persons, and within organizations, without accepting Kantianism; clear norms like 'First, do no harm', are common, without implying utilitarianism; happiness is a common concern in social relations, without accepting Aristotelianism etc.] However an empirical / practical theory of ethics may NOT assume that:

An extreme, monistic, totalizing, or unifactoral belief/value system or 'ism' (like utilitarianism, deontology, idealism, monism, liberalism, individualism, etc), constitutes a valid ethical theory. But such theories raise as many theoretic, empirical and practical questions as it alleges to answer (see MacIntyre, Nietzsche, Williams.) Ethical norms and theories are testable, empirically and

practically, in relation to empirical data and practical implications for living, decision making, etc. The findings of ethical theories are replicable by inquirers not committed to the theory. The findings of ethical theories can command the agreement of inquirers not committed to the theory. Diversity and difference in values or value systems may involve opposition among some. Variability in values implies relativism and skepticism to some, especially if such variation is unsystematic and opaque to inquiry. Limitations in information, resources, understanding, etc, along with errors and other common inadequacies, entail skepticism. A marginal or abstract possibility of error does not militate against the concrete achievement of knowledge, minor or major.

The law, religion or logic or some other single cognitive or social model / sphere is the one true paradigm of theory, in ethics or philosophy. Group structures, histories are reducible to individuals without explanatory loss. Individuals and groups, human and animal, are the bearer of values. Values `reside' or function primarily in behaviour and secondarily in actors' minds or consciousness. Human minds are part of the living, evolving forms of life on the earth. Mental activity, thinking or inwardness does not have an ethically or theoretically privileged status, in contrast to social behaviour.

**ILLUSTRATIVE TEST CASES:** To test any theory one might examine some cases involving value variability, quantitative measures of ethical performance, etc.

- 1 Personal versus Organizational Values [Loyalty to company vs. longstanding friendship]
- 2 Variable cultural values [Decision re firing poor manager in Japanese subsidiary of American MNC: US merit based norms vs Japanese social obligation norms; informally negotiating corporate taxes in Italy vs U.S. formalized tax determination]
- 3 Situationally Limited Moral Knowledge [Foresight/control of consequences of new intra-body devices: P&G tampons; IUD devices; breast implants]
- 4 Quantitative Measures of Ethical Performance [eg, Pollution levels and abatement/prevent; employment equity and performance in affirmative action programs]
- 5 Ground Rules of Distributive Justice [Allocating corporate profits to competing demands on resources]

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