THE MISSING ETHICAL NET IN AMERICAN
CULTURE

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Introduction.

I might have titled this paper "Foundations of Ethics for Citizens and
Soldiers" but I chose to be more direct in order to conserve time and
set the argument quickly.

Recent socio-cultural development in America indicates that there has been
a significant erosion of the sustaining and undergirding "net" of ethical
conviction, and its foundation principles and assumptions, into which a
person may fall, so to speak, when faced with unfamiliar ethical decisions.

Unfamiliar ethical decision situations arise constantly in life because of
the unfamiliar changes that come to us with growth, aging, new responsi-
bility, cultural shifts, geographical displacement, social mobility, and
cross-cultural experience. More radical forms of unfamiliar ethical deci-
sion making situations arise with increasing frequency through the exper-
ience of war, terrorism, criminal violence, generalized threat to personal
security and well-being, and the perplexities of appropriate and adequate
defense of self and society; as well as the problem of devising useful
strategies of discipline, constraint, and restoration of normalcy in society.

The old socio-ethical formulae are not prevailing in the personal and com-
munal need for clear-headedness and sure-footedness in the ethical quicksand
and moral slimyness of our age. Perhaps it is too romantic to recollect that
there was a time, during the rationalism which dominated the late 18th and
most of the 19th century, when some general agreement could be counted upon
in defining the social, cultural, political, and personal ethical code un-
der which American people operated. That consensus is gone. We live in
an age of existentialism in ethics, taken to the point of absurdity. Every-
one has become a law unto himself or herself. Much psycho-social and educa-
tional theory or philosophy of the last two decades seems to have certified
the notion that to be genuinely human it is necessary for "every person to
do what is right in his or her own eyes."

In a time of the greatest social-cultural ferment since the Revolutionary
War Era, the USA is devoid of an objective ethical foundation for its socio-
cultural enterprise. There is no net of ethical assumptions and constraints,
strung carefully between solid mooring pylons in our society, into which an
individual may fall if the trembling ground of social change becomes too in-
stable for him or her - no net of general consensus regarding what is ex-
pected of a responsible and upright citizen.

Tom Wolfe, one of America's leading social critics, a noted journalist, and
the author of The Right Stuff said in 1982 that the situation is infinitely
worse than I have indicated. He declares that the last three decades have
led to an American state of affairs in which the notion prevails that ideas
and ethical perspectives can become articles of fashion which are adopted
or rejected with no more foundation than styles in clothing. He declares
"I see this as the key to the intellectual history of the United States in
the twentieth century."[1] If it is the key to the intellectual history
of the contemporary American society, it is also certainly the key to the
social history of the USA.

Exposition.

This state of affairs is a byproduct of the increasing social mobility and decreasing family systems role in society, informing, monitoring, and stabilizing ethical-social affairs; a condition especially evident following WW II. Local cultures with their careful constraints and their nearly monolithic, Judeo-Christian and patriotic posture have been eroded. Surely any residuum of a monolithic American cultural philosophy has disappeared. With it has gone all remnants of any sort of culturally pervasive ethical principals and assumptions. Neither the Judeo-Christian movement nor the secular Humanist movement has been able to shore up the culture against this ethical erosion, though these were the philosophies which lent perspective to previous generations.

Even more responsible for this slide into the contemporary American ethical swamp is the significant incursion of the cynicism of French Existentialist thought after WW II. What began as a sanctioning of pluralism in America, which social mobility and geographical displacement dictated, has deteriorated into cynicism, as community has declined and alienated individualism entrenched itself.

American pluralism began as an effort to secure the equality of persons. That pluralist ambition is enshrined in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights. That led appropriately to the idea of America as the "melting pot", eroding prejudice, social stigmae, and racial and class bias. That pluralism came to be interpreted formally as an appreciation of the inherent integrity and esteemability of differing cultures, national origins, and languages. Native values inherent in the quality of all humans were sacralized as sources of value to the whole socio-cultural body.

In the last two or three decades, however, it has been claimed popularly, and the mass media have promoted the notion, that American pluralism means that any idea is as good as any other idea, any value, personal preference, individual goal, intent, desire, attitude, judgment, or behavior as good as any other. This concept of good is now taken in the aesthetic, moral, and value/quality sense (how valuable a thing is inherently). Moreover, it is now argued generally, and especially by our mass media, that it is _this_ sense of pluralism that the Constitution and Bill of Rights guarantee. The only case in which the mass media seem to be in doubt about this posture is in the cases in which responsible <u>conservative</u> ideas and values appear to have the upper hand.

This posture regarding pluralism has eroded the possibility of holding a communal philosophical perspective, sufficiently pervasive in the culture, which could constitute a foundation for a cultural-ethical posture of some degree of uniformity <u>in re</u> the crucial issues of national idealism, social responsibility in terms of that idealism, communal security, cultural unity or decorum, responsible goal identification for America, and a palpable basis for measuring personal and communal appropriateness, achievement, and esteemability.

To make matters worse, it seems to me that the purveyors of the notion that no ideas or values have priority over any others seem to be insisting, with increasing vocifferousness, that _that_ value judgment is inherently more valid than all others and must be dogmatically and uncritically affirmed by all of us. That internally inconsistant claim has become a matter of faith in much of American popular thought.

Philosophical Vacuum.

The notion that American pluralism has that meaning and that that is what the
Constitution and Bill of Rights guarantee is, of course, untrue. It is not
true, though popularly believed, that any idea, value, goal, wish or behavior
is as good as anyother. It is not true that your idea is _inherently_ as good
as mine - or that mine is _inherently_ as good as yours, _qua_ idea. Ideas have
merit, not because you or I endorse them - or even because they serve your
or my need in a given situation. Their value is not related to your/my emotion-
al preference for them, comfort with them, or enhancement by them. Ideas and
values have merit in terms of qualities inherent within the ideas and values
themselves - indeed, _certain specific kinds_ of qualities.

It is still true today, as it always has been, that it really counts in signi-
ficant ways whether an idea or value has inherent rationality, empirical
validity, historical warrantability, or functionality in the context of the
whole system of thought and the need of the whole body politic. Those who
think that the day for such claims on human reflection and intercourse has
passed are simply and completely wrong.

Tom Wolfe declares that our country has always lacked an adequate supply of
professional philosophers "who would take it upon themselves to articulate
in some structured form the foundations of American democracy." I question
his "always". I believe that the founding papers of this country and its
19th century behavior clearly indicate that a specific philosophy prevailed
generally and led to such great moral-ethical decisions as the Declaration
of Independence, the Bill of Rights , and the Emancipation Proclamation.
However, I agree with the primary illustration Wolfe used to tie down his
point, i.e., that NASA had no philosophy or ethical perspective on why we were
undertaking in the 60s and 70s to explore space, except their rationale that
we had to counter the Russians. By 1970 it was evident what a lack of a
clarified philosophy had cost NASA. All they could say to justify themselves
and their billion dollar enterprise was, "We gave you the teflon frying pan."
Their enterprise was eminently worthy in its own right but they could not
clearly say why because they had no concerted philosophical perspective in
terms of which to measure and articulate its goals and value.

Wolfe makes an even more serious point in asserting that there is a general
lack of a philosophy with which anyone now on the Right can enter the in-
tellectual vacuum of our culture. I believe that lack exists on the Right,
on the Left, and in the Center. In consequence, we are reduced to an exis-
tence that reminds one increasingly of the morass in the Arab-Near East.
We function as a society, in values and ethics, forever on an emergency-
expediency basis. People get psychologically and spiritually exhausted by
that, because it provides no focus, perspective, achievement measure, closure,
and no ethical net into which to fall when faced with the perpetual unfamiliar.
As growing children need structure within the context of which to flourish, so
that they need to spend relatively little psychic energy on security and can
spend much on exploration and growth, likewise, societies flourish where there
is a clear course and sound goals and values, so its citizens need spend
little energy on stability and can spend much on creativity.

Priorities Among Differing Values.

The merit of one idea over another, of one value over another, is a notion
of meritoriousness which must be the root of any consistent philosophy. All
of us begin the formulation of such an assessment of merit among differing

values or ideas in terms of certain assumptions about what is true and real and how we get to know what is true and real. Those assumptions are faith commitments, whether they are secular or religious in nature, whether they have to do with convictions about rationalism, empiricism or about revelation. However, even those faith assumptions may not be irrational or empirically or historically or functionally without warrant. In the end, nonetheless, the merit of one idea or value over another may be measured in terms of a hierarchy of value priorities, as well as in terms of rationality, empirical authenticity, and functional relevance. Many ideas are good. Some are better than others. Some are even "more better" than others; more comprehensively rational, more empirically imperative, more functionally relevant, or more timely; and some ideas are better than others because they more adequately conform to or represent the higher values in the values priority system.

Carl Horn III, a Justice Department attorney for the USA, suggests, for example, that annually the ACLU sues the USA for the public recognition of Christmas.[2] He correctly observes that

> The fundamental issue has to do with the values crisis in
> late 20th-century American society. Unfortunately, we can
> no longer assume a consensus on basic beliefs and values,
> at least not among public policy makers. With the breakup
> of the consensus the paramount question has become not whether
> but whose beliefs and values - whose worldview - should be re-
> flected in the law and public policy of our pluralistic society?
> This, not the usual rhetoric about "separation of church and
> state" and so on, is the fundamental question which underlies
> the public debate on many of today's controversial social and
> political issues.
>
> The answer to this basic philosophical question given by
> many American intellectuals, the federal courts, and much of
> the major media (if it is even addressed) is that the source
> of our public values must be wholly secular. This assump-
> tion is widely held by policy makers and shapers, who regard
> such a view as mandated by "values neutrality" and "pluralism".
>
> But in reality, what is taking place is a struggle not for
> values neutrality but for the dominance of certain secular
> values. Furthermore, pluralism in United States history has
> never meant that acknowledgement of God or the endorsement
> of certain religiously based values should be excluded from
> the public sphere. Judeo-Christian moral principles have
> always functioned as a foundation for Western law. The idea
> that such principles are inappropriate for our public policy
> is the relative newcomer on the philosophical scene.
>
> A look at two factual situations in which fundamentally diver-
> gent philosophical perspectives are translated into specific
> public policy decisions illustrates graphically the fallacy in
> assuming that secular consensus is "values neutral."

Horn's personal perspective is that of a moderate Christian philosophy. His "two factual situations" are the issues of bioethics and of the secularization of educational values and philosophy. The latter is in- dicated by the National Educational Association Report entitled "Education for the 70s."[3] The document claims that educational institutions must be turned into clinics "whose purpose is to provide individual psycho-social

treatment for the student, and teachers will become psycho-social therapists."
Horn says, "There you have 'values neutrality', secular style." Resocializa-
tion of children in terms of the teacher's whims and values, regardless of
parental, family, community, or national values? If educators are now to
resocialize our children, reshaping their values, beliefs, and morals; whose
philosophy, ethics, and standards will prevail? What happened to parents'
rights, church claims, traditional philosophies, and objective dispassionate
commitment to a just pluriformity in the USA?

In education of the youth, whose values and ideas will prevail? Whose should
prevail? In bioethics, whose life is to be saved? The useful, the productive,
those with political clout? Whose life is to be left unprotected? The unborn
fetus', the enfeebled elderly, or the accidentally comatose - merely because
they cannot speak for themselves, are useless in their present state, are
currently unproductive, or have no political clout at the moment? One wonders
how the 25 million aborted American citizens of the last 10 years would vote
on the values issue next November, if they could speak for themselves.

Horn's personal perspective leads him to the following observation.

> The great irony, of course, is that those in the vanguard
> of such an educational philosophy - those advocating the
> use of psychological techniques to reshape our children's
> personalities, beliefs, and values - are the very ones who
> cry the loudest about how Christians and others holding
> traditional views want to "impose their beliefs." To the
> contrary, let the obvious be unequivocally stated: "Values
> neutrality" is not some kind of moral high ground occupied
> by those advocating wholly secular solutions to difficult
> social and political problems. Rather ... "The cultural
> and political arguments taking place ... reflect a deep
> philosophical chasm between two radically distinct and
> diametrically opposed moral visions of humanity." At
> the most basic level, these two worldviews are the tradi-
> tional Judeo-Christian one, and a more recently ascendant
> secular, individualistic philosophy characterized by sub-
> jectivism and radical ethical relativism.

He points up the problem fairly well. I would disagree with him if he
implies that secular Humanism equals "recently ascendant secular, individual-
istic philosophy characterized by subjectivism and radical ethical relativism."
If he does not equate contemporary alienated individualism with secular Human-
ism, he has not completed his formula, because then he must acknowledge that
it is the relatively ideal traditions of Judeo-Christian and of secular Human-
ism which stand over against contemporary individualistic subjectivism and
relativism. Moreover, he should note that Judeo-Christian and secular Human-
ist traditions are not diametrically opposed to one another. In many ways and
areas they compliment each other. Indeed, it is my judgment that it is possi-
ble for them to find a way to get on very well together, mutually informing
and illumining each other, as I believe history has demonstrated in Europe and
in America.

Individualism.

The larger problem is the generalized morbid individualism in moral and ethical
behavior in our country which has no discernible thought-out ethics or philosophy
behind it at all. It is also _that_ alienated individualism which too often sur-

faces in practical forms in the classrooms of our secondary schools and our universities. It is seldom the grand, consistant, idealism of a secular Humanism or of an historic Judeo-Christian world view which impresses itself upon the educational process in America today.

But Horn is correct in suggesting that if this estranging individualism or the claims of the grander worldviews of Judeo-Christian or Humanist tradition, which are struggling to hold on by teeth and toenails in our society today, are to find legitimate thoughtful reassessment, the hierarchy of priorities in the merit of ideas and ethical principles must be rigorously reapplied to all of them. Let me suggest for consideration here what might be considered to be those principial assumptions which, at the very least, should shape the hierarchy of priorities in terms of which ideas and values must be measured as to their relatively merit in our society.

Principial Philosophical-Ethical Assumptions.

I suggest that there are twelve such assumptions upon which any attempt at an American philosophical ethics must be built.

1. The wellbeing of humans is always, at all cost, the first priority, despite the imperialistic sound of that claim over against all other animate and inanimate reality.
2. Long term human wellbeing has priority over short term wellbeing because it more greatly enhances the human personal and communal potential for survival, growth, and creativity.
3. Communal wellbeing has priority over individual wellbeing because it more greatly enhances the human personal and communal potential for survival, growth, and creativity.
4. Holistic wellbeing of persons and the community; physically, psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually; has priority over particularist wellbeing, i.e., over the compartmentalization of values in a way that gives priority to an individual or a specific kind of wellbeing (physical, psychological, intellectual, or spiritual) at the expense of the others.
5. Humans have no abstract rights or objective rights apart from the right to those resources necessary for their effective service to human wellbeing.
6. The Profession of Arms is inherently not designed to serve as a career but to be a life of service to national and international communal wellbeing.
7. That is ethical in the Profession of Arms which serves the holistic longterm communal human wellbeing, not that which fulfills the designs of making arms a profession, as an end in itself.
8. International life is a family affair.
9. Sibling nations are responsible for eachother.
10. International ethics require power used ethically just as individual love requires power employed to effect wholesome change and wellbeing in the beloved. It is always a matter of the exercise of power redemptively, that is, for holistic human wellbeing.
11. The Profession of Arms is ethical only if it exercises power redemptively in terms of the claims of the long term international communal wellbeing.
12. Wellbeing is defined or constrained by the boundaries of survivability, growth potential, and creativity appropriate to the organism.

The Missing Ethical Net.

Galen Meyer, in a paper on the combat soldier in Vietnam makes a powerful statement on our problem as seen from the ethical vantage point of the extremety of war - especially a war like the Vietnam War.[4] His greatest expressed concern is the effects of combat on the American soldier who, "like the culture in which he lives," is largely devoid of a sound ethical perspective. In his heart of hearts this American is a hollow man, a "house with an abandoned look." Religion and principle are peripheral. If they lie around in that house they have only sentimental value, not practical and useful value. He is spiritually and philosophically stunted, as is his culture. Take him out of his community, hand him a lethal weapon, put him in a situation where the only indentifiable objective is "body count" on an almost unidentifiable enemy, and "you have a dangerous man, capable of horrible things."

Meyer invokes Joseph Conrad's book, Heart of Darkness,[5] in which the Belgian importing company agent, Kurtz, who has set up his grotesque Congo Kingdom, has cut himself off from human ties and normal ethically restrained behavior. He has become a god unto himself. The end is horror. But Meyer points out that, to our surprise, the riverboat Captain, Marlowe, speaks of Kurtz with some sympathy.

> You can't understand. How could you? - with solid pavement
> under your feet, surrounded by neighbors ready to cheer you
> or to fall on you. Stepping delicately between the butcher
> and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows
> and lunatic asylums - how can you imagine what particular region
> of the first ages a man's untrammeled feet may take him into by
> way of solitude - utter solitude without a policeman - by way of
> silence - utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neigh-
> bor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things
> make all the difference. When they are gone, you must fall back on
> your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.

Meyer points out further, that it is wholly appropriate and indeed revela-
tional that Coppola in Apocalypse Now[6] films Conrad's story as the story
of Vietnam. He observes that Coppola gives us more than a political statement
about Vietnam. He shows us what happens to humans who have no philosophy
or worldview, no faith perspective or thought-out and comprehensive way of
understanding things and their ethical consequences or implications or impera-
tives. He shows what happens to the hollow man in the ethical extremities
of human life. The results of the darkness in his heart of hearts are the
atrocities of My Lai, when there is no "solid pavement beneath" one's feet,
no "warning voice of the kind neighbor ... whispering of public opinion."

T.S. Elliot says,

> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw, Alas![7]

Meyer contends: "Vietnam revealed that we Americans are hollow people,"
and continues, "The man Conrad describes in Heart of Darkness, the man
T.S. Elliot describes in "The Hollow Men," the man Coppola shows us in
Apocalypse Now, is not a fictitious man. He is the man of our culture."
Meyer should know. He spent long months with the US Marines in combat in
Vietnam.

Another Vietnam veteran, Philip Caputo, wrote a book called A Rumor of War.[8]
He summarizes our whole discussion in one single stroke, noted poignantly
by Meyer.

> It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush,
> an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness.
> Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill,
> confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy,
> we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be
> checked only by the net of a man's inner moral values,
> the attribute that is called character. There were a
> few - and I suspect Lieutenant Calley was one - who
> had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering
> in their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they
> probably never suspected was there.

Conclusion.

Today this state of affairs exists not only in Vietnam but in the Near East,
Afghanistan, Detroit's ghettoes, New York's streets, academic politics, and
defense contracting. We are now a sufficiently alienated individualistic
society that there are hardly any neighbors whispering of public opinion
in any of our lives anymore, hardly any communal structures and monitors
left, and the crumbled philosophical pavement under our feet can no longer
be repaired. It will need to be replaced. Moreover, solid pavement,
wholesome communal opinion, historically warrantable and functional social
structure are all in disrepute. They are sanctioned as the enemy.

This erosion is not first of all a matter of non-conformity in behavior.
"These things happen in the realm of ideas, not in the realm of conventional
politics ...." or daily social relationships, Tom Wolfe claims. He further
observes, "The philosophy and the confidence that goes with it - these are
everything."[9]

Any attempt to reconstruct the ethical underpinnings of our society and culture,
in any of its varied aspects: politics, social decorum, expenditure of national
treasure, military action, or legal process, will need to take serious account
of the philosophical problem outlined here. We will need to take seriously
the American philosophical vacuum and find an adequate solution for it or
the ethical underpinnings or net we construct will have no enduring founda-
tions and moorings.

Ethics is the name we give to the set of principles we formulate regarding
how a person ought to carry himself or herself. From those principles comes
the shape of our moral behavior - if we are worthy moral persons with some
degree of internal consistancy and rectitude. But that set of principles re-
garding how one ought to carry oneself is dreived from philosophy - one's
world view. We ask what is the nature of things or how things stand and then
in terms of that we gain some notion about how we ought, therefore, to carry
ourselves.[10] So America's philosophical vacuum is potentially fatal to our
ethical republic and its various socio-cultural aspects.

If we hope to steady the fragile bark of liberty and justice and equality
we will need to fashion a sound, comprehensive philosophical worldview
which expresses those ideals clearly, and in terms of which our ethical
principles and priorities can be established.

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