

## TIME TO STOP TALKING ABOUT ETHICS?

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Is it time to stop talking about ethics? On the yes side our authority is Ludwig Wittgenstein, the most cited name in 20th century Anglo-American philosophy. We all know the famous last words of his *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." And to this most celebrated mad genius in philosophy since Socrates, ethics dwells in the realm of the unspeakable. Indeed the Austrian-born *enfant terrible* went so far as to say, "If a man could write a book on ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world." Ethics, that is, could not be talked or written about meaningfully. There are no ethical propositions; the realm of the moral<sup>¾</sup> as well as that of art and religion<sup>¾</sup> could only, as he put it, be shown.

We've heard much about him, that strange man who lived much of his life on the border of mental illness. How he was brought up by his wealthy parents in the heady atmosphere of culture-rich turn-of-the-century Vienna. How as a young man he came to England seeking advanced training in engineering, particularly in jet propulsion<sup>¾</sup> this years before the first World War. We know too that he heard Alfred Whitehead and Bertrand Russell were working on a book—later titled *Principia Mathematica*<sup>¾</sup> designed to demonstrate that all the propositions of mathematics could be shown to be derivable from the principles of logic. Russell knew that he had met more than his match in this hot-eyed young analyst of logic and language and he praised and promoted his young colleague's work to Whitehead and other colleagues at Cambridge. England's ground was well-prepared to receive a brilliant philosopher of logic and language. Russell's senior at Cambridge, G.E. Moore, had analyzed the idea of Good in his *Principia Ethica*. Its thesis: that Good was not reducible to other concepts, that it was itself absolute and indefinable in terms of elements other than itself. Russell introduced to Cambridge the logico-linguistic ideas of Gottlob Frege whose work, as

well as Wittgenstein's, proves basic to today's university courses in philosophy of language. (Later Oxford scholars would develop the philosophy of Ordinary Language.) Interest in logic and philosophy of language blossomed in many quarters even among amateur enthusiasts, some of them delightfully eccentric. Consider a retired British army colonel who worked hard to support his conviction that the English language was superior to all others in clarity and logic. On one occasion, the story goes, the retired warrior addressed a dinner party with his proof that the English tongue surpassed all others in clarity, accuracy, and reason. Holding aloft a table knife, he spoke to his admiring audience: "Now the Germans call this "Messer", the French name it "couteau"  $\frac{3}{4}$ but we English call it a "knife"  $\frac{3}{4}$ which is exactly what it is!"

Apropos military, active or retired, we know that in the Great War of 1914-18, Wittgenstein served in the Austrian army with distinction on the Russian and Italian fronts, earning two Silver Medals for gallantry under fire  $\frac{3}{4}$  decorations roughly equivalent to our Navy Cross and DSC. A line from one of his citations reads: "His [Lt Wittgenstein's] exceptionally courageous behavior, calmness and heroism won the total admiration of the troops."

Throughout his war service, the philosopher carried with him in his knapsack the manuscript of the book he was working on  $\frac{3}{4}$ by the way, he played the clarinet and carried that about wrapped in an old sock. Near the war's end, while he was a prisoner of war near Cassino, he managed to send the manuscript  $\frac{3}{4}$ not the clarinet  $\frac{3}{4}$ to England where Russell saw to its publication, Moore contributing the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, short title *Tractatus*.

As we know, this strange work, the *Finnegan's Wake* of 20th century philosophy, consists of numerically ordered propositions, ranging from the purely logical to the Orphic and prophetic. Using in part the logical symbolism of Whitehead and Russell's *Principia*, the Austrian genius worked out an arcane doctrine, part logic, part manifesto, aimed at a final, philosophy-shattering distinction between what could be said without being nonsense and what couldn't. Wittgenstein did not claim that ethical concerns may not be of great importance  $\frac{3}{4}$  rather, we just cannot say anything logically significant about ethics  $\frac{3}{4}$ without, as we might

say, getting wrapped around the axle. As Wittgenstein said many years later in his only other book, the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*, the task of philosophy is to rescue intelligence from the bewitchment of language. This may be a re-drawing and clarification of his earlier dictum "whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent." It is impossible to put ethical matters in propositional form. They can only be shown.

Shown how? By example? Well, yes, but more than that. Or rather, less by *silence*. Wittgenstein's favorite gospel was Matthew, which says, "I say unto you that for every idle word men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof on the Day of Judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

But didn't Wittgenstein himself make personal judgments of the sort we could call ethical on matters of human behavior? Yes, sometimes, including frequent severe judgments about his friends. In his rare praise of someone's character, he would often use the word "decent". For example, when he had finished reading Brigadier Desmond Young's biography of General Rommel, he exclaimed "what a decent man!" (Brigadier Young, that is Rommel too, for that matter). Of our American philosopher, William James, whom he knew only by reading his works, Wittgenstein said "he's a real human being! that's why he's a good philosopher." Another decent real human being was his doctor's wife who took him into her house when the philosopher, dying with cancer, said he didn't want to die in a hospital.

Alfred Whitehead, who was gentle with Wittgenstein in the old Cambridge days, believed that decency is a basic element of the moral life. As a student in his class at Harvard in 1934-35, I made a verbatim note of the old metaphysician's illustration of his point. (I copied down everything in those days.)

Professor Whitehead spoke of an occasion when he asked an officer of an English college why smoking was prohibited there. To Whitehead it seemed unreasonable. 'But Whitehead', the official replied, 'there must be *some* rules!' This, Professor Whitehead said, was an expression of the ultimate fact that there is a morality and an immorality. True, all questions of morals are passing rules for passing social systems. But Whitehead added there is a fundamental

*decency*. The notion that something is the right thing to do is more fundamental by far than a code of morals."

Commentators have noted that this fundamental sense of decency, real or imagined, is a social as well as an individual and personal endowment¾that it may be found among both simple and sophisticated souls alike. The Hungarian writer Paul Ignotus recalls an incident in London during the Blitz of 1940. An official was addressing a crowd of citizens at Hyde Park Corner, telling them what to do or not to do in case they had to deal with a downed German flier. They were not to talk to him. They were to call the police at once. In no circumstances were they to offer the fellow a cup of tea. This last was too much for some of the crowd. A woman protested indignantly, "My Alfie's in the RAF and he might be shot down any day and I wouldn't want THEM to refuse him his cup of tea."

Lest Anglophiles think that this posited sense of decency warms only English souls, we may recall the French writer Albert Camus' wartime novel *The Plague* and its hero, a medical doctor who has chosen to remain behind in the plague-stricken city of Oran to minister to the dying though he knows his medicines will do no good and that his own life stands at risk. He explains his choice to a journalist, "it's just a matter of common decency (*honnêteté*). I don't know what it means to other people, but for me it means doing my job." Inborn or acquired, decency shows itself in many ways. Sometimes it takes an earthquake to bring it out; sometimes the tear of a child is enough.

Our own Thomas Jefferson, son of 18th century Enlightenment, experienced few moral doubts, save in his later years about slavery. He was particularly skeptical about discussions of ethics presented in academic or metaphysical terms. Writing from Paris in 1787 to his nephew in Virginia, Peter Carr, who was asking about college course offerings, the great Virginian advised the young man not to bother taking a course in moral philosophy, for he believed that a waste of time. We are born with a moral sense, said Jefferson, just as we are born with muscles and sinews. Some of us are strongly endowed with this moral sense just as some are born with greater physical strength, others less so. But just as we can strengthen our

muscles and sinews by exercise and practice, so we can develop our moral endowment by education, exercise and habit. It derives from our instincts as humans; as for reason, it plays some part in our moral development, but not so much as the philosophers make out.

The case for belief in an innate source of ethical dispositions may interest those who come upon a recent book, J.Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense* (1993). This book represents an interesting exception to the rule that professors of management (Wilson is one) tend to refer to the friendliness of moral values to business utility. But where's the harm? Didn't Adam Smith hold that we humans possess not only selfish instincts, but also those grounded in sympathy for others? Jefferson would find this obvious, for we are all born social beings. Rousseau already made the point in his discussion of altruism.

Trouble is, Jean-Jacques would add, that we come into this world as egoists as well as beings capable of sympathy for others. All too often the dear "I" <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> or even more so the dear "we"—takes over in our ineluctable search for power over others. In Dr. Freud's way of putting it, the *id* triumphs easily over the *ego* and *superego*. St. Augustine looked around his world and found what to him seemed ample empirical evidence of the marks of Original Sin. In our own time, the German writer Thomas Mann makes the narrator of his late and sorrowful novel *Doctor Faustus* tell how in 1945 an American Army general forced the population of Weimar to file past the crematorium of a neighboring concentration camp, the action wringing from the narrator a despairing cry: "Curses, curses on the corrupters of an originally *decent* species of human being, law-abiding, only too docile, only too willing to live on theory, who thus went to school to Evil."

Today's television news brings the torment of Bosnia into our living room. Pressing the remote control button, we see the aftermath of a bombing in northern Ireland, a shooting in reprisal. In distant Rwanda we hear of war to the death of guilty and innocent alike, Hutu or Tutsi. Over a year has now passed since I talked to a Somali officer, a Naval Command College student stranded in Newport, bereft of his navy, not knowing if his family still lived. In an awkward attempt to cheer him up I mentioned that Isak Dinesen, author of *Out of Africa*,

had judged the Somali to be the noblest, the most aristocratic of Africa's people. "Why then," he asked, bitterly, "are they killing each other?" A few weeks later, Ahmed died of what an earlier age would have called a broken heart. I watched as his small body, wrapped in a shroud, was dropped into a grave in a Providence cemetery, far from his home. A small circle of Muslims around the grave murmured the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

I might mention that the Naval Command College officers enrolled in the Foundations of Moral Obligation course sometimes expressed puzzlement over pressure from high places to devise and publish codes of ethics for military services. Did not the U.S. military, particularly officers, have codes enough as it was? Some explained this official concern with what they called the American passion for communication. Others put it down to the alleged survival of American Puritanism. Still other ventured that perhaps Americans were rather wild and need a bit of restraint<sup>¾</sup> something like Australians. An officer of the Royal Navy, true to his British tradition, said that while it might be a good idea to have a code of ethics for the military, "above all, don't write anything down" (Wittgenstein would have liked that). A Danish officer said that all who came aboard his country's navy were given simple precepts: don't lie, don't steal, don't get drunk—more than once a week. Seriously he added that those in his navy's service could be assumed to bring a modest amount of civil decency with them. Someone then said that Denmark was a small country with a relatively homogeneous population, while neither could be said of the United States, and that certain presuppositions about the values Americans brought with them to the military could no longer be entertained. From these considerations, I would draw conclusions not entirely pessimistic, though my evidence for countering pessimism is confined to the small quarter of my own experience in what may perhaps be a special world. Our navy has had bad press in recent years; the *New York Times* dutifully recounts its lapses in detail. There was the *Iowa* disaster of 1989, subsequent investigations awkwardly handled. Tailhook of 1991 was of course deplorable, though some of the media hyped it up to the level of an eruption of devils right out of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch (it was bad enough as it was).<sup>1</sup> The latest report on the 1992

cheating affair at the Naval Academy raises again the question of the Academy's commitment to ethical responsibility, despite the Superintendent's and the CNO's long and hard work over recent years to stress ethical awareness in the service.

Perhaps after justice is meted out in the cheating case to those who deserve it, another look at educational methods, including test construction, might be in order. We live today in a computerized world whose atmosphere hums with total information, full of strange airs like mischievous Ariels whispering unasked for information to reluctant ears. I believe the American public and press still assume that the American military acts according to high standards and values. Let me support this assertion by a personal note which may seem exaggerated or even soft-headed. Fourteen years of service at the Naval War College in the company of mid-career officers who studied there¾all made an indelible impression on me of that person Wittgenstein recognized as "a decent human being" or "a real human being"¾a human who is good and not merely good *for* something, like jungle fighting, communications, managerial skills, night flying, air combat, or military intelligence. Just *good*, period¾something akin to that basic quality G.E. Moore pronounced simple and undefinable. Of such a one who had it, couldn't define it further—like Chesterton's mean man, you couldn't say anything about him other than that he was just plain *mean*. I simply could not believe some of the tales certain officers told me about superiors who were tyrannical, paranoid, egoist bosses who were careerist or crazy, flag or general officers who shouted "Find the man! Fix the responsibility! And punish!" Where did those strange, aberrant creatures come from? Not from the likes of officers I worked with—male or female, from Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard. All of them over the years were *good*. Impossible they should be anything else.

Now in retirement, I remember them and the talks we had, those seminar discussions, the office visits when neither of us looked at our watches. Remembering those hours in nostalgia, sometimes troubled, I find myself misquoting the poet Auden:

Equal with my comrades then  
I still remember moments when  
Fear gave his watch no look;  
The lion griefs loped from the shade  
And on our knees their muzzles laid;  
And death put down his book.<sup>2</sup>

And I remember leaving them<sup>3</sup>for Anno Domini presented its claims<sup>3</sup>and I recalled the saintly Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov* saying farewell to his students<sup>3</sup>it could even be to us gathered here tonight:

Even if we go on to more important things, if we attain to high honor or fall into deep misfortune, let us remember how good it was once here when we were all together united by a good and kind feeling that made us better than we are.<sup>3</sup>

But, wait a moment<sup>3</sup>we recall that Wittgenstein has told us that whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent<sup>3</sup>that includes ethics. And here we've been speaking about it all this time!

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<sup>1</sup>In their recent (1993) useful book *Crossed Currents: Navy Women from WWI to Tailhook* Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall give a brief, dispassionate summary of the Las Vegas '91 incident.

<sup>2</sup>The original lines may be found in W.H. Auden's "A Summer Night," *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 733.