An Unpublished Foreword[1]

Stanley Hauerwas

What Is Ethics All About? was published in America in 1969. The book had been published in England in 1968 under the title, *Law, Love and Language*. I would like to claim that I was drawn to read McCabe's book because I recognized that he had forged from Wittgenstein and Aquinas a way to think about ethics that avoided the intellectual dead ends so characteristic of Catholic and Protestant debates about the moral life then and unfortunately still present today. However, that I was lucky enough to read *What Is Ethics All About?* the year it was published was sheer dumb luck. I had just graduated with my Ph.D and I was looking for a press that might be interested in my dissertation, which carries the zinger title: *Moral Character as a Problem for Theological Ethics*. Because my work drew on Catholic sources I thought a Catholic publisher might be more likely to publish my work. Someone recommended a new publisher called Corpus Books, and they were interested in my work. In order to show me the kind of book they wanted to publish, they sent me *What Is Ethics All About?*. That is how I came to read *What Is Ethics All About?* in 1969.

The only reason to report how I came to read *What Is Ethics All About?* is to help explain why McCabe's book did not have the impact it deserves. I believe *What Is Ethics All About?* is one of the most important books to have been written in ethics and theology in the last century. Though it lacks the intellectual mapping of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, I think McCabe's accomplishment in this remarkable book to be as important as MacIntyre's work. But if McCabe's book is so significant, why have the debates in Catholic moral theology and Protestant ethics been carried on as if the book had never been published? Surely one of the reasons is that Corpus Press soon went out of business, which meant that *What Is Ethics All About?* remained unknown in America. We should therefore be extremely grateful that Chapman is again making the book available. My only hope is this time the book will have the impact it so richly deserves.

I wish I could attribute the failure of *What Is Ethics All About?* to influence the debates at the time entirely to its publishing history.

[1] Commissioned for the new edition of Herbert McCabe's book, but by mischance not included.

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One of the reasons the Corpus edition of the book may not have been read was McCabe was not well known in America. I read the book but I had no idea who Herbert McCabe was. But even in England the book failed to have the influence it deserved. The problem in England may have been that Herbert was too well known. He became famous because he had been dismissed in 1967 as editor of *New Blackfriars* when, in the interest of responding to his friend Charles Davis for leaving the priesthood and the church, he acknowledged that the church was "plainly corrupt." I have wondered if his "notoriety" may have distracted some from recognizing *What Is Ethics All About?* for what it is: that is, an extraordinary restatement of Aquinas' moral theology made possible by Wittgenstein's work.

No one in England will need to be told that Herbert was a Dominican priest, but some readers in America may not know his ecclesial status. Of course no description, even the description "Dominican," can do justice to his larger-than-life life. Herbert certainly was a Dominican "all the way down," but he also became a citizen of Ireland, had sympathies with Marxists, and was a gregarious intellect that gave friend and foe alike no quarter in argument. That is why it is no surprise that Alasdair MacIntyre in the "Preface" to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* acknowledges the "special debt" he owes to Herbert McCabe, O.P., whose "pertinacious criticisms of my Carlyle Lectures have had a sustained impact on my views." The change in MacIntyre's views of Aquinas' significance from *After Virtue* to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* no doubt is due to many factors, but surely Alasdair's regard for Herbert's reading of Aquinas had some effect.

It was my great good fortune to have been claimed by Herbert as a friend. One of my favorite memories of Herbert is sitting in the back at Blackfriars, drinking warm beer, and arguing about *Centesimus Annus*. I had written an article quite favorable to the encyclical that McCabe thought insufficiently critical. In particular he thought John Paul II rightly suggested that there were many different kinds of "market" societies, but he failed to make clear that socialism is equally diverse. As a result, the Pope seemed to favor "capitalism" over "socialism." His point was as true as it was obvious, but I had missed it entirely. Thanks to Herbert I was able in a later revision to acknowledge his point.

My debt to Herbert, however, goes well beyond what he taught me about *Centesimus Annus*. Anyone reading *What Is Ethics All About?* will quickly discover how "unoriginal" my work has been. Most of what I have said was said by Herbert in 1968. Indeed not only did Herbert say what I have subsequently said, but he often did it better and more clearly than I have been able to do. I have wondered if one of the reasons Herbert's account of ethics in *What Is Ethics All About?* did not have the influence it deserves is due to the effortless way he got right what is so hard to get right. His argument is so

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elegant and his examples so apposite one might be tempted to miss how he is trying to help us avoid theory driven mistakes that make it impossible for us to see what is right before our eyes.

Herbert was too erudite to need to display his erudition. For example, his argument in Chapter One that we cannot know what we mean by love if we persist in the belief that love is something other than behavior clearly draws on Wittgenstein's arguments against a private language. Of course he knew that the activities love names will always be complex, but that is why, as he observes, "there are no short cuts to understanding what love is." His comment that natural law does not require a law-giver is his response and critique of Elizabeth Anscombe's famous attack on modern moral philosophy for trying to maintain some account of the law-like character of morality without a law giver. McCabe's ability to go to the heart of such issues without needless complexity may have tempted some readers to overlook the revolutionary character of his work.

Hopefully the more than thirty years that have passed since the publication of *What Is Ethics All About?* will make the significance of McCabe's arguments apparent. For example, I suspect few readers in 1968 grasped fully McCabe's contention that the division between matters of fact, which are assumed to be matters of truth, and normative judgements (which Herbert calls "comment") is the result of a liberal world-view rooted in the economic structures of a capitalist society. MacIntyre's arguments in *After Virtue* have at least prepared the ground for us to see the importance of McCabe's rejection of the fact/value distinction. Neither "facts" nor "values" but descriptions shape our moral lives, which means nothing is more important than helping us recover the politics that shape our speech. (Interestingly enough, Julius Kovesi's important book *Moral Notions*, which also made description the center of ethical reflection, was published in 1967. The significance of Kovesi's book, like Herbert's *What Is Ethics All About?*, remains largely unacknowledged by philosophers and theologians alike.)

Of course, 1968 was also the year *Humanae Vitae* was published. *Humanae Vitae* dominated all subsequent Catholic conversations about ethics. Even when *Humanae Vitae* was not mentioned, even when the discussion seemed to be about issues not related to contraception, e.g., nuclear war, the analysis was still shaped by *Humanae Vitae*. Though *What Is Ethics All About?* provided not only a devastating critique of situation ethics as well as a substantive alternative, proportionalists or their critics ignored the way McCabe provided an alternative to that hopeless debate – a debate that seems to have decisively ended with *What Is Ethics All About?*. Indeed one may hope with the republication of *What Is Ethics All About?* that some may find it useful to compare McCabe's understanding of what Aquinas called the object of the act with *Veritatis Splendor*. I am

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not suggesting that McCabe would agree with every paragraph of *Veritatis Splendor* – in fact I suspect he would disagree with some of the interpretations or use of Aquinas in the encyclical – but I think he might well think that at least *Veritatis Splendor* got the discussion in the right ballpark.

After reading a number of Catholic moral theologians, Alasdair MacIntyre concluded that Catholic moral theologians were no longer much interested in God, but they were passionately interested in other Catholic moral theologians. Herbert was passionately "interested" in God. He had no time for the distinctions employed by Catholic moralists to avoid the obvious implications of their positions. That is why this book can be read for profit by those not schooled in the work of Aquinas or Wittgenstein as well as it can be read by scholars of those figures. Only a mind and soul crafted by long study can write with the clarity and confidence that makes this such a beautiful book for anyone desiring to live truthfully and well.

I confess I so admire Herbert, his work, and, in particular, *What Is Ethics All About?* that I have to fight the desire to turn this "Foreword" into an "Introduction." However, I think there is a question that some readers may entertain that should be addressed, namely, given the strong Christological center of my work how can I so admire what many would interpret as McCabe's strong natural law perspective? The answer is quite simple. I have in several places noted I like very much Herbert's account of the "county council" understanding of natural law. Indeed I find quite persuasive his grounding of natural law – and particularly how such "law" is commensurate with our being constituted by linguistic communities – in our biology (though I am not as confident as Herbert that we can clearly distinguish between species). I think he is right to insist that human morality is about doing what we want, and ethics at its best but an attempt to assemble reminders to aid us to be what we were created to be, that is, to enjoy life.

Not to be missed, however, is Herbert's equal insistence that every moral problem of the slightest interest is about who is to get hurt. Moreover, any theory of ethics that attempts to avoid moral tragedy cannot help but mislead us. Accordingly, Herbert rightly insists that the crucifixion of Christ transforms the problem of ethics – that is, the problem of the significance of human behavior – into the problem of sin and holiness. The morality we discover through the languages that make us capable of community is, therefore, subject to the new language that is nothing less than God's very word, Jesus Christ. If I have been read by some to be saying anything different from Herbert, and it may well be my fault, then there has been a failure in communication.

Some may find Herbert's examples a bit dated, but I do not think anyone will miss the main outlines of his position because they are

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unfamiliar with this or that reference Herbert may have made. They may well, however, miss his wicked sense of humor. For example he criticizes those who still think some account of human progress is possible. He observes such a view belongs to a world prior to the concentration camps, that is, "the world of Teilhard de Chardin." Many unfamiliar with Teilhard de Chardin may fail to "get" how appropriate and how funny Herbert's reference to de Chardin is. I hope, however, no one will miss his suggestion that Latin is no longer a living language, that is, it no longer is capable of creations of new meanings, and that is why it "is used for certain ecclesiastical communications."

Herbert McCabe died on June 28, 2001. During one of our last visits I was badgering him to write his "big book" on Aquinas. He told me he had learned a great secret: "If you wait long enough your students will write your books for you." No doubt, modest man that he was, Herbert believed his students capable of writing books better than he might write. But I think anyone reading this book cannot but regret that there will be no more books written by Herbert McCabe. Yet we can rejoice that we have *What Is Ethics All About?* a great book written by an even greater soul.

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