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Ethical Thinking and Philosophy[1]

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Abstract

Ethics has captured the attention of many today—for a variety of reasons. However, different conceptions and expectations of what is involved in addressing the ethical challenge have also arisen. Clarifying the nature of the ethical task, this essay argues for the need to *think through* the judgments we make and the decisions we take on ethical situations and to *investigate more critically* the basis of such judgments and decisions. Furthermore, it claims that in ethics, as well as in other areas of life, it is important to have an *overall vision* that should ground, inform and support any judgment or decision we make. Maintaining that ethics is a rational activity undertaken by rational agents, it shows how ethical thinking, particularly when it draws on philosophy, can help one to develop a moral sense and enable one to take a moral stance.

Keywords

Ethics – ethical thinking – philosophy – moral sense – moral stance

The Ethical Challenge

Ethics has become a particularly relevant topic for discussion and a subject for serious study. It has a very long tradition, of course; but nowadays one hears frequently of the need, because of abuses or concerns, to formulate and adopt ethical codes in various areas or professions. Advances in science and technology resulting in new developments in various fields, including medicine, have presented fresh ethical problems, some of which could hardly have been anticipated. The perception of a loss of moral values in society has sparked off a persistent demand for more ethical training at home, in schools, and in society in general.[2] For various reasons, not all of which are

[1] This essay is an excerpt from the Introduction and Concluding Comments of a forthcoming book titled "Ethical Contexts and Theoretical Issues: Essays in Ethical Thinking".

[2] There has been much talk of recovering the moral status of a country in the recent American presidential elections.

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altruistic or disinterested, "ethical," "responsibility" and "accountability" have become buzz words in present-day society. Ethics and ethical issues do indeed continue to challenge us.

Scholars, educators and practitioners have responded to this need and call by contributing the rich resources of their respective disciplines to the on-going discussion. Consequently, in addition to traditional courses and publications in ethics or moral theology, several more have appeared in specific areas, like bioethics, journalistic ethics, engineering ethics, business ethics and so on. Ethics committees and Institutes have been set up. Various consultancies, conferences and symposia have been organised. Programmes like "Ethics Across the Curriculum" have been offered. All these, and many others, seem to attest to the urgency and relevance of the topic.

The felt need for ethics, however, is translated into different expectations or conception of ethics and its challenges. There has always been a tendency to regard ethics as concerned with rules and regulations. Today that view equates ethics with codes of conduct. As a result, the ethical challenge is identified with the formulation, adoption and implementation of a set of clear guidelines that will regulate and evaluate behaviour or practice. This is particularly true in several professional bodies such as in medicine, science or business. Increasingly, however, this understanding of ethics also seems to underlie the call for ethics among politicians as can be seen in the kind of ethics committees formed for that purpose. Politicians are even hauled before such committees to establish whether one's behaviour can be deemed ethically appropriate or acceptable. Another common conception of ethics is that it is a matter of taking a position or even having an opinion on specific situations. Many times the debates on euthanasia, abortion, or evolving family structures, come down to this. Behind such a view of ethics is the assumption that ethics is ultimately a subjective judgment or decision that one makes. In some cases, it is even equated with simply expressing what one believes about or even what one feels about the matter. It is an assumption that is at times expressed as "in ethics there are no right or wrong answers", a statement that results from realising the complexity of arriving at an acceptable ethical point of view, or "in ethical matters, I want to be able to assert my freedom or to have a choice.", a claim that emphasises the subjective nature of the decision. Still another conception of ethics, which has long roots in society, is that it is the general consensus of the individuals composing that society. That view is sometimes referred to as "conventional or the majority view". One's behaviour is expected to be in line with what is agreed upon by that society. Sometimes this is equated with the culture of a particular people. Such an understanding of ethics especially comes to the fore as we become more aware of the diversity in the ways of life throughout the world.

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But ethics and its challenges are much more than that—when we take into account the nature and status of the moral agents and the factors which make up ethical decision-making itself. In ethics, one is simply not talking about asking for directions or guidelines. Nor is the agent merely an implementer of a pre-established rule or guideline. Although in judging what is ethical or not and in deciding which course of action to take, there is greater involvement on the part of the agent, this does not mean that an ethical decision is merely a matter of preference or choice. It is not necessarily the majority view of society or the culture of that society either. Because of our make-up as human beings, endowed with intellect and free will, such decisions and actions should be characterised by a certain amount of reflection and freedom on our part. It is for this reason that one must distinguish mere instinctive behaviour from human conduct in various contexts and the cultural from the social. Furthermore, exercising one's freedom is not the same as exercising one's freedom responsibly.

Ethical Thinking

In examining the ethical challenge, it is useful to be reminded of the importance of thinking in ethical matters—the main aim of this essay. While it would be rather naïve and even mistaken to claim that in the various expectations and conceptions of ethics sketched out above and the ethical task mentioned earlier there is no thinking involved, it is nevertheless true that in some cases the injunction to simply "follow your heart", "trust your feelings", or "go with the flow" would convey that impression. The same point could be made with the insistence on "abiding by the code" or "following the laws of society." Consequently, the need to *think through* the judgments we make and the decisions we take on ethical situations need to be pointed out. Furthermore, we should *investigate more critically* the basis of such judgments and decisions. In ethics, as well as in other areas of life, it is important to have an *overall vision* that should ground, inform and support any judgment or decision we make. Obviously, these claims belie a certain conception of ethics: namely, that ethics is a rational activity that is undertaken by rational agents. That has to be addressed, of course.

Philosophy as an academic discipline, and not just in ethics, has always been associated with this line of enquiry. In fact, philosophy as the love of wisdom is indeed interested not merely in raising questions to advance our knowledge but also, and even more importantly so, in pursuing any answers received in the hope at arriving at a more consistent and defensible point of view. Regrettably, often philosophical thinking—in the view of many, including some philosophers themselves—is seen to be such an intellectual exercise that it

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is perceived to be divorced from the concrete concerns of ordinary life. Rationality is often interpreted—unfortunately, some philosophical squabbles illustrate this—to mean disembodied thinking! Consequently, as we engage in more serious and protracted thinking—as is done in philosophy and in other disciplines—it could appear more and more abstract. This is inevitable. But hopefully this consequence of the pursuit of wisdom does not lessen the valuable advantage to our daily lives or restrict our ability to conduct what is really a human exercise.[3]

The Continuing Challenge of Ethics

As has already been mentioned, in ethical matters it is imperative that we engage in serious and protracted thinking if we want to arrive at a more coherent and more defensible judgement of what is ethical or not. Such a step is crucial for enabling us to act on what has been reasonably judged to be the right decision. While engaging in this activity will not necessarily prevent us from carrying out unethical deeds, it will nevertheless point us, and even motivate us to move, in the right direction. Such an exercise in ethical thinking is due to our nature as rational beings, endowed with intellect and free will. As in other situations that we find ourselves in, the more we engage in such rational activities, the more we develop our very humanity.

Ethical questions arise in various contexts, some of which may be more urgent and demanding than others, and for a number of reasons. But, irrespective of context and reason, they arise primarily and essentially because of who we are, rather than what we do even if they come to the surface because of what we are doing. For this reason they are fundamental questions. Because of their serious nature and the implications of any answers given, it is important to pursue them much more thoroughly than the other questions that we raise and the answers that we receive.

Science and medicine, for instance, are particularly important contexts today because the rapid advances made in these fields have created increasingly complex ethical problems. Keeping pace with the developments is difficult enough; but the newness of any discoveries, which in turn requires fresh ethical thinking, is certainly challenging.[4] The escalating demand that education adopt the so-called business model in conducting its affairs, including the educative process itself, leaves those of us in this business wondering whether it is really a "fit" since for many educators the focus of

[3] In *Philosophy in Context* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006), I develop and illustrate this point.

[4] Cf. S. Sia, "Science and Ethics: Some Fundamental Considerations," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 87, No. 1009 (May 2006), pp. 273–275.

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education is the human person rather than simply the outcomes. One important ethical consideration is how, in this change in academic climate, can educators continue to live up to the task of educating the moral person, and not just producing the skilled worker or the competent technocrat.[5] Psychology, a strong ally of education in many respects, has contributed research into moral development. Its methodology and findings are crucial in identifying the relevant factors which need our attention in our ethical tasks. An empirical discipline and science, it nevertheless shows how we need to probe into the theoretical underpinnings of conclusions reached. An investigation into the foundation of the empirical studies can throw some light into our understanding of ethics itself. Religion has been so closely identified with ethics that an important issue in the debate is whether one can have ethics without any religious belief or affiliation. The debate has been sharpened more recently with the allegation that religion actually corrupts not just the mind but also the conduct of its adherents.[6] Literature provides a channel for expressing our sentiments. They engage not just our minds but also our hearts. They provide insights into our very humanity and into our responses, including ethical ones, to the various challenges in the different concrete situations that we find ourselves in.

As these contexts[7]—and there are many others—alert us to certain concerns and challenges, an important response that can be made is to continue the ethical pursuit by focusing on specific theoretical issues. Philosophy is in a particularly strategic position to help in this respect since ethics has been an area that it has explored quite thoroughly. In fact, many ways of thinking that we have become familiar with as we discuss ethical situations are echoes, some faint while others are stronger, of philosophical ethical theories. Philosophers, down through the ages and throughout the world, have indeed focused on such important and fundamental issues regarding the good. The philosophical discipline itself can be useful in negotiating this rather complex, and in some cases unfamiliar, territory. The problem, of course, is that philosophers themselves are divided not just in terms of their respective ethical theories but also in what philosophy itself can offer us. So in turning to philosophers and their ideas, one strategy that can be followed is to enlist their help in our own ethical pursuit and in the task of shaping our own outlook on the ethical challenge.

[5] In "Education, the Business Model and the Bologna Process: a Philosophical Response," a plenary address given at the International Conference on Faith and Reason in the 21st Century, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania (October 10, 2008) I discuss this comment more fully.

[6] Cf. S. Sia, "Ethics and Religion," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 89, Issue 1024 (November 2008),pp, 702–709.

[7] The contexts cited here are those discussed in the essays in Part I of the book. They are not meant to be exhaustive.

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Martin Buber had a particularly apt way of expressing this point when he said that he merely opened the window to enable his readers to see the landscape which he was seeing and admiring.

In our ethical thinking, what can we learn from the philosophers? Here are a few suggestions.[8] Aristotle and Confucius have contributed enormously to the ethical traditions of the West and of the East, respectively. A comparative study of their ethical theories raises the question of the goal of moral striving since both of them were particularly concerned with this issue. The striking similarities of their ethical teachings bring out a related issue of the universality of ethics: to what extent can one talk of a global ethics given the enormous diversity of cultures? R.M. Hare, a contemporary moral philosopher, illustrates the direction taken by some philosophers as they see their own task in a different light. Concentrating on the fundamental issue of what we are doing in ethics, Hare supplies us with an ethical theory that has become known as prescriptivism. Ethics, in his view, is about making a moral judgment. It is about prescribing a particular course of action. He therefore shows us that there are subjective factors in ethical decisions since the nature of ethics itself involves the human agent more so than in other kinds of decision-making. On the other hand, an ethical judgement, given that it directs us in a certain way, raises the theoretical issue of the basis for such a judgment. The theoretical issue, therefore of the moral norm becomes particularly important. Thomas Aquinas has been regarded as the strongest proponent of one such moral norm; namely, the natural law. In turning to his philosophy, one can appreciate the importance of this issue for ethical thinking. At the same time, however, one should be aware of the background against which he formulated his version of this moral norm and ask whether—since a background can radically alter our perspective on reality—there is need to examine the natural law theory in the light of the changed understanding of nature in our contemporary times.

Turning to Martin Buber, we will see a different approach to ethical thinking. He starts with what he calls the "lived life"—our everyday experiences as we interact with one another and with the world. He talks of living life fully (but not in the sense in which this phrase is understood in other quarters). For Buber, living life fully is living life responsibly. It is a life of relations, and the kind of life that we cultivate transforms us. It is a life of responsibility; that is to say, responding with our whole being to all our encounters. Charles Hartshorne, who develops what can be called a relational ethics,

[8] The selection of philosophers here represents the thinkers whose insights are discussed in the essays in Part II of the book. The dominant ethical theories of Immanuel Kant and JS Mill have been omitted since the discussion of the philosophical theories is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

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supplies us with a metaphysical structure that draws out and develop further the world of relations that Buber speaks of. In dialogue with contemporary physics, Hartshorne developed the metaphysical concept of creative synthesis. It is also a more contemporary interpretation of nature and how it works. In this sense, Hartshorne puts forward an alternative understanding of a moral norm proposed by Aquinas and a metaphysical foundation of the world of relations that Buber speaks of.

Developing Moral Sense

One important lesson that we can learn from the selected philosophers cited above—as well as from philosophy in general—is that ethical thinking is not intended, given the nature of the ethical enquiry and the ethical task itself, to lead to clear, detailed and conclusive answers to ethical dilemmas and situations. Admittedly, this can be frustrating. But one can and should expect ethical thinking to challenge our presuppositions and even our initial conclusions precisely in the hope that we can reject, modify or substantiate them. Unreflected viewpoints or perspectives have a way of leading us astray even if we also have to admit that any protracted and extensive enquiry can and does lead to more questions. This is true in any field, and compounded in a philosophical study.

Despite inherent difficulties with ethical thinking, however, it does highlight an important area in human life and helps to focus on an essential human concern: how are we to live? Ethical thinking sharpens our ethical sensitivities, which may have been awakened in various contexts, literature being a very good example. It probes into our feelings, which psychology helps us to understand. It checks our particular insights against the wider picture. It facilitates and develops our "moral sense". Nurturing moral sense—as we should do in education and religion, among other contexts—and at times relying on it when faced with new situations—as we may have to at times in medicine and science and elsewhere—is a difficult task indeed. But ultimately, since we have to, and indeed do, make moral judgments, it is essential that we are guided by a moral sense that has been deepened and strengthened by continuous ethical reflections.

Moral sense is much than just moral sentiment or feeling. Moreover, it is not merely an intellectual ability that enables one to distinguish between right and wrong. Nor is it simply a direction one takes when one exercises one's free will. And yet all of these come into play since moral sense is ultimately based on our very humanity.[9] As

[9] There is a close association of "moral sense" with "conscience", but I am distinguishing the two because certain connotations associated with one would not necessarily apply to the other.

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human beings, we possess feelings, intellect and free will, and when we ask what is ethical and what is not and draw a conclusion, we make use of all these gifts.

The word "sense" carries different meanings, each of which we can avail of to shed light on "moral sense" (as used in the present context). "Sense", of course, means our five senses that enable us to be in contact with the outside world. The word is also used to refer to someone having "sense"; and we mean that that person does not just know but has the right knowledge. It can also mean simply, "in a particular instance", as when we qualify a statement or a claim when we say "it is true in this sense". But "sense" can also have a stronger meaning as a more or less coherent overall view as when we talk of "life making (or not making) sense".

The phrase "moral sense" draws on these meanings. It is through our senses that we accumulate experience, including moral experience, of the world around us. We require the right knowledge, and not just any knowledge, to enable us to act ethically. We need to be aware of the particularity of a situation to enable us to judge the appropriateness of our judgement or decision. More importantly—and this is where metaphysical thinking or the religious vision is specially relevant[10]—we ought to be informed by an overall perspective that helps us not just to situate the particular moral situation or context but also to judge it more consistently.

The various uses of "sense" and their applicability to the phrase "moral sense" means that ethical thinking should not be interpreted as solely a cerebral activity. It is a rational activity that involves all the abilities that human beings possess, including the use of our intellect. And since it takes place in concrete situations and particular individuals, it is an activity that draws on various sources, including gender, culture and religion, whenever we resort to it. It is, to use Charles Hartshorne's phrase, "context-dependent". Ethical thinking enables us to appreciate our own status as agents and recipients: beings with "moral sense" that needs to be developed so that we can indeed give a responsible response to the challenges of life.

Taking a Moral Stance

An ethical enquiry should lead not just to knowing what is right and wrong—in the broad sense indicated above—but ultimately to doing that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. For this reason, there is a justified expectation that ethical thinking should

[10] In the light of the worsening economic situation in the world, Christopher Jamison in "Might of Metaphysics" laments the lack of any clear moral compass and argues for the return to classical virtues. Cf. his article in *The Tablet*, 15 November 2008, pp. 9–10.

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facilitate our becoming more responsible, more civic-minded, and better behaved. Such an expectation is exemplified by the call for codes of conduct or the listing of virtues/vices. Moreover, one can ask how it will help us to achieve "the aim of moral striving", whether this is interpreted in the context of Aristotle, Confucius or Aquinas. Ethical thinking should motivate us, at least we hope so, to work towards the betterment of ourselves, of society and of the world we live. In short, does ethical thinking lead to our taking a moral stance?

Philosophers, like Aristotle and Aquinas, have always been aware of the distinction between knowing and willing, not just conceptually but also in reality. That translates to saying that knowledge of the good does not necessarily lead to wanting to do the good. Others, however, like Plato and Augustine, have insisted that the attraction of the good is such that it will make us pursue it. Thus, the more we get to know it, the more we would want it. For this reason, what bars us from ethical conduct is the veil of ignorance on our part. Common experience, however, would seem to favour the first point of view. We do need other incentives aside from knowledge, like law for Aquinas, to make us tread the ethical path. A more cynical observation would be that ethicists or moral philosophers and theologians, who spend their professional time studying and teaching ethics are not necessarily the most ethical human beings!

On the other hand, ethical thinking, while it may not necessarily lead to ethical conduct of the individual agent, nevertheless promotes and sustains it, at least indirectly. While knowledge of what is right needs other factors to make us want and pursue the good, ignorance of relevant information, including what is involved in making the ethical judgement or decision can easily lead to irresponsible or unethical conduct. The will to act, spurred on by our passions, is not sufficient to ensure that we are indeed acting ethically. Too many misdeeds—also in the ethical sense—have been performed in the name of righteousness or God's will. Since acting ethically is dependent on our knowledge of the situation, the more we know the relevant factors, including our moral norms, the less we are in danger of acting unethically.

Even if we cannot provide an indubitable connection, at least in the ethical sphere, between thinking and willing in Plato's and Augustine's sense, it remains nevertheless true that one's moral sense, developed through ethical thinking, does lead to what could be described as exemplary conduct. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi easily come to mind since both individuals as moral agents were inspired and sustained in their way of life and their moral stance by the principles, arrived at through constant and protracted reflection, that they subscribed to. While one may have difficulties with Kohlberg's methodology and conclusions, one can still accept that moral reasoning does promote moral growth (not necessarily in

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the hierarchical order described by him) insofar as one has harnessed one's thinking powers to broaden one's perspective and increasing the likelihood of being guided by this. Because of the kind of beings that we are, the more we engage in rational activities, the more we become truly rational. And that means that we are indeed developing our true nature and progressing towards our calling as responsible human beings.

In taking a moral stance—which leads to moral action—it is important once again to note that it is not simply a matter of deciding and then acting but of situating it against a wider background. Situation ethics, which focuses almost exclusively on the particular situation or circumstance as dictating the morality of an action, ignores the need not only to be consistent in our ethical judgments—a lesson that can be learned from Kant—but also to be the rightness of our judgment. In ethics, what is appropriate is not only always the right ethical decision. We have to guard ourselves against making simply ad hoc decisions. In this respect developing a moral sense—a sense of responsibility that is spurred on by what we can do but is constantly guided by what we ought to do or not do—is particularly crucial. This underlies the need for the larger picture.[11]

While certain ethical considerations do arise in specific professional contexts in a practical way, e.g. engineering, medical, business, all ethical debates by its nature is grounded in certain theoretical foundations. "What ought I to do?" (and the expected answer) in the ethical context is not as straightforward as they are in another context. Probing more fully into it, we will see that even in that particular situation, several factors have to be taken into account, e.g. intention, circumstances, values, and so on.[12] It inevitably leads to further questions: "What is the basis for one's judgment, and why does the question arise in the first place?" We need to "think through" the question itself and any answer that may be given.

Concluding Comments

Ethical thinking challenges us to provide a more consistent and more systematic answer.[13] In some cases the answer to the question "what ought I to do?" has to be a quick and even instinctive one. But in

[11] This where ethical theories—and the study of them—can have a role to play. Cf. S. Sia, "Teaching Ethics in a Core Curriculum: Some Observations," *Teaching Ethics* (Fall 2001), pp. 69–76.

[12] Absolutist ethics errs in not taking the specificity of the ethical situation seriously. While a case can be made for absolute principles, our knowledge of such principles is not absolute.

[13] This is not of course true with every ethical theory, e.g. Aquinas' natural law theory, insofar as his ethical theory starts with a more metaphysical vision.

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the ethical context, one's answer should be much more thoughtful. This does not mean that every time we find ourselves in an ethical situation, we cannot and should not act until we have undergone a prolonged and thorough process of thinking about the matter. Many cases, particularly medical ones, do not allow us that luxury for every problem. But ethical thinking can be of paramount importance as it can provide us with a "theoretical framework" that enables us to work out an ethical solution to the problem. The basis for one's judgment, even those done in a hurry, can be more firmly grounded. What ethical thinking does is to expose underlying theoretical assumptions and subject them to a critical evaluation, thus giving us an "early lead" as it were in urgent cases. Ethical thinking thus can be described as bringing to the fore, with a view to scrutinizing more critically, not just the questions we are asking but also and more importantly disclosing the underlying assumptions behind those questions.

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