Teaching Ethics: How My Approach has Changed

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Introduction

Teaching in general is a challenge because it is not clear what precisely, as teachers, we are doing or asked to do. Are we training minds to think creatively/correctly about a particular subject matter? This begs the question of what such thinking is and what criteria pertain to the practice. Are we training students to live lives worthy of the calling to be well-formed human beings? While this gets closer to what ethics teachers may think they are doing, it nevertheless raises its own set of questions, especially in our culture, as to who gets to name the standards.

Some people would hold these challenges to be radical alternatives, while others would hold them in a complementary relation. Regardless of how the matter is parsed, the really big challenge for ethics teachers is that contemporary pedagogy tends to be suspicious of anyone who would even claim to train students to become particular kinds of people. Even though, truth be told, good teachers inevitably do this, for it is well known that students emulate their most beloved instructors. Nonetheless, this pedagogical reticence has resulted in university ethics curricula consisting primarily of meta-ethics because, frankly, on whose authority are we permitted to say anything about what is right and wrong?[1]

This essay is more overtly autobiographical and self-reflective than I am used to writing. I adopt such a style here because I take it to be my assignment for this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. Hence, with some anxiety, I reflect on how my understanding of the discipline of ethics and my experience of teaching ethics in a college/university setting has changed over the years. How one teaches and what one teaches, even at what level one

[1] The distinction between meta-ethics and normative ethics is a standard division within the discipline. Meta-ethics discusses how ethical terms are used. Normative ethics seeks to show what makes certain actions right or wrong. For a discussion of the distinction, see Harry J. Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2012), 161-62.

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teaches, are deeply interconnected. It is not the case that one pedagogical approach fits all; in fact, I am not convinced that I have a "theory" of how to teach. Even within my own courses, I teach very differently depending on the subject matter. My reflections here focus primarily on teaching at the introductory level.

The Challenge Analyzed

How did it come to be like this? As a philosophy student in the late 1960s and early '70s, I had to read an assigned essay by Jean-Paul Sartre entitled "Existentialism is a Humanism."[2] This was a formative read. Whatever tensions there may have been between studying philosophy and having grown up Mennonite in southern Manitoba, this essay aroused my interests in a special way. At the time it seemed to name the state of modernity in a particularly clear manner, even though the essay, originally a lecture given in 1947, had as its purpose a defence of existentialism against its critics.

Sartre distinguishes between Christian and atheistic existentialism. He says that "what they have in common is simply the fact that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin with the subjective."[3] He clarifies with an example. A paper-knife is made by an artisan, beginning with a concept and then using certain material to make the concept real and functional. That is, there is something that the knife is *for*, and this something is fully determined by the artisan's idea and the material available to bring it to reality. For the knife, then, essence precedes existence. Religious folk, according to Sartre, see human beings as analogous to the paper-knife. We humans are created by God, who has fashioned us after an idea and a function. We too are *for* something. Sartre contends that, as an atheistic existentialist, he can say with greater consistency that since God does not exist "there is at least one being whose existence comes before his essence." In elaborating, he says, "we mean that man (sic) first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards."[4] For Sartre

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1956), 287-311.
[3] Ibid., 289; emphasis in original.
[4] Ibid., 290.

we humans are not *for* anything! In fact, we are "condemned to be free"[5] and are nothing other than what we define ourselves to be by our actions.

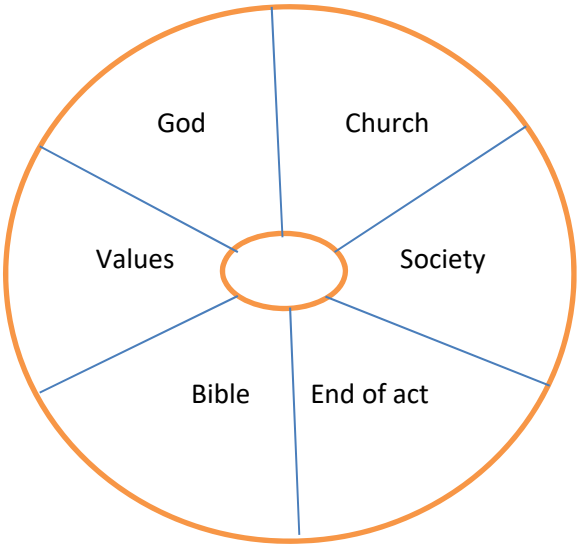
What was interesting to me at the time was that this view raised, more starkly than I had seen before, the question of whether there is indeed anything "given" to the notion of being human. It seemed that what Sartre was espousing as atheistic existentialism was the dominant practice of living in the 20th-century Western world. He was defining the autonomous individual. Of course, Christians would not accept Sartre's overt atheism, but accepting his view wasn't necessary in order to go with his program. What was necessary for Christian ethics was that we place ourselves before God, who calls us to make choices to act in ways that might please God.

What Sartre did in his essay was draw the conclusions of "the turn to the subject" that had begun with René Descartes's *cogito*, then cemented into the human psyche by the rationalistic philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and finally given Christian "evangelical" voice in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard: Ethics, like religion, is an altogether subjective and hence private matter. Hardly an arbitrary claim! From David Hume (philosopher, d. 1776) to Max Weber (sociologist, d. 1920) to Lawrence Kohlberg (psychologist, d. 1987), the disjunction between facts and values was made so total, and the values side so inadmissible for pedagogical training, that ethics—often (mis) understood as "value theory"—can at best be an empirical enquiry describing what values have in fact been held or are being held by individuals, groups, and cultures. But how then does anyone who wishes to speak of Christian ethics teach?

How Then Does One Teach?—Take 1

When I began teaching ethics at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in the early 1970s, I used variants of the following diagram as an aid. I took whatever issue was being discussed—abortion, war, euthanasia, suicide, homosexuality, gender equality, cloning, environment, and so on—and asked how we could negotiate a response in light of what we believed about God, church, Bible, current values, what was going on in society, and how we saw the ends and consequences of an action.

[5] Ibid., 295.



To make a personal decision either on what to believe about specific issues or on how to act, the self is called to be informed and then to choose from among the options that best "fit" with one's values. Of course, this approach creates extreme anxiety, exactly as Sartre described. We feel keenly responsible to do the right thing, but we have no firm basis upon which we can say with certainty, "here is the Christian view of what is right."

This is the model of teaching ethics that Kant, Kierkegaard, and especially the neo-Kantian historicist Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923), taught me.[6] Every generation, indeed every person, must figure out what is going on and how to fit into the current culture in a faithful manner. I found the most compelling account of a variant of this approach in H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*.[7] Niebuhr too had learned deeply from Troeltsch,

[6] My graduate studies in Kant's philosophy of religion in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and my 1981 dissertation at the University of St. Michael's College on "The Continuity of Axiology and Epistemology: An Examination of the Presuppositions of Ernst Troeltsch's Historicism," had me believing that ethics was a generic discipline of thought and hence whatever I was doing in teaching ethics, I needed to do it for everyone. Universalizability and cultural relevance were essential criteria.

[7] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York:

having written his dissertation on Troeltsch's philosophy of religion.[8] Niebuhr's paradigm of "responding to what God is already doing" instead of the traditional models of both deontology (duty to do the right thing) and teleology (seeking the highest good) seemed creative and refreshing. It helpfully exposed the limits of Kant and utilitarianism.

Teaching ethics on this model required that we pay special attention to the self, choice, what's going on around us, and decision-making. The challenge was to teach students to make good decisions. But as is plain rather quickly, the task is impossible. What could possibly constitute a "good" decision? Since "good" is conceived of in terms of subjective values, on the basis of whose values would decisions be judged to be "good?" This does not mean that ethics class was not a lot of fun. To be in a setting where teacher and students debate issues like war, environment, sex, and the economy, and where they bring all kinds of interesting perspectives to bear on the subject, and to hear extremely diverse perspectives, all of which must be taken seriously, can be quite entertaining. But it is not clear how it advances an understanding of anything "good" or "right."

This approach assumed a kind of "emotivism,"[9] where ethical issues are in principle irresolvable. To change someone's mind about an issue thus involves changing the person's attitudes and emotions. And how is that done? Normally, by making the case against the opposite view as revolting and disgusting as possible, and by making the case for the view defended as positive and pleasant as possible. That is, by changing emotions. This is the form that much moral discourse takes in society today. Just listen to political speeches. The case against abortion, for example, is made by showing the most horrific pictures and asking how anyone could possibly have positive emotions towards what these images depict.

An emotivist view makes it very difficult, on a scholarly basis, to

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Harper and Row, 1963). Niebuhr was no existentialist. He sought to combine the thought of Troeltsch and Karl Barth.

[8] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1924).

[9] Emotivism is the view that ethical statements do not assert anything that is true or false but are merely expressions of emotions; they are emotive utterances. To say something is good is to utter a positive emotion or attitude towards it, and to say something is bad is to utter a negative emotion towards it. Ethical debates are therefore never resolvable.

measure as better or worse any presentation of moral rules, standards, or values. It is akin to teaching students to like the taste of Gete Okosamin giant squash, which some of us might think important but no one would consider justified as a subject of study in universities.

Reconstruction

I have traced my teaching, beginning with the aid of luminaries such as Kant, Troeltsch, and Niebuhr, all deeply nurtured by the Enlightenment vision. And I have found it necessary to assess where the Enlightenment has taken us. On the one hand, it liberated thought (consider Kant's *sapere aude* ("dare to reason") from a tradition that at times seemed content with "declaration" as a sufficient rationale for truth. On the other hand, tradition had kept the world united, refusing the ugly binaries of fact and value, faith and reason, and so on.

The pre-Enlightenment world indeed held some sway over me. Although grossly generalized, here is how it seemed to work with such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Ethics is a "science" based on the knowledge of God through divine revelation found in Scripture and reason.[10] It serves as a structure of knowledge (s*cientia*) underwriting particular virtues that well-formed human beings must practice. The virtues are not subjective values that one may or may not hold; they are moral skills that one should learn to excel in. A helpful analogy may be a game like football. The skills appropriate to football are determined by the end (purpose) of the game, and they are *required* (not optional) to play the game well. Similarly, the moral virtues are required for people to become who they are created to be by a benevolent creator. Hence, ethics and faith are intrinsically connected—faith is not private, and ethics is a public skill available for all to practice.

North American students find this model of ethics to be quite foreign. It challenges and threatens their cherished view of the autonomous self that has been re-enforced since childhood, namely that we should be able to express ourselves in thought and action in whatever way we choose, provided that it does not interfere with the rights of others to do likewise.

[10] By the term "science" Aquinas means something like knowledge based on faith and rational discourse (s*cientia*) making faith intelligible. Faith and reason, like facts and values, are not discontinuous bifurcations.

Hence, when it comes to the ethics of relating with others, consent is the principal ethical category.

My approach to teaching ethics changed significantly in the mid-1970s, when I began to see the paucity of what I had learned from my teachers. I became more and more convinced that how we ought to live and what we should do has fundamentally to do with *who we are* both as individuals and as communities. And who we are has to do with how we place ourselves into the drama of life given to us by creator God. That is, the autonomous self is not the center of the moral enterprise. My original model simply couldn't deliver on the Christian moral life. Rather, life emanates from divine action. This I learned especially from Karl Barth (d. 1968), who had issued a sharp *Nein* (No) response to a Troeltschean style of approach to theology and ethics.

On a Barthian view, God calls a faithful community of believers into being who seek to express a life of praise to God. This was the life of Abraham (the Call), of Moses (the Commandments), and Jeremiah (the Prophet), and so on. And it is the call of faithful communities today—the church—based on the confession that Jesus Christ is Messiah. Herein lies the moral mandate for Christians: placing ourselves into the life of a concrete Christian community that both foreshadows a future and postshadows a past. The original creation of peace and justice (Genesis 1 and 2) is embodied in Jesus Christ and will be consummated in the last days. This is the reality, like the game of football, into which we are invited to live a life of faithfulness. This "game" of commitment and struggle *is* the ethic. Or, as Stanley Hauerwas has put it, "the church is a social ethic"[11] as distinct from the church *having* a social ethic.

This reading of the context of faithfulness requires a significant rethinking of the moral enterprise. No longer can what is going on around us determine what social issues should be addressed and responded to. It is instructive to see that the peace that Christ teaches, and the violence he names in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, go far deeper than what was readily apparent to his hearers. Many simply could not see what he was talking about. A significant task of Christian ethics is to open up (uncover)

[11] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

what is hidden; to expose what is wrong (harmful, destructive) with what is taken to be normal. Ethics is about entering a space from which we learn to see properly, long before it is about learning how to act or make decisions.

What is required to teach in this mode changes everything. It requires viewing Christian ethics as practical theology.[12] When it does this, it pays attention to several key factors. First, anthropology. The Christian story says human beings are created in the image of God. Although we are not told exactly what this means, somehow it entails that we are not ordinary animals. Human beings share a likeness with God that makes interchange or communication with God and others possible. This means that humans are best understood not as autonomous and independent but as deeply relational, communal, and interdependent. Moreover, this is not something that we *produce* from within ourselves; this "nature" is fundamentally *given* to us. In one sense, at least, we are not free. We are who we are because of what we have been given. At the same time, we are profoundly unlike God. While God is infinitely within us, God is also infinitely transcendent. We are disobedient, we sin, we reach far beyond our grasp, and we fail even in our best intentions. The potential of our salvation as well as our faithful walk does not lie within us but beyond us, to the very creator to whom we owe our existence and to others.

Second, the incarnation is a seminal event for Christian ethics. When God is reconceived through the faithfulness of Mary ("May it be with me according to your word," Luke 1:38), we see humanity in its fullest possible expression. Who we are comes into focus in Jesus Christ. This is the affirmation of the early church creeds when they speak of Jesus Christ being "fully God and fully human." It follows from this that Jesus is both worthy to be followed (fully God), and capable of being followed (fully human). Theological anthropology, therefore, ties human identity not to a reality that we create on the basis of our actions, but to a reality that emanates from creator and redeemer God.

[12] When ethics becomes theology, much changes. Immediately it ceases to be abstract and is provided with content. Generic thinking and universalizability are then no longer its characteristic features. Karl Barth is important here.

John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*[13] and Stanley Hauerwas's books such as *A Community of Character*[14] give a nuanced account and interpretation of what incarnation ethics entails. Following Jesus has concrete social import in ways that Troeltsch and Niebuhr thought impossible. The dominant teaching of ethics popularized by these and other scholars was that Jesus was far too radical to be a model for social responsibility, given contemporary sensibilities. To teach moral responsibility therefore required looking elsewhere for guidance than to the one who says "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek." Moreover, the argument goes, Jesus never intended his teaching to be a guide for how to live within the world as we know it—it was for a future time!

Yoder and Hauerwas presented an alternative that challenged this reading of the Jesus story. With them it became possible to ask what it might look like if Christians gave up the Kantian principle of universalizability and developed a view of ethics based on discipleship. In fact, Hauerwas critiques the notion that there is such a thing as ethics in general, suggesting instead that every ethic needs a qualifier.[15] Why? Because without it, ethics is abstract and without content in precisely the way that the Kantian categorical imperative demands. Christian ethics is for Christians, not in the sense that non-Christians should pay no heed but in the sense that Christian ethics without theological convictions (such as, that in Jesus the Messiah has come) is vacuous. This insight made it possible for me to teach ethics as a Christian "theological" discipline.

On this approach, Christian ethics is, as I have suggested, about ecclesiology, the third key factor in this reconstruction. That is, it is about a "community of character" called forth to live out the story following from the confession that "Jesus is Lord." The story calling us to live in faithfulness to the life and teachings of Jesus has its roots in the creation narrative, Abraham, and the prophetic witnesses, and culminates in the cross and resurrection. Christian ethics thus has to do with bearing witness in concrete

[13] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994).
[14] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
[15] Cf. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 17-24.

human existence to the confession that life is a gift in response to divine mercy. This is a life where outcome is trumped by faithful witness.

The church relates to the social and political realities around it as a specific space, which in open acknowledgement places people into what God in Jesus Christ is doing; calling to account the abuses of power, upholding the vulnerable, feeding the hungry, and foreshadowing a future reign of peace and justice. It does this through cleansing and commitment rituals, through practices of compassion, love, forgiveness, and through offering alternative interpretations and actions for the redemption of all humanity.

Fourth, this approach assumes a particular account of how we place ourselves, others, and the entire creation within the moral imagination. Like the ancient Christian philosophers have argued, it requires that we distinguish between who we are (or where we are) as a matter of contingent fact, and who we could be if we were fully who we are meant to be. While our identity is given in the "word made flesh," it is never fully expressed by us. This is important, for it guards against an all-too-common Christian arrogance. The language invoked here is that of virtues and sins. Traditionally the seven deadly sins[16] are the behaviors that pull us away from being fully who we are; the virtues are the skills that help us be more fully who we are called to be.[17]

The moral community, then, forever seeks ways of avoiding the powers that thwart the path toward goodness and of cultivating the skills (virtues) that move towards goodness. We are never fully there, but we can be on the way. Such practices as forgiveness, worship, and seeing rightly move us in this direction. Yet these are not merely the practices of the church, for the church seeks constantly to point towards, and to give expression to, what the world is called to be and ultimately will be.

How Then Does One Teach?—Take 2

As my view of Christian ethics changed, so did my style of teaching. I wrote *An Introduction to Christian Ethics* out of these new convictions. Students

[16] The seven deadly sins are: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

[17] Here I have learned much from Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984) articulates the failure of the discipline of ethics in Western Christian thought. His lament that ethics had become an altogether unintelligible discipline seems exactly right, and his reconstruction of ethics on the basis of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought is compelling.

need to understand how the history of Western development and thought has made the common notion of ethics unintelligible. That is, their first learning should be in effect an unlearning of contemporary habits of thought. For example, students find it very difficult to conceive of life from the standpoint of gift and patience in a world of technology, capitalism, and speed. They should learn to see what alternative approaches there are within history itself, approaches often crowded out by more "enlightened" views. The first task of teaching is thus to present a historical account of the failure of ethics.

Second, given that several academic disciplines have defined the terms in which ethics is discussed, students must learn this language in order to enter into ethical discourse. Hence, the most salient contributions of theology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology must be briefly presented. Third, the approach I am suggesting has to do more with modeling one's life after another than with learning how to think correctly or decide wisely. Students are encouraged to consider models of how people of faith have gone before them, and have lived and reflected on matters of faithfulness. These lives are examples of how it has been done—not perfectly, but as a matter of contingent fact. My book presents twenty-two stories of theologians and their biographies and thoughts. The pedagogical conviction behind this is that students can learn how to be good people best by encountering real lives rather than merely by hearing moral theories and debating moral issues. The challenge is to learn the importance of nuance, place, and passion.

As for ethical issues, they get discussed once students gain the capacity to see that issues have contexts and histories, and can appreciate that what makes something an issue comes out of moral imagination. What this additionally means is that the Christian narrative must illuminate the human complicity within a world of consumerism, and the violent protection of goods and property not only from our immediate neighbors but from the poor nations. Justice and peace are not concepts that apply only to particular issues, they are ways of being. Teaching Christian ethics is therefore about asking how we see the Christian faith, and how we can live it in such a way as to be part of what God is doing in the world. It is about how we understand humans being in the world before it is about how we decide to act. Yet, at the heart of it all, this teaching is about inviting students into an active way of seeing the world and their place within it; into a place of worshiping God

in a broken world, and breaking through the manifold pain with concrete signs of hope.

I grew up in a Mennonite family and church where *Nachfolge* (discipleship) was taught and practiced. When my mother gave us moral counsel, she did not list rules to follow or acts to avoid. She challenged us instead to "remember who we are." Presumably, she meant by this—at least this is how we children understood it—that we were to remember we were followers of Jesus Christ. This was our moral guide. Upon reflection, these words suggest that it is important to become people of character (both as individuals and communities) worthy of bearing the description "Christian." We are indeed *for* something; we are not our own.

It is interesting for me to realize that at the end of my teaching career, after studying philosophers and theologians of significant import, I have come to teach ethics much like my mother taught me as a child. For students to notice this, and to take up the challenge of remembering who they are, is perhaps to offer them something too simple. Yet it could well be that there is little that is more profound.

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