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Richard A. Hoehn

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ETHICS AND DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY

In his book, *On Human Care*, Arthur Dyck cautioned that ethical inquiry not be reduced to descriptive or empirical inquiry.[1]   He opposed the view that "ethics . . . is an expression of the feelings of the majority." Dyck pressed this opinion, insisting that ethics has to be something more than a collection of the rationalizations of peoples' preferences. If ethics is merely a cataloging of popular opinion, he points out, we might as well study sociology and psychology to find out what we ought to do.

Ethics, he claims, is something different, maybe something more. He is right; there is a difference between ethics as a normative inquiry which deals with the *ought*, and "sociology of . . ." or "psychology of . . ." studies which are descriptive inquiries dealing with what *is*. There is, however, another serious side to the issue — a side to which both pastors and ethicists need to pay close attention. Both professions frequently take off on their normative inquiries without first having done their empirical homework. The recent flurry of concern about homosexuality is an illustration. One reads articles produced by ethicists, and hears conversations (though not yet a sermon) by pastors, who hold that while the facts aren't all in about the nature of homosexuality, nonetheless the choice of this life style is "less than optimal," or downright evil. More often than not, normative judgments are made before the speakers have done their homework by studying the condition of homosexuality, or the expressions of the homosexual lifestyle. Their empirical homework consists of a few articles, texts, or perhaps a program on television which explores the homosexual life style "in depth" (in thirty minutes).

Ethicists and pastors speak from an understanding of the world accumulated through personal experience, books, the media, and observation of the lives of

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1. Arthur Dyck, *On Human Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

people around them. Sociologists and psychologists take these same general impressions and submit them to a process of disciplined inquiry. They try to determine which, among many conflicting opinions, more closely conform to social reality. They probe beneath the apparent in order to discover whether there is a less apparent, more basic, layer of human reality which has heretofore escaped attention. They look to broader contexts to discover whether that which is personally experienced is also true for other people, or whether it is merely an accidental bundle of idiosyncratic experiences.

Sociology and psychology, or for that matter any of the descriptive sciences, need to inform moral judgments. Even more strongly, ethics cannot responsibly be done without serious attention to descriptions of the character of the modern world. The grounds for this assertion are obvious in some inquiries; less obvious in others. If someone seeks to form an opinion about policy for the urban crisis, or a solution to a current economic problem, he or she would do a rather extensive empirical study of the nature of the problem and possible effective responses to that problem before embarking on the "what we ought to do's" of ethics. Such a study would be social scientific in character.

This is not to say that descriptive inquiry is always prior to normative inquiry. Perception that something is a problem in the first place may proceed from a normative vision of the character of social relations. Something is seen to be unequal, injust, oppressive. This normative judgment triggers the desire for the empirical/descriptive inquiry to help one better understand the lived situation. Normative standards may serve as compelling but rather imprecise images which draw attention to empirical situations which in turn become defined as "problems for inquiry." But, it isn't until those lived situations are explored in their depth and meaning that the inquiry can move back again in a more disciplined way to the normative side where one inquires into such things as the meaning of justice.

Many persons, who would agree that careful empirical studies ought to preceed normative and policy judgments, are less apt to see how studies of the moral life might likewise affect normative ethics. Yet there is an important relationship between descriptive and normative ethics — descriptive ethics (or studies of peoples moral lives) necessarily informs normative ethics. A good understanding of the moral lives of people is a necessary but not sufficient prelude to normative inquiry. Stated in reverse, every normative theory has within it an implicit anthropology and cosmology — assumptions about the nature of human beings (and thus within that the nature of being moral), as well as assumptions about the human condition in general.

The statement is made, for example, that ethical inquiry is rational thought about moral problems. The implied pedagogical principle is that if people are dealt with rationally they will come to see the irrationality of some of their beliefs and actions, and thus will be moved to become more moral, i.e., rational-moral. But suppose that people are not rational in the same sense in which the ethicist typically defines the word rational. Suppose that people act out of their interests and passions, and that rational thought is a justification of those non-rational premises. It would then be quite absurd for the normative ethicist to go on assuming that ethical inquiry as a solely rational endeavor is a meaningful enterprise. It might even be audaciously

claimed that the ethicist's own life is neither rational nor moral, and that his or her inquiries may be shaped as much by institutional location or class position as any supposed rational factors.

STUDIES OF THE MORAL LIFE

Recent studies and current pedagogies of the moral life can inform both the ways one goes about normative inquiry and the education of people to lead more moral lives. Thus, there has been a recent outburst of interest in moral education, especially through the vehicles of values education, and the Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The latter forms part of the regular curriculum for education in the Ontario schools. Teaching strategies, like normative inquiries, also have buried within them some understanding about the nature of the moral life. Thus, studies of the moral life assume some considerable importance to our understanding of the Christian moral calling in the world.

Studies of the moral life are as old as philosophy itself. Probably the most satisfactory exposition of the character of the moral life is Aristotle's phenomenology of the moral life in the Nichomachean Ethics. Since Aristotle's day most ethicists have picked up one or another of the many threads with which Aristotle dealt, and turned that thread into the "only way" to understand morality or do ethics.

Psychological and Sociological Theories

Many recent theories about the moral life are not based so much upon research into the moral life as they are theories about moral formation based on the theorist's own experience and knowledge. Among approaches of this type there are both psychological/psychoanalytic theories, and sociological or social psychological theories.

Psychoanalytic theorists emphasize the internalization of parental values through the process of cathectic identification early in life. The battle for morals and value orientation takes place below the level of consciousness, and depends upon the satisfactory accomplishment of certain personality developmental steps. The person's resultant behaviors flow from causes set so deeply, early, and determinatively that it is almost meaningless to speak of "normative ethics." The moral agent will work out his or her inner drives — listen to those inner voices — regardless.

Some psychologists who view persons as being essentially good believe that morality is a "force antagonistic to life and to love, a force causing illness and death — neurosis and psychosis, homicide and suicide."[2] Common societal moralities are ways of laying inappropriate guilt on people. If we would just leave them alone, they would do what it is their nature to do, and everything will be okay.

On the other side are those who have a less sanguine view of what it means to be

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2. James Gilligan, "Beyond Morality," in Thomas Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilston, 1976), p. 145. Gilligan opens his essay with the assertion that "Morality is dead."

human. People have an inherently viscious quality, and part of the function of morality is to keep us from destroying ourselves and each other. Morality functions as a set of mechanisms of social control which keep the social order going. Even religion functions as a mechanism of keeping people ordered and happy. Morality and religion are necessary aspects of social control devices in the evolution of culture. The parallel between psychological and theological, optimistic and pessimistic views is obvious.

Sociological theories, while not necessarily discounting the working of unconscious factors, tend to put more emphasis on the environmental socialization aspects of moral development. Thus, they emphasize how class factors, for example, contribute to the formation of certain moral beliefs. Social research in this style typically consists of quantitative correlations of class and attitude factors. Some sociological approaches are behavioral, while others are more functionalist in their approach to and understanding of the moral life.

Moral pedagogy in the psychoanalytic approach consists of therapy to rid people of the social norms inculcated in consciousness which occasion guilt, or perhaps counseling which would help people acknowledge their values and then accept them or figure out a strategy for changing them. A pedagogy which fits the sociological theories described would consist of insuring that children do have good socialization processes in the first place or that, when such processes are inadequate, means be provided for re-socialization. That is to say, the role of parents is to educate children to desire that which is good. The role of the school and church is to help youth discern how that orientation is applied in specific situations, to sort out good from bad judgments, to learn to foresee consequences of action, and to figure out how to translate good intentions into actual practice. It is only when one or another of these "moral educators" has failed to do its job properly, that other civic agencies step in to provide needed re-socialization. Many of our public programs evidence this sort of assumption about the character of social and moral education.

Occasionally one hears the cry that the schools shouldn't teach morals; this is the task of home and church. What is usually meant is that the school is teaching values which are different from those taught in home or church. The school cannot escape teaching all sorts of values whether they are dealt with directly or indirectly. Thus, if children are encouraged to sit silently in neat rows during classes, the value of public order is reinforced. If a child is suspended for fighting on the school grounds, the school has reinforced certain values about inappropriate kinds of interaction. If the school has any kind of dress code, certain moral standards are implicitly expressed. The human qualities and teaching style of the teacher establishes a role model and implicit norms for human communication. The reinforcement of sex role, ethnic, or racial stereotypes have important moral implications. Thus it is probably good that schools are becoming more informed about the sorts of value orientations which are foisted — wittingly or unwittingly — upon young people.

Values Clarification

Values clarification is a theory about how to raise such moral orientations to the level of consciousness where they can be affirmed or revised. Values clarification is

increasingly being used in schools and churches, and thus its presuppositions need to be examined.

This theory of pedagogy begins with the common sense observation that each day everyone must make countless decisions, and translate those decisions into actions. One moves through a myriad of practical tasks in the regular process of getting through the day. Precisely because most of these tasks are so routine one doesn't often stop to reflect about the values which lie beneath these operational decisions. One set of values may be in conflict with another set of values held equally dear. Or, values and acts may be incongruous. For example, one may believe that racism is evil and should be eliminated. Yet if no steps are ever taken to eliminate racism can one really claim that the belief is real, i.e., that it is sufficiently grounded in one's value system as to be something acted upon. Thus, values clarification aims at helping raise to consciousness the values upon which people actually operate and encourages them to examine those values over against the values they profess to hold.

Typical values clarification strategies consist of sentence completions, decisions about who is good or bad in a mini-morality tale, or processes which encourage the comparison of one's beliefs with one's practices. The best way to understand values clarification is to participate in some of the exercises.[3] The way the days of one's life are spent is an indication of the things which one values. If eighty hours a week are spent at work and adequate time is not spent with one's spouse and children, there is evidence that the work-task is valued more highly than the family. One may believe that one's family is the highest priority, but what does it mean to discover that this believed-priority actually is not an operational priority. If a person can't find time to go to church due to football games this is saying something about the values which are really held — regardless of what may be professed from time to time.

Values clarification is first and foremost a pedagogy, a way of getting people to think about the values they already hold, not to teach values or encourage any particular normative stand. Whatever values one chooses to hold consistently are fine. Thus, one could in principle imagine Hitler's S.S. sitting around doing clarification exercises in order to be assured that their policy of exterminating people is consistent with their basic values and perceptions.

However, values clarification bears within it some hidden assumptions of normative import — assumptions which say something about the character of the moral life, and the possibility of normative ethics. When some who do values clarification suggest that "it doesn't matter which values you hold, it only matters that you hold them consistently," they are making a lot of statements with moral import. Thus, doesn't it really matter which values are held? Is one set of values as good as another? Are life-denying values really on an equal plane with life-affirming values?

Furthermore, what does it mean to suggest that values should be held consistently? Does not consistency itself become a kind of norm? What does it mean to suggest that the process of value clarification gives rise to a more adequate value structure? The hidden assumption is that the moral life is characterized by dialogue.

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3. Among the many books available, one which has a lot of useful exercises is Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe and Howard Kirschenbaum, *Values Clarification* Revised Ed. (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1978).

Even the values clarification process done in private calls the doer to cast his or her values over against other values which he or she holds in the hope that the better values prevail. This internal dialogue is supplemented by dialogue in group settings which a number of persons are asked to discuss their value positions. It is assumed that out of this discussion some better or higher value orientation may emerge.

That the moral life is in fact characterized by varieties of internal and external dialogues does not obscure the fact that such an assertion has normative import — is not value free. Many normative ethicists find values clarification to provide some helpful techniques, but to be altogether too *laissez faire* for their taste. Furthermore, some say, the values which a person articulates in a classroom may have little or nothing to do with one's actual behavior in social settings.

Situational Studies

Most sociological research studies of the moral life have come to precisely this conclusion. The situations in which people find themselves have a very important effect on the way they behave. Situational studies, typically carried out by sociological behaviorists, try to determine which situations stimulate what sort of responses and/or correlate personality characteristics with typical responses.

The first major sociological study of this sort was carried out in the 1920s by Hartshorne and May.[4] Their findings, published in three volumes, suggested that regardless of character training or personality type, most people will act in immoral ways given certain kinds of situations. They also concluded that no matter what values people say they have, they may contradict those values in the way they act in real life situations.

Hartshorne and May's studies were criticized on a variety of grounds, some of which were legitimate. But later studies have tended to bear out their conclusions. Some experiments were done in the "field," i.e., in normal city settings, while other experiments were carried out under laboratory conditions.

Innocent bystanders were confronted with persons who suddenly collapsed while standing at a street corner, with persons on a subway who gave opposite opinions about which way the train was headed, and with simulated accidents of a variety of sorts. Their finding generally has been that under certain specifiable conditions people are more likely to become involved in "helping behavior" than in other circumstances. In one case, a study discovered that people were more likely to put money in a pot if there was a bell-ringing Santa standing beside it.[5]

One of the more interesting among these studies attempted to assess whether Princeton seminarians who were on their way to preach a sermon on the topic of the Good Samaritan were more likely to stop and help a person who appeared to be in trouble, than seminarians on their way to give a talk on a more neutral subject. Some of their central findings were that there was no correlation between the

4. Hugh Hartshorne, Mark May, and Frank Shuttleworth, *Studies in the Nature of Character* (New York: MacMillan, 1929-30).

5. Ted L. Huston and Chuck Korte, "The Responsive Bystander," in Lickona, *Moral Development and Behavior*, pp. 269-283. See also J. Macaulay and L. Berkowitz, eds., *Altruism and Helping Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1970).

message to be delivered and what they called Good Samaritan behavior. But there was a correlation between the degree of hurry in which the seminarians were placed and their willingness to stop and help the person whom they met enroute to the building where the message would be delivered. The greater the person's hurry, the less likely he was to stop and help. If seminary students on the way to preach on the topic of the Good Samaritan aren't likely to stop and help someone by the path, what hope is there that anyone with high moral commitments will act under even less favorable circumstances?

The most elaborate laboratory study done and one which attracted wide public attention was carried out by Stanley Milgram at Yale.[6] Milgram recruited naive subjects to participate in a project in which they believed that they were giving an electric shock in graduated amounts up to 450 volts to another ordinary citizen (a person who was actually an accomplice of the research team). One of the most important findings was that a startling number of people will, upon the command of a laboratory technician, administer what they believe to be a high voltage shock to another person who has done them no harm. If people are put in a setting where they give high credence to the authority of some other person, they will be willing to obey that person even if the person to whom they administer the "shock" cries and pleads for release, complains of a heart condition, and finally seems to be rendered utterly unresponsive.

Another of Milgram's findings was that people's willingness to continue with the experiment varied with their physical proximity to the "sufferer." In short, people will behave differently in varying circumstances. Milgram's findings about obedience to authority correspond rather closely to Bruno Bettelheim's observations of behavior in a concentration camp in World War Two.[7]

Developmental Studies

Also in the 1920s Jean Piaget was carrying out some studies of the stages at which children develop more sophisticated abilities to make and defend judgments.[8] He observed children playing games to discover how rules came into play and asked children to respond to mini-tales with characters who had done something "bad". Piaget's research was done over a long period of time and his conclusions fittingly detailed. Moral perceptions which children are unable to grasp at one age are more easily grasped at another. Furthermore, there are recognizable developmental levels in learning the rules of the game and in the ability to explain and justify those rules. Though people might get "stuck" at one level — progression was not automatic — there was a definite tendency toward moral growth. People tended to evolve from a heteronomous to an autonomous approach to moral judgments.

Lawrence Kohlberg also conducted an extensive research project in which he and

6. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

7. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1960).

8. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: The Free Press, 1965). For a summary of both Piaget and Kohlberg's work see Ronald Duska and Mariellen Whelan, *Moral Development: A Guide to Piaget and Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist, 1975).

his colleagues studied developmental levels of the moral life.[9]   His interpretation of their findings is often called "cognitive developmental," because it places emphasis on the intellectual developmental stages through which people progress as they move to moral maturity. Six stages can be described as people move from obedience to others (heteronomy) through "conventional morality," to "post-conventional or principled" morality. At this highest level people are able to articulate universal ethical principles and to view social events from a thoroughly rational, moral point of view.

Kohlberg's research method was similar, in part, to Piaget's. The interviewer would present a person with a hypothetical moral tale leading to some sort of dilemma in moral decision making. The person would then be asked to solve the dilemma and talk about why he or she was moved to that specific solution. By the time the person had gone through two or three stories, the interviewer would be able to discern a pattern of response. People tend to justify their moral judgments in patterned or consistent ways, Kohlberg observed. The six stages were inductively established on the basis of a large number of such interviews.

The Piaget and Kohlberg findings are significant for the teaching of morality. Kohlberg pointed out that people tend to move sequentially through those levels. The person who wishes to do moral instruction must first determine the present developmental level of the student and then gradually help the student to shift to the next higher level. If the teacher skips a level, the student will be unable to grasp what is going on. There is no point in trying to explain moral situations in terms of universal rules to a person whose developmental level has not prepared him or her to be able to grasp what is said. Cognitive developmental pedagogy consists of the resolution of moral dilemmas told in classroom tales and reflection on the grounds upon which one's judgments are based.

Kohlberg's model emphasizes the cognitive aspect of the moral life; his work has a Kantian base. The cognitive developmental model lends credence to styles of normative ethics which are heavily "rational," and pedagogies of the moral life which involve the development of rational principles. Even his decision that cognitive factors were the item first in need of study indicates something of the perspective from which the research has come.

Other kinds of perspectival presuppositions can easily be seen in this research effort, though they don't necessarily negate some of the project's findings. It's just that we have to be fully aware of both the possibilities and the limitations of any such project. Kohlberg decided to study moral decisions rather than moral actions in actual situations on the premise that a universal moral judgment is better than a highly particularized one. Yet perhaps it is more important to study why some people are moved to act on their decisions while others are not.

A Study of Moral Consciousness

Over the past five years I have been involved in my own research on the moral

9. Kohlberg's work is gradually being made available in a variety of places. See Duska and Whelan (above), and Kohlberg's essay in Lickona (above). A good introduction to this approach can be found in Peter Scharf, ed., *Readings in Moral Education* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978).

life.[10]   The study is not as extensive as that done either by Piaget or Kohlberg. But it does help bring to light some aspects of the moral life not treated in the above studies. I have interviewed persons who have shown an ongoing commitment to some form of social action in the hope that we could come to a better understanding of the occasions which quicken moral consciousness.

Every project has its philosophical assumptions. Mine were taken from the existential-phenomenological tradition which emphasizes the subject's point of view. Thus, the eighty persons who were interviewed were asked to articulate how they happened to become socially active. The interviews were unstructured and casual. People told their own "life story," or at least that part of it relevant to our project.

It is curious, interesting, even amusing to learn that Kohlberg originally was moved to ask his questions about moral decision making because of a personal experience which he had during war conditions where people had to make life and death decisions. One colleague of Louis Raths — progenitor of values clarification — has claimed that an early elementary school experience which Raths had may have been the seed which eventually grew into this pedagogy. Experiences are complex, fully textured, and have important shaping effects on our lives.

My own research has suggested something of the complexity which is entailed in moral awakening and the activation (or application) of moral commitments in deeds. Sometimes the moral awakening is experienced as an existential breakthrough when one's old moral frame of reference is shattered and a new one is constituted out of the old pieces and the new perceptions. This shattering can come from a moment of high emotion, from a "rational" insight or from circumstantial factors which push one to consciousness. The experience can be a sudden life-wrenching one, or the slow gradual unfolding of the "once-born."

This change of consciousness is very peculiar and seems to occur almost serendipitously. One can pass the same clapboard houses for days on end and then suddenly notice them. Suddenly it comes to one's attention that real people live there and that life in such circumstances must be miserable. The change can be generated almost wholly from within one's consciousness or by the impingement of external events which shake one's normal life routines. The change involves arriving at the right moment — a moment when events in consciousness correspond with events experienced outside one's body. It is a symbolic moment.

The move to activation of commitments is a separate moment in consciousness from that of moral awakening. People typically recount being almost impelled to act. "I just had to do something about it." They almost invariably have the feeling that responsibility for doing something about the situation (whatever it may happen to be) lies directly on their shoulders.

Since this project has aimed at gathering life experiences it should be no surprise that a pedagogy which would fit entails getting people out into the communities where they can directly experience some of the suffering and misery which are common in our world. While such a pedagogical style has some obvious limitations (what about the things which we can't experience directly, but which are nonethe-

less important), I have found it to be effective in practice. When people are directly confronted with the effects of poverty and racism in other people's lives, for example, they are more likely to respond positively to such problems. As another example, nothing seems to have as much effect in shaping people's perceptions of homosexuality as to discover that a loved friend or family member is gay; or to meet someone who cannot be dismissed on other grounds and discover that this person is as normal as everyone else.

Some Conclusions

This brief survey of some contemporary research efforts and pedagogies of the moral life has attempted to show that there are connections which bind empirical studies, pedagogies and normative theorizing together. While they may differ in approach and in basic theory, we still may be able to glean some results from each to help us in our understanding of the moral life, and in our efforts to construct pedagogies and normative theories.

1. People are morally educable. There are discernable developmental levels people can be expected to be able to absorb various kinds of moral insight.

2. Most pedagogies and research studies suggest that the dialogical process is one which can fruitfully be used to get people to examine and change their moral commitments.

3. The moral life is a complex phenomenon of consciousness. At any given moment one or another element may come into play in a way that causes it to dominate. But major changes sometimes shift the way one orients oneself to the world and to other people.

4. Situations do induce certain kinds of moral responses, but not in a necessary manner. While we can say that a certain percent of people are likely to respond to a given set of circumstances in a specifiable way, a strict cause and effect set of relationships does not exist.

Other conclusions could be drawn. But these at least lead us to examine whether over the long haul it will be ultimately fruitful to continue doing moral education as though the reformation of society depends solely on the gradual 1 + 1 process of moral enlightenment.

Our congregations need to use these pedagogies and learn from research studies. We need to do values clarification and cognitive developmental exercises in the classroom, meanwhile discovering community experiences which can move people to concern and action. Pastors themselves need to keep part of their consciousness inside their congregations, so that they can understand the base line from which their people move, and part of their consciousness with the communities of the suffering and oppressed, so that they will not be lulled by their own middle class contexts. At the same time we are called upon to reflect on the ethos of our culture, and to work for transformations of our social order which will enhance rather than undercut the development of human concern.