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Humanity as Community

A Prescription for the Ethically Possible

— JOSEPH P. HESTER, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, CLAREMONT, NORTH CAROLINA, USA

It was in 2010 when I published my first article for the *Journal of Values-based Leadership*.¹ Formerly I had written *Ethical Leadership for Public School Administrators and Teachers* published by McFarland in 2004. It was during this time that I was editing a leadership book for a businessman in Atlanta, Georgia² as well as exploring my own faith.³ Now free of earlier obligations, I began giving attention to my ethical views with reference to values-based or ethical leadership, writing “The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership.”

“The concept of “moral community” significantly enriches and extends the idea of the ethical leadership culture and renews the importance of servant leadership. Servant leadership reflects our commitment to moral principles and to the emerging leaders within our organizations.” — “The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership,” 2010, Joseph P. Hester and Don R. Killian

Discussing this article with Professor Don R. Killian, valued ideas were added and he was included as a co-author. Searching online for a publisher, someone in leadership

concentrating on ethical values, we discovered the *Journal of Values-based Leadership*. Looking through some of the articles previously printed in the journal, I was unsure if a business/leadership journal would publish an article with a decidedly philosophical bent. I misjudged the journal and its editor, Dr. Elizabeth Gingerich, JD, Professor of Business Law at Valparaiso University, as she was not only willing to publish our article, but later asked if I would join her team as an editor and has been supportive of my writing since that time.

Given my long history of writing, I understand many of my old ideas grew from my studies in theology and philosophy and have unsurprisingly been enmeshed with new ones, borrowed from my reading and discussions with friends and colleagues, only to be regurgitated as fresh insights making them present-day relevant. Certainly, *innovation* is often finding something “old” that informs the present, and with some contemporizing, brushing off the dust and bringing it forward. Given this proviso, in this short piece I would like to shake the dust off one of these “old” ideas, one which I think foundational to ethical leadership and apropos to circumstances we find in the United States and elsewhere around the world; that is, “humanity as community.”

Early on I asked, “What is human about humans?” and found the answer in the human relationships cultivated and maintained over the course of our lives. I concluded that we

¹ Hester, Joseph P. and Don R. Killian (2010) “The moral foundations of ethical leadership,” *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.

² Young, H. Darrell & Joseph P. Hester (2004) *Leadership under construction*. New York: Scarecrow Press, Rowman & Littlefield.

³ Hester, Joseph P. (2010) *An ethic of hope*. Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing.

discover our fundamental humanity in our involvement and relationships with others; that is, “humanity is community.”⁴ This idea lay at the heart of the 14-book series (curriculum), *Philosophy for Young Thinkers (PYT)*.⁵ It was the culmination of an idea I had when teaching at Campbell University in 1975, one which I began to more fully develop when preparing teachers for North Carolina’s first Governor’s School-East program in 1978. With contributions by Dr. Philip F. Vincent, who would later become a national figure in “Character Education,”⁶ and sociology Professor Don R. Killian, the *PYT* series was developed and written over the course of the next decade.

In our discussions, we agreed that “humanity” is not merely a descriptive noun, but has normative qualities one of which admits of “community.” “Humanity as Community” became the core of *PYT* and, since 1978, has remained foundational to my moral reasoning, conceivably exposed in the writing of my doctoral dissertation in 1971-72.⁷

In 1987, in the 2nd edition of *PYT’s foundation book*, we wrote:

“The vacuum caused by a generation of uncertainty about teaching values and the move away from a traditional values base at home, is just now having its impact on our schools. Our answer to this social and educational dilemma is the production of a morally-centered, pre-college philosophy curriculum for gifted students. In this curriculum we shall argue for and provide a foundation for teaching such moral values as honesty, integrity, responsibility, honor, courage, and kindness. We realize that not everyone will agree with our approach. Yet, we persist, for the need has been felt.”⁸

“No checklist is required to remind us that leadership is fundamentally a moral, relationship-dependent activity. The complexities of the information society require that doctors and nurses, teachers and principals, and CEOs and their management teams work together, each with their specialty and all contributing to the purposes of the organization. The ideal of servant leadership reminds us that teamwork is the new leadership model in the information age. It is within our workaday environment that we are able to discover our moral purposes and act on them.”
— *The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership* (2010), Joseph P. Hester and Don R. Killian

Twenty-three years later, in 2010, Killian and I continued this theme writing:⁹

“Philosophically, more than words are needed and more than well-crafted arguments are required for human rights, understood as moral rights, to be judiciously spread around the world. Commitment, respect, planning, and action are also required. For those who are leaders in human rights proliferation as well as ordinary people whose voices need to be heard, this is an enabling vision. It acknowledges the essence of humanity as moral and does not contradict what the religiously oriented call the “sacredness of human life.” It also acknowledges the principles foundational to human rights, such as fairness and justice, decency and responsibility, and the importance of human dignity, integrity, nurture, and care.

⁴ First mentioned as such in JVBL by Hester and Killian in *Morality Without Borders* (2019). *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, Vol. 12: Iss. 2.

⁵ Hester, Joseph P., Philip F. Vincent, & Don R. Killian (1983-1887). *Philosophy for young thinkers*, New York: Trillium (Royal Fireworks) Press, and published in Australia by Hawker Brownlow Education.

⁶ Vincent, Philip F., known to many as the voice of character education, brings more than 25 successful years of experience as an educator and an administrator to his consulting, grant project management, presentations, workshops, and many books. See *Multi-Dimensional Education, A common sense approach to data-driven thinking*, June 2011, Corwin.

⁷ Hester, Joseph P. (1973). ‘*Why be moral?*’ *Sense or nonsense, a meta-ethical examination*. Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

⁸ Hester, Joseph P. and Philip F. Vincent (1987). *Philosophy for young thinkers*, Foundation Book, 2nd Ed. Op. Cit.

⁹ Hester, Joseph P. and Don R. Killian (2010). *The moral foundations of ethical leadership*. Op. Cit.

Not mere generalities, these values are drawn from personal and collective experience and an unhampered propensity to care for others.”

We continued,

“Seeking what identifies us collectively is not, as some believe it to be, self-denying, but is self-affirming, with the possibility of enriching the depth of moral purpose and ethical sensitivity. This identification can be expressed simply as ‘humanity as community’ and expresses the foundation of ethics and values-based leadership.”

Could be “humanity as community” is not as original as I once thought. It is substantially derivative of Aristotle’s the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nathan Nielson, founder of Books & Bridges, a community institute of ideas and conversations, wrote in 2018, “Aristotle said it first: The humanities foster community and dialogue. By nature, the philosopher declared, human beings are social animals who desire to know. These two characteristics reinforce each other. Understanding is both rational and relational.”¹⁰ Aristotle emphasized living a life of *virtue* by cultivating one’s ability to think and reason and making good decisions. “Virtue” is moral excellence and by implication, moral strength and courage. Accordingly, a thinking person is able to *reconsider* his or her behaviors and adjust to community standards of morality. For Aristotle, the word *hexis* signified this process; that is, of moving from the selfish and subjective to a more rational and objective life of *virtue*.¹¹ “Virtue,” for Aristotle was “living well,” a life that is desirable for itself and not for the sake of something else.

Today, due to the combobulation of values and decision making, to the uneasy transfer of personal values to the community and work, it’s honest to ask if Aristotle’s concept of *hexis* (*virtue*) was (and is) more of a pipedream than a reality; a *recommendation* theoretically disguised. Conceivably it was a prescriptive idea, more suggestive than descriptive, but, for Aristotle, necessary for communal living. Even so, living a life of virtue or virtuous behaviors is a goal for which to strive.

Using *hexis* as a prescription for the ethically possible, “virtue” can be defined as both an attitude and a behavior—a recommended balance in one’s life enabling ethical choice. Accordingly, within us, moral wisdom seeks unification and stability as nothing is better than moral balance for promoting community in a home, school, business or an organization. As Lao Tsu said, “Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power. If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich.”¹² By implication, this idea speaks to the importance of religion as a regulator of values. About this the Dalai Lama remarked, “Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people’s suffering. On these lines every

“Aristotle’s search for *the good* is a search for the *highest good*, and he assumes that the highest good, whatever it turns out to be, has three characteristics: it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of some other good, and all other goods are desirable for its sake. Aristotle thinks everyone will agree that the terms ‘*eudaimonia*’ (‘happiness’) and ‘*eu zên*’ (‘living well’) designate such an end.”—<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/tries/aristotle-ethics/>

¹⁰ Nielson, Nathan (2018, May 29). “Humanities and Communities,” <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/05/humanities-and-communities>.

¹¹ Aristotle: *Hexis* (ἕξις) is a relatively stable arrangement or disposition, for example a person’s health or knowledge or character. Aristotle describes ethical virtue as a “*hexis*” (“state” “condition” “disposition”) — a tendency or disposition, induced by our habits, to have appropriate feelings (1105b25–6). Defective states of character are *hexeis* (plural of *hexis*) as well, but they are tendencies to have inappropriate feelings. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.

¹² Tsu, Lao (1972). *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House.

religion had more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.”¹³ This idea is embodied in the Golden Rule expressed in over 22 of the world’s religions and generally lying at the heart of many, if not most, ethical systems.¹⁴ The heart of the Golden Rule is caring for and loving others as we love ourselves. To love self is to know self, implying self-reflection and dialogic communication; something urged by Plato, the teacher of Aristotle.

Conceivably, this was what Aristotle was talking about “as living a balanced life”; I believe it so. Aristotle understood the reasonable or balanced life as a choice between what is right and

“The word ‘dialogic’ has two related root words: dialogue and logic. Numerous public intellectuals have written on dialogic communication theory, but Martin Buber’s writings on the subject have become sufficiently ingrained in discussions of the concept that many explanations by others use Buber’s terminology. Buber’s best-known book, ‘I and Thou,’ expresses his theory of dialogic communication, the essence of which is that a truly humanistic relationship requires that both parties come to the relationship without preconditions, fully accepting of the other. This basic dialogic theory definition emphasizes acceptance in the relationship.”

—<https://www.theclassroom.com/dialogic-communication-theory-6501406.html>.

what is wrong. Sometimes this is unclear in our day-to-day affairs, so by what standards do we choose? What are our most treasured values? Aristotle says we must weigh our decisions carefully for sometimes our choice will be between two wrongs. When this occurs, he reflects, we must seek a middle course of action weighing the benefits and shortcomings of the alternatives open to us. This doesn’t mean giving up our values and becoming less virtuous. It does

mean seeking out among our friends and associates the values we share in common and from that commonality build our lives – consequently, humanity is community in the truest sense. Living ethically is a dialogic process.

Within Aristotle’s notion of “virtue,” as in the Golden Rule, ethical stability is sought between “love of self” and “love of others,” contemporized as a balance between narcissism¹⁵ and altruism. This can also be expressed as striking a balance between self-control and behaviors described as excessive individualism. Aristotle believed this principle (*hexis*) should be applied to one’s life with the utmost diligence¹⁶ for the most well-meaning of persons will ever so often lose her/his moral balance. When moral balance is lost, one’s ethic often morphs into a self-centered (egoistical, narcissistic)¹⁷ and relative ethic (what is right for me morally may not be right for you morally). This is sometimes expressed as “excessive individualism,” a philosophy that values the uniqueness and autonomy of each person over any group or authority.

As we know, individualism, when taken to the extreme, can be community deflating and, when this happens, humanity deflating as we discover our humanity within and among others, in community. Daniel Goleman reminds us, “Self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own

¹³ Hester, Joseph P. A summoned life: Forging a new moral identity, An explication of the Golden Rule; Infinity Publishers, 2017.

¹⁴ Hester, Joseph P. Op. Cit. See: Chapter 2, pp. 52-66.

¹⁵ Narcissism is characterized by a grandiose sense of self-importance, a lack of empathy for others, a need for excessive admiration, and the belief that one is unique and deserving of special treatment. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/narcissism>.

¹⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

¹⁷ Egoistical: being centered in or preoccupied with oneself and the gratification of one’s own desires; self-centered (opposed to altruistic).

problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection — or compassionate action.”¹⁸

Most assuredly, ethics is relationship based. For this reason, it’s important to understand the basic values supporting personal decision making and, also, values lying at the heart of one’s community; and democracy itself. As Rushworth Kidder says,

“The moral future we envision and the various moral strands we have pulled together have recognizable parallels, cultural furrows tilled by those who understand the moral needs of humanity and the moral dimensions of our common experience. Without this constant and continuing practice of moral correlation all criteria of moral meaning go out the window.”
The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership, 2010, Joseph P. Hester and Don R. Killian

“As with all other commons, the moral commons requires constant vigilance to maintain. Aristotle sounded that warning. ‘That which is common to the greatest number,’ he wrote, ‘has the least care bestowed upon it.’ Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfill.”¹⁹

Conceivably, finding its roots in Aristotle’s notion of “hexis,” Charles Taylor calls this an “ethics of authenticity” – as being true to oneself, aiming toward self-fulfillment, and having a vision of what a better life would be. Being a complex and comprehensive ideal, Taylor’s notion of *ethical authenticity* has personal applications as well as applications in larger environments such as business, industry, and politics. A clue to Taylor’s intentions is his saying that although this ideal is self-referential, it is not a singular disposition — “... its dialogical setting ... binds us to others.” Humanity as community.²⁰

In summary, “Humanity as Community” is a prescriptive ideal for the morally possible. This Don Killian and I discussed at length while sitting on the sands at Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina in the mid- to late-1970s.²¹ Obviously, it took some time to put words around it. As we are aware, to be moral –

to adhere to and live by moral principles – reveals an uneven history. And this we know, we have built moral principles into law

“Seeking what identifies us collectively is not, as some believe it to be, self-denying, but is self-affirming, with the possibility of enriching the depth of moral purpose and ethical sensitivity. This identification can be expressed simply as ‘humanity as community’.” Joseph P. Hester and Don R. Killian (2019). *Morality without Borders. Journal of Values-Based Leadership* Vol. 12, Iss. 2.

and constitutions, into faith and church polity, and into our businesses. These efforts are not disingenuous, and are significant regulators of human behavior as well as an indication that being ethical may not be a natural disposition,²² but one that is sought after and prized and moved forward with diligence and consideration. Understanding “humanity as community” reveals the importance of living ethically and our commitment to principles of ethical behavior. This idea bores down to the essential nature of who we are, but obviously, our moral timber

¹⁸ Gina Hernez-Broome PhD (July 27, 2012) Book Review, pp. 75-78. Goleman, Daniel (2007) *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. New York: Bantam; Reprint edition.

¹⁹ Kidder, R. M. (2009) “Daschle and the moral commons.” *The Institute for Global Ethics, Newsletter*, 9 February, 2009.

²⁰ Taylor, Charles (1989) *The sources of the self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

²¹ Hester, Joseph P. and Don R. Killian (1975) “The so-called ethnocentric fallacy.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, No. 3, 1975.

²² Haidt, Jonathan (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

is crooked²³ and this exposes the difficulties of this endeavor. This should not stifle our efforts as human connection lies at the core of our moral consciousness revealed most assuredly in the recognition of our essential humanity. That is, within community is where we discover our moral identity.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to my long-time friend and writing companion Don R. Killian who, at age 86, passed away on November 4, 2023.

About the Editor

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Dr. Joseph P. Hester is a professional writer and retired educator who serves on the editorial board for the *Journal of Values-Based Leadership* for which he is a frequent contributor and the advisory board for the *Humanities Bulletin* also for whom he writes. See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/hester-joseph-p-1939>.

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²³ Kant, Immanuel (2013) Critique of Pure Reason. Seattle: CreateSpace.