

2. The Beauty of Contextual Ethics

beyond right and wrong, beyond good and evil

So what is the path from *radical monotheism* to *responsible action* in the everyday moments of personal life and within these challenging times of human social history? My two-word answer to that question is “contextual ethics.” To clarify what I mean, I will begin by distinguishing “contextual ethics” from “right-and-wrong ethics” and “good-and-evil ethics.”

Right-and-Wrong Ethics

The mode of ethical thinking that uses the concepts of right-and-wrong is older than Moses. It has always been a useful mode of thought, and it will remain so. It is based upon the concept of “law.” A law is what defines right and wrong. Thou shalt not murder! Thou shalt not steal! (And so on) Law is a crude tool for ethical application. Law has to be interpreted for each specific instance by a law officer, a judge, or a jury. We might say that a judge or jury is assigned to apply the spirit of the law as well as the letter of the law. This conflict between spirit and letter in the application of law was a core aspect of Jesus’ struggle with the religious establishment of his day. This basic tension continues in the apostle Paul, Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and in ourselves if we are honest. This tension between letter and spirit exists in our personal affairs. Our rules for daily living have to be interpreted for the spirit of their meaning as well as the letter of their statements. Laws or rules exist in our minds (or superego) as well as in our social discourse. Right-and-wrong is a useful way to think about ethical choices, but it is not the only way. Right-and-wrong thinking can be misused through questionable interpretations of our laws, rules, and mores or through establishing bad laws in the first place. And how do we know if a law or rule is bad? Obviously, a complete ethical discussion must probe deeper.

Good-and-Evil Ethics

The mode of ethical thinking that uses the concepts of good-and-evil is a goal-oriented type of ethical thinking that was strongly developed by Aristotle. We have goals, purposes, or aims in terms of which a specific action is judged good or bad. For example, the goal of having good teeth makes brushing and flossing good and failing to do so bad. The goal of having better economic equity in our society makes certain tax laws better than others. The limitation of good-and-evil ethics rests in the issue of determining which goals, purposes, or aims are good and which bad or evil. This question raises the issue of centers of value. If my family is seen as a center of value, then spending time with my family is a good goal, and providing economic, educational, and health services for my family is a good aim. If basic safety in my neighborhood or city is a center of value, then having competent police protection and clear laws against murder, theft and rape are good aims. But how are these centers of

value to be chosen? We typically refer to more inclusive centers of value, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Contextual Ethics

Contextual Ethics is a third mode of ethical thinking. It does not ask about right-and-wrong or good-and-evil, but about the qualities of the situation that we face and what responses are appropriate within that situation. This mode of ethical reflection has never been entirely absent when we are using the other two modes of ethical thought. The judge who interprets a law will typically analyze the situation in which he or she is applying that law. Similarly, the discernment of good over evil in relation to a specific center of value must also analyze the situation in which this center of value is applied. As a basic life method, contextual ethics is never absent. We are always in situations, and we must always know those situations in order to create “appropriate” responses within those situations. Whether an action is “appropriate” or “befitting” to a situation is the key consideration of contextual ethics. In order to know what is befitting we must first know the situation in which our responses are to fit. Moment-to-moment spontaneity is a misunderstanding of contextual ethics. We all have in our memories enduring contexts of interpretation about each sphere of life and each scope of consideration. The thoughtfulness that characterizes contextual ethics is letting the real situation improve our ongoing contexts of ethical thought and action.

Monotheistic Ethics

So, how has the monotheistic attitude toward life employed these three modes of ethical thought?

The Eternal Law

The ethics of ancient Israel was almost entirely about **performing obedience to an Eternal Law**. The good laws of social and personal life were seen to derive from a Final Authority that is law-giving and thereby blessing us with dependable guidance. For example, in the high Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas assumed an Eternal Law unknowable to the human mind. Then “natural law,” according to Thomas, meant that part of Eternal Law that humans could know, and “human law” meant those human constructions of further determinations of right and wrong consistent with natural law.

The Final End

When monotheism joined with good-and-evil ethics, the monotheistic theologians began to discuss what it means to **follow paths toward our Final End** (purpose or blessedness). Augustine’s famous phrase “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, Oh God” reflects a use of good-and-evil ethics. This saying means that Reality is an Ultimate End in the accessing of which we can find restful blessing for our hearts

and heartfelt actions. With lesser ends we are restless and adrift unless those lesser ends rest within the Final End of this “realistic” Rest.

The Ultimate Context

Today radical monotheistic thinkers, such as H. Richard Niebuhr, speak of **befitting responses within the Ultimate Context**. He went further to say that if we are to be loyal to the Ultimate Reality we face today, contextual ethics is the most important mode of ethical thought. The other two can find their place within the context of contextual ethics and within the context of the Ultimate Context. For example, in our one-world era, radical monotheistic contextual ethics finds it *appropriate* or *befitting* for us to move beyond our racism, nationalism, and economic imperialism into a whole-Earth context of ethical consideration. Resolving the issues of the ecological crisis is also supported by contextual thought in which all reality is being affirmed, rather than humanity alone, or wealthy humanity alone.

Let us look more carefully at how contextual ethical thinking works in a monotheistic context of commitment. First of all, it does not mean a complete rejection of the other two modes of ethical thinking. Right-and-wrong and good-and-evil can be integrated into the contextual ethics mode. We can ask what laws are befitting to our world situation today. We can ask what ends are befitting for our government to pursue. Similarly, in our personal lives we can consider our talents, our opportunities, and the world’s needs, and then ask, “What basic vocation is most befitting for the pursuit of our lives?”

Here is another important characteristic of contextual ethics: We begin our ethical thought with an interpretation of the situation that is being confronted. The whole situation is open for consideration. All aspects of it are considered relevant. Only when an approximately holistic view is reached, does creating the “befitting” response “appropriately” take place. The good action is the one that is befitting or appropriate for this situation. Obviously, there may be several different responses that can be viewed as appropriate, but the choice is not entirely arbitrary. The situation provides a vision of limits and possibilities that need to be obeyed for the response to be appropriate. The interpretation of the situation is a crucial element of the process. And this interpretation uses all three approaches to truth we examined in Part One of this book: the scientific approach to truth, the contemplative approach to truth, and the particularization of our scientific knowledge and our contemplative wisdom in terms of workability in our real-time-real-place choices. And these choices concern not just “me” but “we” who are involved in the choice to be made. We simply look and see what is happening, and then we boldly initiate a response. That is it. Behind all of this thoughtfulness, we know that some sort of response cannot be avoided. Inaction and thoughtless action are still responses to the situation. Contextual ethics is adding our thoughtfulness to the unstoppable flow of events.

Notice that beginning with the situation is different from beginning with a law that we apply to the situation. And beginning with the situation is also different from

beginning with ends or ideals that we wish to pursue – hence impose upon the situation. When the contextual ethics mode of thought is primary, the traditions of right-and-wrong and of good-and-evil are made secondary to appropriate response to what is happening now. Current happenings qualify our appropriate responses, they do not determine that response, but they inform it. The response-able human observes, judges, weighs up, and then decides to act from freedom – not pleasing others or blaming the situation or following good principles.¹ We are choosing, choosing, choosing our interpretations of the situation, and choosing, choosing, choosing our free creations of appropriate responses to the situation. We have abandoned every form of authoritarian thinking and opted to rely on what we are experiencing as conscious human beings confronting the ongoing flow of history that is confronting us. That confrontation requires our rational understanding, intuitive awareness, and downright guesses. And in spite of all this fresh knowing, our confrontation with historically experienced Reality remains an experience of the Unknown and, therefore, our responses have the character of being a leap into the vast Mystery that we are always facing.

Thinking from Big to Small

Within this Ultimate Context of loyalty, what does contextual ethics look like as an ongoing feature of our lives? Without always realizing it, each of us has created some sort of enduring contexts for every layer of our awareness. We have a view of the dynamics of the cosmos and the planet and humanity's place on this planet. This view may be poorly thought through, basically just taken over from our parents and our schooling. It may be largely illusory or simplistic, but we have a context already operating in our lives. Similarly, we have a context for living in our region of the planet – whether that is a nation, a group of nations, an ecological region, or a continent. And we have our context for life in our community – whether that be a county, city, neighborhood or each of these. All these layers of context interact with each other, inform each other, enrich each other, and together make up our sense of the world in which we live.

Happenings happen to us as we live within these taken-for-granted contexts. Happenings challenge us to improve our contexts. Improving our contexts turns out to be a lifetime task. The point I am making is that we simply do not live without contexts. We do not live in some sort of mindless spontaneity. We live in a continuum of organized awareness, however in need of reorganization that awareness may be. We tend to be defensive of all our contexts, for it can seem painful to our sense of certainty to have to admit the full extent of our ignorance and take on the work of building smarter contexts.

The ongoing, inclusive rebuilding of our contexts logically begins with the most inclusive, for the larger contexts provide context for the smaller scopes of thought.

¹ This is language lifted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's analysis of freedom.

When we retool our planetary outlook, we affect how we think about our local place and how we respond where our body does its doings. Of course, the planetary context does not entirely determine the local context. We need to retool our local context in the light of our local experience as that experience is seen within the context of our fresh planetary context. Much of this retooling goes on in a piecemeal and chaotic fashion. But a full dedication to contextual ethics in the Ultimate Context of radical monotheism will call for many instances of context improvement. Study and contextual thoughtfulness are an ongoing feature of a life that is responsive within the Ultimate Context.

Nothing about this emphasis on thoughtfulness needs to rob our living of its spontaneity, creativity, and freedom. No matter how realistic and clear our contexts are, when we face each particular decision, we experience a call for sheer freedom. We need to live from the heart, so to speak – while all our contexts hang in the sphere of our mind as guidelines that help us decide, but which we in our raw freedom must apply to this specific choice and to the next specific choice and the next and the next.

History Making

We are parts of communities of action within the Ultimate Context. We do not get to escape into an absolutely lonely existence. We confront the flow of history in companionship with others. This may be understood as our privilege to participate in making history. History is not a dustbin of old facts, but a vital drama in which humans are responsible for many of the major outcomes. In times as grim as ours, people are tempted to avoid full lucidity about their historical power to make a difference. Rather than do something, people are tempted to be aloof and just not care about the failures of their society. Any society is a failure if it pampers the rich and neglects the rest. Making progressive history today includes educating our citizens in responsible democratic processing rather than tolerating rule by a wealthy oligarchy. Any society is a failure if its practices are distressing the natural planet to a devastating degree. Making progressive history today includes dealing with the radial demands of climate challenge as well as, in all other ways, taking care of the ecosystems of the planet in which humanity could be an enriching part rather than a destructive force. These and thousands of subparts of these themes cry out for responsible responses from each community of humans whatever their religion or lack of religion, whatever their culture or race or sex or gifts or flaws. And such responses make history. We are not helpless cogs in some inevitable doom. Also, progress is not assured. The weight of the future is inescapably placed on the shoulders of each awake human. We are all Atlas with the Earth on our shoulders, whether we wish to be or not.

Contextual Ethics is an Interreligious Process

The ethics I have outlined above is not a Christian ethics or a Jewish ethics or a Buddhist ethics or any other ethics derived from a community of religious practice. I

contend that a religion-based ethics is an obsolete idea that is no longer needed in the dialogue among religions or in the dialogue between religions and secular society.

When we use terms taken from a particular religious heritage, we are being contextually befitting only if we use those terms to describe the way life operates. In so doing we can communicate across religious boundaries. The various religious communities use different languages that point to the same or similar dynamics of humanness. Human cultures are more similar on the level of experience than on the level of beliefs or moralities. Therefore, the practitioners of the various world religions can do ethics together, providing that we recognize that we can each root our ethical thinking in the same profound humanness that each religion attempts to access. We need not start from the “authority” of our religions tradition – its dogma, morality, or religious practices. I mean no diminution of the value of these unique practices; rather I am pointing to a huge revolution in ethics. Social ethics has jumped the boundaries of every religious community and landed in a general or secular context in which all communities, religious and otherwise, share.

That secular context is not secular in an antireligious sense, but in the sense that it is not sectarian, but inclusive. Furthermore, our ordinary so-called “secular world” can now be seen as transparent to the Awesomeness of profound humanness. The ordinary is transparent to the profoundness that all truly functional religious practices seek to access. So living in the secular world no longer means leaving the profound realms of existence, but finding the profound in a manner that will seem surprising to our old patterns of two-realm thinking. We find the sacred within the profane. The sacred is revealed as the depth dimension of the profane. Indeed, the very terms “sacred” and “profane” are profoundly transformed, for they have ceased to mean separate realms.

Finally, though I have used some Christian illustrations, I have not intended for this chapter to be a chapter on Christian ethics. I am speaking on behalf of all good religion for its contributions to the inclusive social-process dynamics. Nor have I intended to elaborate the specifics of this generally secular and interreligious style of ethics. With four of my friends, I have written another book on ethics for our moment of history. We entitled it, *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy*. This book employs the contextual ethics methods summarized above, and it does not reference any religious heritage for its “authority.” It sticks with the relative certainties that we can derive from our common experience as human beings. All humanity can experience the same profound humanness and the same overarching Wholeness. We are all Earthlings before we are Christians or Buddhists or whatever religious practice we have or lack. I find it interesting that both the Buddha and Jesus referred to themselves as “the human.” The Buddha made no pretensions about being anything other than “the awake one.” And when Jesus refers to himself as “the son of Adam,” this means the restored and coming true human. We can demote Siddhartha, Jesus, Mohammed, and any other luminary, including ourselves, to the wondrous but ordinary status of “the human,” a potential that is open to every human being. In finite qualities humans differ so vastly it boggles the mind, but before the Final Realty we are all just “the profound human,” or else far less – “the inhuman.”