

The Church in the 21st Century
The Church in the 21st Century: Occasional
Papers

Boston College

Year 2004

Finding Time for Ethical Practice

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Occasional Paper # 11

Finding Time for Ethical Practice

Synopsis Knowing the theory about ethics doesn't assure ethical practice. The author points to the need for developing habits of critical reflection with the support of a community.

About the Author **James A. Donahue** is President and Professor of Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and a former professor of ethics and theology at Georgetown University (1984 to 2000). His most recent book is *Ethics Across the Curriculum* (Lexington Books, 2003).

I have spent the past 25 years teaching ethics and theology to undergraduate and graduate students in liberal arts, business and theological schools. Studying ethics, I believe, can make a difference by creating more ethically sensitive decision-makers in daily life. But as I watch the parade of egregious behaviors by business executives and professionals of all types, including clergy—all of whom, in their professional formation, have at least been exposed to ethics—I wonder about the efficacy of the enterprise.

Aristotle wondered whether virtue can be taught; a contemporary might ask, simply, “What were these guys thinking?” Were they thinking at all—or just reacting to the pressures and the demands of others or their professional environment?

The heart of ethics *education* involves asking some very basic questions about values and decisions. One simple way to understand ethics is to see it as the process of asking the right question at the right time about the right thing to do. To conduct an ethics analysis means assessing our actions and decisions in light of generally accepted understandings of what is good, valuable or worthwhile.

But ethics ought not to be an abstract academic exercise; to paraphrase Aristotle once more, we study ethics not solely to understand what's good but because we want to *be* good. If ethics is the developed art of asking questions, its successful practice will require conversation, a habit of discernment, and a community with which to converse. Religious life abounds in examples of this kind of practice: think of the Ignatian examination of conscience and the tradition of spiritual direction. The ethical person, then, is the one who develops the habit of taking time and asking questions when making a decision -- and who also acts in accordance with the answers.

What are the right questions? Most ethical thinking distills into addressing four basic concerns or sets of questions about consequences, rights, justice and virtue.

Consequences Who gains and who loses here? Who is helped and who is hurt by a decision or policy? Who advances and who is burdened, and by how much? It is possible to measure these gains and losses

through a values cost- benefit analysis. But any such analysis must be certain that it has addressed the “who” question adequately. When an institution—school, church or business—thinks first of “damage control,” the question of who gains and loses has probably been drawn too narrowly.

Rights Who has rights in this situation? What kind of rights do they have, and which decision protects and preserves these rights? Some rights are obvious and most people can agree on them -- the right to food and shelter and other basic survival needs, for instance, or the right of the innocent and the vulnerable not to be harmed. Other rights are less obvious and more contested, such as some civil rights, protections and benefits. Of course, rights are frequently in conflict. But the ethical decisions that follow from asking the questions about rights ensure at least a modicum of ethical awareness in the decision-making process.

Justice Which decision is the most fair? Is a choice fair to all parties concerned, or does it show undue preference to one group over another? What criteria are used to determine how limited goods and services will be distributed among possible stakeholders? Should distribution be based on effort? On need? On merit? Justice raises thorny issues about the beliefs we hold about what is important and worthwhile -- and the hierarchy of those values.

Virtue Considerations here involve seeking ethical wisdom and insight from those who are recognized as morally wise people who can help guide our ethical choices. Again to paraphrase Aristotle, if you want to know what the right thing to do is, go find a good man or woman and determine what they would decide and how they would act in this situation. This requires identifying the moral heroes and saints of our times. What ethical wisdom can they impart to us all?

I don't suggest that all these questions must be asked all the time in every single decision that life presents to us. Nor that the goal is to reach ethical perfection. But the kinds of questions we ask reveal the kinds of persons we are. Creating time for ethical discernment and developing the art of ethical questioning can at least ensure that our conversations with ourselves, our peers, our organizations and our institutions will over time reflect the habit of skillful inquiry, generate lively ethical consideration -- and lead more reliably to good decisions and actions.