

Chapter 33

Contextual Ethics and Responsible Action

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! etc. 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, 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. We may even speak of obeying the structures of Being.

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 being 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 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 guidance.

When monotheism joined with good and evil ethics, it began to discuss what it means to **follow paths toward our Ultimate End**. Augustine’s famous phrase “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, Oh God” reflects a use of good and evil ethics. In this saying we can note an Ultimate End in which we can find restful blessing for our hearts and heartfelt actions. With lesser ends we are restless and adrift.

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 Final Reality we face today, then it is appropriate or befitting for us to move beyond our racism, nationalism, and economic imperialism.

Let us look carefully at how monotheistic contextual ethical thinking works. First of all it does not mean a complete rejection of the other two modes of ethical thinking. Right and wrong, 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 which we pursue within the situation. When the contextual ethics mode of thought is primary, the traditions of the past are relativized in terms of what is happening now, which happenings are qualifying our appropriate responses. We are choosing, choosing, choosing our interpretations of the situation and our creations of appropriate responses. 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 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 be a nation, a group of nations, an ecological region, or a continent. And we have our context for life in our community – whether than 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.

An inclusive rebuilding of our contexts logically begins with the most inclusive, for the larger contexts provide context for the smaller scopes of thought. When we retool our planetary outlook, that affects 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 forth many times when we sit down and intentionally bring additional order into one or more of our ongoing contexts for living. 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 is 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. Today, making progressive history would include educating our citizens in responsible democratic processing rather than tolerating rule by a wealth oligarchy. Making progressive history today would include 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. These responses make history. We are not helpless cogs in some inevitable doom. And progress is not assured. The weight of the future is inescapably placed on the shoulders of each of us. We are 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 that are taken from a particular religious heritage, we can make sure we are using those terms to describe the way life operates. In so doing we can communicate across the religious boundaries. The various religious communities use different languages that often 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 traditions, dogmas, moralities, or any other feature of our religious practice. I mean by this no diminution of the value of these practices, but simply that ethics has jumped the boundaries of every religion into a general or secular context.

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 a dimension of the profane. Whether we call Reality with a capital “R” sacred or profane may not matter, for sacred and profane have ceased to mean the separate realms they used to mean.

I have not intended for this chapter to be a chapter on Christian ethics. Nor have I intended to elaborate the specifics of this general or 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, but 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 humanity. 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 or lack of one we have. We are all humans before we are Jews or Muslims. 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 true human as well as an amazing future arrival. In any case we must demote Siddhartha and Jesus 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 can 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."