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APPLIED AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?

Address to the 3rd Annual Conference of the
Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics
by the Association President, Dr Noel Preston
at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga
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Though this third conference of the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics is not in itself irrefutable evidence that the so-called practical or applied ethics movement has come of age, it is plausible to claim that this conference is at least a strong indication that movement is not a passing fad. The Report from the Committee to the AGM canvasses some of the tasks immediately before the Association. However, in the brief indulgence, also termed "the Presidential address", I want to raise some "big picture" questions about the challenges and directions confronting this loose association of interests which gather under the banner of the AAPAE.

I propose to pick up on a conversation which emerged at the conclusion of last year's conference in Brisbane. Some of you will recall we had a symposium in the closing stages of the conference which asked the presumptuous question: "Where to now for the Australian Applied Ethics Programme?" We were addressed by William May, Tony Coady, Lyn Gillam and Charles Sampford. Their pieces are well worth reading -- though of course they didn't give answers so much as pose further questions. Their contributions are preserved for posterity and the archives of the Association in the Conference Proceedings Publication. They represent 210 pages of stimulating reflection -- well worth buying the Proceedings for them alone, if you haven't already done that.[1]

Quite frankly however, it's not their words that I remember from that conference session but rather the question raised I believe by one of our New Zealand delegates to the conference. She asked, "How do we keep alive the critical and advocacy dimension in applied ethics when it is dominated by professional ethics?" It bothered me because my own immersion in public sector ethics has often left me feeling, "What difference is this making? Are we not getting bogged down in an ethics of process that fails to challenge public policy? Is there not a tendency to turn professional ethics in this domain and others into a micro-exercise which neglects the macro questions of social responsibility?"

The focus on micro-analysis within professional and applied ethics may give us insight into the particulars of ethical practice within limited spheres (say the practice of medicine or the law or the commercial domain). However, it may neglect the wider context within which those practices are pursued or the connections between them. In business ethics [2] for instance the rules for fair exchange between individuals are a focus of micro concerns whereas the institutional or cultural rules and customs of commerce reaching to the wider society are macro concerns. Micro ethical analysis without the macro perspective may lead to a partial moral assessment of a practice's ethical responsibility: for instance, a code which talks about relationships to clients with no account of the total environment in which that relationship is set. Some might say that micro analysis without the critical, macro perspective is a by-product of role morality or the so-called ethic of agency. I also want to say that role morality is an appropriate, modest and necessary first step for introducing ethics to most organisations and professions. The challenge is to interpret the ethic of agency in a rigorous, profound and fundamental way which goes to the heart of the practitioners' obligations. Take the case of public servants. A superficial interpretation of the delegation of public officials is that they should serve the government of the day. The case of Clive Ponting, a British public servant who passed on secret government information regarding the sinking of the Argentine warship, *The Belgrano*, during the Falklands War, is instructive for this point. A jury accepted Ponting's defence that he had a duty ultimately to the Parliament, the institution representing the public, rather than to the government of the day. It is a defence which rests on a particular interpretation of the ethic of agency (or role morality). [3]

This year I have been conducting research into the ethical attitudes of Queensland Parliamentarians. [4] Though I found few of his kind, one perceptive MP reminded me that there is a real danger of turning the ethics debate into one about the personal behaviour of individual members, i.e. focussing on micro concerns. He appealed for a focus on the ethics of policy and careful distinction between professional ethics for MPs (e.g. the proprieties of not misusing one's influence or privileged knowledge for personal gain) and the wider questions of social justice (eg the ethical consequences of policies which disadvantage the poor). In his view, "the ethical focus has been put on personalities and personal behaviour and a personal ethic (the micro if you like). It is not about policy, except for the assertion that honest people are more ready to produce good policy (a questionable proposition) ... The problem is we have ethical issues debated in personality terms rather than policy terms, not just in the Parliament but in the community and the media. It's a problem of the political culture."

My parliamentary friend was making a similar appeal to that of our conference delegate of last year: "how do we keep alive the critical and advocacy dimension in applied ethics, especially in the context of professional ethics?"

In other words, how does the cutting edge of a critical morality with counter-hegemonic potential retain its potency when the focus is on an ethic of role or an ethic constrained by a particular social ethos? And how, in these constrained circumstances, do we combine the capacity for ethics to challenge what *is* with considerations of what *ought* to be?

To appropriate terminology from a previous professional role of mine: the "pastoral" and "the priestly" dimensions of applied and professional ethics are being fostered but the "prophetic" is undeveloped. Consequently, ethics as a managerial device for better relationships throughout the organisation or as a symbolic, ritualised and codified regime to be recalled in corporate gatherings or on glossy brochures may be alive and fairly well. The question which remains however is whether the cutting edge of social justice and the call for fundamental renewal of our communities based on sound social analysis are part of our message and mission?

Now, we need to be wary of such evangelical fervour and the arrogant nonsense that ethics can save the world. Nonetheless, I cannot dismiss our colleague's question: "How do we keep alive the critical and advocacy dimension in applied ethics when it is dominated by professional ethics?" Part of the answer lies in revisiting what we mean by "professional". Intrinsic to the notion of professionalism is arguably a sense of vocation and social responsibility and getting in touch with the core purposes of the institutions which support the professions, or as virtue theorists might put it, discerning the goods which are internal to a practice, and distinguishing them from the external or extrinsic goods.

The possibility of ethics being used for reactionary, coercive and authoritarian social purposes is real. Allied to hierarchical, centralised political systems, programs of social engineering have historically been paraded as ethically justified instruments, most notably in fascist Germany of the 1930s or more recently with South Africa's apartheid policy. Partly as a consequence of this tendency, some in the Marxist tradition are suspicious of the study of ethics. Mindful of the thesis on Feuerbach which serves as an epitaph to Karl Marx ("Philosophers have analysed the world, it is time for us to change the world"), they believe that moral "ideas" are invariably instruments of the ruling class, a form of false consciousness, designed to prevent change in social and economic conditions.

In a social and cultural ethos which produces loving Hansonites and cunning Campbellites and which continues to be disseminated by so-called rational economics and spurious suspicion of political correctness we have every reason to be concerned that ethics might be appropriated for conservative and self-interested narrow agenda. In Australia we are currently governed by political forces who are influenced by groups such as the H.R. Nicholls Society. I came across an alarming gem which was part of the H.R. Nicholls submission to a parliamentary public hearing on the new Industrial Relations Bill. I quote:

> "It is ironic that these arbitral decisions are often justified in the name of social justice or fairness or equity, *or some other weasel words*."

The H.R. Nicholls representative went on to say that fairness "is not a word that I think should be used in political discourse because it is empty of meaning". [5] We need to remind ourselves that it is in this context and social ethos that we pursue our professional and applied ethics.

I view with suspicion any ethical approach which fails to take seriously commitment to a reflective, critical and transformative engagement with changing social and technological conditions by aiming to benefit those most disadvantaged in those contexts. In a nutshell, this means a commitment to reflect ethically about economic issues from the standpoint of the poor, not the rich; or race relations from the standpoint of the least powerful; or environmental questions from the standpoint of the most vulnerable species, and so on.

Such an approach recognises that ethical behaviour takes place within a complex interaction of social forces and vested interests, and that improvement in social conditions or cultural practices requires more than a change of heart or clarification of ideas. It aims for a realignment of those forces and interests generally brought about through social struggle disputation and conflict. Clearly then, ethical deliberation and character formation must be complemented by social analysis. Ethics as philosophical reflection is never enough but must interact with a realistic and accurate interpretation of social conditions and the prospects for their transformation.

Ethics as an instrument of social transformation explores the interface between pragmatic tendencies and idealistic impulses. As a counter-hegemonic exercise built around a rhythm of action and reflection, the priority is to challenge injustice and unethical practices by engaging them, not by distancing from them or being detached. At the personal or social level, this approach takes seriously the question of practical effectiveness -- feasibility as well as desirability. At the same time, the exercise of that responsibility requires vision as well as realistic judgment. Put simply, it is supportive of the view that the crucial test for public justification of any social policy or practice is whether or not the most disadvantaged benefit from it and whether it promotes democratic, participatory processes. At the personal level, this ethic exhibits a caring commitment in relationships which gives priority to the vulnerable and the vulnerability in us all.

It follows that the decisive backdrop to all our discussions in this conference is a tapestry which features the increasing socio-economic injustice in this nation and across the globe, along with the threats to life on earth. The issues of social justice and resource distribution remain overwhelming. A 1995 World Health Organisation (WHO) Report [6] claims one fifth of the 5.6 billion people in the world live in extreme poverty characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy. Such poverty is "the world's deadliest disease", according to Hiroshi Nakajima, WHO's Director-General. Perhaps it is also the most salient performance indicator of the global economy! By contrast, one fifth of the world's population live in extreme affluence because they control four-fifths of the world's resources. The statistics of poverty underline the indecency of military budgets and the arms trade to say nothing of the mega-salaries paid to international executives, sports heroes, entertainers and the like. If an Association like this is to be prophetically relevant in our communities it cannot evade the question: what ethical justification is there for such global inequities?

Linked to these justice questions is a question of environmental ethics: how are we to live with the Earth? This question incorporates matters of global justice and commitment to future generations of course. It is arguably the fundamental ethical challenge for the twenty-first century.

As citizens of this global village in the late twentieth century we are able to reflect more accurately than our predecessors, on the magnificence of spaceship Earth and the wondrous story of the universe. The planet itself is thought to be about 4600 million years old, though the ancestors of our ancestors, a group called *homo erectus*, probably appeared relatively late in this story, a mere million or two million years ago. Until recently, life on Earth flourished, but in our generation the level of damage done to a system that has been almost five billion years in the making gives us cause to re-consider the basic ethical question: *how ought we to live with the Earth?* The strong indication is that we cannot continue to live the consumer driven way we do. The questions of eco-justice hover over every other question we raise in our professional associations or academic dissertations. There is no future for an Association for Professional and Applied Ethics if there is no future for life on earth.

Yet I observe that, as in Brisbane, there are very few papers being offered at this conference on environmental ethics nor directly on themes exploring issues of multi-culturalism and social justice. Perhaps as an Association we should seek closer links with social justice and environmental activists? Perhaps this theme could be taken up directly into the planning of next year's conference?

Having said all this I am not suggesting that this Association as an Association take on the full eco-justice agenda. Nor am I implying that remedies in these matters are simple or beyond dispute. However, I am suggesting that exploring this agenda is a priority for members of the Association and the groups from which we come. So, in our teaching of ethics, for instance, we may focus more on how that teaching contributes to social transformation or, in our professional associations, we may continually seek to widen the agenda from process to policy, from the micro to the macro, from parochial interests to social responsibility.

Our much revered Vice-President, Tony Coady, once published a paper entitled, "Ethos and Ethics in Business". It is, in part, a critique of role morality, the ethic of role (which of course dominates professional ethics). By way of conclusion, I propose to quote an anecdote from that paper and some of Tony's commentary:

> The inadequacy of mere professionalism or role morality is also suggested by the reply given by another of the Nazi doctors in Auschwitz, Dr Fritz Klein, to the brace challenge put to him by a prisoner doctor Ella Lingens-Reiner. Klein was on relatively friendly terms with her, partly because she was a non-Jewish German, and, one day when they were standing together in sight of the black smoke coming from the crematorium, she said to him: "I wonder, Dr Klein, that you can carry out this business. Are you never reminded of your Hippocratic oath?" To this she reports Klein as replying, "My Hippocratic oath tells me to cut a gangrenous appendix out of the human body. The Jews are the gangrenous appendix of mankind. That's why I cut them out". [7]

Coady comments: "the striking thing about the reply is not merely that it involves so cruelly distorted an interpretation of the medical ethical code, but that this distortion is one that could come to seem natural to the professionals themselves and to many others in the community".

Nuremberg remains a constant reminder that in certain cases of professional behaviour, role morality is an inadequate guide. The point is that the pursuit of ethics requires a constant appraisal, critique and challenge of the ethos in which we engage that pursuit. In my view, it should be part of the role of this Association to keep that sensitivity alive.

REFERENCES

1. Miller, S. and Preston, N. (eds) (1996) *Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the AAPAE*, Charles Sturt University, Keon Publications.

2. For similar discussions see C.A.J. Coady "Ethos and Ethics in Business" in Coady and Sampford (1993) *Business, Ethics and the Law*, Sydney: Federation Press; and Robert Solomon "Business Ethics" in Singer, P. (ed) (1991) *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

3. Ponting, C. (1985) *The Right to Know*, London: Sphere.

4. See Preston, N. (1996) *Ethics and the Queensland Parliament: a Research Report*, QUT: Brisbane.

5. Quoted from Senator Andrew Murray's Maiden Speech in the Australian Senate (see the *National Journal of the Australian Democrats*, September, 1996).

6. Report in *Guardian Weekly*, Vol. 152, No. 19, 7 May 1995, p 1.

7. C.A.J. Coady, *op. cit.* p 157.

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