

The Invisibility of Ethics and the Hermeneutics of Conduct

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In philosophy today, “ethics” and “morality” are distinguished in some generally recognized ways. The “ethical” dimensions of activity are usually identified with the social and cultural lifeworld in contrast with deliberative judgment and choice, which are normally thought of in connection with “morality.” Many philosophers have recognized the importance of both of these dimensions in formulating theories of conduct. Yet, ambiguities persist relating to how these terms are used, which can obscure important aspects of their relatedness to each other. In particular, ambiguous usage can conceal the degree to which the significance of the ethical dimensions of conduct are often under-represented in contemporary discussions of these issues, in comparison with the moral ones.

Without attributing some priority to ethics over morals, I argue in this paper for a way of thinking about conduct that emphasizes the interdependence of these components. From the hermeneutical perspective I recommend, a clear distinction between morality and ethics must be made, if the prospective contribution of each to an adequate theory of conduct is to be understood and appreciated. For what would characterize such a theory is its foundation both in the conduct which is familiar to ethical discourse and in the deliberative processes typically associated with morality. Moral and ethical philosophies are concerned with *conduct*, not with mere action or behavior. Conduct involves that reflective dimension by which one seeks to guide or determine the will in light of some standards.¹

¹A related notion of “personhood” in view of moral concerns and concepts of agency can be found in Charles Taylor, “The Person,” Chapter 12 in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 257-281.

As Hegel so clearly emphasizes in his rejoinder to Kant, a moral philosophy is incomplete unless it has thematized its ethical dimensions. But, as Kant replies to Hegel, an ethical philosophy that cannot provide persons with a compelling conception of their practical obligations and duties is not, after all, much of a theory about conduct. In what follows, I shall articulate these moral and ethical dimensions to each other, taking my cues from ethnography. The interpretive dimensions of conduct which come to the fore suggest a hermeneutical understanding of ethics and morality within a broader philosophy of conduct. As much as this conception is indebted to Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics, I am here not so much concerned with Gadamer's particular views on this or other issues, as I am with arguing the need to adopt a general hermeneutical perspective toward conduct.²

Applied and Invisible Ethics

In a recent edition of the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, the entry for "Ethics" notes that, "[m]uch of what is called *moral philosophy* is [actually] *normative* or *applied ethics* ... [I]n many contexts moral/ethical ... are ... [used as] synonyms, [although] writers frequently use the two words in different or contrasting senses."³ The meanings and uses of these "different [and] contrasting" senses are developed in a separate entry

²I am sympathetic with the interpretation of Gadamer presented by Georgia Warnke, especially in *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1987). Michael Kelly notes regarding Gadamer that despite the relevance and importance for ethical theory of his debates with Jürgen Habermas, "the status of philosophical ethical theory... was not a part of the original debate" between them. (Michael Kelly, "The Gadamer-Habermas Debate Revisited: The Question of Ethics," in *Universalism Versus Communitarianism: Contemporary Debates in Ethics*, edited by David Rasmussen, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990, p. 138). Gadamer had not directly addressed ethical and moral philosophy in his influential *Truth and Method*, (originally published in 1960), and this trend continued through the early 1970's. Since then, Gadamer has more directly addressed such questions, in particular with the essays published in English as *Reason in the Age of Science*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), and the recently published, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). In general, the development of hermeneutical perspectives on moral and ethical philosophies has been dominated by deconstructionists, with the notable exception of Paul Ricoeur.

³*The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Thomas Mautner (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 180-81.

for "Morality."⁴ In an entry for "Ethics," a widely-used *Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy & Philosophers* further illustrates the scope and acceptance of ambiguity regarding the distinction between ethics and morality:

No generally accepted terminology for making the necessary distinctions [pertaining to the various types of questions belonging to 'Ethics'] has yet emerged; but in this article we shall distinguish between (1) morals, (2) descriptive ethics, and (3) ethics. Thus, ethics (in the narrow sense) stands to morals in much the same relation as does the philosophy of science to science. The student of ethics will nevertheless have to get used to a variety of terminologies; he will find plain 'ethics' used for what we have just called 'morals';...and so on.⁵

These entries suggest that while the distinction between "ethics" and "morals" is meaningful, such a distinction is difficult to draw clearly on the basis of accepted usage by contemporary philosophers.

I think this ambiguity may result more from the state of present priorities in philosophy than from simple unclarity or terminological carelessness. In other words, the problem may not be so much that philosophers have trouble distinguishing the ethical from the moral, but, rather, that the blurriness of the distinction seems somehow appropriate to many. Analytic moral philosophers long ago placed questions about systems of value and ideas of "the good life" aside as undecidable and "metaphysical." In the twentieth century, it became commonplace to speak as if the useful parts of philosophy about conduct could be restricted to only its recognizably moral-practical content, dealing with the meaningfulness, systematicity, and coherence of discourse about obligation and the rules we think we should follow.⁶

Contemporary Continental philosophers, for their part, often sound as if they are resolved that the condition of post-modernity requires a more-or-less complete suspicion toward talk of systems of value —

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 366-67

⁵*The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and Jonathan Ree, (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 100-101. This *Encyclopedia* does not contain entries for either "Morality," or "Moral Theory."

⁶The traditional wisdom considered this period as dominated by meta-ethics over normative ethics.

especially when it seems to involve claims of necessity or universality. In a general sense, this reflects the contemporary hesitation before universalizing discourses, and the late-modern anxiety about narratives and systems of value in general.⁷ Philosophy today is marked by a seriousness concerning how universalizing discourses intersect with particularity, historicity, and situatedness. This sensitivity expresses itself across many philosophical fields, but because it has so much to do with subjectivity, it has naturally had a strong impact on philosophies of conduct.

But there are non-philosophical issues involved in the disappearance of ethics as well as philosophical ones. Philosophers today frequently find themselves writing, talking, and teaching about the philosophical dimensions of conduct and practice in ways that force ethical issues and questions to the margin. College curricula increasingly ask ethicists and moral philosophers to present an idea of ethics to students — under the rubric “applied ethics,” that is, as pointedly geared toward deliberations concerning the practical circumstances in which ideas of good and standards of value are applied in the form of moral laws and rules. This approach is recommended as a way to help students understand the relevance of ethics to their professional and career concerns by presenting the issues in more practical than theoretical terms. But even on a relatively vague distinction between ethics and morals, this is to say that applied ethics seeks to teach about ethics by teaching about morality.

“Applied ethics” is, in a sense, really about moral reasoning and moral philosophy, paying its closest attention to specific contexts in which moral reasoning is defined with respect to definite content. But this can easily be misinterpreted to suggest that moral reasoning may proceed along as if there were no serious ethical questions connected with its deliberations. To those for whom the differences between the moral and ethical dimensions of philosophy about conduct matter, “applied ethics” can thus become a way that ethical issues become confused with and possibly eclipsed by moral ones. But, one does not remove the

⁷Recent attempts to re-invigorate Aristotelian “Virtue Ethics” I believe have been more about choice than character; more about decision-making and judgement than the propriety of ends and aims. In some ways Habermas’ “Discourse Ethics” seems more of a moral theory than an ethical one, even by his own definitions.

theoretical or philosophical dimensions of moral reasoning by calling a class "applied" and cross-listing it with the Economics Department. One may threaten, however, to make an ethical forest look much more like a collection of moral trees.

Ethics as Reflection Upon Ethos

Ethics and morality are distinguished by philosophers in some generally recognized ways, both from one another and in relation to separate concepts and terms used in the study of human social practices. How we understand concepts like "culture," "custom," and "tradition" to be related and unrelated to morality and ethics is obviously of great importance to any general theory of conduct. "Culture" refers to the relatively stable ideological and practical system, or way of life, of a people. A cultural tradition exists where we recognize regularities in a people's practices, institutions, and expressions. It is in this sense that we speak of a culture as having an *ethos*, or a system of values or standards which are implicit in the regular, institutional, and practical activities and judgments of a people.

Starting here allows us to contrast this notion of *ethos* with the related term *ethics* in a fruitful way. Ethics is not equivalent to *ethos*, but refers to a kind of practice through which persons reflect upon the standards and values implicit in practices. It thus involves a reflective relationship toward the cultural standards and values which constitute *ethos*. Although both terms refer to the standards and values of a community, the difference between them reflects a recognition that taking a different stance or attitude toward values changes their status. The implicit values of a relatively stable cultural tradition become something different to the extent that they cease to be held merely on the basis of their stability. Ethics refers to the values of a culture insofar as they are subject to reflection, since only when the *ethos* of a community is thematized reflectively can standards and values be regarded as action-guiding. By *ethos* we refer to values or standards as providing a description of normality. By ethics we refer to the practice of holding our values in a different way — either insisting that they are right and should continue, or insisting they are wrong, and calling for change.

But, since *ethos* is a descriptive inference from normal practices, change in the *ethos* of a people requires changes in *mores*; either in re-

bellious departures from normalcy or in the establishment of new patterns of conduct. All cultural change involves changes in normalcy, by definition — departures from patterns of activity which could be formulated in terms of the *mores* and *ethos* of a people. But not all such change results from conscious reflection, and a still smaller category results from expressly normative and principled impulses, decisions, and choices. In other words, changes in *more*-ality and *ethos* may result from completely unintended and even unconscious shifts in practice that have no reflective dimensions to speak of. Morality and ethicality, on the other hand, refer to *conduct*, which has an essentially reflective dimension. Ethics, as reflection upon practice, thus involves thematizing and developing criteria by which to assess existing and possible rules and norms. Where *mores* become the object of such thematic assessment, they are reflectively taken-up as a matter of concern. They become *morals*, that is, the subject of a conversation about the relationship between our practices and cherished values in definite circumstances.

Morality is thus an orientation toward practice in contexts where judgement is necessary to guide choice in light of standards of value independent of normalcy *in principle*. It is distinguished from *mores* and *ethos* in that a morality is a body of prevailing norms and rules accepted on some reflective grounds and thus defensible as right, rather than on the grounds of convention or prudence. But, further, prevailing morality identifies a concern for the responsibilities and obligations we bear as persons in light of standards that are themselves reflective, and so also essentially matters for conversation. In other words, while rooted in cultural practices, neither morals nor ethics merely spring forth from culture fully-formed. Morality is the realization of ethics, or of reflection upon *ethos*. But morality exists insofar as conduct is made the subject of a conversation that involves us in a constant re-interpretation of our standards of value in contexts of application. That is to say, the existence of morality reflects our continuing need to re-interpret ourselves in light of experience.

Ethics and morals are not just interrelated components of conduct, but are its mutually determining aspects. Without viable moral conversation in which to become so animated, ethical values and standards exist just potentially, as literally utopian ideals, hopefully reflecting possible future conversations. Without a real connection to an ethics so animated, what may appear to be moral conversation may actually be-

lie the reduction of conduct to mere behavior, of conversation to mere discourse, of engaged concern about real priorities to disengaged and finally unethical rule-obedience — the potentially most deadly form rationality can take.

Ethics and morality are thus closely interconnected with culture and history, but emerge from a stance of reflection upon them. Particular ethical systems and moral rules must be understood as related to their particular historical and cultural contexts. Yet, the reflective dimensions essential to ethical standards and moral rules suggest that criteria pertaining to reflective conversation about conduct would nonetheless apply. Developing such criteria might begin with our identifying moments of possibility and choice in the real and enduring structures of our lives, since conduct is never merely the reproduction of those structures. Where *ethos* is made the object of thematic scrutiny, practices we have taken for granted become matters of concern; my conduct and yours become problematic. Morality reflects the ongoing necessity to re-interpret ourselves and our ethical systems in terms of their relevance to the ongoing conversation of life.

In developing separate and then re-connected ideas of ethics and morals in contrast with ethnographic notions of *ethos* and *mores*, I presented them above as aspects of conversation about practice, as a function of which, the standards implicit in our practices become thematized in our attempt to reflectively determine norms of conduct. Since this hermeneutical conception emerged from a consideration of conduct as a form of social-cultural behavior, it is not surprising to find that ethnographers have anticipated the central contrast from which we saw it emerge. Ethnographers commonly make a distinction between the *etic* and *emic* dimensions of the study of cultural practices, which reflects the difference between the *structural* and *reflective* dimensions of meaning.⁸ I close with a consideration of how this distinction provides a

⁸A careful discussion of the meanings of and controversies about the *etic/emic* distinction can be found in Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times*, (California: Alta Mira Press, 1999), especially chapter 2, pp. 31-48. Harris particularly warns against confusing the *etic/emic* distinction with the commonplace distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, since this identifies objectivity solely with the outsider perspective of the student or scientist of culture. But participants themselves have an idea about how the world is structured independent of themselves and their own subjectivity. As I will explain below, this means that the outsider and the insider both have

helpful way to further clarify the hermeneutical dimensions of conduct, and its ethical and moral aspects.

The *etic/emic* distinction is, at its core, a distinction between meaningful things (*emic*) and the usually hidden (*etic*) structures that are believed to be essential to their decipherment. Meaningful behavior occurs in a context set by a stable, structured, 'grammatical' system according to which features capable of conveying and conferring meaning are organized and arranged into meaningful actions and utterances. In distinction from this abstract system are actual meaningful expressions, or semantic entities and objects themselves.

The study of meaningful activity presents ethnographers with the constant need to recognize the difference between these aspects of meaning. The ethnographer anticipates that cultural activity has a 'double nature.' When the meaning of institutions, practices, and beliefs is considered independent of the participants' ideas and beliefs, they are considered from an *etic* perspective. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that the institutions, practices, and beliefs of a people are not only an abstract system, but real living features of a culture. To this extent, practices are not merely structurally capable of conveying meaning, but they actually *mean*. This makes them a different kind of object.

The ethnographer might observe a ritual ceremony and describe the clothing, movements, and expressions of all its participants in detail. From the standpoint typically assumed by the scientific observer, these elements can be sorted out and re-assembled in order to derive a new meaning not given in or by the performance itself or through its participants. The meaning of the event intended by the scientific observer will be cast in terms of measured empirical observations, in what the observer might call 'neutral,' 'objective' language. Classic scientific ethnographic analysis would pursue the meaning of the performance as separate from and irreducible to what it is and what it says about itself. Prior to the 1970's it was commonplace for scientists to consider the

etic and *emic* meaning-structures. This returns the distinction to its roots in linguistics: the *etic* should be thought of as a classificatory structuring system or code which confers meaning, but does not actually 'mean' itself, like the phonetics of spoken language. This 'objective' structure transcends and links all competent language users. Yet, all so linked remain speakers, with definite things to *say* and to *mean*.

only true meaning of observed practices to be exclusively identified with these *etic* dimensions, despite the fact that for the participants themselves, important aspects of the meaning of their activities lay in the activities themselves.⁹

An important and often overlooked aspect of the *etic/emic* distinction is that it applies to meaningful activity generally, and so it is a feature of meanings within a culture as well as between cultures.¹⁰ In other words, the *etic* dimensions of observed behavior are not simply to be identified with the 'objective,' 'empirical,' 'causal,' account that might be given by a western scientist. These are important aspects of the meaning of any observed human behavior. They indeed reflect a western scientific understanding of what the observed events mean, in terms that are independent of what their participants say. Yet, 'participation is in the eye of the observer.' From the standpoint of the observed, the 'participant in science' has also generated an *emic* meaning in terms of a local perspective belonging to the observer's *etic* structural systems. The *etic* meaning of an event, described from the standpoint of a western scientific system of meanings, is, in a non-trivial sense, also really an *emic* account, from the standpoint of the observed.

This is not to say that the distinction between *etic* and *emic* breaks down or undermines the attempt to say scientifically sensible and meaningfully true things — quite the opposite. It is merely to say what is easy

⁹For example, I do not take part in religious ceremonies *in order to* solidify social bonds in the context of the division of labor, although a case has been made that this is how religion should be understood. A scientific observer could decide that this is what my religious practice means, independent of what I say or think, if he or she only cared to discern the *etic* dimensions of my actions. There are many subtle personal and cultural dimensions involved in the *emic* meaning(s) of my activity, however, that such an observer would have to ignore and possibly contradict. *Emic* and *etic* meanings can and often do appear to contradict one another, since they cross over personal and social forms of impetus and motivation. Thus, I *do not think* I attend a Stanley Cup finals match to participate in the ritual re-commitment of North American males to idealized forms of in-group cooperation around dangerous goal-directed activities. From a certain standpoint, I may actually be doing this anyway. I *believe myself* to attend the game because of specific meanings that matter to me, which are inherent in my experience as a North American hockey fan. Being that person makes a Stanley Cup finals game meaningful and exciting and valuable to me for what it is.

¹⁰Harris has been a particular outspoken critic of many confusions associated with the misuse of the distinction. See note #8.

to grant, that '*independent of what people actually tend to think and say*,' is a category that should be regarded as belonging to local systems of meaning in principle, as well as reflecting the core of the scientific observer's perspective. Similarly, '*as it appears from within the horizon of local interpretations*,' is a category that must be regarded as applicable to the practices of the observer as well as to those of participants.

The distinction of *etic* and *emic* aspects of meaning suggests a helpful parallel that further elucidates the situation of a philosophy of conduct: the cultural values and unreflective attitudes with which ethics begins provide a structural framework in terms of which the reflective expression and conversation carried out as ethical-moral discussion occurs. In this sense, a tradition of conversation about conduct facilitates its own continuation by opening itself up for reflection; that is, for the creation out of the 'grammar and syntax' of a structuring past new utterances that make unanticipated sense in present usage. The cultural world contains *etic* structural features out of which practices and beliefs endure as meaningful from one generation to the next. This suggests that cultural reproduction is not a mere repetition of the speech of the ancestors. Still less can it be the replication of its own objectivity, or a formal recreation of the structures that confer meanings. Rather, cultural life is a dynamic between relatively enduring but essentially fluid such structures and new meaningful utterance.

In a somewhat similar way, ethics should not be conceived as reflecting a stone-carved archaic demand for solidarity, stability, and social control in contrast with which the moral ideal of individual subjectivity arose for the Enlightenment. Nor is morality merely the symptom Hegel diagnosed of a dying, fragmentary form of life that the modern world was about to overcome in the Absolute. Culture and *ethos* are the relatively enduring structures in reflection upon which ethical and moral meanings are instituted with an urgency and originality that is always marked by the uniqueness of their real circumstances

Conclusions

Morality and ethics should thus be seen as neither synonymous, nor completely divorced from one another, referring to complementary dimensions in a hermeneutics of conduct. This idea was presented above using the distinction between ethics and *ethos* as a starting point to-

ward¹ clarifying how culture and tradition relate to ethics as their reflective ground. This suggested a view of morality as conversation about conduct, realizing reflection upon relatively enduring values.

The prevailing morality of a time reflects a consensus about how generally held values should be interpreted and applied under local and historical conditions. But such conventions reflect merely a moment in an ongoing conversation that must re-interpret the relevance and meaning of value systems in relation to real contingencies. Thus, there is a continual need for ethical debate driven by changing circumstance and experience, as new questions and choices force us to thematize and reflect on the priorities implicit in our actual choices and debates. Moral reflection and debate always thus affect the tenure and character of the values they call upon us to instantiate, realize, or overthrow.

This way of thinking about ethics and morals allows us to identify ethical values as historically conditioned and only relatively, falsely permanent. If ethical systems of values and ideas of the good exist only in our conversation about what to do, they live and die in the practices and institutions whose results at any given moment they are. This means ethical values are extremely tenuous as well as tenacious and persistent, just like culture. Culture passes from person to person through the most subtle of gestures, and carves a niche in each mind of millions through vast monumental creations. Yet, existing only in the minds, actions, and artifacts of persons, its venue is history, and it thus ever depends utterly and completely on fragile human choice. It is always open to reflection and critique.

The contrast of ethics and morality with *ethos* and *mores* shows that the *ought* is essential to conduct, for it arises upon reflection, in a stance of self awareness and assessment of cultural practices and of ourselves as actors for whom conduct matters. A commonplace way to say this, I think, is that from an ethical or a moral perspective we consider ourselves responsible for our actions. And yet, the *ought* arises from reflection upon temporary but relatively enduring meaning-constituting structures through which we constitute the meaning(s) of our conduct in conversation as moral or immoral. To this extent, ethics and morals emerge in the recognition that our conduct is meaningful, as an attempt to specify that meaning and its conditions — or those of the various choices we sort through in conduct. 