

FOUNDATIONS IN ETHICAL THEORY

Robert Henman

January 2007

This brief article explores the foundations of contemporary ethics in an attempt to assess the presuppositions that occur in foundational philosophical thinking. The evolution of ongoing contexts will be examined and the notion of focus as a limitation will be challenged. This exploration attempts to highlight what may be viewed as a quandary in the field of ethics. This perplexity can be noticed by perusal of textbooks published for university courses in the fields of ethics, bioethics, and medical ethics. Introductory chapters will usually provide a summary of ethical theories¹ from Plato to Mills. Authors may focus on one particular theory but most often cases, issues, or principles are discussed with more than one theory in mind. So E. Kluge² in discussing allocation of resources provides differentiations of macro, meso, and micro allocations within the context of economy and availability culminating in a discussion of discrimination. Depending on one's status in a particular society not all readers would find the chapter comforting. But more importantly is the random functioning of deductive reasoning, consequentialism, utilitarianism, and circumstance and their influence on 'basic ethical principles'.³ These principles emerging from descriptive social relationships are believed to support an 'ethical objectivism'.⁴

Further analysis of other texts such as Ronald Munson's **Intervention and Reflection**⁵ states the point. "You may find that some of the theories that we have discussed are inadequate to deal with certain moral issues in the medical context." This is the crux of the dilemma. How does one decide which theory offers "the best hope of settling on theories and principles that we can accept with confidence and employ without misgivings."⁶

As a lecturer in ethics and bioethics this dilemma has pervaded my choosing of texts for some years.⁷ The issue of foundations would appear to be the required area of focus if a solution to this problem is to be found. The issue has evolved into a debate about a search for

a uniform pluralism. What I wish to discuss in this brief article is a foundation that will underpin theories of deduction, theories of ethics, contemporary notions of basic principles and the notion of focus as a limitation. The issue of foundations is one that was raised for me in two seemingly unrelated fields of inquiry, that of the philosophy of education and bioethics of geriatric care. I will draw on these two fields,⁸ and my investigation into their basis, to attempt to throw some light on the specific foundational question that is my topic here.

By “basis” or “foundations”, accepted and acceptable tradition would have us mean certain general principles that govern both content and procedure. The paradigm for such a view is the perennial inquiry into, or for, the first principles in logic or mathematics, and they are certainly thought of as axioms or propositions that are in some sense acceptable if not irrefutably obvious. Here, I am trying to break away from such a tradition and, oddly, I would like to think that the foundations I draw attention to are irrefutably obvious.

The obvious foundation of ethics is the person doing ethics. Foundations then, in my sense, are not propositional statements but personal stators, inquirers. The foundations of ethics are the persons who pursue inquiries into various ethical issues pertaining to medicine, gerontology, biochemistry, genetics, etc..

What, then, is it, to know the foundations of ethics, or more pointedly, to know the foundation of my ethics? Is it now to know me, the ethical enquirer? Notice that my suggestion is not novel, it is as ancient as Socrates’ suggestion regarding self-knowledge. But I would claim that the difficulty of the achievement of self-knowledge has only emerged through the millennia of failure to follow up on Socrates’ advice.⁹

But let me stay with the obvious, and indeed with the first statement of Aristotle's metaphysics. Is not the core foundation of ethics the curiosity of the ethicist? So a foundational focus must be: what is this curiosity and how does it function? My reader may sense that this is a simple or trivial issue, or even beside the point of contemporary concerns about genetic engineering or the right to die, etc... Yet, I would claim that a serious focusing on one's own curiosity is deceptively unsimple, massively unwelcome in the present academic tradition, and desperately relevant. "In itself it is so simple and obvious that it seems to merit the little attention it commonly receives. At the same time, its function in cognitional activity is so central that to grasp it in its conditions, its working, and its results, is to confer a basic yet startling unity on the whole field of human inquiry and human opinion."¹⁰

I have quoted here from the beginning of a lengthy text on the topic of philosophical foundations. I cannot reproduce the content of that work here nor is it necessary but I will enlarge on my notion of the obvious by shifting my focus to the object of inquiry. One object of such inquiry is the good life of people: people, then, in their search for 'the good life'. But has not that search the same ground, the same foundation, as the research of those who research it? My reader may well find this a puzzling identification, and if so I would wish to exploit this to further the identification: for it is the reader's genuine puzzling that is the relevant topic here, the relevant data of a needed investigation.

My interest has been, so to speak, in the two ends of life, which I may anchor conveniently in the two ages, seven and seventy. Like most of my readers, I live "in the middle" while I inquire about the two "ends". Let me, then, call up the writers of present inquiry into these two ends, to illustrate the form of investigation and to create some curiosity about our own human search.

A recent article asks: “What does solitude mean to the aged?”¹¹ The more basic issue of course is; what is solitude? The article glides over the issue in what may be termed a truncated form of conceptualism:

“The vocabulary of solitude is derived from a variety of concepts; alienation, marginalization, boredom, solitude, social isolation, and a feeling of loneliness. Because the latter three were most often mentioned they were clearly defined.” (See Table 1 for the synthesis of definitions included in this section and for the references to them.)¹²

The table does layout verbal specifications of these conditions, with references to authorities on the subject of the past twenty years. The article then moves on to sampling procedures that bring these specifications “into contact” with the elderly. But what is missing throughout is serious attention to the real data on solitude: the longing that is constitutive of human subjects of any age; the longing for understanding that, surely, the investigator is. The issue is basic self-discovery. Furthermore, I would note that it is not an issue of talk about self-discovery. Note an article on educational gerontology having the ‘helpful’ title “Cognitive Training Using Self-Discovery Methods”¹³ yet what one finds in it is a standard sampling technology which dodges any discomfort of the group of authors regarding the searching selves that they are. Should the gerontologist not come to grips with the search themselves that will grow into elderly solitude? Should not this constitute the core of good gerontology? My question fits uncomfortably yet tellingly with the context of present discussions of “credentializing and licensing of Gerontologists.”

“From the point of view of the society at large, credentials and licenses are designed to differentiate people who have knowledge and experience in a field from those who do not. We prefer to be assured that those who provide us with services know what they are doing. The

need for credentials and licenses stems from the fact that in the anonymous urban society, people can present themselves as being qualified whose performance subsequently indicates that they are not-sometimes with catastrophic results.”¹⁴

The catastrophic results I speak of are grounded in a self-neglect that leaves the searcher into the dynamics of elderly meaning trapped in a broad damaging nominalist positivism. I turn now to the catastrophic result of a truncated methodology at the other end of human meaning. I do so by recommending a simple exercise: a perusal of indices of textbooks, research journals, compendia, that deal with the psychology of children. If the reader follows up the suggestion he or she will find regularly no entry under the letter Q in the index,¹⁵ except perhaps Questionnaire. Questions are not a topic in modern empirical psychology. Yet the brute fact about the child, especially at ages three, four, five, is that the child is a questioner, a quest. And to round off my suggestion, that brute fact locates what is common to the child, the elderly, the psychologist, the gerontologist, and the ethicist.

Can that brute fact be specified in a correlation of its operative dynamics? I would claim that it can. I list below the elements that point to the relevant basic relations. Yet I must appeal to a parallel here to chemistry. The relations that ground chemistry can be laid out in a diagram that names 113 elements. The list does the same for 13 elements in the human dynamic.¹⁶ Both sets of elements require slow serious empirical work both to discover and verify the relations.

1) Data(experience) 2) What questions-What is it? 3) Insight(understanding) 4) Formulation/Definition 5) Is it so? Questions 6) Indirect Insight 7) Judgment 8) What to do? Questions 9) Insight 10) Options 11) Is it to be done? Questions 12) Insight 13) Decision and finally action

Let us begin with the question, the second element. For its emergence is a natural occurrence after experience. Questions are evoked by an unknown experience or a situation to be solved, say in ethics. For our purposes I offer the following puzzle, as a given, with a two-fold purpose; first to solve the puzzle and secondly to advert to the process of puzzling or solving. The puzzle follows.

A	EF	HI	KLMN	_____
BCD	G	J	OP	

The task is to find out why certain letters are on top of the line and others are on the bottom. Can you complete the alphabet? There is a law functioning in this distribution. Recall our two purposes while solving this puzzle. The second purpose, what am I doing when I am puzzling opens up a new field of enquiry. It manifests data that is not normally regarded as empirical in current social science research or in ethical research. So, what are you doing at this moment in trying to solve this puzzle? Can your questioning be something in itself that is concomitant with solving the puzzle. As you push along try to continue to notice that you are in a particular mode of conscious activity. Are you curious? What is it to be curious? This series of questions is pushing you towards a distinction. It is this distinction that eventually manifests the structure of ethical thought. In order to continue your research I leave you with the puzzle and your two questions: What is the solution to this puzzle? And what is it to puzzle? The prolongation of the question increases the possibility of your refinement in the distinction.

I would also note that the elements diagramed point not only to the spontaneous quest of children and the elderly, but also to the quest that is child studies or ethics, to the quest that grounds any science in its processes of discovery and implementation. The bubbling curiosity

of the young child and the tired-eyed reach of the elderly for sympathetic understanding are understood properly only by the human scientist who takes his or her own curiosity and sympathetic understanding as the core data of human studies.¹⁷

But curiosity about curiosity can be by-passed. David Roy showed hesitation in his syllogistic format to take his own curiosity serious when he wrote: "...if ethics deals with the consistency between knowing and doing, then the foundation of ethics will have to be a principle which is discoverable as a dynamic function that delivers this consistency."¹⁸ The major premise is established by answering the question - is the data of my ethics a consistency between knowing and doing? This consistency can be described as "a structure that is latent and operative in everyone's choosing, it is universal on the side of the subject, because that structure can be dodged, it grounds a dialectical criticism of subjects. Again, because that structure is recurrent in every act of choice, it is universal on the side of the object: and because its universality consists not in abstraction but in inevitable recurrence, it also is concrete."¹⁹ But one can repeat Lonergan's words and still dodge the structure.

Now, I have chosen the foundations of ethics as a point of departure for this paper. But, in fact, I am implying an exposition of a gap in the methodology of social science. My criticism is not restricted to education or ethics. Just as the mind of the physicist adverts to the data of direction and velocity of planetary system to generate theories of motion, so must the human scientist, or whatever, advert to the data of consciousness to initiate a "what's going on in me" form of dialogue to establish a grounding for the human sciences. This grounding can facilitate a foundation that is critical of scientific method.

Over the past century historical consciousness has brought to light the fact that there are different contexts within which similar experiences occur. Those differing contexts affect

the experience so that in fact the experience maybe the same, but the understanding of that experience is different. A major context that has emerged recently is that of feminist theory and its critical reflection on human living.²⁰ Feminist theory is a new context that has positively contributed to the demise of classical culture and the notion of absolutes. The contribution of feminist theory is still emerging and I believe has only just begun.²¹ At this stage of emergence what I believe to be a major contribution to scientific method is the notion of connectedness that feminist theory brings to academic discussion. This pertains especially to ethics in as much as ethical decisions are about people and affect people's lives more directly than some of the other sciences and activities of the human community.

This connectedness is not only a character of human intersubjectivity, but also a character of human understanding-insight. Understanding unifies former acts of understanding, it connects them, it seeks out relations between experiences or former acts of understanding and those relations become the foundations for human judgments and decisions.²²

Some theorists state that to seek foundations in ethics is to limit one's scope. Yet without foundations, from whence do even the diverse and inadequate theories come? I have briefly explored the notion of principles²³ and feminist theory in this paper. Just as I attempted to make a case for the notion of question and the 13 elements as a foundation for education and ethics, I also make the same claim for feminist theory. In other words, each researcher is attempting to provide the most intelligent view possible. If the position put forward is considered unintelligent it usually will not make the journals or textbooks. Underlying all theories is the theorist attempting to be intelligent and to do that, one questions one's experience, attempts to understand that experience, and finally to pass some judgment on that understanding as to its degree of intelligibility. Each theory in some sense is a limitation. The

13 elements are not a limitation, they are, in fact, the structure from which all theories emerge and limitation is born. Limitation is a product of one's level of understanding at the time of the exercise. That horizon can expand at anytime and in fact, its dynamic is to do just that, to grow in understanding, to expand beyond its former capacity, its limitation. The structure of human consciousness, these 13 elements, is the foundation of all human theories. This structure of human consciousness can only be known by itself, the structure of consciousness. Just as in the two types of questions concerning our puzzle, to understand the structure of consciousness, the researcher must ask about their own experience of questioning, understanding and judging. In doing so the researcher experiences, reaches some understanding and judges that understanding to be adequate or not so adequate. The structure of consciousness is the method of reflecting on the very structure itself.

Returning to our introductory remarks concerning textbook choice,²⁴ this dilemma can be solved by an empirical study of mind in the process of doing ethics to outline the foundation of all ethical theories be they utilitarian, consequential, circumstantial, deontological and one can go on. These theories were developed by human intelligence. The problem of deductive reasoning is more complex and I can only add here that the syllogistic expression is the formulation of an insight objectified in symbol²⁵ and not some objective standard "out there".

I have drawn centrally on the thought of one thinker to the exclusion of others in an effort to find a solution to the problems summarily outlined in the introduction. In order to fully explain the relatedness of a foundation to particular theories and issues would involve lengthy research and discussion. Such work cannot be carried out in a short article.²⁶ I offer here merely a pointer towards an empirical method of minding mind for those who have experienced similar problems.

ENDNOTES

1. Kluge, W., *Biomedical Ethics in a Canadian Context*, 1992; Prentice Hall, Ont, Ch. 2, Munson, Ronald, *Intervention and Reflection*, 1992; 4th edition, Wadsworth, CA., Ch.1.
2. Kluge, op. Cit., ch. 9.
3. Kluge, p. 12.
4. Kluge, p. 12-13. Kluge assumes all readers understand objective in the same manner. See McShane, Philip; *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*, 1975; Exposition Press, N.Y., ch. 4, 5 and 6 on the topics of knowledge, verification and objectivity.
5. Munson, R., p. 45
6. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
7. The current texts also leave the student with more of a history of theories and principles to apply to issues rather than a foundation of ethical thought. To push my point further one might ask, 'From where does Kluge form his expression of ethical objectivism?'
8. Robert Henman; *The Child as Quest*, 1984; University Press of America. Chapters. 2, 3 & 4. Bernard Lonergan; *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 1992, University of Toronto Press, CWL 3, ch. 18: "The Possibility of Ethics".
9. Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, 1970; ed. by David Burrell, University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd printing, p. 25, note 122. Lonergan makes a strong case for the seriousness of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas in the pursuit of the Socratic advice as well as a case for a traditional and prevalent misrepresentation of their achievements.
10. *Insight*, p. ix.
11. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 1988, 7(4) pp. 358-371.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
13. *Educational Gerontology*, North Texas State University, 1986; 12(2): p.159.

14. *The Gerontologist*, Gerontological Society of America, 1988; 28(2): p. 170.

15. I have carried out a similar exercise on textbooks in ethics and gerontology and found the entry absent. The indices of handbooks on nursing do mention question in reference to forms of communication between care giver and patient. This expression lacks the sublation that intentional analysis would provide. My thanks to Shelly Cobbett, a former student, for this research.

16. *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*, pp. 15 & 44.

17. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1973, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2nd edition, p.180.

18. Roy D. "Bioethics as Anamnesis: What Lonergan has Understood and Others have Overlooked" *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of B. Lonergan*, 1981; ed. by M. Lamb, Marquette University Press, p. 335-338. A position is a judgment in response to an IS Question: does ethics deal with the consistency between knowing and doing? Until the subject reaches such affirmation ethics is not concrete. There are three instances of hesitation in Roy's paper, "If ethics deal with", p. 332; "On this view of things", p. 333 and "If persons are the root of ethics", p. 336. The article takes a firmer position in its summary account of anamnesis, but, can anamnesis be systematically correlated with ethical thought if there is a failure to face the existential question, 'What am I doing when I follow the dictates of reflective judgment?' My answer may be linguistically the same as another's but the response does not ground an ethics unless one has adverted to the activity in oneself. Past and recent literature on ethics is preoccupied with contemporary issues trying to keep pace with technology while neglecting the subject who is the foundations of ethical theory and of technological development.

19. *Insight*, p. 604.

20. Rosemarie Putnam Tong *Feminist Thought*, 2nd edition, 1998, Westview Press, USA, for a detailed history of the forms and evolution of feminist theory.

21. Susan Wolf, *Feminism & Bioethics: Beyond Reproduction*, 1996; The Hastings Center, for a discussion of the influence of feminism on bioethics see especially the Introduction by Susan Wolf and Section 1, “The Relationship of Feminism and Bioethics”.

22. *Insight*, pp. 460-1

23. Tom Beauchamp & LeRoy Walters(editors), *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, 1999; 5th edition, Wadsworth Pub. Co., USA, pp. 18-24 on principles.

24. Zanardi, B, Shute, M., *Improving Moral Decision-Making*, 2003; Axial Press, Halifax, See my review of this text in HEC Forum Journal in Medical Ethics, Vol. 16, # 3, September 2004 on textbook choice.

25. See Lonergan’s “Form of Inference”, *Collection*, 1988; CWL 4, University of Toronto Press, ch.1.

26. See Zanardi & Shute, *Improving Moral Decision-Making* for an expansion on the thematic relations.
