

Thinking Ethically about Technology

It is heard so frequently today that it is taken virtually as a truism: the development of our moral systems has not been able to keep pace with technological and medical developments, leaving us prey, individually and societally, to a host of dangers.

Is this indeed the case? Or is it possible that there is a true, and hence quite serviceable, moral tradition that is our rightful inheritance but which has been almost irretrievably lost? A moral tradition that would serve the post-modern, technological world as effectively as it did the Greek or Roman or Christian social orders of the past?

In the beginning of his book *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre expresses an awareness of just such a lost moral tradition. He likens the contemporary situation of moral thought to a catastrophe in the natural sciences in which all findings and laboratories and instruments have been destroyed by latter-day vandals. Later, when individuals try to retrieve this past, all that remains are unrelated fragments of studies, scientific terms devoid of their original context, disconnected theories. MacIntyre writes:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I de-

scribed. What we possess . . . are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have . . . lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.

Working professionally in the field of morality as I do, and constantly engaged in the contemporary debates on moral issues ranging from questions of confidentiality in a day of networked computer systems to the removal of hydration and nutrition from comatose patients, I am daily convinced that MacIntyre's observation is correct.

Our current debates use the words of morality with little or no understanding of their meaning. For example, I serve on the Philadelphia Public School Board's Task Force on Adolescent Sexuality, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and HIV. There are approximately thirty active members on the task force, all of whom speak out of profound moral conviction as they formulate policy for our public school children. The representative of the American Federa-

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tion of Teachers and the Gay and Lesbian Task Force uses weighty moral language as he proposes policies for "gay and lesbian youth." The representative of AIDS-Act Up speaks to the morality of putting condoms into the hands of every child and condemns, in scatological and moral terms, anyone who would oppose any AIDS-Act Up program. The Director of Health Services for the School District insists that there are only two approaches to sex education: the moral, religious, parochial approach or the empirical, scientific, secular route. But she then incongruously argues that the only "moral" approach is the non-judgmental, value-free, scientific, empirical, secular one.

Responsibility, accountability, respect, human dignity, values, tolerance, acceptance, love, human rights—these are all words that have been used to formulate policies which not only condone but encourage such things as promiscuity, fornication, sodomy, and pornography, all actions that have demonstrably deleterious effects on the social order. In these cases, the language of morality remains the same; its meaning, however, varies widely with everyone who uses it.

What is noteworthy in this chaos is that all of the challenges to received morality are mounted with an appeal to morality itself! People persist in wanting to do the right thing—even when they are breaking established moral norms. In fact, this desire to do the right thing is one of the characteristics that defines us as human beings. All would surely share Aristotle's conviction expressed in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "We are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good."

Yet the natural inclination within each person to do good and avoid evil is no guarantee that the individual will do so. One must first clear away whatever keeps him from perceiving the good for what it is and pursuing it, for as Plato points out in

Protagoras: "To prefer evil to good is not in human nature." One must dispel ignorance so that he knows what he is doing, and one must do his utmost to assure freedom of action. The capacity to know the truth, which resides with the intellect, and to love it, which belongs to the will, are prerequisites for any truly moral act.

In their pursuit of the good, human beings make radically different choices. Even when people choose to perform the same act, they often do so for quite different reasons. Everyone uses a particular method for arriving at a moral choice, and the chosen method is rarely a matter of indifference. Yet one hardly is presented with any moral methodology today other than those which can be reduced to some form of utilitarianism or deontology.

Regrettably, this myopic position is so entrenched that it cannot even be challenged. And because this "orthodoxy" is so unquestioned, we, as a society, are left with woefully inadequate tools to deal with the challenges presented with the recent advances in medicine, biology, and technology. The moral methodology that has virtually disappeared from the field is natural law, which has in fact been the most influential in fashioning the institutions, customs, and beliefs that have served for centuries to protect the inviolability and unique value of each individual person within our society. These days, the natural law tradition is often subject to dismissive rejection and even ridicule.

American culture, which is increasingly becoming world culture, has lost touch with its deepest roots and has been predominantly influenced by modern British and German moral philosophies: the British given to utilitarianism, the German to order imposed by law—or deontology.

Utilitarianism was, and still is, a philoso-

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phy congenial to the English temper. It emerged in the nineteenth century as the reigning philosophy of the victors in the Industrial Revolution. Abstract questions about the nature of man, metaphysical reflections upon the nature of the good, were judged to be irrelevant. The question simply was: what works? A principle of social morality was developed which insisted that the moral was whatever brought about the greatest good for the greatest number. This principle was further refined along crassly hedonistic lines. The good was understood to be whatever maximized pleasure and minimized pain. Morality, then, became a matter of measure and calculation.

William James refashioned utilitarianism into pragmatism to fit the temper of another highly successful industrial society, the United States. For the proponents of this system—as for many Americans—whatever works is true, whatever works is good. What other criteria for truth and goodness could any reasonable person hope to find? There is little question that such an approach has come to dominate American moral reflection. It can be heard in the indignant voices of those who ask what could possibly be wrong with using the brain tissue of aborted fetuses to cure Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease (or at least to bring some respite from their debilitating symptoms). In fact, the utilitarian principle has come to be so callously applied that brain tissue is sometimes suctioned from the skull of the living child still in its mother's womb, in order that the tissue will be healthy and alive for transplant!

The utilitarian approach can be heard in the impatient voices of those arguing for the withdrawal of hydration and nutrition from individuals in a persistent vegetative state. The moral calculus sets in. These patients cannot experience pleasure, they cannot contribute to society, they require considerable amounts of money and time to main-

tain. The calculations are run, and the conclusion is inexorable: dispatch them.

The utilitarian approach can also be seen in a Dr. Jack Kevorkian who works to develop an efficient suicide machine for those who no longer care to live. Such utilitarian considerations today press hard against all attempts to maintain the civilized order built over centuries with such toil, a civilized order that places a supreme value on each individual life—not because of what that individual can do or have but simply because of what that individual is: a human being, a creation in the image and likeness of God Himself, and hence, a sacred reality that may never be violated.

The other moral methodology that today appears to be accepted as the only legitimate alternative to utilitarianism is deontology. Its name is derived from the Greek *deon*, meaning obligation. In fact, not infrequently, the term "deontology" is used synonymously with "ethics," understood as the science of moral obligation or duty. There is much about this approach that resembles the natural law approach. Both, for example, will hold that there are moral absolutes. While utilitarians will tend to deny any moral absolutes, and on the basis of their moral calculus find ways to justify even such acts as adultery or the direct killing of an innocent human being, those following the natural law or deontological approaches will simply insist that some things may never be done.

Additionally, the manner in which deontological and natural law methodologies arrive at their positions is not insignificant. Plato was well-aware of the way in which different methodologies could lead to the same moral conclusions when he wrote in the *Euthyphro*: "Is what is good good because the gods approve it or do they approve it because it is good?" The same question can be reversed: "Is an act wrong

because it is forbidden or is it forbidden because it is wrong?" The deontologists tend to articulate the proposition in the first manner, the proponents of natural law in the second.

Immanuel Kant built his moral system upon an innate human awareness of the necessity of doing one's duty. To Kant, one does not act morally when one acts out of inclination or out of a desire for happiness, but only when he acts out of a sense of duty. In fact, the morality of an individual acting for happiness could be held suspect because how can it be known whether he is acting out of self-interest, thus making him a slave to inclination, or whether he is truly free? The individual moral agent must be completely autonomous, and this autonomy is actualized only when he is guided solely by the "categorical imperatives" formulated by reason. Moral absolutes are formulated when one attempts to universalize a maxim. If a proposed action can be universally applicable, one can say that it is binding and absolute, allowing of no exceptions. If it cannot be universalized, one ought not to perform the proposed act. Lying, for example, is never allowed since, according to Kant, the universalization of such an act would inevitably lead to social disorder and disintegration. Even though Kant acknowledged that "not every untruth is a lie," he could not bring himself to refrain from calling whomever willfully uttered an untruth a "liar."

The difficulty with the deontological approach is that it carries with it the danger of positivism, the idea that something is wrong because it is forbidden. If one's moral life is defined as acting out of a sense of duty rather than inclination, where and how does one recognize one's duty? For Kant, the answer is provided by one's own autonomous reason and "holy will."

Hegel also appealed to a sense of personal duty, and wrote: "In duty the individual

finds his liberation; liberation from dependence on mere natural impulse." But when asked where this articulation of duty is found, Hegel replied that it is embodied in the state, the subordination to which "frees" the individual from servitude to his self-centered natural appetites. The dangers of the state becoming the final arbiter of human conduct are obvious.

The German philosopher Josef Pieper wrote about a professor of jurisprudence with whom he studied prior to the Second World War, a legal positivist who taught that "*Verbrechen ist, was verboten ist*": a crime is whatever is forbidden. Unfortunately, the man was a Jew, and tragically died as a result of his "crime" after the National Socialists came to power and decreed it to be such. In this way, he died in conformity with his own positivist jurisprudence. Under such a system, regrettably, law becomes divorced from morality—or even more radically, comes to supplant it. Such an approach is not so alien to our own American experience, as can be seen in the writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who urged, "every word of moral significance [ought to] be banished from the law altogether."

Too often, contemporary debate on moral issues actually tries to address the issues without morality! The distribution of condoms to Philadelphia public school children, for example, is called by many a medical, not a moral, issue. Questions of private or public morality are not to enter into the national debate on abortion, according to some. In the opinion of a significant segment of our population, there is only one criterion for the resolution of the abortion question: the woman's unrestricted, autonomous right to do whatever she wants with her unborn child for whatever reasons she chooses—health, vanity, financial well-being, or perhaps even moral sentiment.

The deontological approach to morality

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faces the danger of ultimately falling into the same quagmire as the utilitarian. Some individual or collective person takes it upon himself (or themselves) to be the final arbiter of human conduct without any appeal beyond the interests of the self or the state. In contemporary moral debates we see autonomy running rampant, so that virtually any act becomes morally legitimate simply because there are people who are engaging in it and will argue for its legitimacy! As MacIntyre points out, we have lost any overarching frame of reference for the debate.

Despite its abandonment, the natural law tradition continues to be the most useful methodology in a technological and pluralistic society since it simply looks to the nature of the human person for the formulation of moral propositions and is entirely open to any developments and insights within the natural sciences. The natural law tradition believes in an objective moral order and, consequently, holds that there are certain moral absolutes that ought never be violated if one hopes to attain personal wholeness or societal health. As Aristotle wrote:

There are some actions and emotions whose very names connote baseness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy; and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder. These and similar emotions and actions imply by their very names that they are bad. . . . It is, therefore, impossible ever to do right in performing them: to perform them is always wrong. In cases of this sort, let us say adultery, rightness and wrongness do not depend on committing it with the right woman at the right time and in the right manner, but the mere fact of committing such action at all is to do wrong.

The same insight is evident in Abraham Lincoln's response to Stephen Douglas in their famous debate on slavery: "When Judge Douglas says that whoever, or whatever community, wants slaves, they have a right

to have them, he is perfectly logical if there is nothing wrong in the institution; but if you admit that it is wrong, he cannot logically say that anybody has a right to do a wrong." Within the natural law tradition, certain acts are wrong not because they are forbidden, but because they are wrong—that is, because they do not conform or serve the good of the human person. In his debate with Douglas, Lincoln had to appeal to the precedence of morality over law, since the law at that time did not universally support his position against slavery. But where do these moral absolutes come from? From the nature of the human person and his world.

The natural law tradition holds that the driving motivation of human actions is not a Kantian sense of duty, but rather the pursuit of happiness, a sense of well-being that results from one's becoming more fully human by living in accord with one's own nature. It finds this motivation impelling every human act.

That which is most characteristic of human nature is rationality, the ability to see the purposefulness within one's own nature and to choose actions that enable one to achieve the ends or goals for which one is created. It might be argued that an ethic based on the pursuit of happiness quickly degenerates into some form of hedonism. However, the natural law tradition insists that although certain actions may appear to bring happiness they will ineluctably bring misery if they do not assist one in attaining those ends for which he was created. It is the belief in a created, intelligible order that prevents the natural law tradition from degenerating into subjectivism.

Consequently, it is never enough simply to appeal to human nature as such in the formulation of moral propositions within the natural law tradition. There must always be an appeal to human nature as created, a nature created for happiness in this

world and ultimately in the world to come. If human nature is not created, it has no purposefulness, no intelligible ends that may be reasonably sought in human behavior and fostered through social legislation.

A thing has its nature bestowed upon it by its creator. A pen has a nature because it was created as such, and its nature can be understood in terms of the purpose for which it was created. If there is to be a revitalization of the natural law tradition to assist contemporary society in dealing with ever new moral challenges, it must be one that is faithful to the tradition in its fullness. This means acknowledging, as a minimum, that there is a Creator who has bestowed both worth and meaning on human creatures.

Since Communism was based on atheistic premises it denied that there was such a thing as human nature. If Communism's premise was correct, then so was its conclusion—there is no human nature. Consequently, Communist countries themselves attempted to create man, the "Socialist man," and were prepared to use any means at their disposal, since nothing violated a non-existent human nature! Without a human nature, there could be no such thing as human rights. The logic is inexorable. The consequences are grotesque. In the same way, a secularized technological society that ignores the natural law can be just as dangerous to human flourishing as was any Communist regime.

At the center of the natural law tradition is the inviolability of the individual person—created in the image and likeness of God, from whom he receives his true worth. It cannot be stated in strong enough terms, that a respect for the inviolability of the person is the necessary starting-point for formulating moral propositions to deal with current developments in medicine and technology. One cannot formulate in advance

what moral positions ought to be constructed to deal with specific cases presented by technological developments. But the very nature of the individual person provides the source of moral reflection. The right of the individual to personal integrity will lead to the moral norms governing issues of privacy and confidentiality in an age of electronic data gathering and storage. The inherent nature of man and woman who each produce gametes of 23 chromosomes, the joining of which will give rise to a new human life of 46 chromosomes, provides what is necessary for formulating principles to order human relationships, to govern the social institution of marriage, to regulate the births of children, to overcome the problem of infertility, and to deal with a host of other contemporary moral conundrums. The inviolability of the innocent person will provide guidance for the formulation of policies dealing with "life issues" ranging from feeding comatose patients to waging war and inflicting capital punishment.

The moral dilemmas arising from the mind-boggling advances in medicine and technology do not admit of easy, simplistic solutions. But they are not insoluble. We as a people have the cultural and moral resources to address these questions in a humane and reasonable manner because we draw on a tradition, a tradition of natural law, that has served human goods in vastly different cultural contexts successfully, precisely because it respects humanity as a divine creation. As Americans, we are especially fortunate to have it within our own national tradition. In our own founding documents, we acknowledge the "laws of nature and nature's God" and hold "these truths to be self-evident; that all men have been endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This tradition stands ready to serve us as a people if only we will draw upon it.