



THE KENAN
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WHAT IS ETHICS?

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This paper is in response to Geoffrey Harpham's essay, *Ethics*. It was presented during the "Use and Abuse of Ethics" seminar on September 26, 2008, as part of the "What is Ethics? And Who Cares?" series hosted by the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

The Paper

Dr Harpham begins by telling us a story. It's a story in broadly three chapters. He begins in chapter two, which he calls the Theoretical Era, a period that began around 1968 and ended on December 1, 1987. Chapter two is an exercise in the hermeneutics of suspicion. Imperatives and laws were grand and mystical names for private interests or desires. Ethics was a camouflage for power, hypocrisy and unreality. Ethics was a vicious cocktail of mastery and delusion. I call this period chapter two because it presumes a chapter one that Dr Harpham doesn't narrate. One has to assume that before the theoretical era there was a less reflective era. Recalling Peter De Vries' remark that the unexamined life may not be worth living but the examined life is no bowl of cherries either, we are to take it that like before the theoretical era was more comfortable with the notion of ethics, because it was more comfortable with the unquestioned universal white male heterosexual subject, whose self hadn't yet been thoroughly decentered, and whose bid for power hadn't yet been thoroughly deconstructed. Chapter three, which began with the outing of Paul de Man as possible collaborator in occupied 1940s Belgium, heralded a recognition that, flawed as ethics might always have been, literary theory couldn't do without it altogether, (and in fact never really had) even if such a recognition meant it was time to welcome back the subject after a long vacation.

Having located us diachronically in the interchanges of ethics and literary theory, Dr Harpham embarks on a synchronic attempt to define ethics. He says "Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness ... are articulated and negotiated." This is a definition that owes a good deal to chapter two, in its naming and engaging of otherness, but seems an appropriate chapter three definition because its view of ethics is more positive than was fashionable in the theoretical era. Later he says "Because it posits an overriding imperative, ethics is a grievous offense to those who are overridden, and a mighty temptation to those who wish to override." This hints at a chapter three ethic with full awareness of the critiques of chapter two. However in this section of the paper emerges Dr Harpham's abiding and pervasive unease that ethics promises more than it delivers. This is partly because it is poised between the general and the particular, represented respectively by what he takes as the two key questions, How ought one to live? and What ought I to do? Dr Harpham sees this tension as insoluble. Hence "Articulating perplexity, rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about."

After a story and a definition, Dr Harpham offers a proposal. The proposal concerns the relation of narrative and ethics. Narrative is not resistance to theory, he insists. Ethics is instead the point at which literature intersects with theory, making literature conceptually interesting and humanizing theory. It is in ethics that theory becomes literary and literature becomes theoretical. This builds up to a compelling pair of conclusions. First, "Narrative plot thus provides what philosophy cannot, a principle of formal necessity immanent in recognizable worldly and contingent events that governs a movement toward the eventual identity of *is* and *ought*." Second, "Plot is the law of narrative ... [meanwhile readers] must submit to the text and try to understand it 'on its own terms.' ... The relation of reader to narrative text provides a compelling instance of the free submission of the subject to the law." This is a pair of highly promising proposals.

Review

Taking Dr Harpham's theme of the tension between and eventual harmony of the *is* and the *ought*, I'm now going to move to my second group of three points, examining not what Dr Harpham's paper is but what it ought to be. This is a moment for critical engagement. I shall keep the structure of the Dr Harpham's paper and talk first about his story, then his definition, and third his proposal.

Dr Harpham's story is echoed across the humanities, and notably in my own discipline of Christian ethics. The transitional moments are not quite as precise as 1968 and 1987, but one can trace a quite similar three-chapter story, in which chapter two is constituted by what I have elsewhere called "subversive ethics." The first chapter, which

involves relentless debates about deontological and consequential ethics, I call universal ethics. Where I would differ from Dr Harpham's argument just slightly is that the key question seems to me not who is *doing* ethics or what ethics *is* but *where* ethics is being done and *for whom* it is being done. Universal ethics is for anyone and subversive ethics is for the oppressed. For Christian ethics, I suggest, chapter three is about ecclesial ethics, ethics for the church. This isn't as sectarian as it sounds. It derives a great deal from Alasdair MacIntyre, much of which empowers those in secular contexts who strive for an ethic of character rather than decision. And it doesn't mean Christians withdrawing from or disregarding or despising the public sphere: it simply means Christians no longer regarding their ethic as a default setting for liberal democratic societies, and enjoying that decoupling rather than lamenting it.

However I would take issue with a few of the assumptions Dr Harpham makes in the section where he defines ethics. I'm not sure I agree with his assumption that the one indispensable word in ethics is the word "ought." It seems to me ethics depends rather on the subjunctive "might." Ethics arises when things might be different from how they are. It resides principally in the imagination, in that part of a person or community that envisages how things could be, rather than simply how they are. To go as far as to say how they ought to be is a second step. The prior step is to imagine how they might be. While Dr Harpham refers to making a fetish of choice, I don't detect that he makes a decisive step towards an ethic that isn't essentially about choice. Ethics still seems to be about decisions and actions, right intentions and right outcomes. While he refers to MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, it doesn't seem that MacIntyre's notions of virtue and character have diverted Dr Harpham's attention to an alternative location for ethics. I have little time for Dr Harpham's attempts to distinguish between morality and ethics. Many have pursued such a distinction, but I'm not sure any of them have proved that the struggle was worth it. Morality is the Latin term and ethics is the Greek term. I'm not sure there's really much more to it than that. Beyond that it's Humpty Dumpty territory, where words simply mean what the speaker chooses them to mean. I also wondered whether the paper made life difficult for itself when it discussed feminist ethics. There's such an enormous difference between the discourses of Julia Kristeva and that of Carol Gilligan that I'm not sure it's worth the effort to hold on to a single definition of feminism that unites the two. Some strands of feminism seek to augment the universal paradigm, making women as visible and valuable in it as men; other strands seek to recast the universal paradigm, assigning women roles and qualities of equal or even greater significance but with a decidedly different quality to those characteristically identified with men; others again reject the whole notion of a universal paradigm, on either descriptive or moral grounds. Trying to force these three strands into one definition seems a tall order.

As for the proposals in Dr Harpham's paper concerning narrative, they seem to me marvelous. Dr Harpham points out that the referential specificity, human voice, and uncertain form of narrative seem to undermine theory. But he goes on to argue that the relation of reader to narrative is similar to the relation of subject to law, and that narrative offers a perfect poise between necessity and contingency, one of the chief formal tensions in ethics. If MacIntyre dug the furrow for the role of narrative in ethics, Dr Harpham's paper fills MacIntyre's furrow with very promising seeds.

Imitation

I'm coming close to the part you've all been waiting for, where I get to say "Eighthly, but not finally." In case you've lost count, I'm on seventhly. This is the section where I get to offer you my own account of the territory Dr Harpham's paper maps out at greater length and with more subtlety. Grand narratives have been very fashionable in my own field of ecclesial ethics. George Lindbeck has three chapters referring broadly to preliberal, liberal and postliberal; John Milbank has a grand decline since Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century. The one I've coined myself in a book published this week (you don't often get to say that, so I've indulged myself a little) is rather more specific. I call it the Three Chapter Story of American Higher Education, and it has a prologue broadly pre-1900, with colleges and universities founded to promote and preserve Protestant hegemony, chapter one in the early

twentieth century, a wrestling match in which the denominations kept the institutional control while handing over the curriculum to the faculties, chapter two in the sixties, with the citadel open to diversity, and chapter three today, characterized by those who long to return to chapter one tussling with those who long to return to chapter two. Ecclesial ethics as I understand it is often perceived as a longing to get back to chapter one but I'm interested in an ethic that harnesses the energy of chapter two and yet offers a more explicit constructive agenda. What that agenda can no longer be is both universal and prescriptive. Ethics is about example and persuasion, not about coercion and prescription.

Eighthly, but not finally, my proposal for what ethics is. I define ethics as "informed prayer." Prayer is openness towards, recognition of, appeal to, explicit desire for and dependence on the presence of God. Improvisers in the theatre work long and hard to reach a state of relaxed awareness that one writer calls *la disponibilité*. In one of my books I describe this condition as follows. "The improviser in this state of readiness has at hand all the skills of the trade that the following chapters will explore. There is trust and respect for oneself and the other actors. There is alertness and attention. There is fitness and engagement. There is an understanding of narrative – of what is an end and what is a beginning of a scene or story. There is an ability to keep the narrative going and to explore a situation. There is a willingness to reintroduce discarded material. There is an aptitude for altering and playing with status roles, for relating to others, remembering, sustaining and developing character, and sensing the shape of a story." (I) This is my attempt to map the territory of ethics. For me, ethics is more about bringing people to this state of relaxed awareness than it is prescribing how they should behave in its absence. As Iris Murdoch put it, decisions are what we resort to when we've tried everything else. In another book I talk of ethics as informed prayer. "It begins with the simple 'Help!' of the crisis; it becomes the plaintive 'What should I do?' of the dilemma; it emerges as the retrospective 'What else could I have done?' of the confessional." (BCCE) But a more informed prayer emerges out of the practices that form the relaxed awareness I referred to. "It is a corporate prayer honed by the traditions of centuries into an orchestrated dance of practices that, over time, the believer learns to perform and inhabit. It is these practices, not the crisis, that define ethics."

Finally and ninthly, what fascinates me about Dr Harpham's paper is that his account of the reader's relationship with the text is analogous to my account of prayer and of relaxed awareness. However the reason I talk so much about theatrical improvisation is that I'm not sure that narrative is enough. If ethics is an embodied discourse, it makes sense to look more towards drama than simply towards narrative. But drama itself has drawbacks, since the notion of a fixed script, albeit one refreshed by performance in new circumstances, doesn't do justice to the dynamism required by fresh circumstances. Hence my notion of ethics not as text, nor drama, but as improvisation, a notion that I hope does justice both to tradition and formation and to contemporary demands and challenges. Improvisation in the theatre is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear. That is what ethics aspires to. Far from being the prescription of an unrestricted ought, a sermon is an improvisation on the tradition in the light of contemporary contexts; and the life of ethical enquiry is the same.