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Ethics and its challenges

I would like to look at some of the challenges of ethcis today. Therefore, in the first part I say something about ethics, the ethical theories and ethical concepts. Afterwords I am going to explain a little bit about the human dimensions, the dealing with experiences (i.e. work); because the human person has to decide the right thing in the right place on the right time, and in relatively freedom. In the end, there are some ideas about applied ethics which is necessary to focusing on the practical issues, too. Otherwise people who do not like the ethical discussions they could think that ethical ideas are selfsufficient and do not make sense, but I will tell them something else....

What is ethics all about?

First of all, the systems of value and custom instantiated in the lives of particular groups of human beings are described as ethics of these groups. Philosophers may concern themselves with articulating these systems, but this is usually seen as the task of anthropology.

Second, the term is used to refer to one in particular of these systems, morality, which involves notions such as rightness and wrongness, guilt and shame, and so on. The central question here is how best to characterize this system. Is a moral system one with a certain function, such as to enable cooperation among individuals, or must it involve certain sentiments, such as those concerned with blame?

Third, ethics can, within this system of morality itself, refer to actual moral principiles: Why did you return the book? It was the only ethical thing to do in that particular circumstances.

Key words:

Ethics, Humanity, Freedom, Objectivity, Meaning

Finally, ethics is that area of philosophy concerned with the study of ethics in its other senses. It is important to remember that philosophical ethics is not independent of other areas of philosophy. The answer to many ethical questions depend on answers to questions in metaphysics and other areas. Furthermore, philosophers have been concerned to establish links between the ethical sphere of life itself and other spheres. Some philosophers have, for philosophical reasons, had doubts about whether philosophy provides anyway the best approach to ethics. And even those who believe philosophy has a contribution to make may suggest that ethical justification must refer outside philosophy to common sense beliefs or real-life examples.

A central task of philosophical ethics is to articulate what constitutes ethics or morality. This „project" is that of meta-ethics. What is it that escpecially constitutes the moral point of view as opposed to others? Some argue that what is morally required is equivalent to what is required by reason overall, whereas others see morality as providing just one source of reasons. Yet, others have suggested that all reasons are self-interested, and that concern for others is ultimately irrational. This has not been seen to be inimical in itself to the notion of morality, however, since a moral system can be seen to benefit its participants.

The moral point of view itself is often spelled out as grounded on a conception of equal respect. But there is some debate about how impartial morality requires us to be. Another set of issues concerns what it is that gives a being moral status, either as an object or moral concern or as an actual moral agent. And how do our understandings of human nature impinge on our conception of morality and moral agency?

Once we have some grip on what ethics is, we can begin to ask questions about moral principles themselves. Moral principles have often been put in terms of what is required by duty, but there has been something of a reaction against it as a result of a masculine overemphasis on rules at the cost of empathy and care. These doubts are related to general concerns about the role principles should play in ethical thought. Situation ethicists suggest that circumstances can lead to abandonment of any moral principle, particularists arguing that is because it cannot be assumed that a reason that applies in one case will apply in others. The casuistical tradition has employed moral principles, but in the understanding that there is no „super-principle" to decide conflicts of principles. At the other end of the spectrum, some philosophers have sought to understand morality as itself constituted by a single principle, such as that not to lie.

Duties have been seen also as constituting only a part of morality, allowing for the possibility of heroically going beyond the call of duty. This is a matter of the scope of the notion of duty within morality. There are also issues concerning the scope of moral principles more generally. Does a given moral principle apply everywhere, and at all times, or is morality somehow bounded by space or time? This question is related to that concerning what is going on when someone allows morality to guide them, or asserts a moral principle. How is the capacity of moral judgment acquired? The view that humans possess a special moral sense or capacity for intuition, often identified with conscience, is still found among contemporary intuitions. Scepticism about the claims of morality, however, remains a common view.

In recent centuries, a dichotomy has opened up between those who believe that morality is based solely on reason, and those who suggested that some nonrational component such as desire or emotion is also involved. Denial of pure rationalism need not lead to the giving up of morality. Much work in the twentieth century was devoted to the question whether moral judgments were best understood as beliefs, or as disguised expressions of emotions or commands. Can there be moral experts, or is each person entirely responsible for developing their own morality? These questions have been seen as closely tied to issues concerning moral motivation itself. Moral judgments seem to motivate people, so it is tempting to think that they crucially involve a desire.

Moral principles can be understood to rest on moral values, and debate continues about how to characterize these values and about how many evaluative assumptions are required to ground ethical claims. Against the emotivists and others,

moral realists have asserted the existence of values, some identifying moral properties with those properties postulated in a fully scientific worldview.

Presuppositions of ethical theories

The expression „ethical theory" has been used, and abused, in so many different ways. It is necessary to use it as more narrowly than many writers do – otherwise it would become a subject that could not be covered in a short paper. It is meant by it the study of the moral concepts, that is, of use of the moral words, of their meaning in a broad sense, or of what we are doing when we ask moral questions. An important part, at least, of the meaning of all words, including moral words, is determined by their logical properties. And that is why the subject has practical importance. For one of the chief things that is demanded of the moral philosopher is that he/or she should do something to help to discuss moral questions rationally; and this requires obedience to the logical rules governing the concepts. The prime task of philosophy, since Socrates started that „business", is the study of arguments; and the prime task of moral philosophy is the study of moral arguments, to learn how to tell good from bad ones. In this task ethical theory, which reveals the logic of the moral concepts, is an essential tool.

It may help confine the subject within bounds in saying what ethical theory is not. Many writers now use the expression 'moral theory´. Usually, it is not clear what they mean by it; it seems to cover a vast area of indeterminate size, but at least includes the views of the writers on a lot of substantial moral questions, systematized often into a number of moral principles, such as Rawls´s 'Principle of Justice´. Thus a moral theory cannot be a purely formal discipline dealing only in logical and conceptual studies. Kant was very insistent on this distinction between formal and substantial theses. It is not possible to denying the importance of using rational arguments to decide on substantial moral principles. That is the ambition of all serious moral philosophers. But there is a prior task: that of finding the rules governing the argument. Without those rules, anything goes.

If we ask what are we doing, we shall have to do some conceptual analysis, and the result of it is likely to be that all forms of descriptivism fail to give an adequate account of the matter; there is an essential prescriptive element in the meaning of moral statements which goes beyond their descriptive meaning.

It is necessary of using the expression 'ethical theory´, then, in the narrow sense of the theory about the meaning and logical properties of the moral words. Therefore, it is helpful to distinguish good from bad arguments about moral questions. It is even more surprising, therefore, how many moral philosophers try to persuade us that we do not need to study ethical theory. One reason why people say this may be the following. They have examined various ethical theories that have been put forward, and have (often after insufficient study) decided that these will not do. They have therefore concluded too hastily that no ethical theory is adequate. The different writers on the matter reveal different parts of the truth about morality. The moral philosopher who is less of a defeatist will go on to try to find a theory which preserves the truths in each of these theories but avoids their errors.

Ethical concepts

Some philosophical ethics is broad and general, seeking to find general principles or explanations of morality. Much, however, focuses on analysis of notions central to ethics itself. One such notion which has been the focus of much discussion in recent years is that of autonomy. The interest in self-governance sits alongside other issues concerning the self, its moral nature and its ethical relation to others; and the relations of these selves in a social context. Other topics discussed include the nature of moral ideals, and the notions of desert and moral responsibility.

The question of what makes for a human life that is good for the person living it has been at the heart of ethics since the Greek philosophers enquired into eudaimonia. Once again, a philosopher´s theory of the good will almost always be closely bound up with their views on other central matters. For example, some of those who put weight on sense experi-

ence in our understanding of the world have been tempted by the view that the good consists entirely in a particular kind of experience, pleasure. Others have claimed that there is more to life than mere pleasure, and that the good life consists in fulfilling our complex human nature. Nor have philosophers forgotten 'the bad´.

Moral philosophy, or ethics, has long been at least partly concerned with the advocacy of particular ways of living or acting. Some traditions have now declined; but there is still a large range of views on how we should live. One central modern tradition is that of consequentialism. On this view, as it is usually understood, we are required by morality to bring about the greatest good overall. The nature of any particular consequentialist view, therefore, depends on its view of the good overall. The most influential theory has been that the only good is the welfare or happiness of individual human and other animals, which, when combined with consequentialism, is utilitarianism.

It is commonly said that consequentialist views are based on the good, rather than on the right. Concepts based on the right may be described as deontological. The towering figure in the deontological tradition has been the eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Such consepts will claim, for example, that we should keep a promise even if more good overall would come from breaking it, or that there are restrictions on what we can intentionally do in pursuit of the good. In the second half of the twentieth century there was a reaction against some of the perceived excesses of consequentialist and deontological ethics, and a return to the ancient notion of the virtues. Work in this area has consisted partly in attacks on modern ethics, but also in further elaborations and analysis of the virtues and related concepts.

The role of experiences

One of the most important terms in ethics is that of experience. When we look at it carefully, we see that the meaning of any experience and the meaning of the things that enter into that experience are intrinsic to the experience itself. Not all experiences are that full of meaning, but some are. And it is these particularly meaningful happenings that have impact on people´s lives, on the way they view themselves and their relationships to one another, on the decisions they make, and therefore on the things they actually do, and eventually on the human society they build together.

Not all experiences are equally meaningful. Some psychologists and educators have drawn attention to this rather evident fact, and have pointed to the special role of 'key experiences´. These key or 'peak´ happenings have more meaning, at least more meaning as average experiences. From the meaning attached to these key experiences, a person then finds meaning in the rest of life and establishes a meaning for himself or herself.

There are two kinds of key experiences: (A) There are the striking, out-of-the-ordinary, one-time occurrences – surviving a very serious auto accident, making a scientific discovery, being in a war and working with its victims – that challenge and change the meaning of everything that we thought we understood. (B) There are the more ordinary but basically important experiences that we all share – births and deaths and pain and worry and achievement and friendship – whose meaning affects the meaning of everything else.

Perhaps by looking a bit more closely at one of these latter, more universal experiences we can better appreciate their complex meaning and the impact they have on the meaning of a particular person´s life. Let us look at work. Work, taken in a broad sense, is certainly one of the most common experiences in human life. Whether it is a parent caring for the home and children, or a man or woman in a factory job or an office job, or a lawyer arguing a case in court, or a research scientist in a laboratory, humans with rare exceptions are engaged in some form of work. Yet, work can mean very different things for different people.

Even if two individuals are engaged in what is externally the same kind of work – bus drivers – they can view the work in very different ways. For one person the daily routine of bus driving is a constant battle with impolite car drivers, inconsiderate and complaining passengers, unpleasant working condi-

tions, overdemanding bosses, etc. For the other person the daily routine is quite enjoyable – greeting one´s regular passengers and coming to know their interests and life stories, watching the seasonal changes in the familiar but evolving territory of the bus route, being able to help strangers find their way in town.

Social analysts have pointed out the extent to which the attitude toward work is a major factor in human life today. Because of the routine and monotony that came with industrial development and increased with technology, work often gives no outlet for a woman or a man´s imagination or creative skills. Often, a person is only doing what a complicated machine could do better. The only that the work has is in terms of the marketability of the product; labor is totally product-oriented; the work has no human meaning, at least as far as the worker is concerned. Such an experience of work has proved to be deeply dehumanizing for a large segment of the work force. Some persons seem able to insulate themselves from this depersonalizing effect, but even in these cases the experience of work does not contribute to their life-meaning, except insofar as it provides the financial means for then going something else more truly human. We sell our life time for earning money...

As a result of this situation, which unfortunately has applications far beyond what we ordinarily consider industrial work, many humans do not have the experience of personally achieving something by their labor. Their work experience is one of earning money. Personal pride in work well done, a sense of reasonably discharging a role for the good of their fellow humans – these are elements of a healthy discovery of self-meaning that today´s work situation rather seldom provides. As a result a large portion of most people´s daily experience is deprived of the human meaning it might and should have.

Ethics is... to be human

One thing that is absolutely basic for ethics to being human is our ability to be conscious, to be aware of what is going on within us and around as. This human awareness is more than a perception of what touches us from outside and inside – many levels of animal life possess this. Humans are aware that we as self-identifiable knowers have this perception of the 'world´. When we reflect on this aspect of our human existing, it is truly a mysterious and wonderous reality. Though we are confined bodily to the relatively insignificant portion of space that we occupy at any given moment, our range of conscious existing extends far beyond that. In our knowing we are able to move far beyond our immediate observation (such as the microbes we can see with a microscope or the subatomic structures of matter that we cannot directly see); we can think about things (like mathematical formulations) that our own minds have created as abstract ideas and which have no existence outside our thought. We can know about things that happened long ago, and dream about a future yet unrealized.

Because we are knowers, we can extend the range of our human existing in almost infinite fashion; without ceasing we can enrich the world of conscious existence we move in. We can quite literally bring the richness of the universe that surrounds us into ourselves; and we can even add to the wonder and beauty of that world by our own creative imagining – by our music and art and poetry.

By far the most important part of our 'going out´ to the world around us is our reaching out to people, to the men and women and children who share with us this capacity for consciousness. We are not only able to know that these people are there; we are able to touch them in friendship and concern and shared interests. We are able to form human community with them. We are able, that is, to love. Self-interest we can have (and do); we can and do depend upon others to provide for our needs. But there is something else, human friendship, that has always defied clear explanation or definition. Throughout history women and men have tried, not too successfully, to grasp the essence of this experience that is such a fundamental and important and rewarding part of human life. We still do not know exactly how to explain friendship; we do know that it is precious.

Because of this capacity for affective existing, we humans are able to be for one another, to exist together, to share consciousness with and learn from one another. Paradoxically, because of the capacity to love, we can possess one another as friends without limiting anyone´s freedom or personal distinctiveness. Of course, this ability can often be used in wrong ways. Many people are incapable of loving maturely; no one of us loves with complete maturity. In greater or lesser degree we try to possess others in ways that exploit them; we use them for our own selfish goals; we wish to cling to others, often with little regard for the other person´s good. But when we do things like this, we recognize that this is a poor expression of our power to love; such actions do not really deserve the name "love".

In our better moments we recognize that human love and friendship are a gift and treasure without compare, that no material riches can outweight it or compensate for it if it does not exist in our lives. With friends our lives have meaning; without some persons who truly care for us and whom we in turn love, our human existence is drab and lonely and oppressive and shallow. From a religious point of view the very essence of human sin (in the Christian sense) is the deliberate refusal of love. And it is a sin, not because there is some abstract 'law of God´ that says we should love one another being an ethical person, but because denial of love destroys our own personhood and destroys the shared life of human community upon which we all depend in order to be human.

To be... is to be free

Linked to our ability to know and to love is our human freedom. Clearly, whatever freedom we have is limited by the particular situation in space and time in which we find ourselves. Yet, we do have the power in the most important matters to shape our cultural and ethical future and ourselves. We are not able to become Napoleon or Julius Caesar – or for a matter, any prominent person today – but each of us is able to establish a unique identity as the person we are; we are truly able to decide who and what we wish to be.

No one else can be the person I am; in the last analysis, no one can keep me from being me. While I cannot effectively decide to achieve things that lie beyond my abilities – for example, to become the world´s leading sculptor or Olympic athlete – I can decide to be a good and loving an honest person. I decide to make life happier for those around me. I can decide to be concerned for others and to be of help to them. I can decide to live alert and interested and continually growing in my awareness of the world around me. Yes, there are obstacles to all this; sometimes there are formidable barriers that stand in the way of my becoming the person I wish to be. Ultimately, though, the human person has the ability to surmount these barriers, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that together, helping one another, we have the capability of overcoming or even removing these barriers.

To live this way – alert, aware, concerned and loving and open to others, free and self-determining – does not come easily. It is a challenge, a task to be undertaken, a price we have to pay for being truly human. Actually, the Christian faith (the Jewish faith, the Islamic faith etc.) tells us that this goal would be beyond us. The 'contrariness´ that is linked with many of the obstacles we face is part of the mystery of evil (and evil is a negative ethical idiom). There is a power, evil, that is strange but quite apparent force in our human lives. This force invades the experience of each of us in various ways; it obstructs our attempts together to shape a genuinely human society. It takes the form of dishonesty and infidelity to one another. It takes the form of injustice and exploitation and war. Its power is ultimately so great that only the countering power of divine love is able to overcome it.

Important is the 'meaning´

Each of us is exposed to an outside world that is objectively there, but no two of us perceive that world in exactly the same way; each makes a personal 'world´ that bears more or less resemblance to what is actually there. In this process, one of the most important factors is the meaning we

attach to various things or to the experience as a whole. So, in preparing to understand new ethical challenges, we might profitably take a closer look at the role of meaning in our lives.

Meaning seems to have vanished from much of our life today. Any number of twentieth and twentyfirst-century thinkers have drawn attention to this threat. Perhaps it has been the experience of two world wars and the danger of a third, or the collapse of so much in human society that had seemed solid and lasting. Whatever the cause, there is little doubt that life in recent years has become more and more meaningless for millions of people. For a large portion of the human race there seems to be no permanent significance in anything they do; they seem to have no importance as people. As far as they can see, they could simply disappear from the scene and nothing would be changed; no one would miss them for more than a short time; history would record neither their life nor their death; no achievement of theirs would live in or have any effect on people. So, what sense does it make?

But the problem of finding meaning in a human experience is not all that new. Humans have always faced the need to make some sense out of the flow of happenings that made up their days and any years. To a considerable extent, this is what initiation rites of various kinds in different cultures and religions were all about. This is what took place as parents guided their children through infancy and childhood. This is, or should be, a principal aim of the formal education we provide for young people. As young persons come to awareness and move towards adult life, those who are older and, we hope, wiser guide them in discovering the meaning of the various occurrences and situations that make up their lives.

The meaning or our experiences is often ambiguous. When, for instance, a person gives a gift, does that mean that the giver is expressing friendship, or offering a bribe that will require future repayment? Or if a student is given a failing mark on an essay, does that mean that the student is slow, or that the student did not work hard enough on the essay, or that the teacher is incompetent, or that the class material is beyond the capacity of an ordinary student of that age, or that the teacher graded the essay with a prejudiced view of the student? For the student involved, for his or her parents, for the teacher, the 'objective´ fact of the failure is seen differently, and so far each of these persons the failure is, or can be, a quite different 'reality´.

Reasons for actions

In exploring the nature or the relationship between practical reason and reality, let us begin with the foundations of the analysis. Since practical reason – the reason for ethics – is the reason we use to plan action. The first step to finding reasons is to guide our actions for the person to ask, 'Why are you doing that?´ and 'Why should we do that?´, about all the activities in which she/he, and other members of her/his community participate. Continuing to ask these questions in response to each answer will, eventually, yield a series of reasons for acting for which a person can give no further reasons. So, for example, a person might be asked, 'Why are you going out tonight?´, to which she/he might reply, 'to catch up with some friends´. To this reply, she/he could then be asked, 'Why do you want to catch up with those friends?´ to which she/he might answer, 'in order to maintain my friendship with them´. Again, the question might come, the question might come, 'Why do you want to maintain your friendship with them?´ to which a reply might be, 'because I value friendship´. Here 'friendship´ is being offered as a practical reason that explains and justifies what the person is doing. Asking such trains of questions about a sufficient range of human activities will eventually produce a substantive list of the object(ive)s that people offer as irreducible practical reasons for doing what they do. It is critical to note, because of its importance to our ethical discussion, that practical reflection can only occur in the light of a person´s theoretical knowledge about the world. We make this particularly clear when we observe, in relation to the 'knowledge´ being offered as a basic justificatory reason, that the principle truth and knowledge is worth pursuing is not somehow innate, inscribed on the mind of birth. On the contrary, the value of truth be-

comes obvious only to one who has experienced the urge to question, who has grasped the connection between question and answer, who understands that knowledge is constituted by correct answers.

Finding these basic justificatory reasons for action is one of the first tasks of ethics. However, as we are careful to point out, ethics is both a practical and a theoretical pursuit. We study ethics both to make choices and to understand the nature of human choice-making. When we discover that friendship is an irreducible practical reason that justifies what we do, we discover both the practical truth, that the pursuit of friendship is a practical reason for making a choice, and that friendship is a foundational practical reason for choice in that body of theoretical knowledge we call ethics. As theoretical knowledge, it is possible to relate discoveries we make in ethics to other bodies of theoretical knowledge, such as our knowledge about human nature. In doing so, we may both enhance those other areas of knowledge and enrich our understanding of ethics. It is exactly this task that we need to pursue to understand the relationship between practical reason and reality. And here, we touch the area of 'applied ethics´.

Basic ideas on applied ethics

Philosophical ethics has always been to some degree applied to real life. Aristotle, for example, believed that there was no point in studying ethics unless it would have some beneficial effect on the way one lived one´s life. But since the 1960s, there has been a renewed interest in detailed discussion of particular issues of contemporary practical concern.

One area in which ethics has always played an important role is medicine, in particular in issues involving life and death. Recently, partly as a result of advances in science and technology, new areas of enquiry have been explored. In addition, certain parts of medical practice which previously lacked their own distinctive ethics have begun to develop them.

This development is part of a wider movement involving research into the ethical requirements on those with particular occupations. Some of this research is again related to scientific advance and its implications for public policy. But, again, attention has also been given to occupations not in the past subjected to much philosophical ethical analysis.

The planet, and those who live and will live on it, have in recent times become the focus of much political concern, and this has had its effect on philosophy. But just as the scope of ethical enquiry has broadened, so there has been renewed interest in the specific details of human relationships, whether personal or between society, state and individual.

Cultural challenges

Different religious and philosophical traditions have different ways of accomodating the existential pluralism that is endemic to human social experience. Those intellectual traditions are rooted in the assemblages of lived practices that we call cultures. Global migration, communication, and commerce, of course, bring about an intermingling of cultures that can confuse and torment as well as immeasurably enrich. If the circumstances under which an individual makes choices between opposing and incommensurable values can resound of the tragic, the situation seems even more intractable when it comes to the conflict between different traditions. Antigone chooses between two alternatives that are both recognizably hers. I may have to choose, as a citizen of an EU-country, between the demands of self-interest and the requirements of charity, but both of those choices are recognizable parts of a world that I recognize as my own. It is quite different matter when the choice appears to be between two systems of value, one of which is acknowledged as mine, whereas the other is – other. In this paper we focus most of our attention on this level and we call this form of pluralism, manifested at the level of tension between rather than within cultures, ethical pluralism in the global world.

Cultural ethics on our planet, in this sense, is the recognition that there are in the world different ethical tradtions, that these distinguish themselves at least in name one from the other, and differ not only in matters of practical judgment on moral issues (for instance citizenship, euthanasia, relation-

ships between the sexes) but in modes of reasoning used to reach such judgments. How can such ethical and cultural traditions be brought into mutually fruitful dialogue?

The problem of objectivity

First of all, we must confront the basic epistemological issues. Is it possible to attain any objective knowledge that transcends the broad historical, cultural, political and ethical contexts within which one is embedded? Even philosophers of natural science are no longer certain that this is possible. Consider the discontinuity between Newtonian mechanics and quantum mechanics. From the framework of Newtonian mechanics, motion can be understood in deterministic terms. The relation from cause to effect is singular and in principle predictable. When, however, one looks at very small scale phenomena (the movement of electrons or protons), neither Newtonian mechanics nor, for that matter, Einsteinian relativity any longer works. Instead, depending on the measurement, protons sometimes behave like particles and sometimes like waves and the relation of 'cause´ to 'effect´ is one of probability rather than determination. Is the universe a discontinous 'quantized´ reality or a smoothly curved spacetime continuum? Is it lawlike or not? What you say, it might appear, depends on where you sit!

The apparent irresolvability of such issues has raised questions in other branches of science. Might not all claims about physical reality be in some sense relative to the particular frameworks within which the scientist works, a framework so general and all-encompassing that to step outside of it would be in a real sense 'revolutionary´? Thomas S. Kuhn gave the name 'paradigm´ to such frameworks and claimed, or at least appeared to claim, that basic terms (such as 'length´, 'time´, 'velocity´) had different meanings in each paradigm.

In philosophy, this situation came to be known as the 'theory-ladenness of observations´, and it has been a topic of violent debate in the philosophy of science. At stake was, or seemed to be, the very possibility of objective knowledge. Was it really true that scientific judgements were relative to the theoretical framework of the scientist? If so, it would seem that the framework itself was subject to social and historical factors. There was, to recall Hegel, to be no jumping over Rhodes, no escape from the circumstances of one´s knowledge.

Similar developments can be found in the human sciences. And here the matter is much more intense than in the physical sciences, for in the humanities 'paradigms´ claim more than simple epistemological actuality – they have histories, of greater or lesser length, and have, demonstrably, worked for those who have grown up 'in´ each system. Hence one may understand the world as a Christian, as a proponent of natural law, as a Muslim, as a Confucian, as a Jew, and so forth: what is important is that when one does so, actually is a Christian, Muslim, and so forth. In the ethical realm one does not so much adopt a particular perspective as manifest it. Whereas in the natural sciences quantum mechanics might have a pragmatic justification (for example, it explains a lot even if not gravitation), in the ethical and moral realms, all systems not only seem to work but they rarely if ever offer themselves as choices. Generally one is born and brought up as a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew or a Buddhist, or without religious belief. Even if one changes one´s beliefs, to the degree that one chooses an ethical framework that choice is less likely to be the results of pragmatic considerations than of some kind of conversion experience. Furthermore, by and large people do not live and die over the question of quantum versus relativistic physics, but various peoples have slaughtered others over differences in religious and ethical beliefs. In human relations, what appears to be at stake when one set of ethics confronts another is often personal identity.

Faced with such fundamental epistemological problems, is there any way we can transcend the differences between ethical traditions? It is important to note that in practice the encounter of different traditions has often provided the basis for a genuine mutual enrichment. There is, for instance, a line of social criticism that goes from Diderot to Margaret Mead

that looked – with greater or lesser accuracy – to the South Seas as paradigms of enlightened sexual morality when compared with straiterlaced Anglo-European practices. Here the encounter with others can serve as the foundation for a critique of practices in one´s own society. But encounter can be also violent, as we have recently seen in the confrontation between Western cultural and ethical traditions and militantly fundamentalist understandings of the world-religion Islam.

Conclusion

Ethics is confronted with many different challenges nowadays. Ethical theories are questioned and forced to be effective under the new conditions of a changed world in the public and private sphere. We have on the international level the globalization where cultures, mentalities and life-styles are mixed up. In the same line more and more people ask, 'What is just in that new global situation?´. And on the private level we find a kind of flexibility and experiences which make it more difficult to settle down and start with a family. For solving so many challenges in our world we need as postmodern enlightened people the paradigms of ethical understandings and a basic ethical knowledge. Therefore, we have to look for more tolerance and ethical knowledge to creating a more just world for myself and the next generations. In that we hope finding discoveries; and ethics can be a very big contributor for this new outlines of the society and the people who look still for the happyness like Aristotle told us twentyfour centuries ago!