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Original Article

Language, Reflection and the Dimensions of Conduct[1.]

By

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"Political language…is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind."

—George Orwell, 1946

1.

Human conduct can be considered from a variety of standpoints, some of which are more concerned with its structural, universal, and abstract dimensions, and some of which are more focused on concrete practices and particularities. But inquiry into human conduct that loses sight of the interconnection between these dimensions misrepresents either, or both. I think something like this is often happening below the surface of the seemingly innocuous and widely accepted distinction between "ethics" and "morals," that is frequently taken for granted in philosophy today. Yet, like "time," "democracy," and "being," "ethics" and "morality" are terms we all seem to know how to use, but which provoke confusion and ambiguity when we turn to define them.

I suggest that confusion and ambiguity surrounding the distinction between the "ethical" and "moral" are clues to a broader inadequacy in our thinking about conduct. Implicit in our talk of "ethics" and "morality" as separate or separable lies a misunderstanding about what ethnographers and linguists refer to as the *etic* and *emic* dimensions of systems of meaning and meaningful conduct.[2] As I will suggest, to regard what philosophers often seem to mean when they use the term "ethics" as possible reflects a desire to disregard the inescapably *emic* dimensions of conduct—that is, its meaning as understood from the perspective of the concrete, situated participants themselves. *Mutatis mutandis*, what passes for "morality" is often really an *ersatz etics* of conduct—a fiction predicated on the assumption that conduct can be understood abstractly from the

perspective of no one in particular. Confusion about where "ethics" ends and "morality" begins, in other words, helps us to locate a kind of perspectival fault-line in conduct: On one side of this fault, pressing with tremendous force, is the compelling power of abstract, universal, and objective dimensions. On the other side, pressing against these, is the equally powerful force of the particular, concrete, situated human experience at the location of conduct. To carry out the metaphor, we understand very little about the geography of human conduct by denying the power and importance of either of these forces. And yet, doing so today is as common as making distinctions between "ethics" and "morals."

Thinking about ethics and morality in light of the *etic/emic* distinction will help us understand the benefit to an over-all conception of human nature of an integrative picture of "ethics" and "morals." I think such a picture can be developed on the basis of a hermeneutical conception of conduct in which it always is seen as having both *etic* and *emic* dimensions. To begin with, it will be helpful to recognize what ethnographers and linguists have usually held fast to in using such heuristic distinctions as that between *emic* and *etic*: that these dimensions of conduct can only be considered separately at our peril. If the distinction of morality and ethics is useful at all to maintain in the future, it must cease to reinforce the illegitimate and destructive dichotomy between two essential and inescapable dimensions of meaningful conduct. The hope of reconstructing commonly-accepted but ambiguous and paradoxical notions of the "ethical" and the "moral" along the lines of a more integrated picture of human conduct is that both the *emic* and *etic* dimensions of conduct can be understood in a more subtle and less abstract way than is usually suggested in discussions about ethics and morality.

2.

The terms "ethics" and "morals" are distinguished in some generally recognized ways in philosophy. The "ethical" is usually identified with the social and cultural life-world in contrast with deliberative judgment and choice, which are normally thought of as connected with "morality." Many recognize the importance of both in conceptualizing conduct. Yet, ambiguities persist in how these terms are used, which can obscure important aspects of their relatedness and importance to each other. In particular, ambiguous usage conceals the degree to which under the cover of "modernity," the ethical aspects tend to be ignored and under-represented in discourse concerned with conduct.

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

separate entry for "Morality."[4] In an entry for "Ethics," a widely-used philosophy encyclopedia further illustrates the scope and acceptance of ambiguity regarding the distinction between ethics and morality:

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

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

This ambiguity certainly reflects ambiguous and problematic aspects of late-twentieth-century philosophy. Analytic Philosophy long ago placed questions about systems of value and ideas of "the good life" aside as undecidable and in Hume's and Ayers' largely dismissive sense, "metaphysical." In the Twentieth Century, it became commonplace to speak as if the useful parts of philosophy about conduct could be restricted to only its recognizably moral-practical content, dealing with the meaningfulness, systematicity, and coherence of discourse about obligation and the rules we think we should follow.[6] More broadly speaking, Continental and Analytic philosophers alike have tended to converge on the elusiveness of clear and compelling conclusions of a philosophical nature concerning matters of value in general. One can speak of a general hesitation before universalizing discourses as characteristic of the late-modern anxiety about narratives and systems of value.[7] Philosophy is today marked by a seriousness concerning how such discourses intersect with particularity and situatedness, and whether or not and how universalizing discourses should even be involved in practical reasoning. This sensitivity has naturally had a strong impact on philosophies of conduct.

In addition, college curricula increasingly ask ethicists and moral philosophers to present an idea of ethics to students, often under the rubric "applied ethics," that is geared toward deliberations concerning the practical circumstances in which standards of value are applied. This approach is recommended as a way to help students understand the relevance of ethics to their professional and career concerns by presenting issues in the most practical terms possible. But since "applied ethics" is fundamentally about practical moral

reasoning, paying its closest attention to specific contexts in which moral reasoning is defined with respect to definite content, a hidden and often unrecognized result of so-called "applied ethics" is to obscure ethics by teaching that only morality matters. Intentionally or not, this can easily be misinterpreted by students as suggesting that moral reasoning may proceed along as if there were no serious questions about recognizably "ethical" matters connected with its deliberations. But, one does not remove the theoretical or philosophical dimensions of moral reasoning by calling a class "applied." One may threaten, however, to make an ethical forest look much more like a collection of moral trees.

Unsettling developments like these are sometimes excused on the basis of the idea that the "ethical" assumptions of background cultural traditions cannot be made the subject matter of philosophical questioning. Thus it is that "ethics," understood as pertaining to questions about "the good life," is associated with a cultural horizon or life-world of regularities in a people's practices, institutions, and expressions. It is in this sense that we speak broadly of a form of life as having an *ethos*, a system of values or standards which are implicit in the regular, institutional, and practical activities and judgements of a people. "Morality," to this view, is where things get philosophically interesting. But if one takes it for granted that "ethics" refers to an unquestionable background framework, then it is likely to appear unobjectionable that ethics be regarded as a largely irrational blindspot stuck to the back of conduct. This attitude is especially strongly reflected in the works of many in the more-or-less Kantian tradition today, especially perhaps the critical theorists, and discourse "ethicists" for whom the historical, cultural dimensions of practice are pointedly problematic.

But there are both historical and conceptual problems with this widespread perspective. First, it is important to note that the term we use in English, "ethics," has never simply meant *ethos*. As P.C. Smith notes, for example, "ethics," as translated from the German *sitten*, contains dimensions involving both our notion of "convention" and "custom" but also linked with a sense of "rightness" that is frequently lost in translation or forgotten.[8] For Smith, it is important to recognize that the German still carries the sense of terms which in Greek were usually used in the same context, like *aischros*, ("shameful, ugly"), and more clearly moral terms like *to deon,* and *dikaios.* The "ethical," in this sense, has usually in the history of philosophy referred to something more than the unreflective, precritical cultural background framework of values and priorities, involving a kind of practice of reflection upon standards and values that were otherwise implicit. It thus involves a reflective relationship toward *ethos*. Although both "ethics" and "*ethos*" refer to the standards and values of a community, the difference between them involves a recognition that taking a different stance or attitude toward values changes them. Ethics involves the values of a culture insofar as they are subject to

reflection, when the *ethos* of a community is thematized reflectively and thus as standards and values it can be regarded as action-guiding: By *ethos* we refer to values or standards as providing a description of *normality*. By ethics we refer to the practice of holding our values in a different way—either regarding them as right and worth continuing or as wrong and requiring change.

But, changes in the *ethos* of a people—a possibility always hovering around ethics, requires changes in *mores*; in departures from normalcy and the establishment of new patterns of conduct. All cultural change involves changes in normalcy, by definition—departures from patterns of activity which could be formulated in terms of the *mores* and *ethos* of a people. But not all such change results from conscious reflection, and a still smaller category results from expressly normative and principled impulses, decisions, and choices. In other words, changes in *more*-ality and *ethos* may result from completely unintended and unconscious shifts in practice that have no reflective dimensions to speak of. Thus, when we talk about such changes as changes in morality and ethics, we mean something other than unreflective or accidental behavior. We refer in this case to *conduct,* which has an essentially reflective dimension. Ethics, as reflection upon conduct, thus involves thematizing and developing criteria by which to assess existing and possible rules and norms. Where *mores* become the object of such thematic assessment, they are reflectively taken-up as a matter of concern. They become *morals*: i.e., the subject of a conversation about the relationship between our actual conduct and our cherished values in definite circumstances.

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

Ethics and morals are thus not just inter-related but mutually determining and realizing. In other words, without viable moral conversation in which to become so animated or realized, ethical values and standards exist only potentially, as literally utopian ideals, reflecting possible future conversations.

Without a real dialogue, i.e., an ethics so animated, what may appear to be moral conversation may actually reflect the implicit conceptual reduction of conduct to mere behavior, of conversation to mere discourse, of engaged concern about real priorities to disengaged and finally unethical rule-following—the potentially most deadly form practical reasoning can assume—rationalization.

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

3.

In developing and re-connecting the ethical and moral in contrast with notions of *ethos* and *mores*, I have presented them above as aspects of a broader conversation about conduct, as a function of which, the standards implicit in practices can become thematized in our reflective determination of norms. Since this conception emerged from a consideration of conduct as a form of social-cultural behavior, it is not surprising to find that ethnographers have anticipated the central contrast from which we saw it emerge. Ethnographers commonly make a distinction between the *etic* and *emic* dimensions of the study of cultural practices, which reflects the difference between the *structural* and *reflective* dimensions of meaning.[9] In this section I directly consider how this distinction provides a helpful way to further clarify the ethical and moral dimensions of conduct as I have been developing them here.

The *etic/emic* distinction is, at its core, a distinction between meaningful things and the usually hidden or implicit structures believed to be essential to their decipherment. Meaningful behavior occurs in a context set by a stable, structured, 'grammatical' system, according to which features capable of conveying and conferring meaning are organized and arranged into meaningful actions and utterances. The study of meaningful activity presents ethnographers with the constant need to recognize the difference between the elements and components of meaning and meanings themselves. The ethnographer anticipates that cultural activity has a 'double nature': When the meaning of institutions, practices, and

beliefs is considered independent of the participants' ideas and beliefs, we say they are considered from an *etic* perspective. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that the institutions, practices, and beliefs of a people are not only an abstract system, but real living features of a culture. To this extent, practices are not merely structurally capable of conveying meaning, but they actually *mean*. This makes them a different kind of object—one whose subjective element is irreducibly present.

The ethnographer observes a ritual ceremony and describes the clothing, movements, and expressions of all its participants in detail. From the standpoint typically assumed by the scientific observer, these elements can be sorted out and re-ordered so as to derive a new meaning not given in or by the performance itself or its participants. The meaning of the event intended by the scientific observer will be cast in terms of measured empirical observations, in what that observer might call 'neutral,' 'objective' language. But the *etic* dimensions of observed behavior are not simply to be identified with the 'objective,' 'empirical,' 'causal,' account that might be given by a typical western scientist. *Etic* and *emic* dimensions structure all observed human behavior, since it always can be interpreted in terms that are independent of what its participants say. In other words, the *etic* meaning of an event, as described from the standpoint of a western scientific system of meaning, is, in a non-trivial sense, also really an *emic* account reflecting a western observer's practice of interpretation. *'Independent of what their practice means to participants,'* is a category that belongs to our local system of meaning, which we call the scientific observer's perspective. But, boil the meaningful world down to formal constituents and what one has is formal constituents of meaning. We can utter nothing meaningful about the practice without reconstituting it in our terms, *emically*. In other words, the *etic* meaning of an event, as described from the standpoint of a western scientific system of meanings, is, in a non-trivial sense, also really an *emic* account or a westerner's practise of interpretation, from a standpoint outside its system of meanings. '*Independent of what participants in this practice actually tend to think and say,'* is a category belonging to our local systems of meaning, reflecting the core of the scientific observer's perspective. But, *'as it appears from within the horizon of local interpretations and practices,'* is a category that must also be regarded as applicable to the system of meanings familiar to the scientific observer as to anyone else.

The distinction of *etic* and *emic* aspects of meaning suggests a parallel that I believe can assist the re-articulation of ethics and morality in a broader philosophy of conduct: the cultural values and unreflective attitudes with which ethics begins provide a structural framework in terms of which the reflective expression and conversation carried out as ethical-moral discussion occurs. In this sense, a tradition of conversation about conduct facilitates its own continuation by opening itself up

for reflection; i.e., for the creation out of the 'grammar and syntax' of a structuring past new utterances that make unanticipated sense in present usage. Any cultural world contains *etic* structural features out of which practices and beliefs endure and structure from one generation to the next. But cultural reproduction is not merely the repetition of the speech of the ancestors. Still less could it be a replication of its own objectivity, or a formal recreation of the structures that confer meanings without meaning something all along the way. Cultural life is a dynamic between relatively enduring structures and new meaningful utterances formed from them. Culture and *ethos* are the relatively enduring structures in reflection upon which ethical and moral meanings are instituted with an urgency and originality that is always marked by their real circumstances.

So morality and ethics are neither simply synonymous, nor antithetical. The distinction between ethics and *ethos* was offered above as a starting point toward clarifying how culture and tradition relate to ethics as the ground upon which it reflects. This suggested a view of morality as conversation about conduct, realizing reflection upon relatively enduring ethical values in which the prevailing morality of a time reflects a consensus about how generally held values should be interpreted and applied under local conditions. But, from a hermeneutical perspective, such conventions reflect merely a moment in an ongoing conversation that must continually re-interpret its own relevance and meaning in relation to new, real contingencies. There is thus a continual interpretive demand understood historically as ethical debate driven by experience and history, as new questions and choices force us to reflect anew on the priorities implicit in our choices. Moral reflection and debate are thus dialectically related with the values they call upon us to instantiate and realize, or overthrow.

This way of thinking about ethics and morals allows us to identify ethical values as historically conditioned and only ever relatively, falsely permanent. If ethical systems of values and ideas of the good exist only in our conversation about what to do, as I suggest, they live and die in the practices and institutions whose results at any given moment they are. This means ethical values are extremely tenuous as well as tenacious and persistent, just like culture. Culture passes from person to person through the most subtle of gestures, and carves a niche in each mind of millions through vast and monumental creations. Yet, existing only in the minds, actions, and artifacts of persons, its venue is history, and it thus depends on human choices and actions. It is always open to reflection and critique, because without them it has no life.

The contrast of ethics and morality with *ethos* and *mores* shows that the *ought* is essential to conduct, for it arises upon reflection, in a stance of self awareness and assessment of practices and of ourselves as actors for whom conduct matters. A commonplace way to say this, I think, is that from an ethical or a moral perspective we consider ourselves *responsible* for our actions. And yet,

the *ought* arises from reflection upon temporary but relatively enduring meaning-constituting structures through which we constitute the meaning(s) of our conduct in conversation as moral or immoral. To this extent, ethics and morals emerge in the recognition that our conduct is meaningful, as an attempt to specify that meaning and its conditions—or those of the various choices we sort through in conduct.

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Notes

1. An early version of this paper was published as, "The Invisibility of Ethics and the Hermeneutics of Conduct," *Budhi: A Journal of Thought and Culture,* 4: 1, October, 2000, 67-78. Also, the ideas developed in the present version of the paper benefited greatly from discussion at the 35th Annual Conference On Value Inquiry, held at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, in May, 2003.
2. Kenneth Pike is generally regarded as responsible for establishing the *etic/emic* distinction in his ethnographic work during the 1950's and developing the idea in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior,* 2nd revised edition, Mouton: the Hague and Paris, 1967.
3. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy,* edited by Thomas Mautner (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 180-1
4. Ibid., 366-7
5. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers,* edited by J. O. Urmson and Jonathan Ree, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 100-1. This encyclopedia does not contain entries for either "Morality," or "Moral Theory."
6. The traditional wisdom considered this period as dominated by meta-ethics over normative ethics.
7. Recent attempts to re-invigorate Aristotelian "Virtue Ethics" I believe have been more about choice than character; more about decision-making and judgement than the propriety of ends and aims. In some ways Habermas' "Discourse Ethics" seems more of a moral theory than an ethical one, even by his own definitions.
8. P.C. Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude: Toward a Theory of Ethical Understanding,* NY: Fordham, 1991; 187-194.
9. A careful discussion of the meanings of and controversies about the *etic/emic*

distinction in anthropology can be found in Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times*, (California: AltaMira Press, 1999), especially chapter 2, pages 31-48. Harris particularly warns against confusing the *etic/emic* distinction with the commonplace distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, since this identifies objectivity solely with the outsider perspective of the student or scientist of culture. But participants themselves have an idea about how the world is structured independent of themselves and their own subjectivity. This means that the outsider and the insider both have *etic* and *emic* meaning-structures. Again, this returns the distinction to its roots in linguistics: the *etic* should be thought of as a classificatory structuring system or code which confers meaning, but does not actually 'mean' itself, like the phonetics of spoken language. This 'objective' structure transcends and links all competent language users. Yet, all so linked remain speakers, with definite things to *say* and to *mean*.