

ETHICAL DIRECTION

Confucius created by far the most important revolution that the great people of China have ever known. It was a structural revolution, one from within the establishment. And it was a radical revolution. By that term, I mean foundational, basic, primal.

A revolution is radical when it touches the dimensions of humanness and creates the image of what it means to be a human being. For the first time in history, that kind of revolution is happening across the globe rather than within a particular national or cultural history. Such a revolution can only be a quiet nonviolent revolution within the establishment. Violent revolutions which have happened from time to time in history are relatively superficial revolutions. Even the American Revolutionary War was superficial in that it was simply the continuation of the European culture. That one was not in the same ballpark with the revolution that is now involving the whole globe.

Whether one wants such a revolution or not, it is a necessary fact of this moment of history. The human image is being reconstructed. People of good will ought to be concerned deeply, passionately with the way it is going to be reconstructed and how that reconstruction is going to be articulated. The way it is articulated is what actually happens to the mindset of the masses. The revolution is already happening before that fact is actually perceived in the social processes or web of relationships.

The ancient revolution in China that Confucius instigated was that kind of a revolution. Once you get relatively clear on the theoretical aspects of what you're about, then you have to become practical and think in terms of strategies and tactics. Confucius decided that the way to do that kind of revolution was to infiltrate the upper echelons of the ruling structures of China. So for over twenty years he was the prime minister in the court and worked away at trying to change the situation in China. Then he saw that that would not work. He could get nowhere because it is the job of ruling structures, of the establishment, to maintain the establishment. We wouldn't want it otherwise at least, I wouldn't because I like to see the bread come around daily and have the railroads run. What Confucius did then was to go out to the country and begin to find young men who may have been restless, who wanted to see something happen in China. Together they began to forge the concrete practical vision to be communicated to the minds of the grassroots level of China. He sent those young men called the literati to every village and crossroads of China. As part of the bureaucratic structure, they did such things as make out deeds and collect taxes. In fact, they were the only people who could read and write. But, fundamentally, they were communicating a new image of what it meant to be a human being in China. The result was that China's understanding of itself in history was transformed.

The literati were a guild dynamic. When the task of making that dynamic is overt, active and geared for the future, you have an awakened human being in each local community of the world who has a practical vision and the prowess to communicate that practical vision. That one person alone will never make it or, if he does, it will be a miracle. Let's say at least ten are needed. If that ten stands as iron, a thousand are possible.

A guildsman is a religious. In our day the recovery within the religious of a sense of vocation is more important than anything else, and that task is of the religious. Some of the religious are clerics and some are lay people. The division is incidental, though both are needed. The important thing is the calling of the religious. They are going to be the religious in every local community in the world. These literati, these guildsmen are like the malariacarrying mosquito. The guildsmen will carry the reality of a new morality to every local community on the globe. There's no one else to carry it.

The term "the new morality" may seem strange but in this context there is nothing strange about it for I am not talking about the moral life. The moral life is something that goes on in the life of every human being at every moment all the time. The moral activity of man is observing, judging, weighting up, deciding and acting. Morality is a system of ethics and is a human invention superimposed upon everything that happens in life. It serves somewhat as a roadmap by which the judging, deciding and acting is given direction.

Two great systems of ethics have been invented in Western civilization. I remember being shocked and delighted, although I was not bright enough then to understand it, by the statement of G. E. Moore, an English ethicist of the last century, that there were many systems of ethics that had not been invented yet. I had been taught all my life that ethics was something that somehow came down from an intellectual superuniverse or from divine revelation. Man's only problem then was that he did not embody that system rather than that the invented system was no longer adequate to the situation or to the image of what it meant to be a human being.

You are very familiar with these two systems of ethics. One is called teleological ethics and the other deontological ethics. Those are difficult words and are as long as the ones used in business and medicine. We ethicists have our jargon too. But whenever you are talking about what is good or about virtue or about goals or values, you are using what is called teleological ethics. Your parents started training you in this system. Your religious training picked it up as did your businesses and professions. It is through every fiber of your consciousness. On the other hand, whenever you use words like right or conscience or mores, you are dealing with deontological ethics. Deontological ethicists don't talk about the goal but about the right rule to embrace.

Another system of ethics which H. Richard Niebuhr called dialogical ethics uses the word must rather than either good or right. That approach is very close to contextual ethics which raises the question of what is befitting in a given situation.

Now, I believe that we who call ourselves the movement are in the midst of creating a new ethical system. As a matter of fact, if it were not so, we would not accomplish what unconsciously we set out to do many years ago. This doesn't happen by sitting down and conjuring up something that does not exist. A new system of ethics, like any kind of new philosophy is a drawing together into a rational unity the insights that an age has produced from many sources. It will only come to be when that coagulating process takes place.

If I had to give a name to this system of ethics, I would use a simple word and call it the indicative ethic. In a way, it is all summed up precisely in that. To call it an indicative ethic is to say that we begin with the is and not the ought. There is nothing new about this. In beginning with the given, morality then has to do with what is rather than with what ought to be.

Our studies of The Other World in the midst of this world give us a clue to this new morality. Those areas of mystery, freedom or consciousness, gape or love, and tranquillity or serenity are trans-ontological indicatives of humanness itself. What is humanness about? It is all about mystery. It is not that humanness ought to be about mystery. Humanness is about mystery. No ought is being introduced here. It just is the indicative of life. In our day in the midst of a malaise that is deeper and more complex than any man has yet been able to say, this basic indicative of life has been obscured.

The second indicative of life is freedom or consciousness. It is not that I have freedom but that I am freedom. I am my relationship to my wife, but beyond that I am the attitude that I take toward the relationship that I call "being related to my wife." That is freedom. This is what I mean when I say to my wife, "You cannot keep my conscience for me." I am not telling her that she ought not keep my conscience for me, I am stating an indicative. She cannot keep my conscience for me even if I tried to permit her to do that. That is an indicative of life.

Next is concern for the world. Never again in this understanding of ethics can it be said that somebody ought to care for the world. Man, as man, cares for the world. My illustration for that is the awareness that when I came into being, I did not first come into being in a family and then have to say no to my family in order to care for the world. Nor did I first come into being as a citizen of the United States and then have to say no to my nation to care for the world. I came into humanity. I came into humanness. I did not come into a family or a nation. This is an indicative of life. Therefore, my concern when I dare to embrace what it is to be a human being is, not ought to be, mankind. If you are not concerned with mankind, then I say that you have refused a fundamental indicative of your life and all life.

Last is tranquillity. When you grasp your having shown up with one great life to live and one great death to die, when you grasp the delight of your life just as it is with all of the suffering and all of the tragedy, then you experience what it means to be a human being. This is sheer indicative. In those moments when you reject that indicative and say no to it and go to a psychiatrist, you are refusing the indicative of your existence. You go to the psychiatrist not because you are sick but because you are immoral. Then, only if you want to raise the question of how you became immoral can the psychiatrist help you. This is the ethics of the indicative.

A second name this could be called is the contextual ethic. These states of being just described, because the Other World is only in this world, exist only in concretions. Mystery, freedom, love and tranquillity do not exist except in the particular. That is to say, if you tell me that you are experiencing a glowing or unglowing state of being that is outside of a knockdown, dragout fight with your wife or a moment of fantastic lovemaking with your wife, then I conclude that you don't know what you are talking about. There is no Other World, there is no sense of being me, there is no awareness of an "I" except in the concrete given situation of life.

A third way of describing this ethic is to call it the morality of creativity, a decisional ethic, an ethic of freedom. I create my own morality in every given situation understanding morality to be defined the same way the other systems talk about

morality. I decide the goal. I decide the right. Living is constant and sheer creativity out of nothingness. The significance has to be created and injected into any given relationship. This is what I mean by decision or freedom.

Another way of talking about this ethic is that it is a morality of authenticity. In the twostory universe in which the other systems of morality were created, it is always necessary to appeal to authority, either the authority of universal reason or the authority of some religion or some pseudoreligion.

Authenticity, on the other hand, has to do with assuming final responsibility for your own concrete created moral deed. I like to use the ancient poetry, saying to myself, "When I get to heave, they are not going to ask me what my wife thought of me. They are not going to ask me what my colleagues thought of me or what youth thought of me. They are not even going to ask me what history thought of me. They are only going to ask me what I think of myself." That will fit right into the indicative ethic. That is authenticity. It is like teetering on the edge of your own grave. At that moment your life turns from many, many happenings and many, many deeds into one great happening and one great big deed. To be a moral man is to take it all into your being and then you fall into that hole. That is authenticity.

There is no imperative in this ethic. Yet there are imperatives that grow out of it. Those imperatives are those requirements that you place upon your own life out of the great indicative of your existence. When a moral man identifies his indicatives, he requires of himself that he be those indicatives. Then he builds his models not as some theoretical exercise but as his decisions regarding what he is going to require of himself when he gets up in the morning. That is the imperative in the midst of the indicative.

The dawning of the new ethics is at hand not for the sake of virtue but for the sake of the integrity of living and dying as an authentic human being. The hour is at hand when we know again what it means to be a man of spirit, what it means to be a moral man. We guildsmen have a horrendous march ahead. But at the center of all of the work we have to do is one task. That task is the communication of this ethics of the indicative.

Joseph W. Mathews

Indicative Ethics

November 1972