

## A Conversation about Communication Ethics with Clifford G. Christians

*Christians: "Could we begin with the academic's prayer?"*

*Arneson: "Please do."*

*Christians: "Dear God, lead us to the truth, but save us from those that have found it!"*

*How did you become interested in studying communication ethics?*

It goes back to my college days. I majored in the classics. In our program we had to read the classical philosophers in the original language. Therefore, Aristotle and Plato took on special meaning to me, including their ethics. Then during my master's degree in Theology and my master's in Sociolinguistics, the questions of ethics always came to the fore as well. I was interested in theological ethics in a formal sense, but in Sociolinguistics my particular concern was the illiterate, those learning to read—those who were dispossessed of their own language. I aspired at that time to write materials for neoliterates who had just been given a language in writing, through the Wycliff translators, for example. During those graduate years in Sociolinguistics, I read Paulo Freire. He was an authority on the oppressed and issues of social justice. My Ph.D. at the University of Illinois focused on communications theory and the philosophy of communications. There we had to choose a concentration outside of communications. In my case it was philosophy, and one of the professors from the philosophy department served on my doctoral committee. So it goes back to my educational experience. All my degrees, more or less, centered on the question of social ethics.

For better or worse, most of my interests have been driven by the philosophical and, in a secondary sense, the theological world—rather than by personal experience *per se*. That's how I think of communication ethics. I'm interested in social ethics, both in theory and application. Society is an embodiment of communication. Its linkages are lingual, and those lingual connections are always value saturated. Language, communication, is society's *sine qua non* in John Dewey. He said famously, "of all things, communication is the most wonderful." No social institution is possible except as a communication system.

Rather than thinking of society as an aggregate of individuals, or seeing the social order in political or economic terms, combining communication and social ethics is a different approach. Social ethics commits us to understand those values that make society possible. Values are never held as part of one's innermost life, but they are dialogic. They are interactive, values are

shared. Therefore, if one wishes to study social ethics, it seems to me, concentrating on communications is the best venue to do that. If you think of society as a communication network, then media institutions become a potent laboratory for understanding the way societies are interlinked and social values operate. We do not live in atomistic isolation, but in the social order. The over-riding question here is, “How can one understand social ethics and approach it academically?” Rather than assuming a functional or aggregate form of society, my approach is radically dialogic. The communal relations we call society are concentrated in its particular institutions or nation states or cultural groups. Coming to grips with the values embedded in their structures and organizations is one fruitful venue for understanding the moral order in general and communication ethics in particular.

*Do you use the terms social ethics and communication ethics interchangeably?*

“Interchangeably” mixes conceptual categories, but in my way of thinking about it, there is no pure social ethics outside of the institutions which form a society. Scholars in social ethics study political institutions, or certain regimes in society such as the military, business or religious organizations. To my mind, the media are institutions of acculturation—they produce and maintain culture. Thus in my social ethics I concentrate on communication as a phenomenon and its specific embodiments in popular culture. Through social ethics in its various forms we make judgments about the way society operates and ought to. In other words, I’m concerned about blurring the distinction between communication ethics or media ethics and social ethics, though social ethics is always shaped and directed by context. I’m interested not in meta-ethics *per se*, but normative ethics—ethics within the social order. Abstract concepts in themselves are not the emphasis, such as the nature of loyalty, power, identity, the good: “How are these issues experienced?” “What is empowerment?” “In what situations should we keep our promise?” The question for my kind of social ethics is not values-clarification, but community formation. The compelling questions for me are the extent to which the symbolic world of meaning is available to people: “How is human dignity manifested?” “For whom and under what conditions are speakers establishing the vernacular?” “How are worldviews articulated?”

*How do you define communication ethics?*

I use the term “communitarian ethics,” and I’ve developed that as a concept within the larger world of social ethics. I’m thinking primarily of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, of Michael Waltzer, Carole Pateman, and Michael Sandel. These scholars locate their view of ethics within the notion of society. They take the community as ontologically and axiologically situated, that is, the community in its being and in what we value is prior to the person. It’s a way of working between collectivism on the one hand and libertarian individualism on the other. Collectivism out of Georg Hegel and Karl Marx has been the most powerful alternative to mainstream liberalism since John Locke. So, yes, I would characterize my work as communitarian ethics. It’s a third way, a community of persons-in-relation, not merely a superficial tribute to both society and persons. Within communitarian ethics, I see it as an ethics of duty in contrast to virtue ethics. I also develop it in contrast to consequentialist ethics, such as utilitarianism.

When we wrote the book *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press*, we called chapter three “Communitarian Ethics.” This is the foundational chapter of the book. The ethical theory of chapter three is examined in the rest of the book within the context of the media as a social institution. There is no media ethics outside social structures and culture, only an ethics rooted in community. Communitarian ethics is a claim about normative ethics. It is not a description of morality, and not meta-theory, but a normative ethics of community where “is” and “ought” are integrated.

There are several ways of thinking about communitarian ethics. Philosophy is a discipline. Communications is not, in my understanding of it. Communications is a problematic, a field of interest that people may have. It is an academic area but is interdisciplinary and focused on crucial issues that aren’t neatly contained within a discipline’s boundaries. Therefore the subject matter of ethics is driven, from my perspective, by philosophy and not by the field of communications *per se*. One works out moral problems in the context of communications, but the formulation of them is philosophical in character.

An example might be the issue of “truth.” As I see it, truth is the central ethical problem within the field of communication ethics. Even as the standard of justice belongs in a particular sense to politics and the norm of stewardship to business, so truth or truth-telling is the fundamental issue in communications. To understand truth in a way that’s philosophically

credible, it's important for me to put it in a context of correspondence views of truth versus coherence models. That is, correspondence theories of truth are driven by the philosophical world and do not start with objectivity. Coherence approaches to truth, in the media for example, are established philosophically. We can get to questions about accuracy and precision in journalism after our bearing and way of thinking are settled into philosophical categories.

The notion of truth related to communications that I've been developing personally is what I call "interpretive sufficiency." Interpretive sufficiency works alongside or away from the realm of correspondence, since correspondence truth is obviously unsustainable in a post-Newtonian universe. But I'm not much enamored with coherence views of truth either. In narrative ethics, for example, you attempt to tell your story with overall integration and attention to the integrity of its dramatic character and to the authenticity of its plot. There are no ethical requirements for discourse beyond meeting the test of coherence. That way of understanding truth is too limited and relativistic in my perspective.

What I do is take a concept like "truth," knowing that it's crucial in the world of communications and recognize that the relationship between this problematic called communication and the discipline of philosophy is always an interactive one. I don't want to fall into the ancient Greek idea that if B follows A, B is inferior to A. Communications as a non-discipline is not inferior to the disciplines, but it's apples and oranges. Certainly the battles in the field of communications are important to take seriously. Stephen Toulmin and others have made it clear that the best philosophy is worked off the street, out of the struggles going on in real life. Debates in our homes, pain and death at the hospital bedside, controversies in parliament produce the most profound philosophical inquiry. A long tradition in philosophy sees itself as developing normative perspectives on our everyday experience. In this sense, when an issue arises such as truth in communications, one turns to a philosophical frame of reference and is theoretically serious about the problem. Therefore, to speak about objectivity and narrative devoid of coherence and correspondence views of truth is unacceptable to me. My point is, take philosophy seriously and have one's thinking driven by it while all the time integrated with the field, with that problematic, called communications.

Another example might be the issue of justice. That is, given the new technologies at hand, like digital media, cyberspace, and virtual reality, the

question is “Do we have a new set of ethics on our hands?” We have new technologies. They are not merely televisual like television is, or audio technologies *per se* as radio is. They are convergent. “Are we entering a new arena different from the visual world that we’ve been given through cinema and television?” “Are we turning to digital technology and seeing a brand new agenda; everything else no longer matters because this technology converges all the various forms into a digital composition?” “Has technology, or will it, make today’s dominant media archaic—print, television, film, computers—by reconfiguring them so dramatically that our previous work in media ethics is uninteresting or inapplicable?”

My instincts are to say that with social institutions, one typically understands them around the notion of justice. And that’s how I think of the media—the social institution that is driven by the economic and ideological character of the market system. Therefore, I would be interested in coming to the question of cyberspace from those issues that philosophy has faced inescapably when working on social institutions. “How does the question about justice make an impact on internet resources?” “What about the enormous differences in equitable delivery of this technology?” Parts of the world have an abundance of it, and it serves as a recreational cabin in the woods for somebody who already has a home. Or technology provides another alternative for people who have abundant media versus those who are living with no telephone in some sections of the globe. So one comes to the issue of cyberspace from an agenda that is shaped by philosophy, not just in an abstract sense, but with philosophy and communication interacting. That is at least my way of defining the difference between meta-ethics and normative ethics. The latter works into the issues of the day but shapes them within the context of, and in terms of, the issues of philosophy.

To carry that further, the question about cyberspace from a philosophical point of view comes to a focus through the question of justice. And it’s profoundly stimulating also around the issue of truth, that is, “What is being represented here?” In what sense, as we understand truth in either a correspondence or a coherence view or in terms of interpretive sufficiency, is a system of communication that transmits isolated bits of data in sequence giving us new questions about truth? “Is cyberspace opening up worlds of communication that make it necessary to elaborate what justice means philosophically?” Justice conceptually has moved from its roots in the retributive justice of law, to distributive justice, and more recently to restorative justice. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has

documented, no restoration is possible unless evil deeds and confession are explicitly spoken or written. The reality of communication intrudes upon and shapes the character of philosophical reflection, in this case on the nature of justice.

In addition to truth and justice, a third question from philosophy concerns the nature of the human, or philosophical anthropology. “What is going on when anonymity, in terms of sending and receiving messages in cyberspace, is a characteristic form of human interaction?” Some in the legal community argue that pornography in cyberspace cannot be considered pornography because there is no actual person who’s being raped or treated violently in this technology. Pornography in cyberspace is just an exchange of artifices, of contrivances that are electronically driven. What happens with our humanity within a cyber world is important to me, but that’s because the nature of the human is the longstanding philosophical issue. I’m suggesting here that philosophy as a discipline, and the history of ideas or intellectual history, shape the frame of reference; and communications, the arena in which we live and this venue in which so much of the social order is concentrated, helps me understand it better. Communications feeds back inescapably into the philosophical system.

You asked about my commitment to communitarian ethics, and from this perspective I’ve suggested three important issues so far that we need to work on in communications, each of them philosophical in character—truth, justice, and the nature of the human. I could speak of communitarian ethics in more generic terms as well. Communitarianism is a social philosophy that contradicts mainstream individualism. When it is developed in terms of public communication, the operating term is social responsibility.

And social responsibility has emerged within the communications literature as an important concept. I’ve worked on it on the international level. My colleague Kaarle Nordenstreng of Finland and I, for example, published an article in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* about social responsibility worldwide, trying to take note of this nomenclature as it appears in different protocols around the world. Social responsibility was first formulated in the United States by the Hutchins Commission in its 1947 *Report on the Free and Responsible Press*. The MacBride Commission in 1980, under the direction of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), emphasized social responsibility globally. Today, the European Union is organizing most of its understanding of cultural vitality within the Union under that label. There is more public journalism—and application

of social responsibility thinking—in Latin America than in any other part of the world. Notions like social responsibility I have pursued with some interest but also a host of other generic issues that are philosophically interesting.

*What kind of new questions emerge for communication ethics with the introduction of global media technologies?*

The character of our society overall is technological. Rather than thinking of technologies *per se*, the fundamental issue is what Jacques Ellul calls *la technique*. *La technique* is the concept of “machineness” that underlies the technological world in which we live. The only two specific technologies that are global in scope are information and military technology, and their contradiction indicates that it is important to understand technologies individually from the inside out. If we know the different character of various technologies—as a chemist knows the differences among chemicals—we can make important distinctions between print technologies and electronic ones and distinguish the qualities of audio media from visual ones. The Canadian School of Communication, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan pre-eminently, have been successful at this kind of technology-focused communication scholarship.

However, the important issue, for those of us in ethics, it seems to me, is a deeper understanding of technology as an ideological system in which efficiency or instrumentalism is the dominant feature. My Ph.D. dissertation centered on the work of Jacques Ellul, since I was interested in social philosophy. Ellul’s understanding of the technological society attracted me as the most helpful way of thinking about technology today, his own work rooted in Max Weber and Karl Marx. Ellul argues that in the history of the human race we were synchronized with nature—etching our livelihood out of it, the rise and fall of the seasons, day and night. The character of nature gave humans their orientation and value system. For 5,000 years it’s been a different kind of ambience, away from nature and inscribed into the human and social order. Our identity and moral commitments have been human-to-human, within the social groups that are native to us.

Jacques Ellul’s argument is that for the first time in human history the world essentially has become technological. Of course, we still have a human-to-nature relationship and a human-to-human one as well, but those are residual in his mind. I agree with his argument, based on Engel’s law,

that as quantity increases quality changes. Ellul recognizes that we have always had technologies—hoes, a stylus as a pen, the wheel, needles to sew clothes. The Roman Empire, in terms of its administration, was close to a machine. Certainly the huge armies that were built by Babylon in antiquity were technological instruments. But as quantity expands something radically different happens. A town in Pennsylvania that has 1,000 people and the Pittsburgh area with two million people are on a continuum of quantity from 1,000 to two million. But at some point on the scale, it is a village in one case and an urban center in the other. Ellul introduces the term “the technological society” for the second. There are technologies over history, but currently a technological order is present. Around the 1890s technologies like the underwater cable began to connect the world. Industry started producing technologies that created markets across the globe, and the profusion of the industrial order generated an abundance of technological forms. Industrial societies have been undergoing a shift for a century, so that today it’s a technological order, one that’s driven by technique, by efficiency.

*Has this technological order, in a sense, become a moral order?*

That’s exactly right. One of the questions that you’re interested in is this: What is the biggest challenge for communication ethics for future generations? I would answer that along the line of what you’re implying: the huge challenge is amorality. For Jacques Ellul, the basic issue is not that the world has turned immoral, but that the instrumentalism of efficiency which characterizes technological societies makes the moral order foreign, or inaccessible, or unintelligible. It’s not immorality that we contend with first of all now and in the future, but amorality. Amorality, from his point of view, means that the technological order characterizes what we are—an order that has taken on the qualitative shifts to efficiency, technique, machineness, and the mystique of the instrument. In these terms, the moral life or the moral order is instrumentalized and has no direct bearing on our humanness.

Obviously, immorality persists. Murder, fraud, physical abuse, and lying are as immoral today as always. But it’s increasingly difficult to come to grips with them in our mind and conscience. In a technological society, we know the moral life exists somewhere around the edges, but it’s ephemeral. The world that we live in is a world of necessity, of instrumentalism. If you use the old means-ends distinction as we typically do in ethics, means is the



preoccupation of the technological order, its overwhelming commitment. Ends, therefore, have no bearing psychologically or intellectually or in the way our institutions are organized. The world of amorality means that those of us who are interested in the moral order and questions of value are speaking about a universe that the public generally does not understand. I'm over-generalizing here: specific righteous acts and institutional integrity as we witness it keep technologically sophisticated societies from darkness.

Jacques Ellul would ask, "Can a rose bush grow at the North Pole? Can ethics prosper in a technological order?" Ellul is not a nihilist or a fatalist, nor am I. He's pessimistic, but that's different. A nihilist would say that moral acts are absolutely impossible. A fatalist has so over-defined the world that amorality, in *toto*, is all that characterizes it. For Ellul, we have experienced a qualitative shift to a world of means, where ends are secondary. But one cannot conclude, therefore, that our interest in ethics and appeals to the general morality have no significance. They're an act of faith, however. Ethics is a duty whether one can calibrate substantial results or not. I believe with Ellul that we should make amorality overwhelming and inescapable without, in a fatalistic sense, saying no alternatives are possible. Amorality is definitive without being totalizing.

This is what I mean by our most formidable challenge. The increasing amorality of our technological order, by virtue of it being an instrumentalist system, concerns me the most. Thus, I'm grateful for my colleagues who include systemic failure in their study of organizational ethics. The collapse of Enron, for example, is a demonstration of wholesale failure or "wall-to-wall amorality" as Ellul would call it. The destruction of Enron is not the result of some conniving, immoral, evil leader. Amorality sometimes concentrates in leaders, but the moral failure here is the result of a corporate system consumed by means and devoid of moral ends. Enron illustrates a commitment to efficiency and instrumentalism, so that moral questions within the technological order have no resonance.

*Given your interest in communitarian ethics and recognition that a global technological order is amoral, what are your thoughts about a universal communication ethic?*

As with the subject matter of communication ethics, the question about universals is driven for me by philosophy. One could argue that the character of the human, philosophical anthropology, leads me to the conclusion that

inscribed in our humanness is a moral dimension or proclivity that is irrepressible as far as our humanness is concerned. If one takes the field of ethics out of its epistemological and metaphysical character and makes it an ontological domain, understanding the character of being and the notion of human being, then one is compelled, from my point of view, to see the possibility of morals as a presupposition. "Protonorm" is my term here. Moral values are an underlying belief, a starting point, a faith commitment. They are primordial, deep in our being like a primal scream.

What if one were to ask, "How does that square with a technological order of instrumentalism where the moral life has no resonance?" Remember that Jacques Ellul is a dialectician. He is fundamentally influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and believes in a simultaneous "yes and no." We must face the "no" squarely, coming face-to-face with the abyss, the darkness of the technological order. At that point a leap of faith is possible. Ellul always thinks in counterpoint, "yes and no" dialectically. And this is how we should understand ethics. Resistance is not some streamlined codes of ethics that enables us to get on in the world. Ethics is speaking in the prophetic voice and calling for empowerment over against the system. Ethicists speak as prophets wanting the wayward to come home, not in condemnation as much as invitation. Underneath the declarations against evil is a wooing toward another way of life that is possible.

Ellul's dialectic "yes and no" is ultimately apocalyptic. He's a Christian and believes that when the end of the age finally comes there will be freedom from the dominance of *la technique*. Meanwhile, each of us is called to live out as much of one's own revolution as possible. Ethical acts are the first fruits of the final transformation at the end of time. In his *Autopsy of Revolution*, Ellul wants genuine revolution on the level of *la technique*, not just in terms of some problems on the surface. Revolution is swimming against the stream underneath, that is, always confronting instrumentalism, knowing that it will not basically change until the new order is introduced supernaturally. One must say "yes" while recognizing the negative.

The Kierkegaardian dialectic in Ellul is the answer to your question as I see it. Ethics can be a prophetic voice, a call to resistance, a leap of faith in which one attempts alternative possibilities. The dialectic is a long-standing intellectual tradition that we have available about the nature of the human from many different traditions, both Eastern and Western. The challenge for us is not to let dialectic disappear from the technological order.

Jean Baudrillard is of interest to me along these lines, too. The simulacrum creates through the technological world a hyper-reality, in which the real is reversed so that the hyper-real becomes the definition of reality as we know it. If we see Frontier World in Disney Land, with its assimilated and reproduced artifice of what history was like when Daniel Boone lived, then Baudrillard's argument would be that this hyper-reality becomes the frame of reference out of which we read history. The simulations within which we live, driven by the media, become reality for us, period. There is no meaningful verity that exists outside of technologically mediated frames of reference. Inversion has occurred in industrial societies. Baudrillard uses the term "implosion"—the reality that we know has imploded into hyper-reality.

There is considerable overlap between *la technique* and hyper-reality. We need more time than we have here to distinguish between the details of Ellul's world and Baudrillard's. However, on one fundamental point, I prefer the longer historical perspective in Ellul's way of thinking. Ellul is looking, either through history or through his metaphysics, for a place to stand. He seeks a location of perfect freedom and the ultimate good which are not tainted by *la technique*. At the least, he wants a prophetic voice vis-à-vis the world of necessity in which we live. Baudrillard doesn't grant us that request. I have written about Ellul and Baudrillard and argue that Ellul has the same radical understanding of technology as Baudrillard, but a far more sophisticated approach that makes prophetic resistance credible. That's how I think our stand on ethics ought to be. Ellul gives us a framework for doing ethics without skepticism.

We can also think about the world of technology in terms of what Ellul calls "self-augmentation" and machine-like growth according to the principle of efficiency. Therefore, any claims that we make about ethics are set against this evolving world constantly on the move. It is continually developing out of itself toward greater productivity. In the process of augmenting itself, it replaces anchor points for ethics—such as God, the metaphysical, and the virtuous human being—with its own instrumentalism. Therefore, the banality of evil emerges—the concerns of those who ran the Nazi concentration camps were about the sufficiency of their fuel supplies, and whether their crematoria were handling enough bodies, or whether in a 24-hour period, as a matter of fact, they have been as efficient as they were two years before, or whether Belzec's gas chambers were as effective as those in Auschwitz. The banality-of-evil phenomenon is one way to describe an Ellulian world. The social dynamics and moral qualities get reduced by technology's self-

augmentation and are reformulated around the calculation of means that instrumentalism represents.

I haven't studied the military from this point of view, but those who have notice what happens when the military continues to celebrate its superior technology and makes technological refinements its primary mission. These spokesmen are integrated into military technology. SMART bombs, the ability to fly aircraft in tandem, virtually all defense combines human beings, information sophistication, and weapons. The military is a marriage of communication and weapons technology that was really evident during the Iraq War in 2003. The military celebrates the super-sophistication of military technology for giving us a cleaner approach—that the SMART bomb will not destroy entire populations as in World War II when cities like Dresden were bombed indiscriminately to near oblivion because the technology could not select from among different targets. Ellul's argument would be that as this technology becomes more and more refined, more dominant, more robotic, more of a technical artifice, the ability to use it in morally appropriate ways, or to make ethical discriminations, becomes foolhardy. For sophisticated military instruments, counter-productivity emerges, so that efficiency replaces the social ends with whatever increased technological productivity can achieve. Technologies of surveillance follow the same pattern. The technological imperative determines the goals and strategy. As the electronic ability for tracking electronic data multiplies, the instruments set the pace and standard and bury human issues of privacy and freedom in the process.

The artifice that military and surveillance technology combined with information technology has created is an amoral world. From an Ellulian point of view, to expect morally appropriate decisions by people who are trained and schooled and implicated in this technical system is absurd. It would be enjoyable to pursue this illustration some more. But it's not an area that I've investigated with the thoroughness it deserves.

*Are you seeking a domain outside of technique to enable us to shape society through communication?*

The argument would be that within the dialectic community, within local communities of resistance, one can develop a domain of thinking that as a matter of fact stands in counterpoint against the technological world in which we live. Many people have argued resistance and Jacques Ellul works out of

this legacy. What Ellul delivers to us is a counter-culture. People during the so-called “hippie days” of the 1960s carried his book *The Technological Society* around as their bible. Ellul does insist that the first step one must take is withdrawal from it. The only forms of resistance that are really available to us from his point of view are communities of nonviolence in which the proto-norm, the sacredness of life, is honored. His critics have complained that all he makes available to us is a non-technological island within a raging technological environment. But actually Ellul is not content with that. Max Weber’s bureaucratization is a direct parallel to Ellul’s *la technique*. Ellul’s machineness is not just in our tools, but in bureaucracies. The government and education are machine-like in character. In his case, the Reformed church in France of which he was a part was a stifling, choking bureaucracy. So he starts a church in his own home. He develops a men’s club and a film study group, and refuses to drive a car. In various ways, he is living alongside of the materialist world of which he is a part. The argument would be to enable and empower local resistance, developing groups dialogically, interactively, those that nurture human values, the proto-norms that I’m talking about. Certainly truth and justice and nonviolence are entailed by the sacredness of human life, and resistance then also takes the form of a non-instrumental nurturing of values. That nurturance is not an individual escape but takes place interactively among the like-minded.

Jacques Ellul has written about the Middle East, and it is too complicated to cover adequately here. He would want to see groups of Palestinians and Israelis working together on water projects, on health, on education, on creating a world of nonviolence in the face of the overwhelming violence driven by military technology. Part of my interest in ethics is to spend more time telling the stories of these resistance groups, of people who are trying to articulate, vis-à-vis the instrumentalism of our society, the way of peace and human values. Our research tends to emphasize the major entities and large-scale issues. We examine the *New York Times*, CNN, Hollywood, the global conglomerates, and neglect the small, authentically counter-cultural. To claim that the only alternative is to wait until the world ends and we live in heaven with divine peace would be contrary to Ellul’s thinking. In the dialectic of saying “yes” in the face of the “no,” we thereby resist and empower one another. To the extent we can make public these acts of critical consciousness, as Freire would call them, we inspire others to authentic humanity in their own time and space.

*In addressing themes in your scholarship, you've mentioned several writers. Are there others who have influenced your work in communication ethics?*

Thanks for the question. This gives me an opportunity to take note of several intellectual colleagues I haven't already introduced: Reinhold Niebuhr, W. D. Ross, and Edith Wyschogrod. Niebuhr was one of the most influential thinkers of mid-twentieth century America. His Christian realism showed us how to take divine command theory out of metaethics and root it in justice and social reform instead. His *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and two-volume *Nature and Destiny of Man* are heavyweight books that continue to invigorate my thinking on the problem of structural evil and the distinctive character of the human. W. David Ross in his *The Right and the Good* developed the most influential critique of utilitarianism ever written. In the process, he established an ethics of duty as the most credible alternative and has encouraged my own predilections for a communitarian duty ethics.

And with the relational center to social ethics, feminist moral theory has been indispensable to me, also. Feminist ethics demonstrates how we can start over conceptually rather than be trapped in the individual autonomy of mainstream Western ethics. Edith Wyschogrod represents the dialogic tradition of Emmanuel Levinas, and in doing so demonstrates how the actual moral existence of the saintly few is the best venue for understanding Otherness. She makes inescapable the need in our ethics to account for the surgeon from the Royal College of London serving in a leper colony in Cairo. Ethical reflection on the Holocaust cannot concentrate exclusively on the atrocities of the Third Reich but must include the heroics of Anne Frank.

Even as I mention these inspirations of mine, I need to underscore my indebtedness to classical philosophical tradition. I don't treat Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and Immanuel Kant in scholastic terms; in fact, my communitarian social ethics isn't a contemporary version of any of them. Our theorizing is never *ex nihilo*. We do not create new models *de novo*. Theories engage the *status quo*; they rectify weaknesses in existing paradigms. Theories are oppositional claims. The classic thinkers in the academic enterprise we call "ethics" give us a legacy to work from, without which we merely re-invent the wheel. The intellectual masters are not canonical but provocateurs, essential to our thinking even while we contradict them and create models that are foreign to their age and expertise.

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