ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Reconfiguring Practical Wisdom

At the 1999 Conference on Argumentation in Alta, Utah, I presented a preview of my move to develop the other side of the narrative paradigm, the ethics side (Fisher, 2000, 1-15)**[i]**. Since then, I have written several chapters, one of which is composed as a conversation among philosophers, theologians, and scholars – from Plato to Levinas – who address the question: what does being ethical require of one? From their responses, I derived four different answers, four different requirements. I shall use these ideas to analyze a decision a young Frenchman had to make during WWII: to stay with his dependent mother or to leave and join the Free French Forces in England. The story of Pierre's plight comes from Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on "Existentialism" (Sartre, 1998, 9-51).

Forms of Life and Practices

Before getting to the Pierre's dilemma, I think it is prudent to review key concepts that underlie my attempt to reconfigure practical wisdom. The foundation for the approach I am taking is an adaptation of Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1977, 8e, 11e, 88e) and Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a "practice. By form of life, I shall mean an enduring, historically, culturally developed interpersonal relationship, such as a family or friendship. MacIntyre defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntrye, 1984, 187). Examples of practices include government, medicine, business, science, scholarship, and sports. Forms of life concern "private" virtues; practices are the home of "public" virtues. As will be noted later, private and public virtues are not always separate; they inform one another.

Forms of life and practices are alike in how they are constituted and how their constitutions inform and regulate judgment and action within them. They differ in

their sites: interpersonal versus public and professional. The argument is that different forms of life and different practices are constituted by sets of values which prescribe norms of character, role performance, interaction, and ideal aspiration. Put another way: the values, norms, and ideals that constitute interpersonal and institutional relationships provide the vocabulary that informs discussion, dialogue, and debate about ethical matters. They also provide the grounds for justifying and evaluating ethical judgments and conduct. They are empowered to serve these functions because they are, though they evolve and may be conflicted, the abiding themes of the narratives we live by.

The norms of interpersonal and institutional relationships are intersubjectively created and maintained through symbolic transactions over time. They are neither irrational nor rational; they are the historically and culturally inherited "goods" we acquire through socialization, the stuff of the stories we tell, hear, read, and enact everyday. They become integral to rationality when they are explicitly referred to in interactions or when they become part of conversations about any topic or behavior that threatens the integrity or viability of any particular form of life or practice in which we engage. Problems arise in ethical judgment and conduct because forms of life and practices conflict and are embedded in one another; and because the values that constitute different forms of life and practices are not constant – they evolve and often vary from one culture to another. However, I shall argue that there is a form of life that is life itself. And this is where one may consider universal values, permanence as well as change, respect for transcendence as well as particularities.

The concept of the form of life that is life itself cannot be fully developed here. However, I can offer this preliminary sketch. The form of life that is life itself is the realm of the universal. It is the container of ordinary forms of life and all sorts of practices. Its constitutive values are the core tenets of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity: mercy, compassion, justice, humility, and love (Armstrong, 1993, 377-399). Its character is also caught in Plato's view of divine goods: wisdom, sobriety, righteousness, and valor (Plato, 1973, I, 631d). And these values and goods have their counterpart in affirmations of "rights," whether human, animal, or environmental. Rights in this context are expressions of what is thought to be ethical in relationships, especially those threatened by dishonor or destruction. Thus, we have the United Nation's "Universal Declaration of Rights," which specifies the values of respect for all humans, brotherhood, equality, and freedom. It is well to note that the existence of universal values, goods, and rights does not

entail a necessity that they be upheld universally or absolutely or constantly. That they may be used in self-serving or destructive ways is clear. That they can and are used to serve positive ends is also clear. When these religious, philosophical, or political values inform everyday decisions that concern the integrity of various forms of life or public practices, the decisions have the prospect of being not only practically wise, but genuinely so.

Practical Wisdom: The Basic Conceptualization

Practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, has to do with a capacity "to deliberate well about what is good and expedient…, about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general" (Aristotle, 1973, VI, 1140a, 25). I concur in this basic conception. However, as indicated by the foregoing discussion of forms of life and practices, I consider particular and universal goods to be intrinsic to specific relationships. At the heart of practical wisdom is a kind of reflective intelligence based on knowledge or awareness of what is rightful or righteous in a situation requiring ethical response. That intelligence works in this way, I think: the values that constitute forms or life and practices make up what we call conscience and serve as guides, if not goads, to our thinking. They are, in fact, the mainstays of our ethical knowledge, the basis of being practically wise and they provide the premises of arguments we would use to justify our choices and action. One exhibits practical wisdom when one makes decisions and argues in terms of the values that constitute the form of life or practice one is a participant in; when one takes full measure of whatever conflicts in values there may be because of the evolving nature of that form or life or practice and the embeddedness of that form of life or practice in other forms of life or practices; when one applies the tests of narrative rationality in assessing facts, arguments, values, and emotions in the case – both during deliberation and arguing that case; and, when one recognizes that one's judgment is simply that – a judgment, not an absolute truth**[ii]**. One of the characteristic virtues of the practically wise person is humility.

Pierre's Dilemma

The story of Pierre, as noted earlier, was one told by Sartre and its setting was Nazi occupied France during WWII. Sartre used the story to illustrate his concept of "forlornness," by which he meant that "God does not exist and we have to face the consequences" (Sartre, 21). Here is the story:

(Pierre's) father was on bad terms with his mother, and, moreover, was inclined to be a collaborationist; his older brother had been killed in the German offensive

of 1940, and the young man, with somewhat immature but generous feelings, wanted to avenge him. His mother lived alone with him, very much upset by the half-treason of her husband and the death of her older son; the boy was her only consolation.

The boy was faced with the choice of leaving for England and joining the Free French Forces – that is, leaving his mother behind – or remaining with his mother and helping her to carry on. He was fully aware that the woman lived only for him and that his going off – and perhaps his death – would plunge her into despair. He was also aware that every act that he did for his mother's sake was a sure thing, in the sense that it was helping her to carry on, whereas every effort he made toward going off and fighting was an uncertain move which might run aground and prove completely useless…. As a result, he was faced with two very different kinds of action: one, concrete, immediate, but concerning only one individual; the other concerned an incomparably vaster group, a national collectivity, but for that very reason was dubious, and might be interrupted en route. And, at the same time, he was wavering between two kinds of ethics. On the one hand, an ethics of sympathy, of personal devotion; on the other, a broader ethics, but one whose efficacy was more dubious. He had to choose between the two (Sartre, 24-25).

The question at this point is: how should Pierre have been advised? Sartre told him "You're free, choose, that is invent" (Sartre, 28). Moral choice, Sartre held, "is to be compared to the making of a work of art" (Sartre, 42). Pierre, for his part, decides that "In the end, feeling is what counts" (Sartre, 26). Neither of these responses constitute what I consider practical wisdom. And neither does Sartre's further advice to Pierre that he can not expect help from consulting religion, a priest, or philosophy, Kant in particular.

The Analysis

The analysis of Pierre's dilemma from the four perspectives mentioned earlier. In brief, these perspectives are: ethics as a way of being, a way of systematic thinking, a way of relating responsibly, and a way of enacting practical wisdom, a way that incorporates the other three perspectives. Each of the perspectives will be assessed in terms of the strengths and limitations of the advice it would offer Pierre in making his choice to stay with his mother or leave and join the French Free Forces in England.

1. Ethics as a Way of Being

Thinkers such as Plato and St. Thomas Aquinas, Emmanuel Levinas and Knud Logstrum hold that to be ethical one must be of a certain character: one must possess knowledge of the true good or have faith in God's teaching and act accordingly; one must recognize one's profound responsibility in the "face" of an other or acknowledge the ethical demand of one's presence in the life of others. Such knowledge, faith, or awareness leads to the ideals of love and compassion, truth and godliness, conscience and justice. These ideals mark a path of life that is more consonant with the form of life that is life itself than the forms of life and practices of everyday experience, of genuine rather than practical wisdom. They do not necessarily impinge on or provide immediate solutions to imminent critical ethical choices, especially in cases where there is a conflict of goods such as that faced by Pierre – to honor his mother or to honor his devotion to his country.

2. Ethics as a Way of Systematic Thinking

Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey are the leading exponents of the idea that being ethical requires systematic thinking. They insist on a rational calculation of all relevant facts, contingencies, values, and feelings in a case. Pleasure and pain must be weighed and courses of action chosen to advance the "greatest good for the greatest number" or the most beneficial pragmatic results possible. Following the procedures outlined by these thinkers, Pierre would arrive at a reasoned judgment as to what he should do, and a reasoned judgment is the most that one can achieve in making difficult ethical decisions. However, thinking systematically in and of itself does not attend to the goods conceived by those who view ethics as a way of being.

The same can be said of Kant who also belongs in this category. He takes an analytic rather than an atomistic approach to ethical problems; that is, he recommends a close examination of the circumstances of an ethical case, not to weigh them, but to discern in them a rule of obligation. Duty, not utility or consequences, would be the guide to ethical conduct. The difficulty that arises with this approach is trying to determine one's duty when duties conflict. In the situation faced by Pierre, what would be the "categorical imperative" that he should follow: familial obligation or duty to country? Whichever way he goes, he will, according to Kant, create a rule of conduct for everyone to follow. Making such a choice can, as with any other complex ethical decision, lead to grief, guilt, remorse, even tragedy.

3. Ethics as a Way of Relating Responsibly

As best as I have been able to determine, postmodernists consider ethical conduct as a way of relating to others in a responsible way, a disposition to do the right thing in each case; that is, be authentic, have integrity, be fair and judicious. Following the lead of Nietzsche, or at least apparently so, writers such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida believe that God is "dead," received notions of truth and the good are human constructions that serve private and public interests or desires, and traditional conceptions of reason, especially of calculative reason, lead to domination and "terror." Certain feminists, including Genevieve Lloyd, Annette Bair, Carole Gilligan, and Jane Flax, concur in the idea that traditional conceptions of reason are fundamentally flawed. They see them as ignoring significant features of human being and life, such as care and compassion, love and trust. All in all, the postmodern position tends to support Pierre's decision to act on the basis of feelings, to act without firm foundations.

4. Ethics as the Enactment of Practical Wisdom

The principal source of my thinking about practical wisdom is, of course, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am also indebted to several works by Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 1988, 1990), Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1990, 1994, 1995, 2001), and Jurgen Habermas (1981, 1987, 1990, 1996). As noted earlier, I conceive of practical wisdom as a kind of reflective intelligence based on knowledge of what is right or righteous in a situation requiring ethical response. As such, it incorporates consideration of ideal, norms, and values; involves thinking systematically; and entails virtues and the disposition to do the right thing. How all this comes together is shown in this schematic *(Figure 1)*:

Figure 1. Narrative Ethical Judgment
Model: The Case of Pierre

Before proceeding to the contents of the model, I am sure that some explanation

of it is in order. Its original source was Stephen Toulmin's construction, based on a jurisprudential frame of reference, which was designed to display the anatomy of an argument or specific line of reasoning (Toulmin, 1958). In 1978, I modified it to account for more complex arguments, including consideration of particular and transcendental values inherent in a case (Fisher, 1978). By adding assessment of values, I had, without realizing it at the time, transformed the construction into a near model of ethical judgment. It was only after I had published the initial essay proposing the narrative paradigm in 1984 (Fisher, 1984) and then my book, *Human Communication as Narration* in 1987 that I came to the conviction that any model for the assessment of reasoning – or ethical judgment – had to begin with the narrative context in which it occurred and the emotions it aroused.

I had long believed that certain emotions have cognitive import in reasoning and argument, a view supported by Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Ethics*. I have been further convinced of this view by the writings of Martha Nussbaum. I agree with her when she maintains that "emotions are appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's control great importance for that person's own flourishing" (Nussbaum, 2001, 4). I also concur in her observation that practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom; that emotions are not only not more unreliable than intellectual calculations, but frequently are more reliable, and less deceptively seductive" (Nussbaum, 1990, 40). The result of all this is my current project and the Narrative Ethical Judgment Model.

In this schematic, data, or relevant facts, are considered components of a Scene, that is, the circumstances that give rise to the conflict at hand that requires ethical resolution. Warrant is reconstrued as Premise, that is, the principle, rule, or standard by which one would move to resolution, at least at the outset of reflection. Backing for the Premise and Counter Premise, the term given to what has been called reservation, remain the same: evidence and values. However, emotions have been added to matters to be considered. What in the past has been called claim is now, Resolution. It should be noted that resolution of an ethical dilemma need not be a simple choice between this or that; it can be a choice to do some of this or that or something else not immediately apparent.

Even a cursory examination of the elements displayed in the Narrative Ethical Judgment Model will reveal sources of good reasons for Pierre to stay with his mother or to join the Free French Forces in England. He could argue that he was staying with his mother because of what the Bible admonishes him to do, that he

is obligated by familial and secular customs of his country, that his decision is based on love and caring for his mother, and that his feelings of self-worth depends on his staying. In defense of the decision to leave to join the French Free Forces, he could argue that it is his duty, along with that of all citizens, to fight for his country, that family honor is at stake, that the Bible advises an "eye for an eye," and that his integrity and self-respect can only be restored by avenging his brother's death and his father's probable collaboration.

As compelling as any of these arguments might be for others, they must first and finally be convincing to Pierre himself. Whatever line of argument he might choose, it must be chosen because it is the most reasonable and sincere one he can make; it must be mindful, heartfelt, one that he, and perhaps others, can live by because it is intrinsically good. What ultimately matters is the quality of the reflection and deliberation that goes into the decision.

What Pierre is faced with, in essence, is choosing between conflicting narratives: between the religious and secular stories of familial responsibility and the national and cultural stories of citizenship and familial and personal honor. To choose one or the other of these stories is to choose to be of a certain character, a person who characteristically acts in regard to a particular set of values. His choice calls for much more than a cursory examination of the elements that make-up the Narrative Ethical Judgment Model; it demands thorough reflection and deliberation. The tests of narrative coherence and fidelity, which comprise the mainstays of what I call narrative rationality, are relevant and useful here.

While both of the stories Pierre must choose between have coherence, are consistent structurally and are materially confirmed by other stories, they conflict because one – the familial responsibility story – is embedded in the other – the national, cultural, familial honor story. The conflict is most apparent in their rival values and emotional foundations. The choice of staying with his mother substantiates familial love, obligation, sympathy, care, compassion, and so on. The choice of joining the resistance reinforces Pierre's patriotism, allows him to vent his anger, and possibly restore the family honor. So, what should Pierre choose? Before pursuing a "final" answer to this question, the consideration of narrative fidelity needs to be addressed.

The first concern in regard to fidelity is the truthfulness of the stories that Pierre must choose between. There is no basis for disputing several facts – that Pierre's brother was killed by the Nazis and that his mother needs him and he is her only consolation. However, it may or may not be true that his father collaborated with

the enemy. And there is much more that is not known for sure. For instance, how dependent is Pierre's mother? Is there no one else who might tend to her – family, friends, or professionals? These questions are raised to illustrate that even if facts are available, one who has to make an important ethical decision will have to interpret them and will not necessarily have every fact that may be relevant in the case. What is most crucial about the facts is the values and emotions that they raise and must be dealt with.

With the Narrative Ethical Judgment Model, the explicit and implicit values have been identified. The pertinent questions then to be raised are these: First, how relevant is each of them to Pierre's decision? Pierre's concern for his mother is obviously relevant. Are his anger and hate relevant to anything but his desire for revenge and the restoration of the family name? The answers to these questions will determine Pierre's response to the second concern here: the effects of adhering to the entailed values and emotions in regard to his self-concept, his subsequent actions, to his relationships with others, and society. Whatever decision he makes, he will be able to find confirmation for his action in the experience of some others and in the views of others he admires and respects – such as Sartre, which is the third consideration. Pierre's decision now comes to a final consideration: which story will be chosen for his own and does it substantiate an ideal basis for human conduct generally?

If Pierre reflects and deliberates about his choice as delineated here, he will have enacted the intellectual aspect of practical wisdom. In choosing a course of action in recognition of the facts, principles, reservations, values, and emotions involved in the case, especially the norms of life – familial — and the practice — of government, he will display practical wisdom at its best. If his choice also accords with the values that constitute the form of life that is life itself, the ideal basis for human conduct, he will exhibit genuine wisdom. However he chooses, he will have to live with the inevitable strains of conscience that naturally attend difficult ethical judgments.

The "final" answer to the question of what Pierre should do, the most practically wise thing to do, is suggested by Aristotle's concept of virtue. "Virtue," he writes, "is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being a rational principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (Aristotle, 1973, VI, 1107a 1-5). The exercise of virtue involves finding a mean between extremes: for instance, courage and cowardice, temperance and indulgence, pride and humility, shame and shamelessness. In

Pierre's case, the choice is not clearly between extremes. It is more the case that it is between two kinds of courage, moral and military. One way in which the two might be reconciled is by Pierre choosing to stay with his mother and join the resistance within his own country. Most, if not all, of the elements in the Narrative Ethical Judgment model would be accommodated by this decision.

Conclusion

In closing, I should note that there are perspectives on ethics other than the ones I have mentioned so far. I have left them out because they are of no use for anyone confronted with a difficult ethical decision. I am referring to the views of such writers as A. J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden. They consider ethical statements to be "non-sense," outside the realm of truth and falsehood, or purely emotional expressions. I am also referring to the position taken recently by E. O. Wilson who claims that what is needed to establish a clear and coherent ethic is a "biology of moral sentiments" (Wilson, 1998, 255). With these views, practical wisdom has no substance now and may never have one in the future. I hope that the foregoing analysis of Pierre's dilemma establishes that practical wisdom made good sense in the past, and that its reconfiguration has relevance and utility for today and tomorrow.

NOTES

[i] For those unfamiliar with the narrative paradigm, the following definitions and explanation should be helpful. By narration, I mean a conceptual framework that would account for all forms of discourse that lay claim to our reason, including scientific, philosophical, political, historical, religious, aesthetic, and so on. Such forms are considered as "stories," that is, interpretations of some aspect of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character. By good reasons, I refer to those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical. By warrant, I mean that which authorizes, sanctions, or justifies belief, attitude, value, or action. In brief, the tenets of the narrative paradigm are (1) Humans are essentially storytellers; (2) The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is good reasons which vary in form among situations, genres, and media of communication; (3) The production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character; (4) Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their awareness of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity, whether or

not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives; (5) The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation.

[ii] Narrative rationality has two components: coherence, which is measured in regard to argumentative or structural consistency, material confirmation or disconfirmation by other related stories, and the reliability of the storyteller; fidelity, which involves critically assessing lines of reasoning and weighing values in regard to facts, relevance, consequences, consistency with stories told by those whom one admires; and whether or not the story accords with the highest ideals possible. The tests of coherence and fidelity will be used in the analysis of Pierre's dilemma.

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