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What makes us sick makes other people hungry! ***Food Crash: why organic is the only way forward***

A farmer who is a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life? How so?

In November 2016 Pope Francis issued new statutes for the Pontifical Academy for Life. He directed that the Academy, which was originally founded in 1994 by Pope John Paul II to defend and promote ‘the value of human life and the dignity of the person’, was to widen the scope of its research and teaching so as to include not only “*the care of the dignity of the human person at different stages of life*”, but also “*the promotion of a quality of human life that integrates its material and spiritual value with a view to an authentic ‘human ecology’ that helps recover the original balance of creation between the human person and the entire universe*”.

The year before, in 2015, Pope Francis had issued his encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*. In that letter, he made a major contribution to a tradition of teaching which goes back at least to the 12th century, to the writings of Francis of Assisi.

The earlier Francis, in his Canticle of the Creatures, had called the earth ‘our sister, our mother’ who cries out because of the harms we have inflicted on her by an irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.

The later Francis claimed that the external deserts of the world are growing because the ‘*internal deserts*’ in the human heart have become so vast. For this reason, he said, the ecological crisis is itself a ‘*summons to interior conversion*’. And he added that some committed and prayerful Christians, excused by ‘*realism and pragmatism*’, tended to ridicule

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Bernadette Tobin reviews a book recently published in English by a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life who calls himself a ‘farmer’.

Steve Matthews and Taylan Gurgenci explain the ‘feedback loop’ between public conceptualizations of both people and practices and the resulting moral identities people acquire. Their focus is on the practice of euthanasia.

James Franklin’s 2024 PM Glynn Lecture – Politics, law and policy: A view from the abstract world – is our final piece.

expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive, choosing not to change their habits. What both need, Franics said, is an ‘*ecological conversion*’.

And so, it should not have been surprising that one of the people Francis appointed to the newly-refreshed Pontifical Academy was an internationally-known and widely-respected agronomist, an expert in organic farming, someone who had spent his life not only cultivating a farm in Bavaria (originally, using industrial or ‘conventional’ techniques) but also working for three years in Haiti and in other parts of the world with people who do not enjoy our western prosperity.

That ‘farmer’ is Felix zu Löwenstein. His book, *Food Crash: why organic is the only way forward*, was originally written and published (in 2011) in German. Only recently has it been translated into English and thus made available to an English-speaking audience.

A food crash is a collapse of the global food system. The thesis of *Food Crash* can be stated simply: the world will not be able to feed its people, there will be a collapse in the world food system, unless we turn from ‘conventional’ farming to organic farming and unless organic farming undergoes significant development. Conventional farming (often still referred to as ‘industrial’ farming) is the form of agriculture practised by the majority of farmers in industrialized nations. It uses all the new possibilities offered by agricultural technologies, agrochemicals and genetic engineering; it is capital-intensive (because seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and feed have to be brought into the farm from outside) and labor-intensive (because technical progress requires higher production per hectare and per hour worked).

The term ‘organic farming’ originally referred to farming’s use of organic matter as the primary source of soil health and plant nutrition in contrast to the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers in conventional farming. Today organic farming should be understood as embodying four principles; the principle of health (that it should sustain and enhance the health of the soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible); the principle of ecology (that it should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them, and help sustain them); the principle of fairness (that it should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities); and the principle of care (that it should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment).

The ‘green revolution’ promised that only by employing the methods of industrial farming which include the use of pesticides, artificial fertilizers, genetic engineering, etc, would we be able now, and in the future, to feed the world’s growing population. To anyone brought up on the notion of the ‘green revolution’, the thesis of *Food Crash* is therefore challenging and unsettling. But that reaction might be explained by agribusiness and its lobbying in the political domain: this typically works against the development of knowledge and awareness of how wasteful are our lifestyles and how undesirable are our ways of using land and producing foods (not to mention our individual dietary habits). *Food Crash* provides a wonderful tool for dispelling that ignorance. Full of technical detail, it is immensely readable.

Food Crash starts with the facts of world hunger and asks whether insufficient production per acre of arable land is the cause. Dr Löwenstein argues against putting our trust in agribusiness as the solution: he argues for what he calls ‘ecological intensification’ as the basis for food production. And he sets out a range of instruments for uncoupling agricultural and food economy from its current unreliable basis in industrial farming and for shifting to a sustainable basis in organic farming.

The subject matter of *Food Crash* is complex. Connections are made between how soil is nourished or depleted, why non-economic criteria should be included in world trade agreements, how patent and tax laws need rethinking, why organic farming needs to develop just as much sophistication as has conventional farming.

The argument is dotted with illustrations: for example, the success story of a partnership between small farmers and scientists in the Philippines; the political causes of the potato famine that drove so many Irish to Australia; the usury trap for farmers in the ‘third’ world; why jumping ‘cold turkey’ into organic methods as happened in Sri Lanka is not a good thing; and about the complicated story of Haiti where international aid generally fosters dependency but where some individual initiatives show that it is possible to provide aid so as to generate sustainable success.

Dr Löwenstein puts forward ways in which we non-specialists can evaluate the range of solutions advanced in debates that rely on technical arguments: about whether human activity is the cause of climate change, about whether setting aside productive arable land for the growing of biofuels such as rape-seed is overall a good thing, about why speaking the ecological truth requires internalizing the ‘external’ costs of goods and services. A story about alternative contracts for waste disposal in the streets of Naples is his telling example of this last question; imagine the difference in two bids for a contract, one which internalizes all the true costs of the final disposal of the waste, the other which ignores (‘*externalizes*’) the social costs of, say, dumping the waste into the sea. Which is likely to be the successful bid?

He is instructive about how cattle and sheep have gone from being food *partners* - that convert grasslands unsuitable for the direct production of human food into meat and milk - to being food *competitors* of humans, living on energy-concentrated feeds that, though they bring high yields of meat and milk, are not good for the health of the animals themselves (let alone the human consumers). Not only does this represent a failure of our responsibility to be good stewards, co-creators of the world in which these animals live with us, but it’s also no good for human health. There is a relationship, though it’s complex, between the affluent’s world’s over-eating on the one hand and the impoverished world’s hunger on the other. Dr Löwenstein’s book opens up the complexities of that relationship to the ordinary reader.

And so the crucial issues are protecting soils, mitigating climate change, adopting diets and lifestyles adjusted to the capacities of the global ecosystem, and enacting equitable policies for access to food resources.

Felix zu Löwenstein is not ‘holier than thou’; he never preaches. He himself was an industrial (or as he says ‘conventional’) farmer for many years! Rather, his style, though serious, is self-deprecatory, often humorous. The references are all there for the experts, but the book is addressed to a lay audience. We should eat less meat, use fewer scissors (to cut open plastic bags) and more knives (to slice vegetables!) ...and waste less. Who needs to change? You and me.

Some ‘farmer’!

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By Felix Löwenstein
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Identity and End-of-Life Decision Making

Steven Matthews and Taylan Gurgenci

Renewed interest in questions of euthanasia has been prompted by some recent developments in legislative frameworks that expand the range of cases, particularly in Canada. According to the state justice department there, *'On February 29, 2024, legislation to extend the temporary exclusion of eligibility to receive MAID [Medical Assistance in Dying] in circumstances where a person's sole underlying medical condition is a mental illness received royal assent and immediately came into effect. The eligibility date for persons suffering solely from a mental illness is now March 17, 2027.'*

Many issues are raised by such conceptual expansion, but we will restrict ourselves here to some thoughts about the impact it has on how attitudes are formed towards euthanasia, and in particular how this attitudinal formation is related to the *kinds of people* we become once policies and laws are changed. Our main claim, derived from the work of philosopher Ian Hacking, is that there is a feedback loop between public conceptualizations of people and practices and the resulting ways that people become themselves. If this is correct, then it is important that public information does not create the kinds of people inclined to seek euthanasia for the reasons other than those authorized by the law.

If severe and chronic mental illness can form the state-approved grounds for legal suicide, it is not because of mental illness per se, but because of the unendurable burdens it brings, and if it is the unendurable burdens that are doing the work in the argument, then it is a short step to thinking other conditions, such as poverty and homelessness, might come to be regarded as the causal antecedent for those unendurable burdens, in which case more “edge cases” are admitted. (This then provides a rationale *not* to address poverty and homelessness, but that is not the focus here.)

The conceptual expansion to include non-terminal illness cases often forms what is called a slippery slope argument. This is the argument that advocates against legalization of euthanasia because such a first step sets us on an inevitable path to expansion. But that is not our argument here. Our argument is rather to draw attention to the effects of *public information* about euthanasia on our *moral psychology*. The moral dangers here are that certain ways of framing a message contribute to who we become, that is, to the kinds of people who, knowing legalised suicide is a way out, are potentially rendered helpless, or hopeless, or otherwise demoralized by our condition. (And though we do not discuss it here, a potential corollary effect of this is that governments may be less disposed to regard mental illness or homelessness as social conditions to be fixed to prevent people committing state-approved suicide. But again, we do not pursue that line of thought here.)

Before we outline the details of the argument, let's consider some background, and also some of the dangers we see arising from the problem of expanding cases.

BACKGROUND

The following conditions provide the basis for legally sanctioned euthanasia set within secular polities:

1/ *Terminal illness*: the person considering euthanasia has a terminal illness for which no cure is, or is foreseeably, available, where the probability of death from the illness is above a medically determined threshold within a given period.

2/ *Pain and suffering*: the illness causes intolerable pain or burden.

3/ *Considered decision*: the person expresses an ongoing, uncoerced, competently-arrived-at desire to end their life.

4/ *Sanctioned and supported process*: the person is over 18, and requires medical assistance to give effect to this desire.

For citizens to properly understand what is at stake in euthanasia, as delineated by these conditions, requires at least an adequately informed social environment, but this does not often obtain. For, attitudes toward euthanasia vary greatly between countries, and change over time, often becoming more progressive in wealthier socio-economic regions. These shifts are influenced by evolving economic, public health, social identity, and especially religious circumstances. Countries experiencing economic insecurity and those with deeply ingrained religious beliefs often hold negative views on euthanasia. Social determinants of health, as well as rates of morbidity and mortality, also play a role; for instance, high infant mortality and low life expectancy are often associated with more negative attitudes. Conversely, countries with well-functioning healthcare systems are generally more accepting of assisted suicide.¹ Attitudes are also a function of culture, and when a culture's beliefs are filtered by a certain kind of monolithic group identity, they tend towards a more restrictive homogeneity, in contrast to a culture that provides a civil space for diverse individualist beliefs.² The facts about the homogeneity of beliefs stemming from group identity, and religiously-invoked attitudes to euthanasia, are often mutually supporting, given that the dominant religious group in some polities provides the main filter for individual beliefs. Noteworthy also is that physician attitudes to euthanasia are often negative relative to a general population, though this does not hold for nations in general.³ Confounding factors for physician attitudes are, again, religiosity or its lack, and background cultural and political beliefs.

To complicate this further, special mention must be made of attitudes based on gender, and especially age and ageism, as these relate to euthanasia. On this question, Gamliel and Levi-Belz write:

One of the potential hurtful implications of ageism is its association with attitudes of people, community, and society towards older adults' suicide...[Some studies have] demonstrated that older adult suicidal females received the least sympathy from participants, while young suicidal females received the most. [These] suggest that age and gender are variables contributing to understanding [attitudes towards suicide]. Similar results were found in...euthanasia. Bevacqua and Kurpius (2013) found that counseling students expressed much more support for a 77-year-old client seeking active euthanasia than for a 25-year-old client seeking the same. These differences suggest that ageism may impact attitudes, beliefs, and even clinical perceptions and treatment in life or death matters that may even lead to ethical violations. (2016, 1384)

¹ For a detailed summary see Inglehart et al (2021).

² Karumathil and Tripathi (2022: 692). This point is compatible with work done on social conformity.

³ See Rathor et al 2014, McCormack et al 2012, E. Gamliel 2013.

All in all, then, the conditions forming the background for attitudinal formation towards euthanasia are broad and complex. And given the wide scope of who is affected by end-of-life information in the public sphere, it is clear that most citizens have a stake in the quality of public information that forms attitudes, and this interest intensifies as people move closer in circumstances to being those who really *must* make decisions, such as those with a terminal illness and their families.

MORAL DANGERS

The terminal illness condition for euthanasia (condition 1 above) contains hard objectively assessable pathological or physical prognoses. The second condition is essentially subjective and contains a judgement about the level of suffering sufficiently burdensome to be relieved by death. This subjectivity and vagueness, built into the way this condition is framed, can tend towards expansion of euthanasia to include “edge-cases”. These cases sit outside the remit of the standard conditions and may come to include individuals below the age of 18, the mentally ill (as the Canada case illustrates), or those with intolerably miserable lives due to (say) inescapable homelessness. Public commentary around what constitutes a case deserving of compassion – due to such suffering – may thus expand the set of cases.

The expansion problem forms part of the motivation for the present work, and this can be seen from the moral dangers that follow from biased framing of euthanasia information. The moral dangers we focus on here potentially lead to the premature ending of a life resulting from failure to delay a life-ending decision when a genuine alternative is available. Consider, then, three salient moral dangers:

1/ *Information that conditions people into helplessness.* Repeated positive framing of euthanasia potentially feeds the disposition to end life prematurely. For example, this may come in the form of perceived pressure to benefit a person’s nearest and dearest – to stop ‘troubling them with looking after me’ – or as pressure to free up resources for others more deserving, or it may come to perversely shape a decision to end life simply because one is old, lonely, and feeling abandoned. Or worse yet, family members of a terminally ill person may coerce them – in subtle as well as not-so-subtle ways – to ‘take the euthanasia option’.

2/ *Normalization of death.* The expansion problem is associated with the way language that previously described the ‘exceptional’ begins to describe the ‘normal’. To get a sense of this consider what has happened in the Netherlands.

This month, annual figures from the bodies that review euthanasia cases in the Netherlands showed an 8.1% increase in assisted deaths in 2017, taking the total to nearly 6,600 people. It came on top of a 10% annual increase the previous year. The vast majority had cancer, heart and arterial disease, or diseases of the nervous system, such as Parkinson’s and multiple sclerosis. But 169 had dementia, up from 141 the previous year. And 83 had severe psychiatric illnesses – up from 64 in 2016. “Supply has created demand,” said Professor Theo Boer, who supported the 2002 legislation but resigned from a regulatory body in 2014 amid concern about rising numbers. “We’re getting used to euthanasia, that is exactly what should not happen. We’re no

longer speaking about the exceptional situations that the law was created for, but a gradual process towards organised death.”⁴

Organized euthanasia generates habits of behaviour and language which supports those habits. And as is well known habit formation improves practice while dulling the senses. This is precisely the danger that Theo Boer refers to here, and when he says we are getting used to euthanasia, as we argue, the upshot of this remark is that we are gradually becoming the kinds of people for whom these attitudes have changed.

3/ Information that risks loss of safeguards. Information about euthanasia ought to be framed in ways that respect the conditions termed ‘safeguards’ of the practice. These vary between jurisdictions, but in general they include a process of oversight (e.g., typically more than one doctor must approve a process), and respect for medical practitioners who conscientiously object to involvement. There is nuance here as well, since even when space is made for conscientious objection, empirically, we know that some doctors come to be influenced to accept assisted suicide requests, and that they may reflect on their decision later with some discomfort (Haverkate et al. 2001).

INFORMATION AND KINDS OF PERSONS

Our main claim is that attitudes towards important morally sensitive practices like euthanasia are shaped by the information we receive and the way it is framed. A way to understand the process by which this happens can be modelled on changes in people’s identity resulting from the informational culture. There are two aspects to this process. First, it involves a ‘looping effect’ – the feedback between public conceptualizations and their internalization – and second, it involves the idea of ‘making up people’ – the moral identities that arise out of this process. These slogans were made famous by the philosopher Ian Hacking in a series of publications in the 1980s through until the 2000s, perhaps most famously with his 1995 book on Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), *Rewriting the Soul*. Hackings’ ideas can be usefully drawn upon, and indeed Hacking himself talks about suicide and euthanasia explicitly (though rather briefly and cryptically) in relation to his framework (Hacking 2007, 316).

The main idea is that classifications of people interact with the sorts of people they bring into being, which in turn affects those very classifications. Over time these looping effects manifest changes in the people they create. Now as just described, the position Hacking sets out is general, abstract, and casts an extremely wide net; however, he was interested mainly in the way different kinds of people are created through a process of scientific conceptualization, the way such conceptualizations are filtered in societies (and their recent histories), and the feedback this interaction generates in furthering the whole process. Our interest here is in the way the public understanding of euthanasia, and its framing effects, have impacts on people’s self-conceptions in relation to the practice. Now, to illustrate the framework further using the case of MPD, Hacking writes:

Around 1970 there arose a few sensational paradigm cases of strange behaviour similar to phenomena discussed a century earlier and largely forgotten. A few psychiatrists began to diagnose multiple personality...More and more unhappy people started manifesting these symptoms...First a person had two or three personalities. Within a decade the mean number was seventeen. This fed back into

⁴ See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/17/assisted-dying-euthanasia-netherlands>. Viewed 14 Nov 2024.

the diagnoses, and entered the standard set of symptoms. It became part of the therapy to elicit more and more alters. The psychiatrists cast around for causes, and created a primitive, easily understood, pseudo-Freudian aetiology of early sexual abuse, coupled with repressed memories. Knowing this was the cause, the patients obligingly retrieved the memories. More than that: this became a way to be a person. (Hacking 2007, 296).

Hacking thinks of the products of his framework as ‘moving targets’, to build in the idea that many (though not all) of the kinds of persons and ideas it creates are somewhat ephemeral; some, like MPD, deserve to dissolve away into history.⁵ Applying his idea to our subject yields an interesting view of it as having a ‘wholly modern feel’. He acknowledges the raw fact of it prior to modernity, but the latter imputes

...the gamut of associated meanings, [which are] a product of interaction with statistical and medical sciences, a family of interactions that began around 1825. This modern arrangement of intense feelings and meanings makes us totally confused when we think about ...euthanasia...(Hacking 2007, 315)

Scientific knowledge about suicide is *...indeed true knowledge about the people among us, the suicides and those who meditate self-destruction. They have grown through their lives to conform to the meanings and the stereotypes that the knowledge teaches. But what we know about suicide is not a human universal; it is something that has become true of Westerners rather recently. (Hacking 2007, 316)*

Hacking’s framework includes *classification* of a type, the *people* so typified, the *institutions* that support or promulgate the type, the *knowledge* that accompanies classification (viz., the presumptions that are taught, disseminated, refined, within the context of the institutions), and last, the *experts and professionals* who generate the knowledge, judge its worth, teach, and practice (296-7). We can find correspondences here for the practice of euthanasia: *Classification* refers to the conditions under which *people* with a terminal illness think of themselves. *Institutions* refers to agencies such as dying-with-dignity groups. *Knowledge* refers to information explaining the conditions and norms supporting the practice. The *experts and professionals* include those who explain a practice, typically medical people, and sometimes famous people who access media to do so.⁶

An obvious question at this point is that, whereas Hacking’s framework putatively explains the kinds of *people* classifications give rise to, euthanasia is a kind of *behaviour*. What brings these together? The answer is that attitudes towards euthanasia are attributable to certain kinds of people, arising out of the process identified in the framework. It is simply a condition that certain kinds of people can be in. Or, more simply, possessing such an attitude, including all that goes with it, is a way (among many ways) that a person can *be*. Nevertheless, particularly for those right in the thick of it, such as those with a terminal illness considering their options, it is an all-consuming way to be a person, a way that almost literally provides the overarching organizing principle of their remaining lives. More generally, people disposed positively towards euthanasia (or not) come to be that way via Hacking’s process. Euthanasia has become more common in the last three decades because, like MPD, it has been normalized, and normalization accompanies the making of certain kinds of people. Classification is rule-based,

⁵ Notably, and happily, the DSM dropped MPD in favour of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) in 1994.

⁶ Andrew Denton is an example. (See Ellen Leabeater 2021). And famously author Terry Pratchett. (See Terry Pratchett 2010.)

institutions run on norms, knowledge informs such institutions, experts judge the worth of classifications, and so on. All of this provides the framework within which messaging about euthanasia gives rise to a group of people – especially the ‘professionals’ and ‘experts’ – deciding on its merits.

An important piece in this jigsaw is the concept of identity priming. It is a well-received view in the social sciences that information of a politically sensitive nature – and euthanasia is an example *par excellence* – is processed in a *partisan* way (Zeng, 707). Two salient partisan filters are group identity (say, belonging to a political party, or church group) and relational identity (being related as family member, or friend). So for example we could imagine someone with a terminal illness – let’s call her Stephanie – a recent former atheist who is newly married to Yusuf, a practicing Muslim. Stephanie’s attitude here may well be determined via her identity as loving wife of Yusuf (relational) and partisan of Islam (group). Those relations and groups have normative force – the influence of Yusuf, and the explicit moral precepts of Islam that strictly prohibit euthanasia.

Identity priming brings together two aspects of the discussion. First, it helps explain how information may cue certain moral identities, and over time, how those identities may be shaped. And it explains also how being a certain kind of person cues information about a practice that then guides the person’s actions. This fits with Hacking’s framework. Second, it explains why it is important to frame information in ways that cue moral identities such that this does not close off the possibility of considering, and properly interpreting, counter-information. Identities that consolidate around a fixed view will be more disposed to engaging in motivated reasoning or interpreting the information they receive under a mistaken confirmation bias. Such bias extends even to word meanings where we find, for example, the well-known dual use of the term ‘dignity’ – euthanasia is said both to keep dignity intact and to assault the (Kantian) dignity of human life.

Political persuaders and marketers are of course well aware of the power of identity-construction and regulation of opinion, and this motivates them to frame their messaging accordingly. Indeed, a key mechanism in attitudinal formation is *message framing*, but a consideration of that matter would take us beyond our specific argument here.

CONCLUSION

Modern democratic societies are at something of a crossroads in relation to the question of legalizing euthanasia. Advanced healthcare systems ironically have led to a situation where significantly higher numbers of people (relative to a time several decades ago) have terminal illnesses they correctly predict will end their lives badly, often because of inadequacies in the provision of palliative care. Euthanasia laws are a relatively new and contemporary phenomenon. That their permissibility, and the shape they take, is heavily contested provides a striking example of the problem of disagreement within democracies. Against this backdrop, the ethical formation of attitudes stands as an acute problem of public interest. We need to understand the mechanisms of that formation, how they play out over time, and the kinds of people we become.

In this essay we have proffered a brief account of one such mechanism: the way information-looping effects ‘make’ people and construct moral identities, how these are primed, and how an imbalance in message framing disrupts and distorts correct formation. The normative implication of this is to ensure, through responsible messaging and public information, that

the people we become are such as to partake in the process of deciding on end-of-life decisions in a secure way, unbound by an identity that would distort the right course of action.

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Politics, law and policy: A view from the abstract world

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First, an outline:

A life spent in the world of abstract ideas – mathematics, philosophy, the history of ideas – gives a unique perspective on more practical matters. A focus on principles gives different insights from those of the “practical man” based solely on experience. Euclid brought clarity and certainty to the very practical world of geometry by organising it as a logical structure of theorems provable from self-evident first principles. Surely complex matters of policy, law, ethics and culture would be much simplified if we could understand the applicable basic principles. In this paper I lay out how to think in terms of abstract principles, some of the mistakes so identified (such as thinking in terms of collectivities of people instead of individuals), and the deep positive results that follow (such as the foundation of ethics in the worth of persons).

You will remember the story of Rip Van Winkle. Rip is a villager in the old Dutch regions of the Hudson Valley in the late eighteenth century, with “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour”. One day he goes hunting in the Catskill Mountains and meets a group of mysterious men in old Dutch colonial dress. He joins them drinking and falls asleep. When he awakes next morning and returns to his village he finds that twenty years have passed. Great changes have taken place and Rip himself is barely remembered.

That happened to me too.

I arrived as a first-year undergraduate at Sydney University in 1971 – just as the full force of the Sixties hit, with its libertarian and anti-establishment thought forms. I had a brief period of radical youth (brief as in “blink and you’ll miss it”) – I demonstrated against the Springbok tour of 1971, when South Africa sent a football team with only white players.

I found the world of debate about political, economic, ethical and policy ideas completely confusing. People seemed to take positions very quickly and passionately. On left and right they advanced opposite ideas very confidently, irrespective of how much they knew about the topic.

What they said had a certain initial plausibility. But I could not see what their principles were, or whether their positions were coherent, or how they were replying seriously to opposing ideas. It was all too complicated, I concluded, for a simple philosophy and mathematics student like myself. In any case, I realised I had no political, organisational or persuasive skills whatsoever, so it would be a waste of time for me to try to do anything political. That saved a lot of trouble.

1.1. INTO THE WORLD OF ABSTRACTIONS: EUCLID’S GEOMETRY

Like Rip, I went off somewhere else for a few decades. Not with the ghosts of Dutch settlers in the Catskills, but into a world equally foreign to most people, the realm of abstract ideas. I did a PhD in pure mathematics, in algebra (entitled ‘Homomorphisms between Verma modules and Weyl modules in characteristic p ’). I wrote a book on ancient and medieval ideas of probability and evidence, another on Australian philosophy, one on philosophy of mathematics, one on the foundations of ethics. Fascinating topics, but there is no pretending

they are any immediate use. Like Rip, I had an aversion to all kinds of profitable labour – if “profitable” means useful or lucrative.

Now I am back. The world of profitable labour, of policy, law, politics and economics still looks to me unutterably strange, and more so than in 1971. But this time, I am ready to pick apart some concepts and excoriate a few trends. And for doing that, a background in the abstract world is not a bug, it is a feature.

Useful or not, living in the world of abstract ideas does attune one to certain aspects of reality, aspects that can be lost if one starts empirically from the ground up and just takes on the received ideas of the surrounding culture. Aspects like the reach of very general principles, and necessities.

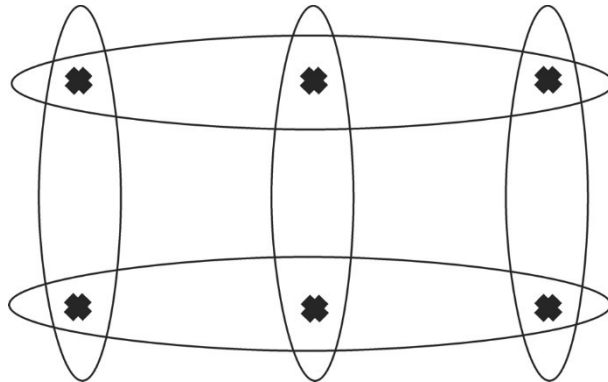
1.2. THE MATHEMATICAL WAY: EUCLID’S GEOMETRY

Mathematicians would like to do things in a certain way. Take geometry, undoubtedly a subject with its uses. Euclid laid out geometry by stating definitions and axioms at the beginning, then proving all the later theorems from the axioms by strict logic. Thus, a circle is defined as a curve *“such that all the straight lines falling upon it from one point among those lying within the figure equal one another”* and one of the axioms is “it is possible to draw a circle with any centre and any radius”. Then the theorems proceed logically in order: Book I proposition 47 is Pythagoras’ theorem, *“The square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is the sum of the squares on the other two sides”*, and by that stage the results are well beyond what is intuitively obvious. So geometry rests on solid foundations; the foundations can be seen and it is clear exactly what they are, and how the more complex truths follow from them.

Practical people might say that Euclid is not much use for working out how far it is to the shops. As Aristotle reports, just before Euclid’s time, people were already complaining that geometry is all very well for perfect circles, but what about real and imperfect wheels and coins? But geometry does apply to those “imperfect” shapes too. If baking paper is cut to fit around the cake tin, and made three times the diameter, it will not fit right around. Pythagoras’s theorem does measure, approximately, how much distance will be saved by cutting a corner. The first four governors of New South Wales were naval officers and hence highly trained in spherical trigonometry, which is how Euclidean geometry adapts to the round shape of the earth; just as well, because despite its size Australia is easy to miss if you head east from the Cape of Good Hope. If you drove here and asked google maps to plan the route, or you came by Uber, a mathematical spatial algorithm plotted your shortest route.

It is true that real-world information is needed for the principles to work on, but the principles explain what to do with the data.

A further advantage of geometry in the style of Euclid is that it attunes those who learn it to the difference between practical matters and the abstract principles behind them. As Plato says, it would be ludicrous to interpret mathematicians’ talk of *actions* like adding numbers, constructing circles and extracting square roots as implying that mathematics is really about *action*. No, it is pure knowledge, he says, *“the knowledge of that which always is, and not of a something which at some time comes into being and passes away.”* One thing that becomes evident in the rarefied air up there in the world of abstractions is the force of necessities. Truths like $2 + 2 = 4$ do not *“come to be and pass away”* because they *have* to be that way. The necessity can be easily seen in this example:



The six crosses form both two rows of 3, and three columns of 2. So it is possible to see (literally see) not only that $2 \times 3 = 3 \times 2$, but that it *must* be so. Pure necessity is made visible.

I would like to see necessities like that recognised more widely, including in debate about policy, law etc. Will abstractions, necessities and attention to principles help there?

1.3. RETURN TO REALITY

And so, after forty years or so in the abstract world, I came back and cast my eye over what was going on in what is sometimes laughingly called the “real world”. It looked strange, even stranger than in 1971.

The younger generation inhabit “social media” which causes them to have short attention spans and little diversity of thought.

There is a whole industry of leaders of institutions tearfully apologising for things other people had done decades earlier.

Various philosophical mistakes apparently finished off in the fifth century BC have been resuscitated under the name of postmodernism and are all the rage in literary studies.

On the plus side, people do not blow smoke in your face in restaurants any more, and there is a solid consensus that we baby boomers were doing such a good job of running everything that we should be paid a lot of money to keep doing it.

One thing has not changed. Debate about political, economic, legal and ethical issues proceeds with the same heat and the same lack of attention to principles as ever. Important questions like abortion and euthanasia are fought out with competing slogans like pro-life and pro-choice, without the principles behind those slogans being laid out and examined. The way debates proceed is the anti-principled one perfected, if that is the right word, in the law of English-speaking countries: hired champions with expensive training in rhetorical skills battle it out in court with reference to a lot of cases, and a jury of twelve people randomly chosen votes the result – without being allowed to do their own research.

Mathematics *could* be done that way, though I would not advise it. Classical Chinese mathematics *was* something like that. Matteo Ricci, the first Jesuit missionary in China around 1600, reported:

Nothing pleased the Chinese as much as the volume on the Elements of Euclid. This perhaps was due to the fact that no people esteem mathematics as highly as the Chinese, despite their method of teaching, in which they propose all kinds of propositions but without demonstrations ... The result of such a system is that anyone is free to exercise his wildest imagination relative to mathematics, without offering a definite proof of anything. In Euclid, on the contrary, they recognized something different, namely, propositions presented in order and so definitely proven that even the most obstinate could not deny them.”¹

So Ricci and his Chinese collaborator Xu Guangqi translated Euclid into Chinese.

This time, when I saw debate on practical matters proceeding as ever, with everyone “free to exercise their wildest imagination” about ethical and policy questions, “without offering a definite proof of anything,” I decided to show the value of abstract principles.

By way of explaining how a more principled approach to policy matters would work, I will look at one way to go wrong with abstractions, one widespread wrong principle, and one right principle that has not come into focus.

1.4. GOING WRONG WITH ABSTRACTIONS

Political argument is still given to clashes of free-floating one-sided ideological packages that do not gel with reality or engage with alternatives. Around 2000 I became disturbed by the mismatch between the well-known extreme levels of violence and poor health in remote Australian indigenous communities, and the obfuscatory Latinate discourse of city dwellers about “reconciliation”, “colonialism”, “disadvantage”, “sovereignty not ceded”, “intergenerational trauma” and “self-determination”. This is a real example:

“the consequences of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and systemic racism continue to cause enduring physical and mental harm and perpetuate inequities relating to the social determinants of health.”²

Those abstractions are devices for not thinking. If Anglo-Saxon words were used instead, like “people are hitting one another every night”, the picture would be clearer.

Did the 250,000 people who walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 “for reconciliation” wish to know about Skull, Walker and Ruben’s 1997 article on ‘Malnutrition and microcephaly in Australian Aboriginal children’?³ I resolved to be on the lookout for better-grounded thinking on indigenous affairs.

¹ *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci, 1583-1610*, trans. L.J. Gallagher (Random House, New York, 1953), pp. 235, 476.

² <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Family-Matters-Report-2023.pdf>, p 46.

³ Susan A. Skull, Alan C. Walker and Alan R. Ruben, Malnutrition and microcephaly in Australian Aboriginal children, *Medical Journal of Australia* 166 (1997), 412–4.

What sort of principled thinking might be better? You could do worse than to start with Thomas Hobbes, the political philosopher of the seventeenth century. He says that the first condition of civilisation is the control of interpersonal violence. In a famous passage, he writes,

*it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war is of every man against every man ... In such condition there are ... no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*⁴

He is right. With the levels of interpersonal violence in remote communities, there is little chance of making progress by supplying resources for education and health. We will just keep scratching our heads as to why “Closing the gap” is not happening.

It could be useful to add to that principles taken from human rights. Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is:

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

When we leave work, we walk out of our workplaces confidently expecting life, liberty and security on the way home. There is a system that protects us. People in remote communities deserve the same rights.

Then I looked for someone – someone better informed than myself – who was saying those sort of things in indigenous affairs already. In 2009 I attended a speech by the Warlpiri leader Bess Price⁵, which did say that. I thus supported her as she became a minister in the Northern Territory government.

In cases like these, a principled approach will not always deliver exact policy prescriptions, since that involves some experience of the situation on the ground and what policies have been found to work. (That is the same as google maps’ algorithm needing information about roads.) How exactly to make remote communities safer needs thinking about in the light of many facts, for example about cultural differences. However, a principled approach *will* explain what counts as success, so we know which direction is forward and can do honest evaluation and accountability. Money spent is not a criterion of success. Lower rates of hospital admission for head trauma are. *“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”*

1.5. THE COLLECTIVIST ERROR

Next, one wrong principle.

As I said, when I came back to the real world from the realm of abstractions, I found a pile of confusions which I concluded were not just *my* confusions. One that I kept seeing, time and again, is what I would call the *collectivist error*. It means praising and blaming collectivities

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, bk 1 ch. 13.

⁵ Bess Nungarrayi Price, Inaugural Peter Howson lecture, 3 Dec 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120204195843/http://www.bennelong.com.au/conferences/lecture2009/howson-lecture-2009.php>

or groups of people, when praise and blame can only attach to agents with intentions, that is, individuals.

We can learn a lot from looking at one of the worst examples, the anti-semitism that has disfigured many centuries of Christian history. It affected even as smart a person as Thomas Aquinas. He was once asked by the Countess of Flanders whether she could confiscate money from Jewish moneylenders. His reply is even-handed and says that the same conditions apply to Christian moneylenders, but he does start with this principle as if it is agreed by everyone: *“as the laws say, the Jews by reason of their fault are sentenced to perpetual servitude.”*⁶ The “fault” he means is the crucifixion of Jesus. The idea that Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus has been a long-running thread in Christian anti-semitism over many centuries and was used to motivate and justify pogroms. Besides being morally revolting, it is conceptually incoherent to blame a people for what certain individuals did in 33AD. Guilt cannot be collective, it cannot apply to people other than those who did whatever it is that was wrong or at least acted in support of those who did. It cannot be inherited. Someone as smart as Thomas Aquinas should have understood that.

Unfortunately, the idea of collective guilt has not disappeared with medieval antisemites. We have seen plenty of collective blaming since last October 7th.

A similar mistake of collectivist thinking is “affirmative action” policies that mechanically apply membership of a disadvantaged group to give an individual in that group an advantage. A year ago the US Supreme Court rightly struck down US college race-based affirmative action admissions policies. It makes no sense either statistically or morally to give possibly privileged members of some collectivity an advantage solely on the basis that the average or majority of that collectivity is disadvantaged. Australian practice, I am glad to say, has been better. Australian universities typically have Access schemes where any applicant for entry can tell their story of disadvantage. Their membership of a generally disadvantaged group might be some evidence of that, but it must bear on their individual case. That is as it should be.

To take a final example, some people believe very passionately that “Taiwan is an integral part of the People’s Republic of China.” That claim is not just false but meaningless – as physicists say about really confused theories, “not even wrong”. Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China are de facto separate and functioning states, and there is no collectivity that they could be an integral part of.

Now, it is quite true that humans are social beings and organise themselves into groups, like families, companies, churches and nations, to get things done. There is a reason why a company or a school can own property and can sue and be sued. Loyalty to a group is natural, up to a point. But it still makes no sense to *blame* a company. The company’s policies are decided and implemented by certain individuals with certain knowledge, who are to be blamed or praised for what the company does, in various degrees according to their influence on decisions.

It is also true that some people are born with disadvantages which they share with a group of other people, such as fetal alcohol syndrome. It is appropriate to act on that and to examine the historical and present-day causes why some groups are especially affected. But that is still

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, Letter to Margaret of Flanders, <https://thomistica.net/letter-to-margaret-of-flanders>

to analyse the problem based on causes affecting individuals, which is very different from blaming or compensating collectivities.

1.6. ETHICS AND THE WORTH OF PERSONS

Now let us turn to something more positive – determining what the principles of ethics are.

Ethics is a topic particularly full of positions talking past one another and failing to get a grip on principles. Books on business or medical ethics typically start with a quick run-through of different views on the nature of ethics – utilitarianism, deontology, divine command theory, natural law, virtue theory and others – and conclude that it is hard to decide but it does not matter in practice.

Of those standard positions, utilitarianism is interesting because it *does* derive ethics from a clear principle. It says that an action is right when it increases the stock of happiness – in a catchphrase, it is for the “*greatest happiness of the greatest number*”. That sounds good – who isn’t in favour of more happiness? Unfortunately it is the wrong principle: which is clear from its consequences. For example, it says that you should sacrifice one person unjustly for the sake of the good of all, because that increases the total happiness – in a classic example, a sheriff in a racist southern US town should execute an innocent black to prevent a riot that would create havoc (“*one man should die for the people*,” as the Sanhedrin put it in deciding to get rid of Jesus). But worse than that, in such a case, utilitarianism gives no weight to justice *at all* – justice itself is not about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. So, according to utilitarianism, justice does not count unless it happens to have good consequences in a particular case.

Who, then, has better principles for ethics? Jesus answered that question, or almost. In Matthew 22 Jesus is asked:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”

And note especially what comes next:

“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

What does “hang on” mean? It can only mean one thing, the same as in Euclid: deducibility from. This is Jesus’s “Euclidean moment”, where he lays down axioms and invites the derivation of theorems. And plainly a lot does follow from loving one’s neighbour – once Jesus has laid down, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, that everyone counts as neighbour. Any kind of deliberate harm is ruled out, for a start, which covers a great deal of ethics.

Jesus talks about “the Law”, but from a modern ethical perspective we can ask: why *should* we love one another? What is it about people that makes that worth doing, that gives it some point?

Jesus had something to say about that too: something that modern readers of the Bible tend to skip over as a platitude, but which is unique to the Jewish tradition. Matthew 10:31 says, “*You are more valuable than many sparrows*”.

What is it, then, about you that makes you valuable – that makes your survival, and what happens to you, matter absolutely? Why is the death of a human a tragedy, while the explosion of a lifeless galaxy is just a firework?

It must be something about the special properties that humans have, which lifeless galaxies do not have. A traditional answer is that one main feature distinguishes humans – rationality. “*Humans’ excellence*,” says Saint Augustine, “*consists in the fact that God made them to His own image by giving them an intellectual soul which raises them above the beasts of the field.*”⁷ It is a good start – rationality really is exceptional in the universe and very special – but as an answer it is too simple. Shakespeare has a quick sketch that suggests some complexity: “*What a piece of work is man*,” says Hamlet. “*How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god ...*” Hamlet is right that possession of such properties as reason, apprehension, the capacity to act freely, emotional structure and individuality confer on humans a moral weight, a nobility, a dignity or inherent worth, that makes what happens to humans important in an absolute sense.⁸

Notice though that these concepts are far from ethics in the sense of what to do: moral action, dilemmas, rights and duties, virtues. The worth of persons is not itself about actions, it is about the nature of humans.

But it does have implications for action, in something the same way as Jesus’s “*Love your neighbour*” is not about action but has implications for action. It explains why murder is wrong – murder involves the deliberate destruction of an infinitely valuable person. Murder is wrong because of that, not because it subtracts from the greatest happiness of the greatest number or violates a command of God or society. Killing in self-defence – we may have to consider it because it involves a conflict between the survival of two persons. To take a completely different kind of example, a right to education follows from the role of rationality in giving persons worth. Rationality is, in Aristotle’s language, a perfection of humans, so they ought to be given the means to exercise their rationality, which is what education is.

And so on. Any ethical matter involving actions towards people, which is most of ethics, will be seen to involve essentially the worth of persons.

1.7. CONCLUSION

Plato advised that the guardians of the state, those who would be rulers of society (and, as we now say, “*set strategic directions*”) that they ought to start with a long training in mathematics. That would ensure that they understood principles, necessity and the connections of ideas. They would look behind plausible flights of rhetoric to evaluate genuine reasons. He was right.

At this late stage we may have to let off humanist scholars with a minimal amount of school mathematics and look to something else as a training in proof and necessity. Perhaps logic. But in debating policy, there is no substitute for a return to principles and necessities.

⁷ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, bk 6 ch 12.

⁸ More fully, in James Franklin, *The Worth of Persons: The Foundations of Ethics*, Encounter Books, New York, 2022

My advice to anyone who wants to maintain the practice of policy discussion via rhetoric based on cherry-picked cases is the same as Lucy's in the comic strip *Peanuts* whenever she's asked for psychiatric advice: Snap out of it.

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