

Third Isaac Armitage Lecture

Ethics and the Mission of Anglican Education

Shore School, 9 November, 2007

Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking Shore's Headmaster, Dr Timothy Wright and its Chaplain, the Reverend Matthew Pickering, for extending to me their invitation to present the Armitage Lecture for 2007. As some of you will know, St James Ethics Centre and Shore are related through a common connection with St James' Anglican Church, King Street, Sydney.

The precursor to the establishment of Shore was the establishment of St James' Grammar School which had been founded by Bishop Broughton in 1838 but only opened some years later. Originally, the St James' Grammar School was housed in the parochial school – and the clergy at St James' were actively involved in the life of the school. Indeed, Thomas Druitt – who succeeded Bodenham as Headmaster of the school – was ordained in Sydney, by Broughton, and assisted in services at St James', King Street. Following government resumption of the School's land, in Elizabeth and Castlereagh Streets, the funds provided by way of compensation were used for the erection of:

A school of the highest type, including departments of education for all classes of the community, in which the teaching shall be throughout in accordance with the principles of the Church of England, and which shall be placed under the direction of a governing body of clergy and laity to be elected by the Synod, the Bishop of the Diocese being ex-officio President.

For those who are interested, a vestige of the original stonework for St James' School can still be seen just outside the doors to the crypt at St James' in King Street.

For our part, the Centre was established by the parish in 1989 – an initiative that grew out of the parish's response to a sermon preached at St James' by then Archbishop Donald Robinson during which he challenged the parish to find new ways in which to be relevant to the community it served. Like Shore, the Ethics Centre later took on a life independent of the parish of St James. Alas, there was no endowment fund to help us on our way, with the consequence that we experience an institutional 'near death experience' with disturbing regularity. The fact that we continue to exist is, to my mind, a constant reminder of the power of providence.

Tonight's lecture is, for me, something of an exploration – as I move from territory with which I am entirely familiar onto ground that is, quite frankly, most challenging for me to traverse. Having had the good fortune to read Andrew Cameron's and Grant Maple's earlier lectures, I have been struck by their great learning and erudition –

My plan is to begin my journey by outlining a basic framework for understanding the concept of 'ethics' and its relationship to our particular form of being – human being. From there, I wish to offer some remarks about Anglican education – both in terms of

1. Epistemology
2. Aesthetics
3. Ontology, and
4. Metaphysics.

'Ethics' is best understood in a similar way – as a label attached to a particular question. Plato ascribes the question to Socrates which comes to us in the familiar form:

What ought one to do?

There are three features of this question that are worth noting.

First, the question encompasses all forms of human conduct. That is, Socrates' question is not limited to what might be called 'Capital E' ethical questions. Examples of these include questions about: euthanasia, the destructive use of embryos for research, capital punishment, what constitutes just war etc. Rather, Socrates' question extends to everything that a person does – including those mundane acts that constitute the bulk of daily life.

Second, Socrates' question can be distinguished from the first four in that it is a practical question. Socrates recognises that life 'presses in' on us and that this requires us to choose and to act (rather than defer decisions indefinitely). However, Socrates' question is practical in a second sense – that it assumes that whatever we decide we ought to do will be, in fact, what we actually do. Socrates (and many others) would think it very odd that any person should be certain that they ought to do 'x' but continue constantly to do 'y'.

Third, Socrates' question employs the impersonal pronoun 'one' – rather than 'I'. The effect of this is that we are prompted to ask what any person ought to do in relevantly similar circumstances.

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or force within the world. 'Good' and 'Evil' perform a much more mundane function in ethics. A core assumption, giving rise to the question of 'good' and 'evil', is that in most cases where human beings are given a free choice between options, then they will choose that option that they think to be 'good' (or at least better). Indeed, it is probably an axiom of human nature that we prefer what we deem to be 'good'. What we disagree about is the definition of what is 'good' (or what should be

A comprehensive ethical framework must therefore include an espoused set of values and principles. Values order our preferences and principles regulate the means by which these preferences are realised. Indeed, it is the relationship

In making this claim, I do not think that we can take Socrates to have been making the relatively trivial claim that life would be better if people thought about what they do. There is certainly something in this idea – my experience is that some of the greatest damage caused to individuals and organisations arises not from the actions of ‘bad’ people. Rather, basically good people wreak havoc by acting without thinking about what they do. They stand in thrall of ‘unthinking custom and practice’ and if challenged to explain the inexplicable will simply say, “Well, everybody does it” or, “That’s just the way we do things around here”. The failure to reflect – to tie one’s proposed course of action back to an explicit set of values and principles is one of the greatest threats to the possibility of living an ethical life. However, I think that Socrates has in mind a deeper point.

I believe that Socrates’ real point is to draw attention to what is distinctive of our particular form of being – human being. Human beings have a capacity to transcend instinct and desire and to make conscious ethical choices. Although other creatures may have this ability, there is (as far as I know) no clear evidence of this capacity. Indeed, I would argue that it is the capacity to make conscious, ethical choices that is most distinctive of our form of being – human being. If this is so, then those who fail to examine their lives also fail to engage in the fullness of their humanity – a diminished life that, in a very real sense, is not a life worth living for a human being.

The trouble is that it is possible to live an entirely conventional, moral life without ever thinking too much about what you do or why you do it. If you ask me if I would rather live in a world in which people are routinely kind to each other simply as a matter of habit – or one in which there is great cruelty, then I would opt for kindness. However, for me this purely moral world would be something less than I think we should aspire to as humans.

It was for the sake of this idea of an examined, ethical life that Socrates chose to die. Condemned of impiety towards the Gods (heresy) and corrupting the youth of Athens, Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy. The Athenians hoped that Socrates would choose exile over death. However, Socrates chose to abide by the laws of his city and accept the penalty imposed – requiring the Athenians to confront the consequences of their choices. Plato would have us believe that Socrates’ death was an easy thing – a kind of creeping death moving up from the toes until reaching

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have read some of the great theologians of the past – and have probably incorporated many of their simpler ideas. The views I offer are probably crude and wrong-headed. However, they are the best I can do at present.

In most circumstances, I would avoid venturing further. However, I am at a loss to know what I could say about the mission of Anglican schools if I do not say something about Christianity and the Anglican Church.

From time to time, I meet Christians who tell me that they have passed beyond faith to a state of certain knowledge. They tell me that they 'know' Jesus in the same way that they know me. Part of me envies such souls for their ease in relationship to God. For my part, I remain stuck at the level of faith. With this comes all manner of doubt – a condition that constantly pits my reason against a deeper (but only occasional) experience of the numinous. In the last couple of years, I have found myself able to reconcile reason and instinct as various moments of understanding have come to me – often at night, often in a state that some would call reflection, and that others might call prayer.

In any case, I have come to a position in which I feel that I can understand the nature of Christ and the relationship of the Gospel to the rest of the Bible. In order to explain this, I need to offer you my rather simplistic account of everything from Genesis to the present. In attempting to do this, I do not mean to offer the equivalent of a three-minute version of *Hamlet*. I know that the things about which I speak are more complex and that I will not do justice to them. However, this is where I am up to in my thinking.

Creation

It seems to me that until there was Man there was no creation. What we see, in Genesis, is a process of 'extension' in which all that is, in God, is extended in order to create the heavens, the earth, time, the fishes, the animals and so on.

It is only when God makes Man in His image that a true act of creation occurs. Why do I say this? Because, God makes Man in His own image. My friends amongst the

(perhaps already a corpse) would have become ritually impure – rendering them unable to discharge their duties until cleansed. I do not think that Jesus sets up the Priest and Levite as ‘straw men’ – only to knock them down. Instead, he wants His audience to recognise how much is at stake for each of them – and for the community they serve. It is only then that the action of the Samaritan can be seen in its revelatory light. Jesus’ contemporaries would have known that the decision to pass on by would not have been a simple one – even if ultimately mistaken. As the scribe observes, the priest and the Levite have ‘kept the law’ – or so it seems until the point of Jesus’ teaching becomes clear. Beyond the immediate point of the teaching, what Jesus highlights, in this parable and in others, is that although we are given the capacity to transcend instinct and desire, in order to make ethical choices, we are required to do so in conditions of radical uncertainty. The human predicament is at its most challenging not when we are asked to choose between good and evil, right and wrong, but when the choice is ‘good’ versus ‘good’, ‘right’ versus ‘right’.

Jesus’ cross bears many meanings. I would include amongst them its role as a powerful symbol for the genuine ethical dilemma. No religion, no moral code can give direction when the choice is between equally weighted values and principles. At that point, we are alone in making our decision. In the fullness of His humanity, Jesus, knew how tempting it is to lay down the burden of responsibility associated with the exercise of free will. Jesus knew that to seek refuge from uncertainty in the arms of the hedonist (let’s get drunk and hope that the complexity has gone away when we sober up) was no better than to surrender to the siren call of the authoritarian who is only too willing to tell us what to do and how to do it. To adopt either course is to deny the foundation of our human being. Angels have certainty – but they were not made in the image of God. God loves Mankind because we are of Him and apart from Him – blessed and cursed with free will in conditions of radical uncertainty. Jesus did not come to show us how to abandon our humanity – but how to live it.

I think it no accident that Jesus chose to teach in a manner that invites us to think for ourselves – to look within and to find the deeper truths embedded in his teaching and example.

Yet, Jesus is quite clear that it is not enough that we think or feel in a particular fashion. Our piety is not enough – it must be expressed in action. Many of Jesus’ stories promote conduct that, at first hearing, would have struck his audience as counter-intuitive, if not conventionally ‘wrong’. And then there is Jesus himself. He might have sat on a hill and preached. Instead, he was conventionally ‘wrong’.

Developments during the reign of Henry VIII seem to have proceeded (at least from his perspective) on the basis that the break with Rome should be the minimum required to secure his preferred outcomes. Yet, despite Henry's tendency to conservatism, I really think that a more radical set of ideas were unleashed by the likes of Wycliffe, Ridley, Latimer and of course, Cranmer.

Thomas Cranmer has not been kindly served by history. He is often remembered for his acquiescence to Henry's schemes – often involving the brutal treatment of people who had formerly been Cranmer's friends and patrons. However, there is something in the life of Cranmer that, to this day, infuses the spirit of the Anglican Church at its best.

Although, I know that some will see a weakness in what I consider to be a strength, I think that the Anglican church is especially well served by its 'open texture' and the absence of any overwhelming force for orthodoxy. I am not so naive as to think that the break with Rome was primarily driven by spiritual concerns. However, this should not detract from the fact that deep issues of principle were at stake – not least of which was that ordinary people should have direct access to the scriptures which should have an authority at least equal to that of any man.

The challenges to the Anglican Communion are as great today as they have ever been. However, I would hope that there endures something of the old regard for the integrity of those who disagree sincerely and in good conscience. Although, Cranmer became an out-and-out Protestant after Henry's death, we should not imagine that he cast off every aspect of his Roman Catholic heritage. In my view, he imbued the Anglican church with one of the enduring gems mined from the earlier dispensation – the idea of the supremacy of a well formed and informed conscience.

Despite recent attempts to undo Aquinas's work, it remains the case that even within the Catholic Church no person – not even a Pope – can claim sovereignty over the individual's conscience. This is not to say that a person may do whatever he or she pleases. The well formed and informed conscience needs to give proper regard to church teachings. For Protestants, the conscience should be informed by a deep engagement with Holy Scripture. However, in the end, each person must decide,

And that is what he did. As Foxe recounts

Christ. I must confess that I have to restrain myself from judging such people hypocrites.

I reject the idea that ethical people are warm and cuddly types destined to be 'roadkill' on the highway of life. Instead, I think of ethical people as strong, courageous, nimble and creative (just to name a few qualities). Ethical people should never accept the world 'as a given'. Each of us has the capacity to engage with the world in a creative way – finding 'inflection' points that allow us to act as we 'ought' and not merely as we think we 'must'.

In my opinion, the Anglican school should be an environment in which students develop their capacity for conscientious action. This objective is achieved, in part, by their education in the traditional curriculum. There is little point in being a committed ethical agent if you cannot read – or if you have not mastered the basic forms of

Christians believe in a universal ethic of love based on the belief that all people are made in the image of God – and not just those within our immediate circle of familiarity. Thus the founding injunction that the money provided to Shore be used to establish “departments of education for all classes of the community”. I think it important that Anglican schools reach out to the widest possible community – enabling their students to learn, in the most immediate way, the truth of our common humanity.

One of the most significant challenges to fl

It has been a great privilege to deliver this lecture. I offer thanks for your engagement and forbearance.

Dr Simon Longstaff is Executive Director of St James Ethics Centre

ii Different religions may disagree about core issues such as the intrinsic nature of God and God's relationship to human beings while sharing a common morality. That is, contending religions will often promote identical values and principles for application in daily life. This observation has struck a number of writers as being noteworthy. For example, C.S. Lewis makes much of this in his book, *The Abolition of Man*. Indeed, a broad spectrum of opinion (ranging from people such as Lewis to secular communitarians) argues against relativism and in favour of a view that some things really are good and bad (evil). I share this view. Although human beings may choose amongst a broad set of potential values, that choice is 'bounded' by objective limitations – most importantly concerning what allows for any individual or community to sustain their life. Those who claim that violence, force or fraud are 'good' ultimately fail – often crumbling from within. We should not be surprised that those things that tend to destroy or diminish the life of the individual or community have been regarded traditionally as 'evil'.

iii I am indebted to the Reverend Martin Robinson, Rector of St Martin's, Killara, for drawing to my attention a complementary narrative structure for understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This is that the relationship between God and human beings should be seen as a 'love story' in which God's love goes unrequited by His beloved, the mass of humanity. Rather than responding in kind, human beings are feckless and unfaithful. Yet, the story of the Bible is one in which God does not give up on the relationship – persisting in the offer of a loving relationship through 'thick and thin' – ultimately culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is, I think, a more constructive analogy than the one that I have used. However, the central point is the same.

iv There are various accounts of the death of Thomas Cranmer. Although varying slightly in terms of detail, they all confirm the major details concerning Cranmer's last minutes and in particular his conscious commitment of his right hand to the flames. A selection of these accounts can be found collected in, **Notes and Queries** H. B. C. s1-IX (235): 392., Oxford Journals.

v Although I do not 'flesh out' a substantive morality in this lecture, I think that it is indeed possible to do so. Indeed, I think that the concept of human being that I attempt to outline – and its relationship to the idea of an ethical (examined) life offers a very promising starting point. It seems to me that anyone adopting the core idea would then be led (almost directly) to embrace a number of values and principles that would include: the exercise of moral courage, acting according to a well formed and informed conscience, love, hope, and so on. To demonstrate the deep connection that I have asserted is beyond the scope of this lecture – a piece of work that I may turn to at a later date.