

Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding

Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding:
Merton's *Conjectures* and the Value of Work

By

Barry L. Padgett

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P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

In March, 2006 the Ethics and Social Justice Center of Bellarmine University, in collaboration with its Thomas Merton Center, hosted a conference on "Merton and Moral Reflection in the Professions," exploring the implications of Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* for professional morality. The conference drew a good number of participants from a variety of walks of life, including law, education, healthcare, and business, among other vocations.

The conference was inspired by the real-world story of Dr. Linda Peeno, whose experience as a medical reviewer for a major health insurance corporation is depicted in the movie *Damaged Care*. A pun on "managed care," the film portrays ethical dilemmas which Dr. Peeno and other healthcare professionals like her encounter on a daily basis. When she meets with a frustrated plaintiff's attorney and discovers that some of her decisions are not what they seem, their subsequent conversation turns to the contemplative moral insights of Thomas Merton. Finding spiritual direction and encouragement from his writings, Linda became a moral protester of the healthcare industry. She has testified before the Congress of the United States, has appeared on numerous television shows, given keynote addresses and conference presentations, and her story was recounted in Michael Moore's film, *Sicko*. Dr. Peeno discovered that many professionals like herself have found guidance and inspiration in Merton's writings. Our conference became a forum for many of their real-world stories.

The conference held at Bellarmine further confirmed the relevance of Merton's insights for contemporary times. Dr. Peeno's experience is not unique, but one of many that finds both comfort and confrontation in the writings of Thomas Merton. Like the old seminary saying that a minister should, "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comforted," Merton's writings continue to offer solace during troubling times. But he also continues to challenge during times when one would otherwise be content and self-congratulatory from the comfort of accomplishments.

Such is the danger of professional life. Work has such an important role in our lives; it bears a standard by which we measure our success. It is a major component of self-actualization and well-being. However, our jobs can also be fraught with ethical conflicts and ambiguities; these

become sources of frustration and alienation. What is needed is a transformation, a renewal of our professional lives and the institutional contexts in which we operate. To use a religious metaphor, we need a conversion experience that will humanize the alienating aspects of work and professions. I argue that Merton's call to contemplation is a means by which this conversion and subsequent transformation can take place. His reflections in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* offer one the confidence to embark on a deeply spiritual journey that seeks to transcend the mountainous peaks which would divide the personal from the professional, and his insights give one hope that through reasoned moral action the negative features our organizations and workplaces can be transformed.

Contemplation, as Merton understands it, facilitates the maturation of character and lays the foundation for wisdom. Self-knowledge, which consists not only of critical self-reflection but also having a sense of one's purpose, constitutes the wisdom that Merton demonstrated on various issues, a wisdom rooted in contemplation. From *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* alone one can sense Merton's grasp of the big picture: regarding war, Christian social action, his views about communism and freedom, and his discussions of interfaith dialogue. Possessing self-understanding, coupled with an expansive and inclusive view of human reality, Merton exhibited tremendous leadership on these and other issues.

Leadership involves the use of moral imagination to create an environment in which open discussions about ethical conflicts can take place, especially without the fear (much less reality) of retribution or being ostracized. Moral imagination enables one to see that, without self-knowledge, a grasp of the big picture, or a unity of purpose, one is simply practicing a logic of failure, allowing an artificial separation of competitiveness and the potential for self-gain to override moral sensitivities. While excessive individualism and competitiveness may appear to lead to genuine success in the short term, in the long run these attitudes tend not to be conducive to well-being for individuals or the communities they inhabit.

Thomas Merton, though a cloistered monk, possessed an uncanny sense of self-awareness and moral imagination. His life and writings have inspired countless persons on their spiritual journeys. Yet, while people have looked to Merton for guidance on spiritual issues, the implications of his thought for several other areas of life are also open to exploration. Moreover, for persons who consider all other facets of life in light of their spiritual commitments, Merton's perspective is even more central to integrating the conflicting demands of modern life, particularly work, into a holistic perspective. Such was the case for Dr. Peeno, who recognized

the ethical import of her daily job and, at that moment, realized that she stood at a crossroad: to carry on as usual, complying to the demands of those in high rank and power, or to exercise transformative leadership aimed at higher values and goals. Like Dr. Peeno, each day many professionals struggle to navigate the difficult ethical dilemmas that they confront in the workplace, moral conflicts that education did little to prepare them for, and for which they receive little support from the organizations that they serve.

This book is an exploration of these and other moral problems of professional life. The investigation begins with an examination of the meaning of work and a brief introduction to Thomas Merton, and then turns to the application of ethical theories to professions. From the perspective of several moral theories, the next step is to examine contemporary ethical challenges in professions, the sorts of dilemmas professionals encounter daily. The expedition then goes into more dense and less charted territory, the importance of moral imagination (in contrast to ethical theorizing) to one's moral compass. In complex terrain and in difficult circumstances, however, a compass is of little use without a map. So this exploration then turns to questions of leadership and, beyond edification of isolated individuals, the task of improving professions for everyone. Along the way, insights from Merton will serve as guideposts. I cannot overstress the metaphor of an expedition here. Although I may make an occasional controversial claim and explore various directions, I do not arrive at any fixed destination or major conclusion. As poet Frederick Smock states in his book, *Pax Intransigentibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton*, "Writing is an act of discovery for the writer—neither the outcome nor its meaning can be predetermined." This book is an initial step on a journey to discover the implications of Merton's insights for moral issues which arise in the context of our working lives. It is dedicated to all persons who share that journey.

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I am deeply indebted to many people for the privilege of pursuing this topic. First and foremost, I am extremely grateful to Dr. Paul Pearson, director and archivist of the Merton Center at Bellarmine University, for his knowledge, wise council and sense of humor as I struggled with many of the ideas in Merton's writings as well as my own. I am also indebted to Lauren Titus, MFA, who read the manuscript several times, offering assistance with technical aspects, excellent critical comments, and many suggestions for improvement. Many others contributed to this work, in large and small ways. I am grateful to Drs. Mil Thompson, Evanthia Speliotis, Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty and especially to Frederick Smock for tolerating my occasional interruptions and impromptu discussions. These close colleagues have done their best to improve my perspective and articulation of ideas in this book; any misunderstandings or errors that remain are solely mine. Bellarmine University generously granted a sabbatical to me in order to complete this project.

I am grateful to Andy Necessian and the helpful staff of Cambridge Scholars Press for their assistance in bringing this project to fruition. Some publishers of professional ethics literature have only passing interest in Merton studies; some publishers of Merton scholarship have little interest in the area of applied philosophy. Cambridge Scholars Press expressed an interest in both, allowing this promising direction of research to move forward.

The author also acknowledges the following publishers for permission to use these sources. The photograph of Thomas Merton used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Citations from Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* are reprinted with permission of Random House. Portions of Chapter Two were published by the author as, "The Importance of Cultural History" in *The Remnant Review* (Vol. 4, no. 1, 2008), journal of the Remnant Trust, Inc. Portions of Chapter Three were published by the author as a review article, "Making Good: How Young People Cope With Moral Dilemmas at Work," in the journal, *Business Ethics Quarterly* (Vol. 18, no. 2, April 2008), journal of the Society for Business Ethics.

I also wish to thank my father, who taught me the value of work; my mother, who instilled in me a capacity for contemplative reflection; and thanks to Kim, Martin and Grahame, who tolerated my "busy-ness" and contributed in no small way to my desire to improve the nature of work. There is a famous quotation from American Founder, John Adams: "I must study politics and war so that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy . . . in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music. . . ." In the spirit of Adams, I study philosophy and work in order that future generations may more closely approach the ideal of making work good.

CHAPTER ONE

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND THOMAS MERTON

A few years ago, administrators of the university where I work asked me to teach a senior-level leadership course with the title, "The Value of Work." Although the title struck me as problematic from a philosopher's point of view (not to mention from a student's point of view—who would want to take a class with that title?), I was very pleased to have been given this opportunity. It was a topic that I had been thinking about for a long time. Growing up on a small farm in rural Alabama informally introduced me to work at a very young age. I had the usual chores, everything from caring for our crops and farm animals to picking up rocks out of the pasture. (Acres of sloped hillside, it seemed to grow rocks almost as well as it did grass). Midway through high school I received the formal introduction to work, first at a feed mill and later as a busboy. After high school graduation I joined the workforce on a full-time basis. During those years of early adulthood, I occasionally changed jobs, some blue-collar and some white-collar, but it wasn't until my mid-twenties that I recognized the advantages of pursuing a college education. Although my father generously helped me to achieve my educational goals (which also changed occasionally), I always continued to work, at least part time, from my entrance into college all the way through graduate school. During my history of employment, I'd seen people happy and successful in their career achievements, and I'd seen people miserable and alienated by their daily jobs. An introspective awareness and an outward recognition of circumstances influenced my own sense of direction and led me to pursue a terminal degree that would allow me to maximize my chances of happiness and success in a career and—perhaps even more—to avoid the horrors of being miserably alienated for most of my adult life. So I was pleased at the invitation to teach a course on "The Value of Work," because it was a topic that had interested me for years, and not just in an intellectual sense. I had lived it, I was still living it; and I wasn't alone. Most adults struggle to resolve the value of work in their lives. Thus in planning for the course, I discussed it with many people, especially friends and family. My father-in-law, a paradigm of a blue-collar entrepreneur,

gave me his thoughts on the subject of work. "I knew from the very first day," he quipped in Mark Twain fashion, "that I wasn't going to like it."

The sentiment of his expression was familiar to me. It captures not only the lack of fulfillment that many find in employment but also the demoralization that work can inflict upon an individual. Yet it also indicates the opposite, the ideal of meaningful work, of work providing an outward manifestation of who we are on the inside. There is a hope, a desire for work to be a source of personal well-being and self-actualization rather than a source of frustration, degradation or just "working for the weekend." This hope was particularly expressed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and continues to this day in themes of social justice. It finds expression from the philosophical writings of a young Karl Marx in the 1840s to the *Laborem Exercens* encyclical of Pope John Paul II in 1981. Along with changes in the economic needs of society, this desire becomes the impetus for formation of modern professions. In the long and sordid history of human labor, the concept of a profession, of being a professional, is relatively new. The expansion of this concept as a category of labor has increased dramatically over the past seventy years and is still in development. In many ways, the unique and emerging notion of "being a professional" is a dynamic concept rather than a static definition. The advent of modern professions is, at least in part, an attempt to actualize the hope and desire of improving the nature of work and thereby the value of work.

Professional Life and the Value of Work

What does it mean to be a "professional?" Four general criteria indicate a profession and typify the persons who occupy the roles therein: specific training, autonomy, public service, and ethical codes. First, most professions require some form of specific training, which may include specialized college degrees, apprenticeships, or licensing from a government or regulatory institution. Second, unlike other forms of employment, professions offer autonomy and give individual workers the freedom and independence to pursue the fulfillment of their work. Third, professions typically provide some variation of public service and may encourage its members to serve populations outside of the realm of the profession and to be committed to and involved in the community. Fourth, professions are also characterized by the creation of and adherence to ethical codes, which are unique to each vocation and which apply to their respective members. It is the last criterion, the formation and application

of professional codes of ethics, on which the analysis of work and values in this book will focus.

Professional life offers the hope of rewarding work, not just financially but work that is fulfilling. Although the additional levels of education and specialized training can be difficult, people are willing to submit to such challenges out of desire and hope that the professions they enter will provide an opportunity for self-actualization rather than a mere means of survival. This is undoubtedly one feature which attracts people to professions over other jobs. However, professions are also riddled with complexities and recalcitrant aspects that obfuscate and impede the goal of meaningful work. The emergence of ethical dilemmas in the workplace is one of the most formidable problems which arises in a profession; it is one of the chief reasons for a great variety of professions to adopt unique and authoritative codes of ethics. Following through with the implementation of values articulated in the code would be a difficult enough endeavor in itself, without a further problem arising: the potential for conflicts between the profession's code and the personal moral beliefs and commitments of the profession's members.

This book is an exploration of these moral difficulties and of one possible, though seldom recognized, response to the contradictions and frustrations of professional life. After identifying the theoretical and philosophical suppositions that provide the foundation and structure of professional ethics, attention will turn to contemporary challenges in professional morality, especially the practical challenges that confront professionals on a daily basis. Throughout this analysis, however, I want to address these issues with responses and insights influenced by the life and writings of Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk in the Order of Cistercians of the Strictest Observance (Trappist) tradition, who wrote extensively on spiritual and social issues. He has been called "a spiritual master" for contemporary times.¹ Since his death in 1968, Merton's influence has not waned. In fact, it has increased dramatically in both spiritual and academic circles. Some of Merton's ideas are especially insightful when applied to social issues, such as the ordinary difficulties and hopes of professional life. His book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966, will be the primary text through which this analysis of professional and personal ethics will be illuminated.

Introduction to Thomas Merton

A brief introduction to the life of Thomas Merton may help to explain my belief in his relevance to issues of "the value of work." Thomas

Merton was born in 1915. Following the death of his mother at age five, he grew up in both Europe and America, being shuffled by his artist father between relatives and family friends. He became orphaned at the age of fifteen with the death of his father. After spending a tumultuous freshman year at Cambridge his guardian suggested that he attend Columbia University, which he did beginning in 1935, where, in addition to his studies, he wrote for a campus humor magazine. Gradually his life settled down, and he began to express an interest in religion. His life changed dramatically when he converted to Catholicism in 1938. He completed a master's degree in English at Columbia, accepted a teaching position at St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York, and began to consider entering the priesthood. In 1941, on the advice of an instructor at Columbia, Merton attended a spiritual retreat at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. A few months later, he joined the Order of Cistercians to pursue a contemplative life. Although he may have believed that he had renounced the world and the spoken word, he did not renounce the written word. The autobiographical account of his spiritual journey, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was published in 1948 and became a bestseller. During the early 1950s, Merton became famous, as did the monastery. He published subsequent books during this period, including *The Bread of Life*, *The Sign of Jonas*, and *No Man Is an Island*. During this time he also was appointed Master of Scholastics at the monastery, the director of students preparing for the priesthood.

In the late 1950s, however, Merton's attitudes toward isolation and contemplation began to shift. His pursuit of the contemplative life became less about the purity of prayer and personal devotion and more about cultivating a deep inner spirituality from which one could critically encounter the world. By the early 1960s, Merton had become very outspoken about war, nuclear weapons, and racial issues in the United States. Contemplation became a springboard from which Merton could take an expansive view of issues and apply spiritual responses to them. The disengaged, world-denying monk of *Seven Storey Mountain* became a hermit engaging the world with compassionate criticism. This shift in his outlook and spiritual journey can be detected from the very titles of his books, in which a blatant semantic change occurs from earlier works to later works: from *Ascent to Truth* (1951) to *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963); *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) to *Seeds of Destruction* (1964); from *The Silent Life* (1957) to *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966). Within this last work, the most remarkable semantic shift occurs. In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton publishes an essay from 1958 entitled, "Letter to an Innocent Bystander," which would soon starkly contrast the title of another

book published later in 1966, which bore the provocative title, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the object of this study.

Within "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" Merton explains the notion of bystanding and rejects the argument that one can remain honorable while being a "helpless witness" to appalling conditions. Merton asserts that one cannot be a detached observer while maintaining one's innocence. It is a mistaken belief, according to Merton, that innocence relieves one of responsibility. Even helpless witnesses can be "helpless" through their own neglect. Like the passersby in the infamous Genovese murder (a 1964 case of domestic violence in New York City in which witnesses of the event took no action to save the victim), people want to ignore circumstances and continue on about their business as if they were not affected by events or because they are waiting for others to take action.² However, Merton equates this sort of passive indifference with actively preparing one's own demise, practicing a "logic of failure" rooted in the comfortableness of evasion. Thus, bystanding is founded on an ethic of egoism, a desire to be uninvolved, to be "clean" and not dirtied by situations. Contrary to vulgar forms of moral self-interest, Merton asserts that standing up and speaking out requires community and the support of others; isolation and separation lead to conformity and silence.

It is interesting to note that Merton's "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" was also written in the same year as his epiphany on a street corner in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Merton describes that event vividly in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. . . . Though "out of the world" we [monks] are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and to make a profession out of this consciousness. . . . A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. . . . As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.³

The book's title alone is indicative of the further shift in Merton's thought, for in this journal of personal reflections he now more deeply questions the "innocence" of bystanding and personal responsibility. The answer, which he relates in personal correspondence, is to "be responsible to everybody, to take upon oneself all the guilt."⁴ Merton had come to the realization, in the words of Paul Pearson, "innocent bystanding was no longer possible—just to bystand made a person guilty because they were a part of the human race and therefore deeply implicated."⁵ But what other alternative is there? How should a person make moral choices or act in a complex world with competing values, in which innocent bystanding is not possible but where we are all guilty? Merton's response in *Conjectures of Guilty Bystander* is both autobiographical and prescriptive for all of us: "you must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream."⁶

This book is an attempt to "upset the general dream." It is an examination of moral values and how those values are expressed—or repressed—in professional life. It is not so much an effort to be disturbing or undesirable, but to make an appeal that Merton's call to contemplation can be a constructive force in the context of moral dilemmas encountered in our work lives on a daily basis. Perhaps this book will be disturbing to the extent that it points to ways in which our lives are shaped by institutional and organizational forces or that it examines weaknesses in professional codes of ethics and their application. Yet, the message here is a positive one: the contemplative perspective that Merton represents can enlighten and revive our commitment to making work meaningful—not just making a living but making a life worth living.

Two Controversial Claims

In order to commence straightaway with upsetting the general dream, I want to defend two somewhat controversial claims and demonstrate the connection between them. The first claim, which I have already introduced, is that Merton's work is relevant to issues of professional morality. Much of what Merton has to say, particularly in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, is applicable to the daily life of work. The second claim, more philosophical and no less debatable, is that language structures the way we experience the world.

Regarding the first claim, reflecting and writing on Thomas Merton's significance for professional life is not an altogether easy task, for in attempting to do it one has to recognize that the effort is akin to the old

logic puzzle of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. There are two things that, particularly by the time of his later writings, Merton has contempt for: politics and business. In an eloquent but sarcastic passage from *Conjectures*, Merton describes businesses as "quasi-religious sects."⁷ He compares working in a business organization to embracing a new religious faith. Everything, including one's life, revolves around glorification of the product, communion with and ultimate submission to it. He even draws an analogy between the monastery and a place of business (he specifically mentions the GE plant in nearby Louisville, Kentucky; but it could be just as easily any office building, superstore or shop at any mall). Merton asks, "Which one is the more religious?" Using another analogy Merton concludes, "the religious seriousness of the monastery is like sandlot baseball compared with the big-league seriousness of General Electric." Hence, I realize that the attempt to draw a positive association between the business of professions and the insights of Thomas Merton might be a tenuous one. For devoted readers of Merton who find spiritual edification in his writings, this project may seem to be an altogether misguided one. Like trying to mix oil and water, some people may view an effort to bring together issues in professional ethics with the contemplative vision of Merton to be ultimately futile and marginally negligent of the nature of each ingredient.

While I have respect for this objection, even some sympathy for this point of view, I disagree with this perspective for several reasons. First, there is without question a "turning toward the world" which is present in Merton's writings, beginning in the late 1950s and certainly into the mid-1960s, which is the time period of the central text for this project, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. After his epiphany in the heart of downtown, surrounded by businesses and the bustle of hurried workers, the world-denying monk begins to engage the world rather than retreat from it. His interaction with the world takes the form of dialogue, not simply criticisms and condemnation from a lofty mountaintop. In Bill Murray's film adaptation of Somerset Maugham's novel, *The Razor's Edge*, the enlightened Murray decides to leave the isolated Himalayan temple in order to return to city-life and his former friends. When the Buddhist priest asks for an explanation of his departure, Murray wisecracks, "It is easy to be a holy man in the mountains."⁸ It seems to me that Merton adopts a similar attitude; though he never abandons the monastery nor monastic life—quite the contrary, during this time of the mid-1960s he obtains permission to live as a hermit—his contemplative commitment serves as a foundation from which he can embrace the world in all of its beauty and contradiction. Merton reflects on the nature of truth

in *Conjectures* and argues that dialogue is a surer way to truth than refutation. The task, he argues, is not to show how others are mistaken in their views but to recognize the truth in another's experiences and perspectives, then to show a higher truth beyond them.⁹ This is Merton's attitude toward interfaith dialogue and it is, in part at least, what it means to act "in the spirit of Thomas Merton." Given his own analogy between the monastery and the business institution, my intention is to engage in a kind of interfaith dialogue, in the spirit of Thomas Merton, between professional ethics and commitment to a contemplative, spiritual approach to life.

A second reason that I disagree with objections to applying Merton's insights to moral issues in professions: I believe this connection between professional ethics and Merton is justifiable because membership in a profession, as such, has a different quality than mere participation in a business enterprise. This is due to the very nature of professions. One of the features of a profession is dedication and service to the community, to the common good. This is not to deny that business enterprises in general may also contribute, as Adam Smith would surely affirm. However, business in general may benefit as well, perhaps more, from the implications of Merton's insights. During these troubled times people in all walks of life, especially professions, are searching for paths to integrate their spirituality and values into their experiences of work. Professions in particular, because they are both implicitly and explicitly committed to human well-being, struggle with the ideals and pursuit of excellence in conflict with organizational roles and institutional demands. I believe that the words and spirit of Merton can speak to these pressing needs.

Regarding the second claim, without digging into the quagmire of contemporary theories of meaning or postmodern critiques of them, it is possible to show how one's understanding of reality and life is shaped by language. Traditional theories of language hold that words have *meanings*, composed primarily of lexical definitions which determine the proper use of a term. Postmodern theories, however, hold that words do not have fixed meanings, rather *usages* which are constantly in flux. The postmodern view asserts that we manipulate language to convey a variety of meanings in different contexts. Some scholars have even argued that without language, thought itself is not possible; one might have sensations and feelings, but ideas about them and reflections on them are not possible without language. So, my second arguably controversial claim is that language structures our experience.

A few examples might help to illustrate this point. For several years I taught a graduate bioethics course in a university extension program a few

hundred miles from our main campus. As I traveled this route, over the course of time, something fascinating occurred to me: there are very few "truckstops" anymore. To be sure, these roadside depots still exist, but the proprietors do not call them truckstops any longer. Think of what imagery the term conjures up, a place where burly guys eat greasy food and tell off-color jokes, a place where typically only truck drivers would stop. But they aren't called truckstops any longer, today they are "travel plazas." These places are mini shopping malls, with food courts of several vendors and an assortment of merchandise from electronics to clothes, great places to spend the day with the whole family! Similarly, at the current moment there is a global economic crisis, but some politicians in the United States painstakingly avoid using the "R-word." Rather than recession they prefer to speak of "a meaningful downturn in economic activity." With ethical issues too: lying on a job application is unethical and grounds for immediate dismissal from many positions (the cases of George O'Leary or Marilee Jones are instructive), so management institutes and self-help gurus call it "resume enhancement" instead.¹⁰ The concept of "global warming" sounds menacing, as though we must radically change our habits of consumption in order to save the planet and our very lives; but "climate change" sounds much less threatening and even inviting in the dead of winter. Of course these terms have political cachet as well, though many people (and surprisingly, even journalists) will use both of these phrases interchangeably. In fact, a 2006 *TIME* magazine article cites a Republican campaign advisor who attributes their campaign losses that year to "linguistic sloppiness."¹¹ Common people are more likely to rally around the issue of a "death tax" than to be concerned about the affluent-sounding "estate tax;" more likely to vote in favor of "free market" economic policies than over concerns of "globalization." Comedian George Carlin pointed out that we often put similar words together to make things sound better than they really are: free gift, money-back refund, added bonus, future plans, and other redundancies. Of course oxymorons are popular too: jumbo shrimp, new tradition, and my students' favorite, "business ethics." Your car may have an airbag, but mine has an "impact management system"—now in which one would you rather be riding? Other universities may have libraries, but ours has a "learning resource center." My favorite example from George Carlin: he claimed there is no such thing as an accident, it is "premeditated carelessness."

Business and professional life is replete with examples. When a large retailer decided to save money by eliminating its highest paid salespersons, the company referred to the plan as a "wage management initiative." The employees were "separated" from their jobs. "Fired"

sounds too harsh. In fact, think of all the euphemisms for it: administrative leave, career change, dehired, downsized, early retirement, furloughed, given notice, pink slip, reduced, released, terminated; the list could go on. People tend to downplay purchases of expensive items by saying, "I *invested* in" a computer, a flat-screen TV, etc. An item isn't "used," it is "pre-owned." A clerk is a "customer representative," a secretary is an "administrative assistant," a cleaner or maid is a "domestic engineer," a dog catcher is a "canine relocation specialist," and a window washer is a "vision clearance engineer."

Language structures our experience because language has power. These are not simply euphemisms. There are core serious beliefs and values which mark the different usages of these phrases. The choice of a word or phrase, it's resonance within us, is a matter of the power which language has to convey our most deeply held beliefs. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a famous twentieth-century philosopher, is noted for saying, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world."¹² Language is not morally neutral, the words we use depict our beliefs and values about the world in which we live.

It may come as a surprise to even devout Merton readers, to realize that he shared this recognition of the importance of language. Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, particularly the early sections, is replete with observations on the importance of language. Merton even suggests that language reflects our understanding and interpretation of experiences. He mentions a faux pas, a syntactical mistake, of a Kentucky governor who visited Gethsemani monastery during Merton's time there. The governor said, "You monks know that you cannot be happy because you have material possessions." Afterwards Merton pointed out the ambiguity of this statement to the novices. Strictly interpreted, the statement means that the monks are in despair because of their great possessions. But this is not, of course, what the governor meant. He intended to say something to the effect that, monks realize that possessions cannot make people really happy. Merton quips, "everyone instinctively pays attention not to what a politician actually says, but to what he seems to want to say."¹³ The philosophical theorists who asserted that language has fixed meanings espoused a position known as Logical Positivism, and Merton explicitly comments on its merits, referring to it as a "mechanical clicking of the thought machine manufacturing nothing . . . about nothing," and summarizing its perspective in the idea that, "Since we cannot really say anything about anything, let us be content to talk about the way in which we say nothing." Merton adds, "That is an excellent way to organize futility."¹⁴ Merton even comments on the way in which we use language

when he observes that a reader in the refectory, a "particularly serious" person who is reading passages from *A Right to be Merry*, lowers his voice on the word "merry" as if to question a monk's right to use the word, but resoundingly emphasizes words like "death" and "dead" from the reading, "with utter finality," Merton says.¹⁵

Merton's astute observations about language are particularly evident in his criticisms of propaganda and political rhetoric. In one passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton mocks quotations from Nazi concentration camp workers who documented braggingly, "We built our gas chambers to accommodate 2000 people at a time." Merton scoffs at the use of "accommodation," which implies "to make people comfortable." For Merton these linguistic constructions are not accidental but indicative of double-talk which is "systematically dedicated to an ambiguous concept of reality."¹⁶ In another passage, he states his averseness for slogans, using rhetorical flourish to pressure people, to get others to serve one's own purposes; for Merton this is too intrusive on another's freedom.¹⁷

Some of Merton's most insightful comments on language focus on the concept of "contempt for the world," the renunciation of the reality of "this world" for the importance of the metaphysical, spiritual world assumed to be the higher reality. Over and over again Merton addresses this pervasive religious dichotomy, rejecting traditional interpretations of its significance. He asks, "What do you mean by 'the world' anyway?" Moving away from theoretical abstractions, Merton offers his concrete answer: "What I abandoned when I left 'the world' and came to the monastery was the *understanding of myself* that I had developed in the context of civil society—my identification with what appeared to me to be its aims."¹⁸ The significance of this statement should not be underestimated for those of us committed to both the pursuit of a deeper spiritual life and an active career. Merton exhibits a keen sense of self-understanding when he continues his explanation with the observation that, by this abandonment he did not necessarily mean any ambition to be successful or achieve personal goals, but he did mean rejection of "a certain set of servitudes that I could no longer accept—servitudes to certain standards of value which to me were idiotic and repugnant."¹⁹ The implications for professional ethics of Merton's rejection of servitudes to particular standards of values needs further elaboration, but this passage is indicative of both his recognition of the power of language to structure our experiences and of his own self-understanding, both of which result from his devotion to contemplative practice.

In light of these two claims, that Merton's ideas, particularly from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, are relevant to professional life and that "language structures our experience of the world," we can now turn to an examination of the foundation and structure of professional ethics. Interestingly, some of Merton's observations are applicable to even some of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives which contribute to the formation of professional ethics.

CHAPTER TWO

MORAL THEORY AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Moral theory is not something that many people find useful in everyday life. Theory, by its very nature, seems detached and somewhat irrelevant to practical decision-making. Hence, many people probably suspect that moral theory is something for academics to argue about: interesting for philosophers, psychologists and sociologists, but of little use for the average person. From this point of view moral theory is, at best, a generalization about ordinary values and practical situations. But this view is overstated, because the relevance of moral theories to our everyday decision-making can, in fact, be demonstrated. In the same way that Thomas Merton speaks of "disposing of the myth that spirituality is not practical," in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, one may also attempt to address the challenge that moral theory is not practical.¹

Any theory, from political to mathematical, can be seen as a broad generalization of principles and concepts that constitute a particular field. Hence ethical theories, with all of their variety, purport to articulate some of the basic values that human beings hold dear and to provide some insight into concepts which inform our moral deliberations. Of course, human beings have many values and those values are not always compatible with one another; moreover, it is often not clear, even to our own selves, which values are motivating our choices. So again, ethical theory can be insightful and informative as it helps to identify the principles on which we are acting and may also help us to clarify competing values when they come into conflict.

There are many theories of ethics. Some moral theories differ dramatically from others. Some theories seem quite esoteric, while others border on pop psychology. What distinguishes the theories from one another is typically the identification of a particular value as foundational to our deliberations over moral choices. The theories are relevant to practical life insofar as they highlight specific fundamental values and demonstrate the centrality of a given principle to our decisions. Furthermore, the theories also provide us with language, concepts, and meanings which we use to articulate reasons and justifications for our

choices. Each theory has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Although philosophical discussions of ethics date back to the time of Plato and Aristotle, it was not until the seventeenth century that the Enlightenment philosophers undertook the task of developing a systematic approach to ethical theory. Many of these philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, understood themselves to be inquiring into the very structure of human nature, and articulating the essence of human nature and values in their theories. However, because many of the theories differ so greatly, it is an open question as to whether or not these theories express basic human nature. Moreover, as postmodernism asserts, it remains an open question as to whether or not there is any such thing as "basic human nature." Regardless of the status of a theory relative to human nature, the theories do provide us with a way of organizing our beliefs and attitudes. Additionally, (as just mentioned), the theories supply us with systematic justifications of our moral rules, and a language through which we can articulate our values and provide supporting reasons and justifications for those values. Moreover, moral theories also provide us with a variety of means by which to prioritize our principles and values, and assist us in clarifying the reasons for our choices, especially when we are confronted by conflicting values. So, setting aside issues of the status of moral theories, discussing moral theories is valuable, even for non-philosophers, because doing so makes us sensitive to the full array of moral reasons which we apply to particular situations.

Four Popular Theories of Ethics

For our purpose it is not necessary to examine a vast number of ethical theories, but it is important to focus on four major ones: virtue ethics, egoism, utilitarianism, and deontology. Some general consideration of each one of these theories will assist us in realizing the ways in which people have contemplated values.

Versions of virtue ethics date back to the time of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, moral values are rooted in the very nature of the human soul. Plato has a relatively positive view of human nature. He believes that we are basically born good, but that the pressures and temptations of day-to-day life (particularly over-concern with our physical well-being and desire for pleasure) distract us from the best kind of human life and lead to the corruption of our souls. It is a positive view of human nature because Plato believed that deep down, inside ourselves, we have a sense of what is good and of what goodness requires. Interestingly for Plato, this sense of the good is also rooted in our communal life. For Plato, the community is "the

individual writ large," the order and sensibility of a community is a reflection of the ordered and reasonable lives of its inhabitants. In other words, for Plato, morality is not simply a question of our own individual preferences or desires, but is reflected in the community of which we are a part, just as the community is a reflection of the nature of the collective souls which constitute it. Thus, Plato believes that we have an innate sense of "the Good," and that good is connected to the good of the community. But when we become overly concerned with our own prosperity or desires, our sense of the good becomes distorted, and the entire community suffers. Nevertheless, we can recover that awareness of goodness through Socratic contemplation and dialectic.

Aristotle's view shares much in common with Plato's perspective, yet with some important differences. For Aristotle, something is "good," when it fulfills its characteristic activity. That is, you know that something is a good *X*, when that thing does *X* things well. His classic example is that of a knife: the purpose of a knife, its characteristic activity, is to cut. So, one knows that one has a "good" knife when that object cuts things well. Having a beautiful handle or special etching along the blade may be nice, but these are not sufficient to make that a good knife. The key question, then, from Aristotle's perspective, becomes: what is the characteristic activity of human beings? Aristotle's answer is, reason. The ability to reason, to critically reflect, is for Aristotle the characteristic activity of a human being. Thus for Aristotle, a good human being is a person that reasons well.

But what does it mean to "reason well?" Is a person good if they merely show exceptional skill at rhetoric, mathematics, or logic problems? How does reason function to lead us to the good? For Aristotle, virtue is destroyed by either an excess or by a lack of particular traits. In other words, we can know that *X* is a virtue if *X* occupies a middle ground between two extremes. This belief is sometimes called Aristotle's doctrine of "the golden mean." We can know, claims Aristotle, that courage is a virtue because it occupies a middle ground between two extremes: a lack of courage, cowardice, on one side; and an excess of courage, foolhardiness, on the other extreme. Contemplating these values, critically reflecting on their importance, is for Aristotle the key to living a virtuous life.

It is also noteworthy that for Aristotle we must habituate ourselves to do good. Aristotle would agree with a slogan sometimes found in gyms and weight-rooms: "It is hard to do a great thing suddenly." He does not see the formation of habits in a negative way, rather he sees them in a positive light: using reason, we must train ourselves to act virtuously in

difficult situations. Establishing good habits is, according to Aristotle, the development of character—much like the ability to lift heavy weights begins by training with lighter ones.

Egoism is another theory of ethics, periodically quite popular in Western culture, which asserts that the individual (or self) is the most important moral value. This is oftentimes the default moral position of many college undergraduates, and it is widely portrayed in movies and television shows. There is a "pop culture" or vulgarized view of egoism, and there is a more sophisticated version of it. The pop culture or vulgarized view is descriptive; that is, it simply describes how human beings behave. The more elaborate point of view is normative; which is to say, it attempts to articulate how human beings ought to behave.

The vulgarized or popular cultural perspective is often known as psychological egoism. It is sometimes associated with seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. His view is descriptive, because he takes himself to be simply describing how, in fact, human beings behave; and, as described earlier, he takes himself to be articulating basic human nature.² Hobbes' view is that each person is constituted so as to look out for his or her own interests. We can't help it, it is just the way we are psychologically "hard-wired," to use a computer metaphor. Hence, from this perspective, although other people and moral theories may call for us to behave unselfishly, it is in fact contrary to our very nature to do so. The psychological make-up of each person is that he or she is oriented to act out of self-interest.

Now a person might believe, "Of course people sometimes act unselfishly," so this theory seems to fly in the face of facts. Note however that this theory relies on a strategy of re-interpreting motives. In other words, if we take any apparently altruistic act, deep down there is a self-interested motive guiding the action. Psychological egoism does argue that, human nature being what it is, people will only respond to the needs of others when there is something in it for themselves. Sometimes it may seem as though the only reward for a charitable act is a "good feeling" for the doer, but Hobbes would argue that we should not underestimate this motive. Whenever I do something for others, according to Hobbes, I get the good feeling precisely because I am exercising and asserting my power over others. So, when I give a few dollars to the panhandler on the street, the "good feeling" I experience comes from my demonstration (both to that person and to myself) that I am so in control of my own circumstances, I can provide for others without experiencing any loss on my own part. Hence, psychological egoism asserts that for any apparently

charitable act a way can be found to reinterpret motives, such that the altruistic motive can be pushed aside for a more self-centered one.

In contrast to psychological egoism, "ethical egoism" is a normative view. This theory claims that, regardless of what one construes human nature to be, human beings *ought* to act in a self-interested manner. Sometimes this view is called "objectivism," and it is often associated with the philosophy of Ayn Rand. In some of her writings, she argues that selfishness is not a negative moral value. Look up the word "selfish" in the dictionary, Rand argues, and one will find a definition like: "concern with one's own interests." Rand asks, what is morally negative about this definition? Though we often associate the word selfish with a morally negative connotation, according to Rand there is nothing morally negative about concern for one's own interests. Hence, no matter what one takes human nature to be, ethical egoism maintains that human beings ought to be concerned with their own self-interests. In doing so everyone will be better off, because I will be taking care of my own interests and you will take care of your own interests.

It is important to note that the view of egoism develops largely in the post-Enlightenment period, and that no ancient philosopher would have defended the kind of radical individualism that most people in Western culture take for granted every day. Ethical egoism is often associated with libertarianism, not in the political sense, but not wholly different from it. As we will see, Merton has much to say about the radical individualism of contemporary society.

Utilitarianism and deontology are the two most prominent ethical theories in Western civilization, the influences of the previously mentioned theories notwithstanding. Both proponents of these theories (Jeremy Bentham for utilitarianism, Immanuel Kant for deontology) believe themselves to be articulating the basic structure of human nature and of moral decision-making. Despite the fact that each of these moral traditions take themselves to be providing the fundamental principle of morality, they are indeed quite different and sometimes posited as antithetical to each other.

Utilitarianism can best be summarized as, "the greatest good for the greatest number." One of its foremost proponents, Jeremy Bentham, characterized utilitarianism as the calculating of consequences in order to maximize happiness. Bentham argued that it was possible to develop a "hedonic calculus" by which we could mathematically calculate our moral preferences, based on the probability of several criteria to produce pleasure or pain. Bentham believed that it was basic human nature to consider the following seven criteria when evaluating a moral decision:

1. Intensity: How much pleasure do I believe that I will gain from this action?
2. Duration: How long is this pleasure or happiness expected to last?
3. Certainty or uncertainty: How sure am I that, on completion of my action, I will receive the expected happiness?
4. Propinquity or remoteness: How long must I wait for my action to come to fruition? One can see how criteria three and four work together: the farther out into the future that I expect results, generally speaking, the less certain I can be to receive the rewards of my action. Criteria five and six work together in much the same way as criteria three and four.
5. Fecundity: By "fecundity," Bentham means, what are the chances that by pursuing this happiness I may incur other pleasures of a similar kind?
6. Purity: By "purity," Bentham means, what are the chances that by pursuing this happiness I may incur sensations of an opposite kind? Now each of these questions could be answered from an individual's point of view. But Bentham supposed that we do not address these issues as radical individualists. Thus,
7. Extent: We take into account the "extent" to which our choices and actions affect other people.

Bentham thought that we find it possible to quantify our responses to each of these questions, thereby developing a hedonic calculus, which results in each individual acting in accordance with the basic principle of calculating consequences in order to maximize happiness for the greatest number of people.

Contemporary utilitarians, like Peter Singer, perhaps the best-known living philosopher at this time, have been critical of Bentham's choice of happiness as the primary criterion of these seven categories. Utilitarians like Singer argue that we consider "preferences," not happiness, as the central value in our determinations of the greatest good for the greatest number. In his book, *Rethinking Life and Death*, Singer argues that older, traditional values such as "treat all human life as equal" need to be replaced by contemporary values such as the recognition that all human lives are not equal, and that we should replace the admonition to "never intentionally take innocent human life" with the present-day imperative to "take responsibility for our choices." Singer believes that these "new commandments" or moral principles can provide better guidance for the ethical complexities of the twenty-first century. These new commandments, he claims, are more consistent with contemporary preferences.³