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Ethics as if Truth Mattered

Thomas A. Cavanaugh

In the exuberant *Fides et Ratio* the Pope proposes the doing of philosophy as if truth deeply mattered for the living of human lives. In what follows, I note the Pope's philosophical interlocutors, and these on two sides. First, those who think that there is truth, but that there is not the kind of truth-mattering of which the Pope speaks. That is, those who deny ethical, life-shaping truth. Second, those who would argue against truth as the Pope uses the term to denote the trans-cultural, trans-temporal, way-things-are, whether of the life-shaping kind or not. Finally, I consider how seriously we are to take the Pope in his assertion of philosophy as sapiential, and how willing the Pope is to acknowledge philosophy as a "search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life." (81) So, my talk falls into three sections, following the title's three terms: mattering, truth, and philosophy, or truth-mattering. Accordingly, I will first consider positivism, second, post-modernism, and, third, perennial philosophy.

Positivism is the philosophical position that, as it bears upon our discussion today, holds that truth in the sense of the way things are, or the way things are regardless of how we think they are, or objectivity can be had about the objects studied by physics, biology, chemistry, cosmology, and astronomy, but not in ethics, aesthetics, or politics. For while the former disciplines concern facts, and "is" statements, the latter concern values, and "ought" statements

Value judgements, the Positivist holds, do not admit of truth and falsity. That is, statements concerning values, such as that Mozart is a greater composer than Beethoven, that Picasso is greater than Matisse, that current income tax laws are generally unfair, or that premarital sex is a bad thing, are none of them true or false. That is, the positivist holds that such statements are matters of taste, that just as Gewurztrameiner is neither better nor worse than Chardonnay, so chastity is neither better nor worse than promiscuity.

As it bears upon ethics, aesthetics and politics, Positivism often is called, “emotivism” because while positivists deny that value judgments admit of truth, they assert that such statements are expressions of the speakers’ emotions or feelings concerning Mozart, Picasso or chastity. That is, emotivists identify the meaning of terms of value with one use of value judgements. So, an emotivist would hold that when I say that promiscuity is bad, I mean that I disapprove of promiscuity and I want you to, also. Of course, it is true that one way of expressing my disapproval of promiscuity is to say that it is bad, but emotivism says that what I mean is that I disapprove of sexual promiscuity and want you to disapprove of it also. At the heart of emotivism, then, is a conflation of the use of certain terms and the meaning of certain terms. Take, for example, my saying that “the stove is hot”. I may use this statement to tell you not to touch the stove, but no one would say that that is what I mean by saying that the stove is hot. Or when I say that it is freezing outside, the emotivist does not take this to mean, I do not want you to go outside, or I want you to close the door. Thus, the emotivist holds that fact statements admit of truth and falsity, even though they may be used to get others to do or want what the speaker wants. So, the emotivist must offer some argument for identifying use and meaning in the case of value statements and not identifying use and meaning in the case of fact

statements.

A problem of a more logical nature for emotivism is the question whether the position that ethical statements do not admit of truth and falsity is itself an ethical statement. Can the emotivist speak about value from outside of value, in such a way as not to rely upon an ethical position in claiming that ethics does not admit of truth? Of course, ability to do this is crucial for the emotivist, for if he cannot speak from elsewhere, then his criticism of the aesthetic, ethical and political, cannot go all the way down; that is, the evaluative must admit of some truth and falsity. As a bare minimum, emotivists seem to be committed to certain counter-factual evaluative positions. For example, that, if values admitted of truth and falsity, then one could reasonably claim of another, that he stop some act, or appreciate some piece of music.

A more direct normative aspect of emotivism would seem to be that we should try to say what we mean. Instead of saying that stealing is wrong, we ought, following emotivism, to say that we disapprove of stealing and would like others also to disapprove of it. This indicates one of emotivism's implicit positions about ethical language, that is that such language is essentially manipulative, for instead of issuing commands, we employ indicative statements to issue commands to one another. As we shall see, this is one characteristic that emotivism shares with post-modernism: both see claims to objectivity to be willfulness masquerading as reason.

One interesting criticism of positivism and emotivism concerns the fact/value distinction itself, how credible such a dichotomy is. For example, biological concepts, such as "crow" have a certain normativity, or oughtness in them. At some point, a bird that lacks enough of the normative characteristics of a crow, being black, of a certain size, with a certain call, from specified geographic areas, will no longer be called a crow, insofar as the fact of being a crow

incorporates certain values, or normative characteristics, lacking which, something is not a crow. Insofar as sciences employ idealizations and notions of what is paradigmatic and best or most exemplary, they incorporate values in their descriptions. Moreover, science is an activity that is motivated by values, by interests in what is studied, and by explanatory values, such as elegance and simplicity. This, of course, is highly problematic for a positivist conception of science and for the fact-value dichotomy. Positivists are troubled by science sullied with value.

Thus, positivism and emotivism can be criticized on a variety of counts. They nonetheless, still hold sway in the classroom, our students and our culture are emotivist. We tend to speak of those issues that have greatest bearing upon how we conduct our lives and what we pursue and avoid in terms of lifestyle choices, and in terms of values in the sense of what we choose to care about. The most robust norm for our public conduct is that it is okay, as long as we don't hurt, in the sense of physically injure, anyone else, unless we are trying to light a cigarette or a cigar.

In terms of the Pope's thinking, and in terms of the title of this talk, emotivism and positivism, represent the rejection, not of truth, but of the kind of truth that matters for how we live our lives. That is, positivism and emotivism are committed to truth in the hard sciences, such as physics and cosmology, but such truth is not the kind of truth around which one can live a meaningful life, at least not unless one is a physicist or biologist. Thus, when it comes to the sapiential character of philosophy that the Pope urges us to recover in urging us to focus on the ultimate questions of meaning about the good human life and the good human and the transcendent, the emotivist response is something akin to the sophomore's "whatever." These positions thus deny that there is the kind of truth that could matter for what the perennial

philosophy has always striven towards, a knowing of the cosmos and oneself that transforms both.

If Positivism can be understood as the assertion of fact and the denial of value, Post-modernism, the other philosophical interlocutor the Pope engages, may be understood as the assertion of value and the denial of fact, as Nietzsche, the harbinger of post-modernity says, there are no facts, only interpretations. Post-modernism is a thorough-going emotivism that denies that there is truth in the sense of a trans-cultural, trans-temporal, objective way things are. Thus, positivism would have us believe that while there is truth, there is not truth that matters in the sense upon which one can erect a human life, post-modernism would hold that there is not truth, only will asserting itself.

While noting the anachronistic character of the attribution, one can find in book V of the *Republic* an apt description of Post-modernism. There Socrates speaks of those who love things intermediate between being and non-being, while believing that that is all there is. One example he employs is of those who love beautiful things, but do not believe in beauty itself. Such thinking incorporates a thorough-going nominalism, the stance that words have no referents outside of language: in Socrates' terms, a belief in beautiful things coupled with a disbelief in the beautiful itself. Post-modern thought emphasizes the contingent and ultimately provisional character of all knowledge: in Socrates' terms, those who love beautiful things while not loving the beautiful itself love what participates in being and non-being: what is beautiful at one time and place and not at other times and places. It is a love of contingency -- what is able to be otherwise -- and a loathing of necessity and essentiality -- what cannot be other than it is. Accordingly, Post-modernism delights in opinion that changes as its object changes and

disparages the aspiration for knowledge of eternal verities.

A severe case of what we may call “nothing-butteriness” ails Post-modern thinking. To illustrate, consider a few paradigm examples. One hears that knowledge is power, that Enlightenment ethical positions are masculine, or that logic is the preoccupation of a Western, binary mind. Now, it is true that knowledge is often powerful. Practical knowledge enables one to do or make and is, thereby, powerful. Yet, this is not what is being said. One who says that knowledge is power, in Post-modern terms, means that it is nothing but power masquerading as something objective. Knowledge thus is understood to be essentially a manipulation of the gullible by the cunning. And in this lies the error of Post-modernism, for while it is true that knowledge is power, and that it can be employed to manipulate; it is false that it is nothing but power, and that it is nothing but manipulative. The reason that knowledge is power is because it is something else first, namely, true and correct, and this enables it to be useful.

The Holy Father addresses post-modernism because he sees it as partially undermining our capacity to respond to divine revelation insofar as this ability depends upon our grasp of the truth as “for all peoples and at all times” (*Fides et ratio*, 27). The Pope understands Christianity to touch peoples precisely at that point at which they attempt to transcend themselves. He says:

The Acts of the Apostles provides evidence that Christian proclamation was engaged from the very first with the philosophical currents of the time. In Athens, we read, Saint Paul entered into discussion with “certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” (17:18); and exegetical analysis of his speech at the

Areopagus has revealed frequent allusions to popular beliefs deriving for the most part from Stoicism. *This is by no means accidental.* If pagans were to understand them, the first Christians could not refer only to “Moses and the Prophets” when they spoke. They had to point as well to natural knowledge of God and to the voice of conscience in every human being. Since in pagan religion this natural knowledge had lapsed into idolatry, the Apostle judged it wiser in his speech to make the link with the thinking of the philosophers, who had always set in opposition to the myths and mystery cults notions more respectful of divine transcendence (*Fides et Ratio*, 36, emphasis added).

Here, the Pope notes that Divine revelation intersects culture where it transcends itself; philosophy serves precisely as that act in which a culture aspires to go beyond its place and time. Again, the Holy Father says:

[I]t was the task of the fathers of philosophy to bring to light the link between reason and religion. As they broadened their view to include the universal principles, they no longer rested content with the ancient myths, but wanted to provide a rational foundation for their belief in the divinity. This opened a path which took its rise from ancient traditions but allowed a development satisfying the demands of universal reason. This development sought to acquire a critical awareness of what they believed in, and the concept of

divinity was the prime beneficiary of this. ... [R]eligion was, at least in part, purified by rational analysis. It was on this basis that the Fathers of the Church entered into fruitful dialogue with ancient philosophy, which offered new ways of proclaiming and understanding the God of Jesus Christ (Fides, 36, p. 16).

Insofar as philosophy aspires beyond times and places it opens to the transcendent as divinely revealed. Conversely, to the extent to which thought understands all as here and now, enmeshed in the particular and offering nothing that reaches beyond specific times and places, it shuts itself off from the transcendent as naturally revealed, and, *a fortiori*, closes itself off from the transcendent as divinely revealed.

Thus, while Positivism does not deny the existence of truth, it does, like Post-modernism, deny the existence of truths that can matter for the living of human lives, and this is the point at which both Positivism and Post-modernity agree with one another and come into conflict with the Pope's aspirations for Philosophy and his own philosophical account of the human as imago die, a rational animal, whose perfection is to be found in the exercise of will in accordance with reason, and of reason knowing the cosmos. The Pope proposes a philosophy of truth-mattering.

Truth that matters is truth that bears upon the practical realm of how we live our lives, how we treat one another, and how we structure our political relationships with one another. So, for example, to employ examples the Pope uses elsewhere, if the most important product of work is the human being himself, then work must be structured so as to lead to human flourishing. That is, if any product of my work is a means for perfecting myself, than this truth will matter, will make a difference insofar as I will always subordinate the product produced to the producer

of the product. I will not, for example, have children make rugs knowing that they will lose their eyesight, or their dexterity in the making of the rug, for the rug is only the opportunity for the child to be made. Again, if money is a means ordered towards the good of the family, this truth will matter by my not subordinating my family life to production and consumption, my children will not be orphaned by my desires to provide them with material goods, for the material goods exist for the sake of my relation with my child, and not vice-versa. These are truths that matter and this is the kind of philosophy that the pope has in mind when he exhorts us to philosophize.

A Philosophy as if truth matters takes the human being, not as its exclusive object of its study, but as the subject capable both of apprehending truth and of living in accordance with truth. In Aristotle's terms, the human intellect exercises itself contemplatively in knowing the truth or practically in making true acts and products. Thus, at the center of the Pope's understanding of philosophy stands the human being, in whom we find united what Positivism and Post-modernism divides. For these two accounts have a crippled human at their center for whom there is not truth that matters, no basis for practical intellect, only acts of will without reason.

In contrast to Positivism and Post-modernism, the Pope understands philosophy as an essentially life-structuring, all-encompassing activity or habit of making all truth matter for how one lives, even if the difference truth makes is contemplative in character, that is, even if truth is not practically-oriented to a doing or a making, but a thinking about, a contemplating, it is still the case that truth structures one's life insofar as one delights in and admires the truth. This, of course, is to take philosophy very seriously.

Just how seriously can we take the Pope in his recommendation of such a profoundly

important philosophy? That is, can a Christian really recommend a life-encompassing philosophy as fully as the Pope does? Does it make sense for those who proclaim Christ as the Way, the truth and the life, to also proclaim as deeply important an all-consuming practice such as philosophy? Can the Pope on the one hand speak of philosophy as addressing our deepest questions and on the other say that insofar as philosophy transcends one's place and time it opens one up to the transcendent which only supernatural revelation offers? Here we really get not to a debate about deficiencies of such philosophies as positivism and post-modernism which cut one off from the transcendent, but to the relation between the truest philosophy one could imagine, the lives lived in accordance with such a philosophy, and faith. Would such a philosophy be capable of realizing the discrepancy between what we humans aspire to and what philosophy is capable of offering us? If so, then a totally committed philosophy could be compatible with a faith that answers the questions that philosophy knows it wants to answer but knows not how. If Aquinas is right in his reading of Aristotle, Aristotle reaches the limits of his philosophy and implicitly apprehends this, when in the Nicomachean ethics, he says that a life of continuous contemplation would be best, yet not a human, but a divine life. Aquinas, relying on Plato, holds that such a comment on Aristotle's part marks the discrepancy that Aristotle should have taken more notice of between his implicit knowledge of something higher than what he proposes as the highest human good; namely, divine beatitude.

Thomas' relation to Aristotle indicates that theologians must theologize about philosophy, as the Pope does in this extravagant encyclical. That is, those who follow in the Pope's footsteps will offer us a more complete theology of philosophy. Such a theology of philosophy would do well to see at what points reason opens itself up to the transcendent in its

recognition of some truth while at the same time realizing that it does not have the answer to the question it is capable of asking. That is, a theology of philosophy will be able to discern those hints half-guessed, those gifts half-understood and the half guessing and half understanding present in philosophy. As noted, Thomas' relation to Aristotle exemplifies such a theology of philosophy. Thomas, in the initial questions of the *Prima Secundae*, notes that Aristotle himself implicitly recognizes a more perfect happiness that would persist in contemplation that is absent in Aristotle's final account of human happiness. Of course, Aristotle goes as far as reason will take him, and that is pretty far; nonetheless, Aristotle's *Ethics* is open to the transcendent, both in its ascertainment of truth, and in its recognition of something more. A theology of philosophy shows how philosophy needs to be complemented in order to ascertain fully that gift unaided reason deeply yearns for, but only half-guesses and half-understands.