Ethics as Method or Process of Decision Making

In Appendix XVII of Living large, I distinguish three major epochs in the history of humankind. Here is a condensed version:

Act One -- From the dawn of humanity through the classical and medieval ages.

In these ages, people are deeply embedded in a set of relationships. We have the whole over the part. Good for stable relationships, not very good for change. Virtues such as submission, obedience, loyalty are cultivated and thrive. Yet some people are too easily subordinated to others. Hierarchies of dominance gain ground.

Act Two – roughly from 1500 CE to present.

Here we have Project Individualism: the part over the whole. Good for freedom of thought and action, not very good for relationships and a sense of a larger whole. Virtues such as self-reliance, competitive excellence and risk-taking are cultivated and thrive. Yet a sense of the common good fades. All is reduced to separate substances -- individuals alone are perceived to be real.

Act Three – Beginning sometime in second half of 20th century and still crystallizing.

Here, we start to sense that the view of modernity cannot be sustained. We look to a different sense of whole and part, where the wholes and parts are thought to arise together, where the whole is specified through the particular parts that make it up and the part is seen as the whole reflected from a unique place in the web of life. Thus, a fuller vision of interconnection and interdependence.

1) Notice that for this third way to be an advance, we must recognize the gifts and correct the errors of both the ancient worldview and the modern worldview.

2) According to Weber, a key feature of modernity was that science and philosophical ethics and art separated out from under the domination of church (more generally institutionalized religion) and the domination of state. I am coming to see that spirituality also separates out from religion in late modernity. Once science, ethics and art separate from church and state, then they can criticize church and state.

Philosophical ethics – having achieved its own independence – constitutes itself as a METHOD or PROCESS. Think of the one sentence translation for what it means to say “X is wrong.” Namely, “There is reason and reason enough, based in EC/FC [ethical criteria and the facts of the case] to disapprove doing X by myself and others.”

Ethics is a normative discipline – it makes and justifies value judgments. Science claims it does not. Still, philosophical ethics is similar to science in that (a) it is a method, (b) it employs reason, (c) it asks for evidence and puts assertions to tests, and (d) it admits that ethical conclusions can be revised in light of deepening sense of criteria and new evidence.

Notice that such ethics takes its criteria from what can be studied in the natural world, namely communities and persons. The more we know about each, the deeper understanding we can have of this criteria GW;FP. Even the criteria can be rightly revised.

For philosophical ethics, what is wrong to do does NOT mean what authority says is wrong to do nor does it mean what I or others may dislike nor even what this or that group finds in their self-interest. To say X is wrong MEANS – by definition in philosophical ethics as I am presenting it – there is reason and reason enough based in EC/FC to disapprove doing X by myself and others.

Philosophical ethics can thus steer a course between the twin evils of ETHICAL ABSOLUTISM (which allows for no revision) and ETHICAL RELATIVISM (which allows for no criteria to say some ways of living are better than others.)
Six Step Model for Ethical Policy Decision Making

This model is most at home where, from an administrative standpoint, one seeks ethical guidelines suitable for public policy. Putting one’s option in standard form has the following advantages:

a. it gives one distance on the problem;
b. it allows one to construct qualified positions which go beyond “always” and “never” positions

c. it allows one to run certain tests concerning fairness and consequences

Step 1) LIST POSSIBLE OPTIONS

Step 2) FILTER OUT those options that are (a) not really practical (do-able) and/or (b) are so extreme that they raise additional ethical problems. (e.g. killing the teacher to avoid cheating on a test).

Step 3) CHOOSE ONE OPTION and put it in STANDARD (XYZ) FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>XYZ in Absolute Form</th>
<th>XYZ in Qualified Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>In ANY CIRCUMSTANCES X (no exceptions) ANY ETHICAL AGENT Y (no exceptions) OUGHT/ OUGHT NOT DO Z. (the definition of action taken as unrevisable)</td>
<td>Except for the following cases, A, B, C ... D, people ought/ ought not do Z. Qualified XYZ in more detail is below: One can qualify on the circumstances on the agents and on the action.</td>
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For example, In certain circumstances X (i.e. those having features $x_1, x_2, ... x_n$) any or certain agent(s) Y (i.e. those with features $y_1, y_2, ... y_n$) 

OUGHT/ OUGHT NOT DO ACTION Z (or an action having features $z_1, z_2, ... z_n$)

Step 4) GOLD Kantian TESTS FOR (Golden Rule) FAIRNESS to Persons

These Fairness Tests are indebted to Immanuel Kant and stress that “Persons are not things.” Persons are centers of worth having intellects and the ability to choose. They are, as Kant would say, "equal, rational and free."

A. Reversibility Test
   If Z is right to do, then Z is right whether I’m on the doer or receiver side.

B. Equal Case Test
   If it is right for me to do Z, then it is right for anyone relevantly similar to me. You must treat equal cases equally or show that in spite of looking similar, the two cases are relevantly different and can be treated differently.

C. Universalizability Test -- generalizes from "equal cases" test.
   Suppose it is right for A to do Z. If B is relevantly similar to A (abbreviated B “rst” A), then it is right for B to do Z.
   If C is “rst” B, then it is right for C to do Z. If D is “rst” C, then OK for D and on and on until we must consider what would occur if everyone (or almost everyone) did Z. “What if everyone did Z?” is the universalized question.

Steps 5 & 6 are SOCIAL UTILITY (Good of the whole) CONSEQUENCES TESTS
   (Bentham & Mill: “Actions have Consequences.”)

Step 5) RED: LIST THE CONSEQUENCES (to you, to others, to what joins you together)
   if everyone were to follow your rule, i.e., if this rule were to become a PRACTICE

Step 6) RED: ASK YOURSELF: Could I truly accept a world in which acting on this rule were a way of life?

If the action or policy or principle so stated does not pass the Fairness and Consequences Tests, go back to step 3 and reformulate it. Then run it through the Good for Whole and Fair for Persons Tests again.