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Moral Styles: A Resource for Value-Centered Counseling

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One of the best resources that ministers and others who engage extensively in short-term personal counseling can have is a consistent method for assessing the needs and initial expectations of persons who come to them for help. Edgar Draper suggests one such method through a set of diagnostic questions: "Why is this person coming for help?" "Why is he coming now?" "Why is he coming to me?"¹ Another psychiatrist, Sandor Rado, suggests a method of assessing the motivational level of a person seeking help in terms of four rather distinct categories related to psychogenetic development. A patient may be motivated by "magical craving." ("The doctor must not only cure me, he must do everything for me, by magic.") Or, at a slightly less regressed level, he may come in "parental invocation." ("What can the doctor do for me? He should do everything for me. I want to be his favorite child.") Someone who comes for help while functioning more fully as an adult may be motivated to join the therapist in "co-operative striving." ("I am ready to co-operate with the doctor. I must learn how to help myself.") Finally, at a clearly adult level of functioning, a client may come in "realistic self-reliance." ("What can I do for myself? How can I best use the help of the doctor?")²

Both of these models serve to direct the counselor's attention beneath the

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content of the client's presenting complaint to include the full context of his appeal for help. Both models are built on the assumption that what is said by the client must be interpreted along with the way he says it.

The same considerations apply to counseling, often by ministers, in which questions of value are paramount. Such counseling is likely to be most effective when the counselor brings to the relationship not only sophistication and concern for problems in ethics, but also a sensitivity to the ways in which questions of value are asked.

This paper will undertake, first, to outline a schema for identifying the various levels at which persons commonly become engaged with issues of direction and purpose in their lives. Then, within that framework, some basic problems of value-centered counseling will be dealt with through the use of the concept of "moral styles." This concept will be examined both theoretically and in a clinical context through the use of case materials.

Levels of values in counseling

Henry David Aiken and Paul Tillich, from their individual perspectives, provide some useful insights into ways in which men deal with values. In an article addressed to his colleagues in the field of moral philosophy, Aiken attempted to bring clarity to their discussions by delineating "four distinctive levels upon which such terms as 'good,' 'right,' and 'ought' are employed."³ It is possible to use such terms, Aiken indicates, at an "expressive-evocative" level as spontaneous expressions of feeling that "pose no problems nor call for any reply."⁴ At a second or "moral" level, serious questions emerge concerning the means and consequences of one's actions. On a third or "ethical" level, deliberation is carried on more theoretically, somewhat removed from the exigencies of the moral. Finally, at the "post ethical" level, the question "why should I be moral?" enters one's deliberations and the limits of this kind of reflection come into view.

Apart from their significance to discussions among moral philosophers, Aiken's categories can be applied meaningfully to counseling. Consider, for



example, the various planes on which a college student may raise a problem concerning the ethics of premarital sexual intercourse:⁵ *expressive evocative* (“Do you think I could wait another two years to sleep with Jane? What do you think I am—a eunuch or something?”); *moral* (“Things are getting to the point where we’ve got to decide what kind of relationship we’re going to have these next two years. Whether we go any further or not, we’ve got to try to come to some decision.”); *ethical* (“You know, I’ve been giving some serious thought lately to the question of what love is. I wonder if there’s any real connection between love and marriage.”); *post ethical* (“What the hell is the point of sitting here trying to decide whether it’s ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to go to bed with Jane?”)

The subject under consideration in each case is, of course, the same: the ethics of premarital intercourse. But the ways in which it is brought into view vary significantly and call for different kinds of response if the client is to be met at the level of his concern.

Two of the levels, the “expressive-evocative” and the “post ethical,” are not very productive for counseling, or, for that matter, any other kind of genuine dialogue. Nonetheless, the person whose concerns at either of these stages are heard and acknowledged by a sensitive counselor may thus find himself better prepared for deliberation at the ethical or moral levels of discourse.

While either the moral or the ethical level can be the locus of significant dialogue, there is a difference between them that deserves careful attention. Paul Tillich has stressed the significance of “morality” to the constitution of persons.⁶ All men, he indicates, live under a “moral imperative,” i.e., “the command to become what one potentially is.”⁷ Inasmuch as man’s potential, true being is that of a person in a community of persons, “the moral imperative has this content: to become a person. Every moral act is an act in which an individual self establishes itself as a person.”⁸

Understood in this way, the “moral” level of concern takes on paramount significance. It is at this level that, as they deliberate in the midst of their immediate experience, persons “live and move and have their being.” Ethical



deliberation, while it is independent of morality, has significance finally only *in relation to the moral*. Its proper function is to enable an individual in a relatively objective atmosphere to sift through the ambiguities surrounding moral decision. The difference between morality and ethics might be illustrated by comparing the activity of a baseball player when he is at the plate in a game on the one hand, or studying films of his batting stance on the other. It is this distinction that Tillich implies in his definition of "ethics" as "the theory of morals" and his use of the term "moral" to indicate "the moral act itself in its fundamental significance."⁹

With these considerations in mind, it is useful to take a fresh look at some of the most challenging aspects of value-oriented counseling and, in particular, counseling with American youth.

Values and American youth

Young people, in increasing numbers, live with enormous confusion as to the meaningful direction of life. Their problem, as Kenneth Keniston notes, is in essence that of an entire society running more or less at the mercy of unrestrained and unguided technological development.¹⁰ Despite its many benefits, American technology, through its perpetuation of constant change, has undermined some of the fundamental groundwork of American life. In particular, traditional linkage between the generations has crumbled beneath the forces of social change. "In almost every other time and place," Keniston notes, "a man could be reasonably certain that essentially the same technologies, social institutions, outlooks on life, and types of people would surround his children in their maturity as surrounded him in his. Today, we can no longer expect this."¹¹

Given a future so beclouded by uncertainty, to which the experience of adults is of such doubtful relevance, young people must rely, increasingly, upon their own resources and those of their peers to direct their course into adult society. Their task is a demanding one. It involves more than accepting socialization to a relatively stable social order; it is rather to achieve the



formation of an individual identity in the midst of a society that is perpetually in flux.¹²

The responses of American youth to this challenge vary widely. Public attention is commonly directed to those whose alienation from adult life is extreme. But stopping somewhat short of the drop-outs are many young people who (like their parents) seek some basis for dialogue with the values of their social order. It is with them that ministers to youth, campus ministers, and others in similar positions often enter into those counseling relationships that focus on issues of decision, commitment, and direction in life. In the context of rapid social change, some puzzling dilemmas are encountered in this kind of counseling, and it is to them that the focus of this paper now turns.

Social change and the problem of standards

One of the most difficult and yet important tasks before anyone who is involved in some way with young people and their moral problems seems to be that of learning to deal constructively with perpetually changing moral standards. This is not the first era in which men have been confronted with the truth that "new occasions teach new duties" or that "time makes ancient good uncouth." But never before have the new occasions superseded one another so rapidly. Many adults, of course, are viscerally inclined to defend the standards of the status quo. What they cannot see as clearly as most young people can is that rapid social change seriously challenges any attempt even to define the status quo, much less to defend its standards.

The issue of premarital intercourse can, again, serve as an example. Traditionally, in middle-class America, premarital intercourse has been officially repudiated. It is possible, if one points to the tradition, to uphold categorically the same standard today. But one does so at the cost of ignoring technologically-based developments that have brought far-reaching changes to American society, such as the development of a reliable oral contraceptive and the changing character of adolescence itself.¹³ While it would be an



oversimplification to maintain that moral standards are absolutely dependent upon social conditions, it is equally invalid to deny that any relation exists between the two. Social change does very definitely have a bearing on the status of moral standards.

Somewhat at the other end of the spectrum but subject to a similar problem are adults who, in their dealings with youth, attempt to keep pace with social change by constantly updating their moral standards. Such well-intentioned liberalism, with its concern for absolute relevance to social needs, often comes up against the impossibility of revising moral positions quickly enough to match changing conditions. "Three years ago," commented the chaplain of a somewhat progressive Southern Negro college, "the students here called me a real liberal. Now, when I take essentially the same position on civil rights as I did then, they call me an Uncle Tom!" Very few individuals find it possible to revise deeply-held convictions so readily as to eliminate gaps between social reality and their standards. In a rapidly changing society, it is difficult to deal meaningfully in any way with standards of morality.

Confronted with the problems inherent in advocating either expiring or emerging moral standards, many adults have been drawn to a viewpoint that appears to offer a means of escape from the dilemma: contextual or "situational" ethics.* Contextualism, with its genuine regard for the idiosyncratic factors that complicate every situation in which (for Christians) love is to be applied through moral decision, is indeed a useful and constructive ethical theory. Freed from the strangulation of prescriptive approaches to behavior, many persons can profit from thinking through ethical

* The characteristic concern in a contextual approach to ethics for persons caught in the ambiguities of moral life is particularly evident in the essay edited by Alastair Heron, *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*. London, Friends Home Service Committee, 1963. See especially pp. 39, 40. The essay also exemplifies some of the difficulties in a contextual approach—taking seriously "the waywardness of love" in human experience while at the same time attempting to put forward concrete guidelines for behavior; see pp. 40-48. Paul Ramsey has responded to this latter section of the essay in his chapter "On Taking Sexual Responsibility Seriously Enough" in his book *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.



problems in the light of contextual theory. Yet there is a great deficit found in contextual ethics when one attempts to relate it directly, as in counseling, to problems of moral decision. Contextualism, to return to the set of terms borrowed from Aiken, is a *theory of ethics*, and as such it is not directly relevant to the language and concerns of morality. For when people (and young people in particular) become engaged in forging the fundamental decisions on which their actualization as persons depends, they often need the opportunity to encounter something much more substantive than a theory, however valid the theory may be.

But is there any way for a counselor with youth to offer some models for moral decision, other than moral standards, with which they can interact?

Moral styles and counseling . . .

A significant resource for meeting this problem may lie in the use of the concept, "moral styles."[†] The attempt, in a counseling relationship, to help someone formulate significant acts and attitudes in his life in terms of moral styles would seem to be helpful in several ways. "Moral style" (by which is meant one's most characteristic stance in life, according to which he makes most of his decisions) in denoting the shape of a person's *moral life* focuses attention on that person himself rather than, as in the case of ethical discourse, on his ideas or beliefs. Without being excluded from consideration,

† The concept "moral styles" in this paper is similar to Erich Fromm's "character orientations," by which he designates somewhat substantive forms in which "human energy is canalized in the process of assimilation and socialization." (*Man for Himself*. Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1947, p. 67.) Like Fromm's formulation, "moral styles" is intended to bring into focus two features of the moral life that, as he notes, often are ignored: that human traits and actions cannot be interpreted meaningfully as independent entities (i.e., apart from the total "structure" of a person's character or "style" of his life); and that judgments about actions should encompass underlying levels of motivation, both conscious and unconscious, as well as the actions themselves. *Ibid.*, p. 42. The emphasis in "moral styles" in the context of this paper is on the "moral" dimension of human personality—i.e., on the ways in which it takes shape through decision (as distinguished, perhaps, from consideration in another context of its genetic development).



ethical theory can be kept in the context of counseling in the subordinate position of a resource for moral deliberation. In other contexts, of course, the theoretical concerns of ethics are an entirely legitimate subject for discussion. But in a counseling relationship of any kind, what a person thinks about the world and its issues is far less important than is the degree of clarity with which he is able to perceive himself.

At the same time, "moral style" avoids the largely unmanageable problems that are encountered in discussions of standards. And the term encompasses dimensions of human existence much deeper than the actions on which attention is fixed when moral standards are discussed. Moral style denotes the way a person *is* in the world—in his unconscious as well as his conscious behavior, in his gestures and attitudes as well as in his actions.

A selection of case material may illustrate the type of counseling situation to which considerations of moral styles may be most appropriate.

Nancy Wallace is a 22-year-old, married, college senior. She had phoned the minister of the campus church asking for an appointment to discuss a problem that had arisen in her marriage.

When she arrived later in the week for the conference, she presented the appearance of a very attractive young woman. Not noticeably upset, she began a detailed description of the disruption of her marriage.

Nancy: I guess it began several months ago, about a year after we were married. Jack had always been very involved in his fraternity up until the time we were engaged and he'd kept in contact with the fellows there all the time since then . . . But for the last three or four months, he's been over at the frat house almost every night. It started with a group of them studying organic chemistry last quarter, but now there's more to it than that. He's gotten elected vice-president of the fraternity, so he's always in meetings of some kind, and after that, more often than not I think they go out drinking. . . . So I was wondering if you would want to see him and find out what he thinks he's doing. . . . So many of the kids at school have told me about you and how much you've helped them. I know you really understand people our age. . . .

Minister: Have you and Jack talked about any of this?

N: I told him how I felt about his staying out a couple of months ago. One night I even threatened to leave him.

M: How did Jack respond to that?



N: Well, that got to him. I knew it would. But before long, he was back to the same routine—home for supper and then back over to the frat house and out till one or two in the morning.

M: You said that you knew your threatening to leave would have some effect on Jack. How did you know that?

N: Oh, that's always been so. Jack may hold out for something for a while, but sooner or later, I've always been able to get what I want from him—especially if I get him to think he might lose me.

M: How does Jack compare in this way to other fellows you've known?

N: You mean getting him to do what I want?

M: Yes.

N: Oh, I guess every boy I've ever gone with was like that. You know, you learn how to treat them. . . . Except this time it's somewhat different. I got Jack scared and he stayed home for a while. But we had so little to do with each other, it was almost a relief the next time he stayed out.

In the course of this brief conversation, the minister began to form some relatively clear impressions of Nancy as a person. Although most of his data came from what he learned of her marriage, part of it came also from the way in which Nancy related to him. As he reflected on what he heard and felt from her, his impressions began to cohere: Nancy was a very manipulative young woman. She was proficient in managing relationships—particularly, he sensed, her relationships with men. He also noted, from her last statement, that Nancy had begun to question this capacity to control others, because of what was happening in her relationship with Jack.

In the course of future counseling, Nancy's life style of manipulation might come under consideration from a variety of perspectives. How did she learn to control others in this way? How did her manipulateness serve as a defense against her own feelings? What effect was it having on her marriage? And, should Nancy subsequently consider her life seriously in terms of its ultimate direction, she might begin to confront questions such as "What does it mean to be a manipulative person?" or "What is the moral significance of a controlling style of life?"

In helping persons to deal with issues of life direction, the counselor, of course, should not fall into the temptation to "moralize." As Paul observed



long ago, the basic problem of human beings is not in knowing the good, but in discovering a capacity to do it. Only as a person in conflict experiences some freedom to choose who he will become will commitment to a particular style of being become a living option for him. The primary task of a counselor must always be to nurture conditions in which freedom, through the counseling relationship, can emerge.

It is also important, even for the counselor who is careful not to “moralize,” to use discretion in speaking of morals with a client. Given the connotations of “morality” in Western culture (see note 6), a phrase like “moral style” either should be carefully interpreted or else replaced in the dialogue of counseling by an expression such as “style of life.” Another option, possibly useful with some persons, could be to discuss the qualities that the client admires in significant others that he would like to develop in himself.

Two areas of counseling with young people on moral styles

There are valuable resources in a consideration of moral styles for dealing with decisions about premarital relationships that can affect the consequent direction of one's life. Moral standards in this area (if they have ever had more than a tangential relationship to actual conduct) are, as has been noted, particularly difficult to apply today. Defending or revising standards is not likely to accomplish much. But neither is the practice of advising young people simply to follow the dictates of love in all that they do. Coping with sexual feelings is always a demanding business; it is especially so in a close and prolonged premarital relationship. The task can be made somewhat easier by being brought into the realm of moral decision with the aid of objective and concrete (but not coercive) guidelines for behavior put in the form of moral styles. It is possible, for example, to consider sexual involvement in terms of how it affects or is likely to affect the shape of all one's relationships. In some sense, “responsibility” can be a style of life; so can “trust”; and so can fear of expressing warm feelings or in other ways taking risks in a relationship. Each of these styles of life is a “moral style” inasmuch as it



functions both as subject and object of decision. As such, it can serve as a guide to one's actions—as a means of concretizing issues of the direction in life that is achieved through actions. Thus instead of asking “How far should I go with Joe?” or “What does Christian love require of me in my relationship with Joe?” a young person should be encouraged to pose questions such as “What kind of person am I and do I wish to become?” (and the same for Joe). Here alternative styles of life (and people who embody them) can come into view, to serve as fairly substantial models to which one can refer as he seeks to mould his own life style.

Finally, the concept of moral style would appear to have value as a means of helping young people today to relate in a free and yet meaningful way to the values of their forebears. For despite the caprice of a culture wedded to technology, the essential styles of life for and upon which persons make significant choices do tend to survive the succession of generations. And in moral styles, with discernment, some essential links to earlier generations often can be found.

Art and Judy are a case in point. A year out of college, they are serving as teachers in a new program for schools in the ghetto. It was not easy for them to interpret their decision to enter the program to many people in the suburb where they both grew up. They found it almost impossible to discuss all the issues in sociology and ethics that had led them to the city with their parents whose own life aim had been to give their children all the advantages of life in the suburbs.

One does not have to be with this couple and their parents for very long to realize how deep is their disagreement on many social issues. But there are interesting areas of confluence among them, too. Listening to Art's father describe his law practice, one becomes aware of the same spirit of dedication that Art brings to his teaching. And in only a short time with Judy's mother, one begins to recognize the same concern for people that is so evident in her daughter. Thus one may begin to become aware of some rather enduring styles of being in the world that, in the midst of social change, have been passed between these generations.



One day, Art and Judy may reflect upon their own histories in this way. Doing so certainly would offer no panacea for the problems of forming adult identities. But in awareness of the sources of moral styles they might stand more steadily in a continuously changing society, from time to time in tune with the good in moral styles that does not die.

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