

Epilogue

One choice persons can rarely make is the choice to refrain from making further choices. Life forces choices, from the trivial to the traumatic. It has always done so. A false nostalgia pervades the belief that in earlier times choices were easier because they were fewer or less complicated. Any time we are faced with alternative courses of action, only one of which can be chosen at that moment, the dilemma can be difficult, whether it involves deciding to leap from a cliff or stand and fight an onrushing mastodon, or to vote for or against a candidate who promises to end a war quickly by resort to nuclear weapons.

In this text we have invited you, as it were, to climb a tree, the ever-branching tree of moral reflection. We began at its roots, unearthing the sources from which moral thinking emerges—the life situation of each person which provides the conditions and produces the dilemmas of moral decision making. Each self is part of a unique tree with its own particular roots, patch of soil, and possibilities. But like other trees it only grows within the boundaries of certain common kinds of nourishment, soil conditions, temperature, and climate. These conditions place limits on the possibilities open to each individual tree and its parts. We discussed some of these issues under the rubric of freedom-determinism. We also noted that most people who read this text will have been brought up within the patch of soil we call the Jewish-Christian-Hellenistic tradition. While it is certainly possible to transplant oneself to new soil, a successful transplant, as well as continued growth in the same spot, will involve a solid understanding of the soil from which one's roots draw sustenance. For this reason we spent some time exploring the roots of Western moral teaching as it emerged from the confluence of Jewish, Christian, and Hellenistic sources.

As the tree grows, it produces buds on multiple and multiplying branches. Each bud, each individual, while drawing on a common heritage and linked to it historically, represents a new and unique expression of that heritage. Some branches and buds grow out from the trunk at bizarre angles, appearing almost to desire to separate from the tree entirely. In

moral thinking we can compare these buds to self-conscious, individual articulations of the meaning of morality, complete with the essential notions of the goal of moral action, its source and authority, and the criteria of its evaluation. Some of these buds flower into marvelously complex, coherent wholes, revealing, even while departing from, the principles of moral thought at the root and trunk of the tree. Although they are often more fully explicit and self-consciously worked out than are most of the flowers or buds nearer the trunk, these somewhat further-out flowers do not always feed back into the tree as directly as do their closer in kindred. We argued that while the moral philosophies of Kant, Hobbes, or Aquinas are invaluable in enabling us to reflect on morality with greater clarity, insight, and rigor, they do not always form the self-conscious foundation for everyday moral choice of the vast majority of people.

As the trunk of the tree grows, it must of course attend to its own nourishment if it is to be a strong and effective support for the branches it will send out from itself. As we grow as moral beings we must become conscious of our own selves, of who we are, how we define ourselves as healthy persons—sexually, biologically, medically, spiritually, rationally, and emotionally. Without that strong sense of self we cannot contribute to or be fed by relationships with others. We concentrated in our next section, therefore, on the moral problems involved in a growing consciousness of selfhood.

But selfhood cannot be achieved without a dialectical relation to other selves. The self is not self-sufficient. To become whole it must reach out to nurture and be nurtured in turn by other people. A trunk without branches may grow tall but it would be bare, spare, and desolate. It needs to feed itself into branches and be fed by their decoration and protection. We traced, therefore, the interrelationships which people have with those closest to them, concentrating on the tensions involved in maintaining a sense of individual integrity while remaining sensitive to the needs and demands of others with their own claims to individual integrity. The dilemmas of loving others sexually, familially, and in friendship were explored.

As the trunk branches out, branches themselves split and multiply. The healthier the tree the more profuse and diverse become the branchings, both opening upward and outward in a network of extraordinarily complex interconnections. While each twig is ultimately linked with the trunk, it becomes harder and harder to keep the links visible. Just so with the flowering of the person into a myriad of relations with other selves. There is a certain beauty, even utility, in being an integral part of a complex whole, but it becomes harder and harder to see how everyday decision making bears on or is affected by the multitudinous branches of one's social, political, economic, and ecological web. We have tried to discern and map out some of the linkages among people and the effect of their moral decisions on social, political, and economic structures.

Nevertheless the linkages remain and the tug of moral obligation can be

felt as strongly in an economic decision about federal budget cutting as it can be in a decision to break off a relationship with someone to whom one has made previous binding commitments.

One of the most pressing and controversial areas of moral discussion today is the relation between moral certainty and tolerance for moral differences. Another area of heated discussion centers around the relation between "private" morality and public morality. When the two areas intersect passions are stirred which promise to affect not only personal life styles but also public policy. We hear much in the press about the decline of morality in western societies that were ostensibly once profoundly religious and whose moral norms flowed from a Judeo-Christian framework. The alleged decline of "family" values, of "rugged individualism," pride in craftsmanship, self-reliance, respect for sexual restraint, and the virtue of hard work is decried. Much of this decline is traced to the rise of so-called "secular humanism," a set of values and beliefs *supposedly* rooted in a relativism which permits anything to be done as long as the individual desires it. The values of secular humanism, its critics claim, are a tolerance for diversity and a smug rejection of anything old-fashioned or traditional.

The clash between the defenders of the "traditional" values and their opponents (whatever the merits of each side) represents an age-old controversy between relativists and absolutists, some historical and contemporary examples of which we have mentioned in the text. The debate clearly has more than academic interest because many people see the values of their way of life and the life of their society caught up in the outcome of the controversy. Without denying that values must be grounded in some set of assumptions about the "absolute" nature of reality, we have maintained that a pluralism of perspectives on that reality is probably inevitable. This means in practical terms a tolerance for diverse moral choices within the general boundaries of rational discourse and humane consideration for others, as well as an ongoing exploration of the boundaries. To be more specific, to defend the dominance of particular values within sectors of private and public life requires the kind of moral awareness to which this text intends to contribute. As a thousand branches of the tree of moral development flourish, it becomes imperative, if one wishes to set forth a case for the relatively greater appropriateness of one branch, to understand not only its roots but its relation to the other branches with which, at some deeper level, it shares a common heritage. It may be the case, as the absolutists claim, that some branches are more firmly grounded, more directly linked to the roots, more capable of supporting life, than are other branches. But this claim can only be made persuasively from *within* the network of intertwining, tangled diversity. No branch can claim *without argument* or as self-evident a privileged, transcendent, or absolutist standpoint. It must make its claims heard by its power to appeal to other standpoints on the basis of coherence, reasonableness, consistency, viability, and "wisdom" about the human condition. We hope that one result of this text will be a greater sensitivity to and awareness of a mul-

titude of moral standpoints and the pluralism of perspectives. The essential moral task is to understand the "logic" of each perspective, to grasp its assumptions and convictions about the source, purpose, and evaluation of moral behavior. Without this understanding, no defense of one's own moral stance is possible, let alone a critical evaluation of others. Simply appealing to "traditional" values or raising the spectre of moral collapse if absolute moral standards are not invoked bypasses the primary elements in moral responsibility. No moral system is so self-evidently true that it can dispense with the task of articulating its presuppositions and arguing for their logical consequences in moral decisions.

Simply talking about "values" or even "traditional values" is no solution to social or personal "decline." It is necessary to understand how moral philosophies develop, how they are informed and nourished, and how they guide a multitude of choices in many different areas of life. No one is excused from the obligation of moral reflection since life forces choices. But the people who have immersed themselves in the history of moral thought and have explored the many complicating and complex dimensions of moral choice in personal and social life will make a far more important contribution to the discussion of values than those who act simply upon reflex, instinct, or uninformed faith.

In addition to the debate between absolutists and relativists, traditionalists and secularists, there is the problem, unperceived by many, of the growing split between personal and social morality. It is quite common for many of us, upon hearing the word morality, to think almost exclusively of individual responsibilities to ourselves or to those persons with whom we are in direct contact. I know it is moral to tell the truth to my children and immoral to abuse the trust my boss has placed in me by cheating. Morality in this sense means individual uprightness and integrity. It is far more difficult for many people to see morality as reflected in the work of social systems and institutions. Consequently, it is difficult for many people to see their own responsibility for the decisions such institutions and systems make.

It has been argued by some that, for example, in dealing with poverty it is moral if I can bestow a gift upon a poor person but outside the scope of morality for an institution to channel money or aid from a richer segment of society to a poorer. In fact, some argue that morality is not being served when problems like poverty, injustice, unemployment, medical care, and the like are handled by institutions and structures rather than by individuals solely on a one-to-one basis. Their objection seems to be based on the belief that morality is a direct personal responsibility of one person for another. This means, to belabor our image of the tree once more, that each branch should touch every other branch directly if it is to bear moral responsibility for it.

In the latter part of the text we have clearly taken exception to this view. We have regarded the institutions and structures of a social order as vehicles through which individuals in community address the needs of people

not in immediate contact with each member individually. Our underlying assumption has been that we as individuals are morally responsible in various degrees for all people whom our actions can affect even indirectly. Clearly the creation and maintenance of an institution is the result of human action. If an institution, such as the Congress of the United States, in turn acts in ways that have a direct effect on people, we as individuals bear a moral responsibility for the Congress, through electing representatives to it, lobbying for or against bills before it, and so forth.

It is obvious, of course, that in taking responsibility for institutional or social morality we find it difficult to trace the effects of our action through to their ultimate consequences. Personal choices are taken up along with hundreds of other choices and factors in determining the final outcome of a policy. As a result, many people become frustrated at not being able to control directly the practical effects of their intentions. An example often cited is that of the American welfare system, in which, many argue, good intentions have led to disastrous results because of the many layers of institutional bureaucracy necessary to carry out welfare policy. Whether their arguments for its ineffectiveness are accurate or not, many people feel that both donor and recipient of welfare are morally compromised because the system is impersonal and institutional. It is not uncommon for someone to respond generously to a single individual in need and to withhold support to many in need if that support is mandated by law and transmitted through social agencies.

We have taken the position that if one is to reject the moral rightness of using institutions and social structures to carry out moral goals, one must do so not only on the acknowledged assumption that only individual to individual morality is appropriate but also only after a thorough evaluation of the actual consequences of individual versus social morality. There *are* forceful arguments that can be made in defense of employing structures and institutions as the *most* effective way of implementing moral policy for large numbers of persons. To meet the moral challenges of the 1980s will require a thorough knowledge of the ways in which social institutions *have* been used as agents of social change and instruments of social policy. It will require an unprejudiced evaluation of the effects of social ethics on concrete groups of people and problems. Moral simplisms, unexamined, will not suffice. Only someone trained in the fundamentals of moral reflection will be able to penetrate behind the slogans and rhetoric likely to fill the political arena on this issue.

We have identified in our closing words just two of the living issues in ethics likely to be on the public agenda in the immediate future. There will be more such issues hardly anticipated at present. The purpose of this text will have been realized if you move out into the world of moral choice, private and public, with a deeper understanding of the need for roots in the moral wisdom of rational reflection and the experiences of others and a sensitivity for and appreciation of the variety of moral philosophies growing out of those common roots.