

Interview with Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes - 4

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“P”.: Is there any fundamental problem you have seen with the way bioethics functions today?

“Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes”: When we speak of “how bioethics functions today”, we speak, first of all, of a huge network of scholarly institutions. These are attached either to medical schools, or to medical humanities departments, or else to philosophical faculties. Here medical students are introduced to the moral quandaries of their profession. So far, so good. But here also the so-called bioethics experts are trained. These experts then serve as consultants on all levels of health care institutions, law making, policy design right down to the nitty gritty of conflict resolution in the hospital, when the interests and commitments of hospital owners, hospital managers, the medical staff, patients and their families are hard to reconcile. These experts have an enormous influence.



What kind of moral principles informs their guidance? How can they establish a just balance when those involved in, and affected by, a decision subscribe to different values, or when they prioritize those values differently, or even define these values in mutually incompatible ways? Modern developed liberal societies, after all, not only are characterized by moral pluralism. They also encourage an individual pursuit of self realization which celebrates and nurtures that pluralism.

The problem presented by such pluralism is generally underestimated. There is a passionate commitment to maintain some Kantian faith in the existence of certain rationally well-founded, and therefore universally binding moral norms, under the protective umbrella of which everyone can pursue their diversely particular ethical visions. When the unavailability of such an umbrella was recognized, certain middle level principles were advertized as a common bond unifying competing theories about what should count as “universally binding”. Such supposed principles were identified already in 1979 by Beauchamp and Childress: respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

After unparalleled prominence for decades, bioethicists finally noticed that these seemingly shared commitments generate a practicable moral consensus only as long as they remain (once again) very general, and when the issue of their hierarchy is left unaddressed. Medical decision making, obviously, will differ, when autonomy takes precedence over beneficence, as opposed to being subjected to beneficence, and the same holds for any pair of these concepts. As Engelhardt has been arguing for decades as well, the claim undergirding the very pursuit of moral

consensus, i.e. the assumption that there exists one universally shared moral reason, is unfounded. Such claims are even quite implausible, given more than two and a half thousand years of quarrel among moral philosophers. Once one takes seriously the fact of moral pluralism, the authority accorded to bioethics experts world-wide presents a puzzle. This puzzle manifests a resolute willingness to let such experts spell out for bio-medicine whatever ethical persuasion is (as a matter of fact) endorsed and legally enforced in any given society.

The problem with this solution is that its lacking conceptual foundations are never admitted. Bioethical expertise is presented instead in a way that suggests valid guidance. Mere conventions are advertised as morally binding. Such misrepresentation is, of course, unproblematic for people who endorse, or are at peace with, Europe's dominant liberal mainstream. That same mis-representation becomes a problem however for all others, and in particular for all members of traditional faiths. This is why Orthodox Christians need to insist on the unfoundedness of the moral claims such "experts" advance. We need to deflate that public culture of bioethics. Only in this way can we keep our own dealings with bio-medicine in line with their faith. Actually, our journal's commitment to highlight the deep discord that separates already the various Christian medical moralities promotes just such deflation.

"P".: We know that you work with H. Tristram Engelhardt who is, like you, a convert to Orthodoxy and, as you already mentioned, enjoys world-wide recognition in the field of bioethics. Tell us a little, if you would, about the sort of person he is and what it is like to work with him.

"C. D.-H.": The story of my own work with Engelhardt is not really typical. We met as friends in a Hegel seminar offered by Klaus Hartmann at Bonn University in around 1969. Ever since then, both Susan and he have been my closest friends, even if usually at long distance. Herman's kindness and generosity of inviting me to conferences, and Susan's self-sacrificial dedication in translating my Germanic ramblings into a thesis and a proof which an English reader could make head and tail of, all of that slowly taught me how to write for a reader, rather than just for myself. During their frequent and extended "rest-and-work" visits to our house in Germany, especially in the time after my children had left to study, Herman and I would talk philosophy incessantly, while Susan and Michael (my husband) would occasionally remind me of the more earthly chores such as cooking or getting shirts washed and ironed.

On our long walks through the fields, Herman always humbly acted as a friend, and it took me much too long to discover that he was actually giving me private

tutoring, and one that was much more focused than what I had ever encountered at the university. He always knew where he was going, and thus could separate philosophical substance from noise. He systematically played the role of the crazy Texan (Viking, Samurai) or argued like an Orthodox Jew, a Confucian, a libertarian, — just in order to wrench me loose from my Kant-infused European infatuation with “universal moral values”. When he and Susan became Orthodox, the challenge became ever greater. In the end, and with the help of much Divine grace, the two were able to lead me out of an impasse in which I was caught, so that Susan became my godmother.

Both have ever since continued to provide me with guidance, both about how to reframe my personality and in view of the English Orthodox literature they brought over on their flights. Almost my whole Orthodox library has grown from their generous gifts. Of course, once I began to live and write as an “Orthodox author”, Herman has become ever more critical and severe. His demands, both in view of personal and professional performance, are at times hard for a proud German ex-Protestant to take. A good cure for self pity, one might say. But at the same time, they both surround me with so much love and parental care that I fall silent and try to scandalize them a little less.

Much more typical are the experiences of his “slaves”, Mark Cherry and Ana Iltis, who also formed part of our group in Alba Iulia. They were not only his students of many years, but they also had “sold themselves into indentured slavery” while working as his assistants. Enrolled in an unlimited 24 hours a day and 7 days a week service under a master who needed at most five hours of sleep, they suffered through the full thrust of his untiring high-pressure leadership. But they gained an experience as editors, writers, teachers, and world-wide presenters, which later qualified them for prominent academic positions. They had to learn to “obey” in order to “rule”, and, in spite of the hardships, they never thought of asking to “be released” before having succeeded professionally, and having become Orthodox as well. Only by drafting such intensive support can Engelhardt manage all the journals, book series, international conferences, unmercenary support of innumerable friends’ academic pursuits, as well as all the seminars and retreats he offers, both in universities and in the service of a whole panoply of Orthodox bishops in America.

What kind of a person he is? More than one could describe in a short response. A genius, who brings together into one coherent philosophical system his many, widely diversified scholarly interests, whose profound insights his readers forever underestimate, who knows every answer before a question is even asked, blessed with an unbelievable memory and a superb sense of humor. He is a Southern

Gentleman whose manners reflect the kindness of his heart and whose thundering presence fills every open space. He is an unconditionally loyal friend, a devoted (even if extremely demanding) husband, a generous father and grandfather, teacher, colleague. I am ever stunned by his ability to antagonize his opponents intellectually while smothering them with love on a personal level.

At social gatherings, he will discern in an instant, whom he should scare away as “beyond help” and whom to bewitch into converting. As editor, he knows at once which papers to discard right away and where the obvious deficiencies are worth mending. Always able to forgive, always holding onto those with whom he ever established contact, forever grateful for any favor rendered, of an unbelievable largesse to friends and churches, an obedient slave to his spiritual father. In general, ever since he became Orthodox, a man who sacrifices himself (and also his dear wife), his slaves and – as far as possible – his friends, for the Church. Or rather, a man who seeks to involve his Orthodox slaves, friends and colleagues in the great blessing of partaking in that service.

[To Be Continued]