

# Wisdom of the Heart: the Meaning and Challenge of Morality

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At the 2009 Parliament of World Religions in December in Melbourne, Catholic representative Fr. Hans Küng, one of the most prominent of contemporary theologians, presented the case for what he called a global economic ethics. Granted the existence of a global economy, it is urgently necessary to develop a corresponding ethical code to ensure that the global economy is properly regulated.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise rampant self-interest, human greed and self-aggrandisement will get out of hand and run the risk of creating another world-wide and even more disastrous depression than the one we have just encountered.



**Professor Hans Küng.**  
Courtesy Parliament of  
World's Religions

These days it is common practice to have codes of ethics for various branches of industry, for medicine, nursing, advertising, and so on. So it makes sense to develop an appropriate code of ethics for the global economy, which will have some sort of international coercive power. This raises several questions relevant to the intent of this article.

1) What is meant by the term ethics? Popular notions of ethics are as varied as the proverbial man-on-the-street. In a survey conducted some years ago, sociologist Raymond Baumhart elicited these sorts of replies about the meaning of ethics from business people: ethics has to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong; ethics has to do with my religious beliefs; being moral is doing what the law requires; morality consists of the standards accepted in our society.<sup>2</sup>

Our feelings can sometimes be a pointer to what is morally right or wrong, but feelings are notoriously fickle and cannot constitute a reliable guide to morality. The difference between religion and morality has already been discussed on this website. Nor can morality be identified with legality. Laws sometimes confirm moral standards, it is true, but laws come from outside ourselves, morality is from within and the two are often in disagreement. Doing what everybody does is not a sound moral guide either. Commonly based moral judgments can, and often are, simply wrong; even whole societies can become morally corrupt – take Nazi Germany for example.<sup>3</sup>

2) These varied answers at least show that ethics is about right and wrong, about standards of behaviour, about being moral, in short, about *morality*. This then raises the further question concerning the relationship between ethics and morality. Sometimes the words are used interchangeably. Morality (from the Latin *mos/mores* = customs, translating the Greek *ethos* = ‘character’) thus describes the character, the values and customs holding society together; in other words it is about how people actually behave, without implying any value judgment. However, in the strict sense, which occupies us here, morality is less about how people actually

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<sup>1</sup> *The Age*, Melbourne, 8/12/2009

<sup>2</sup> *Markkula Center for applied ethics*, <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications>

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of these sorts of issues, see my *The Main Ethical Theories* on this website.

behave and primarily about how they *should* behave. It refers to *behaviour* in terms of whether it is good or bad. The term morality thus carries with it an evaluative sense. The term ethics on the other hand strictly speaking concerns the *formal study* of this good or bad behaviour. So we speak of moral philosophy, moral theology or often today Christian ethics. It might even be said that morality is ethics in action, and it is with morality that we are primarily concerned in this article.

3) A third question that is frequently asked is about how we can encourage morality and lead people to act morally. It is one thing to know what is right and good, quite another to actually do it. Knowledge is certainly an enormous advantage, but it does not guarantee performance. It is this issue which we have designated *the challenge* of morality and which this article will specifically address in due course.

## **1. The Meaning of Morality**

As has been seen, the words ‘moral’ and ‘morality’ refer in the first instance to human behaviour, according as it is judged to be good or bad. The difficulty is to determine what behaviour is good, or appropriate to the human person, and what behaviour is bad, or inappropriate. How is this to be assessed?

### ***Vision of the Goal of Life and the Meaning of the Human Person***

The judgment of the morality of human conduct must ultimately depend on the vision one has of the goal of human life and the meaning of the human person. If one accepts power as the goal of life, one will decide what is appropriate or inappropriate action in the light of that aim



and in consequence will run the risk of having a cavalier attitude to what is entailed in the grasp for power and in consideration of other persons, particularly if they get in the way of one's quest. Similarly, the choice of pleasure or wealth or fame as a person's goal in life will colour what such a person considers good or bad and the decisions made in everyday life.

Again, if one thinks, as does philosopher Peter Singer, that there is nothing distinctive about the capacities and interests of humans in comparison with those of many other animals, one may indeed conclude with him that the moral obligations we have to other people impose on us similar obligations towards at least some members of other species and do not oblige us to every

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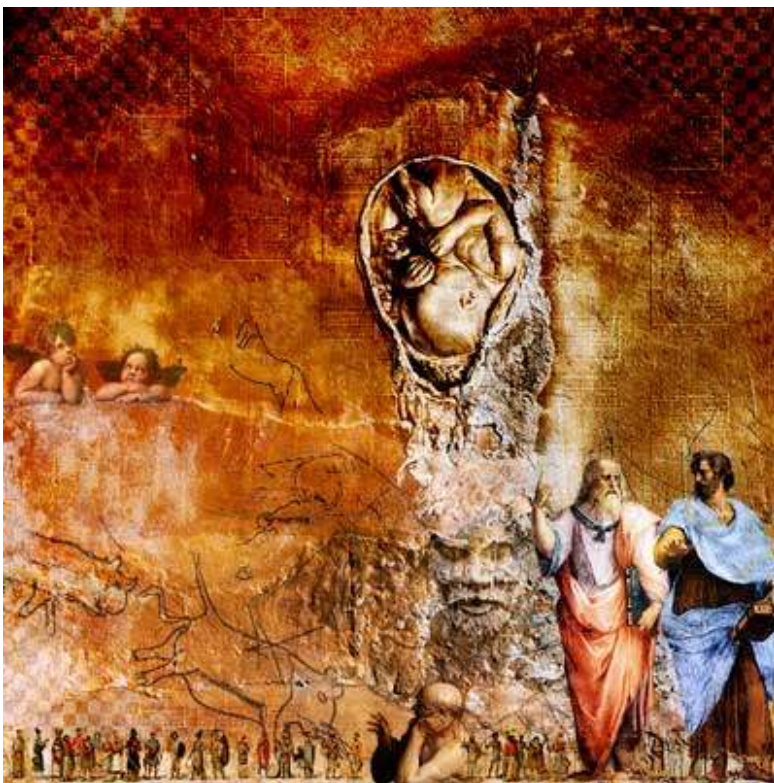
other member of our own species.<sup>4</sup> The concept we have of the nature of the human person thus leads to different conclusions about what is morally good or bad.

<sup>4</sup> *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest* (Text Publishing Company, 1993), p. 174

**“Not only is the human person the centre and crown of everything in the universe, but the cause of humanity is the basic criterion of morality.”**

In Aristotle’s classical vision of the goal of life and of the human reality, there is a contrast between what human beings are and what they can become if they are helped to realise their human potential. Human nature left to itself, he thought, is out of harmony with living a life befitting a human person and needs to be transformed by the guidance of reason and experience into human nature as it is meant to be in the light of its goal, which he saw as true happiness or personal well-being. Thus, in a nutshell, *living a life worthy of a human being in the light of that goal* is what is meant by morality.

This pattern of right or moral living came to influence later philosophical thought and was accepted, although transformed in the process, by the European Middle Ages from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In simple terms the transformation of Greek philosophical thought was brought about because the mediaeval theologians looked at all reality and interpreted it through the prism of their Christian faith.



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The impact of this religious vision on morality is clearly evident in two points. First, the goal of human striving, that is, human well-being or fulfilment, is not merely a this-worldly matter but, in the Christian vision, is ultimately realised in the possession of the supreme good, God himself sought for his own sake.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, morality or living a life that befits a human being is also transformed by the faith vision which sees the human person as a child of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ and called to live eternally with God.<sup>6</sup>

Morality, then, in broad terms means *living a life worthy of a human being destined to fulfilment as a person*, both as a citizen of this world and as a cherished member of the family of

God.<sup>7</sup> Not only is the human person the centre and crown of everything in

the universe, but the cause of humanity is the basic criterion of morality. Against the static

<sup>5</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre discusses some of the implications of this in his *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1984), pp. 52-53

<sup>6</sup> This accords with the formula of St. Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century) that what is morally wrong (before God) is only what is contrary to human well-being, that is, the realisation of authentic ‘being human’ with all its human and Christian goods and values. See the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 122

<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this article, I will not elaborate on the second consideration here. Although religious persons have, or should have, added motivation for being moral, they do not have a moral agenda that is substantially different from anybody else. I have already addressed the question of religion and morality on this website (see my article *Religion and Morality*).

For a discussion of what is distinctive of Christian morality see my ‘Faith and the Moral Life’, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, July 2001, Vol. 78, 3, pp. 291- 299

conception of human nature common in past times, today we see the human person in dynamic terms, as self-transcending, ever responding to new challenges and adapting to the constant process of change.

Against the idealist or exclusively spiritual view of the human person as a ‘ghost in a machine’, imprisoned in the body, a view stemming from Plato, the modern understanding of the human person is of one who is essentially body/spirit, a ‘being-in-the-body’ and through the body a ‘being-in-the-world’. In place of the exaggerated individualism of the past, today we see the human person as essentially a social being, a ‘being-with-others’. The human person is not a passive spectator but essentially one who acts freely and responsibly to, in a sense, create the self and the world in which we live. For Aquinas morals is about men and women precisely as having control over their own behaviour, that is, on the level of responsible conduct.<sup>8</sup>

This fundamental criterion of morality needs to be applied both to human actions and to human persons.

### ***Human actions abstractly considered***

A long ethical tradition has maintained that what distinguishes human conduct from that of other creatures is our ability to choose objectives and to work in a rational way for their achievement. Our actions are human actions precisely insofar as they are a conscious and free seeking of some end or goal, or, as Aquinas puts it, insofar as they proceed from deliberate willing.<sup>9</sup> In this tradition moral action is identified with human action. Within the limits of our human condition, which entails a constant struggle to free ourselves from conscious or unconscious factors that cloud judgment and tend to fetter our will, we are in control of our actions. Ideally, we are free to choose this or that course of action, we can act or simply refrain from acting.



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But we are also responsible for our actions. When our action aims at some purpose which is in conflict with human dignity, and so is immoral, not only is our intention immoral because of this purpose, but all that we do in pursuit of it is immoral too. A man who gives food to a poor woman with the sole purpose of seducing her acts immorally in giving her the food she so badly needs. In normal circumstances giving food to the needy is obviously good, but when one does so with the sole purpose of seduction the very giving of the food becomes an evil action. The bad intention makes the whole act bad.

By the same token a good intention does not justify the choice of evil means, that is, strategies that conflict with human dignity. An evil act does not become good just because it is done for a

<sup>8</sup> Prologue to the second part of his *Summa Theologiae*

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1, 1-3

good purpose. This is traditional teaching among Catholic moral theologians. As Pope John Paul II put it,

The morality of acts is defined by the relationship of our freedom with the authentic good... Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with our true good... The rational ordering of the human act to the good in its truth and the voluntary pursuit of that good, known by reason, constitute morality.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Acting Person***

Human acts do not of course exist in the abstract. They exist as actions of human persons in concrete circumstances. Acts cannot be divorced from the person acting and from the person's intention in acting. For this reason it is of vital importance to consider the acting person rather than just human action in the abstract. People are essentially rational beings and hence human actions must be understood in terms of relationships and community.

Central to the notion of person is also the thrust to reach out beyond the self to all reality, including especially other persons. And in reaching out to others we transcend ourselves. Because of this power and need of self-transcendence, a new centre of being is discovered, namely the good of others, and ultimately the great centre of all being, the Good, the Truth, that is God himself.

This reaching out to others, this self-communication, involves more than a simple deliberate act. It is rather a mode of self-actualisation in the world, a complex relational reality. It is a complex of attitudes, dispositions, habits and acts that expresses, however imperfectly, the person's stance before the self and in relation to other persons. Using a negative example, Richard McCormick makes an important distinction: although adultery can be considered as a single act occurring in a brief time span, integrally considered it 'includes a larger experience: the meetings, thoughts, desires, plans, effects as foreseen, the vacillations, and so on'. In short, 'adultery is a whole relationship brought to this culmination', and 'the entire experience' is to be understood as 'the full meaning of the action'. Although the human act of adultery as it is commonly understood involves this deliberate physical action, it is also much more than this.<sup>11</sup> Human or moral action is more than a physical unity; it is a human unity, a configuration of a person's life in some particular aspect.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Conclusion to this section***

Acknowledging the important contribution of the behavioural and theological sciences to today's more penetrating analysis of the meaning and dynamics of human freedom, which is at the root of human action, Pope John Paul II made the point that human action is ultimately '*a decision about oneself*'. Beyond choices in regard to particular objects, the acting person is able to make a much deeper choice regarding the very meaning and direction of his/her existence.<sup>13</sup> This explains the emphasis placed today on 'the importance of certain choices which *shape* a person's entire life and which serve as bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop'.

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<sup>10</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, n.72

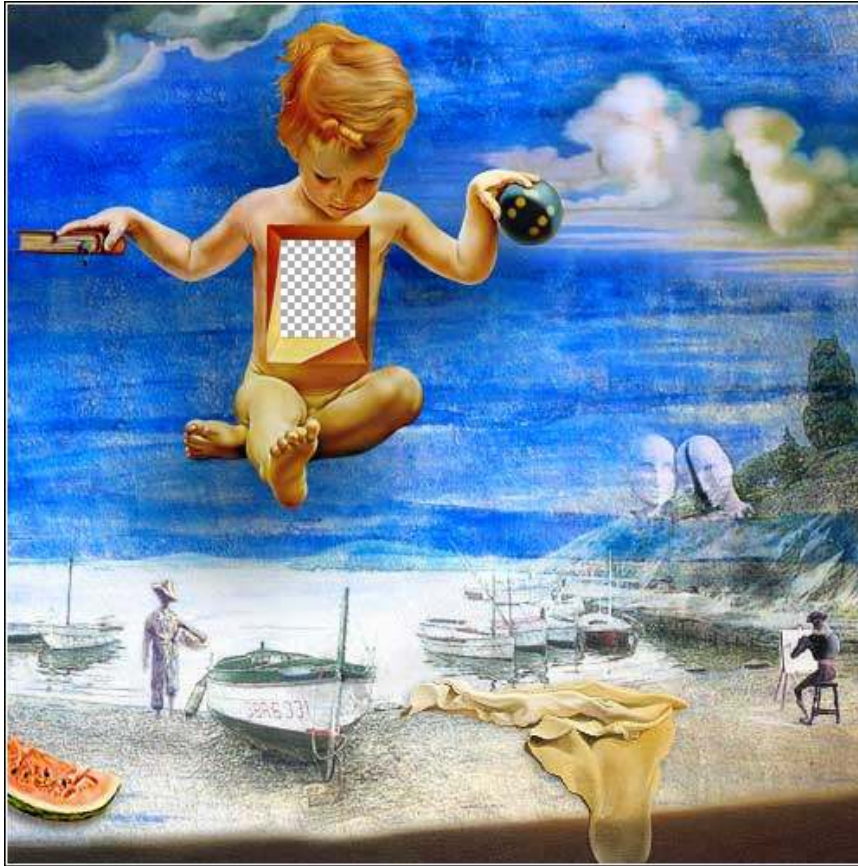
<sup>11</sup> *Notes on Moral Theology 1965 through 1980* (University Press of America: Washington D.C., 1981), p.304

<sup>12</sup> Norbert Rigali, 'The Moral Act', *Horizons* 10/2 (1983, 253-256

<sup>13</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n.65

<sup>14</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n.65

This shaping of the person's entire life in response to the universal magnet of the Good is formed by and actually exercised in the particular everyday free decisions that a person



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makes<sup>14</sup>, decisions concerning either the person in himself/herself, for example, to exercise patience or courage, self-denial, humility, or that person's stance towards others in a relationship of justice and love towards them<sup>15</sup>.

The fully human or moral act, therefore, is that configuration of a person's life that is capable of forming and of giving expression to this radical stance both in regard to oneself and in a relationship of justice and love towards others, and ultimately God.

## **2. The Challenge of Morality**

It is an obvious fact that it is possible to know a lot about the meaning of morality, yet fail dismally to live morally, in other words, a gap can exist between intellectual knowledge and living a life worthy of a human person. How can this gap be bridged? This is what I mean by the challenge of morality.

One answer often given is that law provides the necessary incentive for moral living. The law of the state can indeed enforce conformity as far as external actions are concerned, but coercive civil law in the first instance aims, not at enforcing morality but at safeguarding and protecting public order. In many areas of course coercive laws do in fact try to enforce elements of the moral law. However, the reason for this is not that these elements are applications of the moral law but that public order requires that at least certain minimal standards of public morality be enforced. Otherwise basic human rights would be trampled upon and living in community would be rendered impossible. Thus public order justifies the criminalising of homicide, paedophilia, armed robbery, terrorism and similar grave violations of human rights. The point

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<sup>15</sup> From a Christian viewpoint the 'decision about oneself' which 'qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God... is a question of the decision of faith', which comes from within, from the heart, and by which one makes a total and free self-commitment to God. By the decision of faith a person's life is shaped in a particular way and leads to the adoption of a stance towards others in a relationship of justice and love. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 66-67

that concerns us here is that morality cannot be coerced by law or by any external intervention. It can only come from within the person.

Moral education is obviously indispensable for the development of all individual persons. Children learn to differentiate right from wrong through the teaching and example of parents, teachers, ministers of religion, and significant others in their lives. Even civil laws, friends, sports and professional groups have an educative role in the moral formation of young persons and other community members. But all these remain external influences. They are all meant to lead towards personal responsibility for each one's own life. The directives and values learnt from others are intended in due course to be internalised as part of the individual person's own inner moral attitudes, convictions and good moral habits. In this way the individual is gradually equipped to make his/her own decisions about living a life worthy of a human person. There is no other path to morality.

In practice some people, perhaps many, are to a greater or less degree the fruit of their social milieu rather than free and responsible moral agents. They remain morally immature, failing to have made much progress in the moral life. A few give indications that they are quite amoral, seemingly having no real moral sense and apparently feeling no qualms about the harm done to others by their selfishness or some other unworthy motivation. Perhaps those in our community who take pleasure in attacking innocent people or who for no apparent reason destroy individual or public property are in this category. Whatever of this, morality is a challenge to answer, a goal to achieve, a task to embark upon. The success of this enterprise in our lives is the measure of our genuine humanness as morally mature men and women.

The challenge to live morally as befits a human being thus involves personal responsibility. Moral responsibility requires of the individual first of all to ensure that as far as possible one's moral decisions are in accord with *objective truth*. As Pope John Paul II says,

the maturity and responsibility for these judgments – and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject – are not measured by the liberation of conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions.<sup>16</sup>

Moral rules and norms learnt in the course of life and hopefully made one's own are helps in seeking objective truth and can sometimes determine it decisively, but they often provide only a limited indication of it and are not always and in every circumstance true. They enlighten and inform the searcher after moral truth, who will normally be more or less conscious of them, but the quest is ultimately not just a question of the application of something already spelled out in rules. It is a search, a discovery, of moral truth in the light of what is presented in particular challenging situations, with all its attendant circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

As we have said, the moral shape of every person's life is determined by and exercised in the everyday moral decisions made in relation to oneself and in relationships with others. The object of these decisions, for example, patience or fortitude or other-centred acts of justice or love, are the intermediate goals that need to be realised in the quest for one's ultimate aim in life. The challenge then is to establish a pattern of good behaviour, so that one comes to make

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<sup>16</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n.61.2

<sup>17</sup> See my article, 'Truth in Life and in Action', *Australian EJournal of Theology*, August 2004, Issue 3. Moral relativism in all its forms rejects the notion of objective truth and sees moral judgments as no more than expressions of prevailing cultural norms and practices. In its postmodern form relativism claims that reason itself is no more than a tool of patriarchy or cultural oppression.

the right choices concerning living as befits a human person in the normal course of events, in other words as a matter of habit without involving too much angst or difficulty. Good habits such as this are not innate; they must be acquired in the course of one's growth towards personal maturity by oft-repeated good everyday choices till they become established qualities of the character of the person.

These positive qualities of character are what have been traditionally called virtues. As moral philosopher Bernadette Tobin lucidly explains<sup>18</sup>, they have been marked out by the Greeks under the following concepts: 'courage (rather than recklessness or cowardliness), temperateness (rather than self-indulgence or self-abnegation), generosity (rather than stinginess or prodigality), a sense of one's own worth (rather than vanity or false modesty), good temper (rather than irascibility or sheer impassivity), affability (rather than boastfulness or obsequiousness), ambition, truthfulness, tact, fairness, friendliness, justice'.<sup>19</sup> Unless we have developed these moral qualities of character, we can neither consistently recognise the right life-goals nor are we willingly disposed to do so. For this these virtues need a 'seeing eye', a practical guide in making the decisions that actually realise these life-goals. Aristotle called this guiding influence the virtue of *practical wisdom*. The inner meaning of this virtue might better be brought out by calling it *wisdom of the heart*.

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This virtue of discernment and actuation empowers the human person to listen to the voice of experience, to seek counsel where needed from wiser heads, to look to the future to anticipate difficulties and size up the foreseeable consequences of actions, in such a way as to reach the practical decision that fits the particular complex of circumstances in order to achieve the appropriate virtuous life-goal. The person armed with wisdom of the heart is thus disposed to make a concrete decision regarding *the means to take* to achieve the goal intended – in other words, the best way to do the virtuous action (justice, courage, affability, devotion to one's family, etc) here and now.<sup>20</sup> It is thus rightly included among the moral virtues, even though in itself it is more intellectual in nature and function.

<sup>18</sup> Bernadette Tobin, 'Challenging our Inventiveness: Ethics Today', *Australasian Catholic Record*, April 2000, Vol 77, 2, p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> In the Christian tradition, to these moral virtues must be added the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which seek to perfect personal relationships with God.

<sup>20</sup> St. Thomas makes a subtle point in regard to this. For him moral truth in the strict sense is not conformity to objective reality as such, which is the truth proper to conscience, but harmony with what he calls the individual's 'right appetite', that is, it is the truth of being in harmony with the person who is rightly disposed to the good both in the self and in solidarity with others by the presence of the moral virtues (*Summa Theologiae*, 1-11, 57, 5 ad 3). It might be said that moral truth, as Shakespeare suggested, means being 'true' to oneself. It is practical truth, the truth of life and of action in all its human complexity. The judgment of conscience has the truth of conformity or disconformity with reality, that is, with objective truth. The truth of the judgment of conscience is more of the speculative than the practical type. The virtue of practical wisdom, however, although it is properly concerned with practical truth, in order to merit the title of moral virtue has also to be assured of the objective moral goodness of the action chosen as far as this is possible in often contingent circumstances. Because of the infinite variability of human action, certitude in moral judgments is less than speculative or even scientific certitude. The most that can be hoped for, and all that is required for practical wisdom, is certitude that *excludes the reasonable fear of being in error*. For Aquinas practical wisdom ensures the truth, not directly of

It may be thought that this view of human living is impractical and purely theoretical. However, if in the course of development towards maturity the virtues are presented by parents and educators as they should be, the good of virtue, the value of the goals of the moral virtues, will exercise their own attraction. All human persons are drawn towards goodness and truth strongly enough to outweigh the attraction of evil and untruth. In their hearts people, I believe, want to do what is good and true, but not all become virtuous because they fail to achieve moral maturity. They remain morally immature because they opt for false goals in life or, as Tobin says, ‘waste their lives in the ardent pursuit of what is trivial or unimportant.... Though it is impossible to give a general answer to the question “what is trivial or unimportant in life?”, some things are pretty clear: social advancement is too dearly bought at the cost of friendship, wealth at the cost of health, the good opinion of the world at the cost of integrity or charity or justice, professional advancement at the cost of family ties.’<sup>21</sup>

The virtue of wisdom of the heart is not limited to those who are highly intellectual or sophisticated or well educated. Many are wise without being clever and decent without having graduated from the best schools. And this is especially so if we believe in the in-dwelling presence of the Spirit of God, who breathes where he wills in all persons of good will. Our personal experience of course leaves us in no doubt that we do not always act virtuously. St. Paul put his finger on it when he said: ‘I do not understand my own behaviour. I do not act as I mean to, but I do the things I hate. While I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the law as good’ (Romans, 7: 15-16). Our failures may result from some lack of courage or patience, of justice or love, or perhaps a somewhat blindfolded practical wisdom, but hopefully they are not for the most part serious and do not mean that we lose the moral virtues and cease to be in the main virtuous people.

To conclude, the requirements of the moral virtues both inspire and enlighten us about the living of a life worthy of the human persons we are. And thus we are enabled to answer the challenge of morality. ‘This is true whether the circumstances in which we find ourselves are (on the one hand) ones about which a sense of history ought to make us cautious or (on the other hand) genuinely new and unfamiliar ones (such as those on offer from the new reproductive technologies and the new genetic interventions)’; or, we might add, from the need to protect the environment, to deal with natural or man-made disasters, the ravages of famine, or whatever has to be faced in our life. The focus on moral virtues ‘suggests that, though some ways of acting are incompatible with a life worthy of a human being, the real challenges lie not so much in avoiding those ways of acting but rather in finding or inventing successful ways of living a life worthy of a human being’.<sup>22</sup>

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the judgment of conscience, which precedes it, but of the judgment of election, the moral decision. This is vital for living as befits a human person. See my *Truth in Life and Action*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Challenging our Inventiveness’, p.154-5

<sup>22</sup> Tobin, ‘Challenging our Inventiveness’ p.155