

Existential Ethics: The Case for Optimism and Commitment

The topic this morning was suggested by a member at UU Congregation of the Chesapeake in Prince Frederick, where I filled the pulpit about three months ago. Our conversation drifted into the realm of ethics, and as the member tried to state her position, she sort of got stuck verbally, like all of us sometimes do. In her frustration, she just blurted out, "What the hell *is* 'ethics,' anyway?!" We laughed, and went on; but she set me to thinking.

This morning, I'd like to share with you some thoughts, primarily about "existential ethics," but also about "non-existential ethics," because both are important. By existential and non-existential ethics, I mean the principles by which we determine right from wrong (that's the "ethics" part), on matters that can spell the literal or virtual end of humanity (that's "existential"), or on matters that are still of vital importance to our sense of meaning and well-being (the "non-existential"). So, by "ethics," we're talking about principles – the principles we use to tell right from wrong. For an example of a good list of ethical principles, we need look no further than the back of our order of service today. "Together with our lived experience, our ethics help us determine our values. But ethics are more permanent than values. Our ethics are the directions on our moral compass."¹

One of the watershed ethical experiences of my life came about 25 years ago, while I was doing my postdoc at Caltech. One day, I attended a talk by Dr. Richard Ernst, who had won the Nobel in Chemistry about ten years earlier. Here was Dr. Ernst, speaking at Caltech, in front of faculty, administration, and students, receiving the Pauling Medal, which was named for Linus Pauling, who had won Nobels in both Chemistry and Peace.

In his address, accepting the Pauling Medal, Dr. Ernst broke all norms and measures of irony. He told us how, in the early '60s, the Caltech community ostracized the great Dr. Pauling, for taking a stand against nuclear armament. In 1963, the local Pasadena newspaper quoted Caltech's president as saying, "What do I think of Dr. Pauling? I really just wish he would go away." Dr. Pauling eventually did resign his long-held position there. For four years, he could not get a job anywhere in academia. Only when antiwar politics became popular did he become hireable once again.

In that talk, Dr. Ernst used Dr. Pauling's story to make this point to us who were students and postdocs. He said, "As you go out from here,

consider what's right, and what's wrong. Choose your projects and the companies you work for carefully. Science has not always been the driver, but it has been at least a willing co-conspirator, along with consumerism, militarism, and other 'isms,' in the game of creating the ecological mess the world is in today. Choose a field, a company, and research projects, where you can help repair the damage we have caused. Or at least, choose a field where you will do no harm."

With my training, Dr. Ernst's talk left just a few directions for me to go. I chose to go into biological sensors, because that work generally involves environmentally friendly chemistry, and also because it's really hard to make an offensive sensor. That choice brought me to Maryland to work at Mesoscale Discovery for 15 years, where I got to play minor roles in developing two medical sensors that directly benefited members of my family. That choice also led Connie and me to move to New Market, from where it was just a stone's throw to becoming a member here at UUCF.

Questions like, "What career direction do I want to take?" are obviously important. To make the best life choices, we need to think about what's right and wrong, as Dr. Ernst urged us to do there at Caltech. Many issues of right and wrong – issues of ethics – are now paramount, because they have become existential – matters of life and death for humanity. Humanity is now in an adolescent stage, with the ability to kill ourselves off, but perhaps lacking the maturity and collective thoughtfulness to restrain ourselves from doing just that.²

The list of interconnected issues where humanity needs to make the right choices in order to survive, is enough to make your head spin. There's "human-caused climate change, overpopulation, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, rogue artificial intelligence, antibiotic resistance, social and political instability...." The list goes on.³

But the news is not all bad. We can take heart that people are working on all these problems. If you rate survival of our species as an important end (and that can be argued pro and con – but most people would argue "pro"), these are important *existential* problems to tackle as a career today.

In his book, *What We Owe the Future*, philosopher William MacAskill writes about choosing one's career or volunteer activities as an ethical choice. He points out that people often choose a career because they focus on "on a problem that is close to their heart."⁴ That certainly resonates with

me. In my present career, I help people get jobs when they are experiencing barriers to employment. It's probably no coincidence that when I was 25 years old, I had been homeless for 3 years, and somebody helped me get a job. Perhaps I do what I do because I *identify*.

However, MacAskill suggests ways by which we can systematically choose our careers, or our venues for service, by evaluating where our efforts may be most effective. I won't do a book report here, but **I do highly recommend MacAskill's book to anyone who is considering a future vocation, or a vocational or avocational change.**

To focus on the example of human-caused climate change, the good news about existential ethics is, we are beginning to make progress, at least in our ethical choices – the bottom line of atmospheric CO₂ will come later. Last week, Al Gore pointed out that “clean energy is cheaper than ever, electric vehicle sales are surging, and governments are subsidizing those sales.” He said, **“We know how to fix this. We can stop the temperatures going up worldwide with as little as a three-year time lag by reaching net zero. And if we stay at true net zero, half of the human-caused CO₂ will come out of the atmosphere in as little as 30 years.”**⁵

The challenge, of course, is getting to net zero. In the same interview, Gore criticized “oil and gas companies and rich countries that cling to the veto power over language calling for a phase-down of fossil fuels. The climate crisis,” he said, “is, in the main, a fossil fuel crisis. If we don't permit the world to discuss a phase-down of fossil fuels, because the fossil fuel companies don't want the world to discuss it, that's a very flawed process.”

If you're as old or older than I am, you may think I have been speaking to the younger folks in this room; but that is not the entire case. Just because you're my age or older is no reason to say, “My time is past; he's talking to the young folks, he's not talking to me.” I am not just disappointed, but silently angry, when I hear people my age say things like, “I'm glad I won't be around to see what's going to happen in the next fifty years.” Maybe they're just being honest; maybe they're just depressed about the state the world is in; I have *some* understanding, so I can conjure up some compassion. But you can count me in with Al Gore: I'm not ready to give up yet.

One source of optimism – of an *informed opinion* – that I've found is the “science fiction nonfiction” of Kim Stanley Robinson.

Yes, that's right: "Science fiction nonfiction."⁶ It's *science fiction* because it's in the future – but not so far into the future that it's irrelevant. And it's *nonfiction* because *Robinson goes to professional conferences* where scientists, economists, psychologists and sociologists present their research; then, he goes home and projects those ideas, in his writings, into the near future. To stick with the example of solving human-caused climate change, since Robinson has focused on that for the last decade or so – I've found myself reading his books, thinking, "Now that idea would never work." Then, I've gone online and Googled it, and lo and behold, somebody's actually working on that very thing! There are lots of creative, plausible, fundable (and funded!) projects going on out there. Yes, the planet really *can* be saved – but only at a cost we have so far been unwilling to pay!⁷

One of Robinson's books, *The Ministry of the Future*, follows the adventures of a group of UN bureaucrats who are charged with protecting the rights of future generations to inherit a livable earth. Just stop for a minute, and contrast Robinson's title, *The Ministry of the Future*, with MacAskill's, *What We Owe the Future*. The similarity is no coincidence. **Both Robinson's "pragmatic, science-based, guarded optimism,"⁸ and MacAskill's practical call for the ethics of "long term-ism," help me maintain my own optimism and keep me from giving up on the world.**

So, "Keep the faith," as they say; "the faith," as defined by the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, who wrote, "Faith is the certainty that we can solve all our problems together."⁹

Those of you who qualify for what I hope will be the Next Greatest Generation, may not be keen to take up the mantle. For what it's worth, I acknowledge that my generation, and the one before it, failed to prevent global warming in the 1980s when we had a workable political coalition. The ball is largely in your court now; however, my generation is not fully off the hook. To those of you my age and older: Let us now serve as allies to the younger generations in the fight to preserve the earth for humanity and all living things. And to everyone here, and online: **Use the principles and methods of ethics to reexamine your values, and to make conscious choices that count about what issues you're going to work on for your remaining years.** Never stop; never quit. Make your life count right up to the very last breath. And **maintain a reasonable optimism, coupled with commensurate actions – at any age. I refuse to say I'm glad I won't be around to see the next fifty years.** To the contrary: I

wish I *were* going to be around – so I could see how the Next Greatest Generation is going to succeed!

I’m not saying existential problems are the only ones worth working on. If you value meaning in life as experienced through the appreciation of beauty, then *I say* that is exactly what you should dedicate yourself to. In the process, I somehow expect you will dig down to an ethical level of action like conservationism, or to an ethical exercise of creative freedom through music or dance. In the three professional careers I have been privileged to have, none has directly addressed an *existential* problem beyond the level of individual lives, but I have used ethics to determine my directions. And to use ethics in *that way*, is at least a responsible thing to do.

In the final analysis, our ethical principles are not the most important thing. The most important thing is whether we *live out* those principles. In seminary, I wrote an Ethics paper where, contrary to the directions from the professor, I refused to choose between an ideal solution and a practical solution to an ethical dilemma. My thesis, which I defended over the course of several pages, was, neither the ideal answer, nor the pragmatic answer, may satisfy fully; “the *point* of ethical striving may not be arbitrary results or perfection; the point might be the *process* of continued growth and change.”¹⁰

Interestingly, and to my surprise, the good professor gave me an A on the paper; and it was the only A I got in his class. If that lends any validity to my assertion, that same truth is reflected by Emilie Townes, the womanist theologian and ethicist. Townes writes, **“If we ourselves are not changed by the religious beliefs and ethics we take on, then in leading others, we are hypocrites.” She goes on to say, “The greatest work is what we must do within ourselves and in our relationships with each other.”¹¹** Let us continue to *do* the ethical work we need to do to choose wisely and to build meaningful lives, so we can yet save ourselves, each other, our relationships, and the world. *May it be so.*

¹ Personal conversation with Jim Stam, c. May 2023.

² This is someone else’s thought that I heard many years ago, but I have no idea who said it, and surprisingly I’m not finding this thought online. If you can come up with a reference, please let me know.

³ MacAskill (*vide infra*) also lists “...biodiversity loss, pandemics, economic collapse, mass extinction, super-volcano eruption, resource depletion, nuclear accidents, and asteroid impact.”

⁴ MacAskill, Wm. *What We Owe the Future*. NY: Basic Books, 2022. See esp. pp 223-246.d

⁵ David Gelles, “Al Gore on Extreme Heat and the Fight Against Fossil Fuels,” NYT July 18, 2023.

⁶ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Ministry of the Future*, Orbit paperback edition, 2021. This thought about KSR’s work being “science fiction nonfiction” reflects a review that is excerpted in the Roman numeral pages of *Ministry of the*

Future (paperback edition). Other KSR books I've read and enjoyed include *New York 2140* (2017), *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), *Blue Mars* (1996), and *Antarctica* (1997). *The New Yorker* published an excellent, up-to-date profile of KSR titled "Can Science Fiction Wake Us Up to Our Climate Reality? Kim Stanley Robinson's Novels Envision the Dire Problems of the Future—but Also Their Solutions." by Joshua Rothman, January 24, 2022, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/31/can-science-fiction-wake-us-up-to-our-climate-reality-kim-stanley-robinson>.

⁷ This thought is either from one of KSR's books or from the article about him in *The New Yorker* (*vide supra*).

⁸ Bob Clegg, from "The Audacity of Hope," at UUFGC, Cumberland MD, 1/29/23.

⁹ James Luther Adams, quoted in the UUA's Tapestry of Faith curriculum, "What Moves Us," Activity 3, <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/movesus/workshop7>.

¹⁰ Bob Clegg, from "Distributive Justice vs. Personal Privilege," ES303, Wesley Theological Seminary, 12/16/2016.

¹¹ Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36-7, paraphrased by changing "our relationship with God" to "our relationships with each other".