
Book Review

Eric Mount, Jr., *Professional Ethics in Context: Institutions, Images and Empathy*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. Pp. 176. \$14.95. ISBN: 0-664-25143-9.

The title of the first chapter, “Seeing is Behaving,” succinctly expresses the thesis of this book. That thesis grows out of Mount’s reflections on a moral argument with an acquaintance, an experience that taught him that “how we saw things accounted more for our differences than the moral principles we might evoke in addressing an ethical issue” (14). If seeing is central to morality, it then becomes important to examine the factors which shape how we see. Mount realizes that ways of seeing and perceiving are always embedded in and reproduced by the institutions and communities to which one belongs, and which themselves often become objects of loyalty and faith (123). Thus he sets out to explore the institutional contexts which provide both the “settings and the lenses for vision” (17) with the intent of critically examining what shapes the outlooks of the professions and thereby enlarging our moral sensitivities.

Among the institutional settings (broadly construed) that Mount discusses are business corporations, institutions of higher education, hospitals, government agencies and the professions. He examines the metaphors, images and models used to create and sustain corporate self-understanding (Chapter Four) and traces them back to the stories and myths in which they are rooted (Chapter Five). According to this schema, stories are the most fundamental layer. They provide senses of identity and orientation which in turn drive the development of metaphors which generate models for construing reality.

Integrated into his analysis are two constructive approaches to issues raised by these investigations. First, Mount argues that institutions are best construed covenantally. Although this understanding has especially clear affinities with Judaism and Christianity, Mount argues that such a view is not the exclusive property of any religion. Rather, it is grounded in the tacit moral commit-

ments one makes in joining a firm or a profession (58-59) and is confirmed in the experiences of certain paradigmatic organizations which stand out as exemplary (66-69). What is gained by this construal of institutions, Mount argues, is the ability to hold institutions and professions responsible for how well they uphold and support the common good which they were intended to serve.

Mount’s second proposal has to do with how we assess and evaluate competing perspectives or visions. He is not content simply to report on the content of one’s vision; he wants to put it under scrutiny. Acknowledging that there is no neutral perspective from which to make these assessments, Mount suggests that a critical perspective can be achieved, first of all, by registering inconvenient “facts” which refuse to behave as expected by pre-existing attitudes and paradigms (126). Such a perspective is also marked by humility, integrity, a willingness to take responsibility for actions, a realism about human potential for evil, a sense of relationship with others, faith, inclusiveness and hope (126-129; cf. 155).

Mount is aware that these criteria are themselves indebted to the Christian tradition, but defends them because they are not uncritically adopted. Rather, they are themselves put into dialogue with the stories and perspectives of others (129), a process which requires the difficult but not impossible undertaking of empathetically “standing in others’ shoes” (134-150). The point of this exercise is not to become those other people, but “to reoccupy our own shoes as different people” who “own our traditions in a new way” (150). Such an open dialogue, Mount thinks, may provide a way of discovering common ground in a fragmented world.

Both constructive proposals are timely (his discussion of empathy is alone worth the price of the book) and offer a much needed point of view at a time characterized both by the fact of social fragmentation and the suspicion that differences foreclose the possibility of communication and debate. Mount’s position suggests that one can affirm both particularity and the common

good. Put differently, Mount refuses to choose between the two.

His proposals are not without their tensions, however. Both seem overly optimistic, given Mount's own discussion. In spite of his perceptive treatment of Bellah et al's findings on individualism in American life, he seems unaware of how difficult that attitude makes it to sustain any sense of common good. Following Bellah (perhaps too closely, in fact), he thinks that churches provide such communities and wants to suggest that institutions of higher learning are likewise capable of fostering such commitment (119-120). While the point should not be pressed too far, it does seem that Mount does not take seriously enough the degree to which individualist ideologies have already permeated these institutions and thereby render them incapable of doing what he wants them to do.

With regard to his discussions of common ground, Mount likewise seems to be very optimistic about the possibilities for discovering common ground based on the facts that we share a common planet and a common fate. Such optimism seems a bit out of place, given his own acknowledgment of the difficulties in getting into another's shoes and his cautions about the need to maintain a realistic perspective on the possibilities of human evil. He seems to assume that conversation will always lead to agreement and ignores the possibility that conversation may not proceed smoothly, or even if it does, that it may only clarify very real and deep differences.

Overall, Mount draws from an impressive array of insight and information. He combines theological reflection (primarily from the tradition developing out of H. Richard Niebuhr's work, with some liberation theologies thrown in for good measure) with work from the social sciences (most notably Robert Bellah and associates, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan), philosophy, popular literature and personal experiences. Although he does not explicitly draw from Michael Polanyi's work, those familiar with it will be able to see affinities between Mount's views and Polanyi's discussions of

conviviality and commitment. As usual, however, the down-side of such breadth is that significant differences between thinkers are obscured and perspectives are too easily harmonized.

This remains an important and useful book, though, because it extends the emphases of virtue ethics to matters of institutional and professional ethics. It also provides an accessible and engaging secondary entry into many of the most pressing debates in epistemology and ethics today. It will not satisfy the decisionists and casuists among its readers, but that is to be expected since they see things so much differently than does Mount. The book does leave the reader somewhat sympathetic to their complaint, however, because Mount does not demonstrate the payoff of his approach by offering a well-developed example of professional ethics done this way. At best, he offers some tantalizing hints. In sum, the book should serve as a good companion and counterpoint to more quandary-oriented books. The book should also prove useful to undergraduates who will find the writing style and illustrations accessible and illuminative.

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