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Ethics Beyond Ethics Committees: A Commentary on Lukas Kaelin, “Don’t Trust the Ethicist!”

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Author Lukas Kaelin is deliberate about the polemic character of the title of his short essay, if not the entire essay itself. But he is equally clear about the nature and the limits of the *polemos* he is waging. If polemics is the art of engaging in controversial dispute or debate, then one might read between the lines and say that in this case the *polemos* is waged against the lack of *polemos* in the way ethics is generally practiced and the way it functions within any given society. When the function of ethics is reduced simply to the preservation of an existing social order (what he refers to as merely “duplicated morality”), then it loses its “genuine” character—so Kaelin argues—which must necessarily include that crucial critical function of questioning the framework, presuppositions, and motivations underlying the concrete practice of ethics.

When Kaelin warns his readers not to trust the ethicist, he has in mind a particular kind of ethicist and ethics. He does not refer to, say, scholars and academics engaged in the more or less disinterested work of theorizing and teaching ethics that is made possible and sustained by a general atmosphere of academic freedom. Rather, he points to a particular practice of “ethics” in the form of committees, advisory boards and councils, in which one hardly finds “genuine ethicists or philosophers.” And even if one were to find a genuine ethicist or philosopher sitting in one of these bodies (often by virtue of official appointment by authorities), the parameters of their task and the underlying framework that defines their functions are so set and determined as to preclude the possibility of carrying out the true work of an ethicist or philosopher.

Such a limitation of ethics constitutes not only a constraint that prevents it from performing its true function in society. Worse, it is a distortion of its very nature: “The role it plays in the various committees and commissions is

a distorted picture of the encompassing task of ethics, which is to normatively evaluate life from a perspective beyond the institutional constraints set by contemporary society.” Thus, when ethics fails to play its proper role in society—namely, to critically examine, rather than merely serve, the interests of the existing power—then the first step towards the recovery of its true function is critical self-examination. It is within this context that Kaelin’s three theses on the function of ethics in contemporary society have to be understood, which can be summarized as the mere reinforcement, rather than the critical examination, of some of the “problematic tendencies” of present society.

Kaelin’s three theses are really articulations of the way the betrayal of the true nature of ethics is concretized in specific problematic tendencies of contemporary society. I would like to focus on the first of these three tendencies, namely, ethics’ subservience to and reinforcement of technocracy, since the other two are more closely related to each other insofar as the forgetfulness of the social context usually goes hand in hand with the issues concerning theories of democracy.

The technocratic order is driven, as it were, by the mantra of efficiency. It demands efficiency for the sake of efficiency. Reason becomes technological or instrumental reason, indeed the “rational” is equated to the “technological.” Thus, instead of technology accounting for itself (Gr. *logos*, account, reason, word, etc.), for a higher reason, technology itself becomes the reason for virtually everything in the social order. Social order itself means technological order. As long as the demand for efficiency is met, other questions either become irrelevant, or else are simply suppressed.

In one of the most famous descriptions of the internal contradictions within contemporary society, Marcuse writes in the opening lines of *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in Advanced Industrial Societies*: “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of progress.”¹ The internal contradiction lies in the democratic defaulting on democracy. Within such a society, there is no real opposition, and where there is no real opposition, freedom becomes a farce. And since freedom is a necessary condition for the possibility of ethics, ethics too becomes a farce within a prevailing “unfreedom.”

One of the most grotesque manifestations of the irrationality of the pursuit of efficiency at the expense of freedom is National Socialist Germany. In the concentration camps that have now been turned into museums and

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

memorials in order for all of us—not just Germans—not to forget the evil that we are capable of, one can still see signs that were originally placed in strategic locations that say, “Keep things orderly and clean.” To have to be concerned about the “right” way of doing the most wrong thing, the “ethical” way of doing what is at bottom a monstrously unethical deed—that is perhaps the worst imaginable perversion of the very nature and purpose of ethics. In another work, Marcuse describes this radical perversion underlying the technocracy of National Socialist Germany as follows:

National Socialism is a striking example of the ways in which a highly rationalized and mechanized economy with the utmost efficiency in production can also operate in the interest of totalitarian oppression and continued scarcity. The Third Reich is indeed a form of “technocracy”: the technical considerations of imperialistic efficiency and rationality supersede the traditional standards of profitability and general welfare. In National Socialist Germany, the reign of terror is sustained not only by brute force which is foreign to technology but also by the ingenious manipulation of the power inherent in technology: the intensification of labor, propaganda, the training of youths and workers, the organization of the governmental, industrial and party bureaucracy—all of which constitute the daily implements of terror—follow the lines of greatest technological efficiency.²

But perhaps it is far more disturbing to realize that technocracy is able to penetrate virtually all aspects of our contemporary society not just during “war time,” but even more so in “peace time,” as Heidegger depicts in a most penetrating way:

The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers

² Herbert Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 1, *Technology, War and Fascism*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1998), 41-42.

and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand.³

The challenge offered by Kaelin through his three theses is thus for us to expand ethics so that it is not limited to questions of right and wrong, moral and immoral, good and evil (we recall Nietzsche here of course), but rather extends as far as those that concern more fundamental questions about our being human, whether as individual persons or as communities. As Aristotle had already once hinted at in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics as *éthiké* (moral virtues) is essentially linked to *ethos* (habits). And habits (L. *habitare*, to have) ultimately are grounded on the way we *are* as humans, the way we *inhabit*, the way we *dwell*.

It is clear then that if ethics is to remain genuine, then it must indeed maintain its critical function in a society. At no time in human history is the need for ethics to preserve this function most urgent than in our contemporary period, when the threat of its being reduced to being a mere reinforcement of the dominant technocratic society is made even more insidious by our forgetfulness. Given such urgency, the polemic character of Kaelin's theses is the least that should bother us.

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³ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 18.