

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

Joe Landau
Duke University

How do we begin an authentic ethical search? Where do we look for answers? Who will help us in our search? There does not appear to be any way of finding answers to such questions. And yet, when faced with ethical crises, we often look for answers in the form of prefabricated solutions. We rely on the teaching of others, usually from the past, to inform us with their own wisdom. We look to the great moral philosophers like Plato and Kant, or refer our questions to the teaching of a higher Being. We examine the past decisions of political leaders, or perhaps even those of our own parents and grandparents.

Referring our own dilemmas to the teaching and wisdom of others, although certainly understandable, never proves to be adequate. Despite a wealth of resources surrounding the issues of ethical and moral life, our current age is one that has experienced not a decline, but a resurgence of ethical crises. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide solutions for all of these, what I hope to do here is redirect our inquiry of ethical life toward a new path that will take a fresh approach to some of our most critical ethical dilemmas, particularly those surrounding questions of difference in culture and identity in the modern world. My approach, while certainly theoretical, is intended to inform our *practical* concerns. The encounter with ethics that I propose presents enormous risk and many challenges. Yet it is only through engaging such a question

Landau is a 1995 graduate of Duke University, where he majored in political science and french. He is currently a researcher in Washington D.C. This essay was previously published in Eruditio, Duke University's undergraduate journal of social and political science.

that we can fashion a truly creative and authentic ethical life.

Nietzsche and the danger of the abyss

"God is dead," wrote the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.¹ What did Nietzsche mean by this? Nietzsche certainly knew that the Christian religion was still a thriving order, so the notion that "God is dead" was not a comment on the state of organized religion. Nietzsche posited a philosophy that was "beyond good and evil," and consequently his theories presented a certain danger. They could be manipulated in order to support all kinds of horrific actions, as in the case of Nazism. At the same time, however, Nietzsche's teaching influenced a number of 20th century philosophers, most of whom have embraced *liberal* political philosophies and have eschewed any alignment with fascist regimes. These thinkers include Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida. With their turn away from fascism, these thinkers have defended Nietzsche's philosophy as the first attempt to create spaces for an understanding of human difference, one that is more *inclusive* of the needs of those people who have fallen outside of the privileged majority in liberal political systems. Indeed, Nietzsche can even serve as a point of departure for an ethical search, as his belief in the death of God places us squarely before our task. If "God is dead" and His rules and commandments are null, then we become the sole bearers of both legislating and following a new system of ethical behavior. The dictates of the Old and New Testaments lose their place as holy signifies of the divine order and become relegated to the status of "text," in which their value is measured as any other work of literature. The death of God poses an end to Judeo-Christian morality, and with it the decay of natural law, human rights, and eventually politics itself. At the same time,

however, the absence of God amplifies each person's unique responsibility to cultivate his or her own ethical life, one that can be made with true conviction and dedication.

We may try to convince ourselves that we can live in a world in which the contours of ethics have been established by God, nature, or History, but this is only a form of self-deception. Although it might be more comforting to believe that the ethical path has already been carved out for us, and that our role is merely to follow that path, such a view would belie the most fundamental aspect of authentic ethical decision making. It would preclude our own engagement in ethics, and would relegate ethical questions to an abstract, disinterested level. Ethical life, once abstracted from daily existence, would become a type of luxury item affordable only to the most "righteous." When ethical issues are seen as removed from daily experience, then we are in serious danger, because we have forgotten that ethics is an everyday issue, not one that is reserved merely for theologians and philosophers.

We are, through the death of God, left without any guiding light to lead us toward solving our own ethical dilemmas. We are confronted with the possibility that the whole notion of ethics is a mere projection of the human will. The security of natural law, which accorded each individual his or her own inherent dignity, is no longer a veritable premise. The liberal political doctrines posited by Hobbes and Locke become questionable insofar as they rely on a faulty assertion that such "natural rights" could ever exist at all. The safety net of "inherent human dignity" is stripped away. We are brought to the dark, unfathomable abyss of human existence. Perhaps nothing is true. And in the final moment, we experience the most complete feeling of nihilism: the world is one large chaotic mass of disorder with no meaning and no answers. Everything is false,

and we are alone, without guidance in the world.

This dark moment, this abysmal hour, is not necessarily the moment of doom. On the contrary, it is the point from which we begin a process of authentic ethical decision making. It is the point where we realize that ethical life is an issue that transcends the prefabricated (and illusive) answers provided by God, nature, History, etc. Ethics can no longer be resolved through these exterior and abstract sources, and is left standing as a question whose answer *we* must determine. This condition propels us toward engaging the issue of ethics for *ourselves*. We are brought to a new awareness, through the teaching of Nietzsche, that we cannot deny our ethical existence and our own role in forming ethical life. We are brought to the realization that we are in charge, and must take full responsibility for the future and implementation of ethics.

Responsibility and agency and the issues of identity and culture

If we look around us, there is no doubt that the question of ethics is currently more complex than it has ever been. Questions of ethical life have become inextricably bound with the practical concerns over culture, identity, and difference. These issues, I would argue, contribute to our most intense debates over ethics, and often prove to be insoluble. Considerations of right and legitimacy are mediated not through conversation and negotiation, but rather through subordination to whomever holds the most power. The political and ethical resolution to this absence of mutual respect implies a return to the war of all against all — Hobbes' primordial state of nature. Amidst all of the uncertainty surrounding conflicts among different cultures and identities, is it possible to think again

about a new ethic which would integrate rather than separate our diverse communities? Furthermore, could this ethical plan be one that eschews both the false assumption in exterior and prefabricated solutions to the meaning of life as well as the abusive, authoritarian resolution based on power alone? It is at this hazy point, this moment of anxiety, that a new, authentic view of ethics begins to arise. Such a new ethics begins when we attempt to advance an ethical position out of this abysmal encounter with the possibility that consensus, community, and mutual understanding may be impossible.

Although we have come to the point where we realize that the hope for an "objective" or complete knowledge of human beings is impossible, there are still great strides to be made in coming to a greater understanding of the diverse perspectives which comprise both our national polity as well as our global community. The first step toward crafting a new ethics requires a recognition that these diverse views do exist, and that there is consequently no single view which holds a monopoly on morality. Contrary to the Enlightenment view that we could discover a perfect and ordered knowledge of human beings, our age is one that recognizes our own shortsightedness when it comes to understanding the diverse body of human beings. This recognition of our own ignorance is a crucial step in crafting our ethics. Once we realize that there might not be a clear cut answer to our ethical dilemmas, we incorporate a new self-criticism into our assessment of the decisions that we make. We open ourselves to engaging new values posited by new speakers, and we carve an ethics through consensus and coalition-building as opposed to dogmatic assertions and pedantic, authoritarian dictums. Furthermore, we continue to see ethics as a question, which reminds us that in order to continue to live ethically, we must reawaken the question in order to maintain our commitment to deriving an ethics

from our own responsibility. This responsibility implies not only a commitment to the question of ethics, but also a care for those who journey with us down the new paths we create.

Care - what makes a truly dialogical ethic possible

Given the new approach toward ethics that I have delineated, there is still a vital question that remains to be addressed. How shall we comport ourselves toward the new question of ethics? How do we begin to build a new road toward ethics? Although the solutions vary according to the particular conflicts which arise, they have one common theme: the new road toward ethics must be a *dialogical* one in which diverse members of different communities give proper estimation for the importance of conversation. Ethics, as I have already argued, is not simply about creating various ideals that dictate what it means to display "good" and "moral" behavior. Although this can be an important aspect of ethical life, it should not be its primary condition, because ethics is an everyday question that concerns our practical encounters. Consequently, it is paramount that we begin with these experiences and craft our ethic accordingly, as opposed to creating a moral code that appears perfect but is seldom achieved in human practice. Keeping in mind the need for an ethic of dialogue, one which begins with our daily experiences and therefore views ethics as a matter not only for philosophers and theologians, but rather for all human beings, I would like to turn more specifically to the questions of culture and identity.

No longer do we think of cultures - American, French, South African, etc. - as univocal entities, but rather as phenomena replete with internal differences and complexities. We speak of multiculturalism, or an attempt to show greater esteem for the

different traditions of human beings living in the same locale. Our new-founded esteem for different cultures is representative of an effort to make a greater space for the voices of different perspectives and views that contribute to a pluralistic society. The ethical position that I advance is an integration of this multiculturalist perspective into an ethics that we create for ourselves. Such a new path toward the pursuit of ethics requires first that we understand all human beings as *interdependent*, who through participation in different cultures give rise to the identity of not only their particular culture, but the culture of others as well. The importance of recognizing the role played by others in our own self-formation takes on special importance with the absence of God outlined earlier. If, as I have argued, we are left on our own to derive our system of ethics apart from the ones handed down by previous religious, philosophies, and historical figures, then our own ethics must include a proper estimation of the vital role that others play in our own formation.

Human differences in culture and identity take on meaning only insofar as they can be measured against one another; no single perspective has significance in a vacuum. Thus, diverse perspectives participate in a kind of dialectic, in which each perspective is *contingent* on the perspective of others, taking on meaning only within a marketplace of ideas. Each identity participates in a two-way relationship of giving to and receiving from others. It is through this notion of a dialectical or interrelated identity that a certain responsibility arises. We can build a new path for ethical life only through a continual display of *care* for the differences and distinctions that surround us. The question of cultural difference no longer becomes a matter that involves merely other people, but ourselves as well. We are both constructed by the identities of others as well as important agents in affecting the formation of their own identity. In summa-

tion, the relationship between different cultures amounts to a *dialectical* phenomenon in which each identity reinforces the identities of others. The ethical implication of such a phenomenon is a sincere commitment to a conversation among diverse selves. This conversation represents in my view the most compelling path toward an ethically progressive stance that makes possible better understanding and appreciation of difference in relation to both identity and culture.

Rather than to imagine that we create our identities strictly by ourselves, we must recognize the importance that others play in our own self-formation. Others make us aware of our own distinctiveness through presenting alternative perspectives, values, and ideals. In understanding the vital role that others play in our own identity, we take awareness of our fundamental interdependence. We realize that it would be impossible to sever ourselves from others, because our own identity has meaning only in context to the way others have both defined us and set themselves apart from us. Consequently, our own identity is a manifestation of the different identities that we see in others. We are, at base, not alienated, but *connected* with others. Each individual self does not posit the world through the rubric of his or her own consciousness alone, but rather reaches an understanding of the world through the differences presented by others.

Having enumerated the dialectical relations between distinct peoples, I will illustrate this phenomenon in the context of both African-American and Jewish cultures as well as gay and straight identities. First I will turn to the struggle between the African-American and Jewish communities. Amidst all of the finger-pointing and name calling exerted by leaders of both communities, as well as the proliferation of stereotypes and stigmas assigned by each community against the other, an important *unity* between the two

groups has been forgotten. This unity is not only what the groups share in terms of parallel histories, but also their interdependence and need for each other in their own formation. This interrelatedness has been forgotten in two groups' unyielding efforts to set themselves apart from one another, refusing to see their cultures as interdependent in any way.

Despite the often antagonistic terms upon which the debate between African-Americans and Jews has been presented, the two possess an important connection. They have, in many ways, strengthened each other's identity despite their insistence on being radically different. Each culture has learned from and been affected by the other, and has used this knowledge in fashioning its own identity. Although each group has often referred to the other as a group of conspirators out to destroy their own development, they have failed to recognize that this antagonism has taken place only through a dialogue that has reinforced and affected their apparently different identities. They have referred to each other in various cultural, political, and economic contexts without recognizing that both groups participate in the same economic and political system, one that has presented them with similar conflicts and experiences. Their apparent antagonism, though it has centered on their differences, has taken place only through their shared engagement in dialogue. This crucial dialogue, however hidden from everyday discourse, has played a vital role not only in shaping the identity of each group, but also in reinforcing their fundamental interconnectedness. Their particular conflict, like many others, has resulted not from their radical differences, but rather from their contingency on one another in forming their own identity.

African-Americans and Jews, rather than being adversaries or enemies, are more importantly *interlocutors*, who participate in a

dialogue in which identity and culture are constantly being refashioned and refigured. Recognizing such interdependence would be an enormous aid in bringing the groups to a clearer and more informed understanding of their own situation as well as a greater respect for others. The importance of an ethic of dialogue has significance not only in context to this phenomenon, but in others as well, for instance in the more recent dialogues over sexual identity. With the growing political strength of gay and lesbian groups, our age has witnessed a kind of balkanization, in which both groups have attempted to understand their sexualities as fundamentally distinct. Debates have arisen over the questions of gender construction, with some arguing that sexual identity is biologically determined (essentialism), while others believing it to be a result of cultural and environmental factors (social constructivism). People have become so ideologically fixed to their particular view that they have lost sight of the more crucial principles around which they were originally organized. Groups of homosexual and heterosexual people have begun to think of all human differences as subordinate to the question of sexual identity. They have used the issue of sexual identity to separate people rather than to bring them together.

What has been lost in this debate has been recognition of the fact that sexual identity, like questions of race and ethnicity, participate in a crucial dynamic that ultimately *unites* diverse groups as opposed to dividing them. The questions of sexual identity serve as a link between different people who are brought together in the conversation, even though they may speak from different experiences and viewpoints. Although their conversation often carries with it a rhetoric in which they view themselves as fundamentally distinct beings, their discourse overlooks the fact that such apparent differences actually participate in a common ethical struggle that

brings them together. They lose sight of the importance of the dialogue, and become preoccupied with secondary matters that overlook this vital connection. What is needed, then, is a new recognition of this fundamental connection between interlocutors. Given the fact that we can only come to an understanding of ourselves through being presented with the differences found in others, we must give greater estimation for our interrelatedness. If we can place more importance on the role that dialogue plays in ethical life, we will be able to work toward stronger and more informed understandings of one another. We will be able to gain better perspectives on ourselves and our lives in context to the lives of others. We will be able to count on one another for guidance in reclaiming ethical life as a daily affair, one for which *we* bear sole responsibility. This awareness, however, can be achieved only when we once again show esteem for our interdependence, which requires care for our most fundamental connectedness. Only when we view this care as central to our ethical life will we be able to truly build and traverse our new ethical path.

Authenticity and a new ethical path

Ethics, I have argued, in order to remain authentic, must be treated as a question and not as an answer. Just as the conversation among different participants must be kept open, so must the various solutions to particular ethical dilemmas be treated as negotiations and not eternal solutions. As new identities emerge, presenting new and different perspectives, the debate must accommodate these voices and not withdraw from the responsibility to entertain new conflicts. By treating ethics as a question, we will be able to maintain our self-critical edge as opposed to dogmatically excluding new

possibilities. Our inability to uncover any eternal Truth that will direct the rest of history requires that we remain open to these possibilities, and hence that we return to the primacy of care for the conversation and dialogue among diverse selves.

Despite our vast and varied resources, the question of ethical life continues to puzzle us. The various answers handed down by our predecessors have not adequately enabled us to “do away” with ethical questions and concerns. At the end of the day, we are still left on our own, forced to answer the labyrinthian questions concerning ethical life by ourselves. We are, in the words of Sartre, “abandoned” to solve the mysteries and questions of our time with neither the help of our forebears nor the promise that the choices we make can be verified by any objective standard. We are left, ultimately, with only ourselves as the judge of our own acts. Rather than neglect this vital responsibility, we must adhere to it seriously. We must confront the differences that so much make up the current strifes among cultures and identities, in recognizing the vital role that different members play as interlocutors in a crucial dialogue. This dialogue must lead us to fashion a new ethic of conversation, in which we keep the question of ethics open in order to accommodate new voices. Finally, we must esteem ourselves as the ones who will both take on the arduous task of deriving a new path for pursuing ethics as well as traverse that path, in forming a new ethics that caters to the conflicts of our own age. It is along this path that we begin a more authentic journey toward an ethics that calls upon our utmost human possibilities.

ENDNOTES

The notion that "God is dead" is found throughout Nietzsche's work. Consequently, there is no single source which exemplifies Nietzsche's conviction in the death of God. The death of God is a recurrent theme in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and is found as early as the second aphorism of the prologue. See Kaufmann, The Portable Nietzsche (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 124.