Philosophy and the University: trends and temptations

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Introduction

Mae West once said: "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it". Oscar Wilde seems to have been even worse off when it comes to temptations as he said "I can resist everything except temptation". Although very different from the kind of temptations that West and Wilde might have had in mind, universities are not exempt from temptations.

In the first part of the lecture I will identify trends that can tempt the university and academic departments to deviate from their shared responsibility to cultivate the philosophical mind of students and scholars. It will be argued that a distinction between external and internal goods can assist both the university and academic disciplines in dealing with this temptation.

In the second part of the lecture the focus shifts to a trend that affects Philosophy more specifically. This trend is the unprecedented growth of and demand for Applied Ethics. This recent trend has opened up vast new possibilities for Philosophy as a discipline, but it has not done so without a new set of temptations. Strategies for dealing with this trend and its temptations will be critically explored.

I

The regulative ideal of the university

The ideal of what a university should be has remained remarkably stable over the centuries since the inception of the first universities in Europe in the 12th century. When we compare the writing of John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) more than 150 years ago in a series of lectures as new rector of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1852 with contemporary theoreticians of the university, it is not hard to detect a regulative ideal

of what a university should be. Central to this regulative ideal of the university are the following features:

The university should be an institution –

- that pursues scientific knowledge through learning, teaching and research;
- that provides in the need of society for professional training and specialised knowledge and skills;
- that preserves knowledge (through libraries, collections and archives);
- that disseminates information (through publications, seminars and conferences) and facilitates academic discourse within and between disciplines; and
- that cultivates the intellectual formation of its students and scholars.

(Cf. Coady, 2002:6-7; Langtry, 2002: 88; Twardowski, 1997:10; Pelikan 1992:76)

By being an institution that fulfils these functions, the university attains an important cultural and moral value in society. It contributes towards emancipating society from ignorance and prejudice, whilst also providing society with the skills and knowledge to diminish suffering and to promote the flourishing of individuals and society (cf. Rossouw, 1993:34).

I wish to focus on one aspect of the idea of the university that has become particularly vulnerable as a result of certain trends that universities have to negotiate. This is the intellectual formation of students and scholars – or, in the words of Newman, "the cultivation of the philosophical mind".

The cultivation of the philosophical mind

Although I borrow the term 'the philosophical mind' from Newman, I will give my own content to this term, to distinguish it from the broader concept of liberal education. I wish to argue that even when the ideal of a liberal education is not adhered to, there still remains an obligation on all academic disciplines to cultivate the philosophical mind of their students and scholars.

The philosophical mind refers to a basic intellectual inclination that should be cultivated in all disciplines. This is the inclination towards deeper and more adequate understanding,

the inclination to imaginatively extend the borders of what we know and the inclination to reflect critically on the meaning and value of existing knowledge and the impact thereof on nature and society. The philosophical mind is thus the inquisitive mind, the exploring mind and the reflective mind (cf. Maskell & Robinson, 2002: 25; Pelikan 1992:65). It is the mind dissatisfied to simply acquire and apply what passes as the knowledge of the day. The mind thus inclined legitimately carries the name 'the philosophical mind' since it bears the marks of philosophy, which literally means the love of knowledge and wisdom.

Wherever the cultivation of the philosophical mind is neglected, disciplines are likely to produce technocrats with knowledge and skills of limited shelf-life. They run the risk of producing sterile clones with limited potential to rejuvenate their academic disciplines. And above all, the university where the cultivation of the philosophical mind is neglected, runs the risk of producing an intellectual class that unreflectively endorse the existing order, because they are disempowered to challenge it for its meaning and value.

The responsibility for cultivating the philosophical mind is not a responsibility shouldered by philosophers alone. On the contrary, it is a responsibility shared by all academic disciplines (cf. Coady 2002:7). Each discipline needs to inculcate a spirit of inquisitiveness, exploration and critical reflection in its students and scholars.

Trends and temptations

There is a variety of current trends that can tempt universities as a whole, but also specific disciplines within the university, to neglect or downplay this responsibility towards cultivating the philosophical mind. Prominent amongst these trends are professional and commercial demands as well as managerial demands imposed upon the university.

- **Professional and commercial demands**

Professional training has been part of the university since its inception. To a large extent the existence and growth of the university can be attributed to the need for professional training. In this regard, Pelikan (1992:99) reminds us that the medieval university typically consisted of four faculties, viz the faculties of Philosophy, Medicine, Jurisprudence and

Theology. Three of the four faculties thus were involved in the professional training of doctors, lawyers and clergy, respectively.

Professionals can and should be trained in a manner that will lead not only to their professional formation but also to the formation of their philosophical minds. Neglecting the formation of a philosophical mindset should therefore never be blamed on professional training as such, but rather on a tendency to subject the training of professionals to the demands of professional practice alone. Practising professionals and professional bodies have a tendency to emphasise practically applicable skills at the cost of intellectual formation. Koornhof (2004), in a recent inaugural lecture as Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of Pretoria, confirmed that: "Practical professionals usually have clear expectations regarding the education of future members: they tend to value teaching above research, applied and useful research above pure research, applications above abstract theories; practical training above theoretical education." Given the influence of professional councils on the university curriculum, departments involved in professional training can be tempted to focus merely on the requirements of professional councils to the detriment of the intellectual formation of their students as the latter rarely forms part of the set of professional skills that professions demand.

The demands imposed on professional training at universities are a mere symptom of what is happening to the university in general. Most other disciplines are subjected to similar demands for practically applicable knowledge. Derek Bok, former rector of Harvard University, relates this pressure on universities to "the rapid growth of opportunities to supply education, expert advice and scientific knowledge in return for handsome sums of money" (2003:10). Although commercialisation of knowledge is driven by the market and not by professional councils, it can similarly lead to a focus on the cultivation of knowledge and skills that are immediately useful and sellable at the cost of the cultivation of the philosophical mind.

- **Managerial demands**

A second set of demands that can tempt universities to neglect their responsibility to develop the philosophical mind comes in the form of managerial demands both outside and inside the university. External managerial demands imposed on the university can come in the form of demands imposed by the state and/or the donor community. Such demands often take the form of performance indicators that are used to determine further funding of the university. Targets for financial and social performance, access, cost-efficient delivery of education, throughput rates, research output rates, equity, etc. are imposed on the university. Universities that perform in accordance with these performance criteria reap financial rewards in terms of resource allocation from either the state or donors.

Universities often generate managerial demands of their own in addition to those imposed from outside. Such internal demands can either be generated at university, faculty or departmental level. Internal managerial demands can translate into measurable targets regarding the financial viability of departments, lecturer-student ratios, harvesting the commercial value of knowledge and research, and the measurable impact of the university on society. The drive towards internal accountability can manifest itself in systems of quality and process control and a greater bureaucratisation of the university (Coady, 2002:17).

Despite their no doubt noble intentions, the above managerial demands can have the same negative impact on the formation of the philosophical mind as the professionalisation and commercialisation of knowledge discussed above. It can equally contribute towards an exclusive focus on satisfying immediate demands for applicable knowledge and skills or towards encouraging educational practices in which the cultivation of the philosophical mind carries little, if any, weight.

Acknowledging the existence of the above two trends and their detrimental impact upon the cultivation of the philosophical mind can lead to the temptation of reactively rejecting these trends and romanticising earlier dispensations where the cultivation of the philosophical mind flourished. In an illuminating article titled "Die idee van die universiteit", Hennie Rossouw effectively undermines such reactive interpretations by

identifying a number of conflicting demands that are imposed upon the university. He argues that modern universities find themselves in a situation where they have to negotiate with and orientate themselves within various fields of tension. What is at stake is not a choice between alternatives, but the recognition that each of the demands upon the university is a legitimate demand. In terms of the two trends discussed above it would mean that both the demand for the cultivation of the philosophical mind and the demand for applicable professional or commercial knowledge are legitimate demands. Similarly, both the managerial demands on the university for greater relevance, efficiency and accountability and also the demand for university training that cultivates the philosophical mind are legitimate demands.

I want to argue that a distinction between internal and external goods introduced by Alisdair MacIntyre (1985) in his book *After Virtue* and developed further in a number of articles by himself and scholars of his work, can assist us in making more sense of the tension between the demands discussed thus far and the responsibility of all disciplines to cultivate the philosophical mind.

Internal and external goods

The distinction between internal and external goods hinges on the distinction between internal development and external rewards. Whenever we take part in an activity with the purpose of improving our ability in that specific activity, we are destined to extend our own abilities and become better at achieving in that specific activity. MacIntyre refers to such internal development of abilities as the internal goods associated with that activity (1985:188-190; Higgins, 2003: 286). Exactly because I have improved my own ability through attaining the internal goods of the activity (or practice as he calls it), some external rewards such as fame, money and power often result. These are the external goods associated with the practice that I am involved in.

This can be illustrated by the game of chess – to use and elaborate on one of MacIntyre's favourite examples. The internal goods of chess are the abilities or excellences that one acquires when one commits oneself to playing chess really well. In the process of doing so the dedicated chess player will improve his or her intellectual powers of concentration to

analyse, anticipate, strategise, and foresee the logical consequences of moves. The chess player who excels in gaining these internal goods, is likely to have some external goods bestowed upon him/her. Our excellent chess player is likely to become a club, national or even world champion. With such achievement will come fame, money and power.

If we apply this distinction between internal and external goods to the trends currently impacting on the university to the detriment of the cultivation of the philosophical mind, it seems that external goods such as money, power, local impact and prestige are emphasised at the cost of the internal goods of academia, such as the intellectual formation of those who participate in academia.

In a commentary on MacIntyre, Moore (2002:27) rightly points to the fact that we should not regard internal goods as virtues and external goods as vices. On the contrary, he argues that both internal goods and external goods are genuine goods. In order to keep the practices in which we are involved going, we require both internal and external goods. A good university without excellent intellectuals is as much of a pipe dream as a good university without sufficient money, power and status. The internal goods are required to produce the external goods and the external goods are required to sustain the practices in which the internal goods can flourish.

My contention is that exactly this distinction between internal and external goods provides us with the vocabulary to make sense of the current neglect of the cultivation of the philosophical mind at universities. Among the internal goods that are required to sustain academic practice are the willingness and ability to inquire, explore and reflect – or what I have called the philosophical mind. Each discipline will add further intellectual abilities that students and academics need to excel in, but the philosophical mind is indispensable for all disciplines. Hence my earlier assertion that the responsibility to cultivate the philosophical mind is a responsibility shared by all disciplines. The neglect of the cultivation of the philosophical mind, I wish to argue, is due to the fact that external goods such as money, influence, impact, relevance, status etc. have gained an upper hand over the internal goods of the philosophical mind. The institutional focus on external goods at

department, faculty or university level can be held responsible for sacrificing the responsibility for cultivating the philosophical mind of students and academics alike.

If we accept that academic activity can only be sustained if an intellectual spirit, willingness and ability to inquire, explore and reflect prevails, then it becomes evident that academic institutions have a vested interest in stimulating the cultivation of internal goods, including the philosophical mind. What is thus required is for managers of academic institutions at department, faculty and university level to use their external goods to advance the cultivation of internal goods in the academic disciplines.

Members of academic practices, however, also have obligations to maintain a sound relation between internal and external goods. Academics need to be able to resist attempts by the academic institution, whether at department, faculty or university level, to impose institutional agendas that are alien or destructive to the cultivation of the philosophical mind. Finding a creative balance between the internal and external goods of academia is an ongoing battle that will require, in the words of Charles Taylor, an act of resistance and persuasion (1991:72-73).

The policy document of the University of Pretoria indicates that an inaugural lecture by a head of department can take the format of a policy declaration. I would like to offer something more modest than a policy declaration – only a pledge. And that pledge is: *to commit myself to the agenda of persuasion and resistance for the sake of finding a creative balance between the internal and external goods of academia.*

I I

Philosophy: trends and temptations
In the second part of this lecture I wish to attend to a recent trend that affects Philosophy more specifically, although it also has an impact on the relation between Philosophy and other disciplines. This trend is the demand for Applied Ethics that has gained momentum in society at large, but also within universities. Philosophy departments, more often than not, are expected to meet this demand. The reactions to this demand on the part of

philosophers have been varied. Some simply reject this demand as inappropriate, others reluctantly agree to supply this demand, whilst yet others embrace it. Those who regard this demand as inappropriate, typically portray applied ethics as an attempt by ailing Philosophy departments to grow their student numbers or, as John Passmore put it on a lighter note, as a "last despairing attempt on the part of philosophers to demonstrate that they are not, after all, entirely useless." (1998:681). Those who oppose the move towards applied ethics are typically portrayed as philosophers who have lost contact with reality and, as Martha Nussbaum said on occasion "are playing truant from all meaningful activity, producing works of interest to nobody but one another, and in most cases not even to one another" (Hoffman, Quinn, Audi, & Nussbaum, 1995:144).

The Philosophy Department at the University of Pretoria has not escaped this demand for Applied Ethics. Since 2000 there has been a steady increase in the number of applied ethics modules offered by the Department. By 2005 the number of enrolments for Applied Ethics modules just about equalled the enrolments for Philosophy modules (2 171 module enrolments for Applied and Professional Ethics modules compared to 2 242 enrolments for Philosophy modules). This rapid growth in enrolments for Applied Ethics courses has not happened at the cost of Philosophy enrolments. On the contrary, the rapid rise in enrolments for Applied Ethics modules has been complemented by a steady but substantial increase in enrolments for Philosophy modules as well.

The turn towards Applied Ethics
The turn towards Applied Ethics was fuelled by a variety of developments both outside and inside the discipline of Philosophy.

Francis Bacon's famous adage that "knowledge is power" has become a reality in the modern era. Science emerged as a moral ideal in the modern era. There was an optimistic belief that through modern science humanity will be able to ward off the insecurities imposed by the unpredictability and harshness of nature. Through science, it was believed, humanity would ultimately be able to cope with and conquer scarcity and insecurity that threaten human existence.

The prominence and prestige accorded to science has also had a secondary but inverse effect on the prominence and prestige of ethics. In modern science a stark distinction has arisen between facts and values. The rationality underpinning modern science places a special emphasis on facts, but devaluates values. The discourse on facts gained priority over the discourse on values. Consequently ethics, which by its very nature is premised upon values, has been pushed to the sidelines, if not totally excluded from the mainline modern scientific discourse (MacIntyre, 1979: 128 & 1995: 54). This has resulted in a situation in which the discourse on science and the application thereof has increasingly become isolated from the discourse on ethics.

Developments within Philosophy itself have also contributed to the marginalisation of Philosophical Ethics. Modern Philosophical Ethics, in an attempt to keep up with the rationality of modern science, has produced approaches to ethics that simulate the universal laws of nature produced by the natural sciences. The two best known traditions within modern philosophical ethics, viz Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics and John Stuart Mill's utilitarian ethics, each produced its own version of a universal moral law in the form of Kant's Categorical Imperative (or universal moral law) and Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle.

The focus of modern Philosophical Ethics on fundamental ethical principals has run into a variety of difficulties. Firstly, an anti-theory position has developed that questions the usefulness of ethical principles, because they are too abstract to have a meaningful relevance and application to the mainstream ethical issues of modern society (cf. Furrow, 1995; xiii – xiv; Railton, 2004: 28; Horvath, 1995:501). Secondly, modern ethical theories have failed in resolving moral dilemmas and often, instead, fuel moral differences and disputes (Horvath, 1995:501). This inability to solve moral dilemmas and the obvious incommensurable clashes between the various modern ethical theories has had a double effect on the way in which modern Philosophical Ethics is being practised.

A first effect that it has had on Philosophical Ethics is that a line of thinking has emerged that has viewed moral differences as irresolvable in principle owing to the fact that moral differences can ultimately be related to individual and cultural differences regarding moral

values (Heeger 1993:13). This has opened the door for a variety of versions of subjectivism, relativism and emotivism to emerge. By pushing ethics back into the domain of the subjective and the emotional, the potential of Philosophical Ethics to make a meaningful contribution to the ethical crisis of the modern era has been seriously undermined (cf. MacIntyre 1983:10).

The other effect that the clash between modern ethical theories has had was to transfer the focus on ethics from the modern world and its moral ailments to the inner world of Philosophical Ethics. This inward movement fuelled meta-ethical debates where the focus was no longer on the ethical issues of the modern world but on the nature and meaning of ethical deliberation and the moral concepts used in ethical deliberation. This unprecedented focus on meta-ethics prompted Bernard Williams to say that "contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all" (1993: xvii).

The marginalisation of ethics in modern society and the complementary marginalisation of Philosophical Ethics within Philosophy reached a turning point in the latter half of the 20th century. After two devastating world wars, numerous incidents of genocide, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, a spate of scandals in commerce, professions and politics, and also ecological destruction on a scale never experienced before, the belief that science alone can pave the way to a better future lost its credibility (Heeger 1993:11). Instead, a realisation has dawned that the power that modern science has placed in the hands of modern individuals was able to destabilise and threaten the continued existence of humankind. In this regard Hans Jonas remarked that "before our time man's inroads into nature were essentially superficial and powerless to upset its appointed balance" (in Jacobs, 1993:29). Now, Jonas indicates, we have become aware that nature will not forever be able to take care of itself. Instead, we have started to recognise that we need to assume responsibility for the impact of our actions on our natural and social world.

It is exactly this awareness of ethical responsibility towards our world that has triggered the need for a new way of engaging ethically with our world. Philosophical Ethics with its

focus on abstract moral principles on the one hand, and its fascination with meta-ethical issues on the other hand, has not been able to answer this call for an ethics that can engage with the late-modern world. This void has been filled by Applied Ethics.

Traditionally, Philosophical Ethics focused on the nature of ethical obligation, the fundamental principles underpinning ethical obligation, and the meta-ethical dimensions thereof. Applied Ethics, in contrast, engages with specific ethical challenges that have arisen in various disciplines and domains of life. Instead of merely attempting to apply fundamental ethical principles to practical moral challenges, it has generated what Richard de George (1988: 676) called second order principles and norms: that is, norms that are articulated through a process of going back and forth from ethical considerations to practical ethical challenges until what John Rawls called a reflective equilibrium is reached. Applied ethics also in other respects has ventured beyond the traditional domain of Philosophical Ethics by engaging with ethics not merely at the intra- and interpersonal level but also at the macro-moral level of the morality of social and economic systems (cf. De George, 1988:678;). Instead of merely making moral judgements, it also attends to the prevention of moral failures.

A further distinguishing aspect of Applied Ethics is the depth of its engagements with other disciplines or domains (Heeger 1993:11). It has become clear that ethics can only be applied to a specific domain or discipline if the applied ethicist is properly acquainted with that specific discipline or domain. This realisation stimulated both the growth of descriptive ethics (i.e. social scientific investigation, description and analysis of ethical states of affairs) and co-operation across disciplines, but also across the academic-practitioner divide.

Although Philosophy is not the sole player in this new field of Applied Ethics that has emerged particularly since the last quarter of the previous century, it has been a prominent player from the beginning and still remains one. It is exactly the prominence and participation of Philosophy in the field of Applied Ethics that some philosophers regard with suspicion or reject outright. It is to the concerns of those who regard Applied Ethics as a dangerous temptation for Philosophy that I now wish to turn.

The Temptations of Applied Ethics

There are mainly three concerns to be found amongst those who regard Applied Ethics as a temptation that should be resisted by Philosophy. These three concerns revolve around the nature of Applied Ethics, the scope of Applied Ethics and the philosophical integrity of Applied Ethics. I will now discuss each of these three categories of concerns and also evaluate the seriousness of the challenge that they pose to philosophical engagement with Applied Ethics.

- **The Nature of Applied Ethics**

The first concern that is voiced regarding Applied Ethics is that it is unphilosophical in nature. It is argued that Applied Ethics is a mere technical application of existing ethical theories to current moral issues. There is nothing typically philosophical in applying fundamental ethical theories to practical issues (cf. Friday 2004:30). Applied Ethics thus lacks the critical and creative dimension that should characterise a philosophical approach.

This first concern about Applied Ethics cannot be considered a serious challenge to Applied Ethics as it is premised upon a distorted view of Applied Ethics. In the discussion above on the distinction between Philosophical Ethics and Applied Ethics it was argued that what distinguishes Applied Ethics is exactly the fact that it ventures beyond the mere application of ethical theory to practical moral challenges. Besides being a misrepresentation of the nature of Applied Ethics, this first concern borders on demonising Applied Ethics. Demonising occurs when the worst practice of something is contrasted with the best or ideal form of whatever it is being compared with. In this case an inadequate and deficient form of Applied Ethics is being compared with the best that Philosophy can offer.

- **The scope of Applied Ethics**

A second concern about Applied Ethics is that its scope is too restricted. It is argued that ethical problems are embedded in a wider cultural and intellectual context, and that by focusing on only the ethical dimension of problems the wider philosophical context and philosophical underpinnings of modern moral problems are neglected. Ethical problems, we are reminded by these critics, are rooted in philosophical assumptions about persons,

society, science, knowledge, and the meaning of life, to mention only a few. Furthermore, they are also accompanied by all kinds of meta-ethical considerations and questions. In this regard, Friday argues that in addressing the moral ailments of modern society we would do better to abandon the limited vocabulary of Applied Ethics and replace it with the much wider vocabulary that Philosophy affords us (2004:32).

This challenge that Applied Ethics is too limited in its scope to address modern ethical problems deserves to be taken seriously. A too narrow focus on the rightness and wrongness of specific actions or practices can blind us to the wider intellectual and cultural context in which modern moral problems need to be perceived and discussed. The important question in this regard is whether there are any inherent restrictions in Applied Ethics that prevent it from engaging with the broader philosophical issues and questions in which our modern moral problems are embedded. I find myself in agreement with Richard De George, who says that in practising Applied Ethics one inevitably runs into a host of philosophical and meta-ethical questions that blur the distinction between Applied Ethics, Philosophical Ethics and Philosophy in general (1988: 678). There is thus nothing in the nature of Applied Ethics that prevents it from engaging with any philosophical dimension of any modern moral issue that it encounters. On the contrary, Applied Ethics affords us the option not only to engage with Philosophy but also to challenge existing philosophical views with regard to their relevance and meaning for our modern world. The critique about the scope of Applied Ethics should therefore not be regarded as a critique against Applied Ethics as such, but rather as a critique against some applied ethicists who pursue a too restricted agenda.

- **The philosophical integrity of Applied Ethics**

The third concern about Applied Ethics is by far the most serious one. This is the concern that Applied Ethics can sacrifice the integrity of Philosophy as it might become subservient to the existing order (cf. Heeger1993:12). The concern is expressed that philosophers who engage in Applied Ethics might become so engaged at the micro-moral level that they loose their ability to reflect critically on modern society and the socio-economic system within which they offer their moral advice. In doing so they might sacrifice their allegiance to the philosophical quest for truth and wisdom and become uncritical endorsers of the

status quo who only tamper with the problems that arise within our modern culture, without actually challenging the values of that culture. Noonan articulates this concern when he says that Applied Ethics presents not only a distortion of philosophy's nature but also a fundamental danger to the future of philosophical enquiry (2003:37).

Although it would be possible to dismiss the fear of Noonan and others about the philosophical integrity of Applied Ethics with a number of counter-arguments, I prefer to give this concern the full weight that it deserves and rather propose, in closing, an outline of a responsible Applied Ethics that can address this concern.

A Responsible Applied Ethics

A good entry point into developing a normative ideal of what Applied Ethics should be is to determine what kind of knowing and what kind of knowledge is to be pursued in Applied Ethics. A distinction that Aristotle made in his Nichomachean Ethics is particularly apt in this regard. Aristotle distinguished between five kinds of knowledge, viz scientific knowledge, technical skill, practical wisdom, intuition and wisdom (1976:206-213). I wish to propose that specifically the third of these categories of knowledge, viz practical knowledge, provides a model upon which a responsible Applied Ethics should be based.

The original Greek term *phronēsis* is usually translated as practical knowledge or prudence. Aristotle said that *phronēsis* is distinguished from other forms of knowledge by the fact that it refers specifically to the intellectual ability "to deliberate rightly about what is conducive to the good life generally" (1976: 209). He went on to add that we regard people as prudent when "they can envisage what is good for themselves and for people in general; we consider that this quality belongs to those who understand the management of households or states" (1976:209). In his discussion of the virtue of *phronēsis* he further emphasised that the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis* applies specifically to situations where we encounter variables and not first principles or scientific truths. The meaning of *phronēsis* is well captured by Gerard Hughes when he says that for Aristotle "prudence consisted in an admirable intellectual skill" and then continues to indicate that "the prudent person has to have both an understanding of what human fulfilment is and an

ability to perceive which action, here and now, can contribute to living a life of human fulfilment" (1998).

The above exposition of Aristotle's understanding of *phronēsis* implies that there are three kinds of knowledge or understanding that one has to obtain in order to produce *phronēsis* or practical wisdom. Firstly, one should have a proper understanding of the variables that have caused a situation that calls for practical wisdom. Secondly, one should have a notion of what a good life consists of. Finally, one should know what actions or decisions need to be taken in a specific situation in order to facilitate movement in the direction of a good life. I will briefly indicate what each of these three kinds of understanding entails.

- **Understanding the variables**

To practice Applied Ethics well, one requires a proper understanding of the socio-economic and political context and the variables therein that lead to moral challenges. This calls for what Covey describes as an "increased 'clinical' involvement by ethicists … in mundane, practical, or professional settings" (1993:57). The philosopher who engages in Applied Ethics will have to acquaint herself with whatever area she wishes to work in. Very often this will imply an engagement with practices, socio-economic settings and disciplines that lie outside one's own discipline. It is exactly for this reason that Applied Ethics has a multidisciplinary and sometimes even an interdisciplinary dimension. Applied Ethics thus affords us the opportunity to play on the borders and beyond the borders of our established disciplines. In this regard Socrates set us a fine example with his dialogues and discourses with all who had pretensions to knowledge. Aristotle demonstrated an intimate knowledge of the disciplines and domains with which he engaged in his *Ethics*. As Railton said: "No one did this better than Aristotle who has taken the anatomy of the psyche and the nature of the organism and the role of social context into consideration in constituting moral excellence" (2004:275).

- **Understanding the good life**

Aristotle's emphasis on having an understanding of what a good life entails requires Applied Ethicists to engage with one of the oldest and deepest philosophical questions, viz the question of the meaning of life. This question urges us to determine the meaning and

value of the social, economic and political practices that we are involved in. Without at least some notion of what a good life and good society are about, it becomes impossible to offer any meaningful advice on the moral issues that arise in various domains and disciplines (cf. MacIntyre 1999(a):317; Moore, 2005(a):247).

It is particularly this aspect of Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom that can serve as remedy against the fear that Applied Ethics can sacrifice its philosophical integrity by becoming subservient to the existing social order. An Applied Ethics that is premised on the Aristotelian notion of *phronēsis* by definition has to move beyond the micro-moral dimension of problem-solving within organisations and systems and onto the macro-moral dimension of also questioning practices, organisations and systems as such for their contribution towards a good life and a good society.

- **Understanding what is contextually right**

It is in the interaction between an adequate understanding of the variables of a specific situation or context and an understanding of what a good life individually and collectively entails that judgements about what is right and wrong should be made. Such moral judgements most definitely do not consist of applying abstract ethical theories in a technical manner to modern-day problems, as is alleged by some of the critics of Applied Ethics that I discussed earlier. This engagement has rather the character of a hermeneutical engagement in which my understanding or reading of the specific situation unlocks new meaning that changes both the situation and my own understanding of the situation. Jacobs is correct when he says that the engagement of the Applied Ethicist with a specific context combines inductive and deductive processes similar to Gadamer's horizon of understanding (1993:25).

Philosophers who engage in Applied Ethics in this manner do not do so as figures of moral authority, trying to put a stamp of moral approval or disapproval on certain behaviours or practices. Rather, in their attempts to decipher what is right, they engage with colleagues across disciplines and with practitioners in other domains as co-searchers for meaningful and humane behaviour (cf. London 2001:95). Engaging in this manner opens the opportunity for the philosophers not only to draw on the long tradition of Socratic

dialogue, but also to bring into play, as Passmore rightly said, the typical philosophical methodology of distinguishing issues, sorting out questions, defining concepts and discarding irrelevant considerations.

Conclusion

Against the background of this outline of a responsible Applied Ethics I wish to make a second pledge: *To commit myself to the further development of a responsible Applied Ethics that exists in a sisterly relation with Philosophy and in constant conversation with other disciplines who struggle to make sense of our late modern moral challenges.*

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