TEACHING SOCIAL ETHICS
IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Mokgethi Motlhabi
University of South Africa

Abstract

The article argues that teaching social ethics in the South African context cannot be a completely inward-looking, national-oriented affair. It involves teaching students both universal principles pertaining to the discipline of social ethics, on the one hand, and particular moral issues arising out of the specific South African context, on the other. The former implies studying the nature (including constitutive disciplines, moral norms and principles), task and method of social ethics. The latter implies studying and analyzing the context of moral practice as well as the interaction between it and social-ethical principles. The article draws a strict distinction between ethical theory and moral practice. While the focus in the teaching of social ethics is perceived to be on ethical theory, practical moral issues cannot be completely overlooked. They have to be studied for the sake of demonstrating how they stimulate the establishment of moral principles and also how the latter relate to them. There is an underlying assumption about the given topic, 'teaching social ethics in the South African context.' The assumption is that there is a difference of approach in the teaching of social ethics in South Africa as compared to teaching it elsewhere in the world. This assumption is neither fully correct nor fully incorrect. There are both universality and particularity in social ethics; and these aspects apply to it wherever it is in practice. Insofar as social ethics contains universal elements, its teaching is generally the same in all situations. Insofar as it contains particular elements, it relates differently to different situations. In a preliminary way, we may say that universality generally applies to the 'rules of the game.' That is, it applies to the general understanding of what social ethics is about, how it is constituted, what its method of operation is, and how it relates to social practice. Particularity, on the other hand, applies to the subject matter which social ethics may be called upon to address. In this sense, the subject matter of social ethics in South Africa is necessarily distinct from that in, for instance, Zimbabwe. It follows that this paper will have two main aspects to it. The first will concern the nature of social ethics, its task and method of operation. The second aspect will concern its application to practical situations, with specific reference to the South African situation.

1.   Nature of social ethics

To put our topic in perspective, we have to begin by asking the question, What is social ethics? At first sight this is a very simple question. Many 'lay people' on the subject have assumed that the answer to it is straightforward, as the name itself seems self-explanatory. Upon further reflection, however, the question is more complex than the words may appear to imply.

The simple answer stems from a superficial understanding of the compound term 'social-ethics.' From this understanding, it seems obvious that social ethics has to do merely with the application of ethics to social situations or issues. It is the ethics of society. Since

we all have a general idea that ethics is concerned with issues of right and wrong, good and bad, the imperative versus the indicative, it would then appear to us that social ethics concerns the judgment of society and social events according to these criteria. From the Christian and religious perspective, the kind of ethics in question would be assumed to be theological ethics. Non-believers, on the other hand, would naturally have in mind the employment of general philosophical ethics or any other type of secular ethics.

1.1   'Christian social ethics'

Indeed, social ethics may, in a rather loose way, be defined as the application of moral standards to social matters for the purpose of their regulation and assessment. However, this is not what is normally understood by social ethics in academic circles. Here the answer to, What is social ethics? is more complex. First, it involves the meaning of the term 'ethics,' in particular. Second, it involves the significance of the full components of the compound term, 'social ethics.'

As an aspect of Christian ethics, social ethics is, in fact, the shorter name for 'Christian social ethics.' Understood as such, various people tend to emphasize various aspects of the name and to adopt an appropriate approach in their engagement in social ethics, whether in teaching or social action. This means that because of the various emphases placed on the various components of the compound term 'Christian social ethics,' various interpretations and definitions become misleadingly attributed to social ethics.

A quotation from one of the critical practitioners of social ethics will illustrate this point. Ralph Potter (1972:93), who himself held a particular view of social ethics in the early 1970s, criticized certain advocates of a different viewpoint for what appeared to him as a lack of focus in their approach. This was precisely because of the different emphases adopted by some social ethicists in describing it. According to him, 'Some [practitioners of social ethics] accentuate the qualifier, 'Christian'; others place stress upon the second modifier, 'social.' There are those who emphasize that Christian social ethics is a sub-field of the general philosophical discipline of ethics.' From this observation it seems obvious that those who emphasize the Christian nature of social ethics will tend to see it as the direct application of biblical or Christian moral standards, especially New Testament standards, to society and social life. This is an identical approach to that of applying intellectual ethical standards, whether philosophical or theological, to social issues.

On the other hand, those emphasizing the social nature (or focus) of social ethics often reduce it to sociology or sociology of religion, with an emphasis on the study of deviant behaviour, social control, and the creation of conditions for social equilibrium. Unfortunately, these one-sided emphases make it meaningless to speak of Christian social ethics as a unit composed of different elements. Their Christian social ethics lacks integration, for they adopt a selective, one-dimensional approach which does not do justice to what is signified by the different components of the name.

Another prominent social ethicist, Walter Muelder (1966), addressed the question of such distortion and lack of integration by advocating a single, integrated, interdisciplinary discipline. He rejected (1966:20) the idea of Christian social ethics as merely 'theological ethics with applications to current social questions . . .' Nor was it, 'even when the problems discussed are social, a presentation of general theoretical ethics with biblical sanctions.' He also rejected the idea of social ethics as sociology of religion 'or any other behavioral science.' Instead, Muelder emphasized the 'joint, supplementary and complementary' nature of the disciplines constituting social ethics. These had to be studied together for the

realization of a more meaningful social ethics, leading to 'emergent coherence' (1966:20) - i.e., a joint, consistent operation leading to a common product. Such disciplines are both theoretical and empirical, including theology, philosophical ethics, behavioural and historical sciences. Through this type of integration, social ethics seeks to 'furnish an interdisciplinary approach to problems of social order' (Winter 1968:5).

It follows that the study of theology, with an emphasis on theological ethics, is imperative for social ethics. It is what makes social ethics Christian. Society and its relevant structures also have to be studied and analyzed in order to be afforded meaningful input for the attainment of social harmony. This is not merely a matter of informal social observation. As Muelder suggests, in-depth study of at least one of the social and behavioural sciences is necessary. This is in order to provide the social ethicist with the tools of social research, analysis and interpretation. Finally, both philosophical and theological ethics are crucial for providing norms, values, and principles of acceptable social behaviour.

1.2   Ethics and morals

The complexity concerning the term 'ethics,' on the other hand, is that much confusion surrounds its meaning. This makes it often difficult for people to use it accurately and meaningfully. Many people do not draw a distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality.' They often use the two terms interchangeably. The result is that one word is often used when, in fact, the other is intended and would have been more appropriate to use. Hence often what is meant by social ethics is social morality. Yet social ethics, as ethics, more appropriately refers to the principles of good social conduct. Social morality, on the other hand, refers to the way of behaving within a given social context - that is, it refers to moral conduct within and in relation to social entities.

A topic such as the one presently under examination would, accordingly, often be intended to mean 'teaching social morality in the South African context.' This, however, would be more relevant for a Sunday school or a catechism class than for a university academic course. It would also be more relevant if we were concerned with the particular application of universal moral principles rather than with their formulation. It is, therefore, important for us to know what we really mean by the term 'ethics,' as opposed to 'morality' or 'morals.'

The accepted 'technical' distinction between the two words concerns mainly their application to theory and practice. Ethics, as just implied, has to do with the former while morality is concerned with the latter. Thus we normally speak of ethical theory and moral practice. In this sense ethics concerns what we referred to earlier as the 'rules of the game,' that is, the study of the nature (including norms and principles), task, as well as method of the discipline governing our moral practice or moral behaviour. Morality or morals, on the other hand, refers to conduct governed by given ethical standards. A good distinction of these terms is made by ethicists like Carl Wellman (1975), Enrique Dussel (1988), and David McNaghton (1988).

Wellman appropriately titles his book *Morals and Ethics,* to deal alternately with moral problems and ethical theories. The former include issues such as civil disobedience, the drug problem, abortion, premarital sex, capital punishment, open housing, among others. The latter deals with issues of right and wrong, the good, moral value, moral knowledge, human rights, *inter alia.* In similar fashion, Dussel distinguishes between fundamental moral themes (theory) and disputed (moral) questions (or issues).

In teaching social ethics, therefore, it is important to draw this distinction. Emphasis

should be laid more on social ethical theory, while practical moral problems are cited as the subject matter of social ethics. Unlike Wellman and Dussel, McNaughton uses the term 'moral theory' for ethics and 'practical ethics' for morals. For him the term 'ethics' is reserved for what is normally referred to as 'meta-ethics.' For us it is sufficient to note, however, that even he identifies the idea of morality not as simply 'ethics' but as 'practical ethics.'

2.   The task and method of social ethics

The various disciplines which together make up the discipline of social ethics have implications for the task of social ethics. In suggesting a loose definition of social ethics above, we implicitly alluded to its possible task. We said that social ethics may be defined as the application of moral standards to social matters for the purpose of their regulation and assessment. What this definition would mean is that social ethics is concerned with the regulation and assessment of the behaviour of social entities and also of individuals in relation to these entities and to general social issues. The question is how such regulation and assessment of social behaviour are done. All the disciplines of social ethics would be assumed to contribute to this task.

It is obvious from the foregoing discussion, however, that this 'loose definition,' as well as the task of social ethics implicit in it, is defective. It applies more to what we have described as social morality than to social ethics itself. It relates to the practice or implementation of social ethics rather than to its theory or formulation. A correct definition of social ethics would require an adjustment of the proposed definition. Accordingly, social ethics could be seen as concerned with the *formulation, or examination and interpretation of moral principles intended for the regulation and/or assessment of behaviour* by social entities, and also by individuals in relation to these entities and to general social issues. The formulation or examination and interpretation of these principles involves the contribution of all these disciplines.

First, philosophy and theology are tasked with the clarification and interpretation of concepts as well as with the provision of reasons for moral behaviour (that is, with meta-ethics). It is from them that we find our answer to the question, Why should I be moral, namely, why be good, loyal, upright, trustworthy, and so on. Paul Deats (1972:33) states their contribution to social ethics as being that of 'illumination through historically derived loyalties, traditions, insights and categories of interpretation.' Further, they contribute 'categories and procedures of logical consistency and rational coherence.' This is also probably what Potter (1972:105) refers to as 'the logic of moral argument.'

The socio-behavioral sciences provide the tools of social research, analysis and interpretation. In order to understand and provide an accurate assessment of social problems, we have to know the real facts of the situation. For this we need the socio-behavioral sciences to help us in our search for relevant insights. Finally, for moral assessment to take place, we need norms and values, principles of decision-making, as well as principles of moral action. Both philosophical and theological ethics contribute these, both individually and jointly. A study of social philosophy should also form part of the study of social ethics in order to shed light on the original motivations for social and political (or socio-political) philosophical theories and their contributions to social life and development.

The first goal in teaching social ethics in every situation, therefore, is to take into consideration the universal aspect just outlined. (It is true that in a primordial situation,

naturally, morality precedes ethics (see McAuliffe 1993:2-5, 118). However, once ethical principles have been established, they are to be studied and continually reexamined in order for them to contribute new insights to moral practice.) While students of theology in South Africa normally have a good background in the various theological disciplines, philosophy and the social sciences are seldom included in the curricula of theological education. It is, further, only in Roman Catholic seminaries that philosophy is considered a necessary foundation for theological education, while these seminaries also give only a sweeping introduction to some of the socio-behavioral sciences. While all these disciplines should form a necessary background for theological education as a whole, they are a *conditio sine qua non* for the study of social ethics. Naturally, they cannot all be taught, nor all taught as major subjects. At least one of them, in addition to ethics (philosophical and theological), can be taught as a second major or as a minor subject. For the remaining disciplines, a working knowledge of the some of the subjects would suffice. In the South African context this means at least one, full-year course in each of them.

3.   Application of social ethics

Social ethics cannot be studied in a vacuum. As already obvious by now, it is studied with a view to maintaining social harmony and providing solutions to social problems. This means that while it is basically theoretical, it is studied with a view to social practice. It is the theoretical tools it provides that are used in giving direction and guidance to social life, establishing harmonious social relations, and finding solutions whenever there are social problems.

While the primary focus in the teaching of social ethics should be on its theoretical basis, therefore, the student should be made aware of the concrete situation to which it relates. In the South African context this means being aware of past and current social issues, of erstwhile and currently existing social structures intended for their solution, and of ongoing attempts to maintain social harmony and to find solutions to existing problems.

3.1   Lessons from church social teachings

As the first step toward finding a suitable approach to address the South African situation, it will be helpful for the student of social ethics to learn from the church's approach in its social teaching. This will enlighten students on how Christian social teaching evolved from the early days of the church to its present stage. It will also help them to avoid the mistakes of the past in their approach, including difficulties and deficiencies encountered in the church's own approach throughout its various historical stages.

Learning from the church's social teaching means studying some of the key phases in its historical development. This means examining each of the stages and selecting from them some of the most representative or most significant teachings which can be used as models or measures for present-day socio-moral reflection and judgment. Alternatively, a selection can be made of only some of the stages most relevant to our own needs and situation. From these stages sections can be picked up and adapted to guide our moral reflection in our own social context.

Whichever approach is finally adopted, there are certain milestones and key sources of Christian social teaching which cannot be left out in studying the subject of social ethics. These include the writings of some of the Fathers and Theologians of the church; those of Reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Wesley; of church social movements such as the social gospel/social Christianity; as well as papal social encyclicals of the Roman Catholic

Church and the ecumenical social thought of the World Council of Churches. In a situation in Africa some aspects of the African independent churches must also be studied in order to determine what moral insights they contain and can contribute both to the teaching of social ethics and to social practice.

Not only must these writings be studied for what students can learn from them. They must also be critiqued in terms of present-day socio-moral needs and insights. For instance, some theologians (see McAuliffe 1993) have called for a paradigm shift in ethics to address the ethical implications of liberation theology. They advocate an ethics which makes human suffering its chief motivation and which, therefore, sees its main objective as resistance to any kind of suffering, including poverty, racism, sexism, specisism, and destruction of the environment. In this sense, ethics does not presuppose harmony but socio-structural conflict, to which it is a response. Relevant theologies of liberation, therefore, especially black theology, must be studied carefully not only for their criticism of traditional theology and ethics - nor for their emulation - but also for the insights they can provide in our approach to our own social situation.

In addition to learning from church social teachings and current liberationist ethics, the student must be familiarized with the position of the church on social matters in his/her own country. In South Africa the two main representative church bodies responding to social matters have been the South African Council of Churches and the South African Catholic Bishops Conference. Their positions and declarations, as well as those of selected individual church synods, must be carefully studied and weighed against the universal principles of social ethics as well as against the practical needs of the situation. Further, their campaigns, as well as those of individual church persons and church groups, must be analyzed and evaluated for their moral basis and significance. Following all these studies of the church's social teachings - and of current, national church organizational input - the student would be in a position to engage in a direct investigation of the current practical situation in his/her own country.

3.2   The South African context:
Historical Background and Present Context

In order to understand most of the social problems currently experienced in South Africa, it is imperative to know some of the country's social history. Most of the written history of South Africa dates back to 1652, the year of the first settlement of white people in the country. However, it is now commonly accepted that sufficient background for the current social situation can be based on events which unfolded since the year 1948. This was the year of the National Party government's ascendancy into power, the year when the party's policy of apartheid began to be shaped.

The teaching of social ethics in South Africa, therefore, must include this part of the history of the country. It must examine the motivation for the policy of apartheid, its implementation and its effects on people, its overall positive (if any) and negative aspects, as well as its contribution to some of the present social problems. It must also examine the struggles of the people against this policy, of their political and community organizations, as well as the moral basis of this struggle, its strategy, implementation and general consequences for all the country's population (see Motlhabi 1988).

Apart from national history, the student should be expected to keep current with the issues of the day. This means following social events, both those directly witnessed and those communicated through the media, which have moral implications. The student should

be able to catalogue relevant social issues, to analyze them and to identify their moral significance. South Africa is not wanting in these issues. They seem to increase by the day, chiefly because solutions to them seem to be so elusive. Hence a student buying a daily newspaper will read about racial inequalities (past and present), ongoing racial discrimination in social institutions, resistance to institutional transformation aimed at accommodating those formally disenfranchised and legally disadvantaged, racially motivated and sanctioned economic exploitation, government corruption, poverty, lack of housing and proper human living conditions, violence, crime, car-hijackings, rape and murder, among other moral handicaps. All these are social problems requiring social solutions. Not only are they social, but thy are moral issues as well - more appropriately, they are socio-moral issues. The student must learn to determine their causes, their manifestations, their agents, and their effects. Such background information will provide the necessary basis in subsequent searches for solutions.

The tools provided by social ethics in dealing with these issues will help in their analysis and interpretation (socio-behavioral sciences), in envisioning the ideal social set-up and providing motivation for compliance toward its realization (philosophy and theology), and in providing norms and principles for acceptable social behaviour and harmonious social relations (philosophical and theological ethics and social philosophy).

3.3   Existing social structures and social programmes

In addition to obtaining information on social issues, the teaching of social ethics in South Africa must take into consideration available social structures and programmes aimed at addressing existing social problems. While there are many non-governmental social structures and programmes in the country, it may be necessary to restrict study to only a few of the most significant and effective ones among these, e.g., church social programmes. It would not be practical to expect to study all or even most of these programmes, notwithstanding the significant role they may be playing in society.

On the other hand, it seems necessary to know what major governmental social structures and programmes exist for addressing the multiple social circumstances and problems that exist in the country. The reason for studying these structures and programmes would be to determine their aims and objectives, their relevance, their implementation and their effectiveness in fulfilling their objectives. Since the new government took over office in 1994, a number of such structures have come into being in order to deal with key social and political issues. Prominent among these are the Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Human Rights Commission, the new South African Constitution - incorporating a Bill of Rights, the Land Commission, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Although the RDP (1994) no longer exists as a separate programme, its original aims and objectives are of crucial interest to the teaching and study of social ethics. Its main objective was meeting the basic human needs of all South Africans, especially those citizens whose condition of disadvantage is the result of the previous system of apartheid. These basic needs are generally summarized as jobs, housing, education, health care, and generally healthy living conditions. They are listed broadly in the RDP document (1994:16) to include land reform, housing and services, water and sanitation, energy and electrification, transport, environment, nutrition, health care, social security and welfare.

The teaching of social ethics should determine the government's chief motivation in establishing this programme. It should also establish or provide the moral motivation why it

is necessary for society to meet the basic human needs of its people. It should motivate our corporate responsibility, as human beings and as moral agents, to participate toward this end. Not least, it should assess the appropriateness as well as effectiveness of all existing programmes for social relief with the aim of recommending their continuation, improvement or substitution.

Charles Kammer (1988), writing in general about fundamental and potential human needs, provides a good motivation in his book for the kind of human obligation suggested toward the meeting of fundamental human needs. This obligation for all to participate in the meeting of the basic needs of all in society is seen to reside in the fact of our common humanity and, as Christians, in the belief in our common creation in the image and likeness of God. Both our common humanity and our sharing in the image of God make us members of the same family - the human family. As such, we are bound by these 'family ties' to be, so to say, our neighbour's keeper. They provide us with the basis and background of Jesus' second greatest commandment: Love your neighbour as yourself.

Apart from our common humanity, our obligation stems also from the fact that fundamental human needs have to be met. The very fact of fundamental human need imposes an obligation upon all to do all they can to help meet this need. Not to be moved to respond to the dire need of other human beings is not only considered inhuman and unnatural, but also seems inherently so. It 'just does not feel right' not to help another person in dire need. The least we can do in witnessing the need or suffering of others is to give them our sympathy, if we cannot afford concrete assistance. Hence we often speak of moral support, where we are incapable of providing material support.

Within the RDP, a facility such as a job, for instance, is not a direct need in itself. It is only a need insofar as it facilitates the meeting of underlying needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, among others. Without appropriate provision for these, the possible consequences for those experiencing such need are starvation and exposure, often leading to death. It is this our humanity will not tolerate. Our common humanity (our 'human nature' or *ubuntu/botho*) will not allow us to look on when our fellow-humans are suffering or dying from their need; hence our moral obligation to participate toward the meeting of the fundamental human needs of all. As the question of jobs shows, however, in some cases these needs can be met only indirectly, while in others they must be met directly.

Since the government is like a personification of society, as individuals we participate in its effort to address these needs through our assent to its programmes, such as the RDP, and through our payment of taxes, which are responsible for funding these programmes. In our teaching and study of a document such as the RDP, we must determine and show how it meets the moral motivation and moral end such as those examined by Kammer. We must also show its adequacy in appropriately addressing the basic needs in question.

The same can be said of teaching the South African constitution with its Bill of Rights. It is crucial for a student of social ethics to know the various social provisions included in the Constitution of the country. This includes learning about human rights and duties, what is meant by these rights and duties and how they affect people in general, both as individuals and as communities. Students must learn about specific human rights, their moral basis as well as their legal aspects. The role of a structure such as the Human Rights Commission in promoting and safeguarding adherence to human rights must also be studied and assessed. We may assume that such a structure is armed with tools similar to those provided by social ethics, as well as with legal backing, in its investigation of the adequacy of provisions for human rights in social structures and in its investigation of human rights violations.

Finally, temporary structures which are from time to time established for the purpose of looking at particular social problems, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, must also be studied and evaluated as they come. Matters which form the basis for the TRC hearings are of special interest to social ethics and must form part of the student's area of investigation. They must be studied carefully and evaluated morally, not only as a matter of interest but also for the insights they can provide in helping ethicists anticipate and evaluate similar problems in future.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate that teaching social ethics in South Africa cannot be a completely inward-looking, national affair. It involves teaching students both universal principles pertaining to the discipline of social ethics, on the one hand, and particular moral issues arising out of the specific South African Context, on the other. In addition, it also involves learning from the church's approach to socio-moral issues in its history, as well as from current church structures and movements.

In focusing on the South African context itself, it is important for the student to study both the country's social history and contemporary social issues. This means that both historical documentation and current sources of information, such as the media, will serve as important sources. This information provides the subject matter to which social ethical principles are applied and re-examined in the search for social moral solutions. Social structures and programmes established for the solution of social problems, present and past, must also be studied and their actual contribution evaluated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Deats, Paul K 'The Quest for a Social Ethic,' in *Toward A Discipline of Social Ethics: Essays in Honor of Walter G Muelder*. Ed. Paul Deats, Jr. Boston: Boston University Press, 1972.

Dussel, Enrique. *Ethics and Community*. Trans. Robert R Barr. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988.

Kammer III, Charles L *Ethics and Liberation: An Introduction*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988.

MaAuliffe, Patricia. *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993.

McNaughton, David. *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics*. New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1988.

Motlhabi, Mokgethi. *Challenge to Apartheid: Toward a Moral National Resistance*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988.

Muelder, Walter G *Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics*. New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1966.

Potter, Ralph. 'The Logic of Moral Argument.' in *Toward a Discipline of Social Ethics: Essays in Honor of Walter G. Muelder*. Ed. Paul Deats, Jr. Boston: Boston University Press, 1972.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP): A Policy Framework. Johannesburg: African National Congress, 1994.

Wellman, Carl. *Morals and Ethics*. Glenview, Il.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975.

Winter, Gibson. Introduction to *Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society*. Ed. Gibson Winter. London: SCM Press, 1968.