Homo Ethicus: Understanding the Human Nature that Underlies Human Rights and Human Rights Education

Martin Prozesky
marproz@mweb.co.za

Abstract

The themes of human rights and human rights education in South Africa's multi-cultural society are central to the work of Cornelia Roux. This article discusses the human reality and ethics underlying those themes, using an approach based on a view of human nature. It has six sections, starting with an introduction that states the aims of the article, central to which is fostering debate and research with the goal of enhancing the ethical quality of society. The second section gives grounds for holding that significant ethical enhancement is achievable. Then there is a third section setting out a view of ethics, understood as practice as distinct from the academic discipline of that name. This is followed by a section containing an updated working hypothesis about *homo sapiens* stemming from earlier research by the author on human nature, arguing that it exhibits a drive to maximize well-being. The fifth section links the hypothesis to the ethical dimension of human nature, while the final section provides short accounts of a range of research questions related to ethical enhancement where further research is needed.

Keywords: applied ethics, human nature, maximizing well-being, moral experience, further research

1. Introduction

In writing about the theme of *Homo Ethicus,* my aims are firstly to stimulate

debate and research into what it means to be an ethical human being, by providing an updated account of earlier work on human nature, understood as an experiential, empirical reality. The second aim is to encourage greater commitment to a more socially effective, practical ethic which includes human rights and human rights education. Since the rights in question are those of humankind as such, my account of ethics will be multi-cultural and not merely relevant to one or more specific cultures.

Let us remember that, at a time when serious and seemingly worsening problems of ethical decline confront the country and indeed the wider world, ethics, a word which I use interchangeably with the word morality, in common with some other scholars (Rossouw 2004: 3), itself faces important challenges. Understood primarily in its practical sense as behaviour governed by adherence to a defensible conception of that which is right and good, our view of the good is often too narrowly conceived in terms of academic disciplines, too western, at times patriarchal and even sexist, sometimes too subservient to divisive religious interests, too theoretical and often also under-informed by empirical reality.

The research project which underlies this article has had as its main objective the confronting and reducing of the problem of a heavily theoretical and academic kind of ethic that has little social impact in a situation that cries out for moral strength. To make a difference we need the best, creative thinking based on the best available knowledge of the personal and social moral domain, considered in its widest and deepest, leading later to the creation of effective instruments and interventions to promote ethical practice at both personal and societal levels, from the family, the home, the school and the neighbourhood to the workplace and beyond.

Clearly this is extremely ambitious. Might it be over-ambitious? Only if we insist on thinking small and ignoring the history of recent moral achievement against massive odds, thereby denying ourselves the inspiration that history produces and justifies.

2. Why the Project is Realistic

For inspiration I like to refer to the history of moral effort. There was a time when a mere handful of people knew that slavery was an unspeakable evil. Now it has very largely, but alas not yet completely, gone. There was a time

when Hitler seemed unstoppable or apartheid unshakeable. It took a mere twelve years to destroy Nazism, and just a few decades to bring apartheid to its knees. Early in the 20th century women nowhere had the vote. Now their liberation in most spheres of life in many parts of the world is well advanced, but, as we all know, not yet complete. While it is true that modern times also have a history of some appalling episodes of human barbarity like the Nazi Holocaust and Stalin's Gulag, the moral gains just mentioned are nonetheless real.

Around one hundred and twenty years ago, a young lawyer was thrown off a train in the small hours of a winter morning on Pietermaritzburg station merely because he was dark-skinned. His reaction was not to seek ways of repaying the violence he had suffered with retaliatory violence, but with the moral resources of what he called soul-force. I refer of course to M.K. Gandhi, who went on to turn outrage at racism into the non-violent liberation of India from British control and its associated racism, and was given the title of Mahatma – Great Soul. The liberated India of which he was the moving genius would soon become the first country to support the quest for a non-racial South Africa. That he paid with his life for his vision is true and tragic and a reminder that sometimes commitment to the good can be very costly indeed (Gandhi 1948; Brown 1996).

His example inspired a young black Baptist pastor in the USA to take up the non-violent struggle for equality, dignity and human rights for America's black people, even at the cost of his own life. I refer of course to Martin Luther King, Jr. So there is evidence around the world that good can be made to defeat and transform massive evil.

The moral domain, especially when it works in tandem with commitment to a powerful spiritual or political vision, is not like the world of money where the more you spend the less you have. It works the other way: the more you spend your moral capital, the more it becomes, no matter how small that initial capital might seem. What could be smaller than a moment of moral commitment in the mind of a slender young lawyer alone in the small hours of the morning on a chilly railway station in a foreign land? In the commonwealth of the good, small at times has a way of becoming very, very big, given time and dedication of the kind Gandhi and many others known and unknown had. This reality is especially evident in the way the small, localized ethical beginnings of the world's great spiritual and moral luminaries like Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus of Nazareth and Prophet

Muhammad have grown into massive, long-lasting, trans-cultural movements (Geering 1980: 29-48; Carpenter 1980: 95; Hutchison 1981).

Further encouragement for moral effort comes from the very nature of our time in history, with its unprecedented personal freedoms and its unprecedented explosion of knowledge. We all understand that for an action to have moral status, the agent must understand the action and be free either to perform it or not. So since knowledge and freedom of action are inherent in the very nature of ethical practice, a time of such great freedom and knowledge as ours means that there is now also more scope for morality – for goodness of life – than ever before.

But freedom and knowledge are two-edged swords. They can also be used by the selfish, the greedy and the violent and often are, not least in our own country at this time. Technology alone greatly increases the possibilities of evil, as the nuclear disaster on April 26, 1986 at Chernobyl in Ukraine so shockingly shows, with the meltdown of Reactor Number Four because of deliberate human wrong-doing on the part of two engineers who wanted to run a dangerous experiment and pushed it too far (Kidder 1996: 30-33).

So while the morally valuable greater freedoms and far greater knowledge of our time also mean that there is unprecedented scope for great evil, that should make people of conscience more determined than ever to counter evil as effectively as possible by moral means.

For those who work in universities, the institution which is the acknowledged heart of knowledge production and dissemination, and mindful that knowledge is power, it is well to bear in mind the fact that unless power is controlled by conscious moral commitment, it lapses into what is arguably its default mode, which is power governed by self-interest and, worse still, selfishness that all too often turns to violence to get what it wants. This is what we see in our own country at this time, and also in other parts of the world. We all too often see freedom outstripping responsibility, greed outstripping generosity and gentleness being abandoned for violence.

3. How I see Ethics

The understanding of ethics in this chapter differs in some important ways from that of both philosophical ethicists and religious ethicists, so it must now be explained. This can be done by means of six statements.

Firstly, in common with others I see the good as the central concept in ethics (Rossouw 2004: 3). Accepting the usual understanding of this word, as our most general term of approval, I further understand it to refer to whatever is beneficial to its recipients, in all the countless ways that can happen, like acts of generosity, the beauty of a spring morning, birdsong, friendship, telling the truth and acts of great moral courage. Evil accordingly means, centrally, that which does harm in all the dreadful ways that can happen, especially when the harm is intended.

Secondly, my approach is grounded in direct, repeated, personal experiences of the good as a beneficial force operative in the world, indeed in the cosmos, at least in so far as it affects us (Murphy & Ellis 1996: 202-220). It is not grounded in philosophical theories or religious teachings, though it has important affinities with the ethical thought of Aristotle and Whitehead (McKeon 1947; Whitehead 1978). The goodness I have in mind can thus be experienced by anyone, anywhere and at any time. This universality is significant also for education about human rights that are the birthright of everybody.

Thirdly, I see ethics as a bio-cultural reality. We now know enough about human brain science to know that the capacity for moral choice involves structures of the brain analogous to but also distinct from our neurological equipment for language (Ashbrook 1997; van der Walt 2010: 23-39). There is therefore an important biological aspect to the better understanding of *Homo Ethicus.* We need all the insights into this equipment that neurobiological research can provide, not least in what it reveals about the way we are equipped for feelings of enjoyment and pain and to value the former and whatever we discover favours it.

Like language, however, this biological ethical equipment of ours must be activated from earliest childhood by the influence and teaching of parents, siblings and others as they pass on to us their own ethical beliefs. This brings culture, understood as the totality of human creations that are passed on by education, in the broadest sense, into the picture. The connection of this chapter with the educational work of Cornelia Roux will therefore be clear.

In the *fourth* place, I have consciously sought to move far beyond the narrow moral worlds of my own early ethical formation, the worlds of Christian ethics and western moral philosophy, in quest of a moral vision informed and inspired by as many of the world's value-systems as I can

personally experience and explore, as indicted in the opening paragraph of this article. These value-systems run now from African and Australian Aboriginal to Zen and Zulu, with special attention to the first-named because Africa is our home continent (Murove 2009: 14-32).

The key lessons of this exploration of comparative ethics are twofold: on one hand there are very many issues about whose rightness or wrongness the various cultures differ, at times outrightly, as we see in connection with abortion and sexuality. The other key lesson is, I would argue, more important. It is the very widespread, cross-cultural consensus about core moral values like the importance of truth and concern for others, or the danger of selfishness (Küng 1997; Kidder 1994; Prozesky 2007: 131-145; Ward 1991: 179ff.). Might this consensus even be global? It is too early to say, so further research is needed, especially about China.

Fifthly, I believe that ethics as theory is only worth supporting if it serves the more important purpose of effectively enriching ethics as practice. I have great respect for the intellectual power of the great moral philosophers like Aristotle and Kant. But I remain convinced that Marx put his finger on a crucial proviso about philosophical ethics when he wrote as follows in his famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have hitherto merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx 1845).

My *sixth* statement about my approach to ethics is that Africa's traditional morality is an essential resource not just for moral growth in South Africa but globally, provided it is liberated from its captivity to such anti-social forces as greed, domination and sexism (Boon 1996: 47-48; Murove 2009).

In short, I hold that for ethics to make a difference today and in the future, personally, nationally and even globally, it must be multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural. In a globalizing world the moral silos of the past and present are simply unacceptable if they are seen as all we need, rather than as ingredients in a truly inclusive morality (Prozesky 2007: 131-144). The justification for this contention takes us to human nature, understood as what all people are simply as members of the species *homo sapiens* before culture impresses its influences on them from birth onwards. How might human nature be understood if a significant expression of our humanness is our moral sense and the behaviours it produces?

4. A Working Hypothesis about *Homo Sapiens*

What, then, is the humanity underlying both ethical practice and human rights education? This chapter offers two proposals by way of answer: firstly an hypothesis about human existence that was originally developed in earlier research in connection with religion (Prozesky 1984; 1989) and more recently in connection with morality (Prozesky 2007: 32-60), and which is further adapted in this chapter in order to offer a possible explanation of the ethical dimension of our existence in relation to human rights. Secondly the article offers a set of issues that strike me as needing to be included in further research into *Homo Ethicus.* I turn now to the first of these two steps.

In summary form the hypothesis is as follows: *that all human beings are fundamentally (and uniquely) constituted by an inter-related drive to imagine, conceptualize in language and creatively bring about maximum well-being.* This assertion, which contains an echo of process philosophy's central emphasis on both creativity and relationality (Whitehead 1978: 21) that was not present in the original research referred to above, is intended to apply to the entire existence of the species from the earliest available evidence of its activities, like tool-making, ritual burial and organized hunting, until the present. Specifically, the hypothesis entails the following more detailed contentions.

It is *based on a vital difference between people on one hand and all other intelligent species on the other.* We are of course genetically very close to bonobos and chimpanzees. They too are intelligent and able to understand and respond to a fair number of words, though vastly fewer than we are, but cannot of course speak them. They too feel pain and pleasure and desire; they too are capable of walking on two legs and have opposable thumbs (Fernandez-Armesto 2004: 9-54). But there is nonetheless a crucial difference: on their own all such species can survive only in or near a native habitat, whereas *homo sapiens* has repeatedly created and re-created the means of surviving and also thriving in a great range of enormously different habitats.

I think this indicates a human capacity for mental and physical creativity which is uniquely human: the ability to imagine more enjoyable ways of living and then bringing them about. So our species has moved from the African forests of some 200,000 years ago to the savanna, to the deserts, the ice-fields, the river banks, the tilled fields, the temples, mosques and cathedrals, the industrial suburbs, the moon and fairly soon, it seems, even the planet Mars.

Next, my hypothesis about what it means to be human is *empirical and experiential*. It purports to assert a truth about people in the concrete actualities of their existence *as they themselves experience it*, a matter that I have tested again and again in ethical training workshops and found repeatedly confirmed by attendees (Prozesky 2007: 32-36). As such it has a biological dimension, because it implies that human beings are physically equipped for the pursuit of the increased well-being that they are also biologically equipped to imagine. The hypothesis also has a social-scientific dimension because it implies that a wide range of phenomena of the kind studied by social scientists all have their common foundation in, and bring to expression, the drive to imagine and maximize well-being. These disciplines are collective human behaviour and institutions (the field of sociology), individual human behaviour (psychology), the pursuit of power and wealth (political economy), the diversities of culture (social anthropology), the diversities of transcendental orientation (religion studies, theology and some forms of philosophy), and of course humanity's value-systems. Thus the hypothesis is in principle open to falsification by biological and social science, and indeed by common experience. Whether or not it is consistent with this or that philosophical or theological theory about morality is irrelevant in the present context, where experiential and empirical justifications are what count.

Next, the hypothesis is an empirical *generalization* in that it purports to identify a basic truth about *all* human beings. As such its validity depends on the hypothesis being applicable to all known human cultures past and present. Any attested pattern of human activity which cannot be plausibly subsumed within its logic would therefore refute or at least seriously modify the hypothesis.

By asserting that the inter-related drive to maximize well-being is a *fundamental* human characteristic, the hypothesis implies that all other aspects of what it means to be human depend upon or arise from this characteristic. An inability to demonstrate a plausible dependency-relationship between any of those other aspects and this drive to imagine and maximize well-being would thus count against its being genuinely fundamental. In my original research my concern was to show the explanatory potential of the hypothesis in relation to humanity's religions (Prozesky 1984); It is not my concern now to show this explanatory power in relation to any other sphere of human behavior other than the ethical, which I

do later in this article.

The terminology used in formulating the hypothesis must now be clarified. Six terms are involved. The *first* and basic term is 'well-being' and signifies *an experienced condition of satisfaction which the subject of the experience would not want to change but could wish to enhance.* There is nothing essential about the choice of the term 'well-being'; the words 'flourishing' or 'thriving' could perhaps also serve, but not happiness. This is because well-being or flourishing can refer without distortion to both the subject's experience of enjoyment, satisfaction, and the like, and – crucially – to the conditions around him or her that make that experience possible, like friendship, employment, peace and social justice. Happiness is too subjective to cover that essential, broader, contextual reality. Thus I assert that people experience well-being whenever their consciousness is free, or largely free, in whatever circumstances they participate in, of a sense of uneasiness, discomfort, dissatisfaction, misery or pain whether in relation to themselves personally, to their circumstances, or to both. Positively, well-being is the experience of equanimity, calm, satisfaction, contentedness, pleasure or happiness, either in relation to oneself personally, to one's circumstances, or to both.

Thus the most important experiential or sensory indicator of well-being and its absence is a felt impulse to maintain or change one's present conditions: if the impulse is towards maintenance or increase, then well-being is present; if the impulse is towards change, then well-being is deficient or even absent. It will be noticed that this most basic of my terms is defined ostensively; in other words, it is given meaning by pointing to an experienced reality open to all people alike.

It is worth noting in the context of a publication with a strong interest in human rights that when I first began to formulate the hypothesis, I was seeking an inclusive, unified way of accounting for the world's religions, and thereby to refute conceptually a core tenet of apartheid thinking, namely that human differences are more basic than any similarities. I wanted to see if something as hugely varied as religion could be subsumed under a single logic and believe that I found a way to do so, but that is another story (Prozesky 1984).

The *second* set of terms is 'imagine' and 'conceptualize in language'. As the previous paragraphs imply, I contend that people are consciously aware of well-being or its absence and when it is felt to be absent or

insufficient, they are able to envisage a preferred, more satisfying condition. Much more is thus involved than a blind or sub-conscious process built into us. While not denying that it may have important sub-conscious aspects, I nonetheless wish to place the main emphasis on well-being as a *conscious* experience which involves a range of important cognitive dimensions. It involves imagining the elimination of particular discomforts, often involving the use of symbolic modes of expression like speaking of 'a heavenly experience'; it involves knowledge about proven avenues of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; and it involves critical awareness of potential and real threats to human well-being.

The *third* term requiring elucidation is 'creatively realize'. By asserting that human existence is governed by a drive to conceptualize and *creatively realize* maximum well-being, the hypothesis extends from the intra-personal to the extra-personal; it contends that people act in myriads of ways in order to implement imagined, new scenarios of satisfaction, so converting the expectations of human consciousness, albeit incompletely, into empirical reality. Thus the worlds of other people, of nature and of human cultural creation are changed, and ourselves as well. Here again the hypothesis has strong affinities with Whitehead's process philosophy, especially his celebrated statement that creativity is the process whereby the many become one and are increased by one (Whitehead 1978: 21).

The *fourth* term that needs comment also has strong affinity with process philosophy. It is the term 'inter-related' (Whitehead 1978: 58-59). Given the simple but often ignored fact that for every individual agent there are countless other selves and even greater masses of non-human objects which greatly affect every individual, so that reality is always, objectively, more constituted by that preponderant externality than by individual subjects, it is obvious that any adequate account of human existence must pay particularly careful and sustained attention to the drive to maximize well-being *in relation to the total context of human existence*, as shaped by natural forces and, perhaps especially, by innumerable actions by other people. We are a social species, living in an inter-related totality with other beings and nature. Just how crucially this reality bears on the nature of the ethical dimension of our existence will be shown below.

The *fifth* term is 'drive', meaning that the ability to desire the experience of well-being is behaviourally constituted so as to direct the flow of human energy powerfully towards its satisfaction. The hypothesis thus

means that our inner sensory equipment for experiencing well-being and its opposite, which we may call discomfort, acts like a trigger for the discharge of directed energy in the form of mental and muscular activity.

For example, if we find ourselves cold, we take steps to obtain warmth; if warm, we deploy our energy into a maintenance mode, and so forth. The term 'drive' also means that the phenomenon it names is a persistent and powerful part of our make-up as human beings, not something incidental or insignificant, and that it is both innate and beyond our ability to neutralize through any act of will as such, though this most certainly does not mean that the drive in question cannot be directed to various ends on the basis of human choice.

The *sixth* and remaining term is 'maximize'. It is present in the hypothesis in order to reflect an important, empirical reality. As already noted, human history can be seen as a record of restlessness, of persistent efforts to change socio-cultural, environmental and personal reality. It is not a record of contentment or stasis, except in relatively short-term periods when cultures and individuals achieve a degree of stable satisfaction. To account for this fact, the hypothesis proposes that people are not merely equipped for a drive to satisfy their desire for well-being in its many forms, but for ever-greater satisfactions of that desire, imaginatively probing the entire texture of their existence for anything that generates a sense of dissatisfaction or discomfort in order to obviate it by the realization of yet more well-being. The single word that best captures this is 'maximize.'

The hypothesis being set forth in this article about what it means to be human holds that the inter-related drive to imagine and maximize well-being operates as a directed flow of creative energy in all societies, producing human behaviours and cultures in all their aspects, from saintliness to crime, agriculture to acupuncture, and of course the diversities of good and evil, the diversity being a consequence of varied environmental resources coupled with genuine, creative novelty. The cathedral of Notre Dame, the massive motor assembly plant at Wolfsburg in Germany, Soweto, the Kremlin past and present and all other human creations thus have, I argue, a common source in humanity's species-wide drive to conceive of and maximize well-being.

Such in summary form is the hypothesis that requires further critical testing and if need be modification and even abandonment, if found to be empirically or logically too flawed to be capable of illuminating the nature of

Homo Sapiens in relation to our moral experience. If correct it must illuminate human reality on this planet successfully; it must account better than its rivals for the fact already noted that while even the most intelligent of non-human creatures, the higher primates and the dolphins, have existed in a condition of behavioural stasis throughout their species history, endlessly repeating the same profiles of behaviour in the same narrow band of environments, human beings have changed theirs in that immensely long and diversified process that leads from the ape-like arboreal agilities of our most distant forebears to Manhattan, Mecca – and also to Auschwitz and Chernobyl.

5. From *Homo Sapiens* to *Homo Ethicus*

What must now be shown is how the hypothesis set out above explains good and evil in human behaviour. Lest it seems that I conveniently adopt a definition of ethics that is tailored to fit the hypothesis, which would merely yield circularity and not falsifiability, I turn to Peter Singer, perhaps the most influential applied ethicist of recent times. He defines ethical practice – doing what is right and good – as giving the interests of others at least as much importance as our own. So he writes that: 'when I make an ethical judgement I must go beyond a personal or sectional point of view and take into account the interests of all those affected' (Singer 1995: 21).

Simply put, this is the view that being ethical means combining and balancing due concern for one's own interests with real concern for others. It means avoiding selfishness and harm to those we affect. We can all think of many examples.

The present hypothesis about human existence leads to ethical practice – to doing good – as follows. We all desire greater well-being but experience quickly shows us, as we grow up, that we can seldom achieve much of it alone precisely because we are inter-related, social beings and not self-sufficient individuals. That leaves us with a choice between two basic orientations towards others: we can try to take or even force from other people and from nature the benefits we desire – as we are doing to the environment and as the greedy and violent are doing to others, which gives rise to behaviours we judge to be evil; or we can seek to win their freely given contributions to our own good, which is best achieved when we genuinely seek to further their interests by our honesty and active concern for

their well-being. That, of course, is exactly what Singer defines as the good. Those with physical and mental advantages over others are especially prone to the allure of the first of these two orientations, the exploitation of others for personal benefit. The result is selfish pleasure for the exploiters, whether they are individuals, the affluent or even whole nations, but loss and hurt for those exploited. Since the desire for the greatest well-being of those so harmed is injured by such treatment, and since they can be a lot more intelligent and informed than the bullies in question, their own drive to maximize well-being fosters in them a quest for ways to defeat the bully and the exploiter. They think up – they imagine – ways to free themselves of those who harm them, often with the help of others who care about them.

Sooner or later many of them succeed, which partly explains why dictatorships in modern times tend to be unstable and democracies much more resilient; the latter satisfy the interests of many more than just the elites who cluster around and fawn before the Mobutos, Vorsters, Hitlers and Pinochets of this world. That teaches the defeated bullies who survive and think hard enough about what has happened, and others who reflect on their defeat, that selfish exploitation is at most a short-term project, and the more intelligent among them come to see that lasting well-being is best sought by giving the interests of others due attention along with their own (Prozesky 2007: 65-97)

I therefore submit that my hypothesis about what it is to be human is logically and empirically able to show how and why *homo sapiens* can become, and does become, *homo ethicus*.

6. Towards a Research Agenda: Identifying Key Research Issues

The quest for a richer, more practical ethic addressed in this article could, I suggest, involve the following specific research issues. Each of them is very important for the building of a morally stronger society, and each of them is to a greater of lesser extent in trouble at this time in our history.

6.1 The Home. The first and most important context of life for anybody is the home and such family life, for better or worse, as is present in it. Here it

is that early childhood formation happens, including the beginning and early development of a moral sense. Here are some of the questions that need answers by qualified researchers. What do we need to know about the kind of home and family life that leads to ethically strong young people who could advance into ethically strong adults? What is damaging to the process? How much of what we need to know is already known by child psychologists and educators, who are presumably the specialists about this matter? Most people would say that South Africa has a problem here. But how serious is it and, what must be done to reduce and even overcome it?

6.2   Belief- and Value-systems. The kind of ethic that is implanted in children in their homes is strongly shaped by whatever their belief- and value-system is, like teaching a child to say the Ten Commandments or that their ancestral spirits are watching their conduct. Are there problems here? South Africans report to census takers that they are mostly religious, and among the religious a very large majority identifies with Christianity. But Christianity consists of a great many different churches and denominations, some of them teaching contradictory moral lessons like whether or not it is ethical to be gay, take alcohol, have more than one wife, gamble, or eat meat on Fridays.

Freedom of belief is rightly protected in the 1996 Constitution, but here too there are questions to be answered by means of research. Does freedom of belief not also contribute to a great deal of moral confusion and even hostility towards those whose beliefs and values are different? If there is such a thing as unethical religion or at least serious moral divergence among believers, even in the same religion, with resultant damage to the common good, how can ethical people counter it?

6.3   The School. Next in influence is the school. Here are some of the questions that arise in the context of a society with serious ethical problems. What part should the school play in building morally strong learners and to what extent is it playing this part? Who are the key role players in connection with education for ethical strength? Are our educators equipped for the exercise of a healthy, moral influence through their personal example and how they go about being educators? Many in South Africa sense that we have a very serious problem here. How can we know whether they are justified in this belief and if so, what is to be done about it? (Jansen 2011).

6.4   The Workplace, the Professions and Leadership. What do we know about workplace ethics and the ethically best kinds of workplace leadership? There is clear evidence that a corrupt workplace, like any other unethical context, can corrupt even people who want to do the right thing, such is the pressure to keep a job or earn promotion, especially at a time like the present where unemployment levels are frightening high. Who is responsible for making our workplaces ethically sound? What resources do they need? What resources do they have?

6.5   Sport. Ranging from primary school level to elite and professional levels, sport is a very important part of both the building and undermining of an ethical society. It embraces far more than just health and enjoyment because it ranges into the worlds of entertainment, business, sponsorship, the media, performance enhancement measures, medicine and coaching. Questions that arise in this context include the following. What do we need to know about good and bad in sport and how much of it do we know? Where can we turn to for this knowledge? Are coaches the key players in building a healthy sports ethics? Are administrators? Are captains? Are all of them equipped for this work?

6.6   The Universities. The next sphere to emphasize is the university. The contention here is that there can be no evading of responsibility for ethical enhancement by our universities, and this for two main reasons. Firstly, the very nature of the university as a place where knowledge is created and made available makes it a key centre of ethical behaviour (as distinct from teaching theoretical ethics courses that may have no real impact on behaviour). Knowledge must be true to count as knowledge, and in every value-system known to me, truth is judged to be a central moral value. So, to be in the knowledge business as all universities are, is to be in the ethics business whether we academics acknowledge that or not.

　　　　The second reason is that academics are also key ethics players in their roles as researchers, teachers and in community service. The examples they set both personally and in how they do their work are noted by their students and colleagues, and send out clear ethical (and unethical) messages. How well are our academics equipped for their role in providing moral influence in the academy and beyond? Can they play their part without lapsing into indoctrination? We all have the right to be religious or not

religious but I strongly dispute the notion that we as academics have the right to be professionally amoral if we choose, or that the right to freedom means that what we do off campus, like cheating on our income tax or on our partners, is nobody's business but our own, any more than we have the right to break the law. How can it make sense to claim the right to be wrong? There is such a thing as academic corruption, as the UKZN's Professor Cheryl Potgieter has asserted (Potgieter 2013). What exactly is it and what can be done to stop it?

6.7   Political Economy. There is a growing belief that humanity is now living precariously in the aftermath of two massive failures in the way we run the economy and the politics that feeds off and legitimates it. These are the failures of both communism and capitalism. Among other failures, the former completely misunderstood and in fact denied the reality of a human nature, a set of realities we cannot change (like self-interest and the desire for personal freedom). Capitalists all too often err dangerously in the opposite direction by believing passionately in the myth of the sovereign individual with the right to do his or her own thing (Davidson 1997). Is a better way of organizing production and using power not possible, and can the ethical vision of a better world for all not draw on the awesome creative potential of our species to find it? Are we really programmed, genetically, to be better at greed than at generosity? (Dawkins 1989; Levy 2004:127-205).

6.8 Does Ethics Need its Own Dedicated Support Structure in Organiza-tional Form and if so, What Kind Should it Be? Some years ago I launched a course at the former University of Natal called 'The Ethics of Power'. In my preparation I read a book called *The Anatomy of Power* by the celebrated Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, in which a significant observation caught my attention. It was to the effect that in today's world the organization is the most effective source of power (Galbraith 1983:54-71).

      As I reflected on this contention, it struck me with great force that alone of humanity's main concerns, the moral or ethical dimension was completely without its own dedicated organizational support. Trade between nations has the World Trade Organization. The need for knowledge has schools and universities. Injury has the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and so on. Environmental damage has Greenpeace. Faith has religious institutions. Ethics has nothing like that. The result is that moral goodness is fragmented

and dispersed, under-resourced and often voiceless. People of conscience, thinking about the grave moral ills all around them, can therefore be forgiven for feeling morally powerless and despondent.

My concluding research questions are therefore these. Does the lack of a dedicated, organized support structure for moral strength not deprive goodness of potentially far greater impact than it now has? If so, what kind of organizational support structure does ethics as practice, not as academic discipline, now need?

The research that I hope springs from this article is a daunting privilege. It is daunting because we have no blueprint for an effective, national ethical transformation project on the scale that South Africa and the wider world now need, and because the problems it would seek to alleviate are so massive. But it is also privileged because there is nothing more important than this for ethically inspired scholarship, in any discipline, to do in our situation.

References

Ashbrook, J.B. & C.R. Albright 1997. *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet.* Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.

Boon, M. 1996. *The African Way: the Power of Interactive Leadership.* Sandton: Zebra Press.

Brown, J.M. & M. Prozesky 1996. *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics.* Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Carpenter, H. 1980. *Jesus.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crook, J.H. 1980. *The Evolution of Human Consciousness.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davidson, J.D. & W. Rees-Mogg 1997. *The Sovereign Individual: The Coming Economic Revolution. How to Survive and Prosper in it.* London: Macmillan.

Dawkins, R. 1989. *The Selfish Gene.* Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fernandez-Armesto, F. 2004. *So You Think You're Human? A Brief History of Humankind.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galbraith, J.K. 1983. *The Anatomy of Power.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gandhi, M.K. 1948. *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with*

Truth. Ahmedabad.

Geering, L. 1980. *Faith's New Age.* London, Collins.

Hutchison, J.A. 1981. *Paths of Faith.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Jansen, J. 2011. *We Need to Talk.* Northcliff: Bookstorm (Pty) Ltd; Northlands: Pan Macmillan (Pty) Ltd.

Kidder, R.M. 1994. *Shared Values for a Troubled World: Conversations with Men and Women of Conscience.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kidder, R.M. 1996. *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living.* New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Küng, H. 1997. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics.* London: SCM.

Levy, N. 2004. *What Makes us Moral? Crossing the Boundaries of Biology.* Oxford: Oneworld.

Marx, K. 1845. *Theses on Feuerbach.* Available at: http://www.marxists. org. (Accessed on 2 April 2013.)

McKeon, R. (ed.) 1947. *Introduction to Aristotle.* New York: The Modern Library College Editions.

Murphy, N. & G.F.R. Ellis 1996. *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Murove, M.F. 2009. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Potgieter, C. 2013. Opening address at an international conference on corruption, School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritz-burg, 14 January 2013.

Prozesky, M. 1984. *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory.* London: The Macmillan Press; New York: St Martin's Press.

Prozesky, M. 1989. *A Holistic Model of Human Existence as Governed by a Drive to Conceptualize, Symbolize and Realize Maximum Well-Being.* Unpublished HSRC Research Report.

Prozesky, M. 2007. *Conscience: Ethical Intelligence for Global Well-Being.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Rossouw, D, with L. van Vuuren 2004. *Business Ethics.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Singer, P. 1995. *Practical Ethics. Second Edition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van der Walt, E. 2010. The Limbic System and the 'Religious Brain'. In du Toit, C. *Homo Transcendentalis? Transcendence in Science and*

Religion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.

Ward, K. 1991. *A Vision to Pursue: Beyond the Crisis in Christianity.* London: SCM Press.

Whitehead, A.N. 1978. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology.* New York: The Free Press.

Martin Prozesky
Professor Extraordinaire
Religion and Ethics
University of the Free State; and
Professor Emeritus;
Honorary Research Associate
University of KwaZulu-Natal
marproz@mweb.co.za