

# Next Revolution in Ethics

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Tad Dunne

## Introduction

I will say a number of things about ethicists. And by *ethicists* I will mean the men and women who reflect on the ideals, principles, and standards relevant to morality. And by morality, I mean ordinary reflection about the morality of everyday choices. So “ethicists” will include not only the experts with the job title but anyone who questions the history, conventions, standards, ideals, language, theories, policies, and juridical procedures that shape life in society. However, ethicists would not include people who, while they may be deeply concerned about specific moral issues, are unfamiliar with the critical questions about how moral standards are developed.

The biggest problem among ethicists today is how to do it. Some rely on the natural law, some on consequences or outcomes, some on duty or promises, some on virtue or character, some on civil laws, some on noble exemplars in our past, some on the word of God in scripture, some on the demands of each specific situation. Most rely on some blend or other of these criteria. And some say it makes no difference because ethics is just a cover for what is essentially personal preference or emotion.

Can these conflicts about method be overcome? The natural sciences—physics, chemistry, biology—owe their fantastic success largely to a method that everyone accepts and whose results keep on coming. Can ethics do the same? Might we some day converge on a method that is significantly more effective in making our lives better? If we can, it will certainly require a revolution in human studies—psychology, sociology, history, political science, law, literature and the arts—as comprehensive as the revolution in the natural sciences and far more important for the quality of our lives.

## Norms of Consciousness

I believe that this revolution has been brewing since the mid-1950s.

Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian philosopher who died in 1984, tackled problems of method, particularly in theology, but applicable to all human studies. What he came up with was not a *theory* about what methods we ought to use in the human studies. Rather, he realized that theories themselves are products of prior methods of mind and heart. So his goal

was not to *develop* methods—in the sense of recipes or procedures—but to *discover* the methods of mind and heart that are natural to us.

He made his own discoveries while studying Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. He noticed that while these thinkers didn't write on method, they did rely on personal insights into how the mind and heart work. What Lonergan discovered is that the countless ways we think and choose are driven by combinations of five inner demands—five natural yearnings we feel toward being fully authentic human beings. He expresses them as five precepts:



**Bernard Lonergan**

**Be attentive**  
**Be intelligent**  
**Be reasonable**  
**Be responsible**  
**Be in love**

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**Being authentic**

For the sake of speaking, he proposes that when we follow these inner demands we are being “authentic” and when we don't, we are being “inauthentic.”

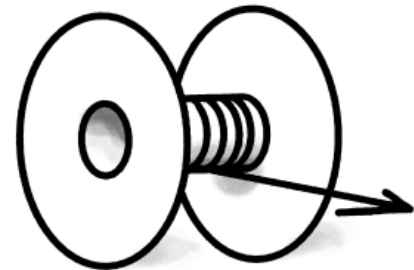
These are not rules he made up. These are not his suggestions on how to live the good life. These are not little voices we hear. These are inner demands each of us experiences all our waking hours. We feel them as urges of our minds, seeking to understand correctly, and hearts, seeking to make good decisions. And, what is very important to notice, when we are not being sufficiently attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love — that is, when we're being oblivious, stupid, silly, irresponsible, or self-absorbed—then something nags us.

There are “shoulds” within us that are the source of all the “shoulds” that society and scripture say make for the good life. It is through these inner, natural “shoulds” that we develop the outer, historical “shoulds” that we call *ethical principles* or *moral standards*. In other words, all ethical norms and all moral choices originate in the normative demands of consciousness itself.

## Two Experiments

Of course, these inner drives do not work so well! History is a mess, and being an authentic person is a daily task that no one does perfectly. But before going into why we don’t, if all ethical norms originate in these drives, it’s important to notice these drives for ourselves. To show you what I mean, I invite you to discover for yourself two of these inner demands. The first is the demand to Be Reasonable. By this I mean our inner urge to find out the truth things, to go beyond thinking what *might* be and to reach what *really is so*.

Here’s a spool, with a string coming out from under the axle. If I pull on this string, will the spool roll toward me? Many people will be confident that it will, and many will be equally confident that it won’t. They can each give good reasons for their confidence, but, if they are reasonable, they will want to test whether their understanding is correct. They will pull the string.



Now it’s easy to find out what the spool will do (and you may be surprised), but the point here is to notice the “should” you feel—the inner demand to find out the truth. No one ever told you that your understanding should be tested against experience; it’s a natural demand. When we let this demand focus our consciousness, we are being reasonable, being concerned about truth.

Next I invite you to discover the inner demand to Be Responsible. This is the properly moral demand to do what is right. Below is an *Advance Medical Directive for the End of Life*. Read it over, and then decide which line you would check.

No doubt you have a few thoughts about starving yourself to death. Maybe you feel annoyed that medical forms like this are foisted on the elderly. Or maybe you feel apprehensive about severing the ties to your loved ones like this. Or perhaps you feel dismissive about this little exercise here.

### **Advance Medical Directive for the End of Life**

If I lose the ability to recognize family and friends, and my sense of humor, and my appetite; and if these conditions are independently determined to be irreversible by two physicians, then do not force food or antibiotics on me, nor any water except to keep my mouth moist and comfortable.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement represents my wishes.

\_\_\_\_\_ This statement does not represent my wishes.

Whatever you did, notice how different your consciousness is. When you wondered *whether* or not the spool will roll toward you, you committed your mind to what is real. But here, your concern is about committing your entire self to what is better.

This exercise is about a life-and-death decision. But we experience the normativity of responsibility anytime the *should* question occurs to us. It occurs not because we make it occur but because human consciousness is naturally an active, normative process that moves us toward the better.

### ***Dysfunctions***

Now, if everyone experiences the same inner normative drives as the source of all improvements in life, why do we often disagree on what is the better thing to do? Somewhere between the inner normative drives and the outer action, the drive to do better is blocked. We desire to be authentic persons, but we are often inauthentic.

There are three dysfunctions that deserve particular attention.

#### **Bias**

The first is bias. By *bias*, I don't mean just preference, as in "I'm biased toward chocolate." I mean an unreasonable distortion in our minds, as in "She's biased against all Republicans."

There is a bias in people who are neurotically obsessed with something. Because their minds compulsively fixate on cleaning house, or watching soaps, or worrying about impending catastrophes—the list is endless—they are functionally blind to more important things at hand.

There is a bias in egotists, for whom "good" means just "good for me." Let others take care of themselves.

There is a bias in what we call “unquestioning loyalty.” Now loyalty is a good thing. Families, work teams, the military, citizenship, and religions all need it. The problem comes when loyalty becomes “unquestioning.” Loyalists won’t think about the good of other families, other work teams, other branches of the military, other religions. Loyalists won’t even question the status quo of their own group. (Dictator-type leaders love having loyalists under them.)

And then there is a bias we can call “commonsensism.” It’s our bias against questions whose answers require hard study and the assumption that common sense is all we need. Some of us felt this “commonsensism” bias a few weeks ago if we hesitated to plow through newspaper explanations of our new national health insurance system. We probably all feel this about getting an education. Knowledge makes a bloody entrance.

### **Willfulness**

A second kind of dysfunction that impairs our authenticity is willfulness. We know very well what we should do but we won’t do it; or we know what we shouldn’t do but we go ahead and do it.

Suppose you are convinced that X is something you ought to do. Suppose, further, that you feel ready, willing and able to do it. Nothing prevents you from doing it, and no “extenuating circumstances” force your hand. Would you ever deliberately *not* do it? Is it really possible that you would deliberately act against your own better judgment?

In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (7, 21), Medea complains about an ailment that affects us all. She was heartsick in love with Jason and convinced that she would do wrong to pursue him. But she admits: “I see the good, and I approve it too; condemn the wrong—and yet the wrong pursue.” And St. Paul, in his *Letter to the Romans* (7:18-19): “Wanting the good is in me, but not the doing. I do not do the good I want, but rather the evil I do not want.”

In other words, we *can* act against our better judgment. This is what religions call “sin” —which is an offense against the creator who gives us the gift of good judgment, and against ourselves who are created to live well by using it.

### **Conversion**

A third dysfunction is the most elusive. It has to do with dysfunctional assumptions about learning, choosing, and loving.

If what we **learn** about **learning** is mistaken, then surely our learning will be distorted. For example, many students come to college with the assumption that learning is about memorizing. But the more time they

spend memorizing stuff in textbooks, the less likely they will even notice that don't really understand it. Teachers regularly see a light go on when a student realizes that learning is ultimately about understanding, not memorizing. And to understand requires asking questions using words like *why, how, what for, is that really true, says who, and so what?*

Likewise, if the criteria we **choose** for **making choices** are faulty, then surely our choices will be distorted. It comes down to what we each mean by the word "good." For Peter, it can mean just "good for me and to hell with you." For Paul, it can mean, "good for us and to hell with them." For Mary, it can mean "good in itself regardless of benefits to me or us."

Then there's **love**. People who have **love** in their lives tend to resolve differences more readily than people who do not. Intellectually they are not afraid to admit ignorance. Morally, they don't spontaneously look for what will benefit themselves. Affectively, they regard themselves as part of a larger "we," despite the regular conflicts that are normal in all communities. Some regard themselves and the entire human race as emerging from the love of their creator.

Those without love may be filled with hate. They may be deeply suspicious. They may have risked love and been badly burned. Whatever the reason, if being in love is the capstone of authenticity, then their natural urges to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible are distorted.

Now learning about learning, choosing our criteria for choosing, and letting love lead our lives all have one thing in common. They don't just broaden our horizons. They reveal horizons that put everything we've learned, everything we've chosen, everything we've loved in a perspective almost completely opposed either to our old horizons or to the horizons of many people we know. So there are conversions. Reality itself becomes different because we take on a new way of knowing, choosing, and embracing reality.

An intellectual conversion learns that learning is asking and answering questions.

A moral conversion chooses the objective good as one's criterion of choosing.

An affective conversion lets love be the meaning of one's life; it lets love love.

Just as man cured of lifelong blindness will have a new meaning of "seeing" that changes the meaning of everything "seen," so a woman undergoing these conversions will have a new meaning of "world" because her learning, choosing, and loving anything in the world are new.

## **Method in Ethics**

So, to come back to our question, if everyone experiences the same inner normative drives as the source of all improvements in life, why do we often disagree on what is the better thing to do? Three big reasons are bias, willfulness, and an absence of intellectual, moral, and/or affective conversion.

So we cannot afford to presume innocence anywhere. Any effective method in ethics simply must take these possibilities into account regarding any situation whatsoever. This is why the next revolution in ethics should provide a forum for revealing these wounds in our nature as they affect real lives. The histories of nations, religions, corporations, neighborhoods, families, and friendships need to reveal how these various wounds crippled their development. Notice, of course, that as historians name this or that trend as driven by this or that dysfunction, they reveal to others how firmly or feebly they grasp what authenticity is. So this forum would have a powerful invitational aspect to it, as those burdened with more dysfunction see more clearly what authenticity looks like in those with less dysfunction. They would notice more poignantly their own deep desires to achieve it. In theology, Lonergan names this forum the "Dialectic."

Also, as ethicists discover the five inner norms of authenticity in themselves and to commit themselves to living them out, they will use words like "authentic," "bias," "willfulness," "conversion", "sin," and so on, based not on dictionary definitions but on personal verifications. They will do the same with classical ethical terms such as *rights, freedom, conscience, autonomy, objectivity, duty, God's will, and authority*. That is, they will secure these meanings by personal discoveries of how each is linked to their natural desire to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love.

In the discipline we call ethics, the emerging set of such terms would function like Mendeleev's periodic table in chemistry. In a foundational model of ethics, if the term "authenticity" is identified as basic, then an ethicist could no more formulate a theory of ethics without reference to authenticity than a chemist could formulate a theory in chemistry without reference to atomic weights. In theology, Lonergan names this function "Foundations."

## **An Eight-Fold Structure**

If the next revolution in ethics will be the emergence of a dialectical forum for revealing basic differences, and a foundational model of humanity based on conversion, then what will happen to ethics as we know it?

Ethics is always about moving from the past to the future. Currently, we recognize three quite distinct functions by which we retrieve the past, and three by which we move into the future:



At a basic level, ethics is about **research** into concrete situations and **communications** about what's to be done.

At a second level, ethics retrieves the past by **interpretation** of what people in the situation actually meant by their documents, their artworks, their behaviors. This is why *hermeneutics* is essential to ethics. Then, ethics moves into the future by developing **systems** — both the systems that coordinate the efforts of various parties and the systems that coordinate the meanings found in the stories of noble men and women with the meanings emerging from philosophy and theology.

At a third level, ethics retrieves the past by setting these interpretations in the larger context of **history**. Here is where *critical history* is essential to ethics. Ethics moves into the future by formulating the familiar ethical **standards**—like “First do no harm,” “Treat others as you want to be treated,” and “Thou shalt not kill”—as among the most valuable lessons from our history.

The next revolution in ethics recognizes that we actually have a fourth level, a level explicitly about personal values. This level has yet to be incorporated formally into a methodical ethics because only recently have philosophers



and theologians inquired into what we do when we learn, when we choose, and when we fall in love. Although this level has always been functional at least informally wherever ethicists actually helped improve human life, ethics in the next revolution will incorporate these functions within its formal methods.

At this level, we saw that the forum of **dialectics** invites researchers, interpreters, and historians, by amplifying on their findings, to reveal what they learned about learning, what criteria of choosing they chose, and how thoroughly they lead their lives by love. These amplifications bring to light not only the best and worst of past situations but also the best and worst in the horizons of the women and men who conducted the research, interpreted the texts, and written the histories.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we saw this played out in the change in attitudes toward withdrawing life support from the dying. Ethicists struggled to work out appropriate criteria for “allowing” and even “hastening” death. Both those who opposed the practice and those who supported it “amplified” the issue by pointing out the current practices of other countries and some potential long-term consequences. What surfaced was a variety of deeper views on the sanctity of life, on the meaning of “suicide,” and on the principle of patient autonomy. It became evident that the intellectual horizon of some ethicists excluded the historical contexts of classical and religious prohibitions of suicide; instead, they regarded the prohibition as a moral principle from which concrete decisions can be logically deduced in any situation. Other ethicists were strictly focused on the wishes of the dying individual; they seemed unaware of any difference between decisions based on mere wishes and decisions based on being responsible for what is truly better all around. Another revelation was the blanket refusal by some ethicists to consider that a “beyond” to this life may even be a relevant question.

Again, at this level, we saw that the task of **foundations** is to develop the basic categories for what constitutes human authenticity. These will be the assertions and categories used in the subsequent tasks of standards, coordination, and communication that move into the future.

Here are some of the main assertions we have presented so far:

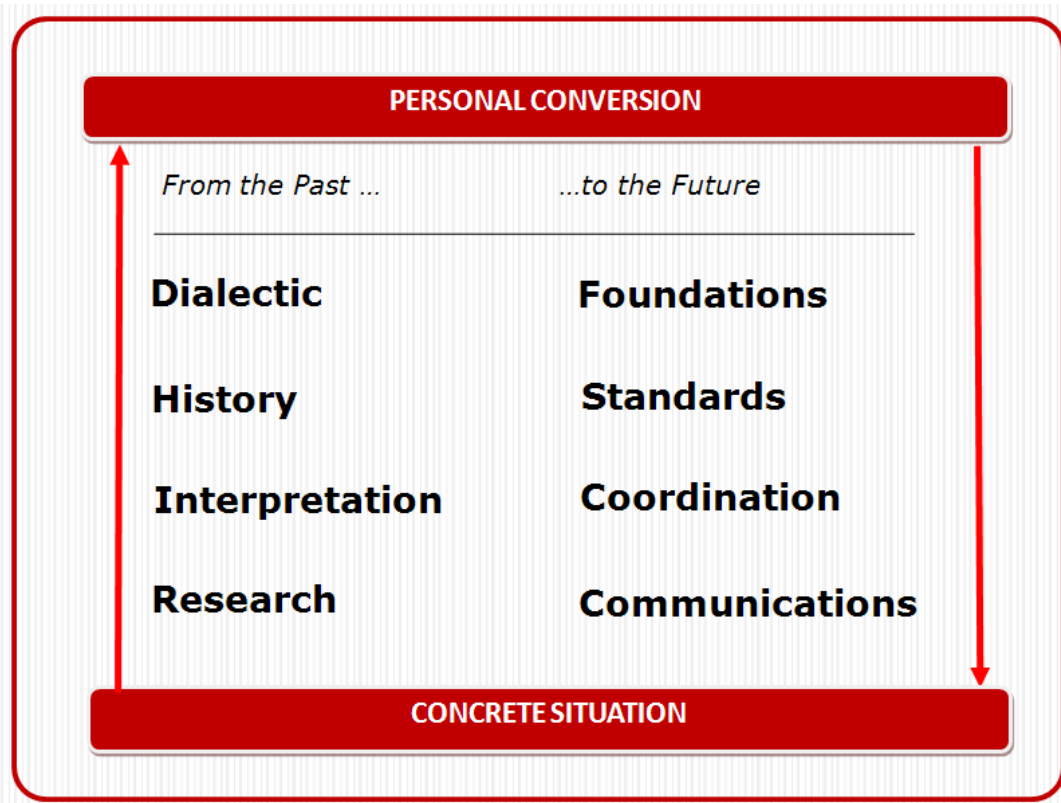
- Moral norms originate in human consciousness, which contains the fundamental normative drives on which all externalized moral norms depend.

- These fundamental normative drives are found in the experienced exigences to be self-transcending, or authentic.
- Authenticity is a compound exigence to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love.
- Radically deficient stands on learning, choosing and loving are remedied by intellectual, moral, and affective conversions, respectively.

As a structured set of categories that represent verifiable elements in moral process, these assertions help us pose questions in ways that can produce answers compatible with each other within the full foundational model. In other words, these statements comprise the *heuristics* of ethics—the features of answers to moral questions that help us pose those questions. Just as algebra does not give any answers but rather specifies the conditions that an  $x$  must meet, so *foundations* does not pass moral judgments on situations, but rather the conditions for validity that such moral judgments must meet.

Finally, notice that overarching and between **Dialectics** and **Foundations**, there is the deeply personal reality of the ethicist. Anyone can do research, interpretation, and history. But dialectic only reveals different sorts of authenticity and inauthenticity. It cannot do what the ethicist herself/himself must do, namely, undergo intellectual, moral, and affective conversions. Since such converted ethicists are the living foundations of authentic living, the categories they use to express their converted horizons constitute the foundations of standards, coordination, and communications that actually improve life.

It is this addition of dialectic, conversion, and foundations that constitutes the next revolution in ethics.



So we have a circle. Eight unique but interconnected functions are identified by which we make real life better. The next revolution in ethics will entail an ongoing, recurring method that invites all ethicists to make these connections between their personal horizons and concrete situations.

### ***Effect on Education***

What does this mean for education? I see five themes that are especially important not just for a university like ours but for teachers anywhere, at any level.

One theme is **openness**. I meant this not as an idea but primarily as an *experience*. This is the pull on consciousness to learning well, to choosing wisely, and to richer personal engagements—the drive for authenticity. We all experience it whenever we wonder about anything. But experiencing the pull is one thing, and understanding it is quite another. Understanding requires noticing and giving distinct names to the different experiences of being open. To recognize it in others requires probing what they say and do. Even then, we can honor openness in others without yet committing ourselves to living as openly as we can. Commitment requires a personal moral judgment that this openness is the best way to live and a deliberate decision to live accordingly.

Of all the value judgments to be made about these pulls on our consciousness, perhaps the most important is this: *Our best selves are self-transcending selves.*

Aside from the stresses rooted in our bodies—like being pregnant, ill, exhausted, or intoxicated—we are also stressed in our spirits. What we can explain to students is that spiritual stress is natural; it is our inner demand to live in a self-transcending manner against the forces of a dysfunctional heritage, personal bias, perverse willfulness, and erroneous assumptions about learning, choosing, and loving. Think about it: Outside of physical causes, is there any stress you feel that is not related to living as authentically as you can?

A second theme is **dialog**. Here, I want to draw your attention to the difference between debate and dialog. In a debate, one side wins, often by undermining all the reasons given by the other side. Indeed, learning how to debate seems dangerously close to practice in being unreasonable. But in dialog, it is collaboration that wins and problems that are defeated. Different sides of a disagreement give their “reasons,” and each side explores them “reasonably”—that is, sees if the evidence supports the opinion.

It seems opportune to train the young in this openness by teaching them how to dialog “reasonably.” Wouldn’t it be revealing if, in our next presidential election, instead of watching candidates *debate* an issue like the economy, we gave all of them one hour to *dialog* toward consensus on a bill about the economy? We’d quickly learn who is more reasonable, more interested in the common good, and more effective to pulling together diverse interests.

Another theme is **historicity**—the awareness that all situations have histories. Teenagers need to realize that rules have dates; in most cases, people made the rules to protect their loved ones. Adults need to realize that rightness and wrongness are lessons drawn from the past. They express value judgments of real people, some living and some dead. Any discussions about what is right and wrong should acknowledge that these judgments always come from people whose horizons may be more or less open, and are therefore more or less reliable, and therefore subject to scrutiny.

Connected to historical mindedness is the theme of a **collective responsibility**. We each have our individual responsibilities, and we also have responsibilities that dovetail with those of others. We may follow common moral standards and coordinate our efforts for common goals. But when outcomes are worse than expected, as they often are, a common reaction is to find out who is to blame. Blaming has its merits: we identify who needs to be trained or excluded from deliberations; blame gives society

examples of behaviors that undermine the common good. But blame becomes just scapegoating if everyone else feels exonerated. What historical mindedness brings is the realization that bad outcomes also present demands on everyone's responsibility for improving the situation. No individual may be blameworthy; no individual may be "held responsible;" but every capable individual is nonetheless responsible for doing better.

Finally, there's the theme of **beauty**. All beauty, both natural and artistic, symbolizes the mysterious objects of our self-transcending desires. It represents to our imagination "the better" that we are impelled to pursue. It stimulates our emotions to support our innate drive to seek always more learning, better choices, and more profound engagement with one another and with divine mystery. Even tragic operas, violent dances, and somber war memorials ignite our sense of beauty by their depiction of human failure to be self-transcending.

Artists whose work somehow improves life draw directly from a personal and quite specific experience of self-transcendence in something they saw or heard or felt or imagined, and they aim to stimulate that same event in others. Many artists never pull it off, and many others start with a keen sense of the alluring depths of ordinary experience, but they get seduced by thoughts of what will sell for a good price, or by a commission to stimulate some group's pride, or by the hope of being praised for their virtuosity.

Our educational systems need to deliver what all students need regarding beauty, namely, a clarification of its function to foster self-transcendence and a training in alertness to what makes life truly ugly.

## ***Effect on Human Studies***

I began by predicting that the next revolution in ethics will revolutionize all human studies as we know them today. What might this incorporation of ethics in human studies look like in the various professional disciplines?

**Historians** will still describe the emerging trends of a particular group, but they will also trace how the horizons of participants regarding learning, choosing, and loving were behind any progress or decline.

**Scripture scholars** will still give their interpretations of what various authors meant, but they will present their findings not as unquestionable truth but as better understandings than those currently in vogue and open to any further, relevant questions.

**Philosophers** will still convey the wisdom of the past to the needs of the present, but they will also articulate their theories in

terms that are clearly linked to normative events in consciousness.

**Theologians** will still give historical and philosophical explanations of the meanings of religious doctrines, but they will also collaborate with philosophers in grounding all religious views in the experience of an unrestricted drive toward all truth, the ever better, and the total engagement with transcendent mystery.

**Psychotherapists** will still use analytical techniques for identifying causes of self-defeating behaviors, but they will also use healing techniques for reversing neuroses, egotism, loyalism, commonsensism, and willfulness.

**Economists** will still report on how money is flowing but, they will also propose moral principles that specify where money should flow. They will measure the success of an economy not on profits of shareholders but on the improvement of people's well-being. Using ongoing analyses of current conditions, they will continually recommend rebalancing the flow—now toward capital investments, now toward higher wages, now toward strengthening infrastructures through taxes, now toward ensuring the basic well-being of the marginalized through charities.

**Business Leaders** will still aim to observe established standards of business ethics within the currently reigning Ethics of Law. But they will also embrace an Ethics of Better, where by "better" they mean not just better for themselves or their company but better, "all things considered."

**Sociologists** will still study the patterns of a community's social arrangements, but they will also make critical judgments on the quality of life among its members and propose policies for better living, where "better" is not restricted to material conditions but is maximally understood as increased freedom to live authentically.

**Experts in constitutional law** will still interpret the intentions of the authors of a nation's founding documents, but they will also take a stand on the adequacy of intellectual, moral, and affective horizons of these founding ancestors.

**Art critics** will still spell out the effects of artistic products on people, but they will also assess how deeply artists may be wonder-struck by the mystery of self-transcendence in human affairs and how effectively they elicit that wonder in their publics.

Like most paradigm shifts, this revolution will likely occur along lines of affectivity and respect among scholars, scientists, practitioners, and local leaders in the community. These ethicists will not drive out old ideas; they

probably will go about their business in the new, more invitational manner that invites a mutual exposure of horizons. Advances will occur in small pockets, but if attention to method produces better living, notice will be taken.

[Also (in response to a questioner), the success of modern science gives us reason to be optimistic. The power of scientific method is based quite strictly on the refusal to ignore any possibly relevant data. While the data studied in the natural sciences is restricted to the data of sense—what can be seen, heard, felt, smelled, touched, or tasted—the data studied in human studies includes the data of consciousness—our common experiences of curiosity, imagining, insight, judgments of fact, feelings, judgments of value, decisions, promises, commitments, and love. Indeed, the combination of experience, understanding, judgment, and decision underlies all progress in both the natural sciences and human studies. At least from intellectually open ethicists, we can expect some enthusiasm for extending empirical method to incorporate the data on events in human consciousness.]

We may also expect (perhaps *hope* is the better word) that the title “ethicist” will be transitional, since all human studies will deal with moral issues explicitly.

Finally, for all the work you have just done for the last 45 minutes, I thank you.

-Tad Dunne

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i It rolls toward you. If you thought it should roll away, it may be because you imagined that the string, being below the pivot point of the axle, will unwind it, making it roll away. But the string is actually above the pivot point—the point where, at any instant, the spool touches the ground—making it roll toward you.