

**Human Nature, Spring, And  
The New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society  
Presidential Address**

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Last spring was an especially happy time for me. SUNY Press published a book which I had worked long and hard on – *A Case for Legal Ethics: Legal Ethics as a Source for a Universal Ethic*. In it I acknowledge how my thoughts grew from presentations to this Society. I described the Society as “a model for academic gatherings – a small and congenial group of professionals who assemble yearly to try some new thoughts out on each other. Each year in April as we met sometimes in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, sometimes in Lubbock and El Paso, I took the opportunity to think through and present to the Society what I considered to be major issues in ethics and legal ethics. Presentations I made there, especially ‘Is Legal Ethics Unique,’ ‘Morally Educating our Lawyers,’ ‘Pragmatic Ethical Theory,’ and ‘Complaints about Moral Philosophy’ became cornerstones for much of my thinking in this book.”

Our Society was the first in which I began regularly to participate after I started my philosophical career in 1976. Each year the thinking which I brought to the Society moved me closer to formulating a theory of human nature. The timing, spring, the nature of the activity, theorizing about human nature, and the setting, The New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society, coalesced as a single, integrated experience. In April 1992 in San Antonio, when my book with the full statement of this view of human nature was in press, I recapped for members of the Society where my thinking had taken me over the years. All of the members seemed relieved in that they reasonably expected that I would now lay this theory to rest. But I resurrect it today and do so to show how this theory of human nature

which has sprung from our meetings allows us now to introduce some new ways of thinking about spring and about the Society.

Once again, the theory simply put is this. "Our nature allows us to construct, in an ongoing process, conceptions of ourselves ranging from our specific roles to our humanity itself, with these conceptions suggesting guidelines for our conduct. Suppose, for example, that our thinking about ourselves as humans leads us to conceive of ourselves as rational beings, as competitive but social and striving to progress. Going hand in hand with this construction are such evident guidelines and admonitions for conduct as to act with forethought, to act rationally, to compete, and to progress. The constructed concept in effect is a normative one and as such brings with it rules to govern our experience."

Whether we are dealing with a restricted role like that of citizen, parent, or teacher, or of humanity itself, we break from thinking of them as static and fixed; we develop conceptions of them from the variables which we first identify. Also open for construction are our environments insofar as they are extensions of our identities or of how we think about ourselves in our environments. These constructions serve to guide us too. For example, "if we think of nature as an active, vulnerable, and living entity, we recycle, conserve, and replenish resources, protect endangered species, and identify and strive to eliminate sources of pollution."

Further, since we develop all of these conceptions and follow their advice in a social context where role modeling is a reality, it makes sense to recognize a duty to act only in ways that we are willing for others to imitate. I capture the notion that "humans can develop an understanding of themselves and that tied to this understanding are guidelines for conduct" by referring to humans summarily as "*constructors of rule-referring conceptions of themselves.*"

Evidently, this theory of human nature is as much a theory about our specific roles and environments as a general view about our humanity. With it I felt that I could address a number of issues. I spoke

on Human nature and world peace, human nature and the environment, human nature and multicultural studies, and human nature and punishment; in each case I sought to make explicit how there were variables from which we could select in constructing conceptions of these environments or institutions along with making suggestions about which we should select.

Most recently I have turned to holidays and am considering philosophical dimensions of them together with opportunities for how my view of human nature allows us to rethink them or how their subject matter might be grist for our constructive endeavors. Let me preview for you what I am doing with spring and the Easter holiday which, for some people, is in part a celebration of spring. I observe first that our feelings match nature's activities: "Green buds appear on trees; tubers and bulbs push stalks above the earth; tiny fish and tadpoles swarm where once was a slimy glop of eggs. Put this explosion of fresh life and new beginnings to music, and however quiet it may occur in nature, would we not depict it as loud and chaotic, sometimes harmonious, sometimes discordant? What nature does in spring is momentous, dynamic, and huge, and we feel great surges of new energy within us as a counterpart."

But I go on to observe that many of our activities and practices seem quite out of line with these feelings: "Within us is spring's essence yet our rituals have us focus on the incidental. We color eggs and keep remote their being a symbol of new life, and we distance ourselves from the rabbit as the preeminent symbol of proliferation by casting its image in tasty chocolate. We dress ourselves up prettily and handsomely, splash fragrances upon ourselves, and sit in church and at our quiet Sunday dinner like the lovely flower rooted in the ground. We insist on making our bodies conform to spring's model of the fresh, the new, and the young as we turn to beauticians to replace gray with color and to redden lips and to surgeons that a sagging face might rise from the head. When this type of effort to imitate nature with our bodies becomes futile, we turn from the cos-

metologist and look to the cosmologist who offers spiritual rebirth, and we become victorious; nature is now wholly unable to show us the futility of such efforts to imitate her."

I continue, "These activities show us to be doing nothing which in the least corresponds to our urges to burst out of ourselves and *do*, vigorously interact, expend energy, create, and be active as nature is. Worse yet, we turn to harnessing and to inhibiting these energies. We give something up for Lent; we deny ourselves; we sacrifice; we hold ourselves back; we exercise restraint. When we simply focus on sacrifice, we dilute the useful model which integrates it with activity which is driven by love and passion and which is geared toward great accomplishment. If God and Christ were able, with their Eater sacrifice, to absolve us of our now and future sins, they accomplished no small task."

We should be giving expression to the spring within us – our new energies – and we should tie them to significant accomplishment. We should participate in the regenerative process through these creative endeavors, and, regardless of whether we subscribe to the model which joins sacrifice and accomplishment, we can give expression to these energies through adventurous and even risky undertakings.

All of us here today have fought back those forces which work so strongly at this time of the semester to keep us firmly planted in our classrooms and at our desks. Each of us has been working on some new idea. Some of us might think of ourselves as pioneers or as adventurers as we pressed on with our new thoughts. But all of these efforts which turn on the affairs of the Society are good examples of activities which match nature's activities and accord with our energetic feelings.

If these thoughts about spring allow us to conceive of our participation in the Society in the ways mentioned, their underpinning, our nature as role-constructors, invites us to participate actively in conceiving of our roles in the Society and the environment which we create with it. I think that we have so participated in recent years as

we discussed the feasibility of inviting each year an especially prominent philosopher to join our prominent number. I have argued against this proposal because, to my mind, it seems to undermine the egalitarian environment which we have created for ourselves and which, to my way of thinking, is a model which other philosophical societies would do well to imitate.

My reluctance to alter the Society in this regard is part of no general resistance to rethink our ways. Indeed, I emulate in two respects Spencer Wertz, one of our past presidents who insisted on breaking from our tradition of delivering the presidential address at a formal banquet on a Saturday evening, on presenting it during the last minutes of a Saturday afternoon, and on freeing us to make some independent choices about where we would dine thereafter. I also like the way he pushed successfully at a later meeting for changing the venue for presenting papers at our hotel in Cloudcroft from a sunny parlour to the dark yet colorful situs of The Red Dog Saloon. So my delivering the presidential address late this afternoon is not without precedent, but neither is it without innovation. The Red Dog Saloon was as dry as ever a presidential address was, but to compensate for my presentation being no less so, I offer libation – champagne: To the Society, to spring, and to the good nature which they bring!