

## The Ethical Stretch: How Parmenidean Logic Can Spot Unethical Ethics Consultants

Daniel T. Primozić

I had the opportunity to deliver a paper at the *7th Annual Conference on Ethics in America*, the theme of which was "The Ethical Stretch." I declined because I have attended far too many national conferences on ethics where flocks of "ethics consultants" foam at the mouth to make the corporations, schools, organizations, cities, counties, regions, nations, and worlds more ethical than they already are. These consultants make mounds of money selling us the idea that the values we espouse can be made much better if only we, for a relatively "small" fee, retain their professionally ethical services. Should this sound ludicrous to the trained, jaded, academic ear or to the person with common sense, be assured of this: it is ludicrous. But perhaps you cannot articulate the bankruptcy of such activities, promises, and claims. I show why all this, in the words of Davy Crockett, "don't even make good nonsense."

First we must examine the metaphor mentioned as the theme of the ethics conference – the ethical stretch – and its attendant, literal consultative promise: "We can make you more ethical than you already are." Parmenides told us all about this long ago: "What is, is and what is not, is not." I choose to retain that idea in my arsenal of logical maxims and treasure it as the basis for the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction. When applied to "the ethical stretch," which, I suppose, is geared to mean that we must become "even more ethical than we already are," it is manifest that we are dealing with foolishness. It is an irrational proposition analogous to saying that we intend to become "more pregnant" than we already are, or that we intend to become "more alive" than we already are, and its opposite, that we intend to become "less dead" than we already are. These sayings may make some sense at the metaphorical level but are utterly nonsensical at the literal level – a level, I take it, that the ethics consultants intend, for they receive literal cash for their promises, literal fame, influence, and prestige. If they intend their claims as metaphors then, of course, it would be silly to take exception to something they did not mean. But clearly they must mean it, or more to the point, they had better mean it because their pockets become lined with more than mere metaphors for professional services hopefully more than metaphorically rendered.

To put it bluntly, if an organization or an individual is less than ethical, then to promise to make them "more ethical" is logically superfluous and foolish just as it is fruitless, redundant, trash phrasing to say "very good," or "quite nice," or "rather

stupid." Obviously, if something is "good" then it is good enough. To say that it is "very good" does nothing to add to its goodness but only attaches unnecessary verbiage. If someone or something is "nice" (a vacuous term) adding the word "quite" does nothing to improve its nicety. If we are unfortunate enough to be "stupid" our unfortunate circumstance is made neither worse nor better by adding the term "rather." As J.L. Austin deftly pointed out:

Another philosophically notorious dimension-word, which has already been mentioned in another connexion as closely comparable with "real," is "good." "Good" is the most general of a very large and diverse list of more specific words, which share with it the general function of expressing commendation, but differ among themselves in their aptness to, and implications in, particular contexts. It is a curious point, of which Idealist philosophers used to make much at one time, that "real" itself, in certain uses, may belong to this family. "Now this is a *real* carving-knife!" may be one way of saying that this is a good carving-knife. And it is sometimes said of a bad poem, for instance, that it isn't really a poem at all; a certain standard must be reached, as it were, even to *qualify* ... A distinction which we are not in fact able to draw is – to put it politely – not worth making.<sup>1</sup>

If we utter these phrases in casual conversation, as we all do, there is no harm done and no one should care about the logical infractions or redundancies therein. However, when contractual claims and promises are made to people and organizations that contain such inanities then we must bolt upright to object. These consultants might not know what they are saying, meaning that they are untrustworthy because they are stupid. Or they know well what they say but hope that their prey does not, meaning that they are untrustworthy because they are unethical. Either way, it seems to me that they are untrustworthy.

But let us play this game for the moment and suppose that such consultants do not mean their business promises (tantamount to "warranties" in business law) metaphorically, as we mean them in ordinary, conversational chit-chat, and that what they really mean to say is that they can make ourselves, organizations, or corporations ethical *simpliciter*. Then they surely must be lying: for how likely is it that one can take people ranging in age from twenty-five to eighty and turn them completely around to leap from the non-ethical domain (equivalent to Parmenidean non-Being) to the ethical domain (equivalent to Parmenidean Being)? I think it is likely that we may see that miracle with the young, yet ethically uninformed and untainted. Aristotle thought so, too. However, to achieve that result in full-blown adults who have been ethically or unethically formed and entrenched would as-

sume the supernatural powers of a great, divine, spiritual healer. Is this the normal claim of ethics consultants? To their credit, in my experience they have not yet reached that far into blasphemy. But then their literal claim to deliver us from the non-ethical to the ethical must be false, and therefore, unethically made.

All of this seemingly obscure analysis only points to the fact that ethics consultants are either superfluous or unethical. Applied ethics, aside from being a redundancy in terms, is a silly development in applied philosophy which, in the first place, is much akin to the silliness of associated phrases "more pregnant" and "real pig." I only raise the issue because in addition to the possibility that ethics consultants are doing inane things to meet their even more inane contractual promises, there is the danger that they are doing "real damage." Mary Midgley speaks to this danger:

#### Who Is Speaking Please?

Inside the philosopher, who is it that does the philosophizing? I am sorry if this seems a confusing query. Life would certainly be simpler if we were so made that such questions couldn't arise. Any readers blest enough not to see why it does arise will, of course, read no further. But most of us do understand it, I think, when we glance round at other professions. Lawyers or doctors, who hand over their business to a trained homunculus within – an automaton, a monomaniac clerk who seldom speaks to the rest of the personality, and who takes notice of nobody except the similar clerks inside other like-minded lawyers or doctors – cause us frequent alarm. Scholars who act on the same pattern can't, of course, usually do so much visible damage. But we are all familiar with the bad work that can result. And when that bad work goes on the reading-list of large classes, the disaster that follows may not be negligible in terms of mere waste of life, even if the stuff were inert and not downright misleading – which it often is.<sup>2</sup>

The kind of "bad work" that Midgley mentions exists outside the "large classes" to which she refers. What follows is an example of the "bad work" being done in a sphere that can do "much visible damage": i.e., the domain of corporate ethics consultancy. Frank J. Navran runs a notoriously successful ethics consultancy firm in Atlanta, Georgia. This is his approach to ethics:

I define ethical behavior as acting in ways which are consistent with one's personal values *and* the commonly held values of the *systems* in which one functions (organizational, political, societal, religious, et al.).

Yes, the philosophers have a field day with my position. They ask if

I would say Hitler was ethical because his actions were consistent with his values? Or are cannibals ethical because their society approves of eating other human beings? ... Let's leave the philosophical arguments to the philosophers ... My definition of ethical and unethical behavior is imperfect, granted. But it is useful and will have to suffice until the philosophers can agree on what is right for all peoples in ways which do not sacrifice one legitimate set of beliefs for another.<sup>3</sup>

It is no wonder that philosophers have a field day with his position. Though in passages preceding those above, Navran explicitly denies that his is a situational ethical stance, I fail to see how he escapes that characterization. My quarrel with Navran's position is that, given his definition for what is ethical, he seems ready to validate *any* corporate system of moral beliefs as long as it is consistent with itself and the laws of the society in which it thrives. This can become an unwelcome, unethical mess given some corporate and societal "moralities." He also is bent upon encouraging individuals to adapt to the beliefs of others, the beliefs of corporations, of society, etc., without much concern for whether any of those beliefs are themselves morally worthy. He pompously pronounces them all "legitimate." My hunch is that at least some of those beliefs, in fact, may not be so and promoting their legitimacy with an edict from the bully pulpit of ethics consultancy does not so make them.

The "bad work" here is evident in that Navran is willing to pipe the song of those who foot the bill. This is not ethics consultancy but stamping the bad with the mark of the good: our own, unique, late twentieth-century form of sophistry. Those ancient sophists were paid well for "teaching virtue" when they knew it not and our Navrans are paid even better for knowing even less about it. But it gives American and global corporations the look and feel of morality – the mere appearance of good and solidly working business. And, for that purpose, corporations doubtless would be glad to pay far more – and, if the Navrans have their way with it, someday they will pay more. Nevertheless, those corporations which hire ethics consultants who would "make them better than they already are" will be saved the tough and expensive job of doing what is good, right, beautiful, and therefore, worthy. Hence, those corporations are getting a really "cheap deal" from the Navrans.

But what about the remark Navran made about us not knowing the "good" for all and everyone? Isn't he just flatly right about that? Isn't this "ethics stuff" that we philosophers worry about merely relative to individuals, corporations, states, nations, and worlds? But here I cling to Parmenides and Austin as I think that the "good" *is*: that we really *do* know what it is (without the "help" of ethics consultancy), and that unethical motives and behaviors simply "do not qualify." I

think we *do* know the “good” when we think or perform it and that it is, often, the most difficult, uncomfortable, painful, and altruistic thing in the world to embrace. Hence, we would rather avoid it and hire a consultant to give us the permission we need. Navran will tell us something akin to what Peter Pan told us about Tinkerbell: that if we believe hard enough, Tinkerbell will come alive for us again. Navran tells us that if we believe hard enough, then mature, entrenched, wicked, egoistic, and shamelessly unethical people can become suddenly ethical – that, contra-Parmenides, with a twist of Navran’s wrist, non-Being can become Being. All we need do is pay him while he believes along with us or, perhaps, while he *teaches* us how to believe that the illegitimate is the legitimate, the bad argument is the better, or that night, after all, is day. To put it concisely, if Navran were to ask me (and I do not worry that he will) how we can know this “good” for all time and for all people, my answer would come in a form parallel to Sachmo’s when asked if he could define jazz: he said, as do I, “If you gotta ask, you’ll never know.”

#### Notes

1. J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 75-77.
2. Mary Midgley, “Homunculus Trouble, Or, What Is Applied Philosophy?,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 20, Spring 1990, 5.
3. Frank J. Navran, “The Individual’s Role in Shaping Organizational Ethics: I can’t do anything. I’m just a ...,” *Proceedings of the Third Annual National Conference on Ethics in America*, University of California at Long Beach, February 1992, 249.