The Meaning of Integrity: A Hermeneutic Reflection

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A good name, the Rabbis tell us, is a great asset. Within the Philosophy of Education Society (PES), the name Michael Katz is good indeed. Katz's reputation as a person of integrity is not limited to those who know him personally; it extends to those who know him only by name. That Katz's reputation as a person of integrity is widely acknowledged within PES attests not only to his qualities as a person. It also tells us something about our understanding of integrity. We can say about integrity what Justice Potter Stewart once said about pornography and what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has said about classic ethnography. We may not be able to offer an *ex ante* definition. Nevertheless, we know it when we see it.[1]

Given that integrity is a quality most people think they can recognize, it is jarring to learn from Katz that integrity may be an incoherent concept. He acknowledges that the so-called "traditional" definition of integrity — the definition Katz finds in the dictionary, that is elaborated through philosophical and theoretical analysis — is illuminating in certain respects. But Katz's discussion of privilege, interpretations of literature, and reflections on his own experience suggest that for him, the traditional definition of integrity often is at odds with how ordinary people understand what acting with integrity requires in the context of negotiating everyday ethical dilemmas. Katz intimates that our ordinary understanding of integrity is more compelling. The dictionary definition, on the other hand, requires serious work and perhaps should be eschewed altogether.

I want to examine what Katz assumes about the dictionary definition of integrity. Clarifying this assumption demonstrates that in fact, the dictionary definition is not separate from how integrity is understood in daily life. On the contrary: these two views of integrity are intimately related. This relationship does not dispel our problems, however. Instead, it surfaces another problem, having to do with the stance of openness Katz counsels us to adopt.

The gap in notions of integrity that Katz perceives is evident in his reflections on May Sarton's novel, *The Small Room*. Katz writes: "So, does the traditional notion of integrity illuminate Lucy's dilemma? Certainly not." The problem, Katz suggests, is that the dictionary definition explicates a general principle of conduct that is supposed to apply across contexts. The contexts in which we actually conduct our lives, however, are particular and ever changing. As Allison Williams's research demonstrates, the demands of local contexts may even contradict what a general precept says we should do.

Insofar as a general principle of action misses or obscures the particular cases it is supposed to explain, the conflict Katz detects is worrisome. Conflict between the general and the particular only arises, however, if Katz assumes that general principles are theories or rules that can be formulated in advance or outside of the specific situations in which they are relevant. Interpreting stories and reflecting on

his own experience, Katz suggests another way to understand general principles and the relationship between the general and the particular. On this alternate reading, general principles may illuminate what Charles Taylor calls an ontological background of moral and spiritual demands.[2] Our prereflective practical engagements with the world always in some way express and enact what we take these demands to be. Background principles are general, Taylor explains, because "they have been and are acknowledged in all human societies"; moreover, they are not simply contingent desires we can choose to fulfill or ignore. Rather, they are true moral demands, "discriminations of right and wrong…which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."[3]

In saying that moral demands are independent of our personal inclinations, Taylor does not mean that general principles float free from how we understand and invoke them in the particular situations in which we find ourselves. Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of ethical knowledge clarifies Taylor's point: "The image that a man has of what he ought to do — i.e., his ideas of right and wrong, of decency, courage, dignity, loyalty, and so forth…are certainly in some sense images that he uses to guide his conduct." Nevertheless, Gadamer explains, our general understanding of what is right "cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action from me."[4]

Thus the meaning of a notion like courage cannot be determined outside or in advance of my experiencing a particular dilemma, which requires me to understand not only that courage is required, but also how to act with courage, what acting courageously in this context involves. To act courageously may entail willingness to die. Acting courageously also may mean refusing to die. These two interpretations are not simply different means to the same end. The option I choose — what I do — affects what courage means in the situation that calls on me to act. The other option means something else: cowardice, for example. In a different situation, the meaning of these two options may be reversed.[5]

Background principles that we prereflectively grasp on a general level thus are not clarified or explicitly construed until we put our implicit understanding of them to work in particular settings. This does not mean there are no general moral principles. It does mean that general principles become clear and relevant only insofar as they are applied in actual contexts. At the same time, what a moral demand requires cannot be reduced to our experience and understanding of this general principle in specific situations. Individual experience alone "can never be sufficient for making right moral decisions," Gadamer explains. "Moral consciousness itself calls for prior direction to guide action."[6] Thus my decision to die or live depends on my having a prior understanding, however inchoate, of what courage as a general principle means. Without this prior implicit understanding, the meaning of my chosen action makes no sense.

Thus on the reading that Gadamer and Taylor suggest, general principles are not objective theories or rules. Rather, they are what Gadamer calls, "schemata," general

guidelines that orient our conduct in particular settings and that in turn are clarified by the specific concrete situations that require their guidance. On this view, we do not first define what a moral principle means and then determine whether specific expressions of this principle measure up to its demands. The meaning of the principle, like the common law, is defined through specific examples. At the same time, an explicit interpretation of a general principle depends on our having already implicitly understood the principle we're trying to clarify. Georgia Warnke puts the matter like this: "Ethical knowledge is a matter of weighing various options against a general normative framework that is itself clarified through the options one chooses."[7]

Viewing general principles as schemata suggests that the gap in our views of integrity may not be as wide as Katz fears. The dictionary definition of integrity may offer a provisional clarification of what integrity generally requires. Thus Lucy's caring behavior may not contradict integrity, defined as a general principle that includes honesty, decency, and acting in a principled way. Lucy's choice to care for Jane instead may illustrate what she believes being a principled decent honest person looks like in her particular circumstances. Lucy's understanding that this choice counts as an expression of integrity inescapably draws on her prior implicit understanding of what integrity as a general principle demands.

Just as our prereflective understanding of general moral principles shapes our explicit understanding of specific actions, so our explicit understanding of specific actions may clarify and even challenge the meaning of general moral principles.[8] The fact that groups of people are systematically forced to engage in acts of self-abnegation does not necessarily mean that our intuitions about integrity are wrong, or that integrity as a general principle is divorced from real-world dilemmas. On the contrary: we understand that self-abnegation is unjust, precisely because it violates our sense of what integrity requires. Upholding this general principle thus compels us to alter what the principle means in light of how it does or does not play out in particular cases. For example, we may redefine integrity as a quality that applies to societies, and that describes how societies support or inhibit flourishing on an individual level.

The idea that particular practices can challenge the meaning of general principles, and that general principles, in turn, can challenge entrenched understandings of specific practices, raises a final question. How does this happen? How do we know that our understanding of practices and principles should be called into question? Even more, how do we know that our understanding is not just questionable but wrong? On my reading of Sarton's novel, Lucy thought that by choosing not to turn Jane in, she was being true to the principle of integrity. But maybe Lucy's choice was wrong. Maybe in this situation, integrity required Lucy to let the student court judge Jane's case. If Lucy thinks her choice was right when in truth it was wrong, Lucy's confusion reflects not integrity, but self-deception.

Lucy cannot appeal to a metadefinition of integrity to help her evaluate her choice. The circular relation of understanding means that Lucy's self-assessment

must presume the very understanding that she needs to question. Katz says that when we are open to the possibility that our understanding may be wrong, the interpretive circle avoids becoming vicious.[9] I agree. But this does not get us very far. Understanding how to be open presupposes that we already understand, at least implicitly and generally, what "openness" entails. If we are not already open to understanding how to be open, I'm not sure we can see what being open means, much less recognize that this stance is what our situation requires.

We thus confront a logical conundrum. Nonetheless, people do see through their self-deceptions and come to realize that their understanding is wrong. In fact, people are opened up like this all the time. Katz's essay provides a moving example of how this happened to him. I want to know more about his transition. I want to know what Katz thinks happened to make it possible, and why Katz believes that in light of this transition, he was able to live up to the moral requirements of integrity in a more honest or clear way. I want to know these things, because, like Katz, I think that we teachers are called upon to nurture integrity in our students. Katz's reflections thus can provide a valuable lesson, which can help us better understand what integrity means, both as a guiding principle, and also as a concrete moral demand we experience in our lives.

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1. Stewart's quotation is in Michael J. Feuer, *Moderating the Debate: Rationality and the Promise of American Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 121. Rosaldo's quotation is in Renato Rosaldo, "Where Objectivity Lies: The Rhetoric of Anthropology," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs,* ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 87.

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4. Taylor includes integrity in the cluster of moral demands he identifies.

3. Ibid.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 317.

5. See Georgia Warnke's discussion of phronesis in Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 93–4.

6. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 316.

7. Warnke, *Gadamer,* 94.

8. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 11.

9. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 268.