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An Ethic for the Third Millennium

Whose Business is Business?

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Business – An Uneasy Success Story

Given the amazing and lasting 'success' of the Irish economy over the last number of years, it is striking to note what a strong sense of unease there is in Irish society. At one level, the first year of the new millennium has been characterised by an almost irrational but niggling fear that much of what we have achieved could quite suddenly turn to dust. Will we wake up and see the cranes have disappeared? Will we discover that the miracle epitomized in the potential of the world wide web has turned out to be more one of its deceit rather than of its lasting contribution to real wealth creation? Will a contemptuously disregarded environment strike back? There are also indications of a deeper fear, the fear that all we have achieved may not have been very much anyhow. That this feeling lingers is remarkable given the extraordinary change in our economic well-being perhaps most notably in relation to jobs and emigration. For all those real achievements, there is little evidence to suggest that we have become a happier, a more content or more fulfilled people. As recent industrial action indicates there are significant sections of people convinced that they have not received an adequate share of the boom. Others - the sick, the excluded - can equally wonder why the boom makes so little difference to them. Could it be that we have been so enthralled by the experience of riding the Celtic Tiger that we have missed its meaning?

A key element in the growth and strength of the Tiger has been the success of business in Ireland. It is true of course that business has not achieved it alone. The hints that the Tiger might be limping remind us that it has been fed by a very favourable external economic environment, by massive hidden contributions of innumerable unsung and relatively under-rewarded heroines and heroes and by the related emerging widespread consensus across key sectors in Irish society that Ireland should entrust its future to business. Supporting the development and growth of business, through wage restraint and through lowering of taxes, has been promoted as the principal way to support Ireland.

This is not to say that people do not have their remaining doubts about business. Tribunals and inquiries which reveal ways in which parts of business have sought to make their own rules, and to buy favour, provide plenty to nourish such doubts. We still hear of job losses, of low pay, of harmfully stressful working conditions and practices which strike at human living, and of how business damages the environment. Intellectually, it is difficult to resist being swept along by the tide of praise for all that the Tiger has done. Yet in the stomach of Ireland there are disturbing and disquieting rumblings which point to a residue of discomfort with the claims of business to pride of place in the creation of not just a more prosperous but also a better Ireland. At this moment in

history, having had a few years to contemplate the beauty of the Tiger and when we are clearer on what business – at its most successful - has to offer, perhaps it is a good time to muse on some different basic question. If so many are calling us to support business, what are we supporting it for?

The Purposes of Business – "Internal Views"

a) Models

There are many people for whom such a question is a dangerous intrusion. Questions about the purpose or the meaning of business are seen as treacherous interventions from an outside world. They are necessarily loaded questions, tainted with anti-capitalism, and with the answers inevitably and crudely stacked against business. For many such people, the question of what business is for is self-evident: it flows from the obvious nature of business. Business exists to make a profit, in fact to make the most profits it can. Full stop.

There is another view of business which holds that business must be somewhat more responsible. The primary purpose of business remains the maximisation of long term owner value, but now this aim must be situated within the framework of a varied and competing responsibility to different stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, workers, shareholders and wider society. This is a wider but still strictly limited responsibility which almost never reaches beyond the best overall interests of the business itself.

If such are some of the more widely endorsed models which stress the very limited purposes of business, it is interesting to wonder why there seems to be so little discussion in our society and in our public life about the role and limits of business activity.

b) Beliefs

Beneath these models it is possible to detect a range of powerful, though perhaps rarely explicitly articulated, beliefs which seem to underpin such views.

i) First among these, there is a tendency to make an easy division of the world into "business people" and "non business people", into insiders and outsiders. Business people understand the way of business, non business people generally do not. This is not unique to business people. As social beings, we do group according to interests. However, it is much more significant for society if business people drift towards discussing their issues with each other, than that football fans only talk to each other.

ii) Then there can be the "claiming of reality" by business people, often in the simple phrase prefacing a conversation: "in the real world…" With this, imagination and almost any suggestion of an alternative approach – to the whats and hows of business - can be dismissed as perhaps desirable but ideal, unrealistic, unworkable.

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iii) In addition there can be the propagation of a "two worlds theory", where a sharp separation is made between the standards one may aspire to or live by in one's personal or private life and the standards by which one lives in the world of business.

iv) Furthermore, the widespread sense that business is generally highly regulated as a public activity can lead to a tendency to believe that a general compliance with the law - itself a time consuming activity - must suffice for attending to the ethical dimension of business activity. It can be as if, because it is legal, it is ethical enough.

These kind of beliefs play a key role in creating barriers between business and wider society, making it more difficult to cultivate a space for deeper public discourse about the real values, limitations and evolution of business. If business - and business people - wish to have the active as against passive participation of society, it needs to allow for genuine dialogue with the rest of society about what it is doing. If business wishes to claim it is so essential to society, that the economic policy of the nation should be directed primarily to supporting its success, then society must be allowed its say in the broadest possible discussion and evaluation of business. There is need for a discussion of a more fundamental nature than can take place in the pressurised atmosphere involved in negotiations by government, union, voluntary and business leaders in the context of social partnership.

The Purposes of Business – "External Views"

The present moment in Ireland gives business – and to be fair, Irish society more widely - an excellent opportunity to attend to this unease. Business is part of society. It needs society - society gives it its workers, its customers, and its markets - but it also needs it in deeper ways. To engage people, to get people to study, to train, to innovate, to work long hours, to stay in the work force, to keep at it, business needs society to endorse what it is trying to do. The best prospect for succeeding in this involves entering into dialogue with society about what it has to offer.

There are many possible dialogue partners for business, including government, political parties, trade unions, and the voluntary sector.

A less obvious one, and one with whom there tends to be less real and meaningful public dialogue, are with people of religious faith gathered in faith based communities. In many ways business and religion are profoundly alike, and could have a lot to learn from each other. Business for many, functions socially as a new religion, claiming total allegiance, holding control of rewards and punishments and offering ultimate salvation. The churches have centuries of experience in this role.

Clearly there are many reasons why such dialogue does not take place. As institutions, both can tend to place their dogmas before learning from others. The Churches have hierarchical structures which consciously place all leadership in the hands of experts in the sacred rather than the secular. This can seem to undermine the critical interest that people may have in what the Churches have to say about the world of business.   Christians – sadly - can easily be seen to be totally naïve about issues of wealth and to be ideologically hostile to its pursuit. In addition they have often failed to make adequate distinctions about a justifiable concern with the distribution of resources, especially to

those in great need, with an indifference or almost chronic reluctance to engage with issues regarding wealth creation.   On the other hand, the apparent strength of business means it has less need to listen to outsiders. Given its astonishing success in the 1990s it has little need to listen to institutions whose more recent years have through media eyes been presented as embarrassing failure.

However, there are also good reasons why such a dialogue could take place, and particularly in Ireland. [i]   From the point of view of the Christian communities, what happens in the world of business is crucial. If more recent theology makes us realise that great sins may be as easily committed in the board room, as the bedroom, the more positive corollary may need to be highlighted: as the greatest acts of love may also occur in bedrooms, so they can through decisions made in board rooms. Huge numbers of Christians spend their daily lives working in business. As Christians, and as people living in the world of business, it is vital that they be given a chance to explore the connections between where their faith draws them and where their lives root them on a daily basis. The world of business has a profound impact on the lives people lead and on the meaning they discover within them. The success or failure of business largely determines the resources there are to meet social and public needs in society and in the wider world.

From the point of view of business, there are things which can be learnt from faith-based reflections on the meaning, the regulation and the purpose of human activities which could make a valuable contribution to the shaping of business. The 'unease' within business points to the possibility that its key resource – its people – want more from life than business has so far provided. This is so even despite the resources business can dedicate to financial and other quality of life incentives.

This dialogue could happen at top level, but it is also conceivable that it would happen at lower levels between people who care about business – about keeping the company going, about developing its potential, providing decent jobs, making positive links to the community, -and people who care about Christian faith. It could happen in homes, in families, in churches, in pubs, wherever people gather to celebrate life's joys and to review life's disappointments. Rooted in such places, the dialogue would need to allow space for the large scale horrors committed in the name of business (and if necessary of Christianity), for example, the notorious abuse of environment and workers prevalent in certain internationally renowned firms. Yet such a focus ought not distract from the importance of exploring and discussing honestly the performance of the more ordinary and less dramatic side which constitutes much of the real business world.

At a more formal church level, such dialogue could be initiated by such simple measures as inviting people involved in the world of business to speak in church of what it is they are doing and struggling with in their lives. If the churches do not actively seek to create spaces where people can name and explore issues, issues which absorb their energies and creativity, are they not guilty of neglecting a major part of their mission to engage with the world? For if it is true that we have largely lost the ability to talk meaningfully of sex, could it not also be said that our religious services seldom help us touch the mystery, with its lights and shadows, of what money – and so business - does to and for us?

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What kind of things might a Christian sponsored dialogue be able to offer to the belief system underlying business, both in its more spectacular multinational version, but equally in the ordinary businesses with which we are continuously involved?

First, perhaps there is need to acknowledge that many business people have an understandable reluctance to allow their work be questioned by people outside the world of business. A great deal of business activity is carried on in a very pressurised and competitive context. Sales targets have to be met, customers satisfied, staff paid, creditors kept happy. Many people experience that they have very little freedom or ability to really control the vital variables which shape the futures of their business. To find space in such a setting to ask deeper or different kinds of questions is not easy.

If there is to be dialogue these difficulties have to be acknowledged in some way. Ignoring where people are, and what they experience as the reality of their situation rarely allows for worthwhile meeting. Yet, if non business people need to step out of their worlds to empathise, so too must business people in some way acknowledge the legitimacy of other peoples' experience and their wanting to hear more comprehensive answers about the purpose of business. The grounds of this depend on a recognition that before we are business and non business we are people with a common humanity. The recognition of this common humanity is fundamental to meaningful dialogue in society about the purpose of business. The acceptance that we share a common humanity also raises serious questions about the notion that we can justifiably compartmentalise moral concern in our lives, in the sense that we treat humans with fundamentally different standards depending on which sector they occupy in our lives. Clearly, it is true that as a parent you have a different role in relation to your children, than in relation to your staff. A question to be considered is whether such different roles and contexts justify a view that the "world of business" is so profoundly different that we would allow a different standard of morality to rule there than we would expect in other areas of our lives? It is interesting to note that our society does not generally accept such a separation of private and public morality. For example, in the case where we entrust vulnerable parents to the medical profession or our young children to child workers, while we may be comforted by the professionalisation of such services, do we place our trust in this or in the fact that the doctor may recognise her father in your father or his son in your son? Clearly there are extras which we do for those who occupy the more intimate spaces of our lives, partners, children, family, close friends. However, the minimum of what we do not do to them also constitutes a minimum which should be observed in the rest of our lives. If you would not sell it to your son, if you would not ask your mother to work for that wage, then maybe you should not treat your customer or employee this way, because they happen to be more vulnerable, as for example, in the case of migrant workers.

Perhaps room could also be found to look again at what the real world is, and who defines it. Different groups – including a male clerical church - need to question their monopolies on defining what 'the real world' is. Meeting sales targets and the need to make profits are important elements in this. Yet they seem inadequate ways of getting at the whole of reality. Outsiders know that. Numerical profits made on the back of unliveably stressful lives, or permanent damage to the

environment, in many ways do more to conceal rather than reveal reality. The encouraging thing is that business itself knows

this. Despite the harsh image of many business people it remains true that very few people easily accommodate to the more brutal logic which "cut throat" business imposes on them.

Supporting the Goods of Business

What then might a Christian inspired reflection have to offer by way of answer to the question – why support business? One of the difficulties of thinking ethically about the function of business is the sheer scale of business and the many different shapes it takes, from small corner shop to multinational oil company. Also the kind of questions which arise seem to be endless. However, precisely in order to be able to address different types of business and questions, it would be very useful to have some more fundamental framework around which basic questions could be gathered. The question, what is business for, can be usefully addressed in terms of three sub-questions: what is produced, how is it produced, and why is it produced?

i) What?

If the purpose of business were really to make maximum profits, or to respond to the demands of stakeholders then what is produced should never really matter. It is clearly possible to see a value in an almost infinite variety and range of products which businesses produce.

However support for business can never be total or unqualified. Again this is something we can easily see if we think about business in the light of how we live the rest of our lives. Relationships are to be supported, but not between bully and child; education too, but not the teaching of racism to young kids; health care, but not against the will of the patient.

According to economic theory the market will play a major role in determining which goods are produced. Only those goods which meet the demand of consumers in terms of quality and price will be purchased. However, even after the market has done its filtering, there are still many products which seem to raise ethical questions. There are basic differences between producing bread and tobacco, or medicine and arms. We also know that the market drastically underestimates the negative environmental value of many so-called 'goods'.

The problem which often stops people going beyond a vague doubt, or uneasiness, about being involved in the production of ethically questionable products – such as tobacco or arms, - is the difficulty of determining which products should be allowed and which not. The idea of developing a list of ethically more acceptable and less acceptable goods and even banning the production of certain products seems a dangerous assault on our basic liberal instincts. There is disagreement about tobacco and what harm it really does. No one is forced to buy it. Also there are people who are addicted to it, and for whom the ending of tobacco consumption would cause them more harm than its continuation. Tobacco exists because people want it. The same kind of points can be made about pornography or violent movies.

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There is something intuitively unconvincing about this line of argument. From other areas of life, we know or discover a sense of obligation not to cause harm to others, even when people seem to be willing accomplices in their own harming. Do we not shudder a little at the thought of allowing our children watch brutal horror movies late at night, even if they feel a certain fascination for them?

Perhaps more interesting has been the campaign to ban land mines in recent years. There is a line of acceptability about what is produced. And in the end landmines crossed over it. Despite the fact that there was great money in landmines, and that shareholders could do very well, the land mine ban shows that the subjecting of profits to the criteria of the harm they cause to people can be carried out.

So whether you are an owner, a manager, or an employee, what you produce does matter. It is never just business, nor is it ever just our business. Whether it is agriculture or banking or computers or services, the questions about the real as against financial value of the product is there to be answered. Do you believe it's good for people, and is it sustainable?

ii) How?

Contrary to what has increasingly become the popular caricature of business there is a great deal to admire in how business is carried out. Business allows for the expression and use of enormous human talents and virtues in terms of attention to needs, identification of opportunities, design of solutions, co-operation, planning, risk taking. Just as we can be stunned at a concert to hear someone's mastery of a musical instrument so we can legitimately admire what an individual or group manage to do through a business or company. Bringing it all together so that jobs are provided, staff are rewarded, needs are met, and the economy is built up, requires admirable skills and commitment.

The fact that business can be done well alerts us to the fact that it can be done badly. The means do matter. What people have to say of the places they work, and particularly of the atmosphere within which they work, over the first pint on a Friday evening, bears powerful testimony to the fact that the vast majority of people have strong and persistent expectations of how business needs to be run. An exclusive focus on meeting targets while ignoring the human cost to staff well being is unacceptable to most people. Workers need adequate pay, manageable patterns of work, an ability to humanise what they do in their work in all sorts of ways, including adequate influence in shaping their own areas of work. This means that what is asked of them and provided to them in work must strive towards acknowledging and positively respecting their humanity rather than expecting them to park this outside.

In this regard it is worth thinking not only about what a firm produces for sale on the market, but also about what it produces internally. In working in this business, in giving their time, their energy, their creativity, their intelligence, what is done by the firm to the people working in it? It is undoubtedly true that business cannot be expected to satisfy all of society's or all of any individual's needs. At the same time, as business asks more from society and of individuals, the

question of its responsibilities to society and individuals become broader, in terms of how they impact on the quality of life. One of the real dangers of having so much regulation to cover protection of staff in so many areas is that it establishes a legalistic mentality amongst business managers. It is important that managers fulfil their legal duties towards their workers, but a spirit of mere compliance with minimal obligations is unlikely to satisfy the legitimate desires and longings of workers. Businesses which genuinely seek to attend to the how of business, and which let go a focus on what they can get away with and replace this with a more vivid sense of the social significance and value of how they produce, have a stronger claim on the support of society.

iii) Why?

Finally a business that produces what is good, and does it in a good way, will be in a better position if it is able to provide some answer to the ultimate question of why it produces this product at this moment in history, and why it draws energy and resources into this area. While this type of question can seem to be too abstract and pointless in that there can be no final answer to it, it is also clear that it is a question that the total commitment of business does itself raise. People who work long hours, who face great pressure, who take real risks almost inevitably come to face this kind of question. The pressure - to the point of imposing a real strain on quality of life for self, family and workers - means that people cannot for ever avoid looking at this question. What is all the effort for?

It is becoming clearer that the intrinsic rewards of business do not ultimately seem to provide an adequate answer to this question. It seems that salary increases, bonuses, perks, the sense of achievement, the prestige of succeeding do not adequately fill the hunger which drives business. To some extent, this is to the advantage of business, as it may provide the motivating force to keep people going at the pace business requires. It works as long as people do not wonder about whether, rather than looking for more, they are actually looking for something different.

Ultimately, the answer to this question depends on a sense of the ultimate purpose in life. Such a question often seems a million miles from the daily cut and thrust of business. Yet, the very pace and frenetic activity of business also pushes people to ask this ultimate why. Far from being the last question, or a question too deep to be answered, this question could be considered to be the first question. We cannot avoid answering it. We may not put it into words, but the way in which we live our lives actually constitutes and expresses our operative answer to it. We cannot avoid wondering what it profits us even if we make millions, but do so by dedicating our most precious personal resources to producing things which we do not value, in a way which we cannot believe in and for reasons we cannot find.

In relation to this question Christianity may have something useful to say. It is possible to debate the question of the ultimate purpose of business and of life in some sort of abstract vacuum. However, at its best Christian thinking urges us to explore such a question within the context of concrete human history.

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Within Ireland, perhaps one of the great ironies of the 'success' of business has been how much more difficult it has become for people to get the housing they aspire to. It is very difficult to see how a business which through hoarding of land, and resisting legislation aimed at tackling the housing problem can present itself as having an ultimate purpose which is not fundamentally in conflict with the wider social good. If business ignores the wider cultural aspirations of the society in which it must work, it will find it much more difficult to win social support.

Among all the challenges facing the business community, perhaps one stands out. It is quite clear that the best foreseeable efforts of governments, of developing countries and of

NGOs will never succeed in the battle to reduce world poverty. To do so, they will need the support of business.

There are those who deny that business can have any noble purpose. However, it is possible to argue that the activity of business could be amongst the most noble if a greater part of the business community were to take on the challenge of showing that it believes so much in globalisation that it works for a world order where poorer countries can be effectively included. Then such business could be supported because it would be directing investment to where it is most needed, targeting production at real human needs and using its power not just to maximise profits, nor to keep stakeholders happy but to contribute to the common attainable and global good.

Conclusion - A brighter future for business

If we are to address the unease with the success which business brings, we need to discover that there are ways in which we can influence the shape of business in the years to come. The climate of business is constantly changing. Business lives with change or it dies. Business then has the capacity to accommodate to new questions from its practitioners and from the society in which it is carried out. For business people, a key is to find time and space to attend to the full range of questions which being involved in business raises. Practically, it seems vital that such questions are attended to not only at crisis moments when ethical questions force themselves to the fore. Questions about where resources are placed, how they are used, and to what end need to be addressed at set up phase, and also within the context of strategic planning.

There are grounds for fear about the future of business, and of business in Ireland. Some of these are economic. The story of 'success' could end. But the deeper reasons for fear are social. Business requires extraordinary levels of human co-operation, and consensus. For an activity that is routinely characterised as competitive, it actually depends on being able to create trust, and a profound level of co-operation among people. For a time, it can forge ahead, but the future for business - or for parts of business - would be much brighter if it could honestly propose that what it produces, and how it produces it is really for some agreed social purposes which respond to the real needs of our world, and the real good of society.

Notes

[i] While the focus of this article is on dialogue about the purposes of business, the possibility that a range of challenging questions could arise in the context of such a dialogue about the churches and what Christians do in the world, should I think be welcomed from a Christian point of view.

Ethics, Compassion and Self-Deceit

Written by [Peter McVerry SJ](#)

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Introduction

There is a homeless person sitting in the street, begging. Passing by, I wonder whether to give him money or not. On the one hand, I feel sorry for him, no place to go, hungry, cold, bored. On the other hand, maybe he isn't really homeless, or even if he is, maybe he wants money for drugs or alcohol and I may actually be making his situation worse by giving him money. It's all very confusing.

In the Millennium, a sustained campaign was waged to abolish or reduce the debt owed by the poorest Third World countries, who were being crippled by the interest they had to pay on loans they had received from the economically developed world. The campaigners argued that this repayment was preventing health and education programmes from being funded and was therefore costing lives and preventing development. Others argued that corruption was so extensive in many of these countries and spending on arms and military so high that to simply cancel the debt would make their ruling elites even wealthier, their armies even better equipped and increase the oppression and suffering of the people, not reduce it. It's all very confusing.

Compassion

Unfortunately, ethical principles are not a quick-fix solution to our confusions. If they were, there would be no problems in the world. Ethical principles are grounded in the values of compassion and solidarity. What is absent in our world today is not a set of ethical guidelines but a deep sense of compassion and solidarity. Unless a person is living those values, then ethical principles become, not guidelines to just behaviour, but rules to be manipulated, interpreted and twisted to one's own advantage.

Compassion is not a religious feeling. While it is central to many religious faiths, including Christianity, compassion is a human feeling that is innate in all of us. It is part of our humanity. All of us, of whatever faith or none, are moved by the sight of children starving, or being ill-treated. Cruelty and sadism shock us all. We can, of course, become anaesthetised to suffering and cruelty and there is a movement in that direction in our society. Technology has enabled us to witness the suffering of so many people in our world that we can sometimes close our eyes because the pain becomes too much. We are also tempted to close our eyes because we feel so powerless to do

anything – there is nothing worse than feeling pain at the suffering of another and knowing that I can do nothing about it.   Compassion involves a desire to remove the pain from people's lives and give them a happier future. But when the pain of observing the pain of others becomes too much for us to bear, then we preserve our own sanity by switching off.   And so we have lost not so much our compassion, but our sense of outrage. Homeless children on the streets of Dublin in the year 2001, with our coffers so full that we dream up National Stadiums so that we can spend the money, is an obscenity.   We are all aware of children dying in our world from hunger and preventable disease.   But where is the anger, where is the indignation, where is the sense of outrage?   Ethical principles are rooted in a deep sense of compassion. To act ethically, we have to continually struggle against the tendency to numb the pain of seeing others in pain.

Solidarity

Our sense of solidarity with others can help to prevent the anaesthetic from dulling the pain.   To empathise with another person in their pain, to feel that pain as if it was our own, can help to keep us alert to the suffering in the world.   It is John and Mary and Jane's pain, John, Mary and Jane being persons known to us, which helps to minimise the tendency to treat the suffering of others as merely a "problem".   It helps to prevent the anonymity of others, others being considered objectively as the "clients" and the problem being "an issue". We need to get to know people who are poor, suffering and marginalised, to be able to see life through their eyes. People who are waiting years for an operation may see the budget in a very different way to those who are cushioned by their VHI payments. Preserving our sense of outrage through personal, direct contact with people who are poor, suffering or marginalised makes it more likely that we will act ethically towards the poor.

Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good: that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all." (Encyclical "Social Concern", par.38)

Jesus did not pronounce ethical principles, he told stories about people:

There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there lay a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even came and licked his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In his torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his bosom. So he cried out, "Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames".   "My son," Abraham replied, "remember that during your life good things came your way, just as bad things came the way of Lazarus. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony. But that is not all: between us and you a great gulf

has been fixed, to stop anyone, if he wanted to, crossing from our side to yours and to stop anyone crossing from your side to ours."   (Luke 16 v 19-26)

The stories talked about situations in which people were treated badly, ignored or walked upon. The stories enabled people to empathise with others in the unjust situation in which they found themselves.   The ethical thing to do was usually very clear, the ethical principles were deafeningly loud, but Jesus explained them in terms of concrete situations and real people.   The discernment demanded by Jesus was based on compassion and solidarity.

So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7: 12)

Self-deception

Ethical principles also have to struggle against our almost infinite capacity for self-deception. Our ability to rationalise and make decisions, which are in our own interests, while preserving the belief that we are acting ethically, is usually very apparent in others!   However, we can often delude ourselves that this very common phenomenon does not affect us. My desire for comfort or for security are two frequently occurring drives which affect my decisions.   My attachment to my own way of doing things or my own attitudes and feelings about things may prevent me from being objective.   This need for psychological security is particularly difficult to unmask as it may be rooted very deeply in my psyche and therefore very hidden even to myself.

Few of us are quite as transparent as President Bush who is very clear that the national interests of the US take precedence over everything else, including the environment, or of Charlie McCreevy whose understanding of social justice seems to be to support those who are doing very well.   Most of us, however, are unwilling to admit that we are motivated by self-interest and believe that we are the essence of objectivity. The problem is not bad people making bad decisions but good people making bad decisions having convinced themselves that they were good decisions.   They are not acting out of malice – indeed it would be much easier to deal with if they were! – but out of ignorance, ignorance of the reality of life for poor people and of the effect of the decisions they make on their lives.

We see it in relations between different parts of the world, between different countries, different regions, different communities.   Decisions that could make a vital, life-giving difference to some people are rejected, watered down, compromised because of the relatively minor effects or inconvenience which those decisions would have for those who make them.

A Matter of Perspective

A major part of the rationalisation which we all go on with is our unwillingness or inability to listen. We do not want our situation or our thinking to be disturbed by the contrary views of others. And so we set up mechanisms by which such challenges can be dismissed.   We find all sorts of reasons which invalidate or rubbish such views.   This is especially true of the views of the poor themselves, which of course challenge us the most.

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If I live in the top floor flat of a building and at 8 o'clock in the morning I pull back the curtains, the sun shines in. I look out the window into the back garden and see the lovely multi-coloured flowers swaying in the breeze and watch the birds dancing on the lawn looking for worms. It seems to be another wonderful day.

But if I live in the basement flat of the same building and at 8 o'clock in the morning I pull back the curtains, nothing happens – the sun can't get in. I look out the window into the back garden and all I see is the white-washed wall of the outside toilet – I cannot see the flowers or the birds or the lawn. I'm not sure what sort of day it is.

Here we have two people looking out of the same house into the same garden at the same time of the same day – and they have too totally different views: there is a view from the top and a view from the bottom.

In our society there are two (and indeed more than two) totally different views. There is the view of those who are in well-paid, secure, pensionable jobs, living in a nice house in a nice area and whose children are going to third-level education; and there is the view of those who are living on the 14th floor of a tower block in Ballymun when the lifts don't work, who have been unemployed for twelve years and whose children have dropped out of school and are hanging around with the wrong crowd. How they see the structures of Irish society and how they view the political, economic and social decisions that are made will probably be very different.

The perspective of the poor does not have any greater legitimacy than the perspective of any other group in our society or in our world. It is, like any other view, the view of a particular group who sees the world from their own unique situation. However, while it does not have greater legitimacy, it does have greater priority, simply because it is the view of those who are suffering or who have been excluded. This gives their viewpoint a uniqueness which demands particular attention. However, it often receives particular disdain – because they often lack education, and so they are written off as not having the knowledge to understand the "complexity" of reality; or because they lack the literacy skills to present their views in a way that keeps decision makers happy; or because they are perceived to be biased because of their particular problems (as if the rest of us weren't!).

It is the difficult task of continually trying to listen to the views of those who are poor and excluded, of trying to see life as it were through their eyes which sustains our compassion and our solidarity. It is difficult because it challenges us, our viewpoint, our securities; sometimes it even accuses us. And we usually do not like to be challenged, still less accused.

Ethical principles have their place. But ethical principles tend to be enunciated by the rich and powerful. Unless they are enlivened and challenged by dialogue with the least powerful and an awareness of their problems, they become little more than maxims of self-interest. Acting justly does not depend on our understanding of ethical principles, helpful as that may be in some situations. It depends on the sort of person we are and are becoming.

An Ethic for the Third Millennium

Written by [Bill Toner SJ](#)

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Introduction

Culture is very fragile. A society or group can live for hundreds of years in a particular way that holds the group together, ensures their survival, and gives meaning to their lives. Then something unexpected can happen, such as an invasion, or a new invention. The culture may be enriched or transformed by these events, but it can also fall apart.   In this article I propose to examine in more detail the role of values during this process of transformation, with particular reference to our own culture on the island of Ireland.

When we speak of culture here we are not referring to what is sometimes called 'high culture' such as art and classical music, but rather to the way of life of a people. Culture in this sense includes such things as 'the meaning of life' and religious beliefs, but also such things as the way people dress, their marriage customs and family life, their patterns of work and leisure, laws, religious ceremonies and so on.   To take two examples: in most of sub-Saharan Africa 'bride price' or lobola is an important part of African culture because it is the legal way to recognize the validity of marriage.

In Ireland, going to the pub for a drink is something we take for granted, but our type of pub is so untypical that we have succeeded in exporting this bit of our culture, profitably, all over the globe.
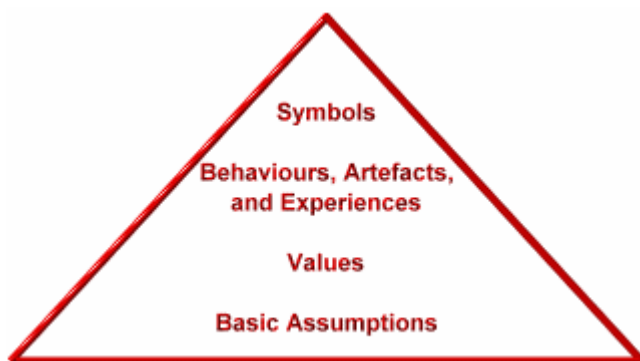

Figure 1

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Previous articles in Working Notes [1] have explored the notion of culture and have described it as in Fig. 1.

Basic assumptions refer to the way a people picture the world to themselves. Values, or ethics, refer to what the people think they ought to do, in general terms, in the light of these assumptions. These values give rise to specific ways of behaving, and to art, industry and social structures.   Some of the artefacts and rituals created can assume great symbolic significance and carry a meaning that goes well beyond appearances.

Each level springs out of the level below it. For instance, an assumption by a group of poor people that they are, and always will be, 'outsiders', could lead to them placing little value on education of their children, - "Education is not for the likes of us".

There is also 'feedback' from higher levels in the pyramid back to lower levels.   If the group of outsiders just mentioned found themselves, for a change, being consistently treated in a very inclusive way by officialdom and other 'insiders' they might gradually lose the assumption that they are outsiders, because their experiences would begin to contradict this.
Basic assumptions can be difficult to unearth, because they often work at an unconscious level. What people say in regard to their basic assumptions cannot always be taken at face value.   It is probable that basic assumptions do not change by themselves, but only through the influence of 'feedback' from higher levels in the pyramid.

Cultural Values

This article focuses on the level of the pyramid called Values. Values or ethics describe what 'ought' to be done, in the light of the basic assumptions.   For instance if there is a basic assumption, as there is in the dominant African world view, that every part of creation is inextricably linked, it will follow that animals and plants ought to be respected as an integral part of nature.   Or if, as in the United States, there is a basic assumption that the people who succeed in life are those who deserve to, then there will be little value placed on helping out the 'losers'.

Values are a hugely important part of a culture.   Unlike assumptions, many of them are explicit, and are often enshrined in national Constitutions. On the other hand it is not always clear what people's real, as against their stated, values are.   This can often be observed only in their behaviour. For instance, we may like to say that we value hospitality in Ireland, but our attitude to immigrants may cast doubt on this.

Values always originate with a 'practical' intent.   In the light of their basic assumptions, any society will draw up a 'list' of things that ought to be done and things that ought not to be done.   In most cases values are derived from long experience.   Take, for example, norms regarding sexual behaviour. Most societies in the past have tried to keep some control over sexual activity (as many still do today).   The reasons for this have varied. However, the nuclear family (two adults living together in a household with children) has always been seen as playing an important part in society, even where extended family networks existed. [2]   The nuclear family was seen as a way of regulating sexual competition and jealousy, of establishing paternity, of avoiding sexually

transmitted diseases, of forming a tightly-knit group for defence, mutual help and ownership of property, and so on.   The sexual norms of many societies, aimed at protecting the nuclear family, were probably laid down over many centuries of painful experience.

Values are not solely a matter of practical calculation. People respond instinctively to certain actions as being 'wrong', for instance where they threaten the value of human life. This may be as a result of basic assumptions in the culture, or it may be something deep in the human psyche.   Nor are values only worked out on the basis of centuries of experience.   We can not, and do not, wait for centuries to make ethical judgments about something like human cloning.   Nevertheless values are essentially practical rules for living, looking to the long term rather than the short term, and to the benefits of the group rather than just the individual.

The Wheel of Culture

A culture which is more or less static can be depicted as a circular process as in Fig. 2:
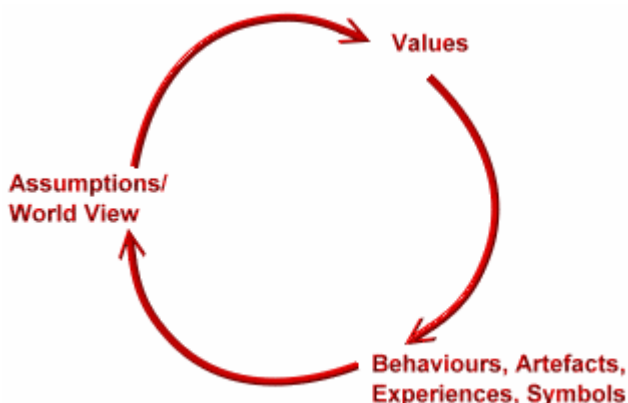

Fig. 2 Traditional View of Culture

Here, Basic Assumptions give rise to values, and values shape particular behaviours and expectations, and these in turn reinforce basic assumptions. For instance, belief in angry gods or spirits can assign a strong value to behaviour designed to appease the gods.   This could consist, for instance, of regular animal sacrifice.   If the rains continue to fall most years, and crops continue to grow, the basic assumption will be reinforced.   Occasionally the crops may fail, and in this case some rational explanation will be sought.   It may be deduced that the gods were angry because of some misconduct by the people or inadequate sacrifices.

In this scenario, all the components of culture hold together.   Only a major long-lasting catastrophe is likely to affect people's basic assumptions and force them to reshape their culture.   The wheel of culture can go around for centuries without notable disturbance.

How important are values in integrating a culture and holding it together? The American sociologist Talcott Parsons, who wrote a great deal on this subject, put great emphasis on the importance of shared values in maintaining social order.   His views have been criticized for over-emphasizing the importance of consensus, and ignoring the importance of conflict and change. [3]

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But it is not Parson's emphasis on values, but rather his conservative view of society, that may merit criticism.

In a static society, such as the one envisaged by Parsons, the wheel of culture goes continually clockwise. But in a rapidly changing society, such as exists today, the wheel of culture also works anti-clockwise, as in Fig. 3, with changing experiences modifying behaviour, new norms of behaviour leading to changes in values, and changed values modifying basic assumptions.
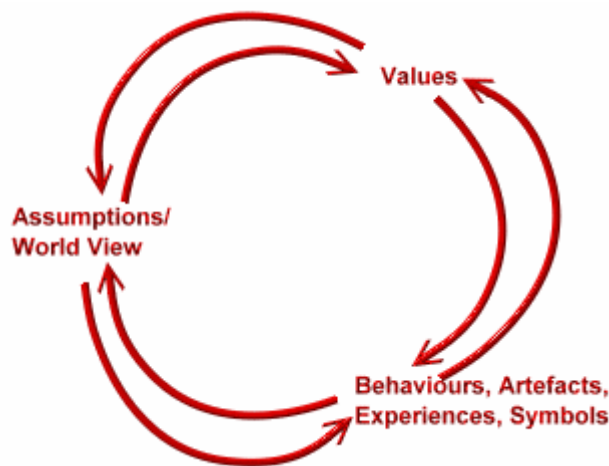

Fig. 3: Culture in a Changing Environment

For instance, a society may have as one of its basic assumptions that life is short and fleeting; this leads to a high value being placed on stoicism and fatalism (or perhaps prayer); and this could lead to a norm of allowing sick people to die rather than making great efforts to cure them. The basic assumption then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the 'wheel' is complete.

But suppose new drugs are discovered and (counter-culturally) administered to sick people who then recover. This undermines the values of stoicism and fatalism, and may even seem to make prayer partly redundant. This gradually modifies the unconscious assumption that life is short and fleeting.

Few cultures are completely static. Some can be affected by enormous catastrophic events such as natural disasters, others by some less spectacular event, or slow erosion. Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, the barbarian invasions, the Black Death, the invention of the spinning jenny, the First and Second World Wars, the contraceptive pill, - all of these have led directly or indirectly to huge cultural changes. The invention of the spinning jenny brought change at the level of artefacts. The Black Death and the world wars caused people to look at life in a different way, and thus changed their basic assumptions.

There is no doubt that modern societies that have once held a set of consistent and shared values can physically survive for some time when these values have lost their force. The culture can then be said to be on 'auto-pilot', controlled by bureaucracies that continue to work off yesterday's values.

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For instance, the Church of England, as the established church, continues to play an official role in British society although its adherents are in a minority. This is because it is difficult for any countervailing value to find general acceptance in a liberal and pluralist society. But eventually a culture can become so riddled with anomalies that it no longer commands respect from anyone.

Changes in Values

Cultures do not change all of a piece. There is a story told of a 'work study' that was done in the British Army on artillery companies. The investigator found that in general the men fulfilled necessary roles, loading the gun, firing it, carrying shells and so on. But he was puzzled about the job of one soldier who simply stood by and raised his hand in the air as the gun was being fired. He thought this might be some kind of signal. When he studied old manuals, he discovered that this man used to hold the horses reins to prevent them bolting when the gun went off. When horses were done away with the companies continued to drill as if the horses were still there. The story could well be apocryphal, but it illustrates the point that 'relics' of a culture can still remain around when the culture changes. Until recently there was a statute on the books in San Francisco that made it illegal to shoot rabbits from tramcars.

When a culture undergoes a major change, there is often a crisis in values. Some of the old norms become clearly redundant ("one ought not to shoot rabbits from tramcars"). But what can easily happen is that when norms begin to be discarded, the whole value system can be called in question. The values of society tend to be seen as a unified bloc or system, and values that may possibly be very important can be discarded along with those that are seen as out of date. We sometimes talk of a legal anomaly 'bringing the whole law into disrepute'.

Changes in culture rarely happen initially at the level of values. Values usually change because assumptions change, or because artefacts and experiences change. However if the dominant values of a culture are for some reason called into question, other values may be 'imported' to fill the breach – in fact this may be happening in Ireland at present. Values have a practical 'function' in a culture, rather than being laid down for their own sake (though this is not to deny that certain values are essential to all cultures). For instance a strong value may be assigned to private ownership of land in a society where tillage is important; but in a nomadic society, where people hunt animals roaming wild on the prairies, fencing off land for private use would be dysfunctional. In the 19th century there was a lot of conflict in the U.S.A. between 'sod busters' and 'cowmen' around this issue, as illustrated in the musical show 'Oklahoma'.

Of particular relevance in Ireland has been the part played by the Catholic Church in defining social values. Vatican II marked an enormous cultural change in the Catholic Church. The Council considered that some of the values traditionally espoused by the Church were now redundant e.g. the value given to Latin in the liturgy. But many Catholics then began to have doubts about other traditional church values, such as regular attendance at Mass, that the Council did not call in question at all. Where the dominant values of a culture are laid down by some institution, such as a particular church or the state, there is the possibility that once people begin to doubt the institution, the whole value system will unravel. This is particularly true where people have been discouraged

from questioning and debate.   Where people have been encouraged to work out for themselves the reasons for particular values or moral rules, these values are more likely to survive cultural upheaval.   Until fairly recent times, many Catholics did not feel the need to examine the rationale for particular Church teachings.   They did not ask, why is perjury, or pre-marital sex, damaging to the social fabric?   It was enough that the Church said it was. This is not to say that the Church never gave reasons for its teachings, but it tended to put more emphasis on what the law was than on the reasons behind it.   Moreover the Church teaching on infallibility in morals was also put across in a way that tended to discourage speculation about the reasons for moral norms.

Many people who agree that our values should be based on what is practical for society, would nevertheless say that it is impossible for us to work this out in certain cases.   Many of these people will fall back on religious authority, and look to church law as God's revelation to us about what is good or bad for society.   It is certainly difficult to 'prove' whether or not euthanasia, for instance, is 'practical' for society in the longer term.   It could be argued that euthanasia will undermine the value we place on human life, that it will debase our feelings, and that it could lead to people being 'killed off' if society finds their survival inconvenient. But other people will argue that there is no inevitability about this.   Or they might point to ancient societies like Sparta where sickly children were exposed and left to die without any obvious 'practical' disadvantages for the wider culture. Given the failure of human logic to provide certainty about the long-term impact of particular practices, many opt for 'divine logic' or their own intuition.

At any rate, in a period of rapid change, a culture is at risk of losing one of its key components, as a large part of its value system is discarded.   Some of this may be for the best.   The values of authoritarianism, narrow nationalism and religious exclusivism characteristic of the middle part of the 20th century in Ireland, are best left behind.   A new set of basic assumptions have now been gradually formed. But without a new set of values that indicate to people what they 'ought' to do, and how they 'ought' to behave, the culture is rudderless.

The Challenge of Liberalism

When we look at traditional cultures, we usually find greater unity than is to be found in our modern western cultures.   Basic assumptions are likely to be shared by all, and values held in common. In many Islamic societies there seem to be a lot of values held in common in relation to, for instance, religion and prayer, family life and sexual behaviour, harsh sanctions against stealing and adultery, and so on.   Differences in views are not obvious but, if they exist, are clearly not tolerated.

In the west, the situation is quite different. This is primarily because the most important value in western society is now considered to be individual freedom.   Throughout history, freedom has always been an important value, but it has acquired different meanings and dimensions in particular cultures. Among the ancient Greeks, and the Jews of the Old Testament, there was a greater emphasis on 'national' [4] freedom than on individual freedoms. A major theme of Jewish writing is liberation from foreign tyranny or bondage, especially deliverance from Egypt and Babylon.   In ancient Palestine and Greece, national freedom was seen as an opportunity for people to live up to

their personal responsibility, whether this be observing the Law, participating in government, or fulfilling one's ordained role in society. Responsibilities were seen as just as important as individual choice.

In an influential article written in 1959 [5] , the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin distinguished between two very different concepts of liberty, 'freedom to', and 'freedom from'. 'Freedom to' refers to the ability of a people to make collective decisions about certain aspects of their society, and it was the main concept of freedom to be found in the ancient world. In many Muslim countries the people exercise their 'freedom to' by imposing a strict code of conduct based on the Koran. 'Freedom from' refers to the rights of individuals not to have certain things done to them, including the imposition of certain restrictions. For instance, people in Ireland are not forced to vote if they don't want to, and sexual relations between consenting adults is not forbidden..

It is of the essence of contemporary liberal societies that 'freedom from' tends to have priority over 'freedom to'. Most western countries can be described as liberal, but even in these, notable clashes occur between the two points of view. An example of this can be seen in the abortion debate in Ireland. In opinion polls, most of the Irish people have expressed a wish to enforce a public policy on this issue, through which direct abortion would be prohibited i.e. 'freedom to' legislate. However a sizeable minority want the matter left to individual choice ('freedom from' coercion).

Ireland is not the only country where this division can be seen. In the United States most people wanted the 'freedom to' have the Lord's Prayer recited in their children's classrooms. But a minority wanted the 'freedom from' having this prayer imposed on their children. The courts decided in favour of the latter, and the prayer was banned.

Because it puts such great store on 'freedom from', liberalism is not supportive of a strong cohesive culture, since it limits the ability of a society to take collective action and to create common norms.

In his defense of 'negative' liberty, Isaiah Berlin insisted that values are plural, and that ranking one value as better than another is not justified. Liberal societies are by definition 'pluralist', meaning that they tolerate different values (for instance some people believe the purpose of life is pleasure, others moral goodness, and so on). In the liberal/pluralist view, people should be free to make up their own minds about what they ought to do, as long as they do not interfere unduly with other people's freedoms However somewhat ironically, the basis of a 'pluralist' society has to be a strongly held and shared value that there should be no requirement to have shared values. To this extent it can be argued that liberalism has an inherently 'illiberal' streak. This sometimes comes to the surface, for instance, when speakers considered to be 'illiberal' are prevented by student protests from speaking in universities.

There is no simple answer to the inherent contradictions of liberalism. Isaiah Berlin argued that choice in a free society was inherently tragic, because not all desirable virtues could coexist in full measure. "Liberty is Liberty", he wrote, "not equality or fairness or justice or culture or human happiness or a quiet conscience". [6]

Pluralism and Law

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Much of the 'pluralism' of liberal societies, including Ireland, is an illusion.   It is unlikely that a completely pluralist society could last more than a few weeks. Modern society is so complex that without a great number of shared norms of behaviour, chaos would ensue. It is essential that people respect one another's lives and property, pay their debts and their taxes, drive on the correct side of the road and so on.

In practice, pluralism in Ireland boils down to the following: (a) 'free speech' is generally allowed (with due regard for laws regarding libel, incitement, sexism, racism, obscenity, contempt of court, and so on) and the press is free subject to the same constraints; (b) people are free to engage in a wide variety of business, social and leisure activities, within the law;(c) there is little attempt to control sexual relations, except insofar as vulnerable people have to be protected; thus people are free to marry, live together, separate and so on; (d) people are free to practice religion in different ways, with due regard for public order; (e) people are free to associate in and with different groups, including political groups, again within the law.

'Pluralism' is greatly attenuated by law.   In pursuing almost any activity one cares to name, one has to take account of the law. And the law is not 'plural'.   If two people go walking in the countryside they both have to observe the law of trespass.   In this respect there is not a 'plurality' of ways they can go walking.   If two people run newspapers, both are bound by the law of libel. Again there is no 'plurality' in this respect.   It is difficult to think of any activity where the law does not impose some degree, and often a great degree, of conformity.

Moreover, a major value in our society today is that the law should be allowed to take its course. We do not all agree on the laws themselves, which can be passed by a bare majority in the Dail. As is normal in a pluralist society, we do not agree among ourselves on the level of taxes or social welfare payments, speed limits, planning restrictions, water fluoridation, censorship, abortion, partition, religious control of schools, and a thousand other things.   We do not always observe laws ourselves if we can get away with it.   For instance when driving a car most of us, if absolutely certain that there were no speed checks and no obvious risk, would exceed the speed limit. What almost all of us do agree on is, that if there is a law about any of these things, it should be allowed to take its course.   Most of us meekly accept speeding tickets, and pay them when any kind of legal pressure is applied.   We are annoyed if we suspect that somebody has got away with a speeding offence because of the position they hold.

So while people's commitment to certain values is very shaky, nearly all of us recognize that laws are essential if society is to function with some degree of fairness and safety. Laws usually aim at protecting some particular value, such as road safety or fair trading, and, even where we do not have much regard for the values they seek to protect, we generally respect the rule of law.   At first glance, this situation is not too dissimilar from that depicted by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes in 1651 [7] where he stated that the basis on which the modern state rests is an unwritten contract whereby we all give up to the state the right of governing ourselves, for our own self-preservation.

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However, in a reasonably democratic society, there has to be some degree of agreement on a value before it becomes enshrined in law.   For instance litter laws could not be passed in the Dail unless there was a fairly general agreement that the country ought to be cleaned up.

The Limitations of Law

In traditional cultures, as has been stated, a shared value system has been the glue that kept societies together. Modern theorists, such as the noted German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, have concluded that in modern society, law is the primary means of social integration. [8]
But there are many ways in which law cannot play the same role as values:

(1) Law is experienced as something that is just there. It is not something that engages people emotionally the way a value does.   Most people feel passionately that we should stop the carnage on the roads, but will still regard as a nuisance, or at best just a fact of life, the law that requires them to have their cars tested.

(2) Law is experienced as a coercive instrument, with overtones of power and even violence. Many people would see a value in contributing some of their income to 'public goods' such as street lighting or the water supply.   But nearly everybody experiences taxation, which achieves this purpose, as oppressive, and are conscious that carelessness in this area could end up with a hefty fine or having their name published in the paper.

(3) Law requires lawyers, and this brings into the picture human fallibility, and sometimes even duplicity.   People have to employ lawyers, but they do not always love them, and people's esteem for the law suffers as they realize that lawyers, and even judges, have feet of clay.

(4) Judges are not generally elected by the people, and are not directly accountable to them.   For this reason their judgements are sometimes perceived to be undemocratic and arbitrary.

(5) Lawyers seem to take pride in saying that they do not administer justice, but only the law. This undermines the whole purpose of law in people's minds, and reduces it to the level of a game.

(6) Insofar as legal judgments often have the effect of driving individuals or groups of people apart, they do not bring about social integration in the way shared values do, but merely a sullen accommodation. This is particularly true in regard to courts adjudication on rights. Most citizens never have occasion to vindicate their own rights, but may be directly or indirectly 'on the receiving end' of other peoples' attempts to vindicate their rights.   Most people are conscious of the possibility of being sued rather than of suing.   In practice the vindication of rights is an antagonistic rather than a socially cohesive exercise.

(7) The law can set a very minimalist standard of behaviour. The observation that 'there is no law against it', can be taken as a licence to do things which clearly offend the values of many people. Moreover, the law can legislate for actions, but not for sentiments. For instance, there is no law against greed. In the business world anything within the law that increases profits and raises the share price, - downsizing, outsourcing, asset stripping - is considered good practice.

(8)   There can be many loopholes in the law, and protracted legal wrangling can only be afforded by the wealthy.

If it is really true, as Habermas suggests, that law is the principal means of social integration, it is a poor substitute for the kind of cohesion that a shared set of values can bring.

It is of course true that the ability to vindicate one's rights is an important part of the common good. Yet the potential for conflict between this vindication of rights and the pursuit of the common good is generally underestimated.

The Priority of Rights

In the 'wheel of culture' depicted in Fig. 2, values are the guide to behaviour for the members of the group as a whole.   In this way of looking at culture there is implicit a concept of a 'common good'. A useful definition of the common good is found in the papal encyclical Gaudium et Spes: 'the common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families and organizations to achieve…fulfilment'.

Although the individual good is part of the common good, there are clearly situations where the two come into conflict.   For instance a wealthy person might achieve great peace and tranquillity by having his own private beach, but this could deny many other people healthy recreation.

In recent times the notion of the common good has become less popular, to the extent that some people deny the concept altogether. There is no doubt that the concept has been abused, for instance where rulers have imprisoned or liquidated people in the interests of 'the people'. However central to the notion of the common good is that individuals achieve fulfilment within it.

Liberalism tends to see the law mainly in terms of rights. Liberals also think of most individual rights as prior to social organization [9] . This means that, in the modern conception of them, human rights are divorced from the aims of society, or the common good. This results in a separation between rights and responsibilities. [10]

The courts in Ireland have tended to express little concern for the common good.   An Irish judge wrote in 1999, in respect of personal injury claims:

The question is, should innocent victims of a negligent act who are badly injured be sacrificed on the altar of what is perceived to be the "common good". Is it preferable that the rights and interests of an individual are subjugated to those of a large group? To be quite frank, I do not think so. [11]

But in fact many people might disagree that the interests of the individual (e.g. the man with the exclusive beach) are more important than those of the large group (all those people who cannot use the beach).

In fact, the conflict here is not really between rights and the common good, but between the legally defined rights of some individuals, and the less clearly defined but no less important rights of other individuals. An example would be the recent dispute involving locomotive drivers. The workers had a clearly defined legal right to seek membership of a union of their choice.   A hundred

thousand commuters had a 'right' to travel unhindered, but one that unfortunately was less clearly defined and legislated for.   The common good is made up of a myriad of such rights, many of them 'rights to' - but a liberal society finds it difficult to come up with a way to protect them.

Though the United States is generally considered more liberal than Ireland, the train drivers' dispute could not have happened there.   In U.S. companies, there are government-approved bargaining units, and the workers in that unit have to elect one union to represent them. Unions with minority support have no bargaining rights.   The U.S. legislature, with the support of the courts, have taken the view that multi-unionism is not in the public interest, and that this takes precedence over the individual right to associate.

It is perhaps unfortunate that the word 'right' is overburdened through its use in relation to such a wide spectrum of 'wrongs'. In particular, it is used in relation to obtaining redress for injury caused by alleged negligence or trespass, as well as injury caused by malice.   This means, for instance, that redress sought by a homosexual person in Egypt for imprisonment and torture comes under the same linguistic rubric as, say, the protection of the courts for the man who wants to keep his beach private.   An exaggerated conception of rights is less damaging to the public interest than a gross denial of rights, but it is still capable of inflicting serious social harm.

Neo-Liberalism: Capitalism Re-Christened

Of all the great '-isms' of the past two centuries, capitalism has shown the most resilience. The 'ethic' of capitalism is probably best expressed in the famous quotation of Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations (1776):

Every individual endeavours to employ his capital so that its produce may be of greatest value. He generally neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. He intends only his own security, only his own gain. And he is in this led by an INVISIBLE HAND to promote an end which was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

To this epitome of the capitalist ethic can be added the notion that governments ought to reduce legislation to the indispensable minimum that will prevent invasions of individual liberty.   Adam Smith's ideas were 'liberal' in the sense that the absence of controls were central to them.

The Great Depression of the 1930s led the British economist J.M.Keynes to challenge liberalism as the best policy for capitalists. He stated that capitalism can flourish only if government and central banks intervene to increase employment.

But the capitalist crisis of the past 25 years, with shrinking profit rates, inspired the corporate sector to revive economic liberalism, now called 'neo-liberalism'. With the rapid globalization of the capitalist economy, we are now seeing neo-liberalism on a world scale.

The value system of 'neo-liberalism', has rushed into the gaps left in cultures by the demise of their traditional value systems.   Neo-liberal values are subtle and pervasive, possibly because they correspond to some of the baser instincts in human nature, and therefore we do not notice how

strong a role they play in our culture. They are also extremely simple, individualistic and limited in scope, so that they cannot play the integrative role in a culture played by traditional value systems. One such value is that it is 'wrong' to make less money in any transaction than it would be possible to do so. In the neo-liberal ethic, a landlord who refrained from evicting a long-standing tenant because they could not pay the increased 'going rate' would be regarded as silly. Following the same ethic, a newspaper editor can choose to ruin the reputation of an innocent party (as happened in regard to Sophie Rhys-Jones) simply to make money and because 'there is no law against it'. In the neo-liberal ethic, sentiments such as compassion, generosity, or a sense of fairness have no place.

Some years ago a statement by the Wall Street banker Ivan Boesky, that "Greed is good" received great publicity and led to a storm of indignation. But a closer look at Adam Smith's statement, which is part of the bible of capitalism and which has been in the public domain for centuries, will show that he said much the same thing: "Every individual…intends…only his own gain".

Law or Values?

In contemporary liberal society, the 'wheel of culture', depicted in Fig. 2, inevitably becomes buckled. Instead of a set of shared and articulated values that would create a link between our basic assumptions and our behaviour, we have a set of laws and 'rights' which many people suffer rather than enthuse about, and which thus play a much lesser role than values in integrating the culture. We still have some shared values, of course, but values are rarely discussed in a serious way, and are often the subject of cynicism and satire. The most dominant values are those of liberalism and neo-liberalism, which can be summed up in the two maxims, 'Leave me alone', and 'Greed is good'. The assumnption of neo-liberal culture – that each person desires only their own gain – becomes part of the basic creed. Our contemporary wheel of culture could be pictured as in Fig.4.
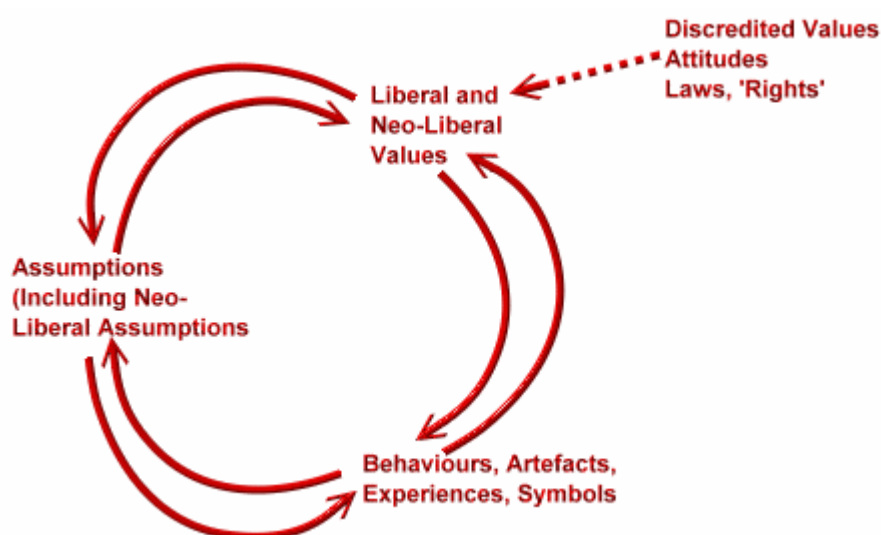

Fig. 4: Culture in a Modern Liberal/Pluralist Society

Working Notes Issue 40:
An Ethic for the Third Millennium

Successive Irish governments have been criticized for a lack of vision in regard to social policy and the future direction of our society. But this deficit only mirrors a wider failure in our society to agree a coherent and constructive set of values that would form the basis of such a vision. Perhaps most worrying is the fact that we do not even have a common language through which we can discuss values. 'Values' or 'ethics' or 'morality' are debased concepts which few people feel comfortable in talking about. They are seen as impractical (the precise opposite to their original meaning) or as being part of the ideology of a particular religious tradition, with no empirical basis.

In the absence of a shared value system, life still has to go on, however. Stability is maintained through various devices. Bureaucracies respond to pressing issues in a short-term, pragmatic way, using yesterday's procedures. Meanwhile new laws proliferate, sometimes as a reaction to some obvious abuse, such as money laundering. Other new laws are inspired by the value system of some other country or political grouping, such as the E.U. or the United Nations. The impression is given that, while we may not share values, the ills of society can be solved by more laws which will eventually close every loophole. Most of the new laws come in without any public debate, or without seeming to arise from widely held values. Many citizens become aware of them only when they read about them in the paper or when they experience unexpected difficulty in some hitherto simple transaction such as opening a bank account or getting a car taxed.

A New Ethic Needed

In Ireland there are signs that neo-liberal values have gained ground. In recent years Ireland has been listed very near the top of the class in the 'World Competitiveness Index', which places great store on the absence of regulations that would restrain trade. The capitalist ethic is basically anti-tax, and the tax wedge in Ireland is the third lowest in the OECD [12]. Our tax on company profits is one of the lowest in the industrialized world. Not surprisingly, the gap between the richest and the poorest in Ireland is among the highest in the OECD. Most large companies seem to have concluded that they have no social responsibilities whatever, and that their sole purpose is to make profits, often resulting in the massive aggrandizement of senior executives. The recent spate of branch closures by banks is one example of corporate anti-social behaviour. The growing gap between private and public healthcare is also typical of a neo-liberal approach, in which the market becomes the main mechanism for distributing resources. The government has also allowed private wealth to create serious inequality in the secondary school system, by its failure to provide either a low-fee alternative to grind schools, or some mechanism to lessen their impact on the selection process for third level.

There is no doubt that Ireland and many other countries have benefited materially from capitalist development. It is also true that most of the alternative economic systems that have been tried have failed miserably, not only on the economic level, but frequently in relation to human rights. The problem with the capitalist value system is not so much what it includes as what it leaves out. It does not look for any purpose in life other than the amassing of wealth, so it does not concern itself directly with positive values such as family, health, art and 'high' culture, the environment, or problems such as social exclusion, child labour, and inequality. It would be wrong to say that

capitalist countries inevitably fall down in all these areas.   In the United States, the home of capitalism, a long tradition of human rights has acted as a protective shield, and the arts receive massive patronage from big business.   Yet in countries where neo-liberalism holds sway, broader social issues are addressed mainly insofar as governments are able to bring other sets of values into play and put some brake on the capitalist project.

In Ireland many traditional values have been swept aside, and people are being easily seduced into neo-liberal ways of thinking. Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to the family. In the prevailing value system there is enormous pressure on both parents to make as much money as they possibly can, and this is actively encouraged by the government through measures such as tax individualization, and 'back to work' schemes targeted at women. The trade unions have also bought into this agenda, and critics of the trend are dismissed as anti-women.   Yet many parents, caught up in a competitive rat-race, regret the lack of time they can spend with their children. More and more children come home from school to an empty house, and we have a rapidly falling birth rate. But in the prevailing value system, where making money is the most respected vocation in life, these considerations are brushed aside and even ridiculed.

The lack of a more broad-based value system is probably the reason why some particular social problems in Ireland seem so intractable.   One of the most striking examples of this is the treatment of the traveller community. There are few if any communities in Western Europe who have been so badly treated. Six and a half thousand of them live in unserviced sites on the side of the road. These lack access to running water, toilets and electricity, and have a reduced life expectancy. Eight and a half thousand of them are seeking houses. Most of their needs could be met fairly easily if the public will was there, but the values of solidarity and compassion needed to achieve this cannot compete with counter-values of snobbery and concern about property prices.   A recent survey shows that 40% of the Irish people would not have a traveller family living beside them, a higher percentage than for any other ethnic group mentioned.   In recent times the government has announced that at last it is to devote serious resources to tackling the problem of rough sleeping. Hopefully it can find a similar impetus to address the problems of travellers.

At the start of the third Christian millennium we find ourselves in Ireland without a coherent set of values that can give us a sense of unity and purpose, a vision for the future, or the ability to decide what quality of life we want for ourselves. Without such values we will continue to measure our progress as a nation only by the crudest of quantitative measures such as Gross National Product. And while we may congratulate ourselves on these, there are other comparative statistics, such as those on drug and alcohol abuse, suicide and violence that point to some sickness in the soul of our people.   We need to find for ourselves a language in which we can talk about values, and give ourselves more room to debate them.   We need to challenge the current ethic of personal material gain. Otherwise we are faced with the slow erosion of our culture as self-interest and greed, now promoted to the status of a 'good', corrode the values of community, cooperation and solidarity.