ETHICS, POLITICS, AND DEMOCRACY:
From Primordial Principles to Prospective Practices

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The Mythical Act of Cosmic Purification shows Mithra—liberty-coiffed God of Light and Chastity, Foe of the Forces of Obscurity—trampling Sin, Malevolence, and Evil (dog, scorpion, serpent), slaying primordial Might (bull), and irrigating "Earth" with its blood.—*Ed.*

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Graphic: Roman Sculpture of Mithra Slaying the Bull.
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Preface and Acknowledgments

At the intersection of religion, morality, and ethics, it puzzles one to find neither serenity nor peace but disconcerting perplexities borne by incessant dilemmas spawned by dichotomies at war: humongous archetypal struggles oft disguised in petty tensions, whether between 'my virtues, your sins', 'I good, you bad', or 'us right, them wrong', with rare if any durable reconciliations between extreme ascriptions, short of oxymoronic concessions rendered convenient by circumstances.

Many important people, at one time or another, have found reason to comment on the true meaning of religion,[1] on what is right and what is wrong,[2] and especially on the merits of doing the 'right thing' for the 'right reason'[3]—some, in their profound fervor, to the extent of seeing no great difference between 'true ethics' and 'true religion'.[4]

Modestly, if determinedly, this little volume seeks to revisit the origins of these certainties; to reexamine the modalities of our grumbling and fumbling practices in the present and, of course, also the prospects for a more sagacious, more astutely inclusive approach to transforming the globe into a more hospitable, more beneficent social abode for one and all. This it sets out to do in fourteen intimately braided, thematically relevant, and logically sequenced short chapters insightfully penned by experts in pivotally pertinent disciplines, each of which is discerningly aware of, and discriminatingly attentive to, its

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1. The reflection that "the true meaning of religion is . . . not simply morality, but morality touched by emotion" is a double-edged sword pre-owned by Matthew Arnolds.

2. "A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right," said once a pensive Thomas Paine.

3. In T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, one stumbles on this merciless judgment: "The highest form of treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason."

4. "Ethics thought out is religious thought; ethics felt out is religious feeling, and ethics lived out is the religious life"—thus spake William Channing Gannett.

others. Truthful adjectival modesty aside, we first visit the ethics of self-governance, past and future; next we examine how the self has almost concentrically evolved across eccentric transactional contexts (household, market, state, and globe); then we problematize the ethics of politics, with the future conditional of self-adjusting democratic governance always in mind.

As the vivid harvest of my final annual seminar cycle, this book completes my *Cross-Campus Conversations at Penn.* I am pleased to have been informed that these seminars did change a life or two on campus for the better; and I know, for having noted their emergence myself, that they also inspired new course titles, encouraged expansions of tired syllabi, and even led to a lavishly budgeted and staffed major initiative—an emulation wrapped in a gilded version of CCC@P— under an ever so slightly different acronym, for good taste. Indeed, as I conclude my proofreading of this last volume, I notice with quiet contentment the proliferation of similar ventures that seem to have been encouraged, catalyzed, or galvanized into existence—in spirit, organization, and method as also in mindset, attitude, and dis- position—on the very greens that between 1998 and 2005 served as CCC@P's intellectual turf, its pilot laboratory, for the then quite unusual transdisciplinary faculty-student interface it first was designed to be, and the strictly invitational interprofessional academic setting it had to be quickly transformed into, in order to survive the wicked threats it faced, thereby the more effectively directly to serve the One University ideal it pursued—by casting bridges over time-honored conventional barriers across full-fledged disciplines and professions at professorial and expert levels only. This it did, meaningfully and successfully, becoming remarkable (and envied) in a very short time.

Our thanks go to the usual suspects—particularly those who help us host our guests in the most hospitable surroundings—in this case, The Carol and Lawrence Zicklin Center for Business Ethics Research of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. We thank also the staff of the Instructional Technology Services of the School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Pennsylvania. We do value very much the loyalty of our contributors, who stuck with us through thick and thin, during this particularly demanding project: without these distinguished colleagues become esteemed accomplices and true fellow pilgrims, this volume would not have seen the light of day. For their magnanimous solidarity and generous confidence, the expression of our appreciation and gratitude iterated on this occasion is only natural.

According to systems theory, regardless of whether undertaken by one or more person(s), a system-wide innovation is at its purposive, progressive, and productive best when its functions, structures, and processes, inter-sustaining by design, relate so well to each other's practical and ethical justifications across time and space that, when the constituents expose and attune themselves to the fast evolving exigencies of their individual contexts and to the vagaries of their forever altering collective relational/transactional environments, they do so in interconnected modes, as "elements" of a "synergetic" ensemble. Manifest in concert, such self-orchestration is purported to be able to transform a self-supporting enterprise into behaving almost as an autopoietic [an actively self-readjusting, continually (re)organizing, always responsively readapting, and self-maintaining] operating "system," empowered to deploy more than the arithmetic sum of its wherewithal as it learns and transforms itself. By definition, such an entity is expected to survive hardships precisely because it is not a mere aggregation of talents the sum performance of which—by resignation—would depend primarily on the mechanics of transfer in clockworks vulnerable to the very first particle of sand that poses a threat. This is why such an enterprise is supposed to become its own magnificent reward: were it because, as if miraculously, the orbits of theory and practice become so teased to come closest to each other that even the mortal enemies of such a systemic creation cannot, hard though they might try, disrupt its purposely reorientable trajectory.

Everyday practice, however, often goes on to prove that the sort of smooth perfection rendered possible by theory is—simply put—not quite of this world. Forming our *Cross-Campus Conversations at Penn*, single-handedly forging the contexts in which they took life; and bringing the seeds of these efforts to blossom, fruition, and harvest proved in practice as challenging as the ideational demands and the managerial exigencies that I had placed upon myself at the outset and also as I kept ideating, designing, organizing, supporting, feeding, directing, improvising, and translating each and all of these quests into outcomes as a purposely interrelated ensemble, even if sometimes I had to do so in defiance of the vicious obstacles placed, and in utter disdain for the noxious adversities encountered along the way. In retrospect, the very conditions in which each and all of these tasks were accomplished now give me cause to consider myself that much more gratified, were it for having been able to innovate against the odds, by devising ways to make do with what I could muster and by inventing alternate routes

as means to reach the final destination—in other words, by constantly readjusting and doggedly moving on without ado, and all the while remaining impervious to inimical acts, or to cheap rivalry.

In the process, I found myself able to perceive new distinctions between theory and practice and to discover new parallels twixt large bureaucracies—military, governmental, or academic: The more proximate the fit between theory and practice across time and space, that more closed may tend to become a system gradually enamored with (enslaved to) itself, the more predictable the existential connections that it entertains within its operational and transactional ambits, and the more mechanical its myriad interfaces with both internal agents and external environments. Conversely, the less espousing the fit, the more open the system in question, the less predictable the potential for serendipitous synchronicity and for corresponding isomerisms by the system and by its statistically significant others in shared or impacting environments. More plainly reworded: at one extreme one finds trains that run on time, every time; aging practices that seem as immortal as ever and cliques that self-perpetuate 'for the good of the masses'—a Platonic universe in which there has been carved out a place for each of the ten thousand things under the sky and where it is a hierarchical obligation to see to it that every single one of these things is, indeed, always, without fail, in its assigned place. At the other extreme: few things that work, junk that accumulates, no garbage collection to speak of, and practically no order; therefore—surprising for some—also 'no fear', out of fear, in total absence of palpable legitimacy embodied in tangible authority. It is not so much that old trains—assuming they still are in running condition—do not move, leave, or arrive on time, every time; but more generally, that a sense of individual latitudes, of shared collective responsibility for orderliness or of regard for the usually unwritten rules of civic reciprocity are neither ingrained in the vernacular nor integrated to the culture. Somewhere along this nonfigurative quasi-continuum that imaginably stretches from one of these two hypothetical extremes to the other, and within the virtual bounds of the labile zone in which principle and practice are often, in the mind's eye, perceived to be traveling companions sitting next to each other, stands democratic citizenship under eminently ameliorable 'enlightened democratic governance'. The exact locus of the ephemeral bliss point in staged scenarios of alternate futures is often suspected to depend mainly on the direction, frequency, and magnitude, if sometimes also on the deep qualitative content of an ethic of freedom that,

if/when at all, only fleetingly impacts the fragile democratic space, with some luck more indelibly so than it touches any other. One might ask, why frequently in some democratic spaces, yet only occasionally in others? This is a valid question at the intersection of ethics, politics, and democracy, one that might find itself rewarded with insights in lieu of answers by the end of the contextualized explorations conducted in the pages ahead.

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