CHAPTER 2

Two Ethical Systems  
*Example and Mystery*

In the previous chapter, we dealt with values and changes of values, with new values of sites and objects, and with free choice and activity. In this chapter, we will deal with some aspects that may appear external to the world of ethics, with the ethical story itself, the story that tells us what is right and what is wrong. We will also show how the profound changes of values are accompanied by a change, not less comprehensive, in the status of ethics in life, a change manifested in the way of judging the world, in learning and teaching ethics, and what to do with ethical stories.

2.1 The Beautiful and the True

The more truth there is in history, the more it causes the writer to use simple words stripped of any human curiosity, such as the prince of the Church, St. Peter, on referring to the mystery of the transfiguration of our Lord Jesus, said in the following words: without imitating the smooth style of the learned proverbs, we will show the virtues of our Lord Jesus, as one would say: I will not preach or tell this absolute truth in the style of a persuasive legend, picking flowers of rhetoric and tying them together in a bunch of elegant court language, weaving a hundred thousand lies together with a few truths, but tell them and preach them I will in simple language, denied of all human creation and clothed in God himself, the ultimate truth. It is as if the missionary had said: nobody will think that what I am saying is a legend or a legendary doctrine the fruit of my imagination, like that of the ancient peoples, poets and philosophers who used to tell many lies around a single truth.1

The modern reader cannot help being impressed by the gap between the content that advocates simplicity and the form that is not simple at all.2 One is

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2 Torquemada’s preface is integrated within the discussion regarding preaching and rhetoric that took place in Spain in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The debate on the decline in the status of the preachers was a popular subject. Modern historians included the phenomenon in the theory of the decline. Miguel Herrero García, *La Vida Española Del Siglo xvii*. Madrid: Gráfica Universal, 1933; Otis H. Green, *Spain and the Western Tradition: The Castilian Mind in Literature from El Cid to Calderón*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin
tempted to regard Torquemada’s preface as a mixture of clichés together with a total lack of insight. I will try to offer another coherent explanation of his style. Such an explanation is particularly required because Miguel de Cervantes presents a similar preface to the book of Don Quixote. One just cannot simply blame Cervantes for a lack of insight. This is how he describes his book in the preface dedicated to the Duke of Bejar:

completely lacking in the kind of precious decorations that decorate the works written in the homes of those in the know.3

In contrast to these decorations, Cervantes presents the good arts, chiefly those that by their nobleness do not submit to the service and bribery of the vulgar.

Our difficulty lies in distinguishing between the superfluous decorations and the above-mentioned good arts. What is it that turns the prefaces of Torquemada and Cervantes into texts untouched by decorations?

Two examples from Torquemada will help us focus on the distinction and better understand what it is that he opposes. Sometimes precise and careful copying, like Torquemada’s, emphasizes the deviations, changes, and omissions from the original. In a long passage that Torquemada copies from Sahagún, almost word for word, he omits the following sentence:

You spoke to us in words that you took out of the treasure preserved in your hearts, words as beautiful as gold and precious stones and beautiful feathers.4

The other example is found in Torquemada’s explanation for his preference of Spanish to Latin.

Although this is neither the language of Parnassus and Halikon, nor that of the people who create a lot of noise and confusion in the ears of those interested only in a language that will serve them as a sack to fill with hay,

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4 de Sahagún, Historia General De Las Cosas De Nueva España, 339; Torquemada, 4: 384.