

# Good advice: The ethicist is in

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

June O'Connor, a noted professor of ethics, leads a double life—and without a whiff of duplicity. Primarily she teaches ethics at the University of California at Riverside. However, she also regularly takes on the persona of advice columnist for “Dear June,” a column that runs in the *Catholic Digest*.

A “Dear Abby” with depth, O'Connor responds to dilemmas posed by “Heartbroken in Arizona,” “Confused and Hurt” or “Honest but Timid.”

“She’s a real friend to the people who read our magazine,” said Kathleen Stauffer, her first editor at the *Digest*, a monthly with 350,000 subscribers. “She never brags and is a bit reticent. She doesn’t take herself seriously; she takes the other person seriously.”

The author of two books, active in editing and writing for academic publications, O'Connor this year completed a term as president of the Society of Christian Ethics. Many of her colleagues in the 950-member SCE hadn’t known about her “Dear June” role until she gave her presidential address at the SCE annual meeting in January. She briefly mentioned her advice column before examining the styles of two of the nation’s best-known popular ethicists: Laura Schlessinger—the controversial radio host “Dr. Laura”—and Randy Cohen, who writes “The Ethicist” column in the *New York Times Magazine*. O’Conner’s address also considered the commercial success of authors and speakers who emphasize personality types and the effect of personality differences on ethical behavior.

Her speech, laced with ad libs and visual aids, was a definite “change of pace” for the scholars, said the SCE’s executive director, Regina Wolfe. “I think that she is being unduly modest and reticent about what she is doing,” said the society’s new president, John Langan, who holds a chair in Catholic social thought at Georgetown University’s Kennedy Institute of Ethics. “Her combination of academic training, clarity of speech and thought, pastoral sensitivity, and straightforward good sense make her an excellent person both to do this popular work and to reflect on it.”

Observing good-naturedly that academic ethicists like a touch of jargon, O'Connor called Schlessinger's manner "markedly but not solely deontological"—the technical term for an ethics based on binding rules. She termed Cohen's method that of a "consequentialist"—someone who stresses "the impact our actions have on others while recognizing responsibilities . . . as means to that awareness."

Schlessinger, whose doctorate is in physiology, speaks openly of her recent embrace of Orthodox Judaism. She is perhaps best known for offering callers blunt advice. If her style can be captured in one line, said O'Connor, it is this: she insists "on the importance of being good and doing good rather than feeling good." The latter approach leads to "stupid" mistakes, Schlessinger believes, whereas being good and doing good are for her "ways of describing human purpose," O'Connor said.

Despite disputing Dr. Laura's answers on some questions, O'Connor said she thinks her "entertaining" show and her books are important because they help to foster broader ethical inquiry, imagination and resolve.

Cohen, although raised in a "suburban Reform Judaism" household, says his perspective is "overtly, resolutely secular." The uncredentialed Cohen was chosen to write the column (called "Everyday Ethics" in syndication) for his writing and analytical ability. He approaches ethics, said O'Connor, "as a rational process of problem-solving" and "accents the impact of one's actions on others." Unlike Schlessinger, who cites the Ten Commandments "as a compelling moral authority," O'Connor said, Cohen debunks them as "not very helpful to schoolchildren, parents and teachers whose concerns are about treating one another civilly, valuing learning for its own sake, being kind," and understanding how people use personal power in relating to others.

Commenting on the personality-traits literature, O'Connor discussed authors Helen Palmer, who has explored the nine-point Enneagram; David West Keirse and Marilyn Bates (*Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types*); and Florence Littauer (*Your Personality Tree*), who is especially popular in evangelical circles. "The major problem with using [the movement's] categories is the tendency/temptation to label and categorize people who are different from the self," said O'Connor.

Nonetheless, "ethics is about vision as well as decision," declared O'Connor, and therefore frameworks defining personality differences as well as religious, gender,

racial and ethnic differences “can be useful resources for ethics in the academy and popular culture alike.”

On balance, O’Connor finds pluses in the personality-traits literature and in the work of Cohen and Schlessinger: “I am pleased that concern for ethics is alive in popular culture, and that self-discovery and personal responsibility are being promoted in a society where there are so many voices that place the burden of bad behavior on parents, addiction diseases and other external agents.”

O’Connor said in an interview that when she mentions the word “ethics” in a classroom, the response is usually not enthusiastic. “I sometimes see their shoulders drop because ‘ethics’ carries with it a matter of ego—‘Who’s telling me what to do now?’”

While children are rightly given norms and standards, when they grow up it is important to be creative in answering tough questions, she said. The important questions are: “How can I express moral value in this mess we’re in? How can I bring life out of this desperate affair?” She tells slumped-shoulder students they should be asking in some cases, “What do I get to do?”

Sometimes, O’Connor admits, the answer may be “Do nothing,” at least for the moment. Personality-traits authors have noted that not everyone wants to handle difficulties immediately. Passive personalities, who often get accused of procrastination, may need time to mull over possible solutions. Or experience may have taught them that some crises fade as quickly as they arise.

That particular insight was not an easy one for O’Connor, who considers herself a good problem-solver and decisive by nature. She says she has adopted some careful steps in her approach to dilemmas.

“*Discernment* is one of my favorite words,” she said. That is, can the problem be seen from a new perspective? In writing her column for the *Catholic Digest*, she said, “I like to pay attention to how the letter writer conceives the problem. I tweak the problem, reconfigure it and suggest new possibilities rather than declare what somebody must do.”

Though O’Connor was a nun for a decade before she left her order and moved toward a secular academic career, she was not very familiar with *Catholic Digest*. “I knew it was inspirational, much like *Reader’s Digest*, that seeks to give people

hope,” she said. Then in 1996, near the end of her 12-year stint as chair of UC Riverside’s religious studies department, she was clearing her desk of mail when she spotted a headline in the *Catholic Digest* that said, “Looking for a Sage.” That headline “hooked my ego,” she recalled. In seeking a columnist on moral advice, the editors asked potential applicants to answer four questions in 250 words or less each.

“My husband and I were planning to go to the mountains on a weekend trip, so I wrote my answers and mailed them off when we got back,” she said. Ten days later an editor called to say she had the job. Hundreds had applied, said Kathleen Stauffer.

“Among the respondents were a ghost writer for ‘Dear Abby,’ numerous daily newspaper reporters, and a few recognizable names,” Stauffer said, “but June did the best job of answering the questions.”

The magazine introduced O’Connor to readers as a professor, an ethicist and a mother who “lists Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and Dorothy Day among her heroes.” (One of her books is on the Catholic Worker leader: *The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day: A Feminist Perspective*).

Her years as a Catholic sister from age 18 to 28 coincided with major social changes associated with the civil rights movement and the reformist Second Vatican Council (1962-65). She earned a B.A. in English literature in 1964 at Mundelein College in Chicago and an M.A. in theology two years later at Marquette University.

As the 1970s arrived, she began graduate studies at Temple University and was also teaching at Mundelein College. She decided to leave her order for reasons she said were “very theological, having to do with my understanding of the nature of vocation.” O’Connor recalled the gracious response to her decision by Mundelein President Ann Ida Gannon, B.V.M.: “June, thanks for the ten years you’ve given to the community.”

On her way to a second master’s degree at Temple and later a doctorate in religion in 1973, she met her future husband. They moved to southern California where she started at Riverside and he taught for many years at LaVerne University before retiring.

O'Connor has no immediate plans for retirement. Though the religious studies department at the University of California at Santa Barbara is larger and better known outside the state, UC Riverside's department is hardly small. The department, about to add a ninth faculty member, has 55 undergraduate majors and 27 students minoring in religion. She hopes that a proposed graduate program will soon come about. "I love my work," said O'Connor, who three years ago was named professor of the year in the honors program at UC Riverside.

She has no plans to end her "Dear June" column. "What I discovered in the course of writing it was that it helps me to clarify problems in my own thinking and come to a decision," she said. "We always analyze, analyze and analyze, but in life the ethical question ultimately is: what do we do— or not do?"