Some Thoughts on Christian Ethics

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Christian Ethics

"The Lord redeems the life of his servants; None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned."
—Psalm 34:22

In this paper I offer an attempt to discern the essential character of Christian ethics in relation to some major traditions in Western moral philosophy. In the course of the paper, I attempt to respond to such questions as these: What difference, if any, does it make to regard the human moral experience from a Christian perspective? Does the Christian dimension bring anything to our moral experience and the understanding of it beyond simply a religious fervor to do what is right? Does the Christian ethical perspective amount to anything more than "morality tinged with emotion?"

I. Definitions of "Morality"

Among the various definitions of "morality" both classic and contemporary, we may distinguish at least the following, a list which is by no means comprehensive but, I think, representative:

Plato and Aristotle seem in fundamental agreement that the moral individual is one whose potentialities as a human being are in process of being realized in such a way as to afford the person his fullest actualization under the guidance of intellect, his distinctive and therefore "highest" capacity. The thinking man (specifically the free man rather than the slave or woman) can—and should—produce the just life for himself and society through intelligent guidance of appetites and intentions so as to produce a harmony of functioning in the self and in the state. This ideal has fired the human imagination quite continuously through history right to the present time, particularly in the intellectual community. A rather similar view is offered by the American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry, who defines morality as the intelligent harmonizing of interests in the individual and in society toward distinctive human fulfillment.

This generally teleological approach, emphasizing the "end" or "purpose" of morality, which Aristotle called eudaemonia and which we variously translate as "happiness," "welfare," or "well-being" became, I would say, "democratized" by the classic British Utilitarians. For Bentham, "happiness" is understood in terms of quantifiable "pleasures"; and the moral individual or society is that one which is effectively realizing an existence wherein the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people is being attained. The morally good people here are not an intellectual elite, as I think for the most part to be the vision of Plato and Aristotle, but a happy mass society. To be a morally good Benthamite, one need not scale the walls of
mathematics and physics with Plato and Aristotle, one need only have the good sense to order one's own life toward happiness and to support welfare legislation in the state. In Mill, however, there is something of a return to the Greek emphasis upon the intellectual, the distinctively human good. Thus Mill wishes to emphasize the quality of pleasure, not merely the amount of pleasure it is good to acquire. For him, the best life is that ordered to the realization of the highest pleasure, satisfaction, happiness, that human beings are capable of as this may be empirically discerned in the lives of those who have attained the greatest self-realizations. For this to be grasped, education is required—there is knowledge to be gained, tastes to be acquired, and so forth.

In the case of Kant, we have a very different, and distinctive, conception of morality. Here morality has nothing to do with what makes anyone happy, or with any other desired end at all except the end that the right itself be done. The only thing which is morally good without qualification is the will to do what is right. Indeed our knowledge as to what we ought to do arises only out of situations in which what we desire to do conflicts with what we think our duty to be. The moral task then becomes one of inferring a universalizable rule ("subjective maxim") which is validly derived from the idea of duty itself. By this purely formal non-empirical procedure we derive specific moral laws; and the moral life is the life lived according to laws, the laws conceived by autonomous reason, which procedure is a logical (not anthropological, or theological) one.

One final example must suffice, this one reflecting more a modern sociologist's views of morality as interpreted by a philosopher. John Hartland-Swann (in An Analysis of Morals, 1960) defines morality as socially important customs, accompanied by regulative prescriptions, which customs are held to be authoritative and obligatory. This definition, while it begs many philosophic questions, would probably make a lot of sense to the man-on-the-street in our time, being perhaps more immediately persuasive to the virgin mind unimpregnated by the theories of, say, Plato or Kant.

Having now noted these several definitions of morality, I wish to suggest that, however diverse, they contain a common element. That element is order and/or organization. While moral philosophers have notoriously disagreed as to the point of order, they seem quite commonly to have seen order as the sine qua non of the moral life. The "harmony" of Plato, Aristotle, Perry, and Whitehead cannot be conceived except as forms of order—the ordering of desires, pleasures, aspirations, potentialities toward complementary contrast and life fulfillment. The concept of order is likewise fundamental in philosophers as diverse as Kant and the Utilitarians; in Kant the moral ideal is the life ordered in accordance with universalizable maxims, in the Utilitarians it is the life ordered toward the maximization of human happiness. This implies measure, order, organization. Likewise customs are basically forms of social order. Indeed it appears that only in few cases, notably that of Thrasymachus (in Plato's Republic), Nietzsche, and certain "existentialist" philosophers, has order been attacked in the name of good. But I think a closer consideration of those writers would indicate that they do not so much attack the concept of order as fundamental to morality as they do attack particular moral orders and types of moral order with, perhaps, an appeal to a
new “order” which is “beyond” the currently prevalent order. But if they do not appeal to a new “order,” then they are likely to be attacking the notion of “morality” itself, in favor of, say, Nietzsche’s Übermensch or Sartre’s authentic self. But both of those ideals do explicitly set themselves against morality as we are acquainted with it.

I remain convinced, therefore, that order is the essence of morality. It is thus easy to see how morality is prescriptive, rule-oriented, and how morality and law are intimately related. They share a common base in order, whether that order be teleologically or deontologically conceived.²

Is there one moral order or are there many? Although this seems a proper question to raise, it strictly speaking is not, since “is” and “are” are here ambiguous. If “Is there one moral order?” means “Do people everywhere and always observe a common morality?” the data of cultural anthropology suggest a negative reply. Obligations, customs, laws, and “what is right” differ in various cultures. But some (e.g., Morris Ginsberg) have argued that cultures may in fact observe a universal moral order in diverse (or even mutually conflicting) ways due to the different material conditions under which life is lived in various times and places; that is, it may be a very different thing to accomplish, say “justice” in one culture over against another, yet both cultures may really be observing “justice” each in its own way. Perhaps; but this argument seems to me to beg the question of a universal order.

The other possible meaning of “is” in the question “Is there one moral order?” might be put this way: “Even if the world practices plural moralities, there really is only one moral order.” This is the Platonist (and Christian Platonist) position. Social moralities are then conceived as imperfect “copies” of an “eternal” moral order whose ingredients are the pure Ideas of Justice, Good, Truth, etc., uncorrupted by the material (and sinful) distortions of that Pure Order as we actually encounter morality in our temporal lives and societies. “Is” here suggests a peculiar sort of existence, one not marked off by time or place, and it is no wonder that early Christian thinkers were attracted to this notion of Being as a means for philosophizing about God. God could then be seen much as Kant saw Him: as the Guardian of the moral order and the Guarantor of its effectiveness in eternity. It cannot be denied that this view of God and the Eternal Moral Order has had a history within Christian theology almost as old as Christianity itself, and that to this day it constitutes one way of conceiving the foundation of Christian Ethics. The more of a Platonist you are, the more convinced you are likely to be that this is the foundation of Christian Ethics. And many Western thinkers really are Platonists, I think, wittingly or not. At any rate, my own approach to Christian Ethics will take, I believe, a more biblical perspective.

As to the question then, “Is there one universal moral order?” I reply: 1) If this means “Do people everywhere and always observe a common morality?” the answer, based as it must be upon empirical evidence, is “probably not.” 2) If this means “Is there in Reality one universal moral order despite appearances to the contrary?” then the reply is, How could we know this? Plato attempts to arrive at such knowledge by dialectic, by discursive reasoning. It remains a great adventure of intellect to follow his procedures in the dialogues—remembering also to read the Parmenides wherein Plato himself cites difficulties with his theory of Forms. But the project remains a specula-
tive business, a matter of a vision of Good rather than of a demonstration. Christian Platonists, of course, maintain that the Logos of God, his Son, makes the eternal moral order known.

But whether there are plural moral orders or "really" just one of which the worldly ones are imperfect "copies," the question arises: What is the point of morality? Why should people be moral?

There are several traditional answers to this question, but I find myself in agreement with Professor Kai Nielsen who has cited the answer of Thomas Hobbes as a "more defensible" one. Hobbes attempts to persuade us that humankind is pre-occupied in self-interest, a self-interest expressing itself in the desires for "gain," "safety," and "reputation." Realizing that our desires for gain become counter-productive and ultimately self-destructive if all people are "out for themselves" without constraint, we recognize that a society of order, laws, government, actually favors our self-interest in a way impossible to the individual person who, without moral order, is always in peril in the "natural state" which Hobbes calls the state of "war." The point of morality, therefore, is to provide a society wherein each person can enjoy "the commodious life," by which Hobbes means a society of peace, security, and freedom from fear. While moral constraints are imposed upon all, any rational person will see that it is in his interest that this be so; and that were it not so, his life would be "mean, nasty, brutish, and short." Granting the premise on human nature which Hobbes espouses, I think his position is well substantiated, and that the question "Why should people be moral?" is convincingly answered.

II. Desire, Duty, and the Self

If it be granted that morality is best defined as the social ordering which people undertake with a view toward what we think ourselves obligated to do, and if Hobbes is right in thinking "self-interest" to be our "natural state," then two fascinating questions arise: 1) If self-interest is our natural state, is acting in accordance with self-interest morally good or is it morally bad? 2) What is the nature of moral obligation? In confronting these questions, we encounter a real watershed dividing many philosophers throughout the history of ethical theory.

If self-interest is "natural," then it is arguable that acting in accordance with self-interest is basically right, indeed that it is our "natural right." To this school of thought belong many otherwise diverse ethical positions: Hedonism, Self-realization theories, and Empirical Naturalism, including the ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas.

On the other hand, there is an ethical tradition which, while it agrees with Hobbes' description of our natural state, considers that state to be a "fallen" state. Here our pre-occupation with self-interest is seen not as a "right" but as a predicament, as what theologians call "original sin." Such a view comes down from St. Paul through the Stoics, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Kant, the Niebuhrs, et al.. As noted earlier, for Kant the fact that we have desires is not even of moral significance, nor is it morally significant whether or not our desires get satisfied. Morality is not a matter of what we want, it is a matter of duty; and the nature of duty only manifests itself in situations where the duties we conceive to be obligatory upon us conflict with our desires. Thus
desires, interests, are basically suspect, morally speaking. What we need is not the fulfillment of our desires but the freedom to transcend them in the name of what is right. The Stoics and Kant, in their respective ways, thought reason the sufficient means of attaining this condition; others have thought divine grace the indispensable ingredient.

The different assessments of self-interest yield also conceptions of moral obligation consistent with either of the two broad positions outlined above. If the exercise of self-interest is my natural right, then moral obligation means essentially effective action to obtain desired ends. But if the condition of my self-interest is rather my predicament, my sinful condition, then my moral obligation is perceived in the objective demands which stand over against my subjective desires as divulged by reason (Kant) or by divine revelation. I am morally obligated to do what is right, and what is right is understood as universal law, not as that which is desired. Indeed Kant goes so far as to say that should I desire to do my duty, leading to the doing of it, then my act is of no moral worth, since I merely did what I wanted to do. For Kant it is crucial that morality arises only in the conflict between desire and duty. Our desires are turbulent and incomprehensible: a knowledge of what is right must be sought beyond them.

My own inclination at this point is to say that in the tradition extending from St. Paul through Augustine, Kant, the Niebuhrs, and others, we begin to sense the peculiar foundations of Christian ethics. "Ethics" I take to be the critical reflection upon morality and moral experience; "ethics" and "morals" do not refer to the same phenomenon. Morality refers to social orders; ethics is the intellectual scrutiny of such orders and of the reasonings which articulate, support, or oppose them. And I am inclined to think that the Pauline-Augustinian ethical account of morality, the self, and what can be expected of it rings true. At the same time I must acknowledge that while many thoughtful people have agreed with this "diagnosis" of the human condition, many others have not. Further, since I am about to approach the topic of Christian Ethics, it is pertinent to acknowledge that Christian thinkers have by no means all come down on the side of the essential perversity of human nature. Finally, the question of human perversity, depravity or whatever, has about it the difficulties attendant upon any statement having the form of an empirical generalization: it cannot be held with logical certainty or finality. Moreover, "depravity" is not an observed fact like "black" in the statement (also lacking finality) "All crows are black." Statements about human nature, "what it is," etc., I take to be recommendations on the part of the writer or speaker, saying in effect, "Look at the matter this way, and draw valid inferences from what this viewpoint presents." And there is nothing "wrong" in offering such recommendations: we do it all the time in science, philosophy, theology, and commonplace affairs. By such means we "get a handle" on issues: and without such "handles" progress in inquiry would often have to cease.

My point is that Christian thinkers have used a variety of "handles" in thinking about morality and the Christian life. The way of Aquinas, say, is certainly quite different from that of Luther. And a great many Christian thinkers have done Christian ethics. The question now is, Is there a common "essence" to Christian thinking about
morality in the diversity of Christian ethics? I venture to say that there is; and in what remains of this article I attempt to designate that essence.

III. Christian Ethics

It seems clear that a great deal of moral philosophy in the West has been influenced by Jewish and Christian teachings derived from Scripture. Christianity has long since become "acculturated" in such a way that many moral philosophers, whatever their ethical theories may have been, have considered their theories to have been at least consonant with the teachings of the Bible, particularly the teachings of Jesus, or even to have been a fuller and more systematized exposition of those teachings. For instance, both Utilitarians and Kantians have frequently considered themselves to be propounding "good Christian teachings" in their ethics. Does God not will the happiness of his creatures? Does he not want us to do whatever is useful toward human fulfillment? Does he not want us to realize our potentialities? Surely God must be a Utilitarian, and an Upholder of the Utilitarian Principle. But on the other hand, does not God stand for universal righteousness? Is he not a God who awakens us to our duties to our fellow human beings? Does he not discriminate between vicious happiness and happiness which is deserved? Does he not speak the language of commands? Surely God must be a Kantian and an Upholder of the Categorical Imperative. While neither Mill nor Kant argue their positions on the basis of Scripture, they do not hesitate to quote scriptural passages in corroboration of their views.

I do not say that such acculturation of Christianity is necessarily "a bad thing" for Christian Ethics. As a Christian I would even go so far as to say that, no doubt, the world would be an infinitely better place to live in if we were to succeed in actually effecting in practice the ethical and moral ideals of either Kant or Mill. Perhaps Christians can be sympathetic toward persons who might be seen urging Utilitarianism or Kantianism in the name of all things Christian.

And yet there are great differences between moral philosophy and what I take to be Christian ethics. At the same time, there are similarities. Let me consider the similarities first:

In common between philosophy and Christian ethics is a concern for the analysis of moral concepts, moral judgments, and moral principles. What constitutes a moral issue? a moral problem? What are the logical grounds of moral obligation? Such questions are the fit concern of anyone wishing to approach the moral experience with care and skill.

Also in common is the concern for logical argumentation in relation to moral judgments, laws, and policies. Discerning judgments are not facilitated in complex moral situations by Christians simply proposing that "love is the answer."

In short, Christian ethics is to share with moral philosophy a common concern for all the issues arising in our moral experience together with the intellectual discipline requisite in handling ethical analysis.

But the differences between Christian ethics and moral philosophy are my reason for writing this paper. Let me proceed to them in this way:

Suppose you fail to fulfill the demands of the Categorical Imperative, not just
once, but many times. What could Kant say to you consistent with his position? Freely translated from the German, he might say something like this: "How could you do it? You could have done what was right because you ought to have done so, and you are rationally able to discern your duty. You are without excuse, are morally unworthy, and deserving of punishment."

Or suppose you rather frequently fail to observe the Utilitarian Principle. What (logically) could Mill say to you? Something like this: "It is admirable that you sought to behave in favor of effecting the general happiness, but most lamentable that you have failed to do so, and that repeatedly. I fear there is something deficient in your upbringing and education, and must exact of you a program of rehabilitation into the accepted ways of our society."

Now I am not suggesting that there is something somehow "wrong" in the hypothetical responses of Kant and Mill to moral failure, but I am saying that neither of them can do much more than decide against you in judgment. Moral philosophy cannot forgive failure, it cannot save the lost. Moral philosophy apart from the gospel cannot offer grace, cannot instill in people the ability to live with failure. This is not because moral philosophy—and concretely philosophers—necessarily lack kindliness or compassion, but because they lack a foundation for grace in their theories apart from acknowledgment of God's self-revelation as one who comes not to condemn the world but to save it. It is for the Christian to see not only the importance of moral order but also to grasp the truth of God's saving grace in renewing the moral offender, the sinner: and it is also the place of the Christian to share in God's activity whereby the sinner is restored to the "congregation of the righteous," the "communion of saints," "God's people." The fervent support of moral order to the exclusion of manifestations of grace to the offender reduces Christianity to morality tinged with emotion.

And the Christian perspective, in addition to enabling us to live with failure, to be "saved" rather than "condemned," inspires us to gratitude, and to a way of life that exemplifies it.

It is both sad and true that the world has often gotten a very different message from Christianity from what I am here setting forth. For whatever reasons, many people remain under the impression that the Christian word to man's moral struggles is, in effect, "Shape up" (and win a place in heaven) or "Ship out" and suffer the torments of hell. I do not know whether it is possible to frighten people into moral righteousness, although it does seem likely that people can be frightened into at least the appearance of it. Flaunting the appearance of righteousness while hiding the fact of unrighteousness, of course, is a form of self-righteous hypocrisy. Christians of this sort are understandably a reason why the world at large comes to find "Christianity" repulsive.

But being Christian is not an attestation to our moral character but to God's Way in saving the lost. Gratitude, whether or not it is a "natural affection" in humankind, does not strike me as being among the stronger "affections." Maybe that is because, if Hobbes is right, we are all governed by self-interest, or, as Reinhold Niebuhr would call it, "self-preoccupation." And if people really are that way, well, then maybe we do not have that much to be grateful for toward each other. Maybe the world apart from
God doesn't have much cause for gratitude. But Christianity here makes the difference: We do have a very great deal to be grateful for, which fact inspires us both toward a fuller personal integrity and toward the aforementioned enablement to live with failure, our own and that of others.

God's grace and our gratitude are therefore the unique features guiding Christian ethics and moral practice in distinction from the other modes of ethics and forms of order that men have devised.

Even though much of what I have said is presented in consonance with the view of the human condition as a "predicament," in consonance with the theological concept of "original sin," I think I can show how the essential features of Christian ethics are crucial also even in a theological perspective which does not treat of man as essentially ridden with "angst," a creature who is essentially "a problem unto himself." I am thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas in particular.

Some people seem ill at ease in the world, others do not. Certainly such people as Plato, Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard, belong in the former category. But there are those like Aristotle and Thomas who find the world to be man's natural habitat: man is "at home" in the natural world. He is happy searching out its secrets, discovering how things function, seizing upon a fuller knowledge of animals, plants, the earth and the heavens. St. Thomas was not primarily struck by man's willfulness, obstinacy, and cussedness, but by his ability to think: to discover the causes of things and processes, to make judgments, to infer truths. Yet Thomas was a Christian; and when he wrote on ethics he made a distinction (not unique with him) between the "philosophic" virtues and the "theological" virtues. By the former he meant the traditional virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude, and wisdom. In my terminology, he acknowledged the going moral order operative in society. He discoursed upon those virtues, analyzed them, supported them. But he held that there was more to the human enterprise than just those "powers" to which one ought to aspire. The theological virtues were cited as faith, hope, and love. These were called "theological" by Thomas because our experience merely of the natural world can offer us no ground for aspiring to such virtues. In the world of man and nature, there seemed no ground for faith, hope, or love. To be sure, the world of animals and men teemed with powers and passions, but not of self-forgetful love: plenty of whistling in the dark, but little ground for hope; a lot of guesswork and ignorance, but little ground for faith. Therefore, held Thomas, we know of these virtues not by natural experience but by divine revelation: moreover no human life can be truly complete without them.

So even in the case of a man whose inclinations and thoughts did not function in a climate of existential dread, a man who probably would have had some trouble appreciating the predicament of the double-minded man of Romans Chapter VII, the ultimate conclusion is finally reached that what sets Christian ethics apart from naturalistic moral philosophy is the awareness of divine grace.

By that grace we are "saved," renewed, restored; and in gratitude we become the bearers of grace in turn, a bit forgetful of our own failures and those of others.
FOOTNOTES

1 No pun intended.

2 Partly because such orders can be described, some contemporary philosophers have argued that ethics is descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature. This, I think, is a fallacious conclusion.


4 The position is hardly ever stated quite as strongly as this, since most people who write upon the subject see that intelligence usually compels them to qualify the position somewhat; so that while it is basically right to act in self-interest it is not always right: sometimes it is not in my self-interest to act directly in my self-interest, etc.