## Perspectives In Christian Ethics

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The problem of the "Good Life" is one which continues to engage the attention of the most sensitive minds of our day. No scientific and technical developments seem to make such a consideration irrelevant: indeed, the ethical question seems more pressing in 1963 than it has been for decades, perhaps for many centuries. It is significant also that after decades of preoccupation with the basis of positive ethics in social organization and social convention, sensitive thinkers are again exploring the question of Natural Law--of the possible discovery of an ethical norm in the constitution of nature itself.

Ethical reflection, originally regarded as an essentially theological enterprise, now emerges as a constitutive dimension of the scientific world. More and more, the men who are responsible for the amazing strides in the realm of technology are seeing that their task is incomplete without some careful consideration of the questions of "good" and "right" and especially of the realm of the "ground of right." Such a consideration involves at least three interrelated elements, which may be regarded as interlocking into a triangular form: 1) the basis for ethics in "natural law"; 2) the relation of theological ethics to the ethic of natural law; and 3) the relating of the ethical norm to the concrete situations of life.

Ι

The ethical import of the world of nature is properly regarded as an area for exploration by the philosopher. By way of definition of the subject, it may be noted that "natural" may be defined, within this context at least, as something differentiated from that which is man-made and hence artificial. This indicates that a natural-law situation is one in which action is judged in terms of that which nature tends to suggest or to endorse. Seen from the perspective of man himself, natural law suggests that

in the action-situation, there are certain inherent or intrinsic qualities, qualities which are regarded as being inborn or as intuitively recognized to be valid.

The whole question of natural law, as historically understood, has been called into question on several counts: as belief in the biblical doctrine of Creation has been superseded by alternative explanations, there has come to currency the view that Nature may somehow be self-contained; as embodying its own answers (in contrast to requiring a Creator to give it meaning) it has been interpreted to be amoral—at least so far as our human values are concerned. That is to say, those of humanistic orientation have held that all teleological interpretations are the simple result of the reading of our limited preferences into the overall movement of nature. This is regarded by the humanist as being sentimental and egocentric.

By this interpretation, an ethic of natural law would require a severe re-interpretation. Values would become essentially those procedures which nature obviously utilizes in the onsweep of her processes, and in the final analysis, only those "values" may be regarded as such which contribute to natural survival and to possible evolutionary improvement. Thus, some other source than nature must be sought for human values, such as justice, love, truth, mercy, and the like. By some naturalistic interpretations, these have no real basis or grounding in nature itself; they issue solely from man's attempts at the ordering of human relationships.

A second basis upon which the concept of a "natural-law" ethic is called into question is that of reaction against the apparently-overworked appeal to it upon the part of Roman Catholic theologians. As one eminent theological educator liked to say, "The major difficulty with the doctrine of Natural Law is that the Roman Catholic thinkers know too much about it!" That is to say, the doctrine of natural law has become so involved with an infallible and tendentious interpretation of its deliverances that the thoughtful person comes to view it with a great deal of suspicion.

It is obvious, of course, that the Western tradition of natural law, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, stems from the views of classical antiquity. It was second nature to the Greeks to seek the permanent and abiding elements which underlie the changing and the transient in both the realm of nature and of human experience. Thus, classical thinkers sought to trace

comprehensible and traceable "laws" in terms of which the world might be viewed as unified and orderly. Moreover, the classical view of Kosmos was an organic one, in which every phase of the world-process was regarded as a part of a coherent and unified whole.

Within this framework, individual objects were regarded as possessing innate tendencies or innate laws of being. These, moreover, functioned organically (and thus smoothly) as a whole, so that it was believed that in the Kosmos one could perceive a permanent order, which is essentially "lawful" and teleological. Thus, there was a "natural" behavior for all things, a behavior which was "highest and best" and which was constitutive of the universe as a whole. Seen from the perspective of human affairs, the Greek view posited gods who were anthropomorphic and who were regarded as giving shape and direction to human affairs.

Man himself was regarded as being truly-man insofar as he brought to realization the potentialities of his essential being. This presupposed an inherent and universal presence in man of humanitas, which was the essential image toward the production of which all processes of his development--whether social processes, education, art or music--led him. Within this framework, certain courses of action were indicated as being "naturally" right or "naturally" wrong. These were held to be discernible by the "wise" man, since they were deducible by reason from the constitution of things. They were, moreover, held to be timeless in their nature and permanent in their validity. Thus, they took relatively little account of individual differences and variations in human needs, human desires, and human sensitivities.

Perhaps more difficult still, this form of ethical thinking tended to ground itself in a form of rationalism, by which it was supposed that all right-thinking persons, given a fair chance to reflect upon the nature of things, would reach identical conclusions with reference to the interpretation of the ground of Right in nature. The passing of the rationalism ordinarily associated with the eighteenth century, and more especially, the spread of the science of anthropology, has brought this interpretation into serious question. It now appears that equally sensitive and sincere persons may, by a diligent study of nature, reach opinions with respect to ethical behavior which are diametrically opposed. Roman Catholic canon law has

tacitly recognized this in its assumption (now codified by implication in the dogma of papal infallibility) that natural law requires also a divinely-accredited interpreter for the derivation of its mandates.

To derive the details of an ethic from the innate tendency which is the law of any being, whether it be microcosmic (i.e., a particular fragment of the Kosmos) or macrocosmic (i.e., at the level of the whole) poses serious difficulties. First, it is by no means clear that the inherent nature of things can be read off with the ease that some moral theologians have thought possible. It is one thing to assert that there is a permanent, immutable structure of rightness at the core of the universe. It is another to assert that this structure lies sufficiently close to the surface that it can be discerned without serious margin for error. It seems to this writer that the ground which is to be cultivated by the ethical thinker who seeks his norm in the structure of nature is much smaller than is sometimes supposed, so that the task undertaken ought to be much more modest and unambitious than it is sometimes envisioned to be.

It should be noted, specifically, that the ethical clues derivable from the consideration of nature and its structures are probably much simpler than may be commonly believed. That is to say, the deliverances of natural law may be far less specific than its interpreters have thought. May it not be nearer to the facts to suggest that the constitution of things reveals certain broad principles, these being basic to positive ethics, but from which no detailed precepts can be directly inferred? Basic to these principles is that of responsibility, of oughtness. Oughtness is the essential characteristic of ethics; however distorted the elaboration of the moral norms may be in a given society, human beings seem everywhere to feel a sense of obligation. That is to say, though men may by conditioning fail to see precisely what is right, they do not doubt that they ought to do that which is right. This seems to be the meaning of the scriptural usage with reference to the law of God which is written in the hearts of men.

Kant had something like this in mind when he suggested that the authority of the Imperative was not relative and hypothetical (and thus defective), but rather, categorical and absolute. Thus, the 'ought' is final and definitive; the content of that ought may in practice be problematic and derived. It may prove to be true that in the derivation of a universal sense of obligation to right, we have as much of ethics as can be derived abstractly from the nature of things. This does not of course rule out the possibility that there may be further accurate derivation from the nature of man himself (as distinct from abstract 'humanitas'). That is to say, from the nature of society, as based for example on the psychology of man, it may be possible to deduce that such an institution as monogamy may be that to which human nature is basically conformable. Similarly, it may be possible to derive some notion of the right of private ownership from within the pattern of common attitudes of individual men.

It remains, however, that the deliverances of an ethic based upon natural law are more convincing when they are abstract and formal, and less convincing as they become more detailed and casuistic. The more inclusive principles (such as responsibility and accountability) appear to be immutable and indispensable, so that they can never cease to be binding. They are valid, whether incorporated in statutes or not. On the other hand, much of statutory law, however derivable it may seem to be from natural law, finally proves to be relative to concrete situations, historical circumstances, and individual peculiarities.

П

The question of the relationship between theological ethics and the ethics claiming to base itself upon natural law is another of the occasions for a great deal of discussion. It is not surprising that extreme positions have been taken with reference to this relationship. On the one hand, there are those who would hold that the two stand in radical opposition to one another, this being held upon the ground that natural law rests upon supposedly timeless and absolute factors, while Christian ethics grows out of a historical and thus dynamic and relative view of reality. In other words, some thinkers hold that the Greek view of fixed and relatively static reality is so violently opposed to the Hebrew-Christian view of reality that the two cannot meet on any common ground.

This objection is not a frivolous one. It is clear that at many points, the Christian understanding of things differs from the classical conception of reality. However, one wonders whether the contention that structure was the all-consuming passion of

the Greek mind is totally correct. After all, the classical world produced a Heraclitus as well as a Parmenides. Similarly, it may be questioned whether the Hebrew-Christian understanding of history was as "dynamic" and fluctuating as it might appear. After all, the underlying motif of New Testament theology is, that the Incarnation, the Atoning Deed, and the Resurrection of our Lord were unique and non-repetitive events, being components of a once-for-all manifestation of the Eternal God in time. Revelation in the Christian sense embodies what Emil Brunner calls in The Mediator, "this element of absolute and never-recurring actuality" (p. 26).

At the opposite pole of this interpretative situation is the view that revealed ethics and the ethics of natural law are basically the same in content, so that man may come out at the same result by the pursuit of either one or the other of them. is essentially the Roman Catholic position. It has the merit of unity and coherence. It seeks to confirm "by the mouth of two witnesses" matters which are of very great significance. It rests, moreover, upon the assumption that the author of the Bible and the author of the "Book of Nature" are one and the same, and thus appeals to the Christian sense for the unity which all of God's activity manifests. The danger inherent in the view is, that it assumes that both the Bible and the world of nature become aspects of some higher earthly authority. In other words, the Roman Catholic interpretation lends itself to the assumption that there is a superior source (i.e., the Church) which is qualified to read both "Books" infallibly, so that an institution becomes the ultimate court of appeal in ethical matters. To the Protestant, and all pragmatic considerations aside, this seems to do poor justice to the internal nature and the self-testimony of the Christian Scriptures. Moreover, an institution which seems empirically relative and empirically dependent upon fallible responses to temporal situations does not seem to the Protestant a reliable mentor in matters so vital as those of the ethical life.

Somewhere between these two positions stands the one toward which many Christian thinkers incline in our time. Basic to such a middle position is the view that God is not only the author of both revealed ethics and the world of nature, but also that the universe displays His purpose throughout, a purpose which is regarded as being unitary. It takes for granted that Christianity is rooted in history, a history which unfolds the "mighty"

acts" of God. But this position contains certain built-in perils, and needs some precision of definition.

One peril is that of regarding the record of the historical context of Christianity as being so largely a record of flux that the permanent structures of historic Christian faith are neglected. The Dialectical Theology has fallen victim to this danger, i.e., the danger of seeing Revelation exclusively in terms of "encounters" which are highly relative to time and to persons. In consequence, the possibility of a written Revelation (which is propositionally articulated and universally valid) is played down.

It will not do to contend that some one aspect of the career of our Lord (such as the Incarnation) can be singled out as the definitive moment of God's revelation to man. entire career of our Lord must be regarded as revelatory of God's final and ultimate purposes, so that His supernatural birth, His sinless life, His substitutionary death, and His bodily resurrection are integral to the expression of the mind and heart of the same God who controls and articulates the world of nature. Seen within this context, the ological ethics appears as a derivative of the divine action by which God moved into history in the person of His Son, to unveil to man the purposes of His eternal heart--purposes which had been revealed in incipient fashion by the intimations of that which He had created earlier. The latter thus appears, not as a mere republication of the former, but as taking the abstract and general qualities of the former and completing them in terms of the new conditions of the "Son-order."

In other words, there is a limited continuity between the ethic of natural law and the theological ethic of Christian Faith. The limitation appears in nothing more vividly than in this: that the New Testament ethic brings to light entirely new duties and totally new virtues. There is an originality about the ethic of the New Covenant, growing out of the unique quality of the revelation of God in the Incarnate Redeemer. Presupposing, for example, the transformation of human character by Grace, the New Testament ethic demands a new (and we believe unique) attitude toward an offending person. New attitudes are prescribed toward enemies, so that a new pattern of virtues is introduced, involving such qualities as humility, moderation, self-control, patience and forgiveness.

These virtues may have been envisioned from afar in an ethic derived from the contemplation of nature. Certainly exceptional persons among the 'gentiles who have not the law' may have demonstrated these virtues. But nothing in the natural law was sufficient to sustain these as a universal law of conduct. We state it as a proposition, that whatever natural ethics may prescribe, its principles can be maintained effectively only by the elaboration, confirmation, and supplementation of the law of Christ. Even the highest forms of human, natural-law type of ethic (as for example that of Confucius) failed to sustain their own views of the eternal principles of right. In case of the ethic of Confucius, there was almost immediate, and certainly widespread, confusion of "right" with the politically expedient and the socially prudential. Without doubt many of the great sages of history were able to recognize true duty, and to appreciate the law of Right as it was written into the constitution of things; but we see in their personal conduct, no less than in their advice to others, a sad inability to realize their envisioned principles in practical conduct. The ethic revealed by natural law needs the stimulation and guidance of the law of Christ, the undergirding of Grace.

Another factor essential to the discussion of the relation which exists between the ethic of natural law and that of the Christian faith is that of motivation in the ethical situation. Any system of ethics may be flawless so far as its principles and precepts are concerned; but it will remain abstract and inert unless there be inherent in it that which will secure the preformance of its duties, the cultivation of its virtues, and the diligent pursuit of its supreme good. It is at this point that the Christian finds his ethic to differ radically from the ethic derived from the study of the constitution of things and of men. Granting that lamentable deviations from the ideal can be observed in the lives of professing Christians, yet the Christian asserts that there is a motive power in the Evangel which energizes the Christian ethic.

This motive power is derived from the multi-faceted ministry of the Holy Spirit--multi-faceted, we say, because it touches the several factors which enter into the human ethical situation. That is, it touches the reason, so that the mind is helped to form the judgments upon which conduct is undertaken and given shape. It touches the affections, which in turn attract the person to one type of conduct and cause him to be repelled by

another. It affects the non-reflective aspects of the Christian, giving to the desires and impulses a new orientation, separated relatively at least, from egocentricity. It is by virtue of this touching of the total motivation of life that St. Paul could say autobiographically, "It is no more I that live but Christ that liveth in me." It is of this that he writes as he speaks of "the eyes of the understanding being opened." And of the over-all result of this, the same writer exults: "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature: Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new"!

It needs to be noted that this writing of the law upon the heart is an occurrence which goes beyond the processes usually designated as "natural"; it highlights the significance of the dualism of Nature--Grace. It is this which the "natural man" cannot receive; to him it seems foolishness at best, and hypocritical scandal at worst. In other words, the man whose ethic rests upon the observation of the world of nature is unable to comprehend the ethic of the Christian faith. While the second is of common origin with the first, it is also so far in advance of the former that it cannot be understood from the standpoint of it. To say it another way, the relationship between the ethic of natural law and the ethic of the Christian Revelation is such that the one whose orientation is in terms of the latter can discern and appreciate the former, while the one who derives his ethic from natural law simply has not the capacity to appreciate the latter. Thus the relationship is one of common origin and of overlap, but not one of reciprocal intelligibility.

A word needs to be said concerning the relation of the question of conscience to the relationship between a "natural law" type of ethic and the ethic of the Christian revelation. The study of cultural anthropology has rendered much of the earlier discussion of the subject of conscience to be irrelevant. To some, this study has led to an abandonment, out of hand, of the whole set of conceptions suggested by the term. This is obviously, if considered in the light of the Christian Scriptures, going too far. St. Paul does after all speak of the twofold role of conscience as either accusing or excusing. At the same time, it must be recognized that conscience is not the uniform and comprehensive function which the term formerly suggested.

Mention has been made previously of the final and definitive quality of the moral ought. It was observed in that connection that the universal sense of obligation may be as much of ethics

as can be derived from the abstract study of things. This is practically equivalent to saying that in the strictest sense, the factor of conscience, is apart from Grace at least, limited in its scope of operation to the deliverance: "I ought to do that which is right." If so, then much of that which is denoted by such savings as: "Let your conscience be your guide," misses the point, for in practice, men seem to perform with a good and untroubled conscience all sorts of contradictory acts. These are in some cases, to be sure, acts which are right or wrong according to circumstance, and hence not intrinsically good or evil. However, those who study the practices of other societies tell us that men and women, with apparent approval of conscience, pursue diametrically opposed courses with respect to practices which seem clearly to possess intrinsic moral quality--that is, practices which are right or wrong in themselves. Certainly all usages cannot be right: and yet they are adjudged to be so. From this, it seems clear that conscience does not legitimately extend to the elaboration of positive ethics, but rather, its proper deliverances are limited to the mandate of "Thou shalt do that which is right"! In the final section of this article, something will be said with respect to the allegedly specific content of the voice of conscience.

## Ш

It remains to be noted, that just as the questions of the basis for ethics in natural law, and of the relation of theological ethics to the ethic of natural law, are not without their ambiguities and their difficulties, so also the question of the relating of the ethical norm to the concrete situations of life involves its own set of problems. Obviously the Christian ethic rests upon the basic Good News, i.e., that in Jesus Christ, God has acted on man's behalf. But when one seeks to move from this proclaimed "deed of God" to the practical implications of that deed, he finds it necessary to bear in mind certain principles of application. Granted that (as Bonhoeffer tells us) the relationship between the general mandate of God (i.e., the command to love) and the practical acts of the Christian must be one of "conformation," it remains true that the momentary concretization of the divinely-revealed norm creates many problems.

Protestantism has been perplexed by casuistry, the art of 'getting down to cases' in ethical matters. Pietistic Evangeli-

calism has tended to stress the possibility of certitude in matters of applied, private morality, while liberal Protestantism has sought to disown casuistry (in the name of the liberty of the Christian man) while at the same time developing a body of "normative" casuistic literature. Paul Ramsey has pointed out, in Christianity and Crisis (March 4, 1963, p. 24), that in "progressive church circles" there is a "Christian ethos that is equally casuistical"—equally legalistic with that of pietistic ethics. Actually, some form of relating the general to the particular in ethics is inescapable, so that there is continuing need for clarification of the factors which relate to the procedures involved.

Each concrete human situation possesses a relatively unique and singular character. That is to say, each point of ethical decision contains its own problematic features, so that it involves a complex of possibilities. Now, the will of God is, we believe, known to man; but it is known in terms of one of two forms: either as a direct mandate, as is found in the Ten Commandments; or indirectly in terms of precepts which relate themselves to concrete ethical situations in historical contexts different from our own. Or to say it another way, much of the ethic of the Bible is in the form of precepts, which arise from a different complex of factors. To relate such a precept to a contemporary ethical situation, one must have ability to discern the inner form of the precept.

To put it in still another way, in dealing with the ethical precepts of the biblical record, one must utilize a twofold movement. First, one must distil from the precept the principle which it embeds; and second, one must re-apply the principle thus yielded to the present historical moment and its complex of demands. To take an exceedingly simple illustration: I Corinthians 14:34, St. Paul writes to the Church at Corinth, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but to be under obedience, as also saith the law." Taken superficially, this passage might seem to forbid all participation in public worship by women, irrespective of time or place. (It is noteworthy that Paul restricts the command to "your" women.) But upon closer examination, particularly of the following verse, one finds that in the Corinthian Church, public worship was interrupted by a disorderly practice by which women, less favored with educational opportunity than the men, asked for a running interpretation of what was being proclaimed.

Seen in this context, the precept is purely local, and encases a principle, namely, that public worship should be orderly and uninterrupted by ill-advised and ill-directed questions. Now, having abstracted the principle (which is permanent) from the precept (which is local and temporary), one can re-apply it in the present worship-situation. And, to fail to apply this technique leads to absurd legalism; for it is not always true that the most obvious solution is the correct one. Certainly in the relating of the Christian ethic in general to the empirical situation, all is not laid out in primer form.

Something needs to be said concerning the concrete ethical deliverances which are sometimes attributed to conscience. Many well-meaning persons feel an absolute inner mandate with reference to specifics in conduct, and feel that this mandate is a conscientious product. If we be correct, as noted in Part I of this paper, that conscience proper speaks only in terms of "I ought to do what is right," then we must re-define what is meant by the supposedly causistic function of conscience. Perhaps this may be done in some such terms as the following: there is an area of the personality contiguous to conscience, which undertakes to spell out specifics in conduct. This is influenced by a number of factors: it is partly conditioned by personal preferences; it rests partly upon imitation of the social and religious usages in one's environment; it depends in part upon personal factors between the individual and his Lord; and it may reflect home environment and home training; and it has been known to rest upon "crank" interpretations of Scripture. It should be given a twofold recognition: first, it should be understood as involving a margin of error; and second, while the individual should obey it, he is duty-bound to clarify and enlighten it. To fail to obey it is to produce moral lesions of a grave sort; and to fail to enlighten it is to perpetuate possible eccentricity and idiosyncrasy.

The Christian ethic is an ethic of love, of obedience, of duty, and of decision. Formally, its nature is structurally fixed and relatively clear. But its content, as related to the concrete occasion, seems in many cases to be problematic, and relative to the circumstances of action. In other words, the fundamental principles of action in the Christian ethic are permanent and immutable, while their application must take into account the

mutable and the variable in concrete ethical situations. This does not mean that in relating abiding principle to the mutable situation, we are without guides. First of all, the New Testament indicates clearly that some forms of action do not contain intrinsic moral quality, such as the eating of meat. Thus, the Scriptures embed the principle of liberty, adding that he who claims this liberty is obligated to concede an equal right to others. Second, the New Testament seeks to simplify the positive mandates, subsuming all duties under the twofold expression of the Law of Love. Third, the New Testament makes it clear that our Lord left an example, and that we are obligated to follow in His steps. This is valid, regardless of the shallow use to which the principle has at times been put. It must be remembered that the Christian ethic makes morality to be a consequence of salvation, rather than a condition of it.

Enough has been said at the point of the three aspects of the ethical problem under discussion to indicate that God has, in His good pleasure, left many issues in the ethical life open to human decision. While one may deal with the ethic of natural law in an abstract and detached manner, the ethic implied by the Christian Faith is one which makes perpetual demands upon the one who ponders it. From first to last, it makes demands: it presents challenges which sometimes tantalize, sometimes perplex. It is as broad as human life, and thus avoids the oversimplification of any abstract and single-track ethic, such as that based upon abstract humanitas. It forces the Christian to commitment, to participation, to action upon decision.

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This issue of The Asbury Seminarian honors our esteemed and retiring Dean, Dr. William D. Turkington. This writer has talked with a number of persons who have pursued the study of Christian Ethics with our distinguished colleague; and student after student has testified to the perpetual worth of the insights which Dr. Turkington has imparted to them. Hearing this "cloud of witnesses" the writer asked one of the able students of our retiring Dean for the notes which he took in connection with two of these courses.

It is a matter of gratification to note the manner in which Dean Turkington was a quarter of a century ago, considering ethical issues which have come to the fore as vital issues within the past five or ten years. His thought in this area has evidently grown out of a keen sensitivity to human situations, along with a continuing curiosity with respect to the implications of the Christian Scriptures for "the good life." His insights were thoroughly scriptural, always humane, and underlain by an attitude of mind which recognized the priority of "doing God's will" for the discerning of that will. His far-seeing vision yielded perspectives, in terms of which concrete issues fell into pattern, and before which the demands of our Lord upon human conduct became vital for our common life.