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ERITIS SICUT DEUS: MORAL THEORY AND THE SIN OF PRIDE

Gilbert Meilaender

The fundamental temptation, especially for those who are serious about the moral life, is always the same: failing in trust, to want to be like God, knowing good and evil. "What the serpent has in mind," Karl Barth has written, "is the establishment of ethics."¹ This is an overstatement, but it points us toward an important truth.

The number of possible moral theories is not large, though their varieties are infinitely complex. C. S. Lewis has a simple illustration which directs attention to the features of life that any moral theory must consider.

Think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another's way; and, secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.²

The analogy suggests three considerations which are important in morality:

- (1) We judge actions as *right* or *wrong* (just as we know that the ships must not collide and get in each other's way), and we may think of human beings as having a right not to be wronged in certain ways.
- (2) We judge *character*, evaluating not just the rightness or wrongness of actions but also the goodness or badness of agents (just as we know that the engines and steering gears of the ships must be in good order).
- (3) We evaluate the *results* of action, the goals at which action aims and the values it seeks to realize (just as we must know whether the ship's destination is New York or Calcutta).

Now, in fact, any ethical theory we develop will try to take account of all three features of the moral life; yet, the distinctive shape of an ethic will depend



largely on which of the three it makes central. Because this is true, it has become commonplace to distinguish three different kinds of moral theories (each of which has its adherents). A *consequentialist* ethic makes the results or consequences of action central in our moral deliberations. A *perfectionist* ethic emphasizes the character of the agent, the way in which our actions both shape and flow from the person we are, both develop and enact character.³ A *deontological* ethic evaluates action more than character but emphasizes the shape of the act itself: not what *happens* (as consequentialists emphasize) but what the agent *does*.

For a consequentialist theory the moral agent is essentially a public functionary whose responsibility it is to evaluate from an impersonal standpoint the worth of possible states of affairs and, then, to seek the best overall outcome available. What the agent *does* is not what counts most morally. What counts is that he is in service of the best state of affairs possible. Perhaps the most illuminating way to describe consequentialism is this: It holds that an *ought to do* follows from an *ought to be*. If it ought to be the case that no one suffer horribly while dying, I (and we) ought to do whatever is necessary to minimize such suffering, even if on some occasions that means aiming to kill in an act of euthanasia. By contrast, a deontological theory makes it possible (though not necessary) to hold that I ought not euthanatize the suffering person even if doing so would result in the best state of affairs on the whole. The difference between the two views can be put this way: If I were to do this, “*things would be better, what happened would be better But I would have done something worse.*”⁴

This suggests that the important distinction between consequentialist and deontological theories involves the kind of responsibility ascribed to the moral agent. Does the agent adopt a universal (and therefore impersonal) standpoint, regarding his own life as would an observer and obligated to achieve all the good he can? Or does the agent seek to act in a particular way and be a person of a certain sort, not ignoring the consequences but also not believing himself fully responsible for achieving the best possible outcome? This way of putting the matter suggests that our threefold division of moral theories needs to be revised. The crucial classification is twofold.

There are some ethical theories—deontological or perfectionist in character—which do not ask the moral agent to step out of his finite location in nature and history to be more than a human being bearing a real but limited responsibility for overall outcomes. These theories accept the moral importance of the agent’s perspective—the importance of what he is and does, not just of what his doing brings about. To be sure, such theories, if they are to be adequate to our experience, can never ignore the results of action. Nor can they permit us to make moral judgments which represent only our personal perspective. The virtue of justice and the requirement that we act justly are, for example, both grounded

in an understanding of the human person not only as finite but also as free. Free to transcend at least to some extent our limited, partial perspective in order to be fair to others. To refuse to exercise such freedom, to refuse to see the world in this way, is the sin of sloth.⁵ The freedom by which human nature is enabled to transcend its particular location means that we can and must consider what is required of us from the perspective of God, before whom all human beings are equal and in whom all are united.

But we are not free to try to be like God. And some moral theories seem to seek a standpoint more divine than human. Such theories—chiefly consequentialist, but also and interestingly, Kantian—in their search for an objective and impersonal perspective ask us to make moral judgments about the world from a position nowhere within that world. They ask us to will universally or accept responsibility for trying to produce the best overall outcome. Such theories are rooted in a sin still more fundamental than sloth: our *prideful* attempt to free ourselves from our finite location within nature and history.

It is perhaps no accident that one of the most powerful and influential ethical theories of the modern period—Kant’s—has taught us to will as moral maxims only those which could be adopted as universal law. It has encouraged us to think that our glory lies in being free and autonomous, obeying no law except that which we legislate for ourselves in accordance with the universal requirements of reason—has encouraged us, in short, to develop a moral theory for beings who are all freedom and no finitude. Not without reason did Iris Murdoch write that “Kant’s man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer.”⁶

That the twofold classification of moral theories suggested above really does illuminate something important can be seen in the ease with which some have managed to transform a Kantian ethic—usually described as deontological—into a consequentialist ethic. R. M. Hare’s “universal prescriptivism” offers a contemporary version of a Kantian ethic. In making a moral decision, Hare contends, we are seeking a judgment which we would be willing to prescribe universally—willing to regard as binding upon any person in similar circumstances. (Interestingly, Hare calls this the “archangel” level of moral thinking. But angels are not constrained by the limits that bind human beings.) How do we know whether we would be willing to make such a judgment in all similar situations? By seeking imaginatively to occupy, in turn, the positions of all other who are involved in the situation—seeking to determine whether we would be willing to occupy their position on another occasion. In this way we discover what is “best, all in all, for all the parties.” And, Hare notes, “we see here how the utilitarians and Kant get synthesized.”⁷ But this idea of taking into oneself the desires and sufferings of the world, feeling even if only imaginatively all its pains and pleasures as equally close to oneself—this move which enables Hare to transform

the formal Kantian urge to will universally into the material consequentialist search for the best overall outcome, is a project which perhaps even an archangel ought not undertake. Unless, that is, he prefers to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

This project is best exemplified and most fruitfully examined in consequentialist theory, and to it we now turn. Utilitarianism, now commonly regarded as one species of consequentialism, was the first great example of such a theory. Classical utilitarians sought to rank possible outcomes according to the amount of pleasure or satisfaction they offered the people involved, and they required the moral agent to seek to produce the best overall (or, least bad) state of affairs. If we abandon the utilitarian notion that good outcomes can be described solely in terms of pleasure or satisfaction, we will speak more generally of maximizing good consequences (however characterized). ‘Consequentialism’ is therefore a wider label and more general description of this sort of theory than is ‘utilitarianism.’ Why might one be attracted to such a theory?

I: *The Lure of Consequentialism*

The power of a consequentialist moral theory comes in large part from the fact that “it is the major recognized normative theory incorporating the deeply plausible-sounding feature that one may always do what would lead to the best available outcome overall.”⁸ This philosopher’s formula has the kind of other-regarding ring which Christians are accustomed to praise, and we may be tempted to believe that there must be little difference between an act which maximizes good consequences and an act that is most loving. Indeed, the power of consequentialist theory—at least within our culture—may be in large part a result of the fact that it sounds like a secularized version of the Christian love command. It is, as I will suggest later, a quite natural theory for those who remain morally serious but who have lost or left behind the Christian framework which gave content and specification to the command to love one’s neighbor.

As a way of seeing how attractive such language may be—how strongly it may tug on the hearts of those committed to self-sacrificial love of neighbor—and in order to suggest the most important problems a consequentialist ethic faces, we will begin with the straightforward and readily accessible philosophical language of an earlier day. The Englishman William Godwin, now largely forgotten but in his day (near the close of the 18th century) a well known philosophical anarchist, developed what we may call a consequentialist theory of morality in his provocative *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*.⁹

Godwin explains that he will use the term ‘justice’ to signify all our moral duty, and he means this rigorously indeed. “If justice have any meaning, it is just that I should contribute everything in my power to the benefit of the whole”

(p. 40). Or again, “it is just that I should do all the good in my power” (p. 45). So exacting a conception of our moral duty has its appeal, but it will immediately suggest two questions to the mind of any thoughtful person. How shall we reconcile this understanding of justice with our sense that we are obligated especially to those who stand in certain special relations to us, that we cannot regard them simply as parts of the whole we are to benefit? And, how shall we reconcile this conception of moral duty with our sense that it is important to see to our own needs and, even, our own pleasures, not simply to think of ourselves as acting at all times in service of the general wellbeing? Godwin tackles each of these problems with characteristic vigor.

Suppose, he writes, a fire should break out in the palace of Fenelon, archbishop of Cambrai, while he is at work on his *Telemachus*. Suppose the fire endangers the life of Fenelon and of his chambermaid, but we can save only one. Because we are connected “in some sense with the whole family of mankind,” it seems obvious to Godwin that “that life ought to be preferred which will be most conducive to the general good” (p. 41).

Supposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother, or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition. The life of Fenelon would still be more valuable than that of the chambermaid; and justice . . . would still have preferred that which was most valuable What magic is there in the pronoun “my” to overturn the decision of everlasting truth? (p. 42)

Someone might object that gratitude should lead me to prefer my mother, the chambermaid, to Fenelon. After all, she has endured considerable pain on my behalf and had nourished my life when it was entirely dependent on her. Godwin admits that gratitude is owed for every voluntary kindness, but it is owed simply because such kindness is virtuous and deserves respect. The fact that a particular kindness was bestowed on me is of no moral importance. The act of kindness is equally meritorious “whether the benefit was conferred upon me or upon another” (p. 42). Hence, in his attempt to eliminate the magic from the word ‘my,’ Godwin arrives at the puzzling notion that someone else might owe gratitude to my benefactor and I to someone else’s. “My benefactor ought to be esteemed, not because he bestowed a benefit upon me, but because he bestowed it upon a human being” (p. 43). Godwin grants that, as things stand at present, our closest companions will often get the larger share of our gratitude; for we lack the ability to make the needed universal discriminations, and we will inevitably think those kindnesses we have experienced to come from the most deserving benefactors. But this admitted fact “is founded only in the present imperfection of human nature” (p. 43).

What of the other problem? If moral duty requires “that I should contribute

everything in my power to the benefit of the whole,” where will time and energy be found for the personal undertakings that add delight to life—for good books and friends, enjoyment of sunrise and sunset, time spent in vocations which please but do relatively little to enhance the “general weal”? This question Godwin takes up by asking about the “degree” to which we must seek the good of others. In particular, what sort of sacrifices on our own behalf may be required? “And here I say that it is just that I should do all the good in my power” (p. 45). Godwin grants, for example, a right to private property. But this is to be regarded entirely as a trust. “He has no right to dispose of a shilling of it at the will of his caprice. So far from being entitled to well-earned applause for having employed some scanty pittance in the service of philanthropy, he is in the eye of justice a delinquent if he withheld any portion from that service” (p. 46). Or again, with respect to our vocational choices, he writes: “I am bound to employ my talents, my understanding, my strength and my time for the production of the greatest quantity of general good. Such are the declarations of justice, so great is the extent of my duty” (p. 46). And thus again, in order to eliminate the magic of the word ‘my,’ Godwin has eliminated something of central importance to human life—the possibility of undeserved generosity and a self-sacrifice that is praiseworthy because not obligatory. “It is therefore impossible for me to confer upon any man a favour, I can only do him a right” (p. 47).

There is much in Godwin’s language that might appeal to one nurtured on Christian talk of love for the neighbor. The search for a perspective from which the seeming arbitrariness of personal preference will be eliminated; the readiness to bring our every thought and action under the rule of love; the sense that, since the neighbor may be anyone, the neighbor must be everyone and our task must be to maximize wellbeing—all these have been thought to be implications of Christian love. But if the hands are Esau’s, the voice is Jacob’s. To imagine that Christian *agape* can be equated with the impersonal attempt to maximize good consequences is to be deceived—tempted and overcome by a seductive but false imitation of love. We can begin to see this if we consider more fully the two problems we noted in Godwin’s discussion. Both have to do, though in different ways, with the place of *freedom* in the Christian life. (1) Are there any limits on our freedom to seek what is good for others? (2) Are we ever free from the obligation to measure our action by the standard of general wellbeing?

That reflection about the Christian life cannot avoid these two questions can be seen if we consider the seemingly simple commandments of the Decalog, to which Christians have returned for guidance in generation after generation. Considered simply as moral rules, each of the ten will need to be made more complicated and complex; exception clauses and more precise characterizations will have to be added. But in their context they are something more than rules—they are a short picture of what it means to *trust* God. For the God who here

commands identifies himself as the redeemer, the One who has delivered his people from bondage.¹⁰ The commandments of the first table of the law call for trust in this God; those of the second table specify how those who trust God to accomplish his saving purposes must treat their neighbors. These commandments of the second table concern themselves with five bonds that are necessary for human life together: (1) the bond of the family, (2) the bond of marriage, (3) the bond of life with life, (4) the bond of persons and property, (5) the bond connecting the person and the person's speech, which makes speech a manifestation of the self.

These commandments do two things: they set limits to our action and they demarcate a sphere of "the permitted." Luther captures this quite nicely in his *Small Catechism's* brief explanations of the commandments of the second table. He articulates both the limit and the permission. Thus, for example, he defines the commandment which binds life with life in this way: "We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need." Some actions—which, of course, may have to be specified in rather precise detail—hurt and harm the neighbor. They should not be done, and, so, our freedom is limited. We are not even to seek the good of some by transgressing these limits and wronging others—not if we are willing to trust God to be the deliverer he has claimed to be. But to respect these limits is not to do all the command asks. The limits—important though they are for human life and even if they were fully observed—do no more than mark out for us the immense expanse of life in which we are set free to serve the neighbor. If not in the ways prohibited by the commandments, if those ways cannot be called love for the neighbor, then in what ways? That is the task the commandments of the second table set for us. If God can be trusted to care for us, the energy that we might have devoted to that cause is set free for service in countless ways which love finds but law cannot command. We are set free to help and befriend the neighbor in every bodily need. And the very open-ended nature of that task could be thought to be an injunction always to seek what is best for the largest number of neighbors. Hence, Luther's explanations of the commandments raise for us the same two questions we found in Godwin, and they cut to the heart of the meaning of Christian freedom.

The basic issue is this: Must we always do whatever will lead to the best available outcome? Does an *ought to do* necessarily flow from an *ought to be*? There are two reasons for denying that it does. Each makes central what the agent is and does, not just what happens as a result of his action. Each thinks of the person as something other than simply a servant of the general good. Each adopts the perspective of the agent rather than the impersonal perspective of no particular person at all. Samuel Scheffler has characterized these reasons in terms of an *agent-centered prerogative* and an *agent-centered restriction*. That is,

perhaps (as Scheffler thinks) we are sometimes permitted to pursue our own projects rather than the general good. And perhaps (as Scheffler doubts) we are sometimes prohibited from adopting a necessary means to the best available outcomes.¹¹ Thomas Nagel uses different language but has in mind the same two challenges to consequentialism. He discusses *reasons of autonomy*, which grow out of our desires, commitments, and projects, and *deontological reasons*, which set limits to the ways in which we are permitted to pursue good states of affairs. Both of these, Nagel believes, provide good reasons for doubting that we must always do what is (impersonally considered) for the best.¹² Thus, Scheffler thinks we *need not* always seek the greatest good possible, but that we *may* do so if we wish. Nagel thinks we *need not* always seek the greatest good possible, and, sometimes, *must not*. Interestingly, neither philosopher is particularly puzzled by the notion that we need not always do what is for the best; they find the agent's prerogative to pursue (some of the time) his own projects rather than the general good to be easily understandable. It is grounded in the person's autonomy or need for personal independence. But both philosophers are puzzled by the idea that we might sometimes be prohibited from seeking the best outcome even if we wanted to. Even Nagel, who argues in favor of such a restriction on our freedom to seek the good, grants that it may seem "primitive, even superstitious."¹³ And Scheffler simply admits that he can find no justification for such a restriction. For Christian ethics, by contrast, it may prove harder to justify the prerogative than the restriction—harder to justify any limit on our obligation to do good than to justify limits on our freedom to seek the good of others.

II: *Freedom From the Pursuit of Good Consequences?*

John Finnis has written of the "secret, often unconscious legalism" of consequentialist moral theory: "its assumption that there is a uniquely correct moral answer (or specifiable set of correct moral answers) to all genuine moral problems."¹⁴ Should Finnis be right it will follow that, if we interpret the love command as a command always to seek the best overall outcome, we will destroy the freedom of the Christian life. One way of putting this—it would be Scheffler's way—is to say that consequentialism demands too much of us, leaves no room for personal autonomy. It moralizes the whole of life—making every decision a moment of obligation and requiring us always to seek what is best overall. It is better, though, to say not that consequentialism asks too much but that it asks the wrong thing of us. It asks us to think of love apart from trust—to imagine that the destiny of the world lies not in God's hand but in ours. It interposes between us and God a moral theory which destroys our freedom to hear in *different* ways God's call to delight in the creation and serve the neighbor's need. It makes us public functionaries, servants of the general good, and thereby

destroys the goal of Christian existence as life in God—a union in love of those who are different, who hear the call of God addressed to them personally and see the beauty of God with a vision peculiarly theirs.

An obligation to love separated from the freedom to trust in God's providential care makes life a heavy burden indeed; for then we constantly bear the godlike responsibility of providing in our every action for the general wellbeing. The consequentialist must be a stern moralist; each action must be weighed and calculated to determine whether it really fosters the greatest good. To play with one's child, walk with one's love, read a book, write a friend, work in a garden, devote long hours to a work of art or craftsmanship, spend one's talents in a small and narrow circle—all such possibilities given in the particular time and place that is ours will (on this theory) require justification from the impersonal standpoint of universal wellbeing. And even if we think such justification possible, a task taken up for that reason can never be the same. "The unbought grace of life" is missed when obligation replaces freedom.

Pointing out that utilitarianism "seems to require a more comprehensive and unceasing subordination of self-interest to the common good" than rival moral theories, Henry Sidgwick called attention to a fact Mill had noted: Although utilitarianism was sometimes criticized as being base and vulgar (because it made maximization of pleasure central), the more plausible charge was that it set too high a standard and demanded too much.¹⁵ It is worth noting, once more, that from the Christian perspective the point must be made differently. For if love bears and endures all things, any limit on our obligation to seek what is best on the whole cannot finally be grounded in a supposed claim to autonomy or personal independence. If there is such a limit, it is grounded, rather, in the nature we have been given: created by God to inhabit a particular location in nature and history. Free to some extent to transcend that location, required to some extent to transcend it—but not to forget that ours is the freedom of a finite, dependent body. To imagine that it is our responsibility to adopt a more universal standpoint than this is to want to be like God—and to fail in trust.

And, indeed, when we attempt this in moral theory, the results are very peculiar. Sidgwick considers in some detail a kind of practical perplexity confronting consequentialist theory. The theory enjoins us always to act in such a way as to seek the greatest good overall. But many pleasures—which would, presumably, contribute to a good outcome—can be experienced only if we do not aim at them. Remembering Godwin, we may use gratitude as our example. Perhaps what is best for all is that each of us spontaneously express gratitude to our benefactors. Perhaps this will lead to a better outcome on the whole than if we distribute gratitude to those who are in fact the greatest benefactors of humanity. For if we do as Godwin recommends we will lose the peculiar pleasure that comes (to both giver and recipient) from the experience of spontaneous and

uncalculated gratitude. Godwin is prepared to argue: “Would not the most beneficial consequences result from a different plan; from my constantly and carefully enquiring into the deserts of all those with whom I am connected, and from their being sure, after a certain allowance for the fallibility of human judgment, of being treated by me exactly as they deserved? Who can tell what would be the effects of such a plan of conduct universally adopted?”¹⁶ Who can tell—but then, who would wish to make the experiment? Sidgwick certainly did not. Instead, he suggests that most of us, most of the time, ought not try to live each moment as if we were consequentialists. Most of the time we should be moved to act by ordinary human impulses rather than the desire to achieve what is best overall; for, he notes, “each person is for the most part, from limitations either of power or knowledge, not in a position to do much good to more than a very small number of persons; it therefore seems, on this ground alone, desirable that his chief benevolent impulses should be correspondingly limited.”^{16a} Sidgwick here puts his finger on the important issue, but he misunderstands its significance—as if the problem were that the consequentialist merely set too high a standard for human beings. It is as if we should give a grudging acquiescence to our finite nature while taking no real account of it in moral theory. Or it is, we might say, as if a parent were to be like a public functionary, charged with looking after a certain number of members of the body politic. What is needed, by contrast, is a glad affirmation of our finite nature and trust that we are free to be the sort of creatures God has made us.

Put most generally, the problem is that to aim in all one’s action at producing the best outcome overall would surely make life worse; for it would—to mention only what is obvious—remove the great good of spontaneity from life. To deal with this problem consequentialists inevitably find themselves suggesting that things will be better if people do not always aim directly at the greatest good—that is, if they do not always act as if they believed consequentialist moral theory! One result of this is to create division and incoherence within the self.¹⁷ For we have adopted a moral theory which is very difficult to act upon. The reasons for action which the theory offers cannot take flesh in the motives which move us. Adopting momentarily an impartial perspective, we can use the theory to approve or disapprove our life, but we cannot really live it. We are divided within between the person who acts and the *person* who theorizes.¹⁸ A more important result must be the creation of division not within but among selves—division between those who can rise to the impersonal standpoint of an objective calculator of general wellbeing and those for whom it is better to act without such reflection. And, of course, since those in the first group know that it will be better on the whole if those in the second group do not try to act as consequentialists, the theory takes on a highly manipulative cast. With better reason than he thinks Hare terms these two levels the *archangels* and the *proles*. A theory which calls

upon the moralist to take responsibility for what is best overall creates division—both within us and among us. This should be no surprise, since this is what Christians believe the sin of pride always does. Hare adds: “If we do not think men can do it, we shall have to invoke a Butlerian God to do it for us, and reveal the results through our consciences.”¹⁹ This alternative clearly has little appeal for Hare, but we shall return to it later.

Christian love does not, therefore, require that we seek in every moment to achieve what is best overall. It interposes no moral theory between us and the call of God and leaves us free to take up our callings with glad and trusting hearts. We love when we serve the neighbors whom our vocation places before us. Now, to be sure, this argument for limited responsibility is not an argument simply for “my station and its duties.” We are finite; but we are also free, not limited entirely by our place within nature and history. Hence, Einar Billing has suggested that “the call constantly has to struggle against two adversaries: stereotyped workmanship and irresponsible idealism.”²⁰ If the heart that trusts God does not seek unlimited responsibility for what is best, neither can it be closed to new possibilities for love which may be given it. Such decisions are always personal and particular. They cannot be made for anyone else. They cannot be willed universally for all similarly situated people. They cannot be made from an impersonal, objective standpoint that is nowhere in particular—for we never hear the call of God except at the place where we stand. In making such decisions we discover who we are and will be—and we are never solely servants of the general good.

III: *Freedom for the Pursuit of Good Consequences?*

The argument of the previous section was that Christians *need not* always seek what is best overall. They are free from the tyranny of consequentialist theory. But another problem remains. Are there occasions when Christians not only may not but also *ought not* seek the best overall result in their action? Are there restrictions on our freedom to seek the good? This is the question posed especially by deontological ethics, the question which seemed so puzzling to Nagel and Scheffler.

One could not ask for a more resounding answer than the one furnished by Newman in a famous sentence, couched in his intricate prose:

The Catholic Church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, or should steal one

poor farthing without excuse.²¹

Here indeed is a man who believes that an *ought to do* will not necessarily follow from an *ought to be*. It is quite clear that for Newman the focus of the moral life is what we *do*, not what *happens* as a result of our doing.

Newman's statement is worth considering because, precisely by its very boldness and straightforwardness, it calls forth an obvious objection. How can we claim the name 'love' for the kind of action he describes? In *Silence*, Shusaku Endo's novel about Japanese Christians suffering persecution for their faith, the protagonist must make such a decision. A priest, he is asked to apostasize, to trample on an image of the face of Christ. If he does, the torture of his fellow believers will end. He will spare them that—and quite possibly keep them from themselves committing the mortal sin of apostasy. And when he finally does it, steps upon the face of Christ, he does it in the name of love. He believes, in fact, that the face of the bronze Christ urges him on, saying: "Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross."²² What if, one may ask Newman, one "wilful untruth" can prevent the "starvation in extremest agony" of millions? Or, what if the telling of one "wilful untruth" can prevent many more such untruths from being told? Many wonder whether such a price is not worth paying. And it may seem that any person genuinely moved by "love" could not refuse to dirty his hands by doing an evil deed whose results were so good. In a moment we will consider what Newman refuses to grant: that there might be circumstances in which one *should* do such an evil deed. But first we must understand the reason why Newman is essentially right, how it is that he articulates a concern that must be central in Christian ethics.

From an impersonal standpoint our actions can perhaps be regarded as just a certain kind of event in the world, but as moral agents—as creatures made for communion in love with God—we can never so regard them. Our actions are not simply events in the world; they are occasions in which to come upon ourselves, to learn as we can in no other way who we are.²³ They permit us to see whether we trust God to care for us and for the world he has made—or whether we have shouldered that burden ourselves. To aim at evil, even in a good cause, is to take into our person a choice against what is good—not just to let this happen, but to invest it with the personal involvement of our purpose.²⁴ *It is to begin to make of ourselves people who would not want to be with God.* This is what must be said in defense of Newman. This is why he is essentially correct.

Having said that, we can grant that moral rules are never likely to be as simple and straightforward as they at first seem. Exceptional cases will present them-

selves, and such cases are often offered in support of a consequentialist ethic. Many exceptional cases are less problematic than they may seem, however; they simply suggest the need for complexity and exception-clauses in the moral rules we adopt. (And Newman has not failed to see this. What he absolutely disavows, for example, is that anyone should steal a farthing *without excuse*.) The more troubling cases are rarer but deeply disturbing. Michael Walzer has termed them instances of “supreme emergency” and, discussing in particular the morality of warfare, has characterized them in terms of a twofold necessity.²⁵ Even though, according to Walzer, the rules of war should not ordinarily be broken even in a good cause, the supreme emergency presents a situation in which we must do so (though without denying that we incur guilt in doing so). An emergency is “supreme” when it is both *morally* and *strategically* necessary to break the moral rule for the sake of the desired outcome. Morally necessary—if it is imperative that we achieve our end, imperative because failure here would mean not just the loss of certain goods but acquiescence to the rule of evil. Strategically necessary—because it must be true that no other way of resisting this evil presents itself to us.

Some will argue that to permit the possibility of an exception even in such circumstances must inevitably undermine the non-consequentialist character of an ethic.²⁶ This might be true if the overriding of moral principle countenanced in the moment of supreme emergency were *justified* on consequentialist grounds. But Walzer offers no such justification; nor do I. Instead, his categories of moral and strategic necessity seek to describe the moment in which necessity truly has us in its grip—the moment when either we accept the rule of evil or, refusing to do that, invest evil with the involvement of our own purpose. A moment, in short, in which we are no longer free—except to cry out as Augustine’s wise judge would: “Deliver me from my necessities.”²⁷ The evil deed can still be done in such a moment as an act of trust, but only if this prayer is uttered also. Thus, the moment of supreme emergency, like what Charles Fried has called the *catastrophic* as an ethical category, identifies a moment of necessity for which our usual categories of moral judgment are no longer sufficient.²⁸ Walzer’s characterization of the moment of supreme emergency is, necessarily, general. And although some might wish that it be made more precise, there is good moral reason why it cannot be. In such circumstances the agent ought to face an internal struggle between the demands of morality and the hard chains of necessity. If moralists were able to specify justifying conditions in advance, this struggle—which is essentially the struggle to trust God—would not have to take place.²⁹

The Christian is called in every circumstance of life to trust God. This call delivers us from the tyranny which requires that we be something more than finite beings, that we always seek to produce what is (impersonally considered) the best overall outcome. But this call does more than free us from the pursuit

of good consequences; it also limits the ways in which we may do so. We are not to seek the good by doing evil, by acting in ways which manifest our failure to trust God to care for us and the world, by seeking to take upon ourselves the burden of a divine providential governance. That is why a Christian ethic need not be consequentialist and must not be. And if a moment of supreme emergency should arise, the Christian can and will offer no justification for overriding the moral rules which bind us to our neighbors and thereby limit us. The Christian must seek no impersonal standpoint from which to be justified in such a decision. If we are truly caught in the web of necessity, we must act. But if while acting we do not fail in trust, we will indeed—as Augustine saw—pray for deliverance from the God who is not bound by our necessities.

IV: *Is God a Consequentialist?*

More than half a century before Godwin wrote his *Political Justice*, Joseph Butler, one of the great English moralists, argued that the moral obligation of human beings was not to produce the greatest good possible but to do good within the limits and restrictions placed upon us by moral law. Butler's reason for believing this was theological, and he did not attempt to understand human nature or our moral responsibilities in isolation from the Creator upon whom our life depends. "The happiness of the world is the concern of Him who is the Lord and Proprietor of it; nor do we know what we are about when we endeavour to promote the good of mankind in any ways but those which He has directed, that is indeed in all ways not contrary to veracity and justice."³⁰ Human beings are not, Butler claimed, free to determine their moral responsibilities from a purely impersonal standpoint. They are always located in nature and history, and to be thus located is part of what it means to be human. Butler was willing to consider the "supposition" that God might himself be a consequentialist, but that would mean only that God had thought it best on the whole for us not to be and had created us as beings whose freedom to seek the good was morally limited.

The fact then appears to be, that we are constituted so as to condemn falsehood, unprovoked violence, injustice, and to approve of benevolence to some preferably to others abstracted from all consideration, which conduct is likely to produce an overbalance of happiness or misery; and therefore, were the Author of Nature to propose nothing to Himself as an end but the production of happiness, were His moral character merely that of benevolence; yet ours is not so. Upon that supposition indeed the only reason of His giving us the above mentioned approbation of benevolence to some persons rather than others, and

disapprobation of falsehood, unprovoked violence and injustice, must be that He foresaw this constitution of our nature would produce more happiness than forming us with a temper of mere general benevolence. But still, since this is our constitution, falsehood, violence, injustice, must be vice in us, and benevolence to some preferably to others, virtue, abstracted from all consideration of the overbalance of evil or good which they may appear likely to produce.³¹

The movement from Butler to Godwin's statement that "that life ought to be preferred which will be most conducive to the general good" represents in some ways the tendency of modern moral theory. And it is a movement from a conception of human beings as creatures always in relation to God and therefore always limited in certain ways to a quite different vision of the human agent as the godlike bearer of an unlimited responsibility for producing good results.

J. B. Schneewind has sketched the "story" of the rise of modern moral philosophy in a way that suggests such a theological point.³² He notes that the moral philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries took place against the background of a received and still deeply held—even if now also deeply challenged—belief in the just and good providential governance of God. The production of good at which the moral life aimed was in no sense anyone's solo effort; rather, it was a cooperative endeavor. Each was to carry out the tasks given him and to respect the moral law that tied his life together with others in various bonds, and this could be done in the confidence that one thereby played one's part in the overall enterprise whose final purposes were God's alone to determine. "Thus," Schneewind writes, "no [human] agent has a task properly described as producing the good." Since human beings never fully understand the final goal and the particular contributions different agents make to it, they are never in a position to accept the governance of this entire cooperative undertaking—never in a position to take control of the course of history. "Hence, for us our duties must always have an absolute deontic status, although—as Butler points out—God may well be utilitarian and may understand the laws of morality in that sense."

But what happens if these religious beliefs begin to fade? It is not hard to see how it should be that, for people who remain morally serious but lack the religious underpinnings once provided by Christian culture, consequentialism should seem a quite natural moral theory. This is the plot of Schneewind's story.

Suppose the aim of the enterprise is human happiness, rather than cosmic displays of God's glory: then we can begin to understand the goal. Suppose God no longer intervenes in particular cases in the world: then we cannot be sure He will make up for failures by our fellows; then each of us has some degree of responsibility of see to it that the end is indeed brought about by doing our duty. The absolute deontic status is

gone; we are required, morally, to judge to some extent by results. Thus, the inner logic of a cooperative venture carries us toward utilitarianism as an explanation.

If God is not available to produce the best overall outcome, and if it is important for human wellbeing that someone accept this responsibility, then human beings themselves are the most likely candidates. And so we succumb to the serpent's temptation in the name of responsible love.

At the same time, the old rules which govern the bonds of human cooperation will remain; they will exercise some claim over us even though we will not always be able to demonstrate that they serve to produce what is best overall. These rules may, therefore, come to seem rather puzzling and mysterious, since it will be hard for creatures who have accepted a godlike role to understand why they should accept any limits on their freedom to produce the good.

Thus, we have learned to deal with the tension between the *good* and the *right* in quite a different manner than did Butler. This tension—between the worthwhile results we seek to produce in and for the lives of others, and the moral limits on how we are to act—is a permanent one in human history. If we try to eliminate it, we seek, in a sense, to save ourselves. But pride and trust will understand it differently. For the heart that trusts God, the tension is always occasion for temptation—a moment of danger in which, seeing that the fruit of the tree is good for food, we will be tempted to eat of it. For the proud heart that would be like God, the tension will seem a call to the daring and responsible exercise of human freedom. But, in fact, this is only the illusion of responsibility, and the proud heart lives a lie. “If, as consequentialism holds, we were indeed equally morally responsible for an infinite radiation of concentric circles originating from the center point of some action, then while it might look as if we were enlarging the scope of human responsibility and thus the significance of personality, the enlargement would be greater than we could support.”³³ Pride makes war on the truth of the universe and must therefore end with no-thing, not even genuine human responsibility.

The first article of the Christian creed locates human beings in nature and history—beings who are limited and dependent creatures, even if also free to an indefinite degree from the constraints of time and space. The second article of that creed affirms that the Father who has fixed the bounds of our habitation has—to use the philosophers' language for the moment—given his Son into death for the general wellbeing. And if the first article of the creed seems to restrict the means by which we may pursue what is best, the second article seems to depict a divine love which, if it serves as our example, might make consequentialists of us all. We can perhaps discern here a deeper reason why the tension between the right and the good cannot be eliminated from our world. It reflects

not only our nature as both free and finite but also God's action on our behalf in creation and redemption.

We may doubt, though, whether Butler's "supposition" is anything more than an interesting thought experiment. For the God of the Christian creed is not precisely a consequentialist—one who seeks what is best by adopting an impersonal perspective from which to manipulate our doings. He is a lover, who enters into our nature and history and never fails to love those whom he meets here. If the Father gives his Son into death, it is also true that the Son willingly takes up this vocation and enacts it without failing in trust. This means that in his sovereign freedom God takes our finite being into himself, suffers its tensions, and overcomes them. For that reason we trust him; for that reason we do not seek to understand the meaning of neighbor-love apart from such trust; and for that reason we live in hope. It may be, indeed, that moral theory needs hope if trust and love are to be understood properly. Moral theory needs the hope that God can complete what remains incomplete in our limited strivings and can be trusted to work for good in everything. Without such hope we may be hard pressed to resist the lure of consequentialism. But when the Christian virtues of trust, love, and hope mutually interpenetrate our character, we may recognize in consequentialist moral theory the voice of the serpent. And even if for most of us most of the time a theoretical mistake in moral theory is not the greatest danger that lies in wait, it's still true that we are given here an opportunity to enact our own trust by loving God, as we are commanded, with the mind.

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NOTES

1. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV/1 IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 448.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 56f.
3. The language here reflects Thomas Ogletree's *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
4. Thomas Nagel, "The Limits of Objectivity," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Volume I, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 131.
5. This shows that the serpent cannot have in mind the establishment of ethics *simpliciter*. We should note a concession Barth himself makes (even if only in a small print excursus). He grants the possibility of an ethic "that knew the limits of humanity, and would not therefore treat humanity as an absolute, but would for that very reason do justice to it and serve it." He finds such an ethic exemplified in the writing of certain novelists. Cf., *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 pp. 540-542.
6. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 80.

7. R. M. Hare, "Moral Conflicts," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Volume I, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 180.
8. Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 4.
9. Godwin's *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* was first published in 1793. My citations will come from volume I of the edition abridged and edited by Raymond A. Preston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926). In later editions Godwin modified some of his stands, but Preston's abridgment uses the first edition in which Godwin sets forth his position most provocatively.
10. Cf. Exodus 20:2—"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."
11. Scheffler, p. 5.
12. Nagel, pp. 119-139.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
14. John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 1983), p. 93.
15. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*. Reprint of seventh edition (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 87.
16. Godwin, p. 44.
- 16a. Sidgwick, p. 434.
17. A point made repeatedly by Bernard Williams. For example: "It is artificial to suppose that a thorough commitment to the values of friendship and so on can merely alternate, on a timetable prescribed by calm or activity, with an alien set of reflections. Moreover, since the reflections are indeed alien, some kind of willed forgetting is needed, an internal surrogate of those class barriers on which Sidgwick replied, to keep the committed dispositions from being unnerved by instrumental reflection when they are under pressure." *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 109.
18. Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (August 12, 1976), p. 466.
19. Hare, p. 183.
20. Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 17.
21. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Edited with an introduction and notes by A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. Riverside Editions, 1956), p. 234.
22. Shusaku Endo, *Silence*. Translated by William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980), p. 259.
23. D. M. Mackinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1957), pp. 97f.
24. Cf. Nagel, p. 132 and Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 27.
25. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), cf. esp. pp. 251-268, 323-327.
26. Cf. Finnis, p. 83.
27. *City of God*, XIX, 6.
28. Fried, p. 10.
29. This is the way Whewell's view is characterized by J. B. Schneewind in *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 114.

30. Joseph Butler, Dissertation "On the Nature of Virtue," appended to *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed*, Morley's Universal Library Edition (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1884), p. 302.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

32. For the general "plot" of the next three paragraphs, see J. B. Schneewind, "Moral Crisis and the History of Ethics," pp. 525-539 in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume VIII: Contemporary Perspectives on the History of Philosophy*, ed. by Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

33. Fried, p. 34.