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Book Review: Christian Moral Realism, Natural Law Narrative, Virtue, And The Gospel

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most gifted philosophers writing today, an expert on the history of philosophy, and someone who has been thinking and writing about Aquinas for many years. So all serious students of Aquinas should read it and seek to engage with its details (on many of which I have not been able to touch in this review). My overall impression, however, is that, interesting though its discussions of texts of Aquinas are, it has somehow managed to miss the forest for the trees, and not to have caught what Aquinas is generally driving at in what he has to say about God, being, and existence. Perhaps Kenny's basic mistake is to assume that talk about God is easily assimilated to talk about creatures. It has been suggested that, in trying to speak of God and creatures (which is what, in effect, Aquinas is always trying to do), Aquinas was working on the assumption that we can use words, not only to say what they mean, but also to point beyond what we understand them to mean (cf. Herbert McCabe, "The Logic of Mysticism," Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 31, Cambridge, 1992). And, though Kenny does not engage with it, there is something to be said for that thesis, hard though it may be to do so given the complexities of medieval theories of reference (of which Kenny says little) and given corresponding complexities in modern theories of reference (of which Kenny says something).

Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue, and the Gospel, by Rufus Black. Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 368. \$90.00 (Cloth).

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The perennial issue of moral realism is made all the more elusive by the protean nature of both the adjective and the noun. As early as Plato's dialogues one finds compelling arguments to the effect that all allegedly moral discourse is but a veiled reference to personal desires and merely conventional values and interests. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moral science was but a part of a general psychology of human nature, with special attention to sentiment and the passions. Much of the influential writing on the subject was in defense of rationalist or emotivist or utilitarian conceptions of morality.

Within these inspired debates it is seldom easy to extract an ontologically precise version of the "realism" being affirmed or denied. Too often the controversy is framed in terms of "objectivity" and "subjectivity," the contestants seemingly and comparably confident that the status of realism must hang in the balance. It is as if, from the fact that the honeybee's visual sensitivity is greatest in the ultraviolet region of the spectrum, and that ours reaches its peak in the region of 5,500 Angstroms, roses can't be real after all! It should go without saying, of course, that ontological questions regarding the reality of an entity are distinct from epistemological questions regarding the adequacy or accuracy with which such an entity is apprehended. Thus, there may well be real moral properties, but they may be beyond our epistemic resources. Or, there may well be real moral properties, but they may elude all powers of comprehension except those

bound up with sentiments or intuitions or judgments of utility, etc.

A now familiar way of conveying the standard sense of "realism" is to say that real entities are *mind-independent*, though this scarcely removes the difficulties. It rather displaces them, often at a distance that can only be traversed circularly. Clearly, "mind" is not *mind-independent*, and if this fact is taken to deprive mind itself of ontological standing then the qualifier, *mind-independent*, becomes jejune. Nor is that ubiquitous conceptual solvent, *referential opacity*, helpful here. Entities in particle physics seem to be neither referentially transparent nor stable, but their reality is beyond dispute. In all, then, treatises on moral realism inevitably originate in ambiguity, all too often achieving less through demonstration than by way of arguable stipulations. This is evident in the early pages of *Christian Moral Realism* where the author, recognizing the difficulties, settles for a broad definition of moral realism; to wit, the claim that, "*the ultimate epistemological grounding for moral truth is a given reality external to the will*" (p. 8, ital. in original). Distinct from this, according to Black, is the question of just how moral truth, as he puts it, might be grounded in this reality. It is sufficient to observe at this point that, as with "mind-independent," so with the qualifier, "external to the will," little clarity is gained as to just what the core ontological claim is. To say that X is external to the will is as true of apples in the basket beneath the tree as it is of the hallucinations experienced by the suffering schizophrenic. Moreover, there is an unacknowledged difference between the ontological grounding of X and its *epistemological* grounding. The epistemological grounding of muons and black holes is the nomological structure of the universe as given in theoretical physics. Their ontological grounding is another matter entirely. Thus, an unambiguous statement of moral realism is far more economical: The ultimate grounding for moral truth is reality. Understood in these terms, the question remains open as to whether and how human beings uncover such a truth, a question not unlike that which asks whether and how human beings uncover the truth (if it is a truth) that the cosmos is ordered.

In *Christian Moral Realism* Rufus Black must abandon the vexing matter of definitions in order to engage what he takes to be fundamental issues in Christian moral thought. To give structure to an otherwise wide ranging set of issues, Black offers a three-way "conversation", as it were, between and among the Grizes school of Natural Law (Grizes, Boyle, Finnis, George), Stanley Hauerwas's narratological perspective, and Oliver O'Donovan's evangelicalism. Within this conversation, Black is not a silent auditor but one who presses contending sides to confront philosophical and conceptual problems arising from their works and, more significantly, from moral thought itself. He proposes to extricate what he takes to be fundamental from contentious debates between liberal and conservative Roman Catholic moralists seen by Black as struggling to control "the morality of the public square in the United States" (p. 5). It is doubtful that the disputants he has in mind would defend their positions in such terms, but he is right to examine the Grizes position independently of this other battle.

Noting the large and expanding literature of clarification, Black recognizes that the Natural Law perspective as developed by Grizes and Finnis is subtle and vulnerable to fairly basic misunderstandings. Thus, in chap-

ter one, “‘Is,’ ‘Ought’ and Theological Ethics”, he locates the perspective within the challenging framework of Hume’s moral philosophy. If one grants that moral imperatives are underivable from physical and anthropological facts, then one is led to conclude with Grizes and Finnis that the foundations of morality are not uncovered by way of theories about human nature. Finding the strictures of classical Scholasticism insufficient to accommodate the robust realm of possible lives, Grizes et al. have enlarged the canvas beyond the perimeter of the obligatory and into the wider margins created by freely chosen courses of action.

Hauerwas, granting the non-derivability thesis—identifies the special problem it poses for the theologian who takes scripture as a summary of the way things really are and are supposed to be. If scriptural truths are factual in the relevant way, “oughts” cannot be derived from them. As summarized by Black, Hauerwas relies on arguments advanced against the non-derivability thesis; the “institutional fact” argument (developed by John Searle), as well as Philippa Foot’s arguments to the effect that the very language of morals requires an integral connection between actions of a certain kind and ascriptions of a certain kind. Hauerwas, availing himself of arguments of this sort, is able to relax the is-ought tension by way of the actual life that is lived in ways intelligibly related to one’s beliefs and interests, as these come to express the very character of the actor. Finally, it is O’Donovan who grasps the nettle and concludes that only by accepting the implicature advanced by the scriptural *therefores* does one enter into Christian morals. But this position, too, can be rendered compatible with both the Grizes and the Hauerwas framework of *possible lives* and the grounding of those free choices that realize some and eschew others.

It is fair to say that, by the end of this first chapter, the uncommitted reader is likely to find that Hume’s vexing thesis has survived, if not prospered. Surely one of the great strengths of the Grizes school is its persistence in arguing for the derivability (via “self-evident” truths) of ought from is. Outside the Natural Law context, there is a general failure to raise that more fundamental question, seldom addressed to defenders of Hume, regarding the alleged requirement that, to have respectable ontological standing, “oughts” be *logically derivable* from occurrent states of affairs. Black is especially attentive to the manner in which the Grizes school develops its argument for the self-evident nature of the basic human goods. He performs an especially useful task in showing how the Grizes school has ready replies to, e.g., Mackie, Blackburn and Harman; perhaps an even more useful task in showing that the Mackie-Blackburn-Harman sorts of critiques were essentially present from the first in Hume’s own formulation of the problem.

Blackburn is now routinely credited with a “sophisticated” (p. 101) version of anti-realism, the adjective here based, I suppose, on the use he makes of supervenience and non-entailment. For moral realism to succeed, it is (allegedly) necessary that moral properties “supervene” on natural properties, the latter (allegedly) exhausting the realm of the real. At the same time, nothing that supervenes on natural properties can entail moral worth. This line of argument (which, alas, is rather more venerable than sophisticated) begs the question as to the boundaries and nature of

what is “natural,” having already begged the question as to whether there can be a moral reality that is not in any way dependent (“supervenient”) on non-moral substrates. On the logical issue of derivability (the entailment condition), matters are even more muddled. Take, as an instance, a state of affairs of such a nature that many agree that something must be done; i.e., that action of a certain kind *ought* to be performed. Let us say that, in this and all kindred circumstances, it is not possible logically to “derive” the imperative from the facts. But is there some more basic imperative establishing such a logical warrant? And what is the source of *that* imperative? Or, again, consider heat. Heat is surely not logically derivable from “mean kinetic energy”; it just *is* mean kinetic energy, and nothing is logically derivable from itself. Thus, one retort to the underderivability thesis is that what one *ought* to do just *is* included in what the occurrent state of affairs affords by way of possible actions. From the fact that, in such situations, there are those who simply don’t see it that way would, on this account, raise questions about the moral acuity of various participant. Is this “moral law by consensus”? Yes and no. In any case, I do not intend to develop the argument here or suggest that it is either the only or the best retort. Rather, I note that the pages devoted to defeating Hume’s claim might, by now, be converted to the more fruitful project of testing its coherence, and this is precisely what the Grizes school has accomplished.

Black next and closely considers the Natural Law foundations of the Grizes school, reducing to tabular form the similarities between O’Donovan’s core values and those “incommensurable goods” featured in the major works of Grizes, Finnis, Boyle and George. The difference between Hauerwas’s reflections on life as an instrumental good and the Grizez position on its being a basic good is noted as a way of illustrating the more fundamental differences in approach. Much more attention is given to the distinctions and relationships between theoretical and practical reason, to O’Donovan’s denial of the rigid distinction, and to the resistance of the Grizes school to the notion that the canons practical reason must proceed from, e.g., psychological research. The basic human goods, on the Grizes’ account, just are the irreducible reasons for actions that are conducive to human flourishing. As it is in the very nature of reality itself that the conditions for moral choice become possible, a *moral realism* is immanent in the very nature of things. This does not generate lock-step orthodoxies and thus is not embarrassed by cultural diversity, moral pluralism, etc. As Finnis has argued and as Black makes clear, the incommensurability of basic human goods virtually guarantees such diversity and even conflict (pp. 107 ff).

A far more compelling challenge to Natural Law theory is advanced by O’Donovan and is based on the deep eschatological truths asserted by Christianity. A fallen creature has no firm and sure grasp of the true nature and end of creation, including his own nature. Abandoned to the historicist’s world of change and clutter, this fallen humanity casts about for the reed-thin moorings of the moment. It is only by way of the stable and complete Christian revelation that all this is overcome, and surely not by way of the logical and ethological devices of the Natural Law theorist.

Black devotes many thoughtful pages to something of a Christian *pax*

philosophica which succeeds chiefly because the points of conflict between O'Donovan and the Natural Law theorists are neither sharp nor numerous. Making this clear, Black is then able to turn again to Hauerwas's narrative mode, contrasting it with Grisez and illustrating the importance of (Grisez-type) rules and principles even in making sense of (Hauerwas-type) moral contexts. One especially instructive illustration pertains to the issue of abortion with pregnancy arising from rape. Black shows (pp. 228 ff) that, contrary to Hauerwas's belief that Grisez's approach does little more than rehearse the Roman Catholic teaching, it is precisely the analytical tools developed by the Grisez school that provides a means by which to reach defensible positions. The manner in which to overcome a relativism arising from the sheer particularity of historical narratives is to locate, within the narrative, just those universal maxims that permit analogies in the first place. An inquiry into what it means to live "like Christ" is not about sandals or fishing villages.

Hauerwas's writings on the nature of character and the manner in which our choices are the means by which we form character form a bridge to Aristotle and to Aquinas that can be crossed as readily by members of the Grisez school as by Hauerwas himself. But once on the other side they are likely to disagree as to what they find. Black shows the fundamental difference in that concept of "free choice" equally central to the Natural Law and the Hauerwas positions. Hauerwas assigns character-forming powers to the community at large, its "narratives" defining what it means to be a worthy person. Surely Aristotle – surely the entire Greek world of antiquity—would accept as a generalization that *polis andra didaskei*. But Aristotle also understands the active part the person takes in selecting from the cultural options and, in general, in forming one's own character. As for O'Donovan, the emphasis on character might well constrict moral space to such an extent as to impoverish it.

Clearly, Rufus Black has thought deeply and justly on those contemporary treatises that affirm and that challenge the Christian conception of humanity, as that humanity expresses itself in its moral confusions, its moral certainties, its moral struggles. It is a worthy addition to a literature otherwise and laudably secular, and therefore less than laudably indifferent to just what makes the struggle a *struggle*.