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A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY

The third paper is the substance of a discussion between Professor Paul Hirst, Mr. O. R. Johnston and Mr. A. E. Willingale, edited by Mr. C. G. Martin. The discussion was based upon a number of previously circulated questions setting out some points in which the doctrine of Common Grace might relate to other concepts. The paper that follows is obviously a selection and abbreviation of the discussion and does not necessarily represent the position of all (or in every point, any) of the participants. It does, however, represent one definite three-hour attempt to relate a Christian view of the world to contemporary thought.

Common Grace and the Autonomy of Knowledge

One of the tasks of the philosopher is to show the logical structure of areas of knowledge and their inter-relation. He attempts to make a coherent map, resolving apparent confusions between different types of knowledge—or at least to show how these confusions arise. Central to such clarification is the idea that certain areas of thought and knowledge are 'autonomous', or logically independent of knowledge in other areas. Agreement within such areas is possible then even for people who differ widely on other matters, and this is not because they 'sink their differences' or 'compromise' but because of the logical limitations demanded by engaging in such an autonomous activity. Just as a Christian and an atheist may play chess, and agree entirely about the threats implicit in a given position and the best ways of meeting them, so they can engage in the autonomous pursuits of knowledge. They may play chess for widely different reasons, and with widely different tempers, but on the correctness or otherwise of the moves they can and must agree. The game of chess is an autonomous field of activity. Is not the pursuit of science, for instance, independent of religious beliefs in just the same way?

To be human involves being able to engage at least to some degree in various fields of thought and enquiry. The Christian would claim that by virtue of his knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Truth, he can see some relationship between all areas of knowledge and find them fit together in a meaningful whole. He would suspect that unbelievers either do not venture into certain areas of thought, or else endure deep tensions between areas—in either case being potentially less able to gain the fullest meaning from experience. But the present discussion suggests that even if people refuse the centrality of Christ, and the area of knowledge related to Him, God has so ordered affairs that there are large areas where truth is still available. In these areas knowledge is acquired autonomously, independently of religious beliefs and the place of such knowledge in a Christian world-view. The fact that men may refuse to act on it, or may suppress it, does not destroy its general availability or compulsiveness. Such a situation operates to the well-being of mankind, and may be seen as a continuous activity of God, giving to just and unjust alike. To such common giving of autonomous understanding, the label 'Common Grace' would not be inappropriate.

General Agreement and Reasonableness

This discussion does not start from any supposed definition of Common Grace, but from the simple observation that in practice Christians and others do work successfully with the same tools within the same frameworks. In intellectual matters we find ready agreement in reasoning as a method of arriving at conclusions, and an astonishing measure of agreement in the conclusions.

About the reasoning enterprise as a whole, Christians may well say that, with every other human endowment, it is part of God's giving; the 'agreement' to seek reasons for acting, the ability to perform the reasoning, are God's grace, even where not perceived as such by those who use them; just as life is God's gift even to those who refuse to see it as such (e.g. Dan. 5: 23). Unbelievers may see the reasoning as the fortuitous fruit of evolutionary process, or may simply accept it and regard questions about its origin as useless. The fact remains that all do in fact practice, recognise and use these abilities according to the same logical laws.

Traditionally this has been seen by theologians in 'restraint terms'. It has been argued that mankind, not wishing to retain God in their knowledge, might wreck the world hopelessly, had God not arranged this area of common agreement, the common rational enterprise, as a bulwark against anarchy and disorder. One could speculate about this—for example, whether 'culture' and 'reasonableness' could be part of unfallen man—part of the original nature in which he was to glorify God.[1] But this is speculation, and, be the function of reason restraint or no, it is certain that the 'dominion' which man exercises over creation rests *now* in his capacity to observe and organise his observations into patterns which enable him to predict and control.

Two Possible Areas of Autonomous Knowledge

As mentioned above, some areas of observation and reasoning appear to be logically autonomous, i.e. the concepts and true statements of the area are related in accordance with certain rules, so that in principle everything in this area is knowable within a given system, and nothing outside the field can affect the truth or relations between statements within it. Two such areas will now be considered—that of scientific enquiry and morality.

Scientific Enquiry

The area of science is characterised by the fundamental principle 'Go and look', and the expectation that what is observed is regular. The resulting descriptions of observed regularities are the 'laws of science', often spoken of in terms of 'cause' and 'effect'. No 'law' is to be denied in the field of scientific enquiry except by some observation within the field which conflicts with it. This is the study of 'what happens', and no happening can be shielded from investigation. It is logically possible to

imagine a complete scientific account of the whole of experience, and no considerations of value or morality could affect such an account. It is a field autonomous with respect to morals and religion. By the same token such questions as 'How did it all begin?' or 'Is there any point in it all?' are questions which cannot be raised in this field—they are not scientific questions.

This field of scientific enquiry is pursued with equal success by Christian and non-Christian, and in the same manner. The Christian will have a different view of science as a whole (e.g. as a God-given method to exercise 'dominion') but as to what is scientifically correct, he will share with all users of the scientific method.

Christians may point out that the scientific enterprise arose out of the idea of God as rational and dependable, Whose ways are open to humble investigation and possess an order and completeness. They may argue that the 'discontinuous' and unpredictable view of God's activity in Islam is one reason for the lack of scientific enterprise in that culture. So much may be granted, but does this mean the Christian will make a 'better' scientist? It may be said he can give a fuller and more coherent account of science, better based and more closely related to a total world-view. But the Humanist—with his emphasis on evolution (biological and psychosocial)—can also give an account of considerable coherence and 'tight-knittedness'. A Christian might better say that his view is more comprehensive; as randomness gives place to pattern, he can say 'This is because there is a Designer, and He may be related to many other fields than the scientific. This is just one meaningful way of looking at God's World'.

But a scientist (Christian or other), *as* a scientist, does not value this portmanteau, overall view—it is not itself part of science. He abstracts sections from experience for study. The pattern he discovers is *consistent with* Christianity, but does not *necessitate* it, and indeed is logically independent. Attempts at logical relation—e.g. to say from religious premisses what scientific discovery will be like—lead only to confusion. Again if we look at different overall world-views, we find they have to be modified in the light of science, or fall by the wayside. The Hindu and Muslim views of the world are now both under pressure from science. Christians, at various times, have had to spend a lot of time re-interpreting Genesis because of their inability to dissociate science as a separate limited area of observation and analysis from a world view in which God is creator and sustainer. Many kinds of 'gods' must be discarded if one is not to contract out of the scientific enterprise.

This general position of the relationship between science and religion has now been convincingly argued,[2] and the autonomy of science is widely accepted by Christians. It is accepted without the fear that in so doing, the Faith is being jeopardised. The two are logically distinct. No amount of description of the psychology or social milieu of Jeremiah can decide whether his 'thus said the LORD' is an actual communication from God

or not. Within the scientific field Christian, Humanist, Communist, or Hindu *must* arrive at similar conclusions, for if they all engage in science they are thereby working under identical principles. How they square these conclusions with other fields is a separate question. Christians see this inevitable agreement in scientific enquiry as a God-given boon which defies the efforts of evil to twist it. Things *are* so; they *can* be understood; here is one ultimate human possibility.

Use and Abuse

Of course it will be rejoined that even if evil men cannot twist scientific truth, they can put those truths to evil ends. *How* to produce atomic fission is a scientific matter all agree upon, and cannot be altered. *Why* and for what purpose such power is used is a very different matter. This introduces us to the transition to another possibly autonomous field—that of morality. Merely as scientists, Christians, Humanists and Nazis may agree that knowledge could be gained by experiment on human beings. But Christian and Humanist would most likely find themselves together at some point in resisting this, or similar, *unlimited* pursuit of science. The 'desire to know' is not the only thing to be pursued. This consideration, however, does not arise *within* the scientific field itself, but from outside. Science is being viewed from an outside viewpoint from which it, as a discipline entire in itself, is put in its place by reference to other considerations. If asked 'Why should we not experiment, for example, on Jews?, both Christian and Humanist will give *reasons*, but not the sort of reasons they give in the scientific field. They will talk of 'rights of individuals', 'equality of opportunity', 'people as ends in themselves'.[3]

Morality

Morality can be seen as the area of reasoning logically about values and actions, of 'having reasons' for what we do. Note that this is in fact what *does* happen in practice. Challenged about a particular action, we attempt to give reason for it, to show that although at first sight it is against some general principle, the present circumstances make the differing action appropriate. If this 'quest for reasons for actions' is pursued long enough, we are driven back to a few basic principles. Principles such as: truth-telling, impartiality (i.e. not making difference of treatment unless there are observable, relevant differences in the cases), liberty, considering other people as able to determine their own ends. If questioning persists at these points, the questions become of a different logical kind. Up to now they have been of the form 'What is the reason for doing A rather than B?': they now become of the form 'Why have reasons?' i.e. 'What is the reason for having reasons?' and this is logically like saying in science 'Why should I go and look?'. Exponents of the autonomy of morality as an area of thought assert that the few basic principles referred to are ultimate, and can be shown to be ultimate, in the same way that observation, regularity and causation are ultimate in the structure of scientific thought.[4] Nor will it do to say that we can choose our basic principles (any more than we can choose our ultimate points of reference in science). It is logically un-

sound to say that we go in for impartiality and the rest because the majority of people *desire* it. Just as what 'ought to be' cannot be derived from 'what is', so it is independent of 'what we should like to be'. If there is a concensus of opinion that impartiality is ultimate, it is not the consensus that validates the judgment. The consensus *must* arise among rational beings, insofar as they are true to their rational nature, because impartiality is the outcome of asking for reasons for behaviour in a community of rational beings'.[5]

Misgivings about the Autonomy of Morality

The autonomy of morality is less readily allowed than the autonomy of science, and several points arise for consideration.

1. Are the two autonomies the same? We can think of God biblically as sending man off to do his own scientific thinking. Saying, 'Here is the world. I'm not going to tell you all about it. You can find out if you look and reason. You will find it answers to the treatment and thus you will come to the truth. When you find how to control it, remember you are My stewards in the earth'. There is no shame or sting in this 'being sent out'—it is, rather, of a piece with man's dignity.

But traditionally, the 'knowledge of good and evil' has been seen as the result of the Fall. Man is 'sent out of the garden'—very much with sting and shame—with the ability to recognise good and evil (but unable to practise the good). How can these autonomies be the same?

The answer lies in the fact that the present discussion is concerned not with the religious origin, but the present status of moral and scientific knowledge. However and whenever man got his abilities, he is *now* in logically similar positions in science and morals. He is equipped with tools to obtain knowledge—a do-it-yourself kit—and he cannot excuse his ignorance in either sphere on the grounds of inadequate provision. For scientific enquiry he is provided with logic, senses, the external world to work on. In morality he has logic, senses, human relations and the basic principles mentioned on the previous page.[6]

How unfallen man knew God's will is not clear,[7] but the *present* situation is substantially as stated above, and Romans 2 may be taken to support this interpretation.

2. 'Autonomy' is often used to describe man's attempt to do without God. 'You will be as gods' is the primeval temptation, and refusal to submit to any law is the essence of sin (I John 5). But in the present discussion 'autonomy' is intended in its meaning in logic. 'Autonomy of morals' for this purpose does not mean that man is trying to go it alone, but that judgments of moral truth form a system which is logically consistent, dependent on a few basic principles that are not derivable from any other area of knowledge. When we say that man decides to go it alone, to suppress the moral knowledge (or neglect the effort necessary to obtain it) and this is 'sinning', we use the language, not of morality, but of man's relation to God.

3. However plausibly the autonomy of morality is argued, the fact remains that few people act so rationally; they act from habit, or upon authority, or by hunch. Yet much of such action is right. Does the present discussion contend otherwise? No, the correctness of a statement or action is not in question—as in science it is quite possible to have the right result without the right reasons. What the present discussion contends is that such actions while being 'right' are not 'moral'. It also urges that, as far as possible, everyone should be encouraged to act with reason. Otherwise, what criteria are available to judge between contrary customs, hunches, intuitions and authorities? Because action *can be* rationally based, we should encourage the practice. This not only gives a defence against imposture, but also makes decisions and actions more fully personal as they are more fully understood.[8]

4. What, then, is the status of 'intuition'? The discussion is concerned with logical structure; i.e. how the judgments may be substantiated if challenged. It may be that people jump to the right judgment—or accept it upon authority. What is important is that they can do the moral sum—'fill in the working' and *show* that the judgment was right. And they should be encouraged to do so. Intuition of itself *guarantees* neither truth nor error.

5. What *is* rationality? Is it purely intellective? What is its relation to emotion? Moral judgments involve general reasoning—what would other people in this kind of situation do? This is certainly an intellective process. But moral judgment is accompanied by emotion and some of the factors to be taken into account in making moral judgments may well be the emotional responses of people involved. But the *judgment* itself is intellectual, recognising the emotional elements present, but assessing their weight according to relevant principles. This may involve 'discounting' our personal emotions—attempting to stand back, outside our own particular concern with the situation. This is clearly involved in the 'general reasoning' referred to above. For example: 'I can't stand the sight of blood, but this should not stop my helping in this accident. If the aversion is so strong that I shall probably faint, then I must help in some other way such as going for assistance'. Emotion may give powerful motivation for a course of action once decided upon, but it does not validate the *judgment*.

Here it may be noted that when a person asks 'Why should I follow reason and not emotion?' he is in fact asking a very odd question. He is asking for reasons for having reasons, thereby supposing that actions should be backed by reasons. Of course, he may not put the matter this way. He may make the assertion 'I shall act how I feel'. This puts him out of range of any logical argument.

To summarise, then, we may say that there *are* certain moral principles which are ultimate—there is a 'givenness' about them which means you can't ask any further questions, for they define moral reasoning. We may arrive at these principles in all sorts of ways—reading them in Scripture, hearing them from parents, teachers, or however. Having got them, we

can, if challenged, arrive at them logically, and it is this logical status which makes them morally binding upon us as rational beings. In this process, no recourse is necersary to other fields of thought.

Does Faith Add Anything?

It might be possible to argue for autonomy in other fields too, such as art or politics. But if all mankind has access to these areas, without reference to God, what does faith add, or unbelief subtract?

Negatively, one sign of sin is the failure to do what is known to be right. Moral knowledge does not give the ability to be moral. Another sign of sin may be the slowness with which mankind comes to both scientific and moral knowledge. Pride, rivalry, idleness, bigotry have all played their part in frustrating the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the same is no doubt true in other fields. As true ideas of God preserve the autonomy of science and morality for fruitful investigation, so unworthy ideas spill over into other areas. E.g. Romans 1, pagan thinking about God ended with 'all their thinking turning to futility'. It is remarkable that the biblical accounts are so free of erroneous cosmology. In Genesis, God is creator separate from his creation. Contemporary Sumerian accounts show confusion between spiritual and material, and gods whose morals are as confused as men's.

Does the Christian, then, have any additional faculty, or does he merely maintain the autonomy uncluttered by extraneous unworthy ideas and unimpeded by neglect or unwillingness to perform? In the justification of actions, the Christian is in general on all fours with others. He gives reasons of the same sort related to the same basic principles (he, of course, sees this autonomous structure as God's gracious provision). He will, however, go beyond the demands of autonomous morality at some points, basing his actions on revelation. There will be two stages in his argument, and they are closely related. When he accepts revelation, he does so *on reasonable grounds*. Thus, the statement 'God is good' uses 'good' in the sense of 'moral excellence' which includes all qualities referred to as 'good' in the autonomous area of moral discourse. Because God shows reliability, impartiality, truth, man has *reason* for accepting His authority, and then it is not unreasonable to say 'Whatever He tells me, I will do'. So the eighth century prophets argue that God should be obeyed—He is open to test in the area of His actions with His people, so they should accept His authority and standards in areas yet untested. For Christians the case is stronger still—the revelation of God in Christ shows every moral excellence and gives solid ground for accepting His direction in all affairs. Thus we justify our allegiance to God rather than Moloch, and acceptance of the Bible rather than the Koran or Gita.

It is undoubtedly part of the divine humility thus to open Himself to examination (e.g. John 8: 46, Isa. 5) giving man this step towards Him—still more, in allowing man to retain the possibility of moral knowledge and scientific understanding even when they are not used as stepping stones to Him.

Thus the Christian response will be twofold. In many situations he will make moral judgments just as unbelievers. In *some* situations, he will see other principles, beyond those which have non-Christian justification, as relevant to the case. If challenged here he will say 'My reasons for these actions stem from revelation, which I accept as reliable because wherever it runs parallel to logically ascertainable positions it is supported by them'. Such areas will include judgments about the spending of time and money, attitude to worship, attitudes of humility and forgiveness. (The New Testament emphasis on humility, for example, is derived from man's creatureliness before God. It is difficult to derive more than a pale reflection of it logically from other premisses, though when one has known Christian humility, other humilities—such as before grandeur in nature, or a work of art, or human self-sacrifice—are recognised as kindred qualities. The following of Christ, therefore, is thus a new *style* of living, within the demands of morality because deeper and more demanding. Love is the fulfilling of the law. And the discipleship does not begin discontinuously—it is continuous with the appreciation of Christ's moral excellence by reference to judgments available to all men.

One further suggestion may be made about revelation. If sin has blurred and slowed the quest for knowledge, faith has sometimes given truth (without the full logical support) in a way which may be described as 'beyond the context'. For example, the hygiene laws of the Hebrews, for which we now know scientific reasons, were in advance of the knowledge of the times.[9] The compassion and humanity of Deuteronomic law was in advance of any contemporary code.

Another way in which belief or unbelief affects the area of morality is this. The Fall means that Morality is not recognised as being relevant to the relationship between God and man. In whatever way (see above) unfallen man might arrive at moral truth, it would be recognised as the will of God. Fallen man may arrive at moral truth,—may even occasionally perform it—seeing in it no more than 'acting according to reason' or 'what must be if we are to live in community'. The Christian (by God's regenerative grace) has become aware that Morality, as a complete area of knowledge, is the mediation of God's will which he is bound to fulfil. The failure to fulfil it, is not only irrational, nor only offence against fellow rational beings, but 'sin' against God (Psa. 51 etc.). So by the law is the knowledge of sin. Two concepts can be distinguished—'man' and 'man-before-God'. The 'good pagan' lives within the first concept, the Christian within *both*. This leads to a further question.

Has the Christian Different Motivation?

He has additional motives because he lives both the moral life (i.e. as rational 'man') and also the religious life (i.e. as 'man-before-God') Moral principles, which on the first level were 'moral'—rationally coherent —are on the second level expressions of the mind of God—claims upon our obedience to Him.

This uses 'motive' in the sense of 'grounds of action'. It is also often used in the sense of 'power to act'. It is a Christian claim that God is at work within him 'both to will and to do God's good pleasure' (Phil. 2). This *claim* is not open to investigation in the field of moral knowledge and is strictly outside the present discussion. Moralists of all persuasions have distinguished moral knowledge from moral power. Romans 7: 19 is common ground to Paul, Ovid and many others. Such moralists also show that clearer moral understanding often strengthens desire to perform, yet makes them more conscious of failure.

Summary

The discussion above may be summarised very briefly as follows. It would seem that experience is so arranged that certain areas of knowledge, autonomous in themselves, are available to all. This is the way that things *are* and presents men with a fundamental human possibility of knowing. Man discovers that experience answers to reasonable investigations in a variety of ways. This, in the Christian view, is God's gracious giving. Things are not like this by chance, but by God's will. Properly understood, this reasonableness of the world may serve as guidepost to God.[10]

Some Remaining Questions

Two main areas await exploration:

A. The relation of this discussion to Biblical vocabulary. A few points are listed briefly for further thought.

   (*a*) 'conscience' appears to be used Biblically to mean 'the mechanism by which men arrive at moral knowledge' and is therefore the subject of the above analysis.

   (*b*) The work of the Holy Spirit. This appears as (i) convincing men of sin—i.e. leading to the recognition of morality as a whole as man's duty to God. (ii) 'striving against the flesh'—this is involved in the building of Christian character and may be described as giving discernment in applying principles, motivation to do so, perhaps overcoming tensions within the personality that make clear thought and steady judgment difficult. Observationally it does make a difference over a period (though a crucial experiment is difficult). The Biblical use would lead us to expect that the exact mechanism is difficult to describe (e.g. John 3: 8). New Testament illustrations include both separate influence (Rom. 8: 14) and inner resource (John 7: 38).
   (iii) glorifying God. The crucial division between Christian and non-Christian is not behavioural, but attitude to God, i.e. not moral but religious. The knowledge of God is not logically deduced (I Cor. chapters 1 and 2) but, when revealed, is found to be congruous with the highest that the world, by its wisdom, can know.

(*c*) 'faculties trained by practice' (Heb. 5: 14) and the general idea of character building. A morally disciplined person is more likely to make the right judgment when there is no time to 'do the sum of reasons'. He is, however, also likely to reflect on the situation afterwards, with a view to appraising his snap judgment. In this way faculties are trained and differing factors more surely assessed.

(*d*) 'repentance' involves not a change of moral reasoning, but an acceptance of it and its conclusions, and the taking seriously of its demands as binding upon *me*. It will also in the New Testament sense, include the awareness that this is binding on me not only as a rational being but as God's creature.

(*e*) 'love'—the usual word in the New Testament is *agapē*. Other 'loves' are largely emotional words, and need to be 'kept in their place' by reason. *Agapē* is often used as applying to a person completely, i.e. it has a strong intellectual component. To seek the good of the other involves knowing what 'good' is. It is suggested that there is nothing in the New Testament idea of love as moral spring to conflict with the most rigid analysis of *reasons* for action.[11]

B. Some other philosophies do not place such emphasis upon reason as fundamental. Existentialism, for example, in some forms seems to make 'will' rather than 'reason' the mark of authentic living. Logical positivism writes off all moral statements as non-sense, seeing them as expressions of emotion. Naturalism attempts to reduce the whole area of moral discourse to a sub-area of the scientific.

It may well be an instance of Common Grace that opposition to such philosophies comes not only from Christians, but from agnostics who still take rationality as a distinctively human attribute.

Man, said Pascal, is a reed, but he is a thinking reed. And herein we may see perhaps, for want of a better term, the 'mechansim of Common Grace'. God graciously provides both to just and unjust the tools for living in the world and in society, and even the grossest neglect and misuse has not blunted them beyond use.

NOTES

1. e.g. Adam naming the animals *before* the Fall suggests that classification—a rational activity—is original in man and not a later 'restraint addition'.
2. e.g. in the Symposium *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe* edited by Professor D. M. Mackay (IVF)
3. There will, of course, be occasional *ad hominem* arguments and prudential reasons such as 'You might be next for the experiment', but argument is basically back to a number of high-level statements of value and duty.

4. Some readers may be familiar with the work of Immanuel Kant which results in conclusions similar to the above.

5. The argument of this section is more fully worked out in R. S. Peters *Ethics and Education*, (Allen and Unwin).

6. It is disputed whether these basic principles should be regarded as *given* (i.e. 'innate ideas which all men have') or inevitable consequences of logical pursuit of moral discourse. In either case it is assumed that they are not 'invented' by man, but in some way 'discovered'.

7. C. S. Lewis's suggestion of intuitive awareness is attractive. See his novel *Voyage to Venus* (originally published as *Perelandra*).

8. There may be an analogy here with art—a 'right' result would be hailed as a fluke or accident, not as a work of art, if it was based on faulty aesthetic principles and techniques.

9. Many of these instructions are paralleled, of course, in the taboos of Canaanite and other Semitic communities.

10. See e. g. C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, section I. 'Right and wrong as clues to the meaning of the universe'. and Acts 17: 26-7.

11. e.g. in the much-quoted 2 Cor. 5: 14 the motivating power of 'Love' is based on a rational 'judgment'.