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Christian Ethics in Current Debate

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TO SAY that the 'New Morality' is only the old immorality may be a neat, bright epigram for the preacher but hardly does justice to the complexities of the continuing debate. Ever since Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* and the essay in *Soundings* by the Rev. Harry Williams on *Theology and Self-awareness*, the epigram seemed only too accurate a comment upon the popular and ill-digested thinking of the first and the disastrously muddled comment upon case-histories in the second. Yet these four books,* involve us in a discussion of real magnitude, which is of high importance to all who are engaged, with any degree of responsibility, in teaching or guiding or counselling at the present time. It is a matter that reaches to the foundation of all moral outlook and principle, and obviously bears a sharpened edge in the light of our present 'permissive' attitude in individual and social ethics. The challenge hits us in startling proportions at a time when, through inattention to the subject by and large, and neglect of the subject in clergy training, Christian teachers, ministers and leaders are unfamiliar with the whole field of discussion and unaware of the sources, the intellectual drives and the ramifications of the debate. It is one that goes on on more than one front at the same time; for there are those within the Christian church who in this, as in other matters, feel considerable sympathy for non-Christian, humanist thinking, with the result that discussion about moral principle and authority *within* the Christian life gets tangled up with the question of general ethical outlook and its foundations and sanctions, which may even go further to take on some apologetic aspects, extrapolating from some universal moral principles to theism.

**Ethical Values in the Age of Science*, Paul Roubiczek, CUP, 318 pp., £3; *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, edited by Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey, SCM Press, 419 pp., 70s.; *The Christian New Morality, A Biblical Study of Situation Ethics*, O. Sydney Barr, OUP, 118 pp., 34s.; *Loving on Principle, A Realistic Approach to Morals*, E. W. Trueman Dicken, Darton, Longman and Todd, 168 pp., 21s.

The four books under review here exhibit all these aspects between them of the ethical argument. Mr. Roubiczek writes as a religious philosopher but very aware that, for many, the subject of morals ought to be dealt with by scientific method rather than philosophical, with the aim of eliminating ethics and replacing it by empirically grounded practical programmes. Thus he is concerned to provide, in full view of modern thinking, a closely argued but limpidly clear moral philosophy, standing on its own feet, and pointing beyond to an apprehension of the divine, to Whom the response of faith is the only appropriate final step. The book openly recognises and deals with its debt both to Kant and Kierkegaard, critically appraising the contribution of both to its clearly developed thesis.

Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, by contrast is a series of essays nearly all by American authors, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. It is divided into four parts; the first on 'Virtue, Principles and Rules'; the second on 'Natural Law: A Reassessment of the Tradition' in which the Roman contributors play their part; third, 'Reformation Themes: the Uses of the Law'; and the fourth, 'Situation Ethics: Defence and Critique' in which Joseph Fletcher, one of the leading exponents of Situation Ethics, whose shadow has loomed over the whole book, comes to the fore with a battling justification of his outlook 'for the professionals'. The apple of discord thrown by the situationists into the ethical field is thus obviously bouncing about all over the place; as you would expect from the close inter-relation of all the issues involved. But the very fact that this is so brings into view the wide-ranging philosophical discussions in the book of essays edited by the present Bishop of Durham, Dr. Ian Ramsey—*Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*—and there are references to show that it has given some of the stimulus to the present volume.

The other two books in this review are entirely reactive to the Situation Ethics debate. Professor Sydney Barr teaches the New Testament at the General Theological Seminary, New York City. Like most 'Situationists' he is concerned that the position should not be misunderstood, and with the popularisation it has had—by Bishop Robinson for example, from whom Joseph Fletcher in *Norm and Context* specifically disassociated himself—this is not surprising. He makes a valiant attempt to expound the teaching and ministry of Christ, the teaching of St. Paul and St. John, as a vindication from Scripture of the situationist position, half-way between antinomianism and legalism. But Dr. Trueman Dicken, at the beginning of his book, will have nothing of this. 'It will be remembered that an early Corinthian Christian loved his father's wife, and expressed his love in the way a man does express his love for a woman—by sleeping with her. St. Paul, claimed as the Apostle of Situation Ethics by most of its exponents, was not amused. On the contrary, he demanded the excommunication of the man in question, which might seem a

thoroughly uncharitable thing to do' (p. 39). Writing from a basically traditional 'Catholic' standpoint, even though fully in touch with contemporary thinking, he finds Fletcher's views slipshod (as do many others of his critics) despite his evident concern for the problem case. But then, Dr. Trueman Dicken is, as might well be expected, a convinced casuist and his book goes on from dismissing Fletcher to elaborating a moral philosophy, which relates to an updating of Natural Law against a supporting display of modern scientific data.

It should be evident by this time that the internal discussion about the Gospel and a structured moral outlook, reasoned through and discriminatingly applied to difficult cases, within the church, has opened up the larger area of ethical debate, in which arise criticisms of the logic of ethics, and its presuppositions (like Natural Law) and its conclusions. We will examine two of these matters as these books deal with them; the thought-structure of an ethical philosophy; and the love-principle of Christian ethics.

Both Mr. Roubiczek and Dr. Trueman Dicken are concerned with building up a logical and reasonable ethical position, in the face of much current thought. Mr. Roubiczek devotes half his book to arguing the rightness of attempting such a task; Dr. Trueman Dicken with a much smaller book, attempting a more varied aim, can give it but one chapter. But both survey the tendency of modern scientific thinking, much of it behaviouristic, at the same time in conjunction with historiography and sociology, that leads to a relativistic outlook in which moral norms would be objectively discounted. To find some rational bed-rock in the midst of this mental quick-sand, Dr. Trueman Dicken suggests reasons for belief in God mainly based upon order in the universe; but Mr. Roubiczek embarks on his painstaking rational construction of an ethical theory, at once consistent and having obvious practical application, which arises from a close examination of man's ethical self. The former approach will lead on to an up-dating of the concept of natural law or morality, in which scientifically observable data are brought together to support this important platform of Catholic moral theology. In this Dr. Trueman Dicken finds a supporter in David Little's essay in *Norm and Context* where, after an examination of Calvin's contribution in this matter, he too calls in anthropological studies to support certain basic human realities that underpin the claims made by the doctrine of natural law, in rebuttal especially of the humanistic opposition of Prof. Kai Nielsen. Of course, as Bernard Häring warns in a further essay in this book, the possible worth of such a platform for dialogue between Christian and non-Christian, must be accepted with care that this way of thinking should be judged by Scripture, and brought under the truth of Christ. Dr. Trueman Dicken finds a moment of obvious delight in discussing Barth's opposition to Natural Law, when he can actually show him restoring to it without mentioning it in the *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III

part 4. There is a case here to be answered, not just by Barthian scholars but as a matter for contemporary Christian thinking both Protestant and Catholic, in their common concern for a Christian moral theology that is true to and disciplined by the Bible.

But all the time Kant haunts the precincts. Mr. Roubiczek knows his thinking better than many, and with both an appreciation of what is, as he holds, still valid, as well as critical rejection of some aspects. From him comes an analysis of knowing in terms of facts and of values—pure reason and practical reason—which still affects the moral discussion as to whether what *is* can lead logically to what *ought* to be. In the course of his book Mr. Roubiczek contributes an answer to this, partly drawn from existentialist insights of the nature of the self as not only a cognitive but an evaluating subject. It was a pity that Prof. N. H. Sørensen in his essay on 'The Three Uses of the Law' (in *Norm and Context*) had not seen this and accepted too uncritically this so-called 'gravest of all category mistakes', the 'naturalistic fallacy', as G. E. Moore called it. It was in fact strange that Prof. Sørensen, who had read something of the book edited by the Bishop of Durham, previously mentioned, had not seen why the Bishop had not altogether accepted this view, and argued for factual situations possessing circumstances of *claim*, as to which we make evaluative judgements (p. 162). Mr. Roubiczek discusses the subject of values at length towards the end of his book, recognising quite rightly that he has re-opened a subject that had suffered from recent neglect, and while referring to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as an attempt to reconcile the logic of 'is' to 'ought', goes on to argue that only by going beyond him here, and dealing properly with values can the gap be closed. His development of this line of argument links closely with that of Bishop Ramsey above. The concluding part of his book, looking at the supreme values of truth, goodness and love, takes up the issue of claim or obligation and carries the discussion into the realm of personal relations. In this, though the theme of the conclusion is followed with the same detailed care in thought, one senses that there are undertones unnoticed, due perhaps to preserving an autonomous ethical stance; but these are the ones that become vocal in the Christian arena where the situationist debate takes place. The debate centres around the Christian principle of love, applied by situationists in discrete events with an empiricism that would find the deductive logic of Mr. Roubiczek quite unacceptable.

Turning here again to *Norm and Context*, the cut and thrust between Fletcher and two critical essayists, Basil Mitchell of Oxford, and Donald Evans of Toronto, is prepared for by a searching, logical essay by Paul Ramsey of nearly seventy pages called 'The Case of the Curious Exception'. It examines the case for the justifiable violation of moral principles and so becomes an inquiry into the nature of moral reasoning about principles, and moral rules. He quickly routs any possibility

of ethical discussion about so-called 'unique' situations and, with some expressions of contempt for some theological moralists who are arguing for 'exceptions', turns the weapons of philosophical ethics upon them for their refutation and instruction. This is basically to work out a scheme of moral reasoning from a Christian attitude of *agape* to principles that govern or direct conduct, and so to rules that command a definite action. Ramsey is a rigorous but fascinating developer of the argument to show that if an 'exception' comes up for moral judgement at all, it does so as an example of a *sort* of action. It is therefore calling for a further refinement of definite-action-rule and therefore not an exception genuinely so-called. There is in this essay a penetrating critique of an essay by I. M. Crombie on 'Moral Principles' in the previously mentioned series edited by the Bishop of Durham. He also shows the fallacious reasoning of Fletcher in propounding some examples of 'exceptions' in situations of extreme stress. This could well be paralleled by Dr. Trueman Dicken's trenchant disposal of the Rev. Harry Williams' equally misguided thinking around breaches in the rules of Christian morality.

When Joseph Fletcher's rumbustious essay is read and pondered on 'What's in a Rule?; A Situationists View' it is easy to be tempted to say with James Gustafson (quoted in the first essay p. 9) that the argument between principle and method is a misplaced debate. He rates himself as a conservative thinker compared with the intuitionists like Bishop John Robinson and Douglas Rhymes; in fact he stresses rightly the rational judgement activity involved in the working of conscience; that under the governing principle or commitment of love as neighbour-concern, there needs to be hard thinking not only in the light of the circumstances but of the normative rules that have been brought together on the matter—so long as they are not regarded legalistically as unbreakable. So, he claims, he is concerned about method, not content of ethics. In saying this he ignores the fact that he has dismissed all kinds of ethical outlooks with their content, and further that method and content are not so easily separable. Fletcher in fact is wide open to criticism for muddled thinking, inconsistencies and vagueness; but in this book he has clarified his approach for the first time as frankly utilitarian and that in regard to isolated acts; for these the particular consequences are particularly to be considered, which include the means to be used. The modern abortion business could hardly have a better defender. But one wonders how far Prof. Sydney Barr will continue to look for the NT support for what he understands as 'The New Morality'.

Prof. Barr's over-priced book is not a profound study of the NT in this field; it never grapples with the significance of the law in the NT (as compared with the essay in *Norm and Context* by Edward Leroy Long Jnr. on 'Soteriological Implications of Norm and Context'), and much that is set forth as proving the situationist case does no more than

set forth the basic conviction of both sides that love is fundamental to the whole Christian outlook. But what is in debate is the extent to which that concern for love works out in being 'under the law to Christ' in ways that are not legalistic; is fully aware of personal problems in harsh contexts; and that the right act is not always the ideal one. Where in the occasional places in this study of the NT the debate really meets head-on, the exegesis is not very respectable; thus on the 'Korban' incident, we are told that 'in this particular instance' obedience to the law was the most loving thing to do. Thus this only proves that Jesus was a situationist like Joseph Fletcher!

Lurking in the background of so much of this debate is the persistent issue of law and grace. Philosophers and theologians have decided in their own minds to approach specific ethical tasks with a preliminary verdict on one side or the other, so that their handling of the specific task reflects this with varying degrees of explicitness. The christological focus of Barth, rejecting any preparatory contribution from natural law (even if he may at times be discerned to be depending on it in a covert fashion) finds support from those with continental Lutheran or Reformed background, like Prof. S  e, who will thus welcome too easily the warning about the 'rationalistic fallacy' from those like R. B. Braithwaite, who wish to reduce ethics to scientifically disciplined pragmatism; and hope to master the situation by claims based upon the person of Christ. But the two essays in *Norm and Context*, by David Little, on Calvin and Natural Law and by Edward Leroy Long Jnr. on 'Soteriological Implications of Norm and Context' bring out very clearly that faithfulness to Biblical and Reformed theology does not necessarily imply this one kind of reasoning. It also seems to follow from this that scriptural exegesis can be more thorough and open, guilty neither of the deafening omissions noticed in Prof. Barr's book, nor of the heavily slanted exegesis which the situationist argument seems to require (not forgetting that the same can be recognised in Barth in his same concern for the *sola gratia*). Of course, acceptance in this way of the modern re-statement of Calvin's thinking, brings Biblical and Reformed theology into direct relations with philosophers of Mr. Roubiczek's stamp, and indeed into fruitful dialogue with modern Roman Catholic thinking, now very concerned to be Biblically disciplined. If (as I happen to believe) the chaotic breakdown of Protestant thinking into 'Death of God' theology and situation ethics is the outcome of disillusionment with the intransigence of Barth in the face of rampantly renewed scientific humanism, there is a crying need for thinking through afresh the kind of synthesis that English theology, both Anglican and Puritan, worked out in the 17th/18th centuries on the basis of Calvin, and the Reformed understanding of Scripture. It would be a fair certainty, in working at this task, that the contents of some of these books reviewed would provide no mean contribution.