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Edited by Robin Gill

Excerpt

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## **Part I**

*The grounds of Christian ethics*

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## I Making moral decisions

ROWAN WILLIAMS

What is it like to make a choice? The temptation we easily give way to is to think that it's always the same kind of thing, or that there's one kind of decision-making that's serious and authentic, and all other kinds ought to be like this. In our modern climate, the tendency is to imagine that choices are made by something called the individual will, faced with a series of clear alternatives, as if we were standing in front of the supermarket shelf. There may still be disagreement about what the 'right' choice would be, but we'd know what making the choice was all about. Perhaps for some people the right choice would be the one that best expressed my own individual and independent preference: I would be saying no to all attempts from outside to influence me or determine what I should do, so that my choice would really be mine. Or perhaps I would be wondering which alternative was the one that best corresponded to a code of rules: somewhere there would be one thing I could do that would be in accord with the system, and the challenge would be to spot which it was – though it might sometimes feel a bit like guessing which egg cup had the coin under it in a game. But in any case the basic model would be much the same: the will looks hard at the range of options and settles for one.

But of course we don't spend all our lives in supermarkets. There are plenty of environments in which this kind of consumer choice is at best a remote dream, where it can sound like a cruel mockery to talk of such choices. And for those who do have the power to exercise such choices, is this model a sensible account of what it's like to make decisions in general?

Whom shall I marry? Shall I marry at all? Which charity shall I support this Christmas? Shall I resign from this political party, which is now committed to things I don't believe in – but is still better than the other parties in some ways? Should I become a vegetarian? Should I break the law and join an anti-government protest? Should I refuse to pay my taxes when I know they are partly used to buy weapons of mass

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destruction? How should I finish this poem or this novel? How should I finish my life if I know I'm dying? Think about these and choices like them. Each of them – even 'Which charity shall I support?' – is a decision that is coloured by the sort of person I am; the choice is not made by a will operating in the abstract, but by someone who is used to thinking and imagining in a certain way: someone who is the sort of person who finds an issue like this an issue of concern. (Another person might not be worried in the same way by the same question.) And this means that an answer only in terms of the 'system', the catalogue of right answers, would help us not at all; what kind of code, we may well ask, would give us impersonally valid solutions to the dilemmas just listed? We believe that, in some contexts, we can say, 'You ought never to do that', but there is no straightforward equivalent formula allowing us to say, 'You ought to do that.' As the Welsh philosopher Rush Rhees argues in an unpublished paper, telling someone else what they ought to do is as problematic as telling someone else what they want. There is a significant sense in which only I can answer the question 'What ought I to do?' just as only I can answer 'What do I want?' But for me to answer either question is harder than at first it sounds. Rhees is careful to say that 'What ought I to do?' is drastically different from a question about my preferences, what I just happen to want (or think I want) at some specific moments.

Herbert McCabe, a prominent British Catholic theologian and moralist, wrote many years ago – not without a touch of mischief – that 'ethics is entirely concerned with doing what you want',<sup>1</sup> going on to explain that our problem is that we live in a society, and indeed as part of a fallen humanity, that deceives us constantly about what we most deeply want. The point that both Rhees and McCabe are trying to make is emphatically not that ethics is a matter of the individual's likes or dislikes but, on the contrary, that it is a difficult discovering of something about yourself, a discovering of what has already shaped the person you are and is moulding you in this or that direction. You might put it a bit differently by saying that you are trying to discover what is most 'natural' to you, though this begs too many questions for comfort. Rhees notes, very pertinently, that if I say I must discover something about myself in order to make certain kinds of decisions with honesty, this is not purely 'subjective': I am in pursuit of a truth that is not at my mercy, even if it is a truth about myself. And when the decision is made, I shall not at once know for certain that it is 'right' – in the sense that I might know if it were a matter of performing an action in accordance with certain rules: it may be that only as years pass shall I be able to assess something I have done as the 'natural' or truthful decision.

That too tells us something significant about our decision-making: we may in retrospect come to believe that – however difficult a decision seemed at the time – it was the only thing we could have done. We were less free to choose than we thought: or, we might say, we were more free (in a different sense) to do what was deepest in us. Some of our problems certainly arise from a very shallow idea of what freedom means, as if it were first and foremost a matter of consumer choice, being faced with a range of possibilities with no pressure to choose one rather than another. But we have to reckon with the freedom that comes in not being distracted from what we determine to do. Saints are often recognised by this freedom from distraction. They may not be – subjectively – eager to do what they are going to do, but they have a mature and direct discernment of what ‘must’ be done if they are to be faithful to the truth they acknowledge. And their confidence comes not from knowing a catalogue of recommended or prescribed actions, but from that knowledge of who or what they are that enables them to know what action will be an appropriate response to the truth of themselves and the world.

#### SELF-KNOWLEDGE

But it is time now to look harder at this matter of self-knowledge. We can easily misunderstand it if we think first and foremost of the self as a finished and self-contained reality, with its own fixed needs and dispositions. That, alas, is how the culture of the post-Enlightenment world has more and more tended to see it. We romanticise the lonely self, we are fascinated by its pathos and its drama; we explore it in literature and psychological analysis, and treat its apparent requirements with reverence. None of this is wrong – though it may be risky and a courting of fantasy; but we have to think harder, in the ‘western’, or North Atlantic, world about the way the self is already shaped by the relations in which it stands. Long before we can have any intelligent account of our ‘selfhood’ in absolutely distinct terms, we already have identities we did not choose; others have entered into what we are – parents and neighbours, the inheritance of class and nation or tribe, all those around us who are speaking the language we are going to learn. To become a conscious self is not to say no to all this: that would be flatly impossible. It is to learn a way of making sense and communicating within an environment in which our options are already limited by what we have come into.

If this is so, self-knowledge is far more than lonely introspection. We discover who we are, in significant part, by meditating on the relations

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in which we already stand. We occupy a unique place in the whole network of human and other relations that makes up the world of language and culture; but that is not at all the same as saying that we possess an identity that is fundamentally quite unlike that of others and uninvolvement in the life of others – with its own given agenda. Thus the self-discovery we have been thinking about in the process of making certain kinds of decision is also a discovery of the world that shapes us. I wrote earlier of finding out what has shaped the person I am, and this is always going to be more than the history of my own previous decisions.

And this is where we may begin to talk theologically (at last). How do Christians make moral decisions? In the same way as other people. That is to say, they do not automatically have more information about moral truth in the abstract than anyone else. What is different is the relations in which they are involved, relations that shape a particular kind of reaction to their environment and each other. If you want to say that they know more than other people, this can only be true in the sense that they are involved with more than others, with a larger reality, not that they have been given an extra set of instructions. The people of Israel in the Old Testament received the Law when God had already established relation with them, when they were already beginning to be a community bound by faithfulness to God and each other. The Law did not come into a vacuum, but crystallised what had begun to exist through the action of God. When the Old Testament prophets announce God's judgement on the people, they do not primarily complain about the breaking of specific rules (though they can do this in some contexts) or about failure to live up to a moral ideal; they denounce those actions that signify a breaking of the covenant with God and so the breaking of the bonds of faithfulness that preserve Israel as a people to whom God has given a unique vocation – above all, actions such as idolatry and economic oppression. They denounce Israel for replacing the supremely active and transcendent God who brought them out of Egypt by local myths that will allow them to manage and contain the divine; and for creating or tolerating a social order that allows some among God's chosen nation to be enslaved by others because of poverty, and that is unworried by massive luxury and consumption, or sees its deepest safety in treaties with blood-thirsty superpowers. If you had asked one of the prophets about moral decision-making, he might have responded (once you had explained what you meant to someone who would not be starting with such categories) by saying, 'What we seek as we choose our path in life is what reflects the demands of the covenant, what is an appropriate response to the complete commitment of God to us.' The

Law tells me what kinds of action in themselves represent betrayal of God; but in deciding what, positively, I must do, I seek to show the character of the God who has called me through my people and its history.

The truth sought by such a person would be a truth shared with the community of which they were part, the community that gave them their identity in a number of basic respects. When we turn to the New Testament, it is striking that the earliest attempts at Christian ethical thinking echo this so closely. We can watch St Paul in Romans 14 and 15 or 1 Corinthians 10 discussing what was in fact a profoundly serious dilemma for his converts. To abstain from meat sacrificed to pagan gods was regarded as one of the minimum requirements for fidelity to the true God by Jews of that age (as an aspect of the covenant with Noah, which was earlier and more comprehensive than the covenant made through Moses); and it had been reaffirmed by the most authoritative council we know of in the church's first decades, the apostolic synod described in Acts 15. But the growing recognition that the sacrifice of Christ had put all the laws of ritual purity in question, combined with the practical complications of urban life in the Mediterranean cities, were obviously placing urban converts under strain.

Paul is, it seems, fighting on two fronts at once. He warns, in Romans 14, of the risks of the 'pure', the ultra-conscientious, passing judgement on the less careful, at the same time as warning the less careful against causing pain to the scrupulous by flaunting their freedom in ways that provoke conflict or, worse, doubt. In the Corinthian text, he offers an even clearer theological rationale for his advice in arguing that any decision in this area should be guided by the priority of the other person's advantage and thus by the imperative of building the Body of Christ more securely. What will guide me is the need to show in my choices the character of the God who called me and the character of the community I belong to; my God is a God whose concern for all is equal; my community is one in which all individual actions are measured by how securely they build up a pattern of selfless engagement with the interest of the other – which in itself (if we link it up to what else Paul has to say) is a manifestation of the completely costly directedness to the other that is shown in God's act in Christ.

So for the early Christian, as for the Jew, the self that must be discovered is a self already involved very specifically in this kind of community, in relation to this kind of God (the God of self-emptying). The goal of our decision-making is to show what God's selfless attention might mean in prosaic matters of everyday life – but also to show God's glory (look, for example, at Romans 15:7 or 1 Corinthians 10:31). What

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am I to do? I am to act in such a way that my action becomes something given into the life of the community and in such a way that what results is glory – the radiating, the visibility, of God’s beauty in the world. The self that I am, the self that I have been made to be, is the self engaged by God in love and now in process of recreation through the community of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

## MORAL DEPTH

What might this mean in more depth? The model of action that actively promotes the good of the other in the unqualified way depicted by Paul, and that reflects the self-emptying of God in Christ, presupposes that every action of the believer is in some sense designed as a gift to the Body. Gifts are, by definition, not what has been demanded or the payment of a debt or the discharging of a definite duty. To borrow the terms of one of our most distinguished Anglican thinkers, John Milbank, a gift cannot just be a ‘repetition’ of what is already there.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a gift has its place within a network of activities; it is prompted by a relationship and it affects that relationship and others; it may in its turn prompt further giving. But in this context it is important that a gift be the sort of thing that can be received, the sort of thing it makes sense to receive, something recognisable within the symbolic economy of the community, that speaks the language of the community. In the Christian context, what this means is that an action offered as gift to the life of the Body must be recognisable as an action that in some way or other manifests the character of the God who has called the community.

And this is where the pain and tension arises of Christian disagreement over moral questions. Decisions are made after some struggle and reflection, after some serious effort to discover what it means to be in Christ; they are made by people who are happy to make themselves accountable, in prayer and discussion and spiritual direction. Yet their decisions may be regarded by others as impossible to receive as a gift that speaks of Christ – by others who seek no less rigorously to become aware of who they are in Christ, and who are equally concerned to be accountable for their Christian options. It would be simpler to resolve these matters if we were more abstract in our Christian learning and growing. But the truth is that Christians learn their faith in incarnate ways; Christ makes sense to us because of the specific Christian relationships in which we are involved – this community, this inspirational pastor or teacher, this experience of reading scripture with others. Of



course (it ought not need saying) such particularities are always challenged and summoned to move into the universal sphere, the catholic mind of the whole body. But this is what can be a struggle. If we learn our discipleship in specific contexts and relations, as we are bound to, our Christian identity will never be an abstract matter. We are slowly coming to acknowledge the role of cultural specificities in the Christian practice. But it is more than that, more than a matter of vague cultural relativity, let alone allowing the surrounding culture to dictate our priorities. It is that local Christian communities gradually and subtly come to take for granted slightly different things, to speak of God with a marked local accent. At a fairly simple level, we might think of different attitudes to the Christian use of alcohol in many African contexts as opposed to prevailing assumptions in the North Atlantic world, or differences as to whom you might most immediately ask for help over matters of moral or even spiritual concern – a cleric or an elder in a community or a family council. At first sight, when you encounter a different ‘accent’, it can sound as though the whole of your Christian world is under attack or at least under question, precisely because no one learns their Christianity without a local accent.

And it would be easy to resolve if Christians had no concern for consistency, no belief that the church ought to speak coherently to its environment about discerning the difference between ways that lead to life and ways that lead to death. We want our faith to be more than just what we learn from those who are familiar and whom we instinctively trust, because we remember – or we should remember – how the faith moved out from the familiar territory of the eastern Mediterranean to become ‘naturalised’ in other cultures. Tribalism is never enough. Yet when we begin to put our insights together, deep and sometimes agonising conflict appears. What are we to do?

#### MORAL DISCERNMENT

So much is being said in all the churches about issues of sexuality as the paradigm tests of moral coherence or faithfulness that I believe it is important to look seriously at some other matters also when we reflect on moral decision-making and the character of our moral discernment. So let me take a different set of questions, one in which I have long been involved. I believe it is impossible for a Christian to tolerate, let alone bless or even defend, the manufacture and retention of weapons of mass destruction by any political authority [see **Chapter 14**]. And having said that I believe it is impossible, I at once have to recognise that Christians

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do it, not thoughtless, shallow, uninstructed Christians, but precisely those who make themselves accountable to the central truths of our faith in the ways I have described. I cannot at times believe that we are reading the same Bible; I cannot understand what it is that could conceivably speak of the nature of the Body of Christ in any defence of such strategy. But these are the people I meet at the Lord's table; I know they hear the scriptures I hear, and I am aware that they offer their discernment as a gift to the Body. At its most impressive, the kind of argument developed in defence of their stance reminds me that in a violent world the question of how we take responsibility for each other, how we avoid a bland and uncostly withdrawal from the realities of our environment, is not easily or quickly settled. In this argument, I hear something that I need to hear that, left to myself, I might not grasp. So I am left in perplexity. I cannot grasp how this reading of the Bible is possible; I want to go on arguing against it with all my powers, and I believe that Christian witness in the world is weakened by our failure to speak with one voice in this matter. Yet it seems I am forced to ask what there is in this position that I might recognise as a gift, as a showing of Christ.

It comes – for me – so near the edge of what I can make any sense of. I have to ask whether there is any point at which my inability to recognise anything of gift in another's policy, another's discernment, might make it a nonsense to pretend to stay in the same communion. It is finely balanced: I am not a Mennonite or a Quaker. I can dimly see that the intention of my colleagues who see differently is also a kind of obedience, by their lights, to what we are all trying to look at. I see in them the signs of struggling with God's Word and with the nature of Christ's Body. Seventy years ago, Bonhoeffer and others broke the fragile communion of the German Protestant churches over the issue of the anti-Jewish legislation of the Third Reich, convinced that this so cut at the heart of any imaginable notion of what Christ's Body might mean that it could only be empty to pretend that the same faith was still shared. How we get to such a recognition is perhaps harder than some enthusiasts imagine, and Bonhoeffer has some wise words about the dangers of deciding well in advance where the non-negotiable boundaries lie. Our task is rather to work at becoming a discerning community, ready to recognise a limit when it appears, a limit that will have a perfectly concrete and immediate character. For him, the limits are going to be set 'from outside': 'the boundaries are drawn arbitrarily by the world, which shuts itself off from the church by not hearing and believing'.<sup>3</sup> But of course the discerning of such boundaries has quite properly involved the church in drawing boundaries 'from within', in