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978-0-521-62351-3 - Priorities and Christian Ethics
Garth L. Hallett
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This book provides the fullest contemporary treatment of an issue which is particularly pressing today; when the claims of the nearest (e.g. parents, children, spouses, friends) conflict with the claims of the neediest, as they constantly do, where should preference go? Professor Hallett focuses first on a specific, representative case, pitting the lesser need of a son against the greater need of starving strangers. He brings to bear on this single paradigm all the resources of theological and philosophical reflection – scriptures, patristic teaching, the Thomistic tradition, current debates; and from this single example he sheds light on a wide range of comparable cases both private and public. This distinctive strategy leads to distinctive and challenging results, and at the same time helps to clarify the traditional “order of charity” and the celebrated “preferential option for the poor.”

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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Christians already know that they should love one another, although they would benefit from further reflection about what that means. But even with more insight into their most basic moral standard, Christians would continue to face difficult decisions about what love requires under various kinds of conflicts.

Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict*

One special relation limits another, and indeed, there can be little doubt that much of the moral life involves various competing obligations of this sort.

Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship*

We should all agree that each of us is bound to show kindness to his parents and spouse and children, and to other kinsmen in a less degree . . . And to all men with whom we may be brought into relation we are held to owe slight services, and such as may be rendered without inconvenience: but those who are in distress or urgent need have a claim on us for special kindness. These are generally recognised claims: but we find considerable difficulty and divergence, when we attempt to determine more precisely their extent and relative obligation.

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*

The problem is not whether we should do more for those who are close to us. The problem is that we are likely to do too much. We are fearful not of excessive distance but of complicity in evil.

George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty*

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General editor's preface

This book is the twelfth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. Like the previous book in the series, Stanley Rudman's *Concepts of Persons and Christian Ethics*, as well as the very first book, Kieran Cronin's well received *Rights and Christian Ethics*, this present book provides a reliable guide for Christian ethics through a complex area of philosophical discussion. All three books exemplify the two key aims of this series – firstly to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate, either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

Using the philosopher A. C. Ewing's moral dilemma about whether to spend money on a son going to university or instead on the needs of many people threatened with famine, Hallett seeks to explore a classic dilemma in both Christian and secular morality. Which is finally to be preferred, the nearest in the form of the son or the neediest in the form of the starving strangers? He explores this dilemma with style and obvious commitment and is, indeed, exploring an issue which is of real interest within and beyond Christian ethics. Working from an admittedly narrow basis, he is able to show that important broad questions about our responsibilities towards our families, neighbours and fellow nationals are raised by this moral dilemma. The questions raised by *Priorities and Christian Ethics* turn out to be amongst some of the most crucial for moral and, indeed, Christian living.

In the first two chapters Garth Hallett sets out a variety of

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philosophical and theological ways in which Ewing's moral dilemma might be resolved, arguing that none is in the end very satisfactory. Next he examines the New Testament and then the early Church in relation to the same moral dilemma. In them he sees an emphasis upon the neediest rather than the nearest. However, the Thomist tradition, and much subsequent Christian wisdom, although not fully losing sight of the needy, tends to reverse the order of preferential options. Now it is often the nearest who are preferred rather than the neediest. Hallett believes that this later development is mistaken. In the final two chapters he sets out his own distinctively Christian position, arguing that it is relevant to a wide range of moral issues. For him "the contribution which Christian ethics makes is strong, both negatively and positively – that is, both in what it excludes and in what it includes and powerfully supports." Negatively, it disregards class distinctions, as such, and, in contrast to much recent secular ethics, shifts preference from self to others. Positively, it supports the equal worth of persons and the parity, other things being equal, of acts and omissions. These considerations, which determine the verdict in Ewing's difficult case, would figure prominently in countless comparable cases pitting the near against the needy.

This book makes an important and distinctive contribution to the series.

ROBIN GILL

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