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Eric Osborn

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INTRODUCTION

An examination of early Christian ethics may begin with a brief appreciation of those contemporary factors which make this enterprise appropriate now. The study of ethics has, in the last thirty years, moved towards a wider recognition of the complexity and diversity of ethical problems. If moral philosophy is a practical science concerned with questions of the form 'What shall I do?' then, one writer insists, 'no general answer can be given to this type of question. The most a moral philosopher can do is to paint a picture of various types of life in the manner of Plato and ask which type of life you really want to lead.'¹ Another sees the function of moral philosophy as 'that of helping us to think better about moral questions by exposing the logical structure of the language in which this thought is expressed'.² For him moral judgements are prescriptive, can be universalised,³ are descriptive and may be logically interrelated.⁴ Reason, good reason for acting in one way rather than in another, provides another way of looking at ethical inquiry or moral judgements.⁵ The crucial thing is that we should have moral points of reference which we have deliberately adopted. 'To become morally adult is...to learn to use "ought"-sentences in the realisation that they can only be verified by reference to a standard or set of principles which we have by our own decision accepted and made our own.'⁶

Still more recently has come a criticism of this prescriptivism, which finds it, like the intuitionism and emotivism which preceded it, barren and restrictive. There is urgent need to identify the subject-matter of ethics and to see it as 'a subject in which there is still almost everything to be done'.⁷

¹ P. H. Nowell Smith, *Ethics* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 277f.

² R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963), p.v.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 2 ed. 1961), p. 197; cf. K. Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Cornell, 1958), p.v.

⁶ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, p. 196.

⁷ G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London, 1967), p. 77.

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Under the promising title *The Varieties of Goodness*⁸ another writer has shown the breadth of ethical questions. In particular the neglect of any consideration of virtue or virtues has been remedied. Virtues are neither value-terms like good and bad nor are they normative terms like right and wrong.⁹ A distinct category, virtues are states or traits of character. They are relevant to choice-situations in which the good of some being is at stake. They enable a choice to be made without the obscuring or blurring effects of passion.¹⁰ The reinstatement of virtue and virtues, or the study of 'aretaics' as it was once called,¹¹ is an encouragement for the study of early Christian ethics. Much of the material may be considered under this head; but something more remains. The determining ideas in ethics are never simply ethical and this is clearly the case in early Christian writings. The concepts which give coherence and vitality to ethical thought may be called patterns or pictures. Moral judgements are only a part of morals. What holds them together? Aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic concepts like 'patterns', 'myth' and 'picture' play an important part.¹² Moral life is not just the record of the choices which one makes nor even the record of what one does.

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.¹³

One may go further and insist that there are positive and radical moral conceptions which stand over against universal rules. These are concerned with the infinite variety of the world, 'the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations "taped", the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique'.¹⁴ A morality is a complex, a ramification of

⁸ G. H. von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London, 1963).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹ J. Laird, *An Enquiry into Moral Notions* (London, 1935), pp. 13–98.

¹² R. W. Hepburn, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (ed. I. T. Ramsey, London, 1966), pp. 181ff.

¹³ Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 202.

¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *op. cit.*, pp. 208ff. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 226e.

concepts. What appear to be single judgements owe their apparent simplicity to the number of suppressed premisses which we all employ. Further, important moral values are visions, inspirations or powers which have to be explored rather than analysed. Wittgenstein was concerned to safeguard diversity when he said, 'What has to be accepted, the given is – so one could say – *forms of life*.' One must accept the givenness of the various forms of moral life and not try to find a single form behind them.

The third encouraging element in contemporary ethics is a deepening seriousness. On the one hand it has been shown 'that moral virtues must be connected with human good and harm, and that it is quite impossible to call anything you like good or harm'.¹⁵ On the other hand the urbanity of much twentieth-century ethics has worn thin. An unconscious behaviourism may be discerned behind it. Moral concepts are not merely factual statements plus recommendations, and moral judgements need not be universal. The inner life cannot be reduced to overt choices. Nor is man as free as he sometimes thinks.¹⁶

In this context a restatement of Platonism has been put forward.¹⁷ To this view we shall return since it offers a contemporary expression of the mind of the early fathers. For while the detail of their ethics is frequently Stoic, the shape is predominantly Platonist. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance for Christian ethics of this recent account of the sovereignty of Good.

The movement from the banal has been continued by another concise work.¹⁸ The amoralist is shown to have moral sensibility as soon as he thinks in terms of others' need and interests.¹⁹ Disagreement in moral matters does not indicate subjectivism but rather that 'you cannot pass the moral buck on to how the world is'.²⁰ Consideration of human nature does not lead to a unique moral ideal for there are too many things which may claim to be distinctively human.²¹ A swift, negative critique of utilitarianism rounds off the work.²²

¹⁵ P. Foot, 'Moral Beliefs', in *Theories of Ethics* (ed. P. Foot, Oxford, 1967), p. 92.

¹⁶ Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', pp. 217 and 198.

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1970).

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, *Morality* (Penguin Books, 1973).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47. 'The fact that men of equal intelligence, factual knowledge and so forth, confronted with the same situation, may morally disagree shows something about morality – that (roughly) you cannot pass the moral buck on to how the world is. But that does not show (as subjectivism originally seemed to insinuate) that there is something *wrong* with it.'

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²² This is further developed in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism* (Cambridge, 1973).

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The new depth of ethical study makes it easier to approach the ethics of early Christian writers for their concern with moral issues was intense. Dread of evil and enthusiasm for good were always with them. Today the obvious evils of war and hunger, brought to wider notice by new means of communication, ensure that some moral issues will be taken seriously.

A final feature of contemporary thought is a thoughtful rejection of Christian claims. Morality cannot depend on religion because of 'the impossibility of thinking coherently about God'. Religious motives need not invalidate the autonomy of morals but they cannot help because religion is incurably unintelligible.²³ An increasing number of people believe Christian moral judgements to be wrong in fundamental ways.²⁴ Christians need to recognise that the universe is far from sympathetic to milder aspects of their morality,²⁵ and that the harsher aspects (intransigence, unfairness, rigour and neglect of human concerns) are far from attractive.²⁶ Artists and lovers, parents and patriots are just as able as Christians to forget themselves.²⁷ The record of Christian morality does not evoke confidence. Time and again Christians have stood to conserve what was bad and to hinder reform. The character of God in the Christian story of redemption seems repugnant. Too much in the ascetic tradition is plainly morbid. Inequality of sexes and psychological terror have come from the same authoritarian source. Intolerance has discouraged intellectual honesty.²⁸

The need for exploration in this area is therefore urgent. It is not merely a matter of better understanding but a question of integrity. Christians have no grounds for holding to moral standards which are plainly inferior or impenetrably obscure. Four things, then, diversity of material, patterns which give coherence, a new seriousness and current criticism, point to the work of reassessing early Christian ethics. The second factor is most important for it provides a method.

Patterns or pictures indicate a necessary element in ethical analysis. 'Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture. This is the process which moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyse.'²⁹ The work which follows is descrip-

²³ Bernard Williams, *Morality*, p. 86.

²⁴ See H. Oppenheimer, *The Character of Christian Morality* (London, 1965), which begins, p. 11, 'Christian morality today needs to be defended, but it is not yet clear where the main battle is to be fought and what is to count as victory.'

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁸ D. Cupitt, *Crisis of Moral Authority* (London, 1972), p. 10. These theses are sustained in the course of Mr Cupitt's valuable book.

²⁹ Iris Murdoch, 'Metaphysics and Ethics', *The Nature of Metaphysics* (ed. D. F. Pears, London, 1957), p. 122.

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GREECE

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tion and analysis of patterns or pictures which persist through the first centuries of Christianity and which have two continuing characteristics: *a respect for the contingent and an awareness of perfection*. Unlike moral codes, patterns or pictures can deal with the contingent and the perfect at the same time. Patterns must respect contingency and variety. Some pictures seem simple and unambiguous; but this simplicity must either be transformed or discarded.³⁰ Clement valued symbolic language because it could say more than one thing at a time, like 'shapes seen through veils which add more allusions to them'.³¹ The variety of human experience forces pictures to produce related galleries. We cannot hope to catalogue but we can show the creativity. Patterns are not exclusive and often come together to produce subordinate creations. There will always be untidiness. 'Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy.'³²

Christianity, as a religion of divine incarnation, is committed to both a sense of perfection and a respect for the contingent. This leads to a second reason why Christian talk about ethics should be considered as picture or pattern. Christianity offers a challenge to perfection and, like true art, always looks beyond itself. It does not give a secular or commonsense morality. 'Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect' cannot be translated into a prudential code. It stands as far from any moral behaviourism of the last forty years as a great work of art stands from a television advertisement. 'While thus renewing our sense of distance we may remind ourselves that art too lives in a region where all human endeavour is failure.'³³ We turn now to the background of early Christianity and then to four great patterns which will show a respect for the contingent and a challenge to perfection.

GREECE

The glory of ancient Greece was an insistence that right and wrong, justice and injustice, were not matters of human opinion, but were fixed by an eternal pattern. Five hundred years before Christ was born, the obscure Heraclitus of Ephesus wrote, 'The people should fight for

³⁰ It has taken two millennia to modify the Greek athletic ideal to a recent account, 'The chaplain has a pleasant way of making you think that Jesus Christ once rowed for the college. . .and that even now he is the finest stroke that any crew could possibly have in the great Boat Race which is life',

R. J. White, *Cambridge Life* (London, 1960), p. 75.

³¹ *Stromateis* 5.9.56.5.

³² Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', *Encounter XVI* (1961), 20.

³³ *Ibid.* Cf. A. Boyce Gibson, *The Challenge of Perfection* (Melbourne, 1968).

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the law as if for their city wall.' 'All human laws are nourished by one divine law.'³⁴ The story of Greek justice takes form around the figure of *Solon* who was responsible for the code of Athenian laws. Solon said of the law, 'Beneath her rule all things throughout the world are tuned to wisdom and to harmony.' He insisted that his laws were the same for rich and for poor, 'I wrote laws for the base-born and the noble alike, and fitted a rule of justice, straight and true to every man.' Solon fore-saw the destruction of his city, not at the hands of an outside enemy, but at the hands of the people themselves, for they could not survive the day when they neglected 'the holy foundations of justice'.³⁵ Behind the affairs of men stood a pattern of right and justice which no one could alter or ignore.

Three great philosophies contributed to a deeper understanding of moral truth. Plato drew inspiration from the heroic figure of Socrates who was concerned to stand out against any values beside those of virtue and truth. There is an ultimate simplicity in morals.

In the divine there is no shadow of unrighteousness, only the perfection of righteousness. Nothing is more like the divine than any one of us who becomes as righteous as possible. It is here that a man shows his true spirit and power or lack of spirit and nothingness. For to know this is wisdom and excellence of the genuine sort; not to know it is to be manifestly blind and base.³⁶

Righteousness is the only thing that matters, and those who imagine that they are great because they ignore moral standards are poorest and weakest of all.

Plato devoted his longest dialogue to the question of justice or righteousness. He considered it in man and in the state, for the two must go together. It is a harmony of parts of the soul, 'binding together all these elements and moulding the many within into one temperate and harmonious whole'.³⁷ Other virtues like fortitude, wisdom and self-control are concerned with particular parts of the soul, while justice involves the agreement of all three parts. Virtues are connected for it is not possible to have one without others and virtue is the excellence or function of the soul, so that a bad soul will do bad things, and a good soul will do good things. Virtue is also health, vigour or harmony and fulfils man's excellence as a man.³⁸ Man is free and can only blame himself for his misdeeds. God is not responsible for what man has chosen. The blame is on the one who chooses.³⁹ Good and evil are

³⁴ Heraclitus, RP 43.

³⁵ Solon. See K. Freeman, *The Paths of Justice* (London, 1954), pp. 19–30.

³⁶ *Theaetetus* 176 (Cornford's translation is generally followed.)

³⁷ *Republic* 443.

³⁸ *Republic* 353.

³⁹ *Republic* 617.

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mutually necessary in this world, so that the only way to avoid evil is to escape to a divine world. This flight is described as becoming like God as far as possible and likeness to God is achieved by becoming just with the help of wisdom.⁴⁰ The one goal of all actions is the good, and every man must distinguish between the good, the pleasant, and the bad.⁴¹ Virtue is knowledge and can be taught. True virtue can be found in no one but the wise man or the philosopher. Unless such a man rules over a state it will not achieve justice. Morals find their fulfilment in politics.

Aristotle stresses even more firmly the importance of goal or end in morals and reaffirms the importance of politics. Man is a political animal.⁴² All men seek for well-being, which is the supreme good, desired for its own sake and found when man fulfils his proper function by acting in accordance with reason. This function of man acts out the best and most complete virtue, and spreads over a complete life. The excellence of man is the excellence of his soul which has two parts, rational and irrational. To the rational part belong the intellectual excellences such as wisdom and prudence. Moral excellences are concerned with the emotional half of the irrational part of the soul. Virtue is chiefly taught and becomes habit. It is found in the mean between excess and deficiency. Virtue is a state of 'deliberate moral purpose, consisting in a mean which is relative to our souls, the mean being determined by reason or as a prudent man would determine it'. Courage lies between foolhardiness and cowardice, temperance between licence and insensibility, friendliness between cringing and quarrelsomeness. A man should try to avoid the extreme which seems to be further from the mean, and to pull himself in the direction which is opposite to his natural inclination. When he cannot find a mean he should choose the lesser of the evils which confront him. Moral purpose involves deliberate choice. Virtue and vice are freely chosen, and therefore may be rewarded or punished. Justice takes different forms, such as distributive justice which works by proportion to allot what is fair, and corrective justice which tries to balance what has been uneven. The mean is chosen by right reason, that part of the soul which is rational in obedience to truth. The highest form of human life passes beyond human limits to what is divine. God is the simple unmoved mover of all things, the highest good, an eternal, living being. Man achieves happiness by becoming like this pure being; 'If pure intellect as compared with human nature is divine, so too will the life in accordance with it be divine compared with man's ordinary life.'⁴³ Summing up,

⁴⁰ *Theaetetus* 176.⁴¹ *Gorgias* 499.⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *passim*, and *Politics* 1253⁴³ *Nic. Eth.* 1177.

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the good is what man aims at, that is, his happiness or the performance of his function as a man. Moral virtue is concerned with the rational control of desires and is learnt by practice and the formation of habit. Virtue is rational and in its obedience to reason it follows the mean between excess and deficiency. The wise man becomes like God because God's function is contemplation and thought and these things fulfil man's highest excellence.

By the beginning of the Christian era, the dominant ethical teaching was that of *Stoicism*. Plato and Aristotle continued to be important, and indeed Stoicism absorbed much of what they had said. Morals became the chief part of philosophy, and were centred upon the ideal of the Stoic sage. Stoicism, now three hundred years old, had lost some of its first rigour and made allowance for man's imperfections and development. The Stoics divided man into body and soul, or into body, mind and soul. Marcus Aurelius said, 'You are made up of three parts – body, breath, mind. The first two are yours insofar as they require your care; only the third is properly your own.'⁴⁴ The body was a hindrance, or at least a subordinate thing. Seneca went so far from Zeno's high estimate as to call it a prison house, following an Orphic maxim. The soul contains reason, which is the ruling part, and guides man in his desire to live agreeably with nature. The world is governed by necessity; the path of virtue recognises what is and what is not within our power. The things which are not in our power include wealth and position. 'For if the essence of the good be in those things that are in our own power, neither envy nor jealousy has any place, and you will not long to be a general, a president or a consul, but you will long to be free. There is only one path to freedom and that is to despise the things which are not in our own power.'⁴⁵ Nothing external can harm man. Only he can harm himself. There are no degrees in virtue or vice. A man is either good or bad and it is as easy to drown in one foot of water as it is to drown in ten. Virtue is its own reward and vice is its own punishment. The worth of virtue is independent of our appreciation of it. Within the wide sphere of things which are indifferent because they are not in our power, there are things which are to be preferred and which have worth over against things which are not to be preferred and which have no worth. The wise man alone is free and reflects the image of the God from whom all have sprung. Yet despite man's dignity his feelings must not be recognised. 'If you love an earthen jar you must say "it is only an earthen jar that I love," for when it is broken you will not be perturbed; when you kiss your little child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being, and then when either of them dies you will not

⁴⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 12.2.

⁴⁵ Epictetus *Encheir.* 19.

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be shaken.⁴⁶ Stoics stressed the importance of the training of the soul. Plato had spoken of the philosopher's life as the practice of death, and Epictetus wrote, 'The school of the philosophers, O men, is a surgery; you should not go out of it pleased but in pain.'⁴⁷

Man strives to live according to nature or to reason. He achieves happiness when the soul within him becomes like God and is self-sufficient and autonomous. The wise man is free from passion, possessing the virtue of *apatheia*. The ideal of the wise man is always before the Stoic as he spares no effort or sacrifice to reach the goal of wisdom and independence. Men are bound together by the spermatic logos which is in them all. The world is one city in which all men are citizens. Virtue is a corporate thing. Men are members one of another, and the world is the one parent of us all. The wise man bears the burden of government. Stoicism produced statesmen and rulers.

When we look at the broad scope of Greek ethics we may hazard some general comments. The good life is a matter of virtue, excellence or function. It should be lived according to nature or an order which is basic to the world, and should pursue the final end toward which all things point. The soul must be ruled by its rational rather than its irrational part. Man is autonomous as an individual, and the goal of the good life is to give him freedom and independence. External things cannot make man good or bad. Wealth and position are irrelevant to the virtue of the soul. Family life and marriage must not conflict with the progress of the individual, and the moral significance of domestic relations is not great. Education is important and the training of children is given a high place.

The general as well as some of the particular features of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic ethics are found in early Christian ethical discourse. They mean something different because they are joined and used in different ways. What this new and sometimes loose synthesis is, cannot be predicted. There is no one general principle which will explain what happens when the terms change their context. We have seen what they mean in one context. We shall see later what they mean in other contexts.

ISRAEL

The people of Israel are joined in common pursuit of a good life, for the Hebrew speaks of his fellow Hebrew as neighbour or brother. To this holy nation, God has spoken his will; ethics are bound to a personal God. It is the Lord who requires that man should do justice, love mercy,

⁴⁶ Epictetus, *Encheir.* 3.⁴⁷ Epictetus, *Diss.* 3, 23.

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and walk humbly with his God. The covenant which binds Israel and God together, pledges Israel to be holy as the Lord God is holy. God has acted in the history of his people and made his ways known. In the golden days, God acted through his anointed king. The king led his people in battle, brought them before God in worship and dispensed justice. As God worked through his king, so God himself is a king to his people, bound to them by personal loyalty. The law of God tells man his place in God's world and guides him concerning his duties to God and to his neighbour. The study and practice of the law bring virtue and wisdom. God's people delight in his law.⁴⁸

Simon the Righteous maintains that the world rests on three foundations – the law, the worship of God and the doing of kindnesses.⁴⁹ The law embodies an unqualified demand for loyalty to God and respect for man. The worship of the temple governs the whole life of the Jew. His obligations in worship were as much his duty to God as was the fulfilment of the law. Acts of kindness or mercy point to the covenant relation between God and his people. The inward direction of the heart to God is all important and it is wrong to obey the law for selfish reasons; obedience must be directed to God himself.⁵⁰

There is considerable variety in the Judaism of the first century; but certain things are general. Law, ethics and worship are held together, and righteousness is central in each. The consciousness of a covenant people remains, and Hellenising influence has been resisted in the Maccabean revolt and in the conscious promotion of independent Jewish culture. Intellectual resistance shows itself among the Pharisees and in sects which look to an imminent end in which God will vindicate his people. The Pharisees studied the detail of the law and elaborated its requirements. Their legalism was less rigorous and more humane and practical than has been thought. The sects, which we understand through Qumran, were inspired with fervent eschatological zeal. In preparation for the fiery day they turned from outward observance to inward piety and humility. The poor man of the Psalms was their ideal as they withdrew from the world.

Hellenistic Judaism is best seen in Philo, an eclectic Platonist who links the formula of man's assimilation to God with the biblical doctrine of man made in the image of God. He adds the Stoic theme that one should live in conformity with nature, identifying natural and Mosaic law, and tries to combine practical and contemplative lives, moderation of and freedom from passion. His highest virtue is faith, or piety. From

⁴⁸ For the following outline I am indebted in several parts to A. Dihle for his article in *RAC*, 6, 'Ethik', 646–796.

⁴⁹ Pirke Aboth 1.2 (ed. R. T. Herford, 1945).

⁵⁰ T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (London, 1960), chapters 1 and 2.