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William Schweiker

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is about moral responsibility and Christian ethics. The idea of responsibility is exceedingly complex and relates to all questions in ethics. The onus upon the theologian or philosopher is to distinguish and yet relate the elements of responsibility within ethical reflection. That is what I have attempted to do. The theory of responsibility presented in the following chapters focuses on the relation between value and power in an age of increasing human power. The book seeks to make a contribution to Christian ethics, and also to reflection on responsibility and power in various disciplines.

The book is divided into parts which reflect dimensions of ethics. Part I specifies the *context* for thinking about moral responsibility in terms of beliefs concerning morality and moral agents found in the late-modern Western world. Chapter 1 is an analysis of criticisms of traditional ideas of responsibility in order to clarify values in contemporary life and to show why the idea of responsibility remains indispensable in ethics. This is followed in Chapter 2 with a statement of the main ideas, assumptions, and distinctions of a new Christian ethics of responsibility. The ethic I propose examines the idea of moral integrity and its relation to power and responsibility within moral reflection. These ideas are introduced in Chapter 2, and developed fully later.

Part II presents an integrated *theory* of responsibility. The discourse of responsibility allows us to consider the connection between an idea of morality and our existence as agents. Part II of the book, and thus the theory of responsibility, is divided between these topics. Chapter 3 begins Part II with an analysis of the linguistic and conceptual complexity of the idea of

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responsibility in moral discourse, and traces the development of this idea in Western ethics. This is followed in Chapter 4 with a typological analysis of theories of responsibility. Within the typology, the chapter also examines particular thinkers whose ideas contribute substantively to the argument of the book.

Chapter 5 presents the theory of value and the imperative of responsibility essential to a Christian ethics of responsibility. This chapter is central to the book, although the theory of value and the imperative of responsibility are elaborated in following chapters. I present a multidimensional theory of value that interrelates goods rooted in human needs. There are naturalistic and also realistic dimensions to this moral theory. This is required in theological ethics because Christian faith insists on the value of created reality and the reality of God as the source of morality. The purpose of the moral life is the realization of diverse potentialities of life. This means that moral reasoning is not solely dependent on the resources of the Christian community, but also on an examination of features of life. On these points the book agrees with so-called natural law ethics. Yet unlike natural law ethics, the position I develop grants descriptive relativism in ethics. "Nature" is not an unambiguous guide to what we ought to do, and morality is bound to other cultural beliefs even though values have a naturalistic cast. The theory of value outlined in Chapter 5 is also an answer to the criticism, explained in Chapter 1, that the demands of responsibility can mutilate human goods.

This moral theory further holds that the basic moral problem of human life is a problem of faith, that is, the problem of what identity-conferring commitment(s) ought to characterize and guide our lives. I argue that moral identity, the coherence of life and its values through time, is bound to the commitment(s) agents hold basic to the meaning and value of their lives. This is why moral integrity, and not only the integration of values in life, is central to the ethics of responsibility. The imperative of responsibility specifies then not only a principle of choice, but also the faith we ought to live by.

The imperative of responsibility is stated thus: *in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God.* Chapter 5 explains this imperative and its relation to the theory

of value. What is more, I contend that by acting on this imperative a distinct good, the good of moral integrity, is manifest in human life. By living responsibly, the Christian trusts that the fullness of life is known and experienced. The book as a whole makes this point, marshalls a protest against the moral projects and values which undergird contemporary culture, and proposes an account of the moral meaning of Christian faith. This claim about the good of moral integrity as the meaning of faith completes the discussion of responsibility and morality in the first half of Part II of the book.

In chapters 6–7 the discussion shifts to the question of the nature of moral agents. Throughout these chapters I explore recent work on moral agency and subjectivity by thinkers like Charles Taylor, Susan Wolf, Harry Frankfurt, and others. The purpose of this discussion is to develop an account of moral freedom and identity within an agentic-relational view of persons.¹ Human beings on this view are defined as agents intimately related to each other and their environments. A person's moral being is constituted in and through interactions with others and the critical assessments he or she makes as an agent about life, others, and the world. I develop this argument in Chapter 6 by exploring freedom and moral responsibility with respect to debates in ethics about the relation between freedom and the good. I also show that the ability to have responsibility ascribed to an agent by others and to assume it for oneself is basic to meaningful human life.

Chapter 7 examines the formation of moral identity and thus how we become responsible for ourselves. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor and others, the chapter argues that a particular interpretive act, what I call the act of radical interpretation, forms moral identity with respect to the diversity of values that permeate life and the imperative of responsibility. The idea of radical interpretation articulates an agentic-relational view of persons within an integrated ethics of responsibility. In fact, it recasts traditional claims about conscience in terms of current work on moral subjectivity and agency. In this way, the realistic and naturalistic dimensions of the theory of value present in Chapter 5 are amended by a hermeneutical account of human existence,

that is, an account of how we exist in the world and with others as self-interpreting agents.² The resulting moral theory I call hermeneutical realism. In making that argument, Part II of the book is concluded because the connection between morality and agency has been made through the idea of radical interpretation.

Part III of the text explores the *source* of responsibility from a theological perspective. The source of responsibility does not rest on the claim that persons “encounter” God as a personal “Thou,” a claim, we will see, basic to previous accounts of responsibility in Christian ethics in this century. The theological dimension, I contend, is specified with respect to the experience of the complexity of value which permeates human life and relations with others and the world. It is this theological claim which demands the new theory of responsibility presented in Part II of the book.

Chapter 8 undertakes the inquiry into the source of responsibility by exploring the recent work on responsibility by Hans Jonas. He argues that the question of power must be central to ethics, and, further, that power makes responsibility morally basic. I show that Jonas’ argument raises questions about the source of moral value which can be addressed only from a theological perspective. And, further, I seek to demonstrate the unique claim of Christian faith about God as value creating power with respect to the question of the source of value. Chapter 9 makes a case for the validity of this Christian ethics of responsibility. I thus explain why theological ethics must be understood in terms of an integrated theory. In so far as this is the case, then the ethics of responsibility has been recast beyond the paradigms of thought which have dominated twentieth-century Christian ethics. Part III examines the religious source of the theory developed in Part II even as it answers the root problems endemic to our current situation, problems isolated in Part I of the book. In this way, Part III completes the argument of the book.

Obviously it would be impossible to account for all theories of responsibility in one book. Accordingly, I have tried to isolate basic issues in the ethics of responsibility and engaged those thinkers who, in my judgment, make distinctive contributions to

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reflection on these matters. In proposing a new Christian ethics of responsibility, I have also not attempted to address all practical matters of responsibility. While some problems in technology, ecology, economic ethics, and theory of punishment will be examined, many questions of responsibility and Christian faith simply cannot be addressed (sexuality, marriage, war, etc.). It is also not the purpose of the book to explore questions about resources in ethics, say the use of scripture in Christian ethics. Finally, my task is not to provide a defense of theistic ethics, although I do sketch a version of the moral proof of the existence of God. My task is to address basic matters in ethics pertaining to moral responsibility to the end of presenting a new ethics of responsibility. The book develops an approach to theological ethics, which, given time and space, could address the range of topics germane to moral inquiry.

A final word of introduction is needed about the enterprise of theological ethics, and, specifically, the term “Christian Ethics.” Following an insight of H. Richard Niebuhr, this book is a work of Christian moral philosophy. While I develop a theory of responsibility which differs from Niebuhr’s ethics, and, indeed, all Christian accounts of responsibility in this century, it is still one purpose of this book to renew the enterprise of Christian moral philosophy.³ “Christian ethics” is critical and constructive reflection on moral existence from the perspective of Christian faith. It is also the articulation and even revision of the moral meaning of Christian convictions. Theological ethics is faith seeking moral understanding: *fides quaerens intellectum moralem*.

This book undertakes theological ethical reflection on basic questions of our time. I draw freely from the whole of the Western Christian tradition and from works in philosophical ethics, Jewish thought, and political theory in order to present an ethics of responsibility. Although the point of view in the ethics is Christian, the object of moral reflection is the existence of all human beings. Problems of responsibility are not unique to Christians. Whatever else we are, we are all members of one species sharing a fragile planet. All forms of ethics must address this simple but important fact.

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I

The context of responsibility

CHAPTER I

Responsibility and moral confusion

Questions of responsibility are as old as human civilization itself. The myths, symbols, and rituals of the world's religions, archeological evidence from early human communities, and all forms of social life testify that human beings have always engaged in acts of praise and blame, debt and reparation, making obligations and fulfilling or failing to keep them, questioning and answering, acting faithfully and without faithfulness. These actions and social practices are the simplest and most pervasive forms of responsibility. On the basis of historical and sociological evidence, one might conclude that to be human is to be responsible. Debates about the grounds, norms, and limits of responsibility are at root disputes about the meaning of our humanity and our lives together.

Contemporary Western societies are riddled with unending criticism of traditional moral convictions, and, therefore, conflicts over the meaning of human existence. At the same time, there is within these societies an increasing demand for persons and institutions to assume responsibility for all domains of life: family, politics, economic life, medicine, and a livable global environment. We can begin the inquiry into responsibility and Christian ethics by exploring criticisms of the traditional ideas of morality and responsibility. This is important since many, but not all, of these ideas about morality have roots in Christian faith. Later in this chapter I will relate these criticisms and the values behind them to problems which make responsibility morally central in our time, especially the fact of moral pluralism and the reality of human power. The way forward in ethics requires a reconstruction of responsibility which takes these criticisms and problems into account.

RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTEMPORARY MORAL VALUES

Criticisms of the idea of responsibility center on a claim found in much of Western ethics and virtually all of traditional Christian ethics. What is under criticism is the belief that the consideration of the well-being of others or one's duty to God ought to determine a person's conduct and also what kind of life he or she should strive to live. Morality is defined by obligation to others which includes reasons for self-sacrifice. William K. Frankena has clearly delineated this conception of morality. He writes:

morality is a normative system in which evaluative judgments of some sort are made, more or less consciously, from a certain point of view, namely, from the point of view of a consideration of the effects of actions, motives, traits, etc., on the lives of persons or sentient beings as such, including the lives of others besides the person acting, being judged, or judging (as the case may be.)¹

The moral point of view requires the consideration of the lives of others in deciding what one ought to be and to do. I should do unto others as I would have them do unto me. We are to love others as ourselves (cf. Matt. 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8). Christian faith intensifies the principles of moral equality and reciprocity through its conception of love, or *agape*. The Christian is to act out of radical other-regard, a revolutionary love for others and their well-being beyond equal regard.² We are to love our enemies. The logic of equal regard, or reciprocity, is transformed in Christian ethics by the reality of superabundant love.³

Critics point out that the demand for impartial other-regard, let alone Christian *agape*, as definitive of morality can mutilate genuine human goods.⁴ It seems to require that we view our own lives from a disinterested perspective and thus forsake the commitments, beliefs, and projects that make us who we are. And yet it is precisely those commitments which provide a framework for making sense of life. The idea that life is lived under obligation to others can stunt human aspirations and also establish intricate systems of debt, retribution, and guilt, systems found in virtually

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II

all cultures. The criticism is significant, because it tells us something about the problems contemporary ethics faces in thinking about responsibility.

Many people live with a crushing sense of responsibility. These persons sacrifice unduly their own aspirations out of a sense of duty to others, or they live with guilt for things they could not have reasonably altered or avoided. Feminist ethicists, for example, argue that the “sin” of women is not prideful self-aggrandizement but suppression of their needs, sensibilities, and actions to the demands of traditional roles and obligations to others. Service to others is claimed to be the path to fulfillment, even if, we should note, the demands for service are not equally distributed among persons. The traditional conception of morality has been used to legitimate “feminine virtues” which actually perpetuate oppression. As one author notes:

We appeal to altruism, to self-sacrifice, and in general, to feminine virtuousness in a desperate attempt to find grace and goodness within a system marked by greed and fear. However, while these virtues may herald for us the possibility of ethics – the possibility of some goodness in an otherwise nasty world – nevertheless ... they are the virtues of subservience.⁵

Morality, the criticism goes, is destructive of genuine human aspirations or is merely the tool of the powerful to oppress others. Oppressed persons learn to understand and value their lives in terms of the dominant social system, a system which does not work to eliminate oppressive structures.⁶ The psychological power of obligation shapes and stunts self-consciousness and thus an understanding of human potential. If we could drop the overriding demand for impartial other-regard as definitive of what is morally praiseworthy, then, the critic holds, we might live less guilty, less stunted, and genuinely happier lives. One could grant obligation a place in human life but not see it as definitive of the morally good life.

This criticism of commonly held notions of obligation and responsibility as well as the Christian conception of neighbor love expresses a pervasive moral outlook. The basic conviction found in contemporary Western cultures is that human life ought to be

characterized by the search for fulfillment and authenticity.⁷ Fulfillment is not defined in terms of obedience to social roles, cultural ideals, or the perfection of a certain set of virtues. It is defined with respect to enhancing the richness and complexity of a person's life. Similarly, authenticity is understood not in terms of fidelity to objective moral standards, values, or codes of behavior, but, rather, in terms of being true to oneself and one's basic commitments. The critics of traditional morality are arguing, then, that individuals ought to seek fulfillment and be true to themselves, be authentic. In so far as responsibility seems to demand some sacrifice of the goods one wants and values, it might be best, on this account, simply to demote its importance in understanding personal life. A basic feature of our situation is, then, that the values of fulfillment and authenticity provide the means to assess the demands of moral obligation. In this way the contemporary moral outlook diverges from traditional morality and Christian love.

However, the criticism of traditional morality centers not only on ideals of human excellence. Since it expresses beliefs for orienting human life, the criticism also focuses on human capacities for action and beliefs about the world in which we live. In this light, traditional discourse about moral responsibility backed the belief that the world is open to moral evaluation. Examples of this conviction abound in the ancient world and continue to shape the moral imagination of the West. For instance, in the book of Job there is an assumption that some agent other than human beings is involved in Job's suffering. Moreover, the backing for specific commandments in the Bible is what God has done in history, for example, how God liberated Israel from bondage (Deut. 6:20–25). It is essential to the Bible that God is an agent in human affairs. Goods and obligations are constituted by God's action even as reality itself is open to moral assessment. These beliefs are not unique to the biblical world. They dominated Greek and Roman thought as well. Sophocles' powerful drama *Antigone* revolves around the obligation Antigone has to her brother under the law of the gods. The Sophoclean vision traces the tragic working of fate in and through human affairs. Forces other than human beings have moral meaning. In each of these