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978-0-521-65709-9 - Responsibility and Christian Ethics

William Schweiker

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The purpose of this book is to formulate a way of thinking about issues of power, moral identity, and ethical norms by developing a theory of responsibility from a specifically theological viewpoint; the author makes clear thereby the significance for Christian commitment of current reflection on moral responsibility. The concept of responsibility is relatively new in ethics, but the drastic extension of human power through various technological developments has lately thrown into question the way human beings conceive of themselves as morally accountable agents. It is this radical extension of power in our time which poses the need for a new paradigm of responsibility in ethics. Schweiker engages in an informed way with what is therefore a highly topical discussion. By developing a coherent theory of responsibility, and inquiring as to its source, the author demonstrates the unique contribution which might be made by Christian thought to moral questions in the next century.

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

General editor: Robin Gill

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In recent years the study of Christian ethics has become an integral part of mainstream theological studies. The reasons for this are not hard to detect. It has become a more widely held view that Christian ethics is actually central to Christian theology as a whole. Theologians increasingly have had to ask what contemporary relevance their discipline has in a context where religious belief is on the wane, and whether Christian ethics (that is, an ethics based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has anything to say in a multi-faceted and complex secular society. There is now no shortage of books on most substantive moral issues, written from a wide variety of theological positions. However, what is lacking are books within Christian ethics which are taken at all seriously by those engaged in the wider secular debate. Too few are methodologically substantial; too few have an informed knowledge of parallel discussions in philosophy or the social sciences. This series attempts to remedy the situation. The aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* will therefore be twofold. First, to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level; second, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications. It is hoped that the series as a whole will make a substantial contribution to the discipline.

A list of titles in the series is given at the end of the book.

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WILLIAM SCHWEIKER

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For Paul

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General editor's preface

William Schweiker's new book is the sixth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. Its theme of 'responsibility' is extremely important and apt and has many points of contact with other books in this series. Schweiker argues convincingly that an approach based upon responsibility has much to contribute to the present-day debate about ethics. He also believes that Christian ethics has a distinctive and valuable contribution to make to this approach. Within the secular world an awkward combination of increasing pluralism and technological power makes a notion of responsibility imperative. As power increases in a technological age – so ironically does pluralism. The latter ensures that people become increasingly confused about the bases of morality just at the very moment that they are possessing an unprecedented amount of power. Schweiker, in contrast, argues that an ethical approach based upon responsibility (both individual and corporate), which has moral integrity as its aim, is more apposite.

Drawing on classical and contemporary sources, Schweiker argues that responsibility is linked to our capacity to reflect upon and then revise or transform our lives through criticism of what we care about and thus value. He does not follow those Christian ethicists who have tended to regard responsibility in individualistic terms as a personal revelation or intuition. For Schweiker responsibility involves cognition and critical reflection/interpretation, and is a requirement both for individuals and for moral communities. It is based upon critical reflection aimed at the question of what has constituted our lives under the recognition of and care for others – and, for theists, our lives before God. As he says himself 'conscience is not a faculty of the soul, a divine

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spark in the mind; it is the practice of radical interpretation within which personal and social identity is constituted and formed in terms of the imperative of responsibility'.

In the final part of this challenging book William Schweiker seeks to show that Christian faith does have a distinctive contribution to make to the general discussion about responsibility. For Christians genuine moral integrity is an indirect consequence of seeking to respect and enhance the integrity of all life before God. An approach which is based simply upon personal autonomy and authentic fulfilment always faces the temptation in a troubled world of the will to power. But for Christians ultimate power is God's alone and faith in this God provides a confidence to live and act amid the fragmentations of life and beyond a culture of personal fulfilment and authenticity. Christian faith offers a vision of 'goodness shining through the fragmentariness and travail of existence, the awareness that being as being is good'. A Christian notion of responsibility is based upon an ultimate power, namely God, who is good, and a finite world that is graciously respected by God.

Responsibility and Christian Ethics has points of contact with several of the other monographs in the series. Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics* repeatedly linked secular language about 'rights' to Christian notions of duty and responsibility. He also argued that Christians have deeper 'justifying reasons for acting morally' than secularists precisely because moral behavior for Christians is a part of their relationship to God. James Mackey's *Power and Christian Ethics* offered a notion of power as moral authority located finally in God which is also very close to William Schweiker's thesis. For Mackey Christian communities at their best offer a 'radical and encompassing sense of life as grace' which 'enlightens and empowers people to imagine and create an ever better life, and also to overcome the forces of destruction which one could otherwise only join and increase, but never beat'.

Schweiker's thesis also overlaps with Ian Markham's *Plurality and Christian Ethics*. Both writers take modern pluralism seriously and Markham, like Schweiker, finally believes that theism offers 'a more coherent description of life than any alternative world

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perspective – it makes sense of the objectivity of value and the intelligibility of the universe'. For Schweiker the very discipline of Christian ethics is finally 'faith seeking moral understanding'.

By a stroke of good fortune *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* is being published simultaneously with Clinton Gardner's *Justice and Christian Ethics* and both of them quickly follow Jean Porter's *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*. An understanding of Christian ethics similar to Schweiker's is seen in Porter's and Gardner's texts. For Schweiker and these other writers moral action is a product of a subtle and complex juxtaposition of interdependent moral virtues – including, crucially, notions of responsibility. However much one stresses such virtues as autonomy, authentic fulfilment or even justice, a strong notion of responsibility – both individual and corporate – does seem to be required by Christian ethics. Schweiker's book provides the needed theory of responsibility for theological ethics.

I hope that this book gets the serious attention it deserves.

ROBIN GILL

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I dedicate this book to my son, Paul. More than anyone else he has taught me that the depths of responsibility and the heights of joy are ultimately one. This insight, I believe, is the truth of our relations to God amid the flurry and fragility of human life.