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978-0-521-65710-5 - Moral Action and Christian Ethics

Jean Porter

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How do we determine whether an action is right or wrong? Until recently, philosophers assumed that this question could be answered by means of a theory of morality, which set forth clearly established rules for moral behavior. More recently, however, a number of philosophers have questioned whether a theory of morality can be postulated in quite this sense. Jean Porter is sympathetic to their critiques of moral theories, but questions whether these go far enough in offering a positive alternative to the accepted view of the moral act. Such an alternative she finds in the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose account of moral rationality is placed in a wider context of ethical thought, and whose moral reasoning is understood as dialectical rather than deductive. The Thomist account of the moral virtues is seen to offer unexpected insights into the relationship between moral rules and the practice of the virtues. For the author, this account can contribute to our own moral reflection, even for those who do not share the religious beliefs of Aquinas.

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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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 provided at the end of the book.

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For Joseph Blenkinsopp

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General editor's preface

Jean Porter's new book is the fifth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. Like the first book, Kieran Cronin's well received *Rights and Christian Ethics*, it is more distinctly philosophical than others in the series. Yet it is written with a minimum of jargon and in elegant, pellucid prose. It offers, I believe, a very serious theological challenge to much recent moral philosophy.

As I had hoped, a distinctive shape is beginning to emerge in the series. Not only are contributors well versed in one of the humanities, science, or social science disciplines, they are also prepared to challenge some of the secularist assumptions that often underpin them in the modern university. Kieran Cronin saw considerable areas of overlap between Christians and secularists in the debate about "rights." However, he concluded that Christians (and many others with religious faith) do 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* also offered a theological challenge to much secular thought. He argued that, in a world that frequently equates power with force, religious communities (despite their many failures) can have real significance. At best such communities 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."

Ian Markham's *Plurality and Christian Ethics* also offered a

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distinctive theological challenge. In arguing for a position of what he termed “constructive plurality,” he maintained that secularism as a basis for rational dialogue in the modern world is surprisingly weak. He argued that theism offers “a more coherent description of life than any alternative world perspective.” He was in the end convinced by those who argue that it is theism which “makes sense of the objectivity of value and the intelligibility of the universe.”

Others have made similar claims in the debate that is currently raging between modernists and postmodernists. However, none of the writers in this series relies upon hyperbole or engages in dramatic end-of-the-Enlightenment discourse. Ian Markham was quite critical of such discourse, reminding his readers of some of the positive features of the Enlightenment, as well as its inherent weaknesses. The dominant discourse in this series is that of a sustained dialogue with secular disciplines, albeit a critical and non-subservient dialogue. Jean Porter's stance is exactly that. She offers a very significant theological challenge to much secular moral philosophy, albeit a challenge couched in her sympathetic and gentle delivery.

Jean Porter is finally unconvinced by what she regards as the false security of modern moral theories “with their promise of certainties that we cannot attain.” With great skill she undermines a position based simplistically upon moral rules. For her they pay insufficient attention to the difficulties inherent in applying notions (whether moral or not), and ignore the analogical nature of moral reasoning. She is sympathetic to the critiques of modern moral theories that have been offered recently by philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Martha Nussbaum. However, she questions whether these critiques go far enough in offering a positive alternative to a modern view of the moral act.

Jean Porter returns to Aquinas and seeks to reclaim his understanding of the moral act as a product of interdependent moral virtues. For her the moral life is shaped by subtle interplay between a healthy self-regard grounded in restraint and forthrightness, kindness and decency built out of caring,

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and fairness and responsibility forming a basis for justice. These virtues are interdependent and become, so she argues, seriously distorted if adopted in isolation. In combination they suggest that to live justly is also to live well. By way of contrast, she regards Kant's single-minded call to duty as inadequate.

Jean Porter offers a sustained and well-rounded account of the moral act which is both theologically grounded and distinct from many of the products of moral philosophy.

ROBIN GILL

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Preface

Scholarship is by its nature a collaborative enterprise, and I cannot even identify, much less thank, everyone who has contributed in some way to the development of my thought on the subject of this book. None the less, I would like to thank those who have contributed more directly to its completion.

In the first place, I wish to thank the administration of the University of Notre Dame, and my department chair, Professor Lawrence Cunningham, for allowing me a sabbatical during the fall semester, 1993, during which I completed a good part of this book. The Association of Theological Schools and the Notre Dame Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts generously provided funding for my research on this project. David Baer offered invaluable help in preparing the final draft of the manuscript, and he also prepared the bibliography.

A number of colleagues have commented on some portion of this manuscript, including Harlan Beckley, Martin Cook, Margaret Farley, William French, James Gustafson, Stephen Pope, and Diane Yeager. My patient and indefatigable editor, Alex Wright, the editor for the series, Robin Gill, and an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press also offered invaluable suggestions on subsequent drafts of this project. My copy editor, Gillian Maude, offered many helpful stylistic suggestions. David Baer, Laurel Jordan, Louise Prochaska, and Gerald Schlabach prepared extensive bibliographies on some of the subjects that are discussed in this book. Alasdair MacIntyre reviewed and commented on an early draft of a proposal for this project, and offered me considerable help at

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an early stage of my research. This book should make my continued debt to him abundantly clear.

Portions of the third chapter were read at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, and I received many helpful suggestions from those present. Portions of chapter 4 are taken from two previously published articles, “The Unity of the Virtues and the Ambiguity of Goodness: A Reappraisal of Aquinas’ Theory of the Virtues,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (published by Religious Ethics, Incorporated), 21, 1 (Spring, 1993), 137–163, and “The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtue in the *Summa theologiae*,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992), 19–41. Both articles are used with the kind permission of the editors of the journals in which they appeared.

Finally, I want to add a special word of thanks to my husband, Joseph Blenkinsopp. He read most of this manuscript in several drafts, and offered many suggestions for improvement. He also reviewed my translations of Aquinas and saved me from many infelicities and outright mistakes; I take full responsibility for any remaining errors. I am deeply appreciative of this practical assistance, but my greatest debts to him are on another level. It is hard to know how to express my gratitude for all that he has brought into my life without sounding banal. This book is dedicated to him as a small token of my gratitude and love.