



Whither Ethics? *A Review Essay*

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Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986)

Daniel C. Maguire, *The Moral Revolution: A Christian Humanist Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986)

Stephen Happel and James J. Walter, *Conversion and Discipleship: A Christian Foundation for Ethics and Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986)

Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987)

Gabriel Moran, *No Ladder to the Sky: Education and Morality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987)

Werner Marx, *Is There a Measure on Earth? Foundations for a Nonmetaphysical Ethics*. Trans. by Thomas J. Nenon and Reginald Lilly (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987)

These books defy any simple categorization. They mirror the current situation in which it is difficult to get a clear sense of where ethics is going. Most of the authors, however, do share a sense of crisis, a sense that something is seriously wrong with our understanding and practice of ethics. This sense of crisis has been with us for some time, but it was heightened by the 1981 publication of Alasdair Macintyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame Press), which argued that we have simply forgotten what moral language is all about. While few others have accepted Macintyre's prescription for a return to Aristotle, many share his perception of a crisis. From a very different perspective, the various liberation theologies agree, pointing to the economic and political crisis faced by the poor and oppressed.

In considering the books to be reviewed here, I will move rather quickly through the first four in order to get to Gabriel Moran's splendid study of morality and education, which will command the most attention.

ETHICS THIN AND THICK: O'DONOVAN AND MAGUIRE

We begin with a pair of opposites: a conservative evangelical, with an abstract, rational ethic (O'Donovan), and a liberal Catholic with a concrete, emotion-laden ethic (Maguire). There is much talk these days of the contrast between "thin" ethics and "thick" ethics. "Thin" ethics is abstract, detached, rational, intellectualist and unemotional; it views emotion as the enemy of clear thinking, and is committed to impartiality. "Thick" ethics, on the other hand, is fully

connected to a concrete social situation by a host of bonds, commitments, and passions; it views intellectualism as the foe of true ethics, and is committed to partiality. “Thin” ethics is concerned with theory, “thick” ethics with praxis. Maguire’s collection of essays is a prime example of “thick” ethics, while O’Donovan’s book provides a good example of “thin” ethics.

At first glance, O’Donovan’s study would not seem to be so “thin”: committed to conservative, evangelical Christianity, he is not impartial about *that*. Yet persistent rationalism and intellectualism characterize his ethics as comparatively “thin.” He has a fairly static view both of God and reality. “Morality is man’s participation in the created *order*” (76; emphasis mine). Creation, for O’Donovan, is a completed process, part of “objective reality.” Although the word “resurrection” in his title might lead one to expect an emphasis on the *new*, resurrection seems to mean primarily the *restoration* of the created order, not the inauguration of anything distinctively new. And even though he uses the word “participation,” O’Donovan seems to have something more like conformity in mind. A student of the late Paul Ramsey, O’Donovan is highly teleological; he particularly castigates “voluntarism,” by which he means any ethics that views the moral task primarily as one of imposing the human will on nature. That, for O’Donovan, is putting the cart before the horse; first comes the created order, then the human will.

Maguire’s book would be a nightmare for O’Donovan; it represents just the sort of “voluntarism”—the one-sided emphasis on the human will and utter disregard for created order—that O’Donovan so vigorously assails. Indeed, Maguire does not seem to see much order in the world, and he urges a revolution against the established disorder he sees in economics, violence, sexuality, and medicine. These essays are written primarily in the mode of assertion; little evidence is offered for the positions he takes. It is a textbook case of “thick” ethics, filled with specific references to Maguire’s family and personal experience. Where O’Donovan makes very few references to specific moral issues (e.g., there is one passing, negative reference to homosexuality), issues are the very stuff of Maguire’s book. He insists on the importance of emotion and nonrational knowledge in ethics.

This book illustrates the great impact that “thick” ethics can have: Maguire’s account of the life and death of his severely handicapped son is quite moving; his discussion of marriage is simply lyrical in its joy and affirmation; and his account of a visit to an abortion clinic is sensitive and vivid. Yet his vindictiveness, his unwillingness to take opponents seriously, and his assertive stance render this book so “thick” as to be obese with preconceptions. The excesses of this sort of anti-rationalism and “voluntarism” prompt, with some justifiability, the complaints of an O’Donovan. O’Donovan’s book is far more

scholarly and precise in its language, but Maguire’s is far more committed and vital. O’Donovan has theology without issues or vitality, while Maguire has issues and vitality but little theology. Can we not have both?

THE ETHICS OF CONVERSION AND FORMATION: HAPPEL AND WALTER, AND SEDGWICK

Next we proceed to a pair of books by new authors who, unlike O’Donovan and Maguire, seek to deal with both the theology and the issues of ethics. Both Happel and Walter as well as

Sedgwick (like Moran below) emphasize the moral *person*, with attention to the cultivation of virtues and the formation of character. This move also reflects Macintyre, who located much of the illness of modern ethics in its neglect of character and virtue.

Happel and Walter set out to develop a foundational moral theology based on conversion and discipleship. Heavily influenced by the late Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, they unite his emphasis on conversion with the concept of discipleship. Their treatment of conversion—“an other-worldly falling in love” (20), a lifelong process—is instructive. Conversion involves: (1) “disorientation,” (2) “gathering together the fragments of the exploded past,” (3) “forgiveness for failures,” and (4) recognition that it all originates “in some Other who is not oneself” (p. 9). Conversion leads to discipleship, and particularly to meeting the needs of the poor. A concluding chapter considers Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms in some detail. Happel and Walter criticize the doctrine, not because of the distinction it makes between inner and outer, gospel and world, but because it allows “no intrinsic mediation” between them (216). They call for a continuing, mutually critical conversation, in which knowledge reflects on praxis and praxis informs knowledge.

Sedgwick’s *Sacramental Ethics* is a highly creative attempt to base Christian ethics on Christian worship. “The place to begin in understanding Christian faith and the Christian life is through the worshipping community” (14). In the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, “the fundamental reality of life is not only revealed, but the worshipper is reconciled to that reality” (16). (O’Donovan might say “conformed,” rather than “reconciled.”) What is that reality? “A way of life marked by the movement in response to God of opening and offering the self, the experience of grace, and the embrace of the world” (19). Specific issues are then considered: sexuality, peace, and poverty. Sedgwick casts ethics not in the role of judge, but in the role of the confessor, engaged in the cure of souls, guiding and forming the Christian life.

EDUCATIONAL MORALITY: GABRIEL MORAN

This book is clearly the result of many years of careful thought and reflection by a mature scholar; it is a breathtaking interweaving of concepts and insights drawn from a great many areas. It is not an accident that such a helpful book comes from a professor of religious education; much of the creative work in ethics these days is being done in education and psychology, by scholars who view morality as an educational and psychological process. The famous work on moral development in children by both Jean Piaget and Lawrence

Kohlberg (which Moran disputes) is now supplemented by Carol Gilligan’s work on women’s decision-making (*In a Different Voice* [Cambridge: Harvard, 1982]; which Moran largely endorses) and James Fowler’s work on adult religious development (*Stages of Faith* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981]), as well as recent work by Don Browning (*Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]).

The Christian Right has monopolized the claim that you cannot teach without also teaching morality; its narrow, ideological, and self-serving version of the argument has served to discredit more serious reflection on the role of morality in education, just as it has served to obscure the legitimate role that religion can play in a public morality. But Moran takes on this question thoughtfully, ecumenically, and carefully. He argues that “morality and education are

essentially the same process” (14), calling for an “educational morality,” which is far more than mere schooling. Educational morality should be a lifelong process, begun before schooling, enhanced by formal education, but never ending. His splendid discussion of the issue of sex education illustrates just how confused our discussion of morality and education has become:

The advocates of sex education protest strongly that they do not teach “moral values,” yet they are obviously teaching the value of rational enlightenment. The opponents of sex education in trying to defend the sacredness of the person can sound as if they favor ignorance. The problem is that we should be discussing not only sex education but sexual education or sexuality education. Then we would have the possibility of a third stage: educational morality. While the argument over sex education goes on, the human race has a crisis in sexual education, a process that occurs from birth to death. (16-17)

Of course! How could “sexuality education” be limited to a few weeks in high school? It is obviously a lifelong process.

Moran develops a sophisticated moral theory on this basis. After he rejects the two main schools of Western philosophical ethics of our day, the ethics of the good (teleology, including utilitarianism) and the ethics of the right (deontology), he advocates a morality of “goodness,” which is responsible, transnatural, and both public *and* private. These terms require some clarification.

1. *Responsible*. “A responsible morality is...a relational morality,...recognizing the many relations in which we participate” (75). Responsibility is cultivated especially by religion, which acknowledges “the bond of creation to its creative source.” This sets the framework of ethics for Moran; we are responsible *to* everything, but not *for* everything.

2. *Trans-natural*. “Trans-natural” is Moran’s attempt to come to terms with the impact of nature on morality. Much discussion of ethics in this century has attempted to discredit nature as a source for morality. Some forms of feminism, for example, in rejecting the idea that “anatomy is destiny,” also rejected the idea that human biology should have anything to do with the way that women structure their lives. There is growing dissatisfaction with this disregard of nature today, coming from sources as diverse as Macintyre, O’Donovan, the ecological movement, feminists, and biologists—such as Edward O. Wilson (*On Human Nature* [Cambridge: Harvard, 1978]). Moran begins his discussion with an eminently reasonable observation: “Reason has to reflect on what is non-

reason, on bodily activities whose structure is not infinitely malleable” (85). In other words, there is much that we cannot change in nature and in ourselves. Yet, echoing Reinhold Niebuhr (without knowing it?), Moran observes that human beings are both *in* nature and *beyond* nature: “Human morality is always both natural and more than natural. The human vocation is to go beyond the natural but not against it” (85). Hence, for Moran, to be *unnatural* is wrong, but something can be *nonnatural*, or, in his word, *transnatural* and still be right. “The moral question is whether we act in tune with the cycles of nature or whether [we] set out to exploit, conquer, and subdue” (97).

3. *Public and private.* We have long distinguished between public issues and private ones. With whom one slept was a private matter; to whom one paid taxes was public. Indeed, moral issues were thought to be exclusively private, and not public: “You can’t legislate morality.” In the recent past, however, there have been several attempts to recover the public dimensions of morality and religion, in, e.g., Martin Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) and Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985). Moran here argues that the more public a thing is, the more private it is as well. (A striking example of an issue that is both highly public *and* intensely private is, of course, AIDS.) Moran’s close linking of the public and private recalls the feminist dictum that “the personal is the political.”

Moran then applies his ethics to three moral issues: abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality. Each is dealt with as responsible, trans-natural, and public/private. His method stands up well. Particularly judicious is his treatment of abortion:

As soon as possible, abortion should be eliminated from the ways the human race uses to control birth. There ought to be much better ways in which we transform natural processes of procreation that would eliminate the violence that abortion entails....The goodness of life and the undesirability of abortion ought not to be in question....The fact that there are no obvious lines between conception and birth does not mean no moral lines can be drawn. (123-124)

Moran concludes that early abortion is preferable to later abortion because it is both less violent *and* safer; but “the moral, religious, social question is how to transform the conditions that make abortion such a common occurrence today” (126). On the specifics of abortion, Moran does not come out very differently from Maguire. Like Maguire, he accepts early abortions; yet Moran’s arguments are infinitely more satisfying. His vision of a future where *both* women’s life *and* fetal life are more respected than they are today, and abortions are less frequent, offers a way out of the impasse of today’s pro-life/pro-choice debate. His treatments of euthanasia and homosexuality are similarly thoughtful: he rejects “unnatural” treatments of the dying that unnaturally extend life, but he also rejects the facile “right to die” slogan; and he argues that homosexuality can and should be responsible, trans-natural, and public/private.

If all this were not enough, Moran throws in the bonus of a chapter on “Teaching Morally,” in which he points out that moral teaching covers a broad spectrum of activities that extends from preaching through teaching to therapy

(recall Sedgwick’s linkage of ethics to the cure of souls). Consider, for example, his/observation that preaching “should not nag people, carping at their failure to do this or that. A morality of goodness struggles with evil, failure, and sin by trying to get more goodness to overflow itself” (153). Moran’s book would make particularly valuable reading for the teacher, preacher, and even the therapist.

A NONMETAPHYSICAL ETHIC: MARX

This book, by the distinguished philosopher and Heidegger scholar, is not for the faint of

heart. It is a taxing, demanding, and highly metaphysical (albeit nonmetaphysical) treatise. Marx, in common with the current drive towards “anti-foundationalism” in Western philosophy, seeks a measure for a “nonmetaphysical” ethic. In other words, he seeks an ethic without reference to transcendence of any sort. Why?

In our secularized age, religious ideas based on the Bible have lost most of their effectiveness. Not everyone still believes that there is a divine creator as an absolute measure and that God created man in His image and likeness. (20)

Note that Marx does not claim that one *cannot* believe such things, only that “not everyone” does—an indisputable observation. So where does Marx find this measure that will make it possible for us to avoid nihilism and make moral judgments?

On the basis of a painstaking study of the later Heidegger, Marx carefully develops an understanding of *death* as the measure for ethics; not the mere fact of death or the isolated act of dying, but rather the way that death enters into all life, is present in every minute of life. Death is not simple Non-being, but it is where Being and Non-being meet: “death both grants Nothing and Being the possibility of disclosure, manifestness, as well as lending them the character of a ‘mystery’” (110). In other words, we do not know life apart from death; death enables us to know life. Death, indeed, is the Other we encounter. Hence it is not merely subjective, but can be used as a measure.

Two more things about Marx’s book: First, it is interesting that, besides the subject of this book, death, there are two other universal human experiences—sexuality (including generativity) and birth—which are lacking. Why? Could not they, too, provide a measure? Second, it is instructive to compare this book with Sedgwick’s *Sacramental Ethics*. Both books focus on death as central to the moral life. For Marx, it is death as the Other, as mystery, that gives us a measure for ethics; for Sedgwick, it is the paschal mystery of the death and self-giving of Christ which evokes a similar movement on our part. Indeed, Marx’s identification of death as the key to ethics recalls the central symbol of Christianity, the cross.

WHITHER ETHICS? CONCLUSIONS

We may summarize the results of this brief survey in the following table, charting the answer each book gives to the question, “What is the key to the moral life?”

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| <i>Author(s)</i> | <i>Key to the Moral Life</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|
| O’Donovan Maguire | The divinely created order which is restored in the resurrection Dismantling the white male monopoly, endorsing feminism, and challenging the Catholic hierarchy |
| Happel and Walter Sedgwick | Conversion and discipleship as a lifelong process The paschal mystery, wherein the self-giving of God calls forth our own self-giving |
| Moran | A responsible, trans-natural, and public/private educational morality Marx The experience of death |

Of course one cannot diagnose the current state of ethics on the basis of such a limited sample, but these books do illustrate several important trends. They indicate that the *theology* in theological ethics is making a comeback, but with very close attention to current moral issues—as in Sedgwick and Moran, for example. Ethics is becoming “thicker,” as in all of these books, except O’Donovan and perhaps Marx. There is new attention to character formation, to ethics as a process for development. One also finds a growing interest in the public *and* the private dimensions of ethics, uniting concern for the *polis* with renewed attention to the self. At the same time, voluntarism and subjectivism are alive and well, but dissatisfaction with them is growing too; there are renewed attempts to find something beyond mere subjectivity. One even sees attempts at a more or less radically revised natural law theory (O’Donovan, Moran, Marx). Another visible pattern here is the growing concern with human sexuality, absent only from O’Donovan and Marx. The influence of feminist ethics is quite visible in Maguire, Sedgwick, and Moran. But one can only wish that all these books shared Maguire’s passionate concern about economic issues, particularly poverty.

In conclusion, we can say that ethics as a discipline continues to thrive. And we can hope that ethics as a practice will benefit, so that we too can aim for the goal that Moran so appealingly depicts: “Moral decisions...are not always agonizing dilemmas; there can be a joy and ease in exercising virtue when it is a lifelong companion” (15).