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Ethics in Conversation

Undertaking Ethical Activity in the Light of Christian Belief

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A note on the title

I have been given the privilege of writing an account of how I attempt to formulate ethical engagement from a Christian perspective. I hope that what follows might be helpful, as you grapple in your own way with the complexities of ethical decision-making. By using the terminology of 'undertaking ethical activity', I have in mind two of the issues involved: first, to lay a theoretical groundwork for ethical reflection and the framework to be erected upon it; secondly, to construct practical, realistic answers to the conundrums of how we should live, as Christians, in a world that no longer takes for granted the truth of the Christian message. In this conversation-piece, I will concentrate mainly on the first, theoretical part, attempting to outline some of the key elements that need to be considered in thinking about ethics in the light of Christian belief.

What is meant by ethics?

Answering the question adequately could take us down a long path. Space, however, prevents a mammoth trek. So, I will confine myself to a brief understanding. Ethics, as an intellectual discipline,

has been described as 'the craft of right living'¹ and 'the organisation of moral convictions'.² It entails making particular moral judgements in the light of basic beliefs and in response to specific circumstances. Ethical decision-making requires a coherent pattern of discernment about which alternative responses should be embraced and which rejected. The process requires a valid method for justifying the choices made.

Distinguishing between different options

Life is full of moral choices, often on a daily basis. I am writing this on the day after the UK General Election in December 2019. No doubt, people engaged in moral considerations, as they decided which way to vote. Some may have followed generous principles, based on what they considered to be the best choice for society as a whole, whilst others might have concentrated principally on matters of self-interest. So, distinguishing between commendable and reprehensible options requires some way of being

¹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 61.

² Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 99.

able to judge what would be right and wrong alternatives.

My own preference is to activate the principle of *inference to the best explanation* (IBE) as the means of making the best possible decision. IBE works by comparing alternative explanations of the data of experience. The 'best' explanation is both the explanation most warranted by all the relevant evidence and the one that, if true, provides the best understanding.³ The best explanation is unlikely to be the simplest explanation, because the latter tends to reduce complexity to what can be handled by unaided human reason. As a result, it tends to ignore, on methodological grounds, substantial pieces of evidence. When the simplest explanation fails to explain, a more comprehensive one, if available, has to be sought. Its potential fruitfulness is due to its being an accepted means of testing scientific hypotheses (abduction). It also implicitly undergirds a way of reasoning used by the first generation of Christians in their encounter with the Gentile world of their time.

On the basis of this heuristic premise, Christian faith, which I take to be grounded in Trinitarian theistic realism, fairs well as a solid and reliable foundation for distinguishing between what is good belief and right action and what shows itself to be false or inadequate. It also has the added advantage of being able to indicate why the scientific method of discovery is able to reveal correctly the workings of the natural world. According to this line of reasoning, cogent ethical reflection can be justified best as the most convincing explanation, which takes into account other alternative explanations, of the entirety of human experience, and especially that of making moral choices.

³ A good account of the method, including responses to its detractors, can be found in Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2004).

In the contemporary Western world, the default approach to knowledge seems to be derived entirely 'from below,' i.e. by inference from data acquired from material sources alone. In a recent book,⁴ I have endeavoured to demonstrate that such a view is intrinsically incapable of discovering the whole truth about what it means to be human. What is required is also knowledge 'from outside.' Science operates within the framework of a given material reality. It presents us with much in the way of secure knowledge, some of which has an important bearing on right ethical judgements.⁵ However, science is not able to exhibit the whole circle of knowledge. Another source of knowledge is required, which tells us what otherwise we would not know. Within the Christian tradition of thought, this is called divine revelation.

The starting line

From where should ethical activity begin? In his book *Finding and Seeking* – citing Ps 95:7 ('Today, if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts...'⁶) – Oliver O'Donovan suggests that a good beginning would be the reality that each human being is a moral agent, bound to make moral choices:

'Today' is the day of *some agent*, some 'I' or 'we' who find ourselves addressed in that 'you'; more precisely, *this* 'I' or 'we' – ourselves, as we take up the question of what to do as our own question... We deliberate about the today on which it is given to you, or me, or us, to live and act.⁷

⁴ J. Andrew Kirk, *Being Human: An Historical Inquiry Into Who We Are* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

⁵ A recent example is the indisputable reality of the binary nature of sex, with the concomitant effect of dismantling the notion of unbounded gender elasticity.

⁶ The quotation from Ps 95:7 follows the version used here by O'Donovan (corresponding to Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition).

⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking, Ethics as Theology: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), ix.

Implicit in this starting-point is the universal consciousness that each human being is endowed with a moral conscience. Behind the individual stands the collective nature of moral reasoning: family, society, culture, tradition. Also, as the Psalmist clearly points out, stands the invitation (or demand) 'to hear his voice'. So, ethical activity also has to begin with some kind of moral framework that guides thinking and action. In the case of the Psalmist, and the whole of the Bible, 'his voice' alludes to the one, true, God who, through prophet and apostle, has spoken his word.

Christian belief is founded on the Bible's essential message

Why the Bible? Christian belief, since the closing of the Canon, has consistently referred to and consulted this particular text. The Bible has operated as the church's supreme authority in all matters of faith and moral

living. Christians have received the tradition that the Bible is divinely-inspired, i.e. that it is fully divine and fully human, its authors

having reliably conveyed in their own words the message that God intended. So, Christians are convinced that its core message is uniquely true among all the narratives that speak of the significance of human life on earth.

In terms of the discussion about alternative sets of belief, the Bible has a demonstrable ability to explain the fundamental aspects of human relationships, how they may work well and why they often fail. It has a predictive quality in being able to anticipate consequences of certain ethical decision-making. Roughly since the middle of the last century a thought-experiment, that goes by the name of post-modernity, has greatly influenced the search for truth. Speaking in general terms, one major criterion of rational

thought, that it should be based on plausible evidence, has given way to emotivism, i.e. resting opinions about life on sentiments and perceptions that one 'likes,' meaning what one 'feels comfortable about'. However, this approach to life has given rise to a world of mirrors that distort reality. On the other hand, the Bible has shown consistently that it does a better job of explaining the real world and invalidating a make-believe one. It provides, in many instances of real living, the best explanation of the reasons why humans think and act in the way that they do.

The core biblical message that guides ethical activity from a Christian perspective

So far I have argued that undertaking ethical activity requires a framework of belief that does the best job possible in clarifying the reality and significance of being human. I have

further contended that, although methods of analysis, employed by the natural sciences, can throw considerable light on aspects of human life, they are

inadequate in providing a circle of knowledge that creates a full understanding of what it means to be human. Science as such is unable to bridge the gap that exists between knowledge of facts about material entities and the value, purpose and meaning of human life on earth. A further source of knowledge is needed that explains adequately human existence as a whole. I surmise, therefore, that the core biblical message,⁸ not imagined or invented by fallible human beings but communicated from beyond self-sufficient

⁸ In the context of this study, I am proposing a hypothesis that the theme of God's reign, implemented through Jesus Christ, constitutes a summary of the entire Biblical message. It is impossible within the scope of this short piece to develop and confirm this hypothesis. However, I hope that the short discourse on the kingdom that I attempt will give some pointers to the validity of this surmise.

human powers of reasoning and intuition, supplies such an explanation.

If this reasoning has merit, a major question confronts us: how is this core message to be identified? The Bible is a big book, covering an account of the origin of the universe and planet Earth, followed by a long period of history, ending towards the conclusion of the first century A.D. It has much to say concerning a God who brought all things into being, about the first humans and one family called by God to be a blessing to all nations and to be his special people. It covers the vicissitudes of this people, the laws God gave them to regulate their common life and their relationship with other nations that existed alongside them. Eventually, it relates the coming of an exceptional person into the midst of the life of this people at a crucial moment of its story and the difference that this person made to all subsequent history. What, then, is the core message to be inferred from this long narrative?

I will offer what to me is the overriding conclusion to the question, derived from a close attention to the series of writings that interpret the significance of this special person for the world-wide human community from 'every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Rev 7:9). Two of the four historical accounts of Jesus begin with his birth in Bethlehem; one of them begins with his existence from all eternity as the Word of God, who 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14). These are important indications that he came into the world as a true human being, brought up in a human family for the first period of his life. However, the substantial drama of his life began with his public ministry.

A new regime is declared

Jesus identified himself with the prophetic movement begun by his cousin John by submitting himself to his practice of baptism.

He was identified by a voice from heaven as the Messiah, promised many centuries before.⁹ Immediately after, guided by God's Spirit, he spent forty days in a desert place, during which he was tempted by God's supreme enemy, Satan, to interpret his messianic calling in ways that denied his true vocation. Soon after withstanding the temptation, he began his public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled' and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!' (Mark 1:14-15)

My premise is that this short message encapsulates the core message of the whole Bible.¹⁰

The significance of Jesus' interpretation of the approaching kingdom can be summed up in three episodes of his life.¹¹ Firstly, there is the narrative of his temptation. He underwent a momentous conflict with Satan about the

9 Scholars normally conclude that the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, 'generally understood to be drawn from Ps 2:7 ... and Isa 42:1', spell out 'Jesus' Messianic mission'; see R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1985), 96. Cf. Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 59: 'The question of whether "Son" was understood as a messianic title must be raised at this point. For Mark and his readers the answer was obvious for the entire Gospel is about "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1; cf. 14:61)'. See also N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 536-537.

10 'The phrase, "the kingdom of God", is a central pillar for our understanding of the message of Jesus,' Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins: The Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism* (London: SPCK, 2002), 132; see also, 113-114, 137-139, 143-145.

11 There is no space to conduct a long discourse on the meaning of 'kingdom of God' in the New Testament. Three key passages, which reflect Jesus' own interpretation, have to suffice. The number of occurrences of the term 'kingdom' in the New Testament, laid out in an appendix to N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* (663-669), suggests weighty evidence in favour of it being considered its core message; see also Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 189-214.

meaning of his ministry as the Son of God (the Messiah). Satan challenged him with the words, “if you are the Son of God...” The temptation was not to doubt his identity, but to interpret it falsely. Satan offered Jesus ownership of the kind of kingdom he had precisely come to replace. He was shown ‘all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and [the devil] said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me”’ (Matt 4:8-9). What Satan omitted to declare was that all these kingdoms lay under God’s judgement and would be replaced.

Secondly, there is Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. This too was a dialogue about the true meaning of God’s kingdom. One must assume from Jesus’ initial response to Nicodemus’s opening remarks that the latter’s real interest, as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, was that Jesus would confirm from his own mouth that he was the true Messiah entrusted with the task of bringing in God’s sovereign rule over Israel, once for all. Jesus response was to affirm that he had a different understanding of God’s reign, which would be vouchsafed to all those ‘born again (from above)’. Jesus explained that God’s kingdom represents a new world,¹² a world of the Spirit, a world that satisfies the longing of humans for a sphere of life that does not seek to derive gratification from a material world alone, in spite of all its splendour and glory. The rest of the conversation brings home the point that humankind is split into two groups, one which acknowledges the real world and another which invents an alternative:

12 I give a summary of the way in which the world is identified in Scripture, especially in the Gospel of John, in J. Andrew Kirk, *The Church and the World: Understanding the Relevance of Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014) 3-29.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil ... But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (John 3:19,21)

Thirdly, after many disputes about the two worlds with various groups of his people, Jesus is brought before Pilate to be tried and condemned to death. Pilate, quite confused about the reason to try him as a criminal, asks him the political question, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ (John 18:33). He must have been even more disorientated by Jesus reply: ‘My kingdom is not from this world’ (John 18:36).

“ Humankind is split into two groups, one which acknowledges the real world and another which invents an alternative ”

In the context, Jesus is simply affirming that his kingdom does not comply with the general character of how the world imagines human life should be conducted. Jesus kingdom

cannot be instituted by recourse to coercive force. It envisages an entirely different vision of the use of power: ‘But as it is, my kingdom is not from here’ (John 18:36).

In these three episodes, Jesus is setting out a distinct conception of what his kingdom entails.¹³ The two kingdoms, or worlds, operate on diametrically opposed principles in just one existence on earth. The old wields a residual power that seeks to eliminate the new. However, it belongs to the past; the new will be a permanent future reality; one already present within the old.

13 The distinctive conception can be further illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles, the NT Letters and the Book of Revelation.

A new order is in place

In many ways the rest of the narrative recorded in the second part of the Bible focuses, theologically and practically, on the theme of the two worlds. Following the extraordinary events that took place in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover – Jesus' death by crucifixion and subsequent resurrection – Jesus instructed his disciples about the future of God's plan for them. God's new creation, under his rule, would continue in a new form under the guidance and empowering of

the Spirit. There would be no restoration of the kingdom to Israel as a political entity, but the formation of new communities as signs of a new world order,¹⁴ yet to be

established in full. On the Day of Pentecost, a new manifestation of God's rule began: the putative *ekklesia* came into existence.¹⁵

The contours of the new order

The church was to be guided by the Spirit of truth about what God was putting in place. There was to be a clear contrast between this new community and the old order which continues to suppress the truth about God and his creation.¹⁶ Paul, towards the beginning of his letter to Christians in Rome, spells out the principal reason why people believe what is fundamentally not true: it lies in the wrong choice about the nature of reality. Erroneous choices, then, spring from the rejection of the universal reality that there is no escape from living in a world designed and established by God. The way the old world functions is summarised by Paul with the word 'exchange'. It is built on a fundamental lie, which inevitably

leads to the destructive consequences of living an inauthentic humanness. The fundamental problem with the old age is that people have not seen fit to acknowledge God. This fact permanently skews its whole outlook on life.

Breaking free from the old order

In his letter Paul, having summarised the cause and consequences of the present world's disarray, continues by showing how God has provided a way to escape from the old world's embrace. The first pathway to new

life is signalled by the symbols of death and resurrection. By God's amazing grace in his own sacrificial gift of Jesus he offers to those, who believe the good news of reconciliation with

himself, the overcoming of humanity's deep alienation from the truth about the world as he meant it to be. Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ became the symbolic act of initiation into a new way of living. The second pathway is signalled by the presence of the Holy Spirit in this restored community.¹⁷ The two separate orders are contrasted by how they function: one, by 'the law of sin and death'; the other, by 'the law of the Spirit of life' (Rom 8:2).¹⁸

Living between two worlds

There is considerable emphasis in all the letters collected in the New Testament on how the members of the new community ('aliens and exiles' (1 Pet 2:11), with 'citizenship in heaven' (Phil 3:20)) should live, whilst in contact with the old way of life with its many temptations and pressures to stray from new commitments. Having left the powers that once held them captive, gratifying 'the passions of our flesh, following the desires of

“Erroneous choices spring from the rejection of the universal reality that there is no escape from living in a world designed and established by God.”

¹⁴ See Acts 1:6-8.

¹⁵ Acts 2:40-47. The word *ekklesia* is used by Luke of a community that extends back to the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 8:1; 9:31; 11:26; 13:1; 15:4,22; 20:28).

¹⁶ See Romans 1:18-32.

¹⁷ See Romans 8:2,4-7,13.

¹⁸ Cf. Gal 5:16,18,24-25.

flesh and senses' (Eph 2:3), they were not to 'be conformed to this world' (Rom 12:2). It is clear from their writings that the first followers of Jesus did not believe that the adherents of the old world could possibly inherit God's kingdom. The lure of the old world is summed up by the enticement of sexual immorality and a lust for financial gain.

The vision of the new world

Finally, the calling to moral purity is not only an abstention from all that corrupts and disfigures human life, but a positive dedication to being models of God's character, even when living under persecution. The language of purity and holiness describes life in the new world. Those who have entered God's new order are urged to 'walk in the light' (1 John 1:7),¹⁹ having nothing to do with 'the unfruitful works of darkness' (Eph 5:11). In synthesis, the calling of the new community is to live out the pattern of life that will occur, when the old world is eventually abolished and the new will take its place.²⁰ So, the fundamental guiding principle of Christian ethics is eschatological.

Conclusion

This piece is proposed as an exercise in Theological Ethics, based on a plausible understanding of what constitutes the core message of the Christian faith. It assumes that the audience is well-versed in Christian belief. Its intention is to give a personal interpretation of how the precept of inference to the best explanation in the field of ethics is fulfilled by

the criteria for ethical living found in the pages of the New Testament. It is orientated towards providing a basis for Christians to grapple with the present epistemological predicament of the West and its failure to specify an alternative, coherent account of a reliable ethical framework for moral guidance.

Thus, undertaking ethical activity in the light of Christian belief focuses, in my estimation, on the way of life portrayed by God's new order as announced by Jesus and his apostles. It is in contrast to a pattern of living characteristic of a world under the dominion of forces hostile to God.²¹ This way of looking at ethics amounts to a presupposition that has to be internalised by a conversion process characterised by 'a renewing of the mind,' in company with God's Spirit recreating human beings in the image of Jesus.

The present state of the world is like a fantastically beautiful picture that has been vandalised by someone throwing acid all over it. The new world is the picture, taken down from where it was hanging and put in the hands of the most brilliantly talented of restorers. Ethics in a Christian perspective is the work of restoration in the perspective of what is still to come.

¹⁹ Cf. Eph 5:8.

²⁰ 2 Pet 3:12,13-14,17-18; Rev 21:1-5; 1 Cor 2:6.

²¹ 1 John 5:19; Eph 2:1, 6:12; Rom 8:38.

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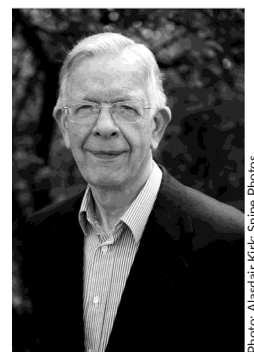


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