New Studies in Ethics--A Review Article

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A SERIES of monographs on ethics written from the viewpoint of contemporary analytical philosophy is edited by W. D. Hudson and written by philosophers from Great Britain, Australia and the United States. Each volume considers some phase or era of ethical thought. All are paperback, approximately 80 pages in length and costing about $1.25. They are published by Macmillan in London and St. Martin's Press in New York. Those reviewed here were published in 1967.

We begin with the volume on **Greek Ethics.** It was written by Pamela M. Huby, lecturer in philosophy, University of Liverpool. It consists in a rapid sketch of the backgrounds of Greek philosophy and religion through the thought of the Sophists and Democritus. More attention is given to the major figures; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Finally, the Epicureans and Stoics receive some attention.

There is little which is distinctive in the treatment of this phase of western ethics. The book is useful as a guide for beginning students in the field, and may serve as a convenient reference for students or busy pastors wishing to confirm a proposed statement about the Greeks.

A second volume entitled **Evolutionary Ethics** was written by A. G. N. Flew. His primary concern is that of separating the significant ethical implications of evolutionary theory from its current utilization by theologians in the development of natural theology. The significance of evolutionary theory for ethics is that it provides another and wider perspective from which to view human conduct. The Darwinian and Spencerian attempts to identify evolution with progress cannot be accepted, but the broadening of our interest in human conduct may be accepted and save us from provincialism in our ethical judgements. Furthermore, he believes we must view the history of mankind as "a continuation of the general evolutionary process and that the future of all other living things, as well as of mankind, lies largely or wholly in human hands." This denies any theory of special creation for the human as well as the attempts of some Catholic theologians to exclude the soul from the evolutionary process.

Another contribution which the evolutionary perspective makes is that we now know that moral ideas and ideals have evolved and doubtless will continue to do so. This suggests the impossibility of any absolute ethic or set of moral ideals. Ethical ideals and codes are in process of growth and development and are more or less directly under human control. This quotation from Julian Huxley summarizes his views: "In the light of evolutionary biology, man can now see himself as the sole agent of further evolutionary advance on this planet and one of the few possible instruments of progress in the universe at large. He finds himself in the unexpected position of business manager for the cosmic process of evolution. He no longer ought to feel separated from the rest of nature for he is part of it — that part of it which has become conscious and capable of love and understanding and aspiration. He need no longer feel himself as insignificant in relation to the cosmos." (p. 60)

Two comments may be in order. The first is that Flew is quite optimistic about man's capabilities. It is true that our computerization makes many things possible, including some conquest of space. It is also true that we find opposing factors which damper enthusiasm a bit. One instance is the fouling of air and water,

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more or less direct consequences of our developing technology.

The second comment has to do with his rejection of the attempts of theologians to find values for natural theology in the same area where he finds value for ethics. He rejects this attempt because the divine is for him a metatechnological agent rather than a trend or tendency operative in cosmic as well as human processes. Until he becomes aware of trends other than the magical in religion, Flew will remain blind to some areas of human values.

Mary Warnock, associated with St. Hugh's College at Oxford, presents a somewhat critical study of **Existentialist Ethics.** She concentrates on Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. Sartre is considered most important, and his philosophy is outlined in terms of Subjectivity, Freedom, Bad Faith, and Other People. The aim of Existentialism is not to present "a pure, disinterested statement of truth, but to free people from their illusions." The basic delusion is that men are not free. Their freedom of choice is curtailed, circumscribed and limited. Existentialists reject this conception and zero in on the fact that man must decide whether or not he will accept the curtailing, circumscribing, and limiting factors. Every choice is necessarily made by some individual. Since this is the case, man is free whether or not he wishes to be.

She develops the view that things as such have no value. What value they may have is conferred upon them by the choice of some valuer. This is the Timological theory of value, only one of many, but is presented as true by the Existentialist. That his code of values is his own deepens the individual's sense of isolation. If he shared in values which were objective, he would feel himself part of some larger whole. But as the creator of his own values, he sees himself even more isolated from others. "He is wholly responsible for creating his own world and living the way he does." (p. 54) This has an interesting corollary. If all ethical judgements are my judgements, there is no room for general ethical laws. Each individual is his own ethical lawgiver. "The only general law of ethics must be to avoid general laws." (p. 56)

Miss Warnock's general criticism of Existentialist ethics is that they reject the normal demands of philosphy. These are that we think with some degree of objectivity, that we strive for exactness, and that we value truth and seek it. Accordingly, she sees little of value in the contribution of Existentialism to ethical thought.

Another volume, **Aquinas and Natural Law,** was written by D. J. O'Connor of the University of Exeter. After a brief exposition of the life and writings of Aquinas, the author notes that St. Thomas sought to combine three elements in his grand synthesis. They were the basic pattern of Aristotelian ethics, the theory of Natural Law, and the Christian conception of the Vision of God as man's highest end. Aquinas conceived Natural Law to imply that "the basic principles of morals and legislation are in some sense or other objective, accessible to reason, and based on human nature." (p. 57)

This was based upon the view that there are discoverable natural inclinations which are characteristic of human nature as such. The sum total of these constitute Natural Law at the human level. Since Thomas believed this to be the case, it followed for him that a careful study of humanity and its behavior would provide him with an objective basis for determining man's goals or destiny. With his Aristotelian orientation, Aquinas viewed man as a rational creature whose highest good consisted in the contemplation of God.

O'Connor notes that Aquinas had little use for "truth on a continuum." A proposition was either true or false; there was no middle ground. This absolutistic view of knowledge combined with St. Thomas' crude understanding of man leads O'Connor to question the whole concept of Natural Law as fundamental to ethics. As he states it, "the pursuit of certainty is the enemy of the pursuit of truth." (p. 84) This has a good pragmatic sound

reminiscent of John Dewey. It also raises question concerning the basis of some Scholastic ethical systems.

The final volume in this review was written by G. J. Warnock, fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. It presents an outline and criticism of some of the more widely held contemporary ethical systems and is entitled **Contemporary Moral Philosophy.** Among the systems presented are Intuitionism, exemplified in the works of Moore, Prichard and Ross; Emotivism, exemplified in C. L. Stevenson's works; and Prescriptivism, typified in R. M. Hare's writings.

After presenting these several positions, Warnock discusses two problems which interest him. The first has to do with the content of moral discourse. How does one define the areas legitimately subject to moral investigation? It is the problem of moral categories, analogous to the search for a definition of religion. The concluding section consists in an examination of the so-called Naturalistic Fallacy propounded by G. E. Moore.

According to Warnock, the Naturalistic Fallacy consists in two mistakes, first, "that of offering a definition of a quality which is indefinable," and second, "that of offering a definition of a non-natural quality in terms of natural qualities." (p. 62)

He then rejects a revision of Moore's thesis based upon language analysis. Warnock insists that the sharp distinction between evaluative and descriptive expressions cannot be maintained. Any evaluation is of necessity an evaluation of **something,** and that something can be described. Accordingly, Warnock rejects both Moore's later criticisms of Naturalism in ethics.

In the concluding section, Warnock returns to the question of "moral argument." He insists that the basic problem is that of finding criteria in whose terms judgements may be made. Many ethicists assert that there are no bases upon which to ground such criteria. Criteria are presupposed, and not subject to proof or disproof. But Warnock argues that all criteria are based upon what I have called primary presuppositions. For him, that primary presupposition is the belief that moral behavior is designed to provide for human welfare. Accordingly, moral criteria are judged by what contributions, if any, their application may make to such welfare. Warnock grants that "human welfare" is often vaguely defined, and that there are real differences in what is so defined by different peoples. At the same time, he asserts that man as man must find satisfaction of some commonly shared needs, if humanity is to survive.

These "New Studies in Ethics" may be fascinating to the philosophically inclined thinker, but they fail to evoke much enthusiasm among those who constitute the minimoral or micromoral students in liberal arts, or the non-students who clutter up parks and other public places. The Minimoral group, if I may be permitted to coin the word, is interested in what life may mean for them. Its members are not interested in following the ways established by preceeding generations. In my youth, we rejected the traditional religious views of our parents and other predecessors. We were called unbeliev ers or little believers. We managed, however, to develop a positive faith which met, in part at least, the needs of our day. We, too, now find ourselves part of the Establishment (what was established in the past) and are now taking our criticism. Perhaps the younger generation should be permitted to do much the same thing in the field of morals. As for the Micromoralists, those who reject all prescriptions except "Love," "Love," "Love," they will probably suffer the fate of the maverick. The latter was an animal who strayed too far away from his group, and was the first to fall prey to the marauder.

Our current insistence upon action, and "being where the action is," leaves little time or interest for serious studies such as those reviewed here. At the same time, more thoughtful students will begin to ask themselves "what action, and why?" When they do, these new studies will be waiting for them, even though somewhat dust-covered.