

Those who reject biblical ethics in the name of “maturity” may be getting into more of an argument than they bargained for

Commands for Grown-Ups

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Modern theologians no longer explain strange Revelations about the ordinary world but tend to seek strange realms in which those Revelations will be ordinary truths.” Thus Ernest Gellner in a parenthetical aside from his controversial attack on recent “linguistic philosophy” in *Words and Things*. While his judgment may apply to much that goes on in Protestant theology today, there are other contemporary Christians, those who think of themselves as “evangelicals” or traditional “confessionals.” Insisting—to toy with William of Occam’s well-known dictum—that worlds are not to be created beyond necessity, evangelicals refuse to accept the “strange realms” proposed by many contemporary theologians.

They insist the Bible is more than a record from, and of, the past. In it God addresses us today with *information*, i.e., claims to be believed, truths about God and man and about *this* world, as it is, was and shall be. Those who reject this view of revelation commonly charge that it leads to consequences simply unacceptable to the reflective twentieth-century mind.

More particularly, they charge that anyone who sees the Bible as providing reliable, often specific, commands or directives for the moral life fails to understand the requirements for moral decision-making. I believe the reasoning behind the charge is hardly convincing, often being based on great confusion about what those of us who appeal to divine moral authority are really saying.

But first some preliminary comments: Defenders of the Bible’s authority regularly counter caricatures and literalistic abuses of their position with a reminder that the Bible is not a textbook of natural science; neither, we must add, is it a textbook of moral science. The Bible, in the view I shall de-

fend, is the authoritative record and vehicle of God’s address to, and dealings with, man in all of his activities, projects and relationships—including those which are properly called *moral*. The Bible offers no theory of moral obligations nor a theory of moral justification; it does call man to obedience in the moral sphere as in all other spheres, and points him to the grace which empowers us to do the right and avoid the evil.

The moral philosopher, on the other hand, critically reflects upon the moral sphere, pondering the nature and foundations of moral obligation and how men ought to go about deciding what is the right thing to do. The *Christian* moral philosopher deals with the same questions but with a conscious recognition of his membership in a community to which God has spoken a word on, among other things, moral matters. The Christian moral philosopher concerns himself with the *status* of divine directives in Christian moral reasonings. He puzzles about what it means that these directives were first addressed to people in cultural and political settings quite different from our own. On occasion, he engages in apologetics, spelling out what he sees as a plausible moral perspective, in response to critics. The apologist may answer charges directly or, as I will attempt, he may challenge his critics’ assumptions.

Talk about divine moral commands is extremely unpopular. The belief that there is something fundamentally wrong about people submitting to moral direction “imposed” upon them from “above” or “without” seems to be one of the few beliefs capable of uniting thinkers of otherwise divergent philosophies. Whether it be Bertrand Russell articulating the *credo* of the “free man,” or Jean-Paul Sartre denouncing “bad faith,” or Julian Huxley preaching a “religion without revelation,” or Herbert Marcuse envisioning man’s final “liberation”—all agree that submission to “external” moral authority is incompatible

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with a proper understanding of "the good life."

Agreement on this score is not limited to intellectuals; it even seems capable of bridging the "generation gap." Compare the counter-culture's "do your own thing" with Frank Sinatra's musical *apologia*: that, granted all the mistakes and hurts, at least this much is true, and this is what really matters—"I did it *my* way."

The arguments given for rejecting moral "heteronomy," especially as they relate to the traditional understanding of Christian morality, deserve a closer examination. Patrick Nowell-Smith, for example, has recently attacked the whole enterprise of Christian ethics on the grounds that it promotes an "infantile" morality with the "characteristics of deontology, heteronomy, and realism, which are proper and indeed necessary in the development of a child, but not proper to an adult" ("Morality: Religious and Secular" in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Ian Ramsey). And, in the professed service of Christian ethics, Graeme de Graaff insists that "there is no room in morality for commands, whether they are the father's, the school-master's or the priest's. There is still no room for them when they are God's commands" ("God and Morality" in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*).

De Graaff's charge, as stated, is simply false. There is at least one condition under which an adult moral agent might have a clear moral obligation to obey commands; for instance, when he made an intelligent *promise* to do so and has no overriding reason to break the promise. If, for example, when Mother Mary told the servants at the Cana wedding feast, "Do whatsoever he commands you," they had answered by promising to do so, then they had at least a *prima facie* moral obligation to *Mary* to obey the Lord's commands.

But those who are suspicious of commands in morality surely have something more basic in mind than this; they are skeptical of a moral system in which "externally" imposed commands have a *central* place. This skepticism is closely related to ideas about psychological development, as is obvious in Nowell-Smith's comments.

The work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (whom, incidentally, Nowell-Smith cites in support of his position) is important to their argument. In outlining the stages of the moral development of the child, Piaget describes a "heteronomous" stage, characterized by "the primitive consciousness of duty" and in which "duty is nothing more than the acceptance of commands received from without." This stage precedes that of "autonomy," in which a rigid sense of duty is replaced by a "morality of goodness." The child begins to reflect on the point of moral rules and begins "to appeal to reason in order to bring unity into the moral material."

Perhaps Christian morality, of the sort that stresses

obedience to commands, results from inadequate moral development, a "freezing" at the heteronomous stage. This arrested development might be compared with Piaget's account of a *normal* transition from the heteronomous stage to the autonomous one:

It seems to us an undeniable fact that in the course of the child's mental development, unilateral respect or the respect felt by the small for the great plays an essential part: it is what makes the child accept all the commands transmitted to him by his parents and is thus the great factor of continuity between different generations. But it seems to us no less undeniable . . . that as the child grows in years the nature of his respect changes. In so far as individuals decide questions on an equal footing—no matter whether subjectively or objectively—the pressure they exercise upon each other becomes collateral [this and other quotations from Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child*].

The normal transition from heteronomy to autonomy, then, is intimately related to a change in the child's attitude toward the one who issues commands: the more the child sees the commander as a person like himself, that is, the more the respect between the commander and the commandee becomes mutual, the less the child will look outside himself for moral authority. A person whose moral development is arrested at the heteronomous stage has failed to come to see a particular moral commander as an equal, or near equal, to himself.

Critics of Christian morality, however, do not accuse Christians of assigning an undeserved role to the moral commands of human beings, of parents, for example, but of God. Piaget's theory might be extended in this way: A person whose heteronomy is frozen at the level of the God-Man relationship is one who has failed to come to see *God* as an equal, or near equal, to himself. Put this way, the proposition hardly seems worthy of serious consideration. For "mature" morality also involves, surely, the sincere desire to be faithful to the facts as one sees them. A Christian who outgrows a morality because it fails to see the equality, or near equality, of God and Man, or because it involves the sort of "respect felt by the small for the great," would be in rather direct conflict with some central Christian beliefs, among them the belief that God and Man are *not* equal, nor even nearly equal, with respect to greatness, moral or otherwise.

Appeals to the type of psychological developmental theory espoused by Piaget are irrelevant to the question of whether a moral system can legitimately emphasize obedience to *divine* commands; at least the relevance of such appeals is not obvious without some subsidiary arguments, such as attempting to demonstrate God's moral non-supremacy.

The case can be put another way. Imagine a per-

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son who undergoes a normal transition from the heteronomous stage to the autonomous one. Imagine further that the spirit of autonomy inspires him to reflect much on moral questions. Questions about the nature and grounds of the moral life occupy his mind to the extent that in his conversation, reading and study he concentrates on man's moral relationships, finally earning a Ph.D. or two in the process, even spending some time studying under Piaget at the University of Geneva. Suppose that as a result of all of this he concludes: (a) men are capable of, even prone to, considerable self-deceptions and confusion regarding moral matters; (b) the moral state of mankind is so sorry that any reliable moral guidance from "the outside" would be welcome.

Christians are committed to views very similar to those arrived at by our hypothetical seeker. They hold that sin has affected human capacity for moral deliberation to the degree that we are desperately in need of moral guidance, and that such guidance is available: for an omniscient, omnibenevolent moral agent has publicly spoken on moral matters.

If a person can reasonably believe Christian teachings about human sinfulness and about God's moral nature, then it is also reasonable to accept the implications of such beliefs for the moral life and Christian moral decision-making. A proper challenge to the Christian notion of obedience must go beyond basically psychological claims about the "maturity" of Christian morality and question the existence and nature of God and/or the existence and nature of sin.

The Christian brand of heteronomy, as distinct from the heteronomy discussed by Piaget, might be termed a *mature* heteronomy. Here the attitude of commandee to commander is one of mature trust, legitimate respect and responsible obedience. In the Scriptures God calls humanity to enter into covenant with Him, a relationship based upon a proper understanding of God's authority and the human condition, and a free, responsible acceptance of the covenantal obligations.

Often criticisms of the Christian ethic of obedience to divine commands presuppose that the Christian

view of the God-Man relationship must be understood in terms of the "despotic" model (Bertrand Russell's favorite charge). Thus, Erich Fromm presents the biblical story of the fall into sin:

Acting against God's orders means freeing himself from coercion, emerging from the unconscious existence of prehuman life to the level of man. Acting against the command of authority, committing a sin, is in its positive human aspect the first act of freedom, that is, the first *human* act. In the myth the sin in its formal aspect is the eating of the tree of knowledge. The act of disobedience as an act of freedom is the beginning of reason [*Escape From Freedom*].

Fromm sees two options open to us in our attempt to relate to the rest of reality: "submission" to some external power or authority, thereby sacrificing one's individuality, or engaging in a "spontaneous relationship to man and nature" in such a way that one's individuality is kept intact. Obedience to divine commands is obviously, for him, the first kind of relationship. But note how he describes the second relationship: its expressions "are rooted in the integration and strength of the total personality and are therefore subject to the very limits that exist for the growth of the self." The Christian, faced with the choice, might well *choose* this second option as Fromm describes it. For the Christian understands his relationship to God not in terms of the despotic model which characterizes Fromm's "submission" but as an involvement in a "growth process" which, as Fromm puts it, recognizes that the process is "subject to" (must *submit* to?) certain "limits." The rub comes, of course, when we ask questions such as: *what* limits? from *what source*? in what sorts of *activity* does the "total personality" derive its "strength"? Here the Christian insists that the debate over the "reasonableness" of divine commands cannot be carried on apart from a discussion of differing views of the nature of man. The fact that Christians *do* have a view on that subject, one intimately related to their account of moral values, is not enough to distinguish the Christian's position from Fromm's, or from anyone else's.

In spelling out the way in which his view of human nature affects his understanding of our moral situation, the Christian cannot avoid speaking of the *sin* which, as he sees it, characterizes our present, fallen condition. Two aspects of that condition are important to the present discussion. The first is the role that *self-deception* plays in human life. In the biblical account of man's fall, Eve deliberately chose to pretend to a role, or office, which she knew full well she could not fill: she succumbed to the Tempter's challenge that she "be like God." This primal act of self-deception extends itself into all areas of human activity, including moral activity. In the moral realm it shows up in the form of *rationaliza-*

tion, the “inventing” of reasons for doing what ought not to be done.

Christians are not alone in recognizing the pervasive force of self-deception in human affairs. In recent years the intellectual community has been sensitized to its presence on the corporate level, especially as *national* self-deception about race relations and foreign policy. This sensitivity, however, is not always as acute in dealing with self-deception on the intimate, personal level. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, does present a fairly comprehensive picture of the role of self-deception in “bad faith projects,” although Sartre isn’t very clear in proposing an antidote to that condition.

The Christian insists that the self-understanding necessary to being freed from self-deception can only come in the light of some external, transcendent *standard*. As John Calvin put it:

It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I].

A second, and related aspect is the Christian attitude toward *vulnerability*. Paul Goodman describes the fear of being vulnerable in this way:

If a man is not continually proving his potency, his mastery of others and of himself, he becomes prey to a panic of being defeated and victimized. Every vital function must therefore be used as a means of proving or it is felt as a symptom of weakness. Simply to enjoy, produce, learn, give or take, love or be angry (rather than cool), is to be vulnerable [*People or Personnel and Like a Conquered Province*].

Goodman suggests that this fear of vulnerability stems from our accepting the “top-down management” model, first expressed in the modern era in the external forms of political and social organization, and gradually “internalized,” producing the internal strife he describes. He proposes a de-structuring of the present modes of social/political life which will result in corresponding benefits for the individual psyche.

Theologically conservative Christians see the development of this model differently but agree with Goodman on the *fundamental* nature of one’s attitude toward vulnerability. This is the question addressed by St. Paul when he speaks of “bondage” and “liberty” in a way that seems, to the secular mind, to have things reversed. For in the Christian view, the life dedicated to the “proving” of one’s sovereign mastery over men and things is a life of

fearful “bondage”; to be made capable of obedience when that is the proper response, of selfless service when that is required, of recognizing and submitting to expertise and correction when that is what is being offered—this is “liberation.”

In arguing for the position that God has commanded us to act in certain ways, I would distinguish between a *direct moral justification* and an *indirect moral justification* for a given course of action. A person has a *direct* justification for a course of action if he reasonably believes it to be supported, in the light of all relevant factual information, by what he takes to be the correct moral criteria. A utilitarian, for example, would offer as justification for a specific act of, say, physically harming another person the consideration that, in the light of all available relevant factual information, the act will produce more good consequences than bad. A deontologist, on the other hand, might offer as a justification for the same act the consideration that, while the act, as an act of harming another person, is *prima facie* wrong, the act has additional moral features, the presence of which overrides the *prima facie* wrongness of the act *qua* act of harming another person.

An *indirect* moral justification for a course of action is different. Suppose one holds that an act is morally justified if, and only if, it possesses property *p* (for instance, being productive of the greatest good, or being one’s actual duty); suppose also that *p* is not directly accessible with respect to a given course of action. But there might be some other distinct, and accessible, property *q* (for instance, that the action is recommended by someone with an expert grasp of the matter), the possession of which makes the possession of *p* either logically certain or inductively probable (other things being equal). In such a case, one could accept the presence of *q* as reason for believing that the action also possesses *p*—that is, as reason for believing the action is justified.

As we can distinguish between direct and indirect justification, so we can make a further distinction in the question itself: “What *makes* something right?” is different from “How do *we* go about *deciding* what is right?” A moral system *may* offer the same answer to both questions; but it *need* not, for they are different questions.

I am not saying here that because God commands something we have a *direct* justification for considering it to be right. (Thus, my arguments here are not in support of the view that “such-and-such is right” *means* “God commands such-and-such”—although I suspect some variation on that statement might plausibly be defended.) Here I maintain the minimal view that God’s commanding something provides at least an indirect justification for believing that course of action to be morally right.

Failure to make this sort of distinction can lead to confusion in discussing morality and God's commands. For example, this by Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The proclamation of imperatives backed by divine authority is not very persuasive today. No doubt some people do not steal or commit adultery because God has forbidden such behavior. But presumably their number is fast declining. In a rationally organized world people are accustomed to act according to reasons, even if they do frequently fail to follow their better insights. To disobey an imperative that is proclaimed without clear reasons and effective sanctions will appear wrong to fewer and fewer people [*Theology and the Kingdom of God*].

The comment is puzzling for several reasons, not least because it is *sociological* in nature—how people today are “accustomed to act” and what “will appear to be wrong” to them—and most thinkers since Hume have been somewhat embarrassed to derive normative conclusions from such premises. (That Pannenberg *intends* a normative conclusion is apparent in the sentence immediately following these remarks: “Neither can the appeal to conscience provide absolute norms for behavior.”)

Furthermore, if appeals to the way in which the contemporary world is “organized” *are* legitimate, one could as well argue that we live in an age of *specialization*, in which it is often impossible for individuals to possess “clear reasons” for the guidelines and claims they act upon. I might, for example, be perfectly justified (in the indirect sense) in reporting to my wife that I have an ulcer, and acting upon the belief that my report is true, if I had received the diagnosis from a physician whom I know to possess the proper credentials—even though I could not explain precisely what an ulcer is, or intelligently refute the claim that I have a hiatal hernia instead.

It would perhaps be nice if we could personally explain and provide (direct) justifications for all the directives we act upon. But in the absence of such personal expertise it is not *unreasonable* to trust authorities whose credentials have been reasonably established. Of course it may be that people today are not, for the most part, *interested* in God's credentials. But to have one's credentials ignored is not the same as losing them.

A morality based on obedience to divine commands cannot be attacked, it should be clear by now, without also challenging a complex of beliefs with which it is intimately associated. To attack such a morality on psychological grounds is to enter into a discussion of issues which go far beyond questions of psychological development. Appeals to “maturity,” or “freedom,” or “rationality,” open up legitimate questions about the theoretical framework

in which those terms are understood. Ultimately, one is led to issues relating to the existence and nature of the deity, and of man's condition, and to fundamental questions concerning the *locus* of moral authority.

Yet another frequent criticism of the sort of morality I have been defending is that it makes things too *easy*, that in the final analysis it must be judged to be, if not incoherent, then at least *stultifying* in its effects on human beings. There is an element of plausibility in this charge, for the attitudes and behavior of Christians who profess to be living in obedience to God's moral directives have often been marked by a lack of moral concern and struggle.

This syndrome, however, is due more to an indifference to the complex world in which we live than to some intrinsic fault in the Christian moral posture. Anyone who seriously commits himself to passionate involvement in human struggles soon realizes that it is impossible to remain morally “pure.” The Christian faces many situations in which he must violate at least one of God's commands. This suggests, I think, that divine moral commands inform us of our *prima facie* duties. A *prima facie* duty is one which we ought to perform “all else being equal”; that is, we must do it unless it is overridden by some “weightier” duty.

The difficulty comes in the weighing, of course, but this is a difficulty for *any* morality that recognizes the binding-ness of more than one duty. His claim to be a recipient of divine moral directives does not free the Christian from the complexity and agony of moral decision-making. For man—to generalize upon an ancient teaching—was not made for the Law; rather, the moral Law was made for man. The commands of God are no pattern for a life of isolated “purity,” but directives for following the way of service and self-sacrificing love.

In this light one recognizes the unfairness of Joseph Fletcher's charge that a morality based on specific Scriptural guidelines is a “prefab morality” which serves as “a kind of neurotic security device to simplify moral decisions” (in *Situation Ethics*). The position I have outlined involves struggles which might differ from those experienced by Fletcher and others, but it does not necessarily simplify the moral life; in addition to the dilemmas described above, there is the ongoing and difficult hermeneutical and theological work necessary to getting the directives themselves straight.

What this morality offers, then, is not simplicity; it does offer *hope*. While the One who first gave those directives did so on a mountain, He meant them as guidelines for travel in the wilderness. Knowing well the gap between the sketchiness of the guidelines and the rough places in the wilderness, He added a promise: “Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared” (Ex. 23:20).