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Bioethics: Whence Do We Derive the Norms ?

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The Christian, especially the informed Catholic, has a certain difficulty when it comes to a question such as that posed in the title of this presentation. He is in much the same position as the innkeeper, Humphrey Pump, in Chesterton's allegorical novel, *The Flying Inn*. Pump had difficulty in composing a fanciful poem about the meanderings of the "The Road to Roundabout." "I write under a great disadvantage," he said. "You see, I *know* why the road curves about!"

So it is with the Catholic scientist or physician. He knows, or should know, the real answer; he can engage in speculation about possible answers only as a didactic exercise or by way of dialog with those who profess not to know and to have open minds about the matter.

It is in the interest of such a didactic exercise and a possible dialog that I chose the above title.

I hope to clarify certain terms and expressions, and indicate some approaches to refutation of the answers to the question provided by materialists, rationalists and secular humanists. I will affirm a thesis, largely by way of propositional statements. In this way I hope to clarify the Catholic Christian answer to this question and lay a suitable groundwork for the speakers who will follow me.

Bioethics is that branch of ethics having to do with human actions in relation to life and death issues. I said "life *and* death," though etymology of the term "bioethics" refers only to life. For death is a part of life, a *necessary* part so far as *physical* life and the *spiritual* life are concerned. It is all too often a part, though *not* a necessary one, of the *emotional* life and the *moral* life of each human being.

I also said ethics and bioethics are concerned with *human* actions — not all human actions, but only those which are specifically human, such as intellection and willing. Furthermore, of these specifically human acts, only those which are deliberate acts of the free will, placed with knowledge and advertence, can be morally responsible or

irresponsible. Thus ethics and bioethics are concerned with *voluntary* human acts.

Immediately we run into a road block in our attempted dialog with agnostics, notoriously those who are not true agnostics in the proper sense of the term, but really ideologs — materialistic, deterministic, atheistic, dogmatic — as only they can be! “All matter,” they will say, “is made up of the same fundamental particles, whose properties and actions can be elucidated and understood only by application of rigorous scientific method — *all* matter, including living matter. All man’s actions, his behavior, will ultimately be explainable in terms of his genes, his constituent molecules, atoms and subatomic particles. There is no free will, no such thing as spirit. How could there be, since experimental science, which alone has access to the reality of things, can find no evidence of such?”

A Commonly Prevalent View

Not all scientists or even pseudo-scientists are such gross materialists. The most commonly prevalent view of man among agnostic scientists is humanism, appropriately labeled *secular* humanism. One such humanist put it in a nutshell at a conference on ethical issues in genetics a few years ago.

Some of us, though profoundly awed by the universal as we appreciate it, do not believe in a supernatural God and we reject divine authority for an ethical code. Nor can we accept the idea of an eternal, universal, absolute ethics imprinted in the conscience of man. . . . It seems to me, therefore, that the authority for ethical decisions, for decisions as to what is right and good, come from man himself, from his own choices, individually and in groups. . . . The touchstone of man’s choices, of his ethical choices, is simply his judgment of whether it is right and good for man. Man is the measure of all things!¹

Now, what could you say in response to the first kind of infidel — the kind who believes that all man’s acts and actions are explainable in mechanistic terms — in terms of probability theory, considering his genetic make-up, acting and reacting to his environment?

You might try what could be called the Christopher Derrick approach — well-reasoned irony. You might say to your materialistic scientific secular humanist: “If you believe all you say about behavior being exclusively determined by subatomic, atomic and molecular actions and reactions, all going on according to established scientific principles and laws; and if you really do not believe there is such a thing as moral evil, but only lesser and greater goods, how could you possibly complain if I decided to choose what you should consider merely a lesser good? What if my chemical reactions compelled me to knock you off because your obstinate schizophrenic rejection of reality is evil in my eyes?

I know it would be morally wrong for me to do so. But how could

you know? I submit you could not, if you do not accept the moral order as a fact. I say you could not ever know if my action could be explained in terms of my genes, or my sociological data, or the 'random walk' of my molecules which, somehow, in some way as yet unknown to science, had been converted into a murderous directionality. And even if you understood the chemistry and the biophysics of my act, what sanction could you invoke against me if you do not believe in God? Does it, in fact, matter one whit what I do to you if there is no God?"

There is a second approach, if your friend is at all capable of logical thought; it is particularly directed to the secular humanist. This is an approach used very effectively by Arthur Dyck, professor of population ethics at Harvard, in his lectures and writings. It consists in a logical analysis of the various ethical systems of thought thrown up by rationalism, scientism and secular humanism — from utilitarian theory to situation ethics. All these can be shown to be involved ultimately in a fundamental logical contradiction, namely, that *moral goods can be determined and evaluated by non-moral means*. There are many other contradictions in such systems but we do not have the time to discuss them.

I want to put before you a third approach for your consideration, an approach directed to both materialists and secular humanists.

If we accepted for didactic purposes and for the sake of dialog the equation of "science" with "experimental science" and if rigorous scientific method is the only way to knowledge of reality, then we would have to assert that science in such a restricted sense cannot have anything to say about such abstract things as good, evil, truth, justice, virtue, love. To hold otherwise would be unscientific, and we should expect the majority of honest scientists to agree with us on this. If so, they may be willing to listen further. For we *must* go further and affirm that positive experimental science, *of its very nature*, cannot contribute to moral theory or to bioethics specifically.

Two Reasons Cited

This is so for two good and sufficient reasons:

1. *Positive science knows nothing about freedom.*
2. *For "science," absolute truth is unobtainable; in fact, it does not exist.*

We mean, of course, human freedom, since science does speak of "freedom" and "degrees of freedom"; this however, at best consists of the "random walk" of probability theory. Concerning these two notions, truth and freedom, we can say that if there is no absolute truth, the best we could come up with would be a relativistic bioethics. If there is no human freedom, *if man has no free will* there can be no ethics; *no ethical question arises or could arise.*

The notion of freedom, therefore, is of prior importance in ethics. One must come to grips with this question of human freedom, because if we do not understand it correctly, we can only be led into a quagmire of moral relativism, subjectivism and downright contradiction.

On the subject of liberty and freedom, all I want to say is that it is becoming more and more evident that the confusion of what passes for modern ethical thought, the degradation of the medical profession, the secularization of Catholic higher education and the perversion of Catholic moral philosophy and theology, are due in large part to tacit acceptance of Hegel's false definition of human freedom.

I want to conclude this presentation with a series of summary propositional statements:

Ethics is concerned with realities of an order which transcends the physical order of the universe — an order that is outside the purview of science, as science has been defined by scientists. This order is called the *moral* order; it is an order of realities called *values*.

The fundamental values in the moral order — goodness, truth, honesty, sincerity, fidelity, etc. — are *immediate "givens."* What this means is that man, by unaided reason, can know the general principles of right and wrong conduct in their fundamental and simplest applications: it is possible for a pagan to be honest or dishonest, loyal or disloyal, selfish or unselfish, truthful or a liar. The moral values are realities that are *important* — important for man if he is to live a truly human life. Above all they are important *in themselves: they exist whether man chooses to accept them or not.*

The values in question, once grasped, evoke a response, a categorical obligation which impresses itself in such a way that man cannot ignore or reject it without uneasiness.²

Man Free to Choose

Man is free to ignore the obligation: he is free to choose. He is not free to choose equally freely between good and evil. In practical terms, this means he seeks to justify his choice of evil by conceiving of it or presenting it to himself as a "good." But he is free to choose, or else the moral order would not apply to him: no ethical question would or could arise.

Grasping these immediate "givens" is one thing. It is another to apply them to the life and actions of man, to interpret what the obligation imposed by moral values means in practice. How should man act so as to secure these values? Obviously there is need for a set of principles, rules, norms, whereby man may judge his actions in relation to moral values. Hence ethics is a normative science. We rejected positive science, materialism, secular humanism as the source of ethical norms. Whence then do we derive the norms? For the Christian there is only one answer — God.

The moral order essentially presupposes God. Like the physical order of the universe, it can lead man to at least a knowledge of the existence of God as the source of these realities and of the sanctions implied in the notion of obligation.

However, an explicit knowledge and acknowledgment of the existence of God are not necessary for moral choice. That is to say, there is a natural moral order which obligates man; a natural moral philosophy can be developed as the ancient Greeks did. *A natural moral law exists which binds all humans insofar as they are free human beings.*

There is, however, yet another order — the supernatural order — which transcends the natural moral order. It is an order of which man has always seemed to be dimly and confusedly aware. This supernatural order, the order of spirit, has been revealed to man by God. The knowledge so imparted and the obligations which stem from it do not negate the natural order; rather, the latter is elevated, ennobled and perfected.

This public and formal revelation of God, recorded in the Old Testament and the New, culminated in the Person, the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Who became Man. He entrusted that revelation to the Church which He founded on Peter and the other Apostles, that Church which has continued the Incarnation in time, in a real, though mystical way.³

The only true and valid ethics for man, therefore, stems from the integral vision of man provided by God's revelation — conserved, interpreted and taught by the Church founded by His Son, Our Lord.

As von Hildebrand says, the one true, valid ethics for man is Christian ethics.⁴ Only such an ethics can begin to provide definitive answers to the multifarious moral questions that beset man. It is indeed a humanist ethics, but Christian, not secular. It is the only ethics that can do justice to man in his entire nature, personal and social, because it does justice to God. It can reconcile man to man, because it reconciles man to God.

In God's providence, bioethics of this kind is the straight and narrow way leading to eternal life.

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