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[Book Review of] *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 1 Theology and Ethics*, by James M. Gustafson and [Book Review of] *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 2 Ethics and Theology*, by James M. Gustafson

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theory. In response, I admit to a good degree of relativism" (p. 172). With these words, the author, a professor of ethics at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, presents us with a succinct review of his analysis of ethical theory as applied to problem areas of medical ethics, basing his ethical analysis upon a synthesis of the thought of the English emotivists and the largely subjective Kantian ideal of personal autonomy. Dougherty stresses instruction of values as the basis of morality and states that ethics should refine and clarify moral instructions.

When discussing medical research, Dougherty expresses shock and horror at the human research protocols carried out by the Nazi medical experimenters (p. 143). After describing some of the horrors perpetrated during the second World War, Dougherty rightly points out that the ideology which allowed such experiments developed well before the second World War. But, ironically, when assigning causes for the Nazis' abuse of human rights, Dougherty fails to list the type of relativistic ethical theory which he espouses.

The best part of the book is a study of the ethical and legal responsibilities of hospitals. Most of the significant legal decisions in regard to hospital care are presented and a very clear list of patient rights and hospital duties is afforded. In this section especially, Dougherty displays a comprehensive view of the values and actions which would improve institutional health care.

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## ***Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 1*** ***Theology and Ethics***

by James M. Gustafson

*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 345 pp. \$10.95.*

## ***Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 2*** ***Ethics and Theology***

by James M. Gustafson

*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 326 pp. \$25.*

These two works complement each other. The first develops a theocentric perspective; the second sets out to explore the question, What difference does a theocentric perspective make to the interpretation of morality? Together they constitute an intriguing and thought-provoking study. While the work of any Christian ethicist or moral theologian presupposes certain theological positions, it is rare to find these elaborated systematically and at length. A serious reader is compelled to grapple with many of the most basic religious issues and

cannot avoid the challenge to articulate her or his own theological stance. While Gustafson's positions have provoked criticism and expressions of disagreement, they force one to respond.

The key themes of the first work are the nature of God and the direction of His purposes; man and the cosmos; religion. The author develops his case by challenging what he takes to be some assumptions which have become embedded in our culture. Man has become the measure in religion, theology and ethics. Religion and God have been put in the service of human needs (p. 83). Gustafson sets out to reverse this assumption and, in so doing, develops a number of distinctive theses: God's purposes do not necessarily coincide with the human project seeking welfare and happiness; the cosmos does not exist for man and for the furthering of his purposes; man is not the moral measure of all things (p. 91); it is questionable whether there is a special providence over the course of human affairs which assures that things turn out for human betterment, if not immediately, then in the long run, and if not in human history, then in afterlife.

Does Gustafson mean that there is a radical dichotomy between human fulfillment and the purposes of God? This is what he seems to assert in the earlier part of the book. If this were the case, and if God's purposes are the ultimate measure of morality, then morality could be in contradiction to the human fulfillment. The achievement of God's purposes could require the negation of the human good. Later he reasserts the view that "... *theos* is not the guarantor of human benefits" (p. 112). However, he later affirms grounds for confidence in God's benevolence towards man. But this benevolence, he argues, does not support the assumption that "... God's purposes are the fulfillment of my own best interests as I conceive them" (p. 202). The dichotomy, then, is not between the divine purposes and *genuine* human welfare, but rather between the divine purpose and what an individual may (falsely) judge to be his or her interests. This is a much less radical view than the earlier chapters suggest. It would imply that God's purposes and my own *genuine* best interests may coincide. However, it is the stronger interpretation which seems to be more dominant in Gustafson's thinking.

In the second volume, the author summarizes his requirements for a comprehensive and coherent account of theological ethics (p. 143). It must developed in relation to four base points: (a) the interpretation of God and God's relation to the world and, in particular, to human beings and the interpretation of God's purposes; (b) the interpretation of the meaning of human experience — of historical life of the human community, of events and circumstances in which persons and collectivities act, and of nature and man's particular participation in it; (c) the interpretation of persons and collectivities as moral agents, and of their acts; and (d) the interpretation of how persons and collectivities ought to make moral choices and ought to judge moral acts. Christian ethics is to be tested for adequacy with reference to four sources: (a) the Bible and Christian tradition; (b) their philosophical methods and principles; (c) their use of scientific information and other sources of knowledge about the world; and (d) human experience. While these elements would, no doubt, be accepted by most who seek to explicate a Christian ethic it is not completely clear why some points are given more prominence than others. It is noteworthy that scientific sources and human experience are more significant than the Bible. But if this is to be tested for adequacy against the Bible, how is it justifiable to subordinate the Bible in this way? Some elements of the Biblical account are selected as "backing" (p. 144). These are selected on the basis of coherence with conclusions drawn from the other sources. But is there not a danger here that only those elements of the Bible will be taken into account which "back" conclusions already drawn from elsewhere?

The central experience is "piety." The New Testament accounts "inform" theocentric piety. The nature of the arguments as a whole seems to be the establishment of a kind of cognitive equilibrium, where particular sources are given weight insofar as they cohere with and support other sources. The starting point is, then, a particular form of religious consciousness which grasps the patterns of interdependence in the world, including nature as signs of the divine power and ordering.

The approach is then illustrated and concretized in a detailed discussion of four topics:

marriage and the family; suicide; population and nutrition; and biomedical research funding. These discussions are finely constructed expositions within the complex framework described. Some features call for special mention. The elements which emerge as normative are responsibility, attitudes and dispositions rather than rules or laws (p. 165). Sometimes this leads to a certain vagueness. For example, accountability does not warrant coercive or intrusive methods to obtain genetic profiles. But it is not clearly explained why not (p. 165). Later it is argued that theocentric ethics backs a preference for voluntary restraints (p. 247). If human self-determination is an aspect of well-being, however, and if the ultimately normative divine purposes do not coincide with human well-being, why is self-determination so significant?

The discussion of suicide manifests a profound, sympathetic understanding of the tragic circumstances which may surround the act. Two points may be mentioned. The strong sense of the bonds arising from the "wholes" or communities to which we belong is brought to bear on this question. Thus, where a person has some prospect of functioning in community, intervention to prevent such a one from committing suicide would be warranted. But it is in the discussion of exceptions that the theological focus becomes clearest. Gustafson argues that there are justifiable suicides (p. 215). In the first volume, he had argued that God does not guarantee human welfare. Here he argues that there can be concrete circumstances of hopeless affliction where this lack of guarantee becomes the dominant reality. In such cases, "... there is reason for enmity toward God" (p. 216). This seems to spell out the implications of the fundamental position taken, namely that God's purposes do not necessarily coincide with human welfare. Does this mean that where this non-coincidence is concretely experienced, one may be justified in a "quarrel" with God? There seems to be more than a rejection of facile theodicies here. There is also a degree of confusion. If one lives within the theocentric ethic described by Gustafson, one would accept that God's purposes do not necessarily coincide with one's human welfare. If one's circumstances are such that one's human welfare cannot be realized in any real sense, it would seem to follow that one should simply submit. For is it not to be expected that sometimes the divergence between personal human welfare and the wider purposes of God will become a matter of experience? Would it not then follow that one should submit to whatever may be these wider, but unknown purposes? That is, should one not accept one's apparently meaningless suffering in the assurance that this somehow serves those wider purposes of God? The only reason which could justify a quarrel with God would surely be that one holds, contrary to what has been argued in these works, that God's purposes ought to coincide with human welfare.

Another fundamental feature of the approach, namely, the discernment of responsibilities with reference to the "wholes" of which we are a part, is particularly clear in the treatment of population and nutrition (p. 247). For Gustafson, the "whole" of current humanity and future generations is morally relevant, and common good of that whole shapes moral judgments, e.g., concerning artificial contraception (p. 229). The latter may be justified for the sake of this common good. Gustafson does not accept the Roman Catholic "method" of sexual abstinence because it runs counter to deep biological drives and can be detrimental to the interpersonal values of love and companionship (p. 246). But, I would suggest, such an argument seems to give human "well-being" a salience which, in Gustafson's view of things, it does not necessarily have.

In the finely wrought discussion of biomedical research funding, the problem of the appropriate relation between the individual person and the morally relevant whole of which she or he is a part has particular significance. Within Gustafson's perspective, that approach which focuses almost exclusively on autonomy, informed consent, etc., is shortsighted (p. 276). This may very well be the case. But if we move to Gustafson's view that the individual persons are not of absolute value (p. 275), does this mean that the value of the individual is relative to one or all of the wholes? Gustafson's care in considering multiple considerations would check any crass instrumentalizing of the individual for the sake of the whole. But is not the danger of such instrumentalizing embedded in the basic presuppositions?

I have focused on two points: (1) the theological thesis that the divine purposes do not coincide with human well-being, and (2) the structures of moral relevance according to which moral significance is to be determined by references to the multiple "wholes" of which we are a part. I have suggested that these give rise to certain tensions. Nevertheless, the volumes remain a profound contribution to theological and ethical reflection. Any subsequent work, to be taken seriously, will have to meet the exacting standards which they have set.

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## *What Are They Saying About Genetic Engineering?*

by Thomas A. Shannon

*New York, Paulist Press, 1985, vi+ 103 pages, \$4.95.*

This is quite a good little introduction to some of the ethical issues associated with the field of genetics. In a remarkably brief space of less than 100 pages, the author covers a variety of fields of contemporary investigation and highlights their ethical components. He begins with three chapters that deal with the relationships between science (and scientists) and society, the control of potentially harmful knowledge, and the nature of human personhood and responsibilities to the future. Then the author moves to a discussion of the attempt to understand human nature through genetics (sociobiology); the use of recombinant DNA technology; techniques for assisting human conception and birth (sperm banks, amniocentesis, in vitro fertilization, embryo transfer, sex selection, surrogate motherhood, the fetus as an independent patient of medical treatment); gene transfer as therapy for genetic disease; induced modifications of plant and animal species; and economic issues pertaining to the funding of and access to the new therapies and technologies. The author constructs his discussion by citing prominent authorities in the field: Paul Ramsey, Daniel Callahan, Leon Kass, Karl Rahner, Richard McCormick, Joseph Fletcher, Jeremy Rifkin, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

This book does not attempt to break new ground, and would be of little use to someone already familiar with the field. But for the reader who is interested in gaining an overview of the ethical dimensions of current genetic theory and technology, the work will serve the purpose admirably. The author's general position is middle-of-the-road, cautious. He is more concerned to achieve a balanced position by noting the strengths of the various views than to criticize any of them in a systematic fashion. Although the scholar would be unlikely to profit from a reading of this work, it could be very helpful as a text for an introductory course in bioethics.

—Gary M. Atkinson  
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