TRINITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ETHICS

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1 The problem.

My interest is ethical. Could there be moral values binding upon all humankind? In terms of what I believe to be true, as opposed to what I can show, I don't doubt for one moment that there are. It is a confidence that I (and many, but by no means all, Christians) share with many non-Christians, though we would all squabble endlessly over the practical application of our shared belief. I want to survey some of the grounds for the view that post-modernism and what Thomas Nagel calls 'scientism'(1) ally themselves against the possibility of a universal ethic by undermining the integrity of the world and the integrity of the person. My view (which is anything but original) is that the integrity of the world is indefensible and must be surrendered, but that the integrity of the person must be defended if at all possible for the sake of ethics. In particular, I want to know whether Christian theology can in any way add to the efforts of secular ethicists to defend the possibility of a universal ethic. I think it possibly can, and I think that Trinity might be the vital clue. That is what this paper is about.

Despite the modern fashion, there are still reasons that might lead one to suppose that the concept of 'person' represents the hope of a metaphysical reality. Strong among them is the chaos amongst those who do not. Certainly it is not easy to discern a diverse population of distinct essences in the world around us of which 'persons' might be a subgroup, but this in itself is not an insurmountable objection. Austin Farrer showed us long ago that we can be at ease with the possibility that 'person' might signify the only finite essence

of which we have any meaningful grasp at all. I don't doubt for one moment that the boundaries of the category 'person' are profoundly problematical. On the other hand, it is hard to refute Thomas Nagel's observation that there are issues so fundamental to life that they are prior to all philosophy.(2) In our wiser moments, we philosophise about being persons, not about whether we are persons. Two of the most basic things about which we philosophise endlessly are the nature of our individuality and selfhood, and the relation of these to our biological status as human beings. In the remarks that follow I assume (I hope not too innocently) that when I speak of 'persons,' I speak of them as possessing individuality, identity and selfhood, and of them being classifiable as human beings. Theologically, I speak of them as recipients of God's saving grace. That is not to say that I consider persons to be philosophical facts; only that I consider them to be possible facts and possible metaphysical entities, and that if <u>they</u> are not metaphysical entities then I do not know what are. Indeed, the struggle to assert persons as facts is central to what this paper is about.

My argument would be greatly helped were it possible for theology to make a contribution to knowledge. There is a certain parallelism between this and whether philosophy can possibly make a contribution to knowledge. I am greatly encouraged by Thomas Nagel's tentative conclusion that philosophy can.(3) He cites the discovery of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as a possible example of a genuinely philosophical discovery contributing not merely to the domain of philosophical discourse but to our general understanding of the world in which we live. Is there, then, any possibility of a purely theological discovery so contributing? I think one can answer with a cautious 'Yes,' and to point to the 'discovery' of Trinity as a possible example. The reason why Trinity interests me with regard to ethics is that it seems to me likely that the fact of Trinity (if fact it be) might have a bearing upon the problem of human personhood, and might even lead one to suppose that human personhood is itself a fact. And from the point of view of ethics in its most general sense, namely the possibility of doing ethics at all, the re-emergence of personhood as a supposed fact would be extremely encouraging.

I wish, then, to propose that we argue <u>from</u> Trinity <u>to</u> personhood. It follows trivially that one cannot preface this by arguing <u>from</u> personhood <u>to</u> Trinity.

There will be nothing specifically Methodist in what follows. On the other

hand, it seems to me that of all Christians, the children of John and Charles Wesley have an inherent interest in a general ethic for humankind.

My discussion is interdisciplinary. It is, therefore, necessarily, thoroughly unrigorous and unsatisfactory to professional philosophers, theologians and sociologists alike. I assume, rather old-fashionedly, that these disciplines should not only take notice of each other, but that they are all in the one shared business of addressing falsehood and human misery. Perhaps I could take refuge in Thomas Nagel's remark, 'Absurdity comes with the territory, and what we need is the will to put up with it.'(4)

2 Geras

It is sometimes helpful to try to think non-theistically first, and then to ask how theistic thinking changes our view of things. Prof Norman Geras, Professor of Government at Manchester University, UK, describes himself as 'some kind of Marxist.' His little book 'Solidarity in the Conversation of Human Kind'(5) is a fascinating attempt to rescue what he has always believed in from the hands of that most slippery of customers, Richard Rorty. Geras regards Rorty as a representative of post-modernism, which, for all Rorty's protests, is fair enough for my purposes here.(6)

Rorty claims that language 'goes all the way down': that is, that there is nothing undergirding our language, and that the cultural perception of reality and value which we express to each other in language is the only reality that there is. Geras picks up Rorty's strange contribution to holocaust studies. The question concerns the 'Righteous among the Nations,' that is, those Gentiles honoured by the Jews for risking all to protect Jews from the Nazi regime. 'Why did they do it?' Rorty asks. His reply, in breathtaking defiance of what the surviving Righteous say of themselves, is that the Righteous did not respond as human beings to a simple, basic, and irresistible appeal from another human being in dire need. They responded, Rorty claims, to a complicated web of lesser commonalities such as nationality, class, profession and the like. In Rorty's view, these lesser commonalities are the bedrock of our culture, and the basis of the ethical structures against which we live out our moral lives. There is no 'human culture.' There is no common humanity, save as an unimportant biological fact.

Geras replies that if language goes all the way down, then socialisation does too. And with socialisation, comes truth. What is to be done in response to the accounts from the holocaust, the gulags, Rwanda, South Africa, Cambodia? Maybe, Geras concedes, justice is too much to ask. Certainly, to survivors, it is beyond hoping for. But, Geras asks, is not the ultimate betrayal to deny the truth of such testimony - to deny that such atrocities ever happened? And is not often the most we can do to listen to the testimony of survivors, and to honour them and their dead? Do we not thus salvage some honour to ourselves, also? For if our language 'goes all the way down,' then so too does society.

Geras' claim, against Rorty, is that our moral integrity rests in our testimony to our common humanity. He believes that, no matter how deeply our cultural divisions may run, when we are faced with misery and depravity on the greatest scale, notions of truth and injustice cannot continue to have meaning for us unless we keep a firm grip on Thomas Nagel's simple remark, 'Language reaches beyond itself.'(7) It reaches, Geras says, to our shared human nature. His point is that if we accept an account of ethics that allows us to localise the objectivity of moral judgments to within a given cultural viewpoint, then the machinery for reaching an unequivocal judgment about such massive events as the holocaust is lost. It isn't, it seems to me, primarily that the objective truth of what happened is threatened (though in the depraved nightmare to which Geras sees Rorty opening the door even that is possible): what is threatened is the universal objective truthfulness of moral judgment on what happened. Is it acceptable for philosophy (and maybe even theology) to view such a result with intellectual disinterest? In my view, it is not. But that is not a philosophical judgment. It is pre-philosophical, though no doubt its philosophical elements could be captured in a metaphysic.

It might be that Geras supposes that we can remedy the situation by abandoning philosophical analysis in favour of sociology and political science. It may even be that he supposes that we can solve the problem by replacing talk about language with talk about behaviour as if it were social behaviour rather than language that were definitive of the world in which we live. If so, he is certainly wrong, for so simple a remedy will not mend the fact that his position is undermined by his having no words to defend the commonality of humankind. He can only articulate his fear that without commonality, all is lost.

3 Eldridge

Geras writes without a Christian viewpoint. I was interested to see an article in the British Methodist Journal, Epworth Review of September 1996 by John Eldridge, Professor of Sociology at Glasgow University. His purpose was to present a broadly post-modern world view, and in particular, a post-holocaust world view. He asks firstly the question we are accustomed to hearing from holocaust writers, 'How is belief in progress and a beneficent God still possible?' and secondly, 'What price the old Christian call for a politics of love, mercy and peace?' He rehearses how all the 'meta-narratives' or paradigms employed since the Enlightenment have now failed us. The world has no perceived centre to its activities, no discernible purpose. How can we find God from such a world of de-centred shapelessness? The cosmological argument cannot survive such an analysis. Eldridge embraces the account, but believes that the formula of personal metaphor can rescue us. He quotes Blake, 'Mercy has a human heart,' and declares rather old-fashionedly that the application of reason to human affairs 'is not, and never can be, a value neutral affair.'(8)

It is as if Eldridge is trying to give some theological content to Geras' argument. True, the old cosmology has gone and with it seems to have gone any hope of universally applicable human values.(9) He seeks to rescue the situation through direct appeal to the nature of humanity. After all, whatever might have happened to our understanding of the world, people are still people. So, the argument runs, first we build our image of God and his mercy upon the personal categories we learn from our experience of ourselves, and then we read the ethical principles that we find in God and the gospel back into our understanding of how the world must conduct its affairs. The Christian personalism implicit within this manoeuvre is part of the steady drift toward the personalising and de-politicising of religion.(10)

There are two major (if not insuperable) difficulties to be overcome if the argument is to succeed: firstly, its blatant circularity; and secondly its damaged starting point in human nature. Eldridge has embraced the deconstruction of 'the world', but has turned a blind eye to the deconstruction of personhood. But Rorty says flatly, 'There is no human nature.'

4 Scientism and post-modernism

i Scientism

Scientism has waged its war on selfhood[11] ever since Descartes. We are, we were told, but bodily machines endowed with minds. Since Gilbert Ryle, the language of mind has been but a trick of speech. There is no 'me' other than the components of my physical body. The approach has become more sophisticated over the years, partly to keep step with neurology and machine intelligence, and partly to deflect the charge of savage reductionism raised against early formulations, but it remains unchanged in principle.

The 20th century loss of the pronoun 'I' is also in part the culmination of the 19th century attack on Aristotelian essentialism. Aristotle's system was one in which notions of individuation and type went hand in hand. The answer to the question 'What is it?' was simply 'It is an x, an example of its type.' Today, we answer differently. A flower is not a daffodil by virtue of the fact that for all its individuality and uniqueness it belongs to the category or natural type 'daffodil,' but because all its component parts combine to perform with sufficient approximation to a statistical pattern which we call 'daffodil'. We treat humans similarly.

If we can no longer say that persons are persons by virtue of their common typology, their essential humanity, what <u>do</u> they have in common by virtue of which they are all human beings and all other creatures are not? Once upon a time, Reason with a capital R provided an answer. D C Dennett still lists it amongst his six conditions of personhood.[12] But we now regard reason as part of the physical theatre of life. It is not definitive of anything, and it can no more be said of us that it harnesses the bits of our bodies into intelligible unities than it can of computers.

ii Post-modernism

Turning from the scientismic to the post-modern, the attack on personhood is perhaps not so transparently obvious as the attack on ethics. Yet the two are intimately related. What is a person, if not a moral animal? This too is still on Dennett's list of necessary conditions for personhood,[13] and he still

claims that no animal but the human appears to possess it. But the tenor of post-modernism is set by Nietzsche's declaration that the self-creating and re-creating demands of the personal good over-rule the self-destroying claims of morality. The damage this does to Geras needs no spelling out. As for loss of personhood itself, Sartre's argument at least has elegance on its side: If my world is intelligible it is because I think it so. I am not a part of my world. Therefore there is no-one to think me. Therefore there can be no concept of my personhood.(14)

I hope I have said enough to indicate firstly that Geras' dream of a shared humanity with a shared ethic has gone, because the unity between persons on which it depends, and which used to be rooted in notions of essential unity, has gone. No substitute for essential unity has been found. Secondly, all hope of bolstering Geras through appeal to God through cosmology has gone with the decentring of the universe, and lastly, all hope of appealing to God by replacing cosmology with personal analogical approaches has gone because unity within a given person has gone. This too has gone because the notion of essential unity on which it used to depend has gone, and no substitute has been found. Like the world, we are but decentred collections of bits.

What hope, then, for ethics? Thomas Nagel's response is to declare that his passionate conviction that the shared moral life is there to be lived outruns his philosophical results. He adds that he is not at all sure that philosophy is capable of making good. Can theology help?

5 Jungel

One extremely attractive possibility is for theology to circumvent the world's loss of personhood completely. Maybe, one might say, theology has no business trying to bale out failed philsophers. Maybe theology has its own answers. For example, Eberhard Jungel(15) has dressed the classical Lutheran theme of Freedom transcending all law and value in Nietzsche's clothes. He embraces Nietzsche's account of the death of the transcendent God gladly. For him, God-in-the-world, God-in-the-man-Jesus, is all that is available to us. He vests everything in the faith-encounter with Christ, which cuts clean across the web of history; a radical and decisive intervention which lifts us right out of the rationalisations of our world and into the life of the spirit. Jungel's vision (and indeed Nietzsche's) is of transcending glory.

Chaotic destruction is but a by-product. Whereas Eldridge's response to chaos is to look for those qualities in human living that can withstand it, Jungel looks to die to it and to rise in triumph over it. Jungel has no interest in defending the unity of the self, let alone the moral integrity of personhood. For those 'in Christ,' (and for those alone) personhood is an assertion of faith and salvation.

There are, of course, many Christians who know nothing of Jungel, Luther or Nietzsche who would have no trouble with this account. It is, undoubtedly, a possible Gospel view. Christian ethics, they would say, needs no undergirding from whatever source, thank you very much. My difficulty is this: the only possible response to the secular moral debate from Christians who adopt this view is silent condemnation. Their only business with the wider world can be to preach the gospel. To me, this is unacceptable. How can Christians stand indifferent to suffering and depravity? I want to protest with Geras that there must be a common humanity that binds Christian and non-Christian alike with bonds of shared objective moral values. I want to, but is it defensible?

6 A neo-Thomist proposal.

I want now to suggest an approach which I believe could reinforce Geras' secular convictions. A longer paper - a proper paper - would start at this point. In 1956 Eric Mascall drew on the writings of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson to elucidate a neo-Thomist understanding of personhood.(16) In this view, what we mean by 'person' with the human connotation is a derivative of what we mean by 'person' with a Trinitarian connotation. A person is someone who freely gives of themself, Maritain taught. The supreme examples of self-giving are firstly within the Godhead, and secondly in Christ. Within the Trinity the persons of the Godhead give of themselves utterly and joyously not because it pleases them to add this to the manner of their living, but because it is precisely and completely the manner of their living. We, in our turn, participate in this life in our creaturely way. Thus, in a classically Thomist argument, Maritain's formulation is that whilst our knowledge that we are persons rests in our experience of each other, the true meaning of what it is to be a person rests in God. 'Person' is predicated primarily of the Trinity, and only of us in a derivative and analogical sense.

The immediate attractions of this ancient formula in terms of its practical

applications are obvious. It is not so much an argument about God as about Trinity. It argues from Trinity to personhood. It argues from Trinity to ethics. It suggests that quite apart from what secular disciplines may be able to say about being a human person, Christians might be able to assert both the fact and the character of personhood out of what they assert about the life of God. It suggests also that Christians may possibly have distinctive views on the structure of society; about our individual completeness resting in the completeness of society, and about the manner in which individuals must give of themselves and receive of others. These are theological extensions of Geras' remark, 'Socialisation goes all the way down.' To seek to opt out of mutual dependency is to seek to be less than human. Christians who adopt such a formula may engage with secular thinkers, in alliance or dispute, with complete integrity, but with an added 'given' that lies beyond the scope of the secular argument.

There are considerable difficulties. Above all, is it possible so much as to reach the argument's base camp in Trinity without recourse either to the old cosmology or to modern personalism and personal analogy?

To begin with, it would not be true to say that the credal formulation of the Trinity rested in personal analogy. True, personal language provided a vocabulary, but without Greek cosmology, Trinity could never have been discovered, and something central to our understanding of the life of God would have been lost to us.

Despite my earlier remarks, I hope my profound respect for Eberhard Jungel shows. I want to draw two more conclusions from his work. Firstly, Jungel declares that if we are to talk of vestiges of the Trinity in the created order, there is only one example available to us, namely the man Jesus. But the witness to him does not speak unequivocally of Trinity. It hints, suggests and enables talk of Trinity, no more.(17) Trinity is not a conclusion of Christian personalism based on the sole example of Jesus. Trinity is our discovery, albeit one revealed to us out of the clues latent in the life in Christ.

Secondly, Jungel demonstrates that the death of metaphysics signals the end of meaningful talk about God, and he does this in two ways. He is emphatic that with the end of classical metaphysics has come the end of God as factually transcendent over the world. But with the emergence of what he calls the new

metaphysics the world is rescued from the 'foregone conclusion' of atheism in the face of the incredibility of God into the possibility of thinking ontologically of God's 'being in perishing.'[18] It follows that if we are to talk intelligibly about Trinity, the concept must be embedded in a metaphysic adequate to speak of the life of God and our own lives.

I conclude that the original discovery of Trinity was born of Gospel plus metaphysics, not of personal metaphor. The reason why we cannot go on a similar voyage of rediscovery is that we despair of ever again having an adequate metaphysic.[19]

Few have attempted metaphysics during the 20th century. In the main, the effort has gone into showing that metaphysics was a mistake, and that we are better off without it. The true metaphysicians who come to mind are, supremely, Whitehead (and the whole Process school emerging from Hartshorne and Cobb), the all-but-forgotten Henri Bergson, and, in this country, Austin Farrer. It is tempting to add Nietzsche, Sartre and even Strawson to the list as reluctant pseudo-metaphysicians if no more.

It is surely significant that Whitehead, and Bergson, and Nietzsche, and Farrer, and Jungel all recognise that what is required above all else is a metaphysic of becoming and perishing, in which the putatively transcendent and remote can be far more intimately involved in the transitoriness of our finite living than the Aristotelian ontology allowed: In theological terms, a metaphysic in which incarnation and indwelling can be rendered intelligible; in secular philosophical terms, a metaphysic that can solve the problems of sameness and identity through change without retreating into the discredited short-hand of essential categories. Of the few examples to hand, I happen to believe that Austin Farrer's voluntarism offers by far the most promising starting point. But my purpose here is not to persuade you of Farrer's formulations. Rather, I want simply to declare that there is no reason why metaphysics should be abandoned, and indeed, I believe that it must not be abandoned if we are to continue to believe in a commonality of humankind and if our talk of God is to be intelligible.

That declaration made, let me reiterate the point behind these rather diverse remarks: Is it not possible that Trinity represents a recognisable fact? Might it not be possible partially to elucidate that fact out of a general metaphysic such as Farrer's and out of the vestige of Trinity that we find in

the Gospel account? Part of that elucidation would, no doubt, be a highly generalised and abstract concept of personhood in terms of the real relations between essences. Might it not then be possible to rework the neo-Thomist analogy proposed by Eric Mascall from Jacques Maritain so as to suggest a further fact, the fact of finite personhood in the divine image? That result would, in turn, transform Norman Geras' pleading for the commonality of humankind from a yearning into a truth claim.

Ends

Notes

1 Thomas Nagel: The View from Nowhere. OUP 1986. p9 etc
Nagel describes scientism as a deflationary and viciously reductionist metaphysical form of idealism which seeks to put one form of human understanding in charge of the universe and what can be said about it. He identifies physics and evolutionary biology as the current paradigms.

2 Nagel: p11. '[Philosophy's] sources are preverbal and often precultural, and one of its most difficult tasks is to express unformed but intuitively felt problems in language without losing them.'

3 Nagel: p75. In fact, the point is Colin McGinn's.

4 Nagel: p11

5 Norman Geras: Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind. Verso 1995

6 I shall not attempt to define post-modernism. That Rorty denies that he is a post-modernist matters not to us here.

7 Quoted by Geras ibid p117.
Thomas Nagel: The View from Nowhere. p108

8 It is possible that I have overplayed Eldridge's hand here, in making his argument into one for moral values and God. Maybe he does not understand 'Mercy' as a divine reference.

9 Eldridge makes no reference to scientism and its paradigms (see note 1)

10 Paul S Fiddes: The Creative Suffering of God. Clarendon 1992. Fiddes describes personal language as 'the final analogy for the being of God.' p260

See also Charles Conti: Metaphysical Personalism. OUP 1995. Conti's pursues the same theme, developing his ideas out of the work of Austin

Farrer.

11 'Personhood' is virtually unintelligible within the framework of pure scientism. It survives in our culture as one of Nagel's intuitively felt pre-philosophical sources as a sort of mythological appendage to selfhood (see note 1). Were the attack on selfhood to succeed completely, all hope of a philsophical understanding of personhood would be lost.

12 D C Dennett: Conditions of Personhood, in A Rorty (ed): The Identities of Persons. University of California Press, 1976.

13 He calls it 'Reflexive self-evaluation.'

14 Sartre's position is beautifully encapsulated by Josef Pieper: The Silence of St Thomas (trans O'Connor): Faber & Faber 1957.

15 Eberhard Jungel (trans Guder): God as the Mystery of the World, T & T Clark, 1983 (In German 1977)

16 Eric L Mascall. The Importance of Being Human. OUP London 1959. p40

17 Eberhard Jungel: God as the Mystery of the World (trans Darrell Guder). T & T Clark. 1983. Jungel says 'It is not adequate, then, simply to collate the biblical statements about God as the Father, God as the Son, God as the Spirit, and then to derive from this material the coercive necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity. The "biblical material" offers, as such, only a possibility for the doctrine of the Trinity, but not its necessity.' p351

18 When Colin Gunton ('The Possibilities of Theology' ed Webster. T & T Clark 1994, p12) says that Jungel seeks to show 'that there can be an ontology without a metaphysics' he is expressing a half truth. Jungel's ontology certainly does have a metaphysic. Jungel speaks approvingly of 'modern metaphysics', meaning metaphysics post-Nietzsche. It is classical metaphysics that has gone for good, in his view, and with it, the transcendent God.

Jungel says, 'If God's identity with the crucified one is believed, then an ONTOLOGICAL task is put to our thinking, which is to grasp God's being

in perishability in such a way that talk of the death of God gains a more profound meaning than that of pointed metaphor for the self-destruction of the metaphysical concept of God.' What is it to make such a remark, if it is not to do metaphysics? That Jungel's actual formulation leads to what I consider to be an indequate account of personhood is beside the point.

19 The curious truth is that Christianity has never possessed an adequate metaphysic. Whether it ever could in a complete sense is open to doubt. Aristotle knew that he was weakest on the twin problems of movement and on 'becoming good' (moral movement). In St Thomas, with the development of the distinction between essential and accidental forms, the problems became insurmountable. Faith demands that one's 'whole nature is transformed.' Aristotlian metaphysics declares it to be impossible.

Ends