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Christ-Shaped Moral Philosophy and The Triviality of 20ᵗʰ Century 'Christian Ethics'

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Abstract: I argue that Paul K Moser's 'Christ-shaped philosophy' has implications not only for the spirit in which Christians philosophise but also for the subject-matter with which Christian engage in the different branches of the subject. I propose an agenda appropriate to Christ-shaped moral philosophy. I go on to argue that late 20ᵗʰ century preoccupation with divine command ethics and with normative reductionism is driven by conformity to secular philosophical ethics rather than 'Gethsemane union' with Christ, that these issues are logically distinct from Christ-shaped moral philosophy and that they are trivial in comparison with the cosmic moral importance of Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

"Jesus Christ is the centre of everything and the object of everything; and he who does not know Him knows nothing of the order of the world, and nothing of himself."
~ Blaise Pascal

Introduction

In his seminal essay "Christ-shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United" Paul K Moser said a great deal, in the abstract, about Christian philosophy, about its background assumptions and about the spirit in which it should be conducted. However, in two respects he did not make explicit the precise implications of 'Christ-shaped philosophy'. Firstly, he discussed Christ-shaped philosophy in general without allowing that it may have differing implications for different branches of the subject; secondly, he said a great deal about the spirit which should inform Christ-shaped philosophy and very little about how Christ-shaped philosophy would impact the subject-matter of philosophy. Whilst broadly sympathetic to Moser's ideas, I will try to correct what I take to be these 'short-comings' by focusing on one branch of the subject, namely moral philosophy, and by focusing on subject-matter rather than - or, perhaps, in addition to – spirit and method. I will inquire how Christ-shaped philosophy should impact the *subject matter* of moral philosophy and the ways in which such Christ-shaped

moral philosophy would differ from the subject-matter orthodoxies which have shaped recent 'Christian ethics'. To these tasks I shall now turn.

Throughout the twentieth century western theological ethics has been dominated by two issues, divine command theory and normative reductionism. The first is an issue in moral semantics: do moral predicates refer to the property of being commanded by God? The second is an issue in value theory: can principles enjoining things such as justice, kindness and truthfulness be reduced to a single principle such as that enjoining love or must we recognise the existence of an irreducible plurality of moral principles? In recent years the issues have become linked because some have argued that the basic principle of normative ethics is one which enjoins obedience to the commands of God. I have called the field 'theological ethics' but it also goes under titles such as 'God and morality', 'Christian ethics', 'religion and ethics' and various other names which I will treat as roughly synonymous. The literature in which these issues are addressed is vast, the discussions have become increasingly technical and there is little evidence of any emerging consensus concerning the problems involved.

Preoccupation with these issues is unduly influenced by developments in secular philosophical ethics; and the literature which they have spawned has little to do with the moral teachings of Jesus or an appreciation of the true moral significance of Jesus' life and death at Calvary, in comparison with the cosmic moral importance of which they are really quite trivial.

Christ-shaped moral philosophy, by contrast, focuses on the moral purpose for which God became incarnate in Christ; and on the understanding of a variety of background moral assumptions – concerning human nature, concerning the character of a morally ordered universe, concerning the nature of the human predicament in that morally ordered universe, concerning the powerlessness of human beings to remedy or even ameliorate that predicament, and concerning the significance of the atoning death of Jesus at Calvary - which make that moral purpose intelligible.

Christ-shaped Moral Philosophy

The central fact which the Christian gospel proclaims is that God became incarnate in the person of Christ. However, Scripture informs us not only of the fact of the incarnation but also, and repeatedly, of *the purpose* of the incarnation.

Prior to his birth, we read, Joseph was instructed by an angel to call Mary's child 'Jesus' for this reason: "he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). Now 'Jesus' is the Greek form of a Hebrew word that means 'Yahweh saves'. As though for emphasis therefore, and twice over in the course of a single sentence, we are told that God became incarnate because human beings are in need of salvation. Repeatedly this message

occurs in Scripture: John tells us that 'God sent the Son into the world…that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17); Luke tells us that 'the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10); Paul tells us that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1Timothy 1:15). When Jesus was being crucified passers-by mocked him in his sufferings but the precise terms in which the religious leaders mocked Jesus are very significant. They said: 'he saved others, himself he cannot save.' (Matthew 27:42, Mark 15:31, Luke 23:35) Even from the lips of Jesus' enemies, therefore, we have evidence of the prominence which Jesus attached to the divinely ordained salvation- mission for which he came into the world.

What is salvation? Why do human beings need to be saved? From what are they to be saved? Properly understood, these are all moral questions and the answers we give to them are of fundamental importance for an understanding of the nature of Christ-shaped moral philosophy. The questions all concern moral aspects of what I shall refer to as 'the human predicament'[1] and it is by way of an exposition of this human predicament that I will develop an account of subject matter of Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

The Human Predicament

What, then, is the human predicament, from which God has gone to such lengths to rescue human beings? An answer requires reference to three themes, all of them essentially moral in character and all at the heart of Christ-shaped moral philosophy: (i) the radical evil of human nature (ii) the fact that human beings live – inescapably - in a morally ordered universe (iii) the powerlessness of human beings to avoid the terrible consequences of (i) and (ii). I shall briefly elucidate each of these themes.

i) Radical Moral Evil.

Human beings sometimes perform morally wrong actions and do things which are morally permissible or right for the wrong reasons; human beings are notoriously prone to selfishness, pride, lust, jealousy, malice and a list of other weaknesses which is too long to contemplate with ease. Scripture teaches that these shortcomings, serious though they may be, are merely the symptoms of a deeper problem with human beings: they are symptoms, not the disease. The real problem with human beings is that, by nature, they are radically moral evil. It is in the human 'heart', Scripture tells us, that the basic moral problem with human nature lies (Jeremiah 17:9).

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[1] For the idea of conceiving of moral theory in this way I am indebted to G.J. Warnock. See G.J.Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen, 1971), ch.2: 'The Human Predicament'.

The Bible refers to this radical human evil as 'sin', indicating that it involves not merely the performing of wrong actions and the nurturing of evil dispositions but, more seriously, the rebellion of the human will against God. This has caused estrangement between God and human beings and this human rebellion and estrangement are at the root of the radical evil which characterises human nature. We can now note, however, a significant contrast between secular moral assumptions and Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

We tend to think that some people are good and other people are evil, or we tend to think of human beings as falling on a scale somewhere between very good people and very evil people. Christ-shaped moral philosophy holds that this is mistaken and that the whole species of human beings is radically evil, one and all ("There is none that doeth good..." Psalms 53:1, Romans 3:12). We carry, one and all, what Kant called 'the debt of sin'.[2]

ii) A Morally Ordered Universe.

The nature of a morally ordered universe is best understood by contrasting it with a morally disorganised universe, the kind of universe which is presupposed by secular moral philosophy. Human beings, individually and through the institutions which they create, attempt to create moral order; they attempt to ensure that virtue is rewarded and wrongdoing is punished. To a very limited degree this ideal is realised. But it is clear that there are vast discrepancies between virtue which people possess and the happiness which they deserve: evil men flourish and good people suffer. Furthermore, luck infects the moral fabric of the universe; luck of character and luck of circumstances, as Nagel describes it.[3] This is what I mean by saying that we inhabit a morally disordered world.

A Christ-shaped moral philosophy views this appearance of 'moral disorder' as temporary and as being, therefore, misleading. Human beings, whether they recognise it or not, are ultimately accountable to God and in the not too distant future God will ensure that perfect moral order is established. God's power, His knowledge and His goodness will ensure that the universe is, ultimately, a morally ordered universe.

Taken together, however, these two points (i and ii) constitute what I have called 'the human predicament'. The human predicament is that sinful human beings inhabit a morally ordered universe and that, granted the constitution of human nature, there is nothing that human beings can do which will ameliorate this situation.

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[2] See especially Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960).

[3] See Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany: University of New York, 1993), pp. 57-72.

iii) The Greatest This-Worldly Good: reconciliation with God.
The good news of the Christian gospel is that God, in His love, has acted to overcome the human predicament; or, more accurately, to make it possible for that predicament to be overcome. A Christ-shaped moral philosophy therefore recognises that the greatest this-worldly good is for an individual to be reconciled with God on the basis of the offer of forgiveness which God, through Christ's atoning death, makes available to sinful human beings.

This completes my exposition of Christ-centred moral philosophy, the themes that are at the foundation of the moral message which Jesus proclaimed.

I turn now to the central critical point of this paper, namely, to examine the two theses – 'divine command ethics' and 'normative reductionism' - that have featured most prominently in 'Christian ethics' in the second half of the twentieth century. In each case I will argue that the point of view is motivated by developments in 20th century philosophical ethics which have little to do with Christ-shaped moral philosophy because they do not entail and are not entailed by themes in Christ-centred moral philosophy; and I will argue that divine command ethics and normative reductionism are trivial in comparison with the themes which are at the heart of Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

The Divine Command Theory of Ethics

The 20th century re- emergence of divine command ethics has its roots, not in anything connected with Christ-centred moral philosophy but in two quite independent sources: one is Greek philosophy, especially one of the options explored in Plato's Euthyphro dilemma; the other is the twentieth century meta-ethical debate between realist and anti-realist construals of moral predicates. It is the second of these sources which is the more immediately relevant to an understanding of contemporary divine command ethics.

Twentieth century moral philosophy was dominated by the meta-ethical debate between realism and anti-realism. Convinced by the arguments of GE Moore's *Principia Ethica*[4] most moral philosophers believed that meta-ethics is logically prior to ethics; that before we can state what is good or right we must be clear about the meaning of these terms. Anti-realism, classically expressed in the writings of CL Stevenson and RM

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[4] See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), ch. 1-3.

Hare, quickly became the dominant mid-twentieth century meta-ethic but by the 1970s it had been eclipsed by a series of imaginative realist positions. Divine command ethics re-emerged in Christian ethics in the wake of this revival in meta-ethical realism. Drawing on Kripke-Putnam semantics, especially the claims that there are 'a posteriori' necessary truths which include property identifications, writers who were sympathetic to theism revived the view that the property 'rightness' is one and the same as the property of acting in accordance with God's will. The thesis admitted of a wide range of formulations: some held that divine command theory explain all value terms, others that it only explains expressions of obligation; some held that the relationship between God's will and moral predicates is a causal relationship, others that it is a supervenience relationship, yet others that it one of reductive analysis; sometimes the analysis was expressed in terms of the commands of God, sometimes in terms the commands of a loving God and so on. The literature, in which the writings of Robert M Adams[5] and Philip Quinn[6] are most prominent, is vast.

The second thing to notice about the emergence of divine command ethics is that there is no necessary connection between Christ-centred moral philosophy and divine command ethics or, for that matter, between Christ-centred moral philosophy and any of the main meta-ethical realist and anti-realist positions which featured in mid-twentieth century moral philosophy. Christ-centred moral philosophy can be expressed in terms of any of them and so it is logically neutral between them. I shall develop this point in more detail, taking anti-realism as my starting point.

RM Hare, the architect of modern anti-realism, held that moral judgments are a species of imperatives.[7] Moral judgments are not imperatives but they entail imperatives. Thus for Hare 'Smith ought to do X' entails 'Smith, do X' and 'X is good' entails 'If choosing between X and Y choose X'. Provided that such judgments are characterised by supervenience, prescriptivity and universalizability then they are moral judgments. Furthermore, universal prescriptions can be used to express <u>any</u> moral viewpoint. Therefore, the moral judgments of Christ-shaped moral philosophy – for example the judgment that human beings are characterised by radical evil - can be analysed in terms of the anti-realist framework which I have just described. Hare defended this compatibility thesis and Hare was, in fact, a practising Christian. It is possible, therefore, to combine Christ-shaped moral philosophy with anti-realism.

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[5] See, for example, Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness" in *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)

[6] See, for example, Philip Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements (*Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

[7] See Richard M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

Christ-shaped moral philosophy is consistent with all of the various forms of meta-ethical realism, those which espouse divine command ethics and those who reject it. It is, therefore, consistent with, though not entailed by, all of the various forms of divine command morality which I described earlier.

However, Christ-shaped moral philosophy is also consistent with many forms of moral realism which reject divine command ethics. A Christian might be a utilitarian or might defend a rights-based approach to ethics; Richard Swinburne has recently defended the view that moral properties are like Platonic abstract entities. All of these views are compatible with the various theses which comprise Christ-shaped moral philosophy.

In summary, divine command ethics is a form of moral realism whose emergence has been inspired by late twentieth century forms of meta-ethical realism, a theory which has no intrinsic connection with the moral messages of the Christian faith; and since Christ-shaped moral philosophy can be expressed in terms of any of the realist and anti-realist points of view it follows that there is no logical connection between it and any one of them. Christ-centred moral philosophy and divine command ethics are logically unrelated points of view.

Normative Reductionism

The second philosophical project which obscures Christ-shaped moral philosophy is Christian 'value reductionism', a view that can match divine command theory in a page-for-page count in 20th century scholarly literature even if lacking the philosophical sophistication. What is value reductionism? Value reductionism is a program in value theory rather than a set of philosophical views, the program being to reduce to a single moral value the apparently great diversity of moral values which is taken for granted in everyday experience. In uncritical moments we recognise a plurality of values such as kindness, gratitude, truthfulness, justice, equality, tolerance and so on. However, value reductionists hold that these values are all expressions of, and hence are reducible to, a single value. Strictly speaking, the program is consistent with there being more than one basic, irreducible value but most value reductionists tend to be monists, holding that there is only one basic value from which, together with subsidiary empirical premises, all other values can be reduced. Though other conceptions are possible I will keep the discussion simple by assuming that the issue is simply between value pluralists and value monists.

The debate between monism and pluralism has a long and honoured place in the history of moral philosophy and it has caused division within both of the great schools of ethical thought, consequentialism and

deontology. Consequentialists such as Bentham[8] and Mill[9] are monists, holding that the only thing that is of intrinsic value is happiness and that all other values are ultimately reducible to happiness. Other consequentialists such as GE Moore[10] are pluralists, holding that we must recognise a plurality of moral values and that the pleasures of friendship and artistic appreciation, for example, are not reducible to happiness.

 Deontologists are equally divided. Some, such as Kant, are monists holding that all values are ultimately reducible to a single principle such as reason; other deontologists, such as WD Ross[11], argue that the troublesome cases of moral conflict requires us to recognise, in addition to beneficence, the existence of other irreducible moral values such as non-maleficence, justice and prudence.

 This philosophical controversy has been taken up by writers in Christian ethics. I will argue that, as in the case of divine command morality, the Christian arguments shadow arguments in secular moral philosophy, that Christ-shaped moral philosophy is neutral with regard to the program and that a preoccupation with it has deflected attention from the themes of Christ-shaped moral philosophy which are the proper concern of Christian moral philosophy.

 There has been a steady stream of Christian contributors to the monism / pluralism debate throughout the twentieth century, prominent amongst whom have been Reinhold Niebuhr[12], Anders Nygren[13], Paul Ramsey[14] and Joseph Fletcher[15]. Perhaps the most notable of these was Ramsey, who developed what James Gustafson called a version of 'love monism'. The philosopher, William Frankena said that Ramsey came 'very close' to 'pure act-agapism'. Ramsey replied by saying that 'agape is honour bound to figure the angles' and elaborated this in the following terms:

> It seems to me that if a Christian ethicist is going to be a pure agapist…there can be no sufficient reason for him programmatically to exclude the possibility that there may be rules, principles or precepts whose source is man's natural competence to make moral judgments. An inhabitant of Jerusalem need not rely on messages from Athens, but he should not refuse them; he might even go to see

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[8] Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1948).

[9] John Stewart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Collins, 1962).

[10] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica,* Ch. 6.

[11] W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).

[12] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1944).

[13] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1953).

[14] Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1945).

[15] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics (*New York: John Knox Press, 1966).

> if there are any. This would be mixed agapism – a combination of agape with man's sense of natural justice or injustice, which, however, contains an internal asymmetry that I indicate by the expression 'love transforming natural justice.[16]

This quote and especially the last sentence (italics mine) indicate the philosophical quality of the arguments as Christian writers carried the monism / pluralism debate into the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Christ-shaped moral philosophy is logically independent of the debate over value reductionism. That is to say, it is possible to hold the views - concerning human sinfulness, concerning the moral predicament which, in a morally ordered universe, this entails and concerning God's offer of forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ's atoning death - irrespective of which view you take of moral reductionism. Furthermore, an ethical monist can subscribe to all of the different aspects of a Christ-shaped moral philosophy which I have sketched; and it is possible to be an ethical pluralist and to subscribe to all aspects of a Christ-shaped moral philosophy. No entailment relationship exists in either direction. The two views are, therefore, logically distinct and unrelated.

My impression of the reductionism debate – of course, it can only be an impression – is that, as in the case of divine command ethics, a long running argument in academic Philosophy has simply been carried over into Christian ethics allowing writers in the field of 'Christian ethics' to follow developments in secular moral philosophy.

Gethsemane Union

In conclusion, at least three points of clarification are in order: the first defends the triviality charge; the second concerns the scope of my conception of Christ-shaped moral philosophy; the third returns, briefly, to my agreement and disagreement with Moser.

1) The Triviality Charge

Jesus proclaimed the good news of human redemption and he told his disciples, also, to proclaim that message. So, Christ-shaped moral philosophy has a distinctive subject matter. As is well known, a rejection of key aspects of Jesus' message is at the heart of many aspects of Enlightenment and contemporary culture. So a primary responsibility of the Christian philosopher is to restate Jesus' message and defend it from its modern detractors. However, this task of analysis and proclamation has different implications for different branches of philosophy – for

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[16] See the discussion of the issues in M.C. McKenzie: *Paul Ramsey's Ethics: The Power of Agape in a Post Modern World* (Westport: Praeger, 2001).

metaphysics, for epistemology, for ethics, for philosophy of science and so on. However, although epistemologists have recently done a very good job in that apologetic program it is not clear that moral philosophers have been so successful. I have argued that Christian moral philosophers should return from the technicalities of divine command theory and normative reductionism to a defence of central aspects of Jesus' moral teaching concerning the human predicament. I do not deny that conventional themes are intrinsically interesting, nor that they have a proper place in a study of normative ethics nor that an understanding of them illuminates debates in practical ethics. All of these things are probably true. Nor am I saying that there is anything reprehensible about Christians taking an interest in debates on these issues. The point is, rather, that Moser has challenged Christian philosophers to philosophise from a 'Gethsemane perspective' and I maintain that both of the issues discussed are trivial if seen from that perspective. Why is this so?

On the night before His crucifixion Jesus went, with his disciples, across the Kidron Valley to a garden called 'Gethsemane'. In their accounts of the events on that fateful night the apostles tell us of Jesus great distress. Matthew tells us that Jesus was 'sorrowful and troubled' ('My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death' Matthew 26:37-39); Mark tells us that Jesus was 'deeply distressed and troubled' (Mark 14:33-34); Luke tells us that Jesus was 'in anguish', that an angel came from heaven to strengthen him and that, as Jesus continued to pray more earnestly, 'his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground' (Luke 22:43-45). The issues with which Jesus wrestled in Gethsemane were moral issues, and in connection with them I make two claims. Firstly, the issues most certainly had nothing to do with moral semantics or normative reductionism. Secondly, the issues were precisely the ones which I described as being at the heart of a Christ-shaped moral philosophy: the sinfulness of the human race, the resulting plight of the human race in a morally ordered universe, the need to make atonement to God the Father for the sins of human race so to make possible their forgiveness and reconciliation to God. Seen in this context, divine command ethics and normative reductionism appear trivial.

2) The Scope of Christ-shaped Moral Philosophy

It might seem that my radical critique of 20th century Christian ethics cuts a very broad swathe through nearly all of Christian ethics; indeed, far too broad a swathe. Are we really to think that sin, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation with God are the only themes which merit philosophical analysis? However, this is a misleading interpretation of the Christ-shaped moral philosophy which I have defended. Issues in practical ethics play an important role in Christ-shaped moral philosophy. For example, termination of third-trimester pregnancies for social reasons is one aspect of the sinfulness of human nature; failure to respect basic human rights is another;

issues connected with the cancellation of third world debt is another and so on. Christian critiques of these and a host of other practical ethical issues are vitally important aspects of our understanding of human sinfulness and of human repentance. Did Jesus grieve over aspects of human nature to which I have alluded? Most certainly, in my view. So the dismissal of moral semantics and reductionism as trivial (did Jesus grieve in Gethsemane over the philosophical technicalities of the realism / anti-realism debate?) does not rule out quite as much as a hasty encounter with Christ-shaped moral philosophy might lead one to think.

3) Agreement and Disagreement with Moser.
Having focused almost exclusively on the subject matter of Christ-shaped philosophy my approach is open to the charge that I have missed the main point that Moser was trying to make: no matter what the subject matter, unless Christian philosophy is informed by a 'Gethsemane union', by obedient dying and by voluntary co-operation with Christ it leaves Christian philosophy impotent. Subject matter is secondary to spirit.

There is much truth in this claim. However, sometimes spirit without the proper subject matter can also be spiritually impotent. More so than in other branches of the subject, in moral philosophy proper spirit focused on proper subject matter must be the aim of Christian philosophers.

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