AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction by Edmund N. Santurri
ideal by employing coercion in defense of the relatively innocent against the unjust, sometimes at great moral cost, including harm to other innocents.

To assume that one can live through these conflicts and exigencies without moral guilt is, in effect, to claim exemption from the sin that plagues all and thus from the need for justification by faith. Indeed, for Christians to deny all of this and insist that the redeemed community somehow can avoid or transcend these empirical and normative effects of the fallen world is, in Niebuhr's view, to evidence the very "self-righteousness of the righteous" that Jesus relentlessly exposed and condemned (225).

NIEBUHRIAN ETHICS AND DIVINE COHERENCE

A final critique of Niebuhr is one grounded in a kind of philosophical-theological rationalism that prizes depictions of God as practically coherent and maximally benevolent. In this account, Niebuhr's theological ethic is deficient because its normative judgments conjoined with its metaethical point to a divine will in conflict with itself. The logic of the critique goes as follows: Niebuhr's normative determinations allow that human agents often confront genuine moral dilemmas, defined here narrowly as situations in which the doing of some moral wrong is unavoidable. To be sure, in cases of conflict between love and justice, Niebuhr typically proposes that justice should override love in practice. The failure to execute justice in these situations presumably is a failure to exercise moral responsibility and therefore is morally wrong in some sense. But Niebuhr also insists that agents incur moral guilt in leaving love or the ethics of Jesus behind. The upshot is that in cases of conflict between love and justice, agents do moral wrong no matter what they do. Yet, given Niebuhr's metaethical, such dilemmas also signify conflicts in the divine will since God's will in that metaethical is the source of all moral right and wrong. If a course of action is morally required, then God commands that action; if a course of action is morally wrong, then God forbids that action. To say, then, on the terms of Niebuhr's theological-ethical voluntarism, that an agent is faced with a genuine moral dilemma is to say that God both commands and forbids a particular course of action or that God commands what an omniscient being would know to be mutually exclusive courses of action. But to embrace either of these last two descriptions is to say that God is practically incoherent, if not perverse, sadistic, or otherwise malevolent. In sum, according to this critique, Niebuhr's theological ethics wreaks havoc with the doctrine of God.48

Niebuhr's most straightforward attempt to deal with this problem is given in his proposal that, for Christianity, genuine moral dilemmas are a mark of the fallen world. They come about as the consequence of human sin, and are not, as in Greek tragedy, the expression of an intrinsically conflict-ridden universe reflecting conflict within divinity itself.49 But, however successful Niebuhr's proposal may be in resolving a traditional problem of Christian theodicy, his appeal to the fall cannot resolve the problem of God's incoherence posed by the central critique under consideration. For it is one thing to claim that sinful human beings rather than God are responsible and thus incur guilt for creating a fallen world filled with situations requiring agonizing moral decisions inevitably accompanied by anxiety, harm, loss, pain, grief, and regret. It is another thing entirely to claim that, however they decide in such difficult situations, agents inevitably do something morally wrong. And this is a crucial distinction, because the first claim poses for the Christian theist no obstacles to affirming God's practical coherence, while the second claim does pose such obstacles given the terms of Niebuhr's theological-ethical voluntarism. All in all, then, Niebuhr still has compelling theological reasons to deny the existence of genuine dilemmas even if one grants his theodicy point that the anxiety, harm, loss, pain, grief, and regret associated with difficult moral decisions are the responsibility of sinful humans rather than God, and he can retain the theodicy point without affirming the existence of moral dilemmas.50

Of course, as we have seen, Niebuhr does suggest in moments that an affirmation of dilemmas somehow follows from commitment to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. In this account, the refusal to acknowledge inevitable moral guilt in conflict situations reflects the assumption that we can live through such conflict without guilt, an assumption that betrays, presumably, an attitude of works righteousness contrary to the spirit of the doctrine. But, as I have argued elsewhere, this linking of the justification doctrine with moral dilemmas is deeply problematic since it would appear to equivocate on central concepts:

After all, it is reasonable to propose that the sin standing in need of divine grace, according to the doctrine, involves a moral violation willfully embraced and prompted by wayward inclination. In this view, the condition of sin is simply that persistent, internal impediment preventing agents from doing what they ought to do. But the "sin" that would be generated by a moral dilemma appears to be not like that at all. In such a case it seems possible to say that the agent's psychological integrity is maintained, that her intentions are good, that she is perfectly prepared to do what she ought to do even if it conflicts with her inclinations, but that she is prevented from doing so because of external constraints imposed by the world. The general point is that . . . one could intelligibly assent to the doctrine of justification by faith and its correlative notion of sin as internal impediment.

47. Ibid., 284.
48. I have offered this argument in my Paradox in the Moral Life: Philosophical and Theological Considerations (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987; Reissued Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 165-1-81, 117-1-55.
50. Santucci, Paradox in the Moral Life, 194.
51. See pp. xxv-xxvi above.
to moral righteousness without admitting the existence of situations where
"sin" is generated by external factors. 32

If all of this is true, then, contra Niebuhr, commitment to the doctrine of justification
by grace through faith does not require the affirmation of genuine moral
dilemmas.

Yet there is another, perhaps stronger, argument for dilemmas that Niebuhr
occasionally intimates. This is the claim that the uneasy conscience or feeling of
remorse typically experienced by moral agents no matter what they do in
conflict situations signifies the inevitability of wrongdoing in these circumstances. 53
Such an argument brings Niebuhr in line with a range of contemporary philo-
sophical proponents of the dilemmas thesis who argue specifically that a theo-
retical exclusion of dilemmas fails to account fully for agent experience in moral
conflict. 54 Now I have also contended elsewhere, along with others, that such
"phenomenological" arguments for dilemmas beg important questions. For
instance, feelings of guilt or remorse reported by agents may be pathological, or
the reports may be the result of mistakenly identifying as guilt or remorse other
unpleasant emotions endemic to conflict experience that do not signify wrong-
doing, e.g., profound nonmoral regret over loss or harm, or anxiety created by
uncertainty about the right course of action. 55 But for the sake of argument,
let us set such objections aside and concede that the agent's sense of guilt or
repentance in conflict cases offers a powerful datum in support of accepting the
dilemmas thesis. 56 Is the datum sufficient to warrant that acceptance by Chris-
tian ethics given the theological question that proposals for such acceptance
invariably raise, namely, how can the existence of a God Christians worship as
perfectly reasonable and unfailingly benevolent be reconciled with a view of
moral conflict that suggests divine irrationality if not divine perversity?

I think Niebuhr would be inclined to respond to this problem with a general
denial of the philosophical-theological rationalism that worries excessively
over it, with a firm proclamation of the explanatory limits of a theology bound
to strict canons of logical coherence and with the insistence that sometimes inco-
herence, irrationality, anomaly, paradox, and "unresolved mystery" are the dues
paid in theology for explanation fully adequate to human experience. 57 "Loyalty
to all the facts may require a provisional defeasance of logic, lest complexity in the

facts of experience be denied for the sake of a premature logical consistency." 58
For this reason, in Niebuhr's view, the Christian consciousness cannot stay settle-
d with the formal constraints of reason that attach to systematic philosophical
and theological inquiry and repairs instead to myth in the comprehension and
representation of ultimate reality:

In this sense the myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm
of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence. Its
world is coherent because all facts in it are related to some central source of
meaning, but is not logically coherent because the myth is not under the
abusive necessity of relating all things to each other in terms of immediate
rational unity. (26)

Thus, as Niebuhr hints elsewhere, the appropriate theological response to cer-
tain philosophical conundrums is not to match argument with counterargument
but simply to echo Job, its voice from the whirlwind (38:1-4), its faithful, yet
agnostic, confession and repentance (42:1-6). "Implied in such a faith is the
sense of a goodness which not only fulfills, but may negate, the highest human
goodness. This is the implication developed in the Book of Job, when God
refuses to be judged by human standards of justice and quiets the protests of
Job by overthrowing him with the mysteries of the world beyond human ken"
(230).

And here a central theological issue is joined. It is a mark of the continuing
intellectual relevance of Niebuhr's An Interpretation of Christian Ethics that the
work still offers this sort of compelling theological challenge and demands seri-
ous response in kind. With due respect to Hauerwas, we do not read Niebuhr
simply "because of how he helps you understand that time." We read Reinhold
Niebuhr because he speaks powerfully in our time just as he spoke powerfully
in his own. 59

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54. See Bernard Williams, Problems of the Self (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,
1973), 172-79; Ruth Marcus, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," The Journal of Philosophy
55. Santurri, Perplexity in the Moral Life, 47-60.
56. I also set aside my own suggestions for an alternative phenomenological account that
distinguishes inevitable moral cost from inevitable moral wrong in conflict situations. See Santurri,
57. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith," in The Essential Rein-
hold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale Uni-
versity Press, 1986), 222.
59. The longer unpublished version of this introduction includes an extended defense of
Niebuhr against Hauerwas's criticisms.