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Agape and Agapism

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I

THE PURPOSE OF this paper is to discuss a problem which is not explicitly central to, but which none the less arises inescapably from, Professor Paul Ramsey's "Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Paper" entitled *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*.¹ The main thesis of this work, which also suggests its title, is that there is a place for rules and principles in the Christian ethic of love, and that the principle of "situational" ethics—that the duty of the Christian is to meet, without the aid of any preformulated standard, the immediate demand of the present concrete situation—if true at all, is certainly not the whole truth. This immediate demand is generally represented as the demand of love, and accordingly Ramsey denominates the position which he is opposing "act-agapism." The alternative to this he regards as neither simple nor single, for the rules for which he is seeking recognition may, on his confession, be summary or working rules which experience shows to be the best ways of acting in love, or they may be derived rules of general validity which are inherently imposed by the command of love, or they may even be separate from, perhaps subordinate, but also supplementary, to that command, and in this last case these non-agapistic rules may derive either from revelation or from natural reason and conscience.

In the prosecution of his design Ramsey devotes the bulk of his discussion (sections II, III, and IV of his five sections) to an examination of certain widely read contributions to the contemporary debate on Christian morals, namely *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*² (section II), the writings of Bishop Robinson and Mr. H. A. Williams (section III), and Professor Paul Lehmann's book *Ethics in a Christian Context*³ (section IV). By and large what he does in these sections is to show either that the author under review, in spite of his own intention, is compelled to supplement his act-agapism with rules and principles of one sort or another (the Quakers and Robinson), or else that the particular moral judgment he arrives at is not after all a Christian moral judgment but stems from some other source, such as "the atomistic individualism of secular thought in the modern period" with "a liberal addition of Freudianism"⁴ or "a secular theory of contextualism"⁵ (Williams and, to some extent, Lehmann).

1. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965.

2. London: Friends' Home Service Committee, 1964.

3. London: S.C.M. Press, 1963.

4. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, p. 37.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 60; cf. p. 69.

There is much to be said for the view that, over a large area of his discussion in these sections, Ramsey's analysis is a valid one. It is difficult to believe, for example, that the Bishop of Woolwich can be effectively defended against the charge of confusion in both his interpretation of what others have said and his adumbration of what ought to be said. As far as the former is concerned, it is enough to note that under the heading "Nothing Prescribed—Except Love" Bishop Robinson has suggested⁶ that Professor Joseph Fletcher's "situational" ethics were "foreshadowed" thirty years ago by Brunner's *The Divine Imperative*, and this in the face, not only of Brunner's whole treatment of the order of marriage (for instance), but also of his statement that "the 'form' of the will, obedience, is all. But to be obedient to the will of God means: 'love your neighbour!'"⁷—a statement which, especially in its conjunction, may be wrong-headed but which is perfectly clear and unambiguous.

As for Robinson's attempt at a constructive reinterpretation of the Christian ethic, it is again perhaps enough to note that, in the same section and under the same general heading, Robinson has recognized, over and above the prescription of love, what he calls "guiding rules," "the cumulative experience of one's own and other people's obedience," "our working rules of 'right' and 'wrong'."⁸ This recognition, of course, created a problem for Robinson, which he immediately attempted to resolve by saying that "it is these, constantly re-examined, which, in order to protect personality, have to be built into our codes of law, paradoxically, 'without respect of persons.' But love is the end of law precisely because it *does* respect persons. . . ." Strictly speaking, however, there is only a verbal paradox here, since the very same act may wholly protect and respect personality and yet be entirely without respect of persons; and accordingly the verbally similar phrases, since they are about entirely different things, do not help at all to resolve the problem and to relate "working rules" and the prescription of love with each other in such a way that the validity of the latter, only, is at once apparent.

II

There is then good reason to go part of the way with Professor Ramsey's analysis; and yet one may still have an uncomfortable feeling that act-agapism has not been confronted to the full extent of its resourcefulness. Perhaps he penetrates most deeply when he complains of "the atomistic individualism of secular thought in the modern period." "This," he says, "continues to be the acid that eats away at moral relations, and at the very idea that there are moral bonds between man and man or between one moment and another."⁹

6. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p. 116.

7. E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 59.

8. Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 119f.

9. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, p. 37.

The source of this atomism, however, so far as act-agapism at its most profound is concerned, is not, as Ramsey alleges, Jean-Jacques Rousseau but Jean-Paul Sartre. More broadly and accurately, it is existentialism, with its feeling for the concrete and the particular, and, in its theological dress, with its emphasis upon the historical moment, the eschatological present, and the immediate encounter. That is why Bishop Robinson can say that love "is prepared to see every moment as a fresh creation from God's hand demanding its own and perhaps wholly unprecedented response,"¹⁰ and can quote Tillich with approval: "'Ethics in a changing world must be understood as the ethics of the *kairos*'—of the God-given moment, mediating the meeting with the eternal in the temporal. 'Love, realizing itself from *kairos* to *kairos*, creates an ethics which is beyond the alternative of absolute and relative ethics. . . .'"

A charge of atomism may still be valid, but it is no longer a charge of individualism at the same time—quite definitely not that. It is simply the charge that the present moment has been divorced, has been isolated and insulated, from the past and from the future, from what was and from what is to come. The charge of individualism cannot be preferred, for the moment is, explicitly, one of encounter; but the charge of atomism remains. This present moment is a moment in this man's life and it is a moment in the life of his neighbour who now confronts him. Are these two moments then the same moment, like a mathematical point where two separate lines intersect? Or is the moment of encounter the sum of two different moments, one in this man's life and one in that man's? Or is it that plus something more? On the whole, something like the last seems to be the case; and indeed it is the something more that is decisive, for in the moment a man may have the opportunity, not only to love his neighbour, but to achieve authentic existence—and he may indeed achieve this; in other words, he may find himself.

Indeed, on this view, the moment is so pregnant with altogether new possibilities and at the same time so replete with detailed demands that there is much reason for supposing that it has been allowed to become something of a mythico-mystical reality; and yet, if words mean anything, it remains an historical moment, the present. Accordingly, the charge of atomism in this existentialist context is really the charge of an excessive actualism against one wing of radical Protestantism, corresponding to the charge of an excessive actualism brought against the opposite wing by H. R. Mackintosh, when he spoke of "Barth's . . . persistent tendency to stress what may be called the dynamic aspects of Christian faith and life at the expense of the static."¹¹ In other words, the charge is one of atomism, not only within the life of the Christian, but also within the activity of God, however that is to be conceived. Both the promise and the response are atomistically but dynamically conceived.

10. Robinson, *Honest to God*, pp. 115f.

11. H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1937), p. 314.

To this position many objections may be taken. Theologically, it may be held that the eschatological "now" is no adequate substitute for the economy of divine saving events. Anthropologically, it may be argued with Thomas C. Oden that "Bultmann's view of 'the moment' is constantly in danger of becoming an abstraction"¹² and that "in a certain sense, Bultmann *dehistoricizes* man,"¹³ or with Paul Weiss that existentialism tends "to exaggerate, and seems to say that there is nothing more to the future than its meaning in the present."¹⁴ Ethically, one may very well doubt whether for the Christian the demand of the moment is sheerly particular without any admixture of elements of general validity—apart from the fact, apparently, that it is always the demand of love. But there is a question whether this final objection is precisely the same as Paul Ramsey's thesis that act-agapism requires to be supplemented by some form of "rule-agapism" and perhaps even by rules which derive from some other source than the demand of agape.

Put in another way, my reservation regarding his critical analysis amounts to this: that, on the one hand, if the choice is restricted to these possibilities, act-agapism, rule-agapism, and what he calls mixed agapism, it is difficult to withstand his thesis that the first by itself is inadequate, but that, on the other hand, there is a lingering doubt whether this way of putting the matter grasps the strength of the position it is seeking to attack. In particular, it is doubtful whether it grasps that the Christian life and the Christian ethic are responsive in character—"we love him because he first loved us"—and this doubt comes to a head when Ramsey turns to consider Professor Lehmann's discussion in his book *Ethics in a Christian Context*. Once again it is difficult to quarrel with some of Ramsey's specific criticisms, and certainly I do not think that Lehmann's substitution of maturity for morality and of the indicative for the imperative as the fundamental ethical factors can in the end be defended, no matter how much one may learn from his discussion; but once again it is far from clear that Ramsey has done justice to his opponent.

This question becomes more troublesome still when Ramsey accuses Lehmann of begging the question when he moves from "Ethics in a Christian Context" to "The Contextual Character of Christian Ethics"—of reading far more into the adjective than the noun could possibly contain and yet moving from the one to the other as if nothing of substance were involved.¹⁵ This accusation is plausible only if the phrase "ethics in a Christian context" means and suggests nothing more than Ramsey takes it to mean, namely, "the primacy of Christian theology to Christian ethics"¹⁶ or "that Christian ethics is ethics in a Christian theological context."¹⁷

12. T. C. Oden, *Radical Obedience* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 127.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

14. Paul Weiss, *Man's Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 18.

15. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, p. 66.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

However, when Lehmann speaks of the contextual character of Christian ethics—and indeed, I imagine, when he speaks of ethics in a Christian context—he already means a great deal more than this; and it may even be that he precisely does not mean this.¹⁸

That Christian ethics is ethics in a Christian theological context might have been said by many Christian moralists who belonged to the tradition of Christian ethics which stems from Schleiermacher; around the turn of the century the phrase “the theological postulates of Christian ethics” was a highly significant one. But when Lehmann speaks of ethics in a Christian context, unless I have misunderstood him, he does not mean a theological context in the sense of an intellectual one; he does not mean, that is to say, a context which consists of ideas and propositions, but rather a context of life and act, of the *koinonia*, of what “God is doing to make and to keep human life human.” Moreover, it is because the context of life is itself life, because the context of action is itself activity, that the Christian life and ethic have inescapably a responsive and transitive character which the self-contained concept of agapism, whether it be act-agapism or rule-agapism, is unable to grasp; and to speak of the contextual character of Christian ethics is one way, not necessarily the most accurate, but one way of underlining that responsive character.

III

Thus far the argument has disclosed one source of the disquiet which attends even a sympathetic following of Professor Ramsey’s careful analysis, namely, that in his very presuppositions he tends to treat the basic concepts of Christian ethics as self-contained; and it is important to see that this disquiet is not tied to Ramsey’s choice of agape to indicate “the reality upon which the Christian life rests.”¹⁹ He himself allows that other Christian moralists might find themselves constrained to employ some other basic concept, such as *koinonia*, and he argues that, even so, the same question would arise whether the Christian life is “productive of *acts only* or of *rules* also”²⁰; but if the same question arises perhaps also the same criticism holds, that the basic concept, whatever it is, is self-contained and has failed to grasp the responsive character of the Christian life and the Christian ethic.

There is indeed a difficulty in grasping and in articulating this criticism, and one can readily imagine a moralist arguing that in the case of agape,

18. Lehmann himself has indeed already said, in reply to Ramsey, that his book is about “the *theological* context of ethics,” has spoken of Christian ethics as “a theological discipline,” and has declared that “Christian thinking about ethics goes on within the Church”. Cf. *Theology Today*, 22 (1965–66), pp. 119, 121. But my point is that such language is ambiguous; that Ramsey uses the language in one sense, Lehmann in another; and that Ramsey accuses Lehmann of moving illicitly from the one to what is, in effect, the other.

19. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, p. 3.

20. *Ibid.*

at any rate, the concept cannot be self-contained, since by its very nature agape is a going out towards another and requires an "object" as well as a subject. The answer to this objection, of course, is that the Christian life and ethic are responsive, not only to a man's neighbour, but fundamentally to the saving activity of God in Christ. To this in turn, however, the objection may be made that, even so, the appropriate response of a Christian to his neighbour can surely be conceptualized, grasped in a concept or concepts of what Ramsey calls "the 'structures' of *agapé* or of *koinonia* life, the 'style' of the Christian life, or the 'anatomy' or 'pattern' of Christian responsibility."²¹

To this, however, the reply is that while they may be so grasped *empirically*, retrospectively as it were, such concepts are deficient in respect of, are but shadows of, the requirement in its *normative* and, one might say, existential impact. Such concepts (and even parables and illustrations which teach in a more lively fashion) do not themselves, in any given situation, answer the questions: Who is my neighbour? How far shall I go with him? How am I to deal with him in love? The answers can only be obtained by bringing the present concrete situation into relation with what is here the governing situation, the redemptive situation created by God in Christ and brought home by the Holy Spirit. Barth, in an early essay, expressed, I think, what I have here in mind, when, speaking of forgiveness, he said:

It is an inconceivably new factor in our practical reckoning. This constituting anew of the moral subject, in the very midst of moral and political realities, by a man's being set in the order of the Divine King—and being reckoned as belonging to God; this spectacle of the beginning of good there at the very heart of evil. . . . is this . . . not . . . something outside all history, a sheerly new thing, an absolute datum?²²

But—against all "situational" interpretations—this practical reckoning can be done only by a moral agent, a moral consciousness, a conscience, and all the more readily by one who has grown in grace and in the knowledge of God.

It is for this reason and in this way that the Christian life and ethic are essentially responsive to the divine activity, so that a self-contained concept of agapism inevitably falls short of them. Accordingly, when he insisted that, in spite of all distracting accusations of materialism, relativism, subjectivism, and legalism in contemporary theological debate upon ethics, "the real issue is whether there are any *agapé*- or *koinonia*-embodying rules; and, if there are, what these rules may be,"²³ Ramsey had already made what was an abstraction, an oversimplification and a distortion. Indeed, he had done so even earlier when, from Professor William K. Frankena's book on *Ethics*, he entertained the suggestion that "pure agapism" might be "a third kind of normative theory in addition to deontological and

21. *Ibid.*

22. Quoted in Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*, pp. 307f.

23. Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, p. 4.

teleological ones"²⁴; and the fundamental error here is repeated in the final section of Ramsey's discussion when he holds that "if agapism is *not* a third and a distinctive type of normative theory which is neither *teleology* (goal-seeking) nor *deontology* (an ethics of duty), then it seems to me more true to say that it is a type of deontology than to say that it is a type of teleology."²⁵

The fundamental question here, which Ramsey does not discuss, is whether Christian ethics can find its place within normative theory at large, either as a special case of an already recognised type or as an additional type; and the essentially responsive character of the Christian ethic demands, if I am not mistaken, a negative answer to that question and rejects an assumed affirmative answer. It was within the tradition stemming from Schleiermacher that A. B. D. Alexander could declare that "Christian Ethics is a branch of general Ethics";²⁶ but in truth, if the close connection between Christian ethics and dogmatics is kept in view, as modern theology has tried strenuously to keep it in view, the former can be regarded neither as a branch nor as a type of general ethical theory. The categories, methods, and conclusions of the latter are by no means unimportant to Christian ethics; but to be true to itself Christian ethics is bound to carry these into a much larger sphere, where it is not only man who acts, but also God, and where, to use a phrase of Brunner's, truth is not just monological but dialogical.

24. W. K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 43, quoted in Ramsey, *Deeds and Words*, p. 2.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

26. A. B. D. Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics* (London: Duckworth, 1914), p. 22.