

Consequently St Thomas is recommended to Orthodox and Protestant Christian; he does not express the crusading expansionism of the Franks nor the juridical religion of the Romans. Both may be defended, but with little help from the *Summa*. Be warned, however, that the present volume shows him just getting into his theological stride as a Christian. He has given an account of the reasons for holding that God exists and how we can formulate true statements about him. Now he discusses what we mean when we say that God knows and loves and provides in particular for the creatures he has made. All this, however, is a preliminary to his meditations on the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, and the Father's sending of the Son and the coming of the Spirit, that we may dwell with them for all eternity.

## Act and Meaning

### by David John Melling

1. The foundation on which any adequate moral theology or philosophy must be built is an anthropology which does justice to the complexity of human life. The picture of the human agent enshrined in the manuals of moral theology on which the clergy of past generations were reared showed man as an intelligent being making rational decisions. Manualist man was a free agent bound in conscience by various hierarchically ordered systems of law. The ultimate ground of all morally significant law was the positive will of God. This picture has lost its credibility. The insights of contemporary philosophy have shown it to be an arid and distorted representation of the human condition, and moral theologians have already begun to enrich their understanding of man by incorporating into the picture they use elements drawn from existentialist, phenomenologist and even logical positivist analyses.

2. For moral theology as such, not only must an adequate picture of man be developed, there must also be a serious reconsideration of the traditional images of God. The God of the Divine Plan, Lawgiver, Judge, is no more credible in this century than is *homo manualensis*. Once again the work of demolition and reconstruction has already begun: philosophers and theologians (in this country one is tempted to add 'respectively') have already gone far in the work of dissecting and reconstructing or replacing the outmoded images of God. As yet, there is little sign of the more radical aspects of theological reevaluation having a transforming influence on many moral theologians.

3. The Sophists began to investigate the function as well as the forms of human linguistic communication. Their theories were, so far as woefully inadequate evidence allows us to judge, often naïve by comparison with contemporary thinking on the same subject, but at least they had realized the one essential point: that an analysis of the structure of a linguistic entity must be complemented by an analysis of the way in which the linguistic entity is used.

The Sophists were never a major influence on the development of Christian thinking. The philosophical traditions of Greece were mediated rather by Plato, Plotinus, the Stoics, Boethius (and Aristotle in so far as Boethius had translated him), Augustine and, perhaps, the Cynics. Aristotle arrived late on the scene and acted as a liberating influence on the philosophical thinking of the thirteenth century in many ways, not least in his provision of a picture of man and of the foundations of morality more adequate than that given by the Platonist traditions.

The Christian philosophy of man underwent many developments under these various philosophical influences, but never attained the vision of man as a linguistic being that a more generous inheritance of sophisticated thinking could possibly have produced. Instead this insight has come from recent European philosophers, especially from Heidegger, and tends frequently to be stated in an unbalanced and unnecessarily mystical fashion. To assert that 'language is the house of being' is neither accurate nor helpful, save in so far as it leads to a serious and rigorously philosophical reconsideration of the status and function of language in human life.

Such a reconsideration, however, will certainly allow to language a much greater significance and importance than was the case in any of the great systems of the pre-twentieth-century philosophers. We are aware of the extent to which reality presents itself to us in the terms of our needs and wants, and that our languages' forms reflect the way in which reality is perceived. We are aware of the dangers of taking linguistic forms at face value; an entity having the grammatical form of a simple descriptive sentence may be a wager, a threat, a turning point in an attempted seduction or a despairing cry for help from a human being who feels he is losing all contact with others.

Language is not something we human beings happen to use to make life easier; we are by nature linguistic beings. Reality actualizes itself to us patterned and schematized according to our language; language forms itself according to the patterns of perception. Things, events, situations present themselves to us as significant. Our actions are meaningful responses to reality as it is actual to us in perception.

The survival of the human race suggests that in some way we have discovered viable ways of actualizing the reality in which we are and of which we are part. But a study of different language systems and of psychology of perception makes it evident that,

although languages enable us to communicate to some degree, there is always the possibility of materially identical situations being perceived in different ways. This is especially true of human behaviour. The way in which a particular gesture is perceived is culturally relative, and is sometimes a function of the psychological state of the individual percipient. What is to Jones a warm and ingenuous smile to Smith may be a grotesque leer: the traitor is shot but it is a patriot's body that is buried.

In attempting any analysis of moral experience we must retain a clear awareness of the degree to which the significance of a situation is relative at both the personal and the cultural level. Actuality is for each man a system, a cosmos, some at least of the significance of which depends on the particularity of his experience. His actions are performed within this cosmos and must be interpreted in terms of the systems of meanings and values which constitute the individuality of that cosmos. It is at this point that Jesus's prohibition on judging others is particularly relevant: we are never in a position to judge the morality of another's acts unless we have access to his cosmos, to the way in which he experiences the world.

Acts are significant at the personal level: if I know that a man has done something it is reasonable to ask him what he intended to do. Unfortunately what I perceive him to have done is not always what he believed he was doing: an act can have a significance at the interpersonal and social levels which the agent does not intend or foresee. A public statement is taken by a colleague to be a personal attack, a tentative outline of a political figure's views is seen as a bid for high office. Acts are ambiguous. On at least three levels (personal/subjective, interpersonal/intersubjective, social/public), an individual's acts are open to interpretation and evaluation. Only at the first level, however, can we speak of a moral evaluation in the sense that might lead us to attribute merit or guilt to the agent. The morality of an individual's acts is dependent on their significance for him; their significance for him can only be interpreted from within the cosmos of experience in which they take place. My decisions are to be understood against the background of my personal lifescape.

4. A Christian moral theologian must go beyond the interpretation of the individual's acts in terms of the meanings and values which structure his own perception of those acts, but it is not enough to rest in an empathetic appreciation of their significance to the agent. He is committed to providing a second interpretation which will understand what an agent does in terms of a theological model. Two basic types of model can be used; the first interprets the individual's moral situation in terms of his personal relationship to God, the second in terms of a global picture of the Divine act of creation. For the moment I consider only the first.

The traditional theology of personal morality concentrates on the themes of sin, law and love. The moral life is a warfare against

temptation, and despite St Thomas *homo manualensis* seems all too often to be at war with his own nature; the Law (and it really makes very little difference whether you call it the Law of Christ or the Law of Moses) imposes a set of objective norms which can guide the Christian out of the bondage of sin into the friendship of God. The life in perfect accordance with the Law is both the Natural life and the life of Love.

Sadly, the manualist theology, concerned as it was with the defining of the objective norms of morality, had little occasion to explore the economy of divine revelation in the sphere of morals. The emphasis on the rationality of man and on his freedom led to an ignoring of the degree to which the cosmos of experience within which a moral decision is made, a moral action performed, determines that the decision shall be seen in certain terms and not in others, that the act shall have a particular and perhaps intensely personal significance to the agent. In the life-place where it occurs, an act which is far from being objectively 'grave matter' may be the turning point in a man's life. To give alms to two beggars on two successive days may well be two utterly different experiences—the first a ritual of social class, a ritual giving which ignores and even implicitly denies the individual humanity of the beggar, the second a sudden compassionate identification with the beggar leading to a gift no less spontaneous in that it would have been given even without the influx of compassionate insight. The third-person description of a situation does not reveal the nature of an individual's experience of it . . . and the theology of the encounter with God in moral experience is concerned with actuality, not with a model of it so structured as to exclude those very elements that make *this* experience and not *that* a significant moment in the individual's growth in insight and love, in the formation of a pattern in his responses to the world. It is, I think, a basic presupposition that any pattern of response to life can be interpreted as ultimately expressing love or rejection of creation and its source . . . but one must beware of identifying rejection of one's own life experience in its totality with rejection of God; it may be that for a given individual his experience of life is formed by parental rejection, unintelligible suffering and lack of communication with others: in such a situation suicide could be a symbolic cry of anguished longing for love and peace, a cry that reality *cannot, must not* be like this. . . .

5. If the morality of an individual's acts is a function of his particular systems of meaning and values, there seems to be no place left for objective moral norms or standards. Moral rules and principles as they are usually understood are concerned with the ordering of human behaviour, and one's own behaviour, however deliberate, is at the same time a part of one's experience. No moral rule can convincingly prescribe how I shall experience what I experience. It would seem, then, that any prescription ordering my behaviour

cannot be a moral prescription unless it is concerned with my behaviour as I experience it. But how could one ever formulate rules which could take into account the unbounded variety of experiences which different individuals might have in what is materially the same situation?

There is, however, a way of understanding the nature of objective moral norms which seems to avoid the difficulty sketched above. Once we have admitted that the meaning of a particular act is ambiguous—it may mean one thing to the agent, another to the immediate observer, another to a judge in a court of law—we have also opened the way to a discussion of the significance of particular acts as creating interpersonal actualities and as public events having meaning to the members of a specific society. It is not unreasonable to speak of a language of actions . . . and then to move more or less as one might in attempting to show that the viability of word-languages and of societies using them showed that they provided a fundamentally adequate picture of reality: one could similarly argue that the conventional moral principles honoured in certain societies must have some metaphysical foundation since those societies have been able to flourish and develop. Unfortunately the attempts that have been made in this field have been singularly unsuccessful . . . the criteria for judging the vitality and growth of alien societies arising so obviously from identification with or rejection of the investigator's own. Homosexuality ruined Greece, self-indulgence and luxury ruined Rome, and the stern Victorian parent nodded agreement.

The quest for moral absolutes at the level of particular acts is the quest for the prescriptively unambiguous act, or at the social level, for the act with determinate social consequences. (Perhaps all homosexuals did contribute to the downfall of Greece, except Plato . . . or . . .) But the same objection does not apply if one seeks moral absolutes in paradigms, if one looks for the descriptively unambiguous act and makes it an exemplar. In this case the paradigm still has to be communicated in such a way as to be relevant to the meaning and value systems of an individual's cosmos of experience.

At the normative level, moral absolutes seem to be transcendental and uninformative as to how one should act *now*, or rules of thumb which apply to most people most of the time, and therefore not in the true sense absolutes at all. All morally significant acts are open to interpretation and evaluation at more than one level: establishing moral absolutes of a prescriptive nature would lead to either the approving of a man's acting against his conscience or the approving of acts with undesirable social consequences. Rather than adopt either of these courses I should prefer to accept a principle of double evaluation of human behaviour, accepting that a given act can be both right and wrong, its status depending on whether it is judged as agent-experienced behaviour or as observer-experienced behaviour.

6. Even at this point the surface of the problem has scarcely been scratched. To emphasize the relativity of the meaning of what a man does is important but it is only the first step. The picture of man as a moral agent needs more radical transformation; man is not merely an intellect faced with decisions, he is a living, historical creature, a participant in social and political life. A given individual may have little influence on the course of human history, but there are men whose place, time and nature enables them to be leaders in the transformation of physical and social reality. Creation is not simply an act of which man is the partial and passive object, it is a co-operative process in which we are called to participate.

The Aristotelian theology, with its strong emphasis on rationality needed to think of God as having a Cosmic Plan: the modern mind is more open to the suggestion that Creation is the Self-expression and also the Self-discovery of God, that creation is open rather than strictly determined, that it is man's place in this mystery to create himself in society, to accept dominion of the physical world in so far as it is open to him, and to transform it according to his will. It is against such a background that the nature of morality needs to be re-assessed. The moral theology of the last century was not only inadequate, it was trivial.

Augustine's vision of man as serving one of two loves is open to development on the lines suggested above, He gives us the picture of man not merely as a seeker after rightness, but as one who, by selfless love, can strive for the building of the Kingdom, the City of God. For him the City was, of course, an eternal rather than a temporal reality, but the City of God can be seen as a mythical hope-symbol, calling men to action, to realize its ectype on earth . . . this involving man in his political dimension as well as in the dimension of personal relationships.

The foundation of human responsibility is man's power as co-creator to transform the world. At school we were warned by the Jesus of the cosy catechism that it profits nothing if a man gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his own soul: the danger for the modern Christian is the opposite; we are tempted to keep our hands clean even if it means the setting up and perpetuation of institutionalized oppression and injustice.

To discover one's given nature and to respond creatively to that discovery is the essence of the moral life. It is more important to be oneself than to be good; only from where one is can there be change, and the attempt to conform to the demands of a morality that consists of rules and laws not derived from the situation where one is can be a slow form of spiritual suicide.

The skill of moral decision is not that of finding under which of several possible general rules an individual case should come, it is rather that of being able to interpret and respond to the patterns of experienced events.