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THEOLOGICAL ETHICS, MORAL PHILOSOPHY, AND NATURAL LAW

ABSTRACT. The article deals with the relationship between theological ethics and moral philosophy. The former is seen as a theoretical reflection on Christian ethics, the latter as one on secular ethics. The main questions asked are: (1) Is there one and only one pre-theoretical knowledge about acting rightly? (2) Does philosophy provide us with the theoretical framework for understanding both Christian and secular ethics? Both questions are answered in the negative. In the course of argument, four positions are presented: theological ‘unificationism’, philosophical ‘unificationism’, theological ‘separationism’ and Lutheran ‘dualism’. It is argued that the latter position is most convincing. It is dual in the sense of being both a theory of Christian ethics and of including a recognition of natural law. Hence, it unites a particularistic and a universalistic point of view. In the last section a reformulation of the Lutheran position is attempted in making use of the ethical theory of Knud E. Logstrup’s The Ethical Demand.

KEY WORDS: Christian ethics, secular ethics, Lutheran ethics, natural law, particularism, universalism, ethics of interdependence

I. THE PROBLEM

According to Kant, moral philosophy does not have the task of establishing a normative theory of ethics from scratch. The basic knowledge about how to act in a morally right and wrong way is not something to be invented, but is rather contained in what Kant calls common knowledge (gemeine Erkenntnis, gemeiner Verstand, gemeine Vernunft). ‘Gemein’ here has primarily two meanings: (i) common in the sense of universal, and (ii) common as distinct from philosophical in the scholarly sense. Kant thus takes for granted that there is what we could call a pre-theoretical moral knowledge. The task of moral philosophy is to clarify and systematize this knowledge: to make clear in what moral normativity consists and to find the one principle in which it is summarized. In his view, this task is not just an academic pastime, but serves a function in common moral life. For if the grounds for common normative knowledge are unclear, moral life tends to be corrupted.²

¹I want to thank my colleague Lars Reuter for having read through the text and made linguistic improvements. Also I am grateful for the comments and improvements made by the journal’s referee.

²The foregoing of course refers to the preface and the first section of Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten.

Basically, I agree with his drawing a distinction between pre-theoretical moral knowledge and the theoretical activity of ethics in the sense of an academic endeavour. This distinction holds for both theological ethics and moral philosophy. There is another part in Kant’s theory, however, affecting the relationship between theological and philosophical ethics more controversially. Kant is convinced of there being one common (universal) knowledge of the morally right and wrong, with one corresponding theory to represent that common knowledge, viz. the theory he outlines in the *Grundlegung*. This theory is a philosophical theory, of course. And it is a theory that encompasses Christian ethics: the commandment of neighbour love is part of common moral knowledge, and hence it is the task of moral philosophy to integrate the commandment into the philosophical theory. The commandment of neighbour love is a somewhat imprecise version of the categorical imperative.

I think that Kant’s reflections provide us with a useful conceptual framework for formulating some problems concerning the relationship between theological and philosophical ethics. I would like to present some of these problems by posing some questions with the help of Kant’s terminology.

(1) *Is there one and only one common (pre-theoretical) knowledge about acting rightly?*
(2) *Does philosophy provide us with the theoretical framework for understanding both Christian and secular ethics?*

The latter question contains a distinction in need of clarification. By *Christian ethics* I understand the idea or knowledge of the rightness and wrongness of human acts originating in Christian faith. *Secular ethics*, on the other hand, is the knowledge/idea of acting rightly and wrongly that does not presuppose any religious – Christian or other – belief. Question (1) then may also be phrased as whether Christian and secular ethics basically are the same. To the distinction between Christian and secular ethics corresponds, I claim, the one between theological and philosophical ethics: *theological ethics* is the systematical, reflective presentation of Christian ethics understood in the pre-reflective sense; *philosophical ethics* is a reflective presentation of a common, secular ethics in the pre-reflective sense. The second question therefore can be formulated as the question whether theological ethics basically is a part of philosophical ethics.

In this article, I want to argue that from a theological point of view the answer to both questions should be in the negative. It would be prejudiced simply to take for granted that Christian ethics is part of one common moral knowledge. The first question to be asked by theological ethics concerns