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# **Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics**

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Chapter One

**The Natural Ethic**

Oliver O'Donovan

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Natural Ethic

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### *Moral Disagreements*

TO BEGIN WITH THE MOST TRIVIAL OF OBSERVATIONS: ethical judgements are controversial. Why are they so?

In the first place, controversies arise about matters of fact. Some people think that marijuana does, and some people think that it does not, damage the body and mind of those who smoke it. Which of these beliefs is true will make a considerable difference to our moral judgement on the smoking of marijuana. There is a respectable philosophical tradition which supposes that all moral controversy is due, in the last analysis, to the want of hard information. The utilitarians of the nineteenth century, for example, who are enjoying something of a revival today, thought that moral judgement was essentially a matter of accurate prediction: if one could know exactly what consequences would follow from each of the alternative courses of action, one would be in no doubt as to which to follow. In such a theory there is no such thing as a genuinely *moral* disagreement. Values as such are not up for discussion — they are supposed to be uncontroversial, or perhaps, more aggressively, non-negotiable. Within the community of reason, only the facts can be a matter of legitimate doubt or dispute.

But the most profound and terrifying moral controversies resist this kind of rationalization.

Which is why a second tradition of philosophical thought has represented moral disagreement as a function of inscrutable personal commitment. If clashes of moral conviction cannot be resolved by factual information, it appears that moral conviction is not susceptible to rational arbitration at all. There is a place for reason, of course: reason clarifies what the alternatives are, reason can tell us what will be involved if we hold to a certain judgement consistently. But when reason has fulfilled its office, we have simply to make our choice. Reason is the handmaid of personal decisions which go beyond reason; and there is no way that rational argument can demand anything of a man other than that he be true to himself. Moral disagreements are irresolvable, and we have to live with them.

There are certain kinds of decisions which this description fits very well. 'There's no accounting for tastes', and most of us can think of decisions which we have made, for which there is, quite literally, no accounting — not because they were irrational, but because they transcended rational considerations. An example might be the decision to follow this or that career — a 'vocation', we call it, meaning that God has summoned us personally to it — or the decision to marry the partner we did. On these decisions we could receive advice of a kind, but not *moral counsel*, for nobody else could put himself in our shoes and tell us whether we loved Elvira enough to marry her, or whether we enjoyed study enough to become a professional academic. But then these decisions were not 'moral' decisions in the normal sense. John cannot form a good opinion about whether Philip should marry Ann, but he can form an opinion about whether Philip should marry a divorcee. Moral judgements, unlike personal choices, belong to the public domain of reason. We evaluate other people's moral stances and we expect them to evaluate ours. We argue about them, even get angry about them, all of which presupposes some public criterion of right and wrong. This second account of moral disagreement is as inadequate as the first.

### *The Natural Ethic*

There is a third traditional account which claims our atten-

tion. It was the accepted view of mediaeval Christianity, which got it from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, and in consequence it has had little favour in Protestant cultures. But recently there has been a revived interest in it. It is sometimes called 'natural teleology'; but I shall refer to it simply as 'the natural ethic'.

It is possible to agree entirely on the facts of the case, and yet disagree about how it should be described. 'The government acted to protect the dairy industry', we imagine someone saying, 'by disposing of surplus dairy produce.' While another person may say: 'So much food was wasted!' The descriptions differ, because they make use of different categories. But that is because they presuppose different views of what the world actually contains. Two men look on milk: one sees it as 'produce', a sort of artefact of the dairy 'industry'; the other sees it as 'food'. But the one, in seeing it as food, cannot prevent himself thinking that it has a purpose: food is *for* nourishment. And that in turn commits him to seeing it as a 'waste' when it is thrown into the sea. The other, seeing it as produce, is equally bound to infer that milk has no natural purpose, since the purpose of produce is simply the purpose that its producer has had for it. Indeed, in describing milk as 'produce', he declares that 'food' does not really exist, not at any rate as a *natural* kind of thing. In his context of thought 'food' could only describe a use to which human agents might decide to put this or that product or this or that raw material. To call upon a traditional Greek distinction: one sees food as a category that exists 'in nature', the other as a category that exists only 'in convention'.

The natural ethic offers us this account of moral disagreement: that when men look on the world as a whole they see different things. On the bare facts they may agree; but the structure of reality behind the facts they see quite differently, and this affects the way they describe and understand the facts. Is there such a thing as 'food', or only market produce? Is there rule and obedience, or only a social contract? Is there free gift, or only subtler forms of exchange? Are there natural ties, or only voluntary associations? At this meta-physical level many of the most profound and painful moral disagreements arise.

It is my purpose in this essay to make a case for the natural ethic, mindful of the fact that I am in the presence of both science and theology, both of which have, for their own reasons, wished to deny it.

### *Voluntarism and Nominalism*

Philosophers of science often stress that the Western scientific enterprise was born, at the end of the Middle Ages, in an intellectual milieu marked by two parallel movements in philosophy, 'voluntarism' and 'nominalism'.

'Voluntarism' was the belief that good and evil are determined, not by God's intellect but by his will. A sharp distinction was made between fact and value. Nature, as the expression of God's mind, was value-free; questions of good and evil turned on what it was God's will from time to time to command. If you are a voluntarist you can no longer say that God has made soya beans for our nourishment; you can only say that God made soya beans on the one hand, and now he commands that soya beans should feed us on the other, rather as he commanded the ravens to feed Elijah. Another way of expressing it would be that God's purposes are to be known only in his providential work in directing history, not in his creational work which precedes history.

From the philosophy of voluntarism science is held to have learned its detached approach to nature, as something to be 'put to the question', observed and understood, without love or obedience. Values may be imposed upon the natural order by technology, but not discerned within it. For the purposes of scientific thought natural teleology is rejected.

'Nominalism' on the other hand was the contention that 'kinds' of things do not have any real existence in nature, but are simply interpretations that the mind imposes on particular phenomena. The particular is real, the universal is a construct of the mind. God made me and you and the table, but it is man's mind, and not God's making, that classes the two of us as human and the table as inanimate. This philosophy made possible the pursuit of economy of explanation. If kinds are conventional, and not natural, it is up to us how many of them we choose to retain in our understanding of the world. We may force as wide a range of phenomena into as limited a repertoire of categories as we feel we can get away with.

From this follows what has sometimes been called the 'fragmentation' of reality under the discipline of scientific investigation. A science limits the area of its interest to the range of phenomena which appear to be susceptible to its patterns of thinking. Two different sciences may cover the same ground, and each give what seems to be a complete description of it, and yet the descriptions do not coincide. Philo-

sophies of science have often accounted for this by some theory of 'aspects' of reality: some of us may be familiar with the elaborate system propounded by Herman Dooyeweerd under the heading of 'sphere sovereignty'. But this is to reflect back onto nature what is really a fragmentation in knowledge. The Western world has chosen to know the universe in parts rather than as a whole, and in economy rather than in diversity; and this deliberate policy, while it has yielded an extraordinary degree of technical mastery, has bred its own kinds of confusion. Ethical confusion is endemic to this mode of knowledge, for if there is no agreed way of describing what we see, there can be no agreed way of responding to it.

### *Science and the Natural Ethic*

This, then, is why it is often said that the natural ethic received its death-wound at the end of the Middle Ages from that infant Hercules, the scientific revolution, then lying in its cradle. The first principle of the natural ethic is that reality is given to us, not simply in discrete, isolated phenomena, but in kinds. Things have a *natural meaning*. It is not a matter of interpretation to say that the table is an inanimate artefact while you and I are human beings; it is a matter of correctly discerning what is the case. The second principle is that these given kinds themselves are not isolated from each other, but relate to each other in a given pattern within the order of things. To know what *that* thing is is to know what *kind* of thing it is, and to know what *kind* of thing it is is to know how it fits into the whole, that is to say, what it is *for*. Things have a *natural purpose*. In understanding the natural purpose of a thing, we attend to its claims on us, and so are able to deliberate on our response to that claim. But with both these principles the philosophical revolution of the late Middle Ages tried to dispense.

It tried, but did it succeed? Science today, fully integrated into a world-view which accepts as an almost unquestionable premise the theory of evolution, can be seen to have done no more than substitute one species of teleology for another. Those who regard the nominalist-voluntarist revolution as a magnificent liberation of thought for 'masterful objectivity' may feel that the dog has returned to its vomit.<sup>1</sup> But we may

1. See Reflection B: The Views of T. F. Torrance

wonder whether the dog ever left its vomit. Some kinds of scientific description simply cannot be done non-teleologically. Biological and zoological descriptions are classic examples. How would you describe the digestive organs without saying that they were *for* digestion, or the tail of a horse without saying that it was *for* protection from flies? It was these sciences that espoused evolutionary thinking earliest and most determinedly, for they needed some teleological principle to make sense of their own work.

And then, too, while attempting to make all kinds relative, did scientific thought not absolutize to an extraordinary degree the categories of observer and observed? One form of this absolutism was 'humanism', which set mankind, the observer, over against all nature, the observed. But as the scope of science has extended to include humanity itself, humanism has been superseded by the same absolutism in new and more alarming forms. The observing and manipulating mind itself becomes something set absolutely over against the world. So far from abolishing metaphysics, the scientific approach to reality has only exchanged one set of metaphysical suppositions for other and more questionable ones.

But if the philosophical programme that gave birth to science was incapable of consistent fulfilment, we are relieved of a nagging anxiety. If scientific knowledge were a way of knowing the world that could be carried through consistently, we would have to choose between this kind of deliberately fragmented knowledge and the perception of the world as an integrated whole that our faith demands of us. The intellectual dividedness which all of us who have learned to know in both ways have experienced, would then be a wound beyond healing. But if it turns out that scientific objectivism is bound to serve *some other way* of knowing the world, then there is a possibility that it can be made to serve the Christian way. Once we see that the description of things with fluid categories and without teleology will never be a final description, then we can allow the usefulness of such description as a kind of thought-experiment to achieve a greater clarity of knowledge-in-detail. If we decide, as men of faith, that milk is not simply dairy-produce but food, then we can consider it also, though in a hypothetical and provisional way, as dairy produce. Provided we know that this is an experimental distortion of thought, not the essence of the thing, we can gain knowledge by looking through the distorting lens. It remains to us then to reintegrate what we see through the lens into the

total pattern of understanding; and that, I suppose, is why it is thought proper for us, as representatives of so many disciplines, to discuss the questions of ethics, not in our separate disciplines, but together.

### *History — Revelation and Eschatology*

Thinkers who understand the development of Western thought in this way, whether they welcome it or deplore it, are inclined to ascribe a good deal of the credit for it to Christianity.

It is true that for more than a millennium of Christian life and thought the late-Platonic unity of fact and value remained unchallenged in the Western church (as it still does in the Eastern); but that, it is said, only shows how slow Christianity was to emancipate itself from Hellenic tutelage and enter into its Jewish heritage. The sundering of fact and value was already implicit in the Old Testament conception which we call 'salvation history', the idea that meaning and worth were not to be found in the stabilities of nature but in the dynamisms of history. This conception reappears in Christianity in two forms. On the one hand it underlies the notion of a *historical revelation* of the meaning of the universe in the incarnation of the Son of God. On the other hand it underlies the belief that all history is to reach its goal at the *final intervention* of God and the establishment of his kingdom.

The voluntarist-nominalist movement of the fourteenth century has more to its credit than the fostering of scientific thought. It was the philosophical inspiration also for the Reformers. It gave them the tools to attack the Thomist epistemology which allowed that in principle (and in fairness to St. Thomas one should stress the phrase 'in principle'), natural man might perceive natural values and natural meanings without the aid of revelation. To this the Reformers reacted with a powerful and authentically Christian stress on the decisiveness of revelation. But revelation for them was really a Christological matter: to question the need of revelation was to question the need of Christ. The meaning of the world, the 'Logos', came down at Christmas; the man without Christmas is a man without meaning. The bestowal of meaning is part of God's saving work in history, for in nature man can discern no meaning.

What the Christian doctrine of revelation does for natural

meaning, its eschatological expectation does for natural purpose. Within Christianity one cannot think or speak about the meaning of the world without speaking also of its destined transformation. The problem of evil is met, not by asserting a profound cosmological order in the present, but by confident announcement of God's purposes for the future. He who has come to earth as the meaning, has come also as the Purpose or Fulfilment. To understand the first coming of Christ it is necessary to expect the second coming.

There are, of course, notoriously, two ways of living in expectation. We can believe in the value of intermediate transformation, 'preparing the way of the Lord', and so commit ourselves to a life of activity; or we can feel that the ultimate transformation renders all penultimate change irrelevant, and so resign ourselves to a life of hopeful suffering. But what these two attitudes have in common is far more important than what differentiates them. They both take a negative view of the *status quo*. There is no natural purpose to which we can respond in love and obedience. The destiny of nature has to be imposed on it, either by our activity or by God's. The purpose of the world is outside it, in that new Jerusalem which is to descend from heaven prepared as a bride for the bridegroom.

This description of the Christian impact on the natural ethic would meet with fairly wide acceptance, among those who deplore it as well as among those who welcome it. Yet I am bound to think that there is much of importance that it leaves out.

To take the point about revelation first. Revelation in history is certainly the lynchpin of Christian epistemology. But epistemology is not the same thing as ontology, however often the Protestant world may have confused the two. 'Nature' may be contrasted with 'revelation' as an epistemological programme; or it may be contrasted with 'history' to make an ontological distinction.<sup>2</sup> The important epistemological points that the Reformation had to make must not be allowed to shelter a destructive and semi-Christian ontology. It is one thing to say that until the Word became incarnate, man could discern no meaning in nature; quite another to say that until the Word became incarnate nature had no meaning. Revelation is the solution to man's blindness, not to nature's emptiness. True, man's blindness is itself part of a disruption within nature, which we call the fall. But the very

2. See Reflection A: 'The Natural' in Theology

fact that nature can be called disrupted and disordered shows that it cannot be inherently meaningless. In its earliest days the church was puzzled to find some within its midst believing that the world was made by an evil divinity, hostile to the God of redemption. In rejecting this speculation it made a sharp and necessary distinction between the idea that the world was simply chaotic and, what it understood the gospel to teach, that the world was an ordered creation tragically spoiled. Protestantism, in making the epistemological issue supreme over the ontological, has often tended to upset the balance that the Fathers struck.

Christian eschatology, too, to take up the second point, has to be seen in the light of the doctrine of creation. Christianity is an eschatological faith, having as its central theme the experience and hope of redemption from evil. But this redemption is not to be understood dualistically as the triumph of a good redeemer-god over an evil creator-god. It is because God is the creator of nature that he does, and will, redeem nature from its state of corruption. He who is the Saviour of the world is also the 'Logos', 'through whom all things were made'. He is the Second Adam, restoring that which the First Adam lost. Creation and redemption are not in hostile antithesis, but in complementarity, each providing the context in which we understand the other.

### *Balance between Nature and History*

When thought fails to keep the Christian balance between meaning given in the natural order and meaning revealed in the course of history, it is at the mercy either of a static naturalism or an indeterminate belief in progress.

There are 'natural ethics' with which Christianity can have nothing to do. The respect for given orders can easily become a form of idolatry. The family, the state, the animal world, the mountains, the stars in heaven, man himself, can all command our love and allegiance in a way that allows no understanding of their proper place in the scheme of things. We love what is, only because we mistake it for something that it is not. We suppose that our tribe is the whole or the chief of mankind, we suppose that the planets fashion our destinies, we suppose that man is the master of all things. Much has been honoured as 'natural' that is purely conventional, the

product of certain passing historical circumstances, and in this way great oppression has been laid on the souls of men.

But not even a natural ethic that was entirely obedient to the revealed doctrine of creation could suffice as a complete moral guide in itself. The natural order makes claims upon us, which we must recognise and attend to; but the claims are generic, and in some situations we confront more than one of them. It may seem to us that seals have to be conserved; but so does the family and community life of Newfoundland seal-hunters. Man, too, is a creature with his own natural meaning and purpose, and part of that purpose is to exercise authority over the rest of nature. While we must certainly insist that his authority cannot be properly exercised unless he has a real understanding and love for nature, nevertheless he does have real discretion and a capacity to make choices which are not given inherently in the structure of nature itself.

And to these considerations we must add one more: in our actual situation in salvation history, we are dealing as fallen men with a fallen nature. Both we and nature come under the judgement of the God who created us, and that judgement is reflected in an ascetic series of duties and vocations which stand in a paradoxical relation to natural goals and functions. Thus we are required to 'hate' our father and our mother, our wife, children, brothers and sisters, and even our own life, in order to be Christ's disciples. Allowing for the element of rhetoric in this, we must still recognize a demand which falls quite outside the scope of the natural order, and, because the natural order itself is in rebellion against God, runs counter to it. Again, there is the possibility of a calling to singleness, 'making ourselves eunuchs', as Jesus puts it, for the kingdom of heaven's sake; and here too we have to recognise an eschatological demand which runs counter to the course which nature indicates.

We cannot allow ourselves, then, to champion an ethic in which everything is given in nature, nothing is to be revealed in history. But then neither can we take the other route, abandoning altogether the given values in favour of a solely eschatological outlook.

The Reformers avoided the consequences of their formal abandonment of natural value because they held so strongly to the decisive revelation of God in past history, which, including as it did the Scriptures as well as the Christ himself, in effect allowed them to have their cake and eat it. They still recognized given natural values, though not under that des-

cription, because they recognised Christ.<sup>3</sup> But when belief in a determinative past revelation was abandoned, the real implications of forsaking nature began to be apparent. The result was an open-ended belief in progress.

Belief in progress can be thought of as 'salvation history' without salvation. There is a general optimism, but no understanding of history as the restoring of what was lost, the recovery of things as they were always supposed to be. Value and meaning now arise from the very fact of transformation itself; there is no other criterion, other than the simple fact of change, by which we can judge good and evil. 'Progressive' and 'reactionary' become the standard terms of praise and blame. Despite its optimism, it is to the doctrine of progress that we must ascribe a large part of the anxiety and comfortlessness of our times. For when the future is known only as the negation of what is, and not as the more profound affirmation of its true structure, then it is simply alien to us. We cannot view it with hope, for hope requires some point of identification between the thing hoped for and the one who hopes for it. The only ways of facing the future are with fear or with the wild, self-destructive excitement which can grip a man when he stands on the edge of an unplumbed abyss.

### *Between Naturalism and Historicism — Race*

One could choose many examples of how Christian ethics finds its way between a static naturalism and an unbridled historicism. I choose a familiar, perhaps a hackneyed one, in which the actual moral judgement involved is likely to be uncontroversial among us, but in which the Christian church has been both brave and effective. I speak, of course, of racism. There are two kinds of racial prejudice that have earned that name. On the one hand there is what is sometimes also called 'tribalism'. It is a naive naturalist philosophy, in which the race or the tribe is felt to have more importance in the structure of things than mankind as a whole, probably because it is more limited and so more easily conceivable. The race is known and loved as a natural kind. Life is lived in obedience to the fragmented good which this kind reveals. It is a simple man's vice, one manifestation of the xenophobia

3. The fact that some Reformation thinkers (notably Calvin, and later Hooker) had a place for the traditional doctrine of Natural Law, does not invalidate this generalisation about the tendencies of Protestantism.

which has always characterized the sheltered and the inexperienced. On the other hand there is the racism which motivated the Nazis, and today motivates at least one Western society, springing from a historicist philosophy. This is a vice of the sophisticated. It recognizes the fact that mankind is greater than the tribe, but it accords the kind, as it is given in nature, no love or allegiance. The existence of the human kind can have no point except in the light of a proposal to turn it into something else. But as all of what is traditionally called mankind cannot be included in the transformation of man into superman, the boundaries of humanity have to be kept fluid. The scheme of things can be reorganized in the service of a developing economic or scientific civilization to which only some of mankind can be admitted.

The Christian response to racism has appealed both to nature and to historical freedom. Christians have pointed to Christ, the Son of Man and God become man, to establish the worth of every man. On the one hand we cannot continue to elevate the tribe above the human race when we see how the Saviour of the world broke through the most intransigent tribalism to extend the offer of salvation to the ends of the earth. Our reading of the natural phenomena has to be controlled by what happened, by the Syrophoenician woman and by the vision of St. Peter. On the other hand we cannot treat the significance of humanity as a mere historical relativity when we believe that God has made humanity his own. Here is a category now that can never be transcended in history; but as soon as we have said that, we have asserted something about the structure of reality, not simply as it is becoming, but as it is given.

### *Tensions in Evangelical Ethics*

This has some bearing on a disagreement which has disturbed our own small circles in recent years, between those who urge upon us a 'kingdom' ethic and those who support a 'creation' ethic. Neither kingdom nor creation can be known independently of each other. He who is called the King of kings is also called the Second Adam: nature and history in him are not divided. We would be foolish to allow ourselves to be polarised in this way, and even more foolish to conceive of such a polarisation in terms of Left and Right, as though the very profound philosophical issue involved could be summed

up in a political cliché.

However, we may suggest in conclusion that there may be a legitimate division of interest among us that might appear to line us up in naturalist and historicist camps. We have to proclaim the gospel in different cultural and philosophical contexts. Many of us have deep sympathy with the problems of the Third World, tyrannical regimes, oppressive family and tribal structures, maldistribution of resources, and so on, and, speaking authentically to the static naturalisms which have produced and aggravated such problems, will talk eschatologically of transformation, and even, with a daring but possible expropriation of language, of 'revolution'. Others of us are concerned chiefly with the problems of the Western world, the abuses of technology, the threat to the family, the dominance of financial power, and so on, and find themselves needing constantly to point to the *data* of created nature. No doubt there is a temptation here: it is easy for the one group to think of the other as 'conservative' or 'radical'. But whenever we do this we exclude one side of the nature-history balance, and condemn our own stance to being less Christian for lack of that balance. I hope that in this conference we can make the mental and spiritual effort required of us to think beyond the issues that are all-important to ourselves at the moment and to learn to appreciate each other's proper concerns. As we do so we will approach nearer the point where we can grasp the Christian metaphysic in its wholeness and realize its significance for ethics.

### Reflections

Conferences, especially if they are good ones, have a way of catching one's thought at a moment of transition. This poses a problem for 'the book of the conference': either the author rewrites his contribution entirely in the light of six months' more wrestling with his problems, or else he lets it stand as a kind of action snapshot, resigning himself to its unposed, provisional character. The subjects touched on in this lecture will continue to perplex me for some time yet, so I have been reasonably content to take the latter way, merely excising irrelevancies and one outright error. But discussions at the conference convinced me that, if I was to make myself understood, I must offer some clarification and defence at one or

two points, and I have tried to meet that need in these reflections. I owe a word of thanks to those who pressed me hard in argument, forcing me to think further, but especially to my wife, Joan, who opened my eyes to these problems in the first place.

### A *'The Natural' in Theology*

The term 'natural' has two proper uses in Christian theology: one ontological, opposed to 'historical' ('history' being used in the Hegelian sense of *purposive* history), the other epistemological, opposed to 'revealed'. (There is also a third, improper use, in which 'natural' stands for 'fallen'; on this, more below.) What the two uses of 'natural' have in common is that they refer to everything that is not the self-giving of God in Jesus Christ. Natural knowledge is that which does not depend directly on Jesus and on his appointed witnesses, the apostles and prophets. The natural order is that which is not brought about as the result of saving history. But although 'the natural' is not a part of salvation through Christ, neither is it opposed to it, for it is the work of the same God, the creator and sustainer of all. In either case the natural is presupposed by, and redeemed through, the work of salvation: natural knowledge is restored by revelation, the natural order of things by saving history.

The 'natural ethic' which was defended in this lecture is 'natural' in the ontological sense — that is, it derives from the created order. With the natural *knowledge* of ethics the lecture was not concerned. Perhaps some would think it less confusing, since the two uses are so important to distinguish, to retain the term 'natural' only for epistemological purposes, and to find some other — 'created' suggests itself — to do duty in ontological contexts. Against this proposal, however, there are three considerations which I have found decisive.

First, 'nature' and 'history' are common philosophical terms, and their use enables us to speak more effectively to important debates going on outside the church.

Secondly, we need a term broader than 'creation', one which will include also what has commonly been designated in Christian theology as 'providence' — that is, God's work in history which is not directly purposive- or saving-history, the work of preserving and sustaining the created universe. Christian ethics finds it important to speak of a natural order

which embraces God's providential dispositions for fallen man (in the political realm, for example), and which is not confined to the primary forms in which man receives his created being. Failure to speak in this way leads to the quite untheological assumption, not without its advocates among those present at the conference, that these secondary forms of natural existence are simply the product of man's own constructive ingenuity.

Thirdly, the term 'natural' is used famously in the Authorised Version at 1 Cor. 2:14ff. to translate St. Paul's *psuchikos*: 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God'. At the High Leigh conference I was so unwise as to criticize this translation. Misled by the RSV and other modern versions as to the apostle's meaning, I took the Stuart translators to be guilty of a typically Protestant confusion of the natural with the fallen. But Paul was not speaking of fallen man in these verses, as his own interpretation of the *psuché-pneuma* contrast at 1 Cor. 15:44f. makes quite clear.

### *B The Views of T. F. Torrance*

I quoted the phrase 'masterful objectivity' from Professor Torrance's article, cited below. In the course of the conference Dr. David Cook persuaded me to look more carefully at Torrance's views and especially at his book *Theological Science*. It has been an exciting discovery.

The 'masterful objectivity' for which Torrance praises a somewhat idealised scientific enquiry is not a dispassionate attitude, but a selfless absorption in the object of enquiry based on the knowledge that God has made it. Nor does it force an arbitrarily conceived structure of kinds upon nature, but is wholly reponsive to the kinds which nature has in itself and will reveal to the enquirer. Thus the meaning of things is immanent to them, and naturally known. Not so their purpose. Value is conferred upon the creation by divine grace alone, and cannot be discerned immanently within it. The theory of natural teleology, purporting to trace the purposive interconnections of kinds, is rejected as a form of idolatry. Thus, measured by the late-mediaeval grid, Torrance counts as a voluntarist, but not a nominalist.

Torrance's objection to natural teleology is that it fails to distinguish the creation from the creator, an objection which is valid against some, but certainly not against all versions of

the theory. In return we must object that the value supposedly conferred upon nature by divine grace is a mere abstraction unless it can be recognised, with or without the help of revelation, in the purposive interconnections of kinds. Only so can we see that the universe is an 'order', and affirm, with the creator, that it is 'very good'. Without the possibility of this discernment, the doctrine of creation is destined to drop out of sight, and man's autonomous will-to-mastery must take over, imposing human purposes where God apparently omitted to impose divine ones. Which, of course, is the story of Western culture since the Reformation.

When revelation is barred in principle from communicating any substantial information about the kinds in nature, and when science is barred in principle from observing purposive interconnections among the kinds, the possibility of a unified knowledge of the natural order is lost. We are left to the fragmented vision afforded by a plurality of arbitrarily-defined sciences. The objection we raised against Dooyeweerd applies even more forcibly to Torrance: God's creation should not be held responsible for a fragmentation which is really due to the problem of *knowledge* in fallen mankind. (On this, Rahner's article, cited below, is important.) Theology is committed to pursuing a unified vision. The devastating implications of scientific fragmentation for Christian ethics are not observed by Torrance, probably because he measures all science by the norm of physics and does not concern himself with the human sciences, where the issue arises most sharply.

### Reading List

- Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York, 1965).
- Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State* (1936) (Nutley, N. J., 1968).
- George Grant, 'In Defence of North America', in *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto, 1969).
- Karl Rahner, 'Theology as Engaged in an Interdisciplinary Dialogue with the Sciences', in *Theological Investigations XIII* (London, 1975).
- T. F. Torrance, 'The Influence of Reformed Theology on the

Development of Scientific Method', in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965).

— *Theological Science* (Oxford, 1969).

### Questions for Discussion

- 1 Are there matters of fact which carry with them a moral demand? (For example: If Jones promised to Smith . . .)
- 2 Is scientific description bound to over-simplify the truth?
- 3 Is what we see through Christ in nature different from what we would see otherwise?
- 4 If we cannot *balance* creation ethics and kingdom ethics, what *can* we do with them?