The Disappearing Proportionalists

Although framed as a somewhat simplistic dichotomy between “proportionalists” and “traditionalists,” Aline H. Kalbian’s “Where Have All the Proportionalists Gone?” (Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol. 30, No. 1) poses a striking question. Ever since the appearance of John Paul II’s encyclical letters *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae* (and the Catechism of the Catholic Church), these once highly-cited theologians seemed to have left the scene. Where did they all go? A remnant of the old guard remains, but younger scholars either have not taken up the cause with a similar enthusiasm or do not display the same intellectual acumen. Kalbian perhaps underestimates the impact of the Vatican’s very public assault on proportionalism, but she does offer a nicely nuanced exposition of the mains themes of this nearly extinct species of philosophy.

Her view is that proportionalism, which she describes as an effort at “freeing morality from the shadows of neo-Scholasticism and neo-Thomism,” has not ceased to exist, but has transformed itself into a more general influence upon the whole of Catholic moral thinking, especially as this has led to new emphases on “virtue ethics, casuistry, and feminist ethics.” Two of these areas, of course, are not new at all, but Kalbian’s focus is not so much on showing how these influences are currently present (she spends some time on Lisa Sowle Cahill’s work) as to dissect what it was that made proportionalism so controversial.

What is the proper focus of moral analysis? Is it the act that is performed? Or is it the agent who performs the act? While invoking the traditional three fonts of morality, proportionalists drew our attention away from the object and to the agent by denying that the object is determinative of the moral worth of an act; thus they emphasized the role of intention and circumstances. The truly controversial character of proportionalism, however, was its position on intrinsically evil actions. Kalbian argues that the proportionalists did not deny the existence of intrinsically evil acts, but denied that such acts could be wrong because of their object. “Traditionalist” moral theologians, the proportionalists contended, took the same position without realizing it by unwittingly including intentions and circumstances in their descriptions of objects.

Thus, an act of almsgiving, considered as a physical event that occurs in the world, cannot be described as an objectively good act without first including the intention of the agent. The same is true, the proportionalists said, with the use of contraception. Any action that takes place in the world, understood in the traditional terms of a physicalist interpretation of natural law, failed to give us the means to determine whether an act is intrinsically good or evil until we examined the intention and circumstances of the agent. And, as is well known, the proportionalists concluded that contraception was not an intrinsically evil action, but could be justified given an appropriate intention and certain exceptional circumstances.
Many scholars have effectively critiqued the proportionalist outlook on morality. That is why it is disappearing. The entire school was founded upon a view of nature that was essentially physicalist in character—even though proportionalists claimed to have first found this speck in the traditionalist eye. Though proportionalists decried the excessively biological view of nature that was supposedly adopted by “the traditionalists,” it was in fact their own failure to appreciate the teleological aspect of natural law theory that led them to suppose that objective descriptions of nature could not form a proper basis for moral judgments. The good is the teleological basis of nature. Thus procreation is more than merely a biological function, but is an ordering of nature toward the raising and educating of children. The proportionalists missed the teleological depths of nature and therefore had to substitute intentions and circumstances to make up the difference.

One of the most regrettable aftereffects of proportionalism has been the harm done to a fine word, “teleological.” Once teleology was removed from nature and made a part of the proportionalist vocabulary of intentionality, it too had to be attacked as another term in the arsenal of those who would try to take their moral bearings, not from nature, but from the subjective intentions of agents.

The Principle of Double Effect

Neil Delaney, in “To Double Business Bound: Reflections on the Doctrine of Double Effect” (American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 75, No. 4), tries to chart a course between two contending views of the principle of double effect, one which sees it as a universal norm that suffers no exceptions and the other which describes it as incoherent and useless. Delaney takes as working examples the cases of hysterectomy and craniotomy, noting that the former is generally considered permissible under the double effect, while the latter is not. What is the reason for this difference? In both cases the result is to save the life of the mother even though this results in the death of the child. Delaney is not prepared to say that he sees any difference at all (though he finds, oddly, a difference at the level of “aesthetics”). He concludes by rather weakly suggesting that the principle of double effect be viewed as just one among many competing principles in bioethics. To take this view seems unwarranted given that the principle so successfully describes the causal interrelatedness of our world. Negotiating the difficult causal connections of moral experience is what the principle of double effect enables us to do.

Ethics as a Problem in Calculus

One might think that personalist accounts are making their way into consequentialism, given M.A. Roberts, “A New Way of Doing the Best We Can: Person-Based Consequentialism and the Equality Problem” (Ethics, Vol. 112, No. 2), but this is an atomistic approach to human happiness in which well-being is defined “as that which makes life so precious to the one who lives.” The article is in many ways typical of the analytical school of moral reasoning that dominates so much of the academy today. He discusses the “infinite population problem,” the “genesis problem,” and the “equality problem,” offers us many p₁’s, p₂’s, and p₃’s, and even lays out an equation in calculus designed to help us determine the greatest amount of well-being for the greatest number of individual persons. This is a good example of how theorists today often speak only to members of their own tribe.
Pre-Implantation Genetic Diagnosis

Bonnie Steinbock, in “Sex Selection: Not Obviously Wrong” (Hastings Center Report, Vol. 32, No. 1), asks us not to reject this procedure outright. What is hopeful in discussions such as hers is that authors who are not opposed to abortion are at least compelled to admit that abortion in certain cases (here, for sex selection) is not only wrong, but “horrifying.” In preimplantation genetic diagnosis, embryos are created in vitro, tested for genetic defects, and then either implanted or discarded. When none are defective, Steinbock find no immediate reason why we should not be able “to discard on the basis of sex.” Why this case differs from abortion is not entirely clear. She is certainly right when she says that sperm sorting is not as morally objectionable as preimplantation genetic diagnosis, but how does her stated opposition to sex discrimination square with recent research that indicates that 81% of women and 94% of men, if given the choice, would want their first child to be a boy?

Trust in Medicine

The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy remains one of the most rewarding journals in print. The editor the February 2002 issue, Laurence B. McCullough of the Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy at the Baylor College of Medicine, has put together a fine set of papers in clinical ethics. Among them are two interesting essays on the question of trust. An effective argument for keeping the principle of trust in medicine, rather than surrendering to a consumerist model, is offered by Chalmers C. Clark in “Trust in Medicine” (Vol. 27, No. 1). The grounds for this defense of trust are the need for a just response to the vulnerability of the patient and one’s own professional self-interest. Clark makes interesting use of the idea of social contract and tacit covenant. The second article, by Patricia Illingworth, “Trust: the Scarcest of Medical Resources” (ibid.) examines the compromises imposed on the doctor-patient relationship by standards of managed care.

Abortion and Fetal Defects

Also of note in the February issue of the Journal of Medicine and Philosophy is Simo Vehmas’s “Is it Wrong to Deliberately Conceive or Give Birth to a Child with Mental Retardation?” (ibid.). This sensitive but marred analysis places the primary focus on the good of the child. Vehmas argues that “future parents assume (or at least ought to assume) a strong responsibility toward the well-being of their prospective child the minute they decide to reproduce.” Genetic screening enables us to know when there is an increased risk of conceiving a child with mental retardation or some other incurable defect. What are our moral obligations in such situations? Vehmas rejects any purely utilitarian or consequentialist solution and invokes teleology: “The telos of parenthood is to act for the good of children” (citing Pellegrino and Thomasma). This means committing oneself to a future child even when the child has not yet been conceived. Vehmas’s metaphysics, however, only goes so deep. The fact that a future child does not yet exist makes appeals to the rights of the child impossible. This leads to his odd conclusion that the child born with a defect that could have been avoided (by, for example, conceiving at a later and safer time) has not been harmed even though the mother has acted wrongly.

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