

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by **William Schweiker**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xiv, 255. \$54.95 (cloth).

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Those who claim that their books do something new are brave indeed, but the bravery is seldom warranted: It's very hard to do something new. Even truly new ideas are in some sense just refinements of old ideas, as the list of footnotes to Plato gets longer. There is more hope of newness in ethics, where the author can claim that the something new is the application of old ideas to new situations.

William Schweiker's purpose, in *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, is to do something new, specifically, to deploy a new Christian ethics of responsibility. (This book is the sixth in a new series on Christian Ethics, edited by Robin Gill.) He wants to give "a theory of responsibility which differs from...all Christian accounts of responsibility in this century." In the same place he makes a more modest claim for the book: He wants simply to "renew the enterprise of Christian moral philosophy" (p. 5, emphasis added). The renewal is necessary, he says, in light of the increasing pluralism and "the radical extension of human power in the contemporary world" (p. 24).

This is what he wants to do, but what does he actually do? To give the good news and the bad news all at once: At its best the book suggests an important change of emphasis to those doing ethics, especially Christian ethics. But it does little more than suggest; it does not argue for this emphasis, and the book is not clear. Though Schweiker uses the word "argue" often enough, what he does is summarize rather than argue for positions, his own and others. Contributing to the lack of clarity are the failure to make distinctions, the lack of examples, and the superficial dismissal of arguments for competing points of view.

But let's go through the book first.

Schweiker wants to add a new moral theory to the present number, and he wants to call it an integrated ethics of responsibility. "Much as one can speak of virtue ethics, natural law ethics, or divine command ethics," he writes, one can speak of an ethics of responsibility (p. 38). The key concepts of his theory of responsibility, he says, are (not surprisingly) responsibility and integrity. The proposed new theory of responsibility will offer that "basic, irreducible conception which serves as a starting point for the development of a coherent and comprehensive ethical doctrine," he says,

quoting Albert R. Jonsen (p. 43). That concept is responsibility. His plan is to integrate into his theory all the advantages of previous moral theories, especially all previous theories of responsibility, to add an element all of them lack, and to avoid all the disadvantages of those other theories. Of course this is what every moral theorist wants to do, so it is nothing to write home about. What would have been worth writing home about is having pulled it off.

Schweiker thinks the right theory must have the following characteristics: (1) a description of the moral life as characterized by "the dialectical relation between actualization of self and encounter with others mediated by social roles and vocations"; (2) a thorough presentation of the relationship between "the goods which persons are to respect"; and (3) an explanation of how it is that the agent's identity is constituted in terms of these goods (p. 104).

As for the first characteristic, Schweiker thinks that moral theories of responsibility which are defined in terms of the agent's encounters with others and their claims on the agent are most on the mark. He catalogs extant theories of responsibility as agential, social, and dialogical, but he finds all of these wanting, even the dialogical type he favors. The first type, the agential, grounds responsibility in the acting agent. The second, the social, centers on social practices of praise and blame. But these other theories of responsibility all fail because, according to Schweiker, they "fasten on only one aspect of responsibility" and miss that important element he calls integrity.

Schweiker's reservations with respect to the ethics of both Kant and Tillich, which he calls the agential type, have to do with their interiority—in Kant's case, too much on the will, not enough on the world; in Tillich's, too much on conscience, not enough on "the multidimensionality of life." What he likes about these theories is the emphasis on respect (Kant's) and integrity (Tillich's).

He calls the theories of responsibility of F. H. Bradley, Peter French, and Marion Smiley the social type. He discusses with approval Smiley's and French's broadening of the concept of agent responsibility to include actions they do not directly cause. Schweiker also approves of the way these theories define and assign praise and blame in a community context, and he especially likes that these theories recognize the importance given to the maintenance of identity within the community. The shortcoming of the social type of theory is that it can't account for the authority of social practices, according to Schweiker.

Representatives of the dialogical type of moral theory, he says, are Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Bernard Haring, and Charles Curran. What characterizes theories of this type is "a marked social dimension...with respect to the demand to respond to others" (94). Schweiker distinguishes Niebuhr's theory from Barth's by the former's emphasis on responsibility and the latter's on divine command through Jesus Christ. Theories of this type address the need to thwart the tendency to self-aggrandizement, which is good, according to Schweiker. But what's bad is that they put their money on revelation rather than responsibility: "This shifts moral reflection from the responsible self to the priority of the [Divine or human]

other." (p. 102).

Each of these types, Schweiker says, offers a "genuine insight" but none is "adequate." None of these theories, he thinks, says enough about "the complexity of life in a late-modern, technological world," because of the possibilities for power and its abuse in these times.

The old moral theories, including the old theories of responsibility, are inadequate to this challenge, he says. Those moral theories which address the use of power at all do so only by offering some modest limits on its use when a more comprehensive and aggressive approach is called for. Traditional Christian ethical theories merely "specify norms for the exercise [of power] so that one could determine when coercive action was justified" (p. 45). Schweiker thinks that the traditional theory of a just war, for example, falls short of an adequate treatment of power.

What all these theories need to do is consider power aggressively and proactively, with norms for the control of power as the centerpiece. "The core of Christian faith is about the radical transvaluation of power in order to respect and enhance the integrity of finite life" (p. 216). What they all need to do is take responsibility for the right use of power seriously. Responsibility comes with voluntary action, and voluntary action means freedom from compulsion. Responsibility is not dependent on particular social practices of praise and blame.

Second, Schweiker thinks that the moral theorist has to get the relationship between goods right. Schweiker proffers three kinds of human goods: pre-moral, social, and reflective. Over all these, the agent is to put on integrity, which binds the rest together. Integrity, in other words, is *the* ethical good, he says, though "the moral domain of life is constituted by interlocking goods." (p. 118). By "integrity" he means "the abiding commitment to a specific moral project as well as the attitudes and dispositions this commitment entails" (p. 32). Schweiker wants to preserve and amplify the insights of those contemporary philosophers who realize the value of integrity (like Bernard Williams) and the value of responsibility (like Peter French).

Third, Schweiker explains how the agent's identity is constituted in terms of these goods by introducing two new terms, "hermeneutical realism" and "the act of radical interpretation." To explain these, Schweiker tries to clear some ground between moral "realism" and "anti-realism" and to plant his theory there. Roughly, by realism he means the view that moral norms are discovered, and by anti-realism that they are invented. On the one hand, he says that moral values are real in that they depend not upon their acceptance by either the individual moral agent or her community, but rather on "the reality and/or will of God" (p. 110). On the other hand, he says that he agrees with J. L. Mackie in insisting that "values are not part of the fabric of the world" (pp. 107, 109). So what's a Christian ethicist to do?

The trick, according to Schweiker, is to see that the conception (of moral norms and values) depends on the perception (of the world). The Christian perceives the world in a certain way, and his perception of the world requires adherence to certain moral norms which come with the perception. Integrity is the virtue of one's abiding commitment to that certain

perception of the world which is distinctly Christian. Moral values are real, then, in the sense that they are dictated by the Christian's interpretation of the world—hence what Schweiker calls “hermeneutical realism.”

Hermeneutical realism is the interpretation the agent gives to a situation with potential moral relevance, and this interpretation constitutes that situation's moral value, and the agent is guided in that interpretation by the social, natural, historical and biological conditions in which she finds herself (p. 113). Nonetheless, Schweiker says, “valid moral norms, accounts of moral situations, and decisions about what to do are not reducible to the subjective understanding of an agent” or a community (p. 40). I suppose what he means is that the agent cannot be guided by mere whim or preference but is restricted by the conditions mentioned above, and the community is restricted by its adherence to a Christian perception of the world.

This interpretation is radical because the moral norms the agent chooses and the ways she accounts for moral situations determine who she is. She accomplishes who she is in what Schweiker calls “the act of radical interpretation,” that is, the ways in which “we determine the desires and volitions we want to characterize our lives” (p. 39).

It's (barely?) possible that a Christian ethics would not offer a distinctive course for action, but it is not at all possible that a distinctively Christian ethics would fail to offer a uniquely Christian way of thinking about the moral life. Here's how Schweiker intends that his theory be distinctively Christian: It defines responsibility as being accountable to others and obedient to God. Indeed, this putatively new imperative of responsibility specifies that “in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God” (p. 38).

The individual agent rather than the community is the primary locus of responsibility, but responsibility is deployed in the individual's dealings in the world and with others. By the way, Schweiker thinks that it is possible to call institutions moral agents, as long as “the institution represents its identity through interpretive practices (reports to shareholders, accounting practices, political traditions, social histories, communal memory) and constitutes itself through time.” (p. 184).

The book's contribution is this: It draws the reader's attention to the dangerous escalation of power in the modern world, with its attendant new possibilities for misuse and abuse. Schweiker thinks that the possibilities for power have increased exponentially and that this fact alone cries out for a new ethical theory. He's probably right.

But Schweiker does not always explain his terms. He does not tell us enough, for example, about what he means by being obedient to God or what he means by integrity of life before God. For another example, I don't know what he means by calling the goods which are supposed to dominate the moral life “interlocking.” But hedging his bets is what characterizes Schweiker's approach in this book, so what I think he means is that in one way he wants there to be just one moral good, but in another way he wants there to be several goods. Now this way of claiming both sides of the issue is not *tout court* an inconsistency. But an author who is trying to marry previously conflicting claims must be

clear about the distinctions he is making and Schweiker isn't.

Here's another example: He says that the "interlocking" goods, like sexual fulfillment, bodily comfort, food and shelter, and "profound music" are pre-moral and so "in certain circumstances it is permissible to violate...these values while it is much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to justify acting directly against a [which?] moral value" (118). As I read this claim, Schweiker is saying that one may violate some value without acting directly against that value. But what does that mean? What does it mean to violate a value without acting directly against that value? It may be that there is a difference, but Schweiker does not seem to notice that there is a need to explain what the difference is.

And the reader has probably already noticed that on the one hand Schweiker rejects dialogical theories because they make revelation central, but on the other hand, he wants the conception of moral values to be dictated by a Christian perception of the world. If it is revelation which gives this Christian perception of the world—and where else would it come from?—we've got another inconsistency.

While in some places Schweiker does not seem to notice that he has a problem when he has one, in other places he thinks he has a problem when he does not. For example, when he blames dialogical theories of responsibility for shifting moral reflection from the self to the other, I think he has fallen victim to a false dilemma. I don't know why a moral theory cannot include "moral reflection" on self *and* other.

Another problem is the cavalier dismissal of the complexity of some conceptual problems. Here is an example: He says that "there simply is *no evidence* that reality, nature, or God can be held morally accountable in the same way that human agents can" (p. 13, emphasis added). I don't know what it would mean to hold reality or nature morally accountable, but there are certainly good arguments (and therefore *some evidence*) for calling God a moral agent.

There are different ways to make a contribution to ethics (or indeed any field), but perhaps they all amount to two kinds: Either (1) one contributes to a dialog already in process, or (2) one stands back from the present dialog, takes stock of the big picture, and points the direction the dialog ought to go from here. William Schweiker does do the latter.

As for the inconsistencies, maybe keeping the best features of conflicting moral theories is impossible, not just for Schweiker but for anybody. Maybe doing moral philosophy itself is eternally frustrating: The theorist sees clearly the claims entailed by his position, but also sees clearly the value of what he has had to let go of in order to have a coherent moral theory. Maybe the prolonged effort of the human intellect to frame a satisfying moral theory is (as Sidgwick put it) "foredoomed to inevitable failure." Maybe the theories Schweiker wants to synchronize cannot be synchronized. But it is certainly worth a try, and someone (or several) should try it. Moral philosophers, both Christian and secular, then, can learn from Schweiker.