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Introduction

Anyone who is at all familiar with the discipline of theological ethics recognizes James M. Gustafson as one of its leading and formative figures of the past fifty years. His various contributions have helped to define and give shape to the discipline. Indeed, many of the other important writers and teachers now working in the field of theological ethics in North America received their graduate training under Gustafson’s tutelage. While his is only one voice in a field marked by diverse, even conflicting perspectives as to what constitutes theological ethics and how it is to be practiced, surely it is no exaggeration to say that one cannot become a serious student of this discipline apart from close study and careful consideration of Gustafson’s arguments on formal methodological questions as well as his positions on substantive material issues. It is our hope that the essays brought together in this volume represent a sufficiently broad range of Gustafson’s thought so that readers may come to a deeper understanding of both fundamental debates within the discipline of theological ethics in general and Gustafson’s own positions in these debates in particular.

Since one of Gustafson’s guiding convictions is that the perspectives of all persons, including academics, are highly conditioned by the social and cultural circumstances as well as the personal experiences that have shaped their lives, a few words about Gustafson’s biography are in order here. Gustafson was born in 1925 in Norway, Michigan, and was raised among Swedish immigrants. His father was a pastor in the Swedish Mission Covenant Church, which had its origins in Sweden as a “free church” (i.e., not connected to the state church) nourished by Lutheran pietism. The family moved to Scranton, Kansas, in 1939 when the elder Gustafson was fired from his congregation on account of theological disagreements with fundamentalists. At that time Scranton was a farming and coal-mining community in the throes of the Depression. From 1944 to 1946 Gustafson served in the army and did tours of duty in India and Burma. Experiences from these
years—of tragedy and human suffering, of the larger historical and political forces to which persons and communities are subjected, of the ambiguous circumstances in which persons are often called upon to act, and of the existence of deep cultural and religious differences among civilizations—became formative influences in Gustafson’s subsequent development as a student of theology and ethics.  

After the war, Gustafson received his BS degree in 1948 at Northwestern University, where his studies were focused primarily on sociology and other social sciences. The deep and lasting impact of sociological modes of inquiry on his thought is evident in his later theological and ethical work. He graduated in 1951 with a BD from Chicago Theological Seminary and the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of Chicago, where his primary mentors were Daniel Day Williams, Wilhelm Pauck, and James Luther Adams. Adams introduced Gustafson to the writings of Ernst Troeltsch, that pioneer in the investigation of the implications of historicism and social and cultural relativism for Christian theology and ethics. Pauck, who had been a student of Troeltsch in Germany, suggested that Gustafson read H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation*, which impressed Gustafson as a statement of how it is possible to affirm a historic religious tradition all the while fully cognizant of its historical and cultural relativity. (Interestingly, Niebuhr himself had written his doctoral dissertation at Yale on Troeltsch’s philosophy of religion.) On reading this book, Gustafson knew that it was Niebuhr who would become his main mentor. So he applied for late admission to Yale University and moved to New Haven, where he began what became a deep academic, professional, and personal relationship with Niebuhr.  

Gustafson was ordained a minister in the Congregational Christian Churches (later to become the United Church of Christ) and served as the minister of the Congregational Church in Northford, Connecticut, from 1951 to 1954 while working toward his doctorate at Yale. From 1954 to 1955 he served as assistant director of the Study of Theological Education in America. (Niebuhr was its director and Williams was associate director.) Together they authored the famous study *The Advancement of Theological Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957). In 1955 Gustafson graduated from Yale with a PhD after having submitted a dissertation on the topic “Community and Time in the Christian Church: A Study of the Church from a Sociological and Philosophical Perspective.” His first published book, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), represents the continuation of this line of inquiry.  

Gustafson served on the faculty of Yale from 1955 to 1972, teaching in both the Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies; in 1972 he accepted an appointment as University Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chicago, where, in addition to his teaching responsibilities in the Divinity School, he regularly taught in many other departments and fields of study in the university at large. In 1988 he moved to Emory University to become the Henry  

R. Luce Professor of Humanities and Comparative Studies, an appointment he held until 1996, at which time he became the Woodruff Professor of Comparative Studies and of Religion, also at Emory. During his years at Emory, Gustafson led seminars for faculty members from various disciplines; such an interdisciplinary emphasis has also been a major factor in Gustafson’s thinking about theology and ethics.

During his professional life Gustafson has authored many books and articles on various topics and issues (a complete bibliography of his works may be found at the back of this anthology). Indeed, some of his writings have attained what can only be called “canonical” status for students of theological ethics; one thinks, for example, of such classics as *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), and *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Much of this work is concerned with providing a formal analysis of the elements that go into the construction of a comprehensive systematic theological ethics. Other writings focus more concretely on specific areas of moral concern and ethical inquiry. Gustafson’s major constructive statement is the two-volume magnum opus *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1984). In these two volumes Gustafson implements the program for theological ethics that his earlier formal analyses had called for. The first volume, *Theology and Ethics*, shows Gustafson at work as a constructive theologian, outlining a theological framework from which to construe human life in the world in relation to God; the second volume, *Ethics and Theology*, illustrates what ethics and the moral life look like when framed by the theological perspective set forth in the first volume. Gustafson understands himself to be a theologian as well as an ethicist, and anyone who reads his works will be impressed by the scholarship in both disciplines.

The editors of this volume approach Gustafson’s work from two distinct disciplinary perspectives: ethics and theology. Our collaboration on this project grew out of our shared perception that Gustafson’s work is of immense importance for both of these disciplines and especially for their close interaction and mutual fructification. Like Gustafson, we are convinced that the disciplinary separation of ethics from theology, while understandable and to some extent necessary for purposes of specialization, needs to be bridged by ethicists who think about the theological presuppositions of their work in ethics and by theologians who think about the ethical implications of their work in theology. Furthermore, we are at one with Gustafson in the conviction that theological ethics has to be responsive to the needs of the church and its ministry. For this reason, those who labor in this field have an obligation to write for a wider readership than merely that of their fellow scholars. Gustafson has never forgotten that his first calling

was to be a pastor, and his work in theological ethics has always been informed by his awareness of the difficult demands placed on ordained ministers.

The essays in this collection were published in a time span of more than thirty years and constitute, we believe, a representative selection of Gustafson’s academic interests and research foci. The essays in this anthology are arranged in chronological order. An ordering along thematic or methodological lines would no doubt also have its merits. However, the reader will find that no essay fits neatly into any one single category. Theological ethics, in the hands of Gustafson, is an integrative process that brings together questions and concerns of theology and ethics, engages in concrete description and careful analysis of circumstances, reflects philosophically on issues of method, attends to procedures for decision making, and gathers relevant information and knowledge from the social and natural sciences. It is precisely Gustafson’s criticism of much of modern ethics that it neglects the interdependence of the parts. The reader is thus free to begin with any essay of particular interest and need not read the essays in the order in which they appear in this volume. Nonetheless, we are confident that the reader of these essays will get to know a theologian and ethicist of extraordinary skill and unusual insight whose contribution to the discipline of theological ethics can hardly be overstated.3

Here is a brief introduction to each of the essays chosen for inclusion in this volume:

1. “Context versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics” first appeared in *Harvard Theological Review* in 1965. Thanks to its clarifying value, the essay has had several reprints. It addresses a highly polarized discussion that originated in the 1950s with publications of Paul Lehmann, Joseph Fletcher, and Paul Ramsey, and that went on deep into the following decade. On the one end, there were ethics that were described in often vague terms as “contextual,” “situational,” “existential,” “subjective,” and “immanent.” The other extreme was depicted as “deontological,” “objective,” and “extrinsic.” In this essay, Gustafson stresses the insufficiency of these categories. They not only fail to describe adequately the complex reality of moral reasoning and decision making, but also do injustice to the arguments and motives of the positions they categorize. Yet both parts of the polarity have their merits. Contextualists argue the need for a careful analysis of contexts and have a point in stressing God’s radical sovereignty over rules and moral codes. In contextualist accounts, we also meet an understanding of the nature of human selfhood, which stresses human moral responsibility. But contextualism doesn’t necessarily exclude the use of rules or principles, as is illustrated by Karl Barth, just as, on the other end of the spectrum, a “principalist” like Reinhold Niebuhr did have an acute “contextual awareness.” Gustafson sees his task not in a further polarization, but rather in arguing that any serious ethical theory must in

the final analysis pay attention to the aspects it tended to neglect in the heat of the dispute. It is characteristic of this early essay that Gustafson is hesitant to give his own opinion. (“Is there one normative starting point, or base point, for work in Christian ethics around which other discussions ought to cohere? On this question the author has convictions, but their exposition lies outside the scope of this methodological analysis.”) The author’s own answer is found in “The Relation of the Gospels to the Moral Life” (see below), written six years later.

2. In “Moral Discernment in the Christian Life” (1968), the believer’s quest for guidance in moral issues is described in terms of a dynamic and multifaceted process of discernment—a process of seeing and weighing, taking into consideration a range of salient factors such as the potential consequences of an action, a variety of motives, moral maxims accepted by a community, empirical data, the moral ordering of the universe as understood by reason, all seen within the context of God’s beneficence. It yields no predictable outcomes as the result either of a system of deductive logic, of the accumulation of information, of the expression of emotions, or of the stubborn allegiance to principles, although it may imply some of all this. Those who discern will inevitably do this from their own perspective, history, character, and community, and against the background of beliefs and principles. Gustafson’s way of describing the process of discernment sheds more light on the allegation that, in the “context versus principles” debate, he is on the side of the former—that he is a situationalist, or a decisionalist: “Discernment seems to require some sensitivity and flexibility, some pluralism of consideration that is a priori ruled out by dedicated allegiance to single principles.” At the same time, the clearly realistic approach avoids subjectivism: neither are moral actors merely following their own feelings nor is the rightness or wrongness of a moral choice rooted in the agent’s decision. There is “some objectivity” that we must take account of. In theological terms the moral question, “What ought or are we to do?” is to be understood as “What is God enabling and requiring us to do?”4 With all the uncertainties that this position involves, human morality is, from a theological perspective, rooted in the way things really and ultimately are.

3. “The Relation of the Gospels to the Moral Life” was presented at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary’s “Festivals of the Gospels” as part of its 175th anniversary in 1971. Gustafson depicts three ways in which the Gospels are relevant to theological ethics: in depicting God’s love for humans in the example of Jesus Christ, they provide a powerful reason for being moral; principles and rules can be retrieved which guide particular actions; and the narratives of the Gospels influence “the sort of persons members of the community become.” In concentrating on the third, Gustafson displays both a concern for virtues and awareness of the communal character of the Christian life. Christ as the paradigm does not provide an extrinsic goal or a timeless ideal, but in-forms and in-fluences members of a community in their distinctiveness.

4. In later accounts, this sentence is changed into “What is God enabling and requiring us to be and to do,” cf. “Say Something Theological!” in this volume.
4. “Down Syndrome, Parental Desires, and the Right to Life” (1973), prepared for the Kennedy Foundation, is a case study regarding a baby with Down syndrome. In short, the case goes as follows: At the request of the parents, health care professionals do not remove a fatal intestinal blockage, and the child is allowed to die. The first part of the chapter analyzes the reasons the actors have for their decisions. In problematizing the decision and its reasons in the subsequent section, this essay provides an example of how theology may influence the way in which a moral dilemma is analyzed and, hence, the outcome that is considered morally right. Theologically, there is reason to question the view that desires form the basis of our obligations toward others, and the view that the value of a human being is qualified by its intelligence and capacity for productivity. Rather, the value of a human being is intrinsic, constituted by its very existence in relation to others and in its dependence on them. Moreover, a theological view leads to a different assessment of the significance of suffering.

5. The short essay “A Theocentric Interpretation of Life” (1980) is one of the few autobiographical essays in Gustafson’s oeuvre. It appeared in the Christian Century’s long-standing series, “How My Mind Has Changed.” The invitation for this contribution could not have come at a more appropriate moment. The article, in which Gustafson for the first time describes his own ethical proposal as “theocentric,” is a prelude to the first volume of his constructive statement Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective. That Gustafson has come to a crossroads is reflected by the remark, “I shall not cite quotations from my previous work which are no longer accurate expressions of my present thinking.” It is noteworthy that this essay refers to criteria for adequate and coherent theological ethics that are found in other publications (with occasional shifts in wording), but hardly anywhere so concisely. First, a theological ethic should contain an organizing perspective, metaphor or principle; second, it should relate coherently to four base points: (1) theology in the restricted sense of an understanding of God and God’s purposes in relation to the world; (2) an interpretation of “the world” and of the significance of events in the world for human beings; (3) an interpretation of persons as moral agents; and (4) criteria and principles of moral decision making; third, it should make use of four sources: the Bible and the Christian tradition, philosophical methods and principles, solid scientific data, and human experience broadly conceived.

6. Another important statement of Gustafson’s constructive position is “Say Something Theological!” (1981). It is a lecture in the prestigious annual Nora and Edward Ryerson Lectures, established in 1974 in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Chicago. It addresses a university-wide audience and is in more than one respect a benchmark in Gustafson’s oeuvre: it is an eloquent declaration, concise and comprehensive at the same time, of where Gustafson stands as a person and a theologian. Here again we find the combination of intellect and piety, reflecting his career as both a teacher and a preacher. To say something the-
ological means three things: it is to say something about how things really and ultimately are, it is to say something religious—"Theology has its deepest significance within the context of piety, and in the context of a historic religious tradition"; and it is to say something ethical. The ethical task, then, is to discern what God is enabling and requiring us to be and to do: "We are to relate ourselves and all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God."

7. "Nature, Sin, and Covenant: Three Bases for Sexual Ethics" was the 1981 Jake Ginsburg Sex Psychology Lecture at Stanford University. It is a theological reflection for a secular university audience on the need for a new sexual ethic against the background of changing views on the nature and purposes of sexual relationships since the 1960s. Instead of proposing his own version of a normative sexual ethic, Gustafson depicts three "bases" that any revised sexual ethic will have to take into account: facts about biological and personal nature, the human fault to which all persons are susceptible and against which they need safeguards, and the human need for some form of covenant. As in many other essays, the point of departure is analysis and description. Even if no blueprint of a single normative sexual ethic can be given, the consequence of the "isness of things" for their "oughtness" is an ethic that affirms much of the traditional tenets of marriage: "The traditional prescriptive sexual ethics of our culture are based on comprehensive vindicating reasons that continue to be valid." Although the focus of attention is on human well-being, "these necessary conditions cannot be ignored or defied without pain and harm, though acknowledgment of them does not guarantee happiness."

8. "Nature: Its Status in Theological Ethics" (1982) is an essay written for a conference at Santa Clara University in California on the topic "Biomedical Ethics: A Christian Perspective," which was part of an ongoing series of annual conferences devoted to the larger theme of "Philosophical Issues in Christian Perspective." Its critique of Protestant thinking recurs in several of Gustafson's other publications. Gustafson criticizes Protestant theology for being unable to state the relationship between theology and nature positively and for wrongly elevating history as the primary or sole arena of divine activity. The essay offers an informative introduction to the Roman Catholic alternative, Thomist essentialism. Traditional Roman Catholic theology rightly attends more seriously to the divine sovereignty over nature. Nevertheless, there is good reason for problematizing the traditional Thomist interpretation of nature in the light of modern scientific data. Is the order of nature static and unchanging? Is it warranted to speak of a human "essence"? Are we right in assuming a natural telos of, for example, human sexuality? And should we not adjust our anthropocentric view of the place of humans in nature and adopt a view that better accounts for the interdependence of humans and nature?

9. "Professions as 'Callings'" (1982) was written at the invitation of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. It first analyzes the two main concepts. A calling provides dignity to the worker and the work done and provides a sense of fulfillment and meaning. When we speak of a profession, it is implied that highly developed skills are used with intelligence, reflectiveness,
and discretion; moreover, a profession is highly institutionalized and is guided by publicly transparent codes of conduct; finally, a profession is highly service oriented, that is, directed at meeting the needs of individuals and communities. Common examples are found in the clergy, in the health care sector, in law, and in social service. The overlap of a profession and a calling then lies in the motivation and in a deep vision of the human and social ends that are served. “A ‘calling’ without professionalization is bumbling, ineffective, and even dangerous. A profession without a calling, however, has no taps of moral and humane rootage to keep motivation alive.” Despite the pitfalls that the concepts of “calling” and “profession” undeniably have, they are indispensable for our future understanding of work. In times when the merits of having a job are seen primarily in terms of self-realization and financial profit, this analysis of what the calling of a professional is may prove to be relevant for people working in any occupation.

10. “Death Is Not the Enemy” was cowritten with Richard L. Landau, MD. Originally published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1984, it contains a powerful and concise statement of an almost prophetic nature. Although secularization is not criticized per se, the authors contend that, for many persons in our culture, the loss of belief in a power that transcends nature has led to a deification of life, which, in turn, results in an unprecedented and unwarranted “priestly” role for practicing physicians in fighting and postponing death. Without arguing explicitly for a return to belief in God, the authors do plead for an acceptance of death as natural and thus not to be fought against at all costs, even if our present technological capacity allows us to prolong life indefinitely.

11. The essay “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University” (1985), written for the Catholic Theological Society of America, is Gustafson’s response to the widely popular postliberal theology of George Lindbeck and his followers. An argument in favor of “Christian participation in the ambiguities of moral and social life,” this article reflects a recurrent concern throughout Gustafson’s whole authorship: to prevent religion and theology from becoming irrelevant through isolation. Several kinds of sectarianism are identified: the “pious” sectarianism of some churches and groups in which Christian beliefs become subjectively meaningful, but their truth is not challenged by any serious criteria of coherence and adequacy; the “academic” sectarianism that divides the language of science and the language of religion (including theology) into incommensurable realms; and the sectarianism of purely descriptive theology which refuses to ask the question of truth. In all cases, Christian faith is rendered irrelevant for the world that surrounds it. Even Barth, Luther, and Calvin, with their solid doctrine of biblical revelation, had strong views on the relevance of the Word of God. In this essay, influences from Weber, Troeltsch, and the Niebuhrs can be found. Sectarianism is sociologically wrong in assuming that the Christian community is isolable from the wider society; it is theoretically wrong because it makes Christianity into a modern and trivial form of Gnosticism; and it is philosophically wrong in assuming that religious knowledge is the result of a totally incommensurable way of knowing.
12. The concise *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* article on “Christian Ethics” (1986) exemplifies the typical “Gustafsonian” combination of description and normativity. While describing the field of Christian ethics, Gustafson includes in a nutshell his own methodological proposal. The prerequisites of consistency and adequacy (“the four base points and the four sources”) mentioned in the introduction to “A Theocentric Interpretation of Life” recur here. This formal proposal, first elaborated in *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, continues to be of great methodological relevance to a new generation of scholars in Christian ethics.

13. “Roman Catholic and Protestant Interaction in Ethics: An Interpretation” was first published in 1989. Throughout his writings, Gustafson displays an interest both in Roman Catholic social thought and in exploring interactions and common grounds between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The study *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (1978) was not only an overview of different aspects of the interactions between the traditions, but was in itself an important proposal for how such interaction might proceed. One of the tenets of that book can be summarized as follows. Theological ethics in the last century can be described in terms of persistent tensions between “classical” polarities: nature versus grace, creation versus history, order versus dynamics, law versus gospel. The former elements have originally been stressed by Roman Catholics, the latter by Protestants. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially after Vatican II, theologians from both backgrounds came to affirm the poles their traditions had typically ignored. “Roman Catholic and Protestant Interaction in Ethics” builds on the groundwork of that study and shows with some sense of tragedy how much had happened in the eleven years since. Notwithstanding its self-confessed limitations, the essay is a tour de force of analysis of a broad range of literature, including recent Protestant writers like Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and Allen Verhey. It raises some sharp methodological and substantive questions about ethics, ecumenism, and theology. Although interaction between the two traditions continued toward the end of the twentieth century, there is hardly reason to speak of “rapprochement.” Attention shifted from a pursuit of ecumenism per se to debates of a more methodological nature.

14. “Moral Discourse about Medicine: A Variety of Forms” (1990) may serve as an eye-opener to many scholars who have become involved in the growth industry of medical ethics. In this essay, four types of moral discourse in medicine are identified: ethical, prophetical, narrative, and policy discourse. Medical ethics in its restricted, modern sense as we know it—concentrated on particular actions, against the background of particular moral conventions—is but one

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form of moral discourse. For a complete normative evaluation of medical practice and policy, we need a variety of types of discourse.

15. In 1970 Gustafson published a now-famous essay titled “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study.” In that essay, Gustafson approached his topic by beginning with biblical materials and themes and then asking how they might be applied to ethical questions. The more recent article reprinted here, “The Use of Scripture in Christian Ethics” (1997), addresses the theme “Scripture and ethics” in a reverse order. Gustafson takes his point of departure in questions of ethics and inquires how biblical materials might answer them. He works from five questions of ethics formulated by William Schweiker in his Responsibility and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): “What is going on?” “What is the norm for how to live?” “What are we to be and to do?” “What does it mean to be an agent?” and “How do we justify moral claims?” Depending on the question that is asked, different types of answers concerning the use of Scripture are needed. Using terms developed by H. Richard Niebuhr, Gustafson contends that the authority of the Bible is not hierarchical as the ultimate justification of ethics, but can rather be described in terms of its educative and corroborative value.

16. “A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1948–1998” was published in the 25th Anniversary Supplement of the Journal of Religious Ethics in 1998. Gustafson identifies four major shifts in the field of religious ethics: (1) from Christian ethics to religious ethics; (2) from normative ethics to descriptive, comparative, and analytical ethics; (3) from philosophical assumptions to critical philosophical consciousness; and (4) from the social gospel’s traditional agenda to more and different practical issues. The question that naturally comes up is: does the development of Gustafson’s own thinking fit into this description? The question can be answered in the affirmative, with one notable exception: Gustafson made a shift from descriptive ethics to normative ethics, rather than a shift in the reverse.

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FOR FURTHER READING

