Chapter Nine

The Relevance of God for Morality: A Concluding Essay

9.1   Introduction

Transition
Theological ethics after Gustafson can not be the same as before. Although deeply rooted in elements from theological and moral traditions, Theocentric Ethics turns a number of normative priorities upside down and puts some common methodological presuppositions under serious challenge. By concentrating on the line of argumentation presented by Gustafson, we have discovered how some of the most urgent questions in theological ethics can find answers. First, Theocentric Ethics provides a powerful way for accounting for the place of the *nonhuman and the inanimate nature as a proper object of moral concern*.[1] This concern is not motivated by nature's value for the advancing of human interests, but by the conviction that it has an intrinsic value, rooted in God's creative activity. Second, we found that Theocentric Ethics offers perspectives ranging down *from a worldview to applied normative ethics*, and *vice versa*.[2] Gustafson construes a link between worldview and ethics which is multifaceted and which takes place on three levels: theoretical convictions about God, humanity and the universe; evaluative assumptions about their relative value and about the role of human morality; and affective elements which empower human actors and qualifies their character. Thirdly, Theocentric Ethics advances a *modern account of what Christian ethics can be* in continuity with a sound tradition and in open discourse with scientific and humanistic disciplines outside the theological realm.[3]

Perhaps one of the most intriguing effects of analyzing Gustafson is that even the initial ambition of this present study is criticized. Seen from a theocentric perspective, it may be said, our questions of analysis are all too much instrumental. We cannot start from scratch and look for the best proposal to give nature a place in our moral concern, for the most adequate method to link ethics and worldview, or for the most appealing elaboration of a Christian ethics. For Gustafson, the starting point is neither a theological need nor a philosophical quest, but the compelling consciousness of a divine reality which subsequently gives direction to human morality.

This Chapter
As we noted earlier, the imposition of some tools and concepts was necessary in order to provide a clarity which the subject matter does not always provide. Because of its comprehensiveness, its multidisciplinary approach, its rootedness in a tradition and its challenging tenets, a systematic analysis of Theocentric Ethics is rewarding for many reasons. But what about ethics after Gustafson? In the form of a somewhat looser essay, this chapter will constructively and critically comment on some of the most poignant elements and contributions of Theocentric Ethics to present-day theological ethics, and give some prospects for Christian theological ethics. This will be done from the perspective of the same tradition which inspired the theory that was analyzed, that is, the

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[1]   Cf. section 1.1.2.
[2]   Cf. section 1.1.3.
[3]   Cf. section 1.1.4.

Reformed tradition. In continuity with Gustafson, this attempt intends to be "theocentric, of sorts."[4] Our critique will concentrate on the aspects in Gustafson's ethics which can be criticized for unwarrantably dispersing some of the basic elements of the Reformed tradition.

The scope of this chapter is that ethics and worldview are most intricately and intensely linked. The articulation of this link is not only necessary for descriptive scholarly reasons, it also offers prospects for moral dialogue and for a deepening of our moral commitment. First, we will make some observations on the situation in which theological ethics seems to be at the end of the twentieth century (section 9.2). In section 9.3, we distinguish between three points at which theological ethics (based on a Reformed worldview) may contribute with a critique of contemporary ethics: the view that human values and human preferences ought to be the goal for our moral concern (axiological autonomy), the view that humans decide what is right and good (ontological autonomy), and the contention that natural human capacities are sufficient to know what is morally right (epistemological autonomy). This critique will be elaborated in the ensuing sections. First, we argue that a theocentric construal points to other values than human values: the whole of creation and God (section 9.4). In the following sections, we develop the idea that morality from a Reformed point of view incorporates elements of particularism and moral authority. In contrast to some criticisms, it is argued that morality it not only unable to rid itself of these elements, but also that a certain degree of particularism and moral authority is beneficial. Moral authority may very well be compatible with rationality, universalism, and universalizability, with the quest for an intermoral dialogue, and with the concept of moral accountability. As a general characterization of this, we use Böckle's term *theonomous autonomy* (sections 9.5 and 9.6). After these theoretical excursus, we concentrate on some of the implications of human self-restraint in the light of theocentrism (section 9.7).

In the second part of this essay, we concentrate on the triangle between theology, ethics, and the sciences. It is argued that theology should be coherent with the sciences, but only as long as the latter do not overstep their proper boundaries and become worldviews in disguise. This element is highlighted, because the impact of scientific theories seems to be dominant in Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics, despite its normative theology (section 9.7).

Finally, we look at the strength of the Reformed tradition for ethics. First, we look at Gustafson's use of this tradition and ask to what extent Theocentric Ethics can be called "Reformed, of sorts" (section 9.8). In the last section, some of the points where a Reformed worldview can contribute to theological ethics are presented. It is argued that the concept of hope for a restoration of all things, in combination with earlier assumptions about God's sovereignty and God's goodness, offers prospects for a truly "theocentric ethics, of sorts" (sections 9.9 and 9.10).

9.2   Theological Ethics at the Crossroads

In a way, western theological ethics at the end of the twentieth century has come to a crossroads in its identity. What is its identity in relation to other systematic theological and philosophical disciplines? What is the specific contribution of Christian theology to the discipline of ethics? Does theological ethics have an independent right of existence? It can be observed that writing theological ethics is not a common thing to do, especially when it comes to comprehensive systematic construals. There seem to be several reasons for this current situation.

(1) Most of the mainstream denominations in Western Europe and North America— traditionally the nourishing context of academic theology—are experiencing a decreasing membership, which leads to a decreasing enrollment in theological faculties, and, hence, to a decreasing influence of the church on society and politics. Ethics, as a consequence, is moving from church to society.[5]

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4   When referring to Gustafson, references will be made to Theocentric Ethics in capitals, when referring to my own proposal, theocentric ethics will not be capitalized.

5   Churches that do grow, such as evangelical, conservative Reformed and charismatic congregations, circumvent the channels of academic theology and found their own seminaries. As their primary interest

(2) Western society as a whole becomes more pluralistic; the relatively undisputed privileges of the Christian churches have now become challenged by similar claims from other religions and world views. A Christian theological approach to moral problems is no longer automatically met by a sympathetic audience. When a theologian wants to be heard and taken seriously, she will have to avoid particularistic language and will have to use terms, concepts, and sometimes even theories that are accessible if not acceptable to a pluralistic readership.

(3) As a consequence of globalization, economic growth and the need for sustainable development, and new technical and medical progress, a range of new practical moral problems needs to be faced and solved, which diverts the scope from the level of normative theory to the level of applied ethics.

Although the outcome of these developments cannot be adequately described in a few sentences, there are some general issues that a theological student who wants to study Christian ethics, is very likely to meet. First, he will notice that the majority of academic theology is critical towards "historic Christianity," not only in a sound methodological sense, but also in the sense that substantive parts of the historic Christian creed are discarded.[6] Insofar as the language of pietism and orthodoxy is used in academic theology, many of these terms are used in a predominantly constructivist sense. As soon as it comes to the "real thing" outside the human consciousness, language will be more sceptical. Moreover, he will discover that liberation theology and feminist ethics—apart from some exceptions, such as Moltmann—are the last remaining normative systems in which theologically motivated ideals still have a decisive effect. He will observe that ethics on several universities has become exclusively a branch of practical philosophy, whereas theology is primarily concerned with ultimate considerations. He will become convinced that a link between moral "ought" and theological "is" is highly problematic. He will learn about utilitarianism, intuitionism, Kantianism, relativism, postmodernism, and their bearing on modern ethics. He will acquire a variety of tools to analyze moral issues. He will be told that most moral problems have either more or less than one solution, which makes them dilemmatic in both cases. And he will be taught that we need a universal language in order to be in continuous discourse with other disciplines and worldviews—despite the "sad little joke" that almost nobody speaks such a universal language.[7] To what extent a Christian worldview can make a meaningful, relevant, and positive contribution to normative ethics will remain largely undefined.

In the midst of all these developments, James Gustafson is a relative stranger. According to his Theocentric Ethics, theology should neither be adapted to other disciplines, nor withdraw into a splendid isolation. In virtue of theology's specific focus on God and God's relation to the world (and *vice versa*), Gustafson claims that theology does have a specific contribution to ethics. He does this by seriously questioning the sacred watershed between a theoretical theology and a foundationalist ethics, that is, an ethics based on philosophical methods and principles. His main charge against modern theological and philosophical ethics is anthropocentrism.[8]

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seems to be pastoral training rather than theology, publications on ethics have primarily educative purposes and fail to come into real discussion with academic theology and philosophy.

6   Stout defines theological liberalism as "Letting theoretical reason live in the optimistic modernist's machine while finding another home for reflective piety; post-Kantian epistemology (bad sense) or hermeneutics (bad sense) applied to theology" (*Ethics After Babel*, p. 301).

7   Midgley, *Beast and Man*, p. 306.

8   The term "anthropocentrism" can be used in two ways. First, we can use it in a nonevaluative way as to refer to any view which gives human values, capacities, or perspectives a relative priority over other considerations. That humans are given certain priorities over other species, entities, and perspectives, hardly needs to be proved. More commonly, however, the term is used with an implicit moral evaluation, just as with "murder" and "deceit." As with all terms with an implicit negative evaluation, those to whom the charge might apply will not use the term themselves. Although there are reasons to use the term in the first, nonevaluative sense—on some occasions, it may be proper to stress human values and perspectives—, the existence of its evaluative counterpart is reason enough to avoid the term for constructive purposes. In other words: anthropocentrism is, by definition, morally rejectable. The question is: how can we identify elements in moral theories (theological and philosophical, secular or pious) which give human values and perspectives a morally unwarranted preference? For an extensive

9.3   A Theocentric Criticism of Moral Autonomy

Because of the negative evaluative implications of the concept of anthropocentrism, it is very unlikely that a theology or philosophy will present itself as anthropocentric. It can be argued, however, that the use of the concept of moral autonomy establishes a virtual equivalent for what Gustafson calls "anthropocentrism." Needless to say, this does not intimate that autonomy as such should be distrusted. What can be criticized, is the extent to which autonomy is allowed to play a role in both theological and philosophical ethics. To start, let us, parallel to a distinction made in chapter 7, discriminate between three interpretations of moral autonomy:[9]

(1) In an epistemological, Kantian sense, this refers to the *subject of moral reflection and moral decision*. The moral agent has to make moral judgments on the basis of an evaluation free from fear or compulsion. This does not imply that the norms are based on individual human preferences, nor that they necessarily enhance human interests. An autonomous decision may very well be compatible with norms that are found outside the self, because moral autonomy means a voluntary compliance to the universal moral law.

(2) On a second, ontological, level, autonomy may refer to the source of the moral law, implying *freedom from external moral standards*. The only requirements to be met are minimal and merely formal, such as universalizability, information, impartiality, or prescriptivity.[10] The observance of a set of methodological requirements is assumed to lead to a morality which is meaningful, applicable, and widely respected.[11]

(3) A third form of moral autonomy can be called *individual preference satisfaction*. It refers not to the stance from which moral evaluations are made, nor to the locus at which moral norms are found, but to the interests that are enhanced and the values that are promoted. Although not necessarily so—one might have a preference to promote one's neigbor's wellbeing—, the primary object of moral concern is considered to be the moral actor himself, with a possible extension to those in his vicinity.

9.4   Axiological Autonomy

From a theocentric point of view, the use of autonomy can be criticized in all three modes of interpretation. We start with some comments on the axiological use. Much of modern ethics is preoccupied with, and in some cases almost exclusively directed at, the satisfaction of individual human preferences. This has a number of negative side effects. Because of the emphasis on the rational and volitional capacity of individual humans to decide their own destiny, the focus is on wants rather than needs. This will leave a number of needs unsatisfied, namely the needs that no one

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discussion of anthropocentrism, see section 7.4.

[9]   In chapter 7, we distinguished the following three interpretations of anthropocentrism: *(1) epistemological*: human capacities are sufficient to know what is right and good; *(2) ontological*: moral norms are issued by human beings; and *(3) axiological*: human beings represent the highest, or the only, value in the universe. See section 7.4.

[10]   According to Hare, "Ethics is the logical study of the language of morals" (Richard M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953]). Cf., "if we assumed a perfect command of logic and of the facts, they would constrain so severely the moral evaluations that we can make, that in practice we would be bound all to agree to the same ones" (*Moral Thinking*, p. 6). In post-modern times, however, there are signs that the optimism about the role of logic and facts in ethics is shared by a decreasing number of scholars.

[11]   There are even forms of Christian ethics which try to apply such rationalism to ethics, and in which the specific Christian contribution—apart from providing an "intelligent" perspective—is limited to motivation. See, e.g., John C. Dwyer, *Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 175ff., who "sees the ethical decision . . . as one which is truly intelligent." This is essentially the same as Harry Kuitert's position in *Filosofie van de theologie* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988).

is able (or willing, or perceptive enough) to explain in terms of wants. If the format of ethics is on weighing the satisfaction of preferences of competent individuals, any other well-being presents, by definition, a moral complexity, if not a moral hot spot. Not only animals and the rest of the living world fall outside this format; within the human species, important of persons fall outside the core of the moral enterprise—all those who lack mental capacities, and those who, for reasons of age, intelligence, or social status, lack the capacities to formulate their preferences and to bring them out in the open. In an ethics which focuses principally on autonomy, special arrangements have to be made. Constructions such as proxy-consent or substituted judgment are applied in order to reestablish a person's autonomy. Behind this concentration on individual autonomy stands a normative view of humans which can be questioned: it is suggested that only individual preferences constitute a safe basis for a moral judgment; morals seems to be more a matter of rights than of duties, and more a matter of wants than needs; moreover, it is suggested that the value and relevance of a human person can be exhaustively described in terms of preferences rather than of intrinsic value or personal dignity.[12] As a consequence of this, one's lack of ability to formulate one's preferences diminishes the possibilities of being seen as a full member of the moral community. Especially in the care of the mentally handicapped and in nursing homes, this emphasis on individual autonomy is seen as increasingly inappropriate.

The emphasis on human autonomy correlates to a confusion of the three levels of autonomy as distinguished above: autonomy as a moral principle, and autonomy in its two versions of a methodological principle.[13] To start with the latter: *epistemological and ontological* autonomy are philosophical principles which permeate the whole enterprise of ethics (see below). They include formal requirements, such as rationality, impartiality, freedom from compulsion, and universalizability. As such, they apply to any moral choice, whatever the circumstances, the actors, the interests, the procedures, and so on. However, *axiologically* interpreted as individual preference satisfaction, respect for autonomy is only one out of a range of moral principles. In health care ethics, autonomy as individual preference satisfaction tends to become a general regulative principle. In effect, individual autonomy seems to have become a soccer game, in which the individual patient not only plays the game, but also writes the rules and referees. In many medical ethics theories, the wolf of individual want-satisfaction comes dressed in the clothes of the universal and impartial sheep of Kantian autonomy. This threatens to disengage persons from a shared moral and social context, and makes individual preferences the sole basis for morality. No doubt there is reason to speak of a victory of human rights over the paternalism of history. One should not expect, however, that axiological autonomy can do the entire moral job. Only when individual wishes are put under the scrutiny of other moral values, such as human dignity, beneficence, or justice, and under the formal requirement of universalizability, we can speak of "morals."[14]

The emphasis on respect for human autonomy as individual preference-satisfaction is bound to lead to an undervaluation of the weaker members of the community, of future generations, of species, or of the well-being of the whole planet, as none of these entities can raise their voice in the current moral debate. But even if these voices could be brought in, there are two important

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[12]   It would lead us way beyond the scope of this chapter to make suggestions as to what extent this emphasis on autonomy in public morality relates to the increasing importance of lawsuits as problem solving devices in social life.

[13]   This can be especially witnessed in the context of health care. One of the contributions to this common conception is the book *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress (Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Two features are striking here: First, in contrast with Kant, autonomy is only one out of four principles, whereas for Kant it is regulative for the whole enterprise of ethics. And, second, autonomy seems to have become a form of individual preference satisfaction. The confusion starts when autonomy in this latter sense starts to resume a traditional all-pervading regulative function. This pledge for autonomy may go so far as to even motivate other norms, such as paternalism. Cf. Mark S. Komrad, "A Defense of Medical Paternalism: Maximizing Patients' Autonomy," Rem B. Edwards, and Glenn C. Graber (eds.), *Bioethics* (Orlando FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1988), pp. 141-9.

[14]   See Theo A. Boer, *Het slecht-nieuws gesprek. Morele zorgvuldigheidscriteria bij het brengen van slecht nieuws in de gezondheidszorg* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 1989), pp. 109ff.

observations to make. First, the concern for the well-being of others (other generations or species) may still be exclusively or mainly instrumental. Even an ethics with the widest possible concern can in effect be nothing else than a sophisticated promotion of self-interest.[15] One might, for example, comply to a universalizable ethics because one expects the best individual results, just as it may be wise to pay taxes in order to be allowed to drive a car. The small Dutch boy who put his index finger in the hole of a dike, may not have been the altruistic hero everyone assumes him to be; he might simply have had an individual preference to preserve his parents' house. At the end of the day, concern for the common good may turn out to be a function of the promotion of the individual good. In this case, the concern for the common good will last only as long as it corresponds to a narrow anthropocentrism, and one might question to what extent this has anything to do with morality.

Secondly, granted that we would assume that persons, other generations, species, and elements outside the sphere of immediate human interests do have noninstrumental value, there is, from a theological perspective, still an important pitfall to be avoided. In almost all axiological discussions, an implicit hierarchy of values is made in favor of human beings or the human species. Whatever choice we make, there seems to be an unquestioned recognition that the human, in comparison to other elements of the cosmos as we know it, still represents the highest intrinsic value. Put simplistically: if we assume that humans have a value of 100, the strong anthropocentrist would say that the rest of the cosmos has no value, a weak anthropocentrist assumes that the rest of the cosmos has a value of 5 or 10, and a non-anthropocentrist attributes the nonhuman world a value of 80, or even 90. Still, very few humans would be prepared to offer their life to save an animal or a species. Even in a biocentric ethics, or an ethics of animal liberation, human life still has a very high, if not the highest, value.[16] At this point, the criticism from a Reformed, theocentric perspective reaches one of its climaxes: what if there is a God whose value surpasses human values by and large? What if there were a Being in relation to whom the value of human beings would be extremely relative?

This question is only meaningful only under two circumstances. First, that "God" is not a semantic function of the human mind, because in that case, anthropocentrism is reintroduced through the back door. Secondly, God should not be entirely immanent—there should be some degree of transcendence left. If God could, one hundred percent, be described in terms of natural processes, patterns, and events, the best way to value God would be to value the most developed species of his creation as we know it. The result would be an ethics with a very high esteem for humans, for other elements of reality, and for the whole. But in such a theology of immanentism, respect for God may well become synonymous with "respect for nature," or "consent to being."[17] Again, it is not fictitious that this would yield an ethics with highly anthropocentric features.

The Reformed tradition, which stresses God's sovereignty over and transcendence over against his works, will yield a view which is just as far from anthropocentrism as possible. A Christian and a non-theist are both confronted with the endless extension of the universe in time and space, in comparison to which human beings are but a minor detail. But the non-theist could still comfort himself anthropocentrically with the thought that humans are the most highly developed elements of the universe as we know it. The Christian however, insofar as he has a personalistic God-conception, will have to acknowledge that even in the aspect of personhood, humans are

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[15]   Cf. Gerrit Manenschijn, *Eigenbelang en christelijke ethiek. Rechtvaardigheid in een door belangen bepaalde samenleving* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1982).

[16]   A biocentrist would, perhaps, assign "the whole" a value of more than 100, but still, humans would represent the highest isolated value.

[17]   Although Gustafson at times does come close to immanentism, he affirms God's transcendence. To be sure, God cannot be known in his aseity. Experiences of God are always at the same time experiences of something else. But this is only an epistemological clue: ontologically, God does not coincide with his works. Theocentric Ethics breathes a spirit of awe over against the divine powers, based on evaluative assumptions of axiological theocentrism, theoretical assertions about God's transcendence, and attitudinal elements of reverence. Only when one overlooks the impact of and the relevance of Reformed piety for Gustafson, may one draw the mistaken conclusion that Gustafson's God equates the sum of all being. Cf. section 7.4.11.

overshadowed largely by God's impressive love, strength, wisdom, and all-pervading presence. Not even in their supposedly unique capacities as persons can humans represent a preeminent value.[18]

A view of the world and the cosmos as created by God motivates reverence for creation in the form of a practical moral concern for the well-being of human beings and nature alike. The same hands that created humans, created animals, plants, landscapes, and planets. Despite the fact that humans are seen as created in the *imago Dei*, they share with the rest of the cosmos the character of createdness. In Reformed theology, there is a genuine concern for comprehensiveness, fullness, unity, and the well-being of the whole.[19] Individual human actions are seen as parts of a whole: "We should relate to ourselves and all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God." Gustafson gives this concern a new depth, as he contends that our moral concern pertains to "what is just for trees and water, for animals and plants, as well as what is just for the human species,"[20] and "[i]t is necessary to think . . . of the proper distribution of 'what is due' not only to persons but also to animals and plants."[21] This common good is more than the sum of individual goods, and more than the sum of all common human well-being.

A Reformed point of view offers, thus, opportunities to deepen the criticism of axiological autonomy in two respects. First, it stresses that reverence for God implies reverence for all creation. There are no warrants for viewing the nonhuman part of creation as a mere instrument for the promotion of human well-being. Secondly, reverence for all of God's works is still not the same as reverence for God. If worship of God is substituted by reverence for God's creation, there is a risk of idolatry.[22] Just as human love cannot exhaustively be described in terms of respect for the partner's accomplishments, but also implies signs of endearment for the person behind acts of benevolence and creativity, theocentric ethics is more than just the highest possible respect for creation: it implies worship of the creator as well.[23]

9.5   Sense and Nonsense about Particularism

Introduction

Another level on which the effect of autonomy can be criticized is its role on philosophical and ethical methods, that is, on the level of ontological and epistemological autonomy. Since Kant, it is assumed that an ethics based on autonomy has transcended the stage of particularism, tribe morals, and uncritical obedience; instead it is believed to have reached the age of rationality and universalism.[24]

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[18]   Of course, assumptions about God's personhood can be adduced as an argument to increase the values of humans, and thus to reintroduce anthropocentrism through the back door. One could argue that humans, by virtue of their capacities as rational actors, are, in a sense, divine (cf. Psalm 8). This pitfall may only apply when this axiological anthropocentrism is supported by the ontological anthropocentric assumption that humans can decide what is valuable; definitely, Biblical material does not give warrants for such an anthropocentrism.

[19]   Cf. Theo A. Boer and Egbert Schroten, "Life and Death Seen from a Dutch Reformed Position," in: Lars Östnor (ed.), *Bioetikk og teologi. Rapport fra Nordisk teologisk nettverk for bioetikks workshop i Stockholm 27.-29. september 1996* (Oslo: Nordisk teologisk nettverk for bioetikk, 1996), pp. 36-7.

[20]   "Interdependence, Finitude, and Sin," p. 165.

[21]   *The Contribution of Theology to Medical Ethics*, p. 32.

[22]   This element is forcefully present in Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics. It is one of the reasons why "religion" and "ethics" in Reformed theology are so closely intertwined: even worship of God is, in a way, a form of moral action, and even piety is a moral disposition.

[23]   If Gustafson's conception of "God" had not become darkened by the clouds of empiricism (especially where it comes to the element of God's personhood), Theocentric Ethics would certainly have had a stronger critical and prophetic appeal to contemporary theological ethics. Its criticism seems to not be strong enough to convince the real axiological anthropocentrical diehards.

[24]   Outka describes *universalism* as follows: "First, basic moral beliefs are known or apprehended through 'reason' rather than 'revelation'; they are available across cultures and historical periods, at least implicitly, in the science that it is common to all human being, to believers, agnostics, and atheists.

Now, however diligently one may look for an ethics without particularistic elements, one is hardly likely to succeed. To be sure, some theories are more universalistic or rational than others. But no theory is fully untouched by the element of particularism. But granted that particularism in the epistemology of ethics may be unavoidable, does that make it desirable? To begin, let us take a look at the concept of particularism. Its most common interpretation, in contrast to universalism and moral autonomy, is its allowance that historical or personalistic elements receive a special epistemological or ontological authority. To some, the term "moral authority" is a *contradictio in terminis*: morality is known by and rooted in human reason or the human conscience.

This, however, raises the question about the exact content of its alternative, "moral autonomy." Kant's interpretation of autonomy certainly does not assume that morality finds its origin in the individual rationality. It implies voluntary compliance to a given set of universalizable moral rules. For Kant, the categorical imperative could very well be part of the God-created ordering of things. What made his ethics autonomous was that the individual by means of her rational and volitional capacities had to make the categorical imperative her own. To be sure, this excluded the need for special revelation, theological terminology, historic particularities, or moral traditions.[25] But whether morals can be known by particular means, or by reason alone, is not the main issue. The main issue is that even Kantian ethics assumes the authority of a morality which transcends individual preferences and judgments.[26]

Optimism about Human Rationality

Despite the fact that Kant's ethics is ontologically heteronomous, it is optimistic about the epistemic qualities of human beings. Now what exactly is meant by reason or, to quote a contemporary mouthpiece of Kant, "logic and the facts?"[27] As MacIntyre has shown, the outcome of a process of moral reasoning, however rational, objective, or impartial we deem it to be, is largely conditioned by implicit substantive theoretical and normative surmises.[28] James Gustafson, as we saw, strongly agrees with this position.[29] In morals, as in any other realm where practices and theories intertwine, there is no such thing as a *tabula rasa*. Even those who argue that there is a rational, impartial and objective starting point, end up having different *tabulae* with different outcomes as a consequence of what Don Cupitt calls a "leap of reason."[30] One might humbly blame one's own method—which apparently needs further perfection— for this, or one might find imperfection in the method and stance of one's adversaries, but this hardly brings us closer to a solution.

Despite the differences, modern analytical ethics[31] has a number of features in common: (1) it stresses the need to use the proper methods and tools in order to identify and describe a moral

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Second, these moral beliefs are entirely or sufficiently justified without recourse to particular beliefs and practices that distinguish certain communities, including religious ones. Third, the class of those to whom basic moral beliefs apply is conterminous with the human race, and the moral obligations that trump are ones that as far as possible disengage from, and are comprehensible independently of, particular moral contexts." Gene Outka, "The Particularist Turn in Theological and Philosophical Ethics," Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1996), p. 96.

[25] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in L.W. Beck, trans. and ed., *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

[26] Cf. Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular: The Dilemma of the Traditional Conscience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 151ff.

[27] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, p. 6.

[28] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

[29] Hence, it is all the more strange that Porter argues that Gustafson wants to "establish an account of morality that would be compelling to anyone" (Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue. The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1989], p. 175).

[30] Don Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason*. Studies in Philosophy and Religion (London: Sheldon Press, 1976).

[31] Stout mockingly defines *analytic philosophy* as "love of technical reason; what philosophy became under the pressures of professionalization and modernist ideology in English speaking universities" (Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 296).

problem—even to the extent that some theories argue that the use of the right procedure will automatically yield the right outcome; (2) it stresses the role of human epistemological abilities in discerning what is right and good; (3) it shares the view that whoever allows particularistic elements not only as part of the "raw material" for a moral assessment, but also as methodological devices that steer the process of ethics, is in serious philosophical trouble; (4) it shares the view that moral and religious elements should be separated; and (5) it shares the view that in a pluralistic society, a broad (inter-)moral discourse should be pursued.

In fact, it does seem almost self-evident that rational analysis in the light of logic, language, and facts is required. With just procedures and methods, we are more likely to yield right outcomes than without them. When a moral problem is adequately described and analyzed, we are already halfway down the road to its solution. All this is not the issue here. The question is: what about the rest of the road? The potentials of a proceduralistic form of ethics have often been exaggerated. In an increasingly pluralistic society, anyone can observe that rational methods do not yield a moral consensus. However alluring a Rawlsian *original position* may be, it is more a paradise lost than an accessible reality.

Postmodern Pragmatism

As a reaction to an old fashioned optimism about the epistemic possibilities of human reason, one can observe a marriage of traditional rationalistic theories and postmodern pragmatism. Be it out of real philosophical conviction, or just out of a resigned pragmatism, postmodernism argues that reality should be dealt with bit by bit because, as Rorty says, an overall view of reality "As It Is" is impossible.[32] The marriage between rationalism and relativism consists in a consensus about the need to concentrate on analyzing practical moral problems and on applying right procedures instead of claiming to know what can be called "just outcomes". However, in Stout's words, preoccupation with method is like clearing your throat[33]—indispensable as it may be, the real thing has yet to start.

Modern and postmodern ethics resemble a grocery store. The tools one needs are a shopping cart, knowledge how to read the customer information, and a credit card. The product information should be as uniformized and accessible as possible, so that the different products can be compared in compatible terms. What the customers should buy, however, has eventually to be decided by themselves. By analogy, a postmodern ethics comprises a method which is universally shared by and accessible to all, and a substance which is subject to particularistic preferences and views of individuals or groups. About these preferences, there is little or no debate, because there are no external material criteria to evaluate them.

Hollenbach argues that normative ethics is a way of living,[34] in which method and substance can be distinguished, but not separated. Many others, not in the least James M. Gustafson, have argued in the same way. However value-free a postmodern ethics may seem to be, its method and substance are interdependent and its rationality is contextual, that is, nourished by theoretical and normative convictions which are a mixture of a number of different worldviews,[35] in combination

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[32]   As the Dutch post-modernist politician Wolffensperger stated in a television interview, "the time is over when ideologies steer our political decisions. Instead, we should solve our problems in the light of the future." One wonders how many in his audience will have noticed the category mistake behind this alternative. One of the foremost advocates of post-modernism is Richard Rorty. See, e.g. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53, (1980). For a description of post-modernism and related terms like "antifoundationalism" and "neo-pragmatism," see Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 25, nr 2, 1996; Christina L.H. Traina, "Creating a Global Discourse in a Pluralist World: Strategies from Environmental Ethics," in Cahill and Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics*; Stout, *Ethics After Babel*.

[33]   Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, p. 163.

[34]   David Hollenbach, S.J., 'Tradition, Historicity, and Truth in Theological Ethics,' in Cahill and Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics*, p. 72.

[35]   E.g., elements from the Jewish, Christian, and humanistic tradition, but also elements from stoic, Hindu, and Buddhist views.

with a massive input from theories and explanations in the natural and social sciences. Just as a department store is only one out of many places to do your shopping, an ethics which stresses methods and procedures is as much based on a normative choice as any other ethics which it criticizes. The question, then, is not: which system of ethics transcends particularism? Rather, the issue is: which system of ethics is most honestly aware of its own inner normativity?

9.6   Confidence in Tradition and Authority

Christ as the Authoritative Pattern

From a Reformed point of view, there is reason for sound scepticism concerning human capacities to attain moral norms through reason alone. It is believed that adequate and comprehensive knowledge about the moral law is found only through revelation. Particular historical experiences are interpreted as God's actions and God's words to humanity. From the endless variety of norms and values which surround humanity, a choice is made in favor of one paradigm which sets the interpretative moral framework. This paradigm is Christ, the incarnation of what God wants us to be and to do.[36] Taking the historical person of Christ as the starting point, a range of human experiences, hopes, and fears receives a meaning, a place, and a direction. Now although a postmodernist could agree to all this, he would deny this interpretative pattern a universal bearing. Thus, whereas the rationalist says, "particularistic elements should be abandoned," and the postmodernist, "different particularistic elements are meaningful to different people," Christian ethics assumes that although the epistemic means may be particularistic, their outcome is of universal significance and makes universal claims.

Prioritizing traditions or strands within a tradition is one form of "moral authority"—a topic to which we now turn. The concept of authority is met by some important objections, such as: does this mean that moral discourse in a pluralistic society is precluded? what about human accountability? is there any place for rationality? how can an ethics which is based on particularistic elements make claims about universalizability? is there no shared basis with ethics from other angles? Some of these objections will be discussed below. What needs to be stressed from the onset is that moral authority has a primarily positive content which is indispensable in ethics, namely "having confidence in."

Confidence versus Fear

Without confidence in the reliability and adequacy of our moral sources, no moral system can exist. There seem to be two related uses of authority: (1) using it in the process of moral education, or a motivating power for human action, and (2) using it as an element in the epistemology of morals. All human beings seem to accept some form of moral authority in the first sense, for example, in the period of moral upbringing. However, moral authority seems to be even more inherent to the process of a establishing a normative theory or an action theory than is often admitted. Whether one assumes a revelatory concept of moral truth, a cumulative concept of truth, or a more revolutionary concept,[37] tradition continues to play a role, whether one uses and develops it, alters it, or abandons it altogether.

The number of people who adhere to a theory, or to a set of norms, may be an indicator of its truth and adequacy, but this link is fairly loose. Much of what is taken for granted as true or right is the result of bitter and brave fights by individuals who defied the majority's received opinion,

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[36]   An allusion to Gustafson's more loose view of Christ as "*an* incarnation of theocentric piety" or "*an* embodiment of what we are to be and to do" (*Theology and Ethics*, p. 276, and "A Response to Critics," p. 197, *italics* added). Cf. ("The Idea of Christian Ethics," p. 692), "The singular and determinative event for interpreting the Divine for Christians is Jesus Christ, and thus, in one way or another, for ethics to be Christian they must be grounded in some interpretation of his person and/ or work." See also section 5.8 of this study, and "All Things in Relation to God," p. 102.

[37]   See Bo Hanson, *Metod eller anarki: Moderna teorier om vetenskapens väsen och metoder* (Avesta and Lund: Doxa, 1982), p. 14.

whether in the physical sciences, the humanities, or religion and morals. On the other hand, one should take heed not to assume too rigid a pattern, according to which creativity, freedom, courage, and abandonment of old ways are set against adherence to a tradition and the fearful, rigid acceptance of authority.

To be sure, cumulation, conservatism, and fundamentalism can be motivated by fear—of punishment, of insecurity when bereft of a solid normative pattern, of social isolation, and such. They may be motivated by blind submission to authority. In all these cases, secondary considerations, such as the instrumental value of a theory, threaten to obscure considerations about its truth or goodness. The adherence to a tradition and the capacity to develop it creatively, presuppose a rational creativity and a volitional freedom which are incompatible with fear and insecurity. If, in a process of actualization of a tradition, creative powers are to be released, this can only take place on the condition that this presumed authority is somehow based on goodness and trustworthiness.[38]

The strength of Theocentric Ethics is that it combines respect for the goodness and adequacy of a tradition with a search for interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue, and an open mind for what are believed to be facts and theories in the natural and social sciences. It is a challenge to bring this into a fruitful interaction with the inalienable particularistic elements of the Christian tradition. But we did raise the question whether, at the end of the day, the balance does not tilt towards giving a postmodern empiristic worldview an unwarranted priority.

Confidence Applied to Morality

When it comes to applying the concept of confidence and authority to a moral context, it may be meaningful to make some remarks. First, there is no clear separation between "facts" and "norms." Information and action-guiding directives are closely related. When we rent a car, some may try to figure out how it works and why it works. Most people, however, simply trust *that* it will work and act accordingly. When the signal indicates, "Brakes," we will release the parking brake, and when it says, "Fuel empty," we will drive to the nearest gas station. We trust in the accuracy of these signals, not only as an indication of factualities, but also as action guiding benchmarks. There is nothing strange about this; rather, it would be remarkable if we would have trust in the theoretical elements, and *not* follow the directives.

Furthermore, we may distinguish between situations where non-compliance to the directives leads to immediate consequences, and situations where this is not the case. Only in a limited number of situations, will we be able to personally witness what happens if directives are not followed; sometimes, the consequences will occur much later, or they may concern people in a distant place or time; sometimes, there are no certain consequences, but only chances or probabilities involved; in extreme cases, we do not even have a clue about the *rationale* behind an admonition or an advice.[39] In all these cases, the force of a directive depends on the trust put in its issuer or advocate.

In daily life, a directive or an advice always implies, by definition, that there is a personal issuer or actor, whether directly or indirectly.[40] As soon as we start doubting that there is a personal

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[38]   To be sure, we follow a tradition because we were brought up in it or educated in it. But one will not very likely stay within a tradition (especially not in a pluralistic age), unless one has confidence in it.

[39]   Only in situations where this is not possible (and where one doesn't even have a clue as to the aim of a directive), a rule may be felt as a taboo. Following is the story of how a taboo can originate. Ten gorillas are living in a room. In the middle of the room, there is a cord which, when pulled, releases a shower which within seconds will make the gorillas wet. Since apes don't like water, they will stop pulling the cord as soon as they discover the causal sequence, and by a social mechanism they will prevent each other from pulling it. After some time, a gorilla dies and is replaced by another one. Although he does not know about the shower, he will be taught never to pull the cord. As the years go by, all original gorillas die and are replaced. Still, no gorilla will ever dare to pull the cord. Thus, a *taboo* is established.

[40]   This pertains even to situations of personal experience ("don't play with fire"), because this presupposes that we trust our own experience and the inferences made thereby as reliable issuers of normative rules. This, of course, raises difficulties concerning the possibility that one and the same person can be both the issuer and follower of a rule. Likewise, it may pertain to, e.g., the "directives" of a machine or a computer, which we assume to have been programmed by human intelligence.

intelligence or rationality behind a directive or a rule, it looses its character as a norm. In other words: confidence in the reliability of information or advice is always in some way or another related to the assumption that behind this advice stands a person whom one can trust—either as an issuer of the rule, or as a means through which a rule is mediated. It seems hard to imagine that morality, if it does not stem from the human will, can only survive if one assumes, in some way or another, a personal issuer.[41]

Additionally, the *sort* of relation that is present (or absent) between the moral actor and the personal issuer should be specified, because it defines both the degree of confidence and the extent to which kinds of authority or appeal are present. The trust one has for a physician is different from the trust one has for a neighbor, a Swede, a philosopher, a mentally handicapped person, a bike rider, a mentor, a Roman Catholic, or a husband. Not all relationships of trust have moral dimensions but, conversely, it is certainly warranted to presume that trustworthiness is a necessary attribute to guidance in moral issues. Other things being equal, one would trust a person with proper knowledge more than a person without it; a friend more than an enemy; one's parents more than one's neighbor; a "good" person more than a "bad" one; an old aged person more than a child; a mentor more than an intern; and a person more than a thing.

Trust in God

What kind of trust do we assume in relation to God? This depends on two groups of factors. First, it depends on whether we view God as personal, good, just, transcendent, united, and so on. And, secondly, it depends on the relations we assume between God and humans.

As we argued, confidence is always conditioned by considerations of truth and goodness. Be it in the realm of facts, or of values, one does not trust other persons unless one assumes that what they teach is true, adequate, and just. Two plus two will never make five, even when my maths teacher tells me so. As MacIntyre suggests, the acceptance of God's will as normative for human action should be combined with an understanding of authority grounded in justice.[42] If authority, interpreted as confidence, rules out standards of truth, adequacy, or goodness, we have reason for sound suspicion.[43]

Different types and levels of relationships yield different degrees of confidence. The one who, for one person, is a friend, may, for someone else, be a shallow acquaintance. Likewise, what for one person or group of persons is a source of moral authority, is for other individuals or groups an irrelevant tradition. What for some persons is God, is for others a mental projection of an old man with a beard. Our conception of "God" is crucial for the kind of confidence and moral authority we deem him to have. Potentially, confidence in God is the highest form of trust, and by consequence, it yields the most comprehensive form of moral authority. Gustafson has made clear that the Reformed tradition has clear implications for morality, although we indicated that the forced abandonment of God's personhood and moral goodness implies the loss of a genuine component of Reformed ethics.[44]

From a Reformed perspective, the relation of God to the good can be stated in a number of

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[41]   In this option, the possibility that a "reality" which is assumed to be impersonal, has a moral appeal to humans, seems highly problematic.

[42]   MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Even a Christian missionary like Cotterell claims that a Christian view, based on the authority of Scripture, "will not . . . outrage common sense and our common ideas of justice. The Lord of all the earth does what is right" (Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* [Melksham: Comwell Press, 1990], p. 83).

[43]   The question here is and remains whether we have an opinion of justice *prior* to the acceptance of divine or scriptural authority. This discussion runs parallel to the question whether something is good because God commands it, or whether God commands something because it is good. In sections 5.5 and 5.6, it is argued that this question is meaningless on the level of ultimate considerations.

[44]   Among other things, this is compensated by the moral appeal of people "in God's name": Christ, as an outstanding incarnation of theocentric piety and fidelity (*Theology and Ethics*, p. 276. See section 5.8 of this study) and anyone who in one way or the other embodies the right moral character. In Theocentric Ethics, even the impersonalistic parts of reality transmit a certain moral appeal, similar to Loegstrup's *ethical demand* (Knud E. Loegstrup, *Den etiske fordring* [Köbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1956]).

different ways. First, there is a causal relationship. It is confessed that God created the good, that is, the conditions for morality, the conditions for human and nonhuman well-being, and the capacities for rational reflection. Secondly, it is assumed that natural human epistemic capacities are corrupted to such a degree, that without God's light on moral issues—through Scripture, prayer, and rational reflection on these elements—, human beings would not be able to find the proper morality. This is not to say that without revelation there can be no moral truth. Clearly, even a revelational positivist like Karl Barth speaks about the "lights of the world." The assumption that humankind needs divine revelation does not entail a comparative claim that Christian morality is better.[45] Rather, it is the assumption that, once a person is committed to Christ, her perceptions will never be the same. What is at stake, is the contention that Christianity has moral consequences for the community of believers. Thirdly, from a Reformed perspective we can say that what is good is substantially dependent on God's will. There is, in other words, no independent morality prior to God, and which God might or might not accept. Rather, the will of God is the basis for what is good and right. Ultimate moral considerations and ultimate theological considerations converge in our doctrine of God. And, finally, we can say that there is an identity relationship, namely, God and the highest good are identical.[46]

From a normative religious point of view, a number of philosophical and theological moral theories exhibit an optimism which seems unwarranted in the light of what we know about humanity. Rationalism, ontological or epistemological autonomy, or universalism are not goals in themselves. They are only meaningful as long as it is assumed that there is no God, just as it is only meaningful to send letters by bottle when there is no electronic mail available.

Characteristics of Theonomous Autonomy

In Reformed ethics, the claims of human autonomy are thus heavily qualified. Reformed ethics implies the claim that one should be principally prepared to give up claims of epistemological or ontological autonomy. The incorporation of particularistic elements and the acceptance of moral authority can take place only under a number of conditions. These are universalizability, dialogue between moral views, maximal rationality, accountability, and freedom from human paternalism.

(1) Universalizability and Universality. No theory can be called "moral" unless it presupposes that its norms are universalizable: equal cases should be treated equal under relevantly equal conditions. Christian ethics is no exception. However, universality should not be interpreted as an epistemological category (saying that the epistemic means to arrive at a norm should be exempt from elements which are not accessible to all rational persons). As Outka points out, particularity implies claiming to have epistemological access to certain normative sources, which would not be accessible by other means.

> If all that Christian beliefs and practices accomplish tells us in a loud voice what we otherwise may know and do (e.g., by independently founded philosophical schemes), then we trivialize commitment to historic particularity.[47]

In Christian ethics, elements from history or tradition are believed to reflect normative aspects of reality itself, not just normative aspects of a subjective human consciousness. Ascribing Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount normative ethical priority is done with the assumption that these norms are not only *interesting*, *beautiful*, or *attractive* to some, but that they are *good* and *right for all*.[48]

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[45]   One may be convinced that this is the case, but this is contingent rather than necessary.

[46]   In section 5.5.2, we suggested that "God" and "the good" can be linked in a fifth manner, namely conceptually. This means that the concepts of good, bad, right, and evil, are linked with the concept of God by means of linguistic convention.

[47]   Outka speaks about the "fear of redundancy" (*The Particularist Turn in Theological and Philosophical Ethics*, p. 94-5).

[48]   Clearly, Gustafson is much more hesitant in this respect. Still, he observes that "Christianity has always claimed its historical particularity—the biblical events and their records—to have universal significance and import" (*Theology and Ethics*, p. 68).

Different human interests, as well as human and nonhuman interests may collide. Gustafson makes a point of stressing that what is good for A, is not necessarily good for B. On a premoral level, it may be meaningful to stress the contextuality of human and nonhuman good.[49] But despite incommensurable interests, the question whether something is morally right has universal dimensions. Moreover, different contexts may necessitate different norms in different cultures, but this does not preclude universal significance. Rather, it is applying universal norms to a concrete practice.

(2) Intermoral Dialogue and a Quest for Consensus. Notwithstanding the differences in rationality and epistemology (and in claims about them), every system of normative ethics comprises to varying degrees elements of moral authority and particularism. Descriptively, the elements which all theories have in common (both in method and in substance), seem to provide a sufficient basis for intermoral discourse. From a normative perspective, discourse is both possible and desirable. For one thing, even some more radical revelationalist positions in the Reformed tradition would agree with Barth's notion of "lights of the world," implying that moral truth can be found across the world and throughout history, provided that the norms for assessing truth are coherent with a Christocentric approach (and *vice versa*).

Another reason for moral discourse is that it is needed as an instrument to attain the goals of the different moralities. Peace, concerted action for a sustainable development, conditions for personal development, stable political systems, and so on, are a basis on top of which adherents of different systems of ethics and worldviews can pursue their own, specific goals. Moreover, dialogue and peace are not only means to pursue different goals, but the goals of most ethics as well, including a theocentric approach.

Seeking discourse, however, does not mean the quest for a moral consensus at any price.[50] In order to bring about a dialogue between different systems of ethics and worldviews, pluralistic elements should be articulated rather than evened.[51] This presupposes that an atmosphere of respect and confidence undergirds the process of discourse, and it presupposes the ability of the parties to articulate their own views in a way which is understandable and relevant. This entails a description both of elements that one has in common with others, and of elements where the lines diverge.

(3) Maximum Rationality. Dwyer makes an important point in stressing that a religious contribution to ethics does reinforce, rather than decrease its rationality.[52] Acceptance of authority does not take away the moral actor's responsibility to make a rational decision and does not erase his accountability for actions or dispositions that are pursued. Rationality plays a part on three levels. To begin with, the initial choice to accept authority and to grant particularistic elements a certain priority, requires a conscious choice. This choice, unless simply motivated by fear or compulsion, is supported by information, rational abilities, and emotional and volitional capacities. Secondly, there is, in the words of Martin Luther, the level of the "daily conversion," that is, the continuous process of affirming and evaluating this initial commitment over against alternative courses. And, thirdly, no moral authority can replace the Kierkegaardian *Augenblick* or *momentum*. Any human decision involves an evaluation of the arguments pro and con, however rapid, short, or partial such an evaluation may be. Accepting divine authority may be very well compatible with Kantian autonomy as a human act of rational will to comply with the universal moral law. Accepting the concept of moral authority,

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[49] For an analysis of Gustafson's view on the contextuality of the good ("Good for whom?" "Good for what?"), see section 5.5.3.

[50] Two levels should be distinguished here: the level of personal convictions and the level of agreement. A moral discourse may cause someone to change her views, which may lead to a consensus of personal moral convictions. When these convictions continue to diverge, however, a consensus comprises only the greatest common denominator.

[51] Cf. William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 154-174. Placher pleads for an authentic Christian contribution combined with a quest for communication and understanding.

[52] Dwyer, *Foundations of Christian Ethics*, pp. 175ff.

implies what Mouw calls "indirect justification,"[53] that is, one assumes that the one who commands, has valid reasons for issuing the command, and, in turn, one has valid reasons to have confidence in this authority.

(4) Accountability. In a way, moral authority reinforces human accountability instead of weakening it. Some of the most powerful illustrations of human accountability are found in the Biblical accounts according to which the first humans (to Adam: "where art thou?" to Cain: "where is Abel thy brother?"[54]) are confronted with the presence of a just and loving God as a warrant and a guard for the humanity of their behavior. A concept of accountability has three elements: (a) a human agent is accountable (b) for pursuing certain actions or dispositions, (c) over against others.[55] The question "why did you do this?" not only continues to be meaningful in a religious context, it even gains poignancy and relevance, because humans are accountable not only over against themselves and fellow humans, but also to God.[56] The highly social character of morality is illustrated and reinforced by the assumption that God, the creator of the universe, the issuer of moral commands, the source of all that is good and right, the highest "Thou," holds humans accountable for their actions. In the Christian creed, it is confessed that God incarnated as a human being and by the Spirit comes closer to humans than anyone ever can get. The effect is a form of conditioned autonomy or, in the words of Böckle, theonomous autonomy.[57]

(5) Freedom from Human Paternalism. Although from a theocentric perspective, human autonomy is bound to several limitations, it is important to stress that it principally refers to human relations to God, not to interhuman relationships. The concept of moral authority is not intended to give certain human beings power or authority over others.[58] In this respect, the Reformed notion of the priesthood of all believers plays an important role.[59] A theological realist position (which says that there *is* a God, apart from the religious community or the individual religious consciousness), in combination with the concept of the priesthood of all believers, provides a position in which the moral accountability of the individual is enhanced to a degree which equates the moral freedom of Kantianism.[60]

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[53] Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 27-8.

[54] Genesis 3:9, 4:9, *King James Version*.

[55] E.g., (a) a babysitter bears responsibility (b) for a child (c) over against its parents. Just like we raised the question whether human beings can be the issuer of their own commands, it is questionable whether humans can be accountable over against themselves.

[56] To be sure, one might try to live heroically *etsi Deus non daretur*. This usually implies the assumption that the most proper forms of morals do exist without a big brother who issues moral commands and who holds humans accountable. This objection, however, is only relevant when convictions concerning the existence of God are an option open to human choice.

[57] "God has destined humans to be acting subjects in history . . . Rather than taking away human responsibility . . . , faith authorizes and empowers to this responsibility." Franz Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral* (München: Kösel-verlag, 1977), p. 233; and "Theonome Autonomie: Zur Auf-gabenstellung einer fundamentalen Moraltheologie," in J. Gründel, F. Rauh, V. Eid (eds.), *Humanum: Moraltheologie im Dienst des Menschen. Festschrift für R. Egenter* (Düsseldorf 1972), pp. 17-46.

[58] We can see a clear difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant ethics. In the former, the divine authority in moral issues is mediated through human beings, even though the human conscience is believed to have the final say.

[59] In the same manner, the Roman Catholics refer to the individual believer's conscience as the ultimate moral "authority" which cannot be overruled by any considerations of ecclesiastical hierarchy.

[60] To be sure, this conclusion has a critical bearing both on fundamentalist religious notions about human freedom, and on modern misconceptions about the nature of Kantian autonomy! Cf. Harry M. Kuitert, *Een gewenste dood: Euthanasie en zelfbeschikking als moreel en godsdienstig probleem* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1981); Boer et al., *Zorgen met visie*.

9.7 The Form of Human Self-Restraint

Introduction: Does It Matter?

Until now, we have argued that a Christian, and especially a Reformed, view on morals implies that humans refrain from claiming certain forms of axiological, ontological, and epistemological autonomy. From a theistic point of view, the answer to the question concerning the extent of human autonomy is basically a religious answer. This answer is more down to earth than one might think: one's view on human autonomy may have immediate bearing on the way in which human social life and human life in the world are developed.

Now one does not need to be religious to recognize that there are limits to human action. Therefore, the religious issue starts when it comes to the question whether we should accept this finiteness, and what we do with the possibilities that remain.[61] The principal questions can be formulated as follows: should humans try to gain as much control as they can? Should only factual limitations hold us back from gaining more control, or should humans refrain from exercising certain control, even if they are able to?

The main reasons for human self-constraint in contemporary applied ethics seem to be all but deontological. For instance, we fear the adverse consequences of our powers now or in the future, especially since we do not exhaustively know the possible effects of our actions. In this option, to give an example, the development and use of human cloning techniques will be acceptable as soon as we are sure that there are no risks beyond an acceptable level. Refraining from the use or development of certain powers is not motivated by a moral deontological principle, but simply because the price to pay is too high.

One of the side effects of recent human progress in technology and medicine is that human self-conception becomes permeated by a sense of ever growing possibilities. Alluding to the traditional "ought implies can," a widespread moral assumption is that "can implies 'cannot be intrinsically wrong'."[62] Not that this would make an unlimited extension of human powers compulsory or even commendable. Such a stance would be incompatible with a pluralistic ethics, in which all can pursue their own goals as long as they do not disproportionably affect the interests of other individuals, or the common good. As has been the case with many recent developments, appeal to the liberty to pursue one's own aspirations is seen as justification as long as there is not disproportionate interference with similar rights of others. In the Western culture on the threshold of the twenty-first century, the sky is the limit, not because we do not want to pass beyond it, but because we cannot pass beyond it. In pursuing both human well-being and the development of human potentials, the limits of human action seem to be factual rather moral or voluntary. Let us for the sake of the subsequent argument describe this as the "Humans should play God" position.

"Playing God?"

Interestingly enough, "playing God," even to those who barely call themselves "religious," seems wrong by definition, just as "murder," "deceit," and "anthropocentrism" are wrong by virtue of their implicit moral stipulations.[63] Thus, as Schroten points out, playing God does not mean "stepping

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61 Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 170.

62 A trained ethicist knows that he will be able to make a case for any form of human intervention, however absurd, or far-fetched this may be. In the hypothetical case that human beings would be able to have and use four hands as a result of genetic engineering, other things being equal, there would be no conclusive moral argument against it. In the far-fetched case that human beings would be able to revitalize dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals, an ethical committee would probably recommend that this is acceptable under the condition that due moral caution is exercised. The list could be endless: colonizing other planets, postponing human death to the age of 140 years, growing tomatoes on Greenland, reviving ancient philosophers . . .

63 Of course, one might argue that "playing God" is not wrong, but absurd. As a form of playing, it is by definition not a part of real life. Moreover, it is a joke to compare humans to God, because they lack the power and transcendence which are implied in the term. In other words: these two characteristics merely indicate that "playing God" is impossible, not that it is morally undesirable.

beyond the limits of our factual capacities,"[64] but rather "stepping beyond our moral limits." The philosophical question is whether God, if he existed, would really matter. Of course, the philosopher will ask: What do you mean by "God?" Do we know anything about "him," "her," "they", or "it"? Is "he" a "person," in essential respects comparable to human agents? Are "his" "actions" "guided" by "principles," moral or nonmoral? Does he have any power over human beings? Is his power affected by human agency? Does he have any interest, approvingly or disapprovingly, in human actions? What is our relationship to him: do we "owe" him our existence or our well-being? However philosophical the questions may be, their answers cannot be established philosophically. No rational principle will tell us casuistically something like "if there is a God, and he is a person who has power over human beings, etc., then we should obey whatever he commands, unless his commands are contrary to our norms x . . . z." We cannot shape a descriptive and normative framework which helps us to understand the universe and which guides our actions, prior to and independent from our convictions about the existence and characteristics of a God.

One commonly finds philosophies of religion, or moral philosophies, which start without any theological *prolegomena*, but which nevertheless allow theology to provide the finishing touch. The initial philosophical assumptions function, together with some additional theological affirmations, in a peaceful co-existence. One might wonder what has gone wrong: what is the deity we are talking about? Has this "God" a merely constructivist function? Put in a more challenging way: if one starts from the conviction that "God" does not matter, initially and methodologically, this is not done prior to this person's view of God. Rather, this conviction reflects an already present normative theology.[65]

Conclusions

The question "may human beings play God?" seems not very relevant. Those who have a sense of the divine would not even ask the question, whereas those who do not have such a sense, may well have reason to stop asking a merely rhetorical question.[66] The point is that experiences of God are very likely to have direct bearing on both the perspective, method, and outcome of our ethics, so that those who have a "sense of the Divine" are likely to also have a sense not only of factual, but also of normative limitations to human conduct. When one cannot think of a universe without God, why would one even try to do so?

Does all this mean that a theocentric perspective has no relevance in a secular context? The answer is ambiguous, as we can go in two directions. One is to embrace Gustafson's own allusions concerning the absence of divine personhood, and about the identity of "God" and "nature." We did indeed identify Gustafson's personalistic vocabulary concerning God as a constructivist dome on an otherwise realist building. Following this line, "God," despite its conceptional centrality, is not very much unlike anything which "bears down upon us and sustains us," whether we call it "God," "the cosmos," "being," or "the whole." Interpreted in this sense, Theocentric Ethics has a secular appeal, but the width of the appeal exists at the expense of the depth and poignancy that characterize the Reformed tradition. When, however, we interpret and elaborate Theocentric Ethics in the light of the Reformed tradition, and once again grant conceptions about God's personhood, will, and transcendence a more central place, the secular appeal might become less convincing. On the other

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[64] In Schroten's words (Egbert Schroten, "Playing God: Some Theological Comments on a Metaphor" in Van den Brink et al [eds.], *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*, p. 190): "Can humans jump over the shadow of their own finite existence and play God's role?"

[65] One might, as Dwyer has done, try to restate the issue in a nearly "secular" way: "The division between believers and unbelievers in our day is not between those who use the word 'God' with confidence and those in whose vocabulary the word 'God' does not appear. It is rather the division between those who hold to a moral relativism whose ultimate principle is 'I must do whatever I *feel* is right for me,' and those who recognize that there are objective values in life, which lay claim to us before we know it and whether or not we like it" (*Foundations of Christian Ethics*, p. 1). In this construal, "God" has become a function of morality.

[66] Schroten, on the basis of notions concerning the *imago* and the *analogia actionis Dei*, argues that humans are even called to "play God," but he hastens to add that " 'playing God' is not 'being God'!" ("Playing God," p. 194)

hand, it challenges contemporary ethics in a more critical and radical way.

8.8   Science, Theology, and Ethics

Introduction

One of the things Gustafson has put on the agenda of theological ethics is the need to bring ethics, theology, and the sciences into a proper relation. Basic to this approach are the following two assumptions. First, theological realism: When we say something theological, we say something about how things really and ultimately are. Theology and the sciences deal with one and the same reality. And, secondly, the contention that the "oughtness of things is grounded in their isness." The first assumption runs counter to a widespread tendency in favor of theological constructivism, while the second runs contrary to a similarly popular conviction that facts and values are separated by an infinitely deep chasm.

The two contentions are courageous and necessary, but they are risky, too. We will concentrate here on the theological realism, which is closely linked to Troeltsch's integration criterion.[67] As in any situation in which two or more issues are linked, a link can be good or bad.[68] This depends on two features: the intensity of the relation (is it too loose or too tight?) and the interdisciplinary respect (do the sciences attempt to play the role of a worldview? does theology attempt to be a pseudoscience?).

In earlier parts of this study, we maintained that Theocentric Ethics assumes a strongly normative theology. Analogous to Karl Barth's all-pervading principle of faith, the element of piety as a "leap of faith" is crucial for Gustafson's theology.[69] But to what extent has this theological principle been strong enough to resist the challenge that any theology in any time will have to face: the challenge to maintain its own identity over against the *Zeitgeist*?

In the case of Gustafson, the *Zeitgeist* seems to have come in through the back door of the sciences. Of course, insofar as the sciences explain many facts, we had better rely on them. The point, however, is that the sciences might be more like theology in the aspect of being normative disciplines. The coherence, the effectiveness, and the scholarly and public appeal of a theory depend largely upon some of its structural hypotheses or axioms. There is nothing critical about this, as long as we are willing to admit that these explanatory elements are only hypothetical. Oftentimes, however, the tentative character of those elements is forgotten or denied, and the theory is presented as being beyond any doubt.

The Religious and Moral Claims of Evolutionism

One of the most compelling illustrations for this is the impact of evolutionism.[70] As most scholars concede, evolutionism lacks evidence in the sense of proof which meets scientific standards. The weaker the evidence, the more the acceptance of a theory leans on the absence of a convincing alternative, as well as by virtue of its appeal, its coherence, and its ability to "make sense of something."

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[67]   Cf. section 4.5.

[68]   In mountain climbing, two or more persons are joined by a rope. If one person falls, he will be saved because he is attached to the others. When the proper precautions are taken, this will save the lives of many. In some situations, however, the outcome is the opposite: the falling person draws the whole cordee into the crevasse.

[69]   In comparison: Gustafson's epistemology is circular and mutual: not only are our interpretations of the world and its meaning influenced and directed by our experiences of God, but also our interpretations of the deity are corrected by what we know about the world through the sciences. This feature of Gustafson's theology is not a coincidence, because it rests on some elements of natural theology that are forcefully present in Gustafson's thinking. For him, all of reality is in some way related to God, and from this assumption follows that one can know (aspects of) God—whether one is aware of it or not.

[70]   By this, we mean the theory which assumes that complex life forms come into existence only by developments out of simple life forms only by means of a natural "trial and error" selection.

The point here is not a pledge for creationism, nor is it a way to incorporate biology into theology. It is the reverse contention that modern evolutionism is an implicit theology. Darwin started with the hypothesis or the assumption that there is no personal God. How would a nonreligious person come to terms with a reality (including his own existence) which is complicated and highly developed? If we are convinced that there is no divine actor, we must necessarily conclude that life is a coincidence. Not the evidences, but the absence of an alternative give it its seemingly unmistakable character. Evolutionism is the result of the all-pervading influence of a nontheistic worldview. It reflects the human need to make sense of an assumed godless universe.

But whereas evolution theory is the only way out for the atheist, the theist has more options, such as that (1) evolutionism is wrong,[71] (2) it is partly right, and (3) essentially right. Deliberately left out here is the fourth option which says that evolutionism is fully right. No one can accept the widespread cultural automatism in which all conclusions of popular evolutionism are assumed as given, especially those which pertain to the possibilities of a metaphysical reality.

Evolutionism is about the origin life on the planet earth. In its boldest and most popular forms, it comprises anthropological assumptions, explains the origins of culture, morality, and religion, puts links between love, sex, and procreation, suggests human values in relation to the rest of the living world, and so on.[72] But although it has all the essentials of a worldview,[73] it is presented as a science. Those who prefer to retain a theistic worldview will simply have to replace "coinciden-ce" by "God." A theory, however, in which "God" can be completely restated in nontranscendent terms, will leave very little room for a God who transcends human reality and who is critical towards it.

A Clash between "God" and "Science"?

The current "truce with science" (Stout) of theology still rests on Schleiermacher's *adagium*: theology speaks only of piety, science speaks only of facts.[74] Stout calls this an "eternal covenant," intended to allot science and theology separate realms of human experience to cover, and to prohibit all trespassing of boundaries between the disciplines.[75] Schleiermacher did assume that the sciences have nothing to say about God (not even implicitly), and theology has nothing to say about reality, not even by implication. As we argued earlier,[76] such a separation can only hold for a theological constructivist.

Gustafson is one of the exceptions, which causes Stout to exclaim that "I can think of no recent writer who has struggled more valiantly or more honestly with theology's dilemma."[77] Because theology and the sciences deal with the same reality, modern science presents a challenge to Christian thought.[78] What begins, however, as a respectful dialogue between theology and the sciences in Gustafson's works, seems to end as a tragic monologue in which the latter, knowingly or not, dictate an implicit theology of hopelessness and *Diesseitigkeit*.

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71   De Cameron goes as far as to say that "evidence shows that life itself can only be the product of a superior, pre-existing intelligence" (Nigel M.de S. Cameron, *Evolution and the Authority of the Bible* [Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983], p. 123).

72   Notwithstanding the relatively general acceptance of evolutionism, however, there seem to be only few adherents to Social Darwinism, i.e., the strand which applies the concept of "survival of the fittest" to the context of interhuman relationships.

73   In chapter 2, we defined a worldview as a set of theoretical, normative, and affectional convictions, (1) shared by a social group, and consisting of (2) a comprehensive view about human beings, the world, and their interrelation (the cognitive element), (3) a central valuing system (the evaluative element) and (4) a basic attitude (the affectional element).

74   Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1928), pp. 76, 125.

75   Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, p. 178.

76   Section 2.3.3.

77   Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, p. 184.

78   There is certainly no reason for Porter's conclusion that " . . . the particular deliverances of modern science to which [Gustafson] refers do not present significant new challenges to Christian thought" (*The Recovery of Virtue*, p. 174).

Now to be sure, "[t]ruly to listen to the voice of science is to risk having one's vision transformed."[79] Thus, if science shows that some theoretical elements in a worldview are mistaken, a realist theology should draw the proper inferences. On the other hand, Gustafson seems to not fulfil all the expectations suggested by an theocentric epistemology and a theological normativity.

"God shall be God!", Gustafson exclaims at the end of his *magnum opus*, and in many other occasions he would, unlike many of his colleagues, make explicit reference to the all-surrounding presence of God.[80] Yet, many of his critics, both believing and nonbelieving, ask whether Gustafson's God makes any difference. Daniel Maguire calls it "post-Christian,"[81] McCormick finds it "utterly gloomy and eventually hopeless,"[82] and Stout quotes Mary Midgley: "If God is dead . . . why dress up in his clothes?" "If we know the house is empty, why ring the bell and run away?"[83] If our enterprise is the construal of a theology, assumptions about God should be more than footnotes in the margins of a scientific worldview. In order to be meaningful, any discipline should contain elements which cannot be translated in terms of other disciplines. Is, then, Gustafson's theology a form of humble self-abandonment? Stout implies this when he suggests that Calvinistic theology should extend the range of the "moral impulse against idolatry" to the remnants of theistic metaphysics itself.[84] In other words: with the tools handed over to us by Gustafson's construal, a following generation can finish the job and abandon the idea of theism altogether. Thus, not without reason, some scholars, while dismantling the last elements of the deity, prefer to use the term Theocentric Ethics as a synonym for biocentric ethics.

Why Theocentric Ethics is Still Theistic

Now clearly, the question whether the *theos* in Theocentric Ethics is as crucial and forceful as it suggests itself[85] is not entirely unwarranted.[86] Theocentric Ethics does not lend itself to rigoristic interpretations. This may not only be due to Gustafson's inability to give unambiguous descriptions of his own position; it may also be a consequence of the incapacity to view Gustafson's works in their particular context of Reformed tradition and piety. Half a bottle of milk may be "virtually full" for the optimist and "almost empty" for the pessimist, but both are rigorists. One can recall numerous attempts to interpret Barth as a non-theist or as a fundamentalist. In exactly the same way, the theoretical and normative elements of Theocentric Ethics may be interpreted too rigorously.

Not only for the interpretation of Theocentric Ethics, but also to be able to proceed beyond it, one needs to understand its nourishing context. Without the Christian community, without the Reformed tradition, without the experiences of a powerful Other, without piety as a central interpretative clue, Theocentric Ethics can neither be understood nor be passed on. To be sure, a range of interpretative difficulties is found throughout Theocentric Ethics. But this does not justify an "anything goes" attitude concerning its interpretation. Gustafson's affirmation that Theocentric Ethics is "Reformed, of sorts," is more than a side remark; it is an intention, a public declaration, and a clue for anyone who wants to grasp it. In chapter 4,[87] we argued that the main link between the Reformed tradition and Theocentric Ethics is to be found on the level of the "basic attitude," namely, "an

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79   Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 181.
80   See, e.g., the exclamation "Soli Deo Gloria!" in "A Brief, Unscholarly Afterword," in Cahill and Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics*, p. 382.
81   Daniel Maguire, "Book Review of Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. I" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 37 no. 3 (1982), pp. 256-259.
82   Richard A. McCormick, "Gustafson's God: Who? What? Where? (Etc.)," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol 13, No. 1 (Spring 1985), p. 56.
83   Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 181.
84   Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 183.
85   "The argument of this book is that for theological ethics the base point that ought to be most decisive is the interpretation of God," *Ethics and Theology*, p. 144. See also "Denial of God as God."
86   Cf. Peter, when commenting on the difficulties in the interpretation of Paul's letters, said, "in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction," II Peter 3:16, *King James Version*.
87   See section 4.4.1.3.

attitude of reverence and awe,"[88] "a sense of a powerful Other,"[89] a "sense that providence 'governs all things',"[90] "the inclination and will 'towards divine objects',"[91] "some fundamental attitudes toward God and the world,"[92] and the like.

9.10 The Reformed Tradition

Introduction: The Reformed Tradition

Douglas Ottati describes some of the main elements of the Reformed tradition as follows:

> The Reformed tradition in theology and ethics is a pattern of sapiential reflection that centers on an *apprehension of God and God's glory*. The decisive apprehension *influences the ways that other important aspects of knowledge of God and ourselves* are understood. The result is a convictional wisdom that *combines an evangelical respect for God's Word with an openness to all truth*, a *pessimism about human corruption* with an *optimism born of grace*, an attention to inward disposition with an insistence on outward standards and practices. The result is a manner of living that encourages us to *reorder all of life in response to God*.[93]

Ronald Preston adds to this characterization the elements of dynamics (as a consequence of its stress on the third use of law as a guide to personal and civic righteousness), and the concern for social and political action.[94] There are some striking resemblances with the main elements of Theocentric Ethics: the apprehension of God and God's glory, the way in which this apprehension influences other aspects of human knowledge, the combination of respect for tradition with openness to all truth, the pessimism about human corruption, the quest for an ethics of virtue and sanctification, and the attempt to "relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God."

When Is a Theory Part of a Tradition?

Theocentric Ethics *does* retain some of the core theoretical and normative elements of Calvinism, and the congeniality on the level of the basic attitude seems to be even more remarkable.[95] On the other hand, some vital elements of the Reformed tradition have been altered or left out, such as the depth and unconditional character of God's goodness, the salvific work of Christ, the final restoration of all things, and the epistemological significance of Scripture.[96]

What constitutes a worldview's belonging to a certain tradition? It can hardly be the full and comprehensive identity of all its theoretical and normative tenets. A tradition, by definition, is

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[88] *Theology and Ethics*, p. 165.

[89] *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 167.

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[91] *Ibid.*, 173.

[92] *Ethics and Theology*, p. 40.

[93] Douglas F. Ottati, "The Reformed Tradition in Theological Ethics," in: Cahill and Childress (eds.), *Christian Ethics*, p. 56, *italics* added. Elsewhere, Ottati mentions the element of God's sovereignty, *ibid.*, and *ibid.*, p. 54. See also Ottati, *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today's World*, 1995.

[94] Ronald H. Preston, *The Future of Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 38. De Kruijff interprets the Calvinistic tradition as a call to sanctification rather than to participation in the social and political debate. Gerrit C. De Kruijff, *Waakzaam en nuchter: Over christelijke ethiek in een democratie* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1994), pp. 230ff. Cf. Gerrit Manenschijn (ed.), *Christelijke ethiek in een democratie* (Kampen: Kok, 1995).

[95] Similarities which may be noticed by outsiders, are only one of the indications of belonging to a tradition. Of importance are two other elements. Gustafson's own explicit assertion (see above) that Theocentric Ethics belongs to the Reformed tradition, and, secondly, the fact that Theocentric Ethics is nourished within the Christian community.

[96] See section 5.9.

characterized by a mixture of continuity and change. On the other hand, at some point it may become seriously questionable whether a theory continues to be part of a tradition, and whether one still can meaningfully speak of Theocentric Ethics as "Reformed, of sorts." When does a tradition stop to be a tradition?

> Suppose that, at some future date, the famous Baileys Irish cream factory decided to revise its recipe? In the year 2001, vanilla is found to cause insomnia and is replaced by cinnamon and cloves; in 2038, whisky is shown to cause eye cataracts and is therefore replaced by red wine; in 2087, research shows that the combination of red wine and cream is not nearly as beneficial as the combination of red wine and lemon juice, and thus lemon juice is substituted for cream; and finally, in 2102 the company advises that this drink is much tastier if served hot, not cold. Now exactly at what moment should we stop speaking of Baileys and start using the term *Glühwein*? We should note that every generation retained more of the old than it replaced. Every individual change that was made, when seen in separation from other (earlier or later) adjustments, seemed to leave the tradition as such intact. But considered in combination with all other changes over the course of generations, one would hardly be able to recognize the beginning and end products (or, traditions) as one and the same.

We may roughly discern two views: one that stresses the historical continuity, and the other which stresses the substantial continuity. The former allows for discontinuities, even if this, in the long run, may mean that the original contents of this tradition are no longer recognizable. This view, which we find represented in Gadamer, is more interested in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a tradition, rather than in its content.[97] Baileys remains Baileys, even when all the ingredients have gradually been replaced. The alternative is to stress the continuity in content. Quentin Skinner also notices that a tradition contains a range of discontinuities, due to the fact that the circumstances change. In the end, however, he contends that a tradition should display a material continuity with its roots.[98] In this view, we could say that somewhere along the process, the product has reached a point where it can no longer be called Baileys.

It seems appropriate to assume that a tradition should somehow display both a historical and a substantive continuity with the past. It is not coincidental that some of the main revisions in the history of Christian theology contain elements which were elaborated *in the light of the early roots of its tradition*. The theological significance of Augustine, the Reformers, Barth, and others, is based on an intention to return to Scripture, to reread the historic sources in the light of a new era, and to interpret their own generation in the light of historic sources. Old concepts and norms were dusted off and became reinterpreted as *Gebote der Stunde*. Reviving a tradition logically implies respect for it. The motivating intention is not abandonment of a tradition, but rather abandonment of some elements which are believed to be incompatible with its main tenets.

Similarly, the theological significance of Theocentric Ethics is not merely its newness. Rather, it is the combination of reviving traditional concepts of God's sovereignty and glory, and relating it to the insights and circumstances at the end of the twentieth century. To a considerable extent, Gustafson's revisions of the Reformed tradition are in accordance with Calvinism itself. This applies especially to the elements of reverence for the divine sovereignty, to the importance of "is" for "ought," to the recognition of the seriousness of the human fault, to the quest for an ethics of duty and character, and to the realistic character of theology. The whole enterprise of Theocentric Ethics, including most of its revision, is another way to say that things are not true because we want them, or because we choose them. Rather, we should want and choose them because they are true. This deeply Reformed realism, its search for truth, even outside the divine revelation, is not a departure from, but the enhancement of this tradition.[99] Main tenets, such as God's personhood and the restoration of all

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97   See, e.g., Reiner Wiehl (ed.), *Die antike Philosophie in ihrer Bedeutung für die Gegenwart: Kolloquium zu Ehren des 80. Geburtstag des Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1981.

98   Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

99   For the element of truth in its relation to tradition, cf. David Hollenbach, S.J., "Tradition, Historicity,

things, are not abandoned because they are not liked, but because they are believed to be untenable and untrue.

Theocentric Ethics as the Beginning of New Interpretations

Inherent within the aspirations of Theocentric Ethics itself, then, is the question, what if the "consolations of traditional religion" are not mistaken? What if God's personhood and the restoration of all things have been all but falsified? What if the endless diversity and complexity of life forms on the earth, the unsurpassing intensity of Bach's Matthew passion or Brahms's German requiem, the indescribable beauty of both cultural and natural accomplishments, and the undescribable passions of love, would lead to the conclusion that there is a divine designer, personal, but endlessly wiser, more powerful and more loving than humans? What if the unspeakable human atrocities and environmental tragedies in the twentieth century would lead us to the conclusion of an evil which has transcendent dimensions, and which needs a transcendent solution? What if the narratives of liberation in the Old Testament, and of the resurrection of Christ from the dead in the New Testament, would convince us that no situation is so hopeless that God cannot make it right? Certainly, it would yield a different form of theocentric ethics than Gustafson's construal. But it would not be less theocentric, it would still be Reformed, and it would still be Christian.

When we ask ourselves the question, "what do ethics look like after Gustafson?", the answer depends on three conditions: on the audacity of future readers in ethics; more objectively, on the range of interpretative possibilities which are inherent to Theocentric Ethics; and on one's own understanding of what it means to interpret a tradition. As for the latter, it seems appropriate that one is not only justified, but also obligated, to interpret a theological view in the light of its own tradition. When the element of historical continuity is no longer present, and "Gustafson" is interpreted only in the light of "Gustafson" and the consciousness of the interpreter, then we end up with a theocentric ethics which will no longer be recognizable as "Reformed, of sorts."[100] Thus, a future interpretation of Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics and the further development of Christian theological ethics need to take place in the light of an interpretation of Scripture and tradition.[101] The explicit appeal to the

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and Truth in Theological Ethics."

[100] An example of this can be found in interpretations of Theocentric Ethics which use the concept of theocentrism as a "not entirely nonreligious" form of biocentrism. Other examples are found in nonreligious or constructivist interpretations of the dialectic theologians Barth and Bonhoeffer.

[101] Christian theological ethics at the beginning of the third millennium seems in need of a new understanding of the relevance of Scripture for moral action and life. In such an understanding, a balance will have to be found between applying one all-pervading interpretational pattern (such as Nygren's agapeism, Ramsey's love-ethics, or Barthian Christocentrism) or using the Bible in its full width as a textbook for Christian ethics.

On the one hand, Christian ethics needs a conception of what is the "heart of Scripture." The fact that there is no (and never will be) unanimity as to what constitutes the heart of Scripture and the heart of Christian faith, does not warrant the conclusion that no attempts should be made. To start with, there should be some agreement as to what is definitely *in*appropriate scriptural use. By studying the cultural and religious context, the development of ideas, etc., there is hope that aberrant interpretations can be dismissed in favor of interpretations which are deeply rooted in the whole *corpus* of Scripture. Moreover, we should abandon the idea that a description of "the heart of Scripture" necessarily implies our agreement with the resulting substance. Thirdly, there is no use in exaggerating the differences. The English literature professor C.S. Lewis, a convert to Christianity from atheism, argues against embellishing the differences and presents a set of convictions about which there is a broad consensus amongst different confessional traditions. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. A revised and amplified ed., with a new introduction, of the three books Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality (London: Bles, 1952). Cf. Troeltsch ("The Significance of the Historical Jesus for Faith," in Morgan and Pye, eds., *Troeltsch*, p. 196, quoted in *Theology and Ethics*, p. 323): "So long as Christianity survives in any form it will always be connected with the central position of Christ in the cult. *It will either exist in this form or not at all*," *italics* added.

The element of "back to Scripture" is crucial for Calvinism. As repeatedly stated before, this element is underrepresented in Theocentric Ethics. Gustafson's concern cannot be found on other places. For this reason, the element of Scripture in relation to ethics is not given further attention here.

Reformed tradition seems to warrant the further development of Theocentric Ethics along the broad banks of the Reformed tradition.[102]

9.11 A Theocentric Ethics Based on Hope

Introduction
The broad and multifaceted Old Testament tradition in which God was experienced as a sovereign commander who willed the well-being of creation, came to a point of immense concentration in the Gospel narratives. The result was a movement which united people from all races and cultures around a hope that became so strong that it came to be called "faith": the assumption that God cares, now and forever. What bearing might this perspective have on a theocentric perspective, and what are the consequences for Christian ethics?

The Interrelatedness of Theological Propositions
Earlier in this study,[103] we contended that the following three propositions have a place in a comprehensive system of Reformed theology:

> F0   God is powerful
> F1   God is good
> F2   God will restore justice in the end

When one of these three propositions is omitted or denied, at least one other proposition should be altered as well. To some, the thought of altering the system may seem so harrowing that they will try to exonerate this coherent system at any price. In theological realism, however, the basic question is, "what is the case?" and, secondly, "what are the consequences of this for the rest of this theory?"

Since we have discussed the question, "what is the case?" on several occasions above, we will here concentrate only on the second question. As Gustafson, on the basis of a scientific worldview, assumes that F2 is untenable, the adequacy of the two remaining propositions is challenged. As Gustafson chooses to leave F0, the concept of God's power—or sovereignty—, essentially intact, an alteration of F1, the concept of God's goodness, is made. In order to still be called "good," God can no longer be seen as personal, because it is problematic to love and worship a powerful God who would intentionally inflict harm without a possibility of restoration.[104] If God is not personal, personhood cannot be given the highest value in the universe as we know it, and this could have an impact on the value of human beings in the world.[105] One essential change brings about a chain of reaction.

Hope versus Reality

The relationship between hope and reality can take four forms:

	No Warrants for Hope	**Some Warrants for Hope**

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[102]   Gustafson admits that "readers who most consciously . . . adhere to the Reformed tradition . . . might well take great umbrage at my claims to develop my thought in continuity with it," *Theology and Ethics*, p. 163. In a similar way, one might expect that Gustafson does not take too great umbrage at attempts to develop Theocentric Ethics in continuity with the Reformed tradition.

[103]   See section 6.7.

[104]   See section 6.6.3. It is possible that the first alteration did not concern the "restoration of all things," but the conception of God's personhood. We argued, however, that the latter was a consequence of the former, section 6.7.

[105]   See section 7.4.4.

Hope	(1) False Hope	(2) Justified Hope
No Hope	(3) Justified Despair	(4) False Despair

When evaluated from a theological realist system, only (2) and (3) are proper emotions, whereas (1) and (4) are deceptions or self-deceptions. Hope when there is no hope, and despair when there is hope, are unwarranted, even though "false hope" may have some emotional and strategic advantages.

There is a complication to this relationship because the causal sequence goes both ways. The presence of hope is based on the presence of potentials for fulfilling that hope, and the direction that reality takes may partly reside on the human attitude of hope. When someone is convinced that there is hope in a seemingly hopeless situation, this may unleash a potential of energy, endurance, and creativity. Gustafson's point of criticism, linked to his theological realism, is that we should not fool ourselves and believe that there is hope when there can be no hope. But insofar as there is hope left, we should affirm the remaining potentials and avail ourselves of them all the more. For Gustafson, there is no situation in human life in which possibilities (however small) to enjoy life and to make the best of one's misery are entirely absent.[106]

In the Reformed tradition, the affirmation that no situation is fully exempt from hope rests on the theoretical assumption that there is eternal life. Gustafson positively denies this final destiny of human being, but continues to be hopeful. The question seems to be: does the final outcome matter? Does the conviction that there is eternal life instead of eternal demise, have a bearing on our experiences of meaning in earthly life? There seem to be five potential answers:

(1)   only when there is the prospect of eternal life, earthly life has a meaning
(2)   the prospect of eternal life adds a meaning to life
(3)   the prospect of eternal life does not have any relevance for the meaning of life
(4)   the prospect of eternal life diminishes the meaning of earthly life, and
(5)   only if there is no prospect of eternal life, earthly life has a meaning

A discussion about eternal life never takes place in terms of absolute certainty. Rather, we speak in terms of probabilities, warrants, and the like. There seems to be an interdependence between theoretical and evaluative convictions: the more one is convinced of the prospects for future personal life, the more one will be bound to consider it indispensable for the meaning of earthly life. Thus,

the stronger the conviction of eternal life
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the stronger the valuation of its meaning for earthly life

Conversely, this interdependence may take the following form:

the stronger the valuation of the meaning of eternal life for earthly life
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the stronger the **hope for** eternal life

The correlation is not exclusive. Theoretically, it is possible to combine a strong conviction of eternal life with the view that it does not matter, should not matter, or that it even threatens or excludes experiences of meaning in earthly life. For example, one may, in line with Marxist or existentialist ethics, be convinced that the prospect of eternal life paralyzes humans to be accountable actors and distracts them from fighting social injustice.[107] Reversely, one may be convinced that there is *no*

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[106]   No doubt, we find resemblance to Kant's position when it comes to the freedom of the human mind and will: no matter how dominant the elements of force and necessitation may be, there is still a small corner in which humans can exercise their freedom.

[107]   In the Christian tradition, it is generally assumed that belief in eternal life does augment human moral accountability. A very fresh account of this is given by John Finnis, who describes this transcendent

eternal life, but one may still have great difficulties in coming to terms with this.

When we assume a connection between "is" and "ought" (or between theoretical and evaluative convictions), and we combine this with theological realism, the prospect of eternal life and of a final restoration of all things will be likely to add to our experiences of meaning within earthly life, and thus form a theoretical and normative framework for morality. On the other hand, when we believe the chances of eternal life to be practically absent, we are likely to develop a worldview in which such prospects are not essential for our experiences of meaning and for human morality.[108] Again, whether this morality is better or worse than its counterparts, is not a relevant question.

One way or the other, every human being has a conception of meaning, whether narrow or wide in context. Just as in ethics, where every single action is related to a broader conception of "the good life," individual emotions and actions of hope are usually linked (and rightfully so) to a wider awareness of possibilities, a greater longing, a deeper sense of hope. You change a flat tire on a rainy evening, because you hope to come safely home and join your family; you apply for a job in the hope of starting a career; you work out regularly in the hope of climbing that mountain; you kiss a girl and you silently hope that she will marry you. Hope strives towards the highest possible level and extension. When there are assumptions of eternal life, human actions and experiences are seen in the perspective of eternity. When it is assumed that "with the demise of the brain the center of personal identity is gone,"[109] the highest possible aspirations and hopes will be located somewhere between the cradle and the grave.[110] Any worldview will, some way or another, have to provide stories, paradigms, and ideals, which motivate and direct moral action.

One of the most distinctive features about the concept of "hope" in Western thought and life, at the shift to the third millennium, is the virtual absence of metaphysical dimensions.[111] Accustomed as we have become to enjoying what we have, we are not only assuming that "this is all we are going to get," but also that it does not really matter whether there is more than life as we know it. Reluctantly or bravely, we are reconciled to the limitations of a species that will eventually face extinction.

The Remnants of Reformed Hope in Theocentric Ethics

For Gustafson, hope is related to more: Theocentric Ethics offers a broad spectrum of ideals and concerns. There is a concern for the well-being of the whole of creation, there is joy in the beauties of nature, there is gratefulness for the possibilities of human flourishing, and there is awe for God as the source and sustainer of human and nonhuman well-being. As such, it is more than a critique of its time: it breathes the quest for a paradigm shift in which human well-being is no longer at the center of our concern. At the same time, however, it fails to exploit one of the deepest resources of Calvinist thinking: the deep and grounded hope for a happy ending. Two key elements of the Calvinist tradition—the theology of hope, and theological realism—collide forcefully. There is little doubt as to who wins and who loses. Hope for God's personal provision, hope for a final restoration, and hope for a kingdom of heaven are crushed on the rocks of a compelling empiricism.[112]

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accountability in terms of "Friendship with God" (John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], p. 151).

108   The most problematic of all convictions seems to be the one (3) according to which a possible prospect of eternal life does not have any relevance for experiences of meaning. There seem to be only two explanations for this: either one has not understood the meaning and the bearing of "eternal life," or one has a strong but unexplicit conviction that there is no real possibility of eternal life.

109   *Theology and Ethics*, p. 252.

110   Of course, we can also hope beyond our own existence, e.g., hope that the well-being of future generations will be promoted.

111   Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zu der Begründung und zu der Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie* (München: Kaiser, 1973); Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

112   No doubt, the element of hope in its traditional Reformed garment would have survived if Gustafson wasn't convinced that it runs contrary to the facts. Gustafson sharply criticizes Moltmann for "flying in the face of centuries of development in the natural sciences" (*Theology and Ethics*, p. 44). His

But what if the consolations of traditional religion are not mistaken altogether?

9.12 Postscript

On February 13 and 14, 1945, the historic city of Dresden was almost completely destroyed by allied bombings. Among the thousands of buildings that were bombed, was the seventeenth century Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady), the most important protestant church in Germany at the time. For more than forty years under the socialist regime, the ruins were left untouched as a commemoration to the bombing. After the sudden and unexpected fall of communism, funds were raised to rebuild the 290 feet tall church in its original form, a process scheduled to be finished by the year 2006. Since it was decided that as much as possible of the old materials would be used, clearing the rubble took some years. Of the tons and tons of debris, every single piece of sandstone, whether large as a van or small as a fist, was collected, identified, and stored in one of the huge racks which temporarily covered the vast square in front of the church. What for half a century had been a form-less pile of anonymous stones, was now carefully sorted out and prepared for reuse.

For many older citizens, who had known the glory and beauty of this "Florence along the Elbe," the rebuilding process expresses the victory of hope over destruction. The most impressive feature is not that an exact copy of the former church will be built; it is the fact that the original stones are being used. Each and every one of these individual black stones, which for almost two generations were believed to have reached their final destiny, will be incorporated and will once again—together with vast numbers of newly excavated yellow sandstone—be part of this God-glorifying edifice.

There is hardly a stronger way to illustrate the Christian hope for the resurrection than the careful rebuilding of a Cathedral. Apart from its more speculative strands, the Christian tradition has no clear perceptions about how a final restoration is to take place, just as it knows little about how creation came about. The strong hope, however, suffices that no human action, no human virtue, no acts of self-sacrifice, and no moral accountability will have to be in vain.

The main theoretical elements of a Christian worldview can be subsumed as follows. Human beings were created in the image of God. As beings that can think, intend, will, and love, they were intended to have their feet firmly on the ground and their minds and eyes directed to the God who created them. At the same time—especially in the Reformed tradition—there is a deep awareness that something went wrong. Failures to comply to the moral law display a pattern of necessity and inescapability. A preoccupation with the promotion of short term human interests has become a steady characteristic of almost any morality, if not in theory, then in its practice. Humans have become accustomed to living as if there is no God, assuming that even if there were one, that he cannot be known, or that his existence does not essentially matter. The pursuit of economic growth, the development of technical possibilities, the increasing quality of health care facilities, and the in-creasing control over and knowledge of the natural world, may compensate for and obscure this finitude. But the problem remains that God is not seen as God, that humans fail to bring about justice, that the divine purposes have become obscured and distorted, and that humans all too often fail to see themselves and one another in the fullness of their irreplaceable value and dignity.

In the Christian tradition, there is also the conviction that God, by an act of free will, did everything to pick up the pieces, and to restore the broken image and the broken relationship between God and humans. In and through specific events in history, through the deeds and words of particular men and women and, finally, through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, humans experienced the liberating sovereignty of God and heard and understood God's intentions for the world. It is believed that one of those intentions is the promise that no individual human should

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normative criticism that this hope is too anthropocentric, seems to be a side remark, not nearly as compelling as the scientific objections.

remain lost.[113]

All this is not true simply because we want it to be. Rather, we have reason to want it to be because it is true. As long as this is combined with a realistic conception of God, this is no longer a form of wishful thinking, but rather a form of thoughtful wishes. The hope for a restoration of all things puts any sequence of hopelessness under criticism. There is no question, then, whether this theistic worldview has consequences for ethics and human morality.

What is the specific contribution of a Reformed worldview to ethics? It is a theocentric ethics in which the glory of God forms the basis for, the motivation behind, and the final intention for ethics. Human autonomy is not a goal in itself, neither epistemologically, ontologically, or axiologically. Because it is believed that God requires and empowers us to be accountable moral actors, human morality becomes all the more important. As a result, a theocentric ethics will reinforce the element of human accountability for fellow human beings as well as for future generations. Moreover, it gives the deepest possible motivation for moral concern for the well-being of the rest of creation. The awareness of God's goodness and sovereignty grounds morality, it boosts moral motivation, and grounds our moral accountability.

Worldview and ethics, appeal and response, indicative and imperative, enablement and requirement, "is" and "ought," form a complete package. This, it might be said, could weaken the voice of Christian ethics in a pluralistic society, because it contains particularistic elements and accepts moral authority. Should not Christian ethics be as universally accessible and communicable as possible? As we argued, the dream of such a global ethics is hardly to be realized. Rather than striving for the largest common denominator, adherents to different worldviews should be inspired to find common ideals and perspectives and bring them to the table. The question is not whether Christian ethics is the best contribution to a society with more respect for humans and for the world. To say the least, it offers a relevant contribution to the solution of moral problems. But the issue is not one of comparing instrumental values. Rather, the order should be reversed: once standing at the intersection of a rich religious tradition and a highly developed and pluralistic culture, is there any reason not to be inspired by the hopes and directives stemming from the grounded hope that there is a God who cares?

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[113]   Cf. Boer and Schroten, "Life and Death Seen from a (Dutch) Reformed Position," p. 40.