

# The Cartesian Basis of the New Morality<sup>1</sup>

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The Bishop of Woolwich has, I need hardly say, a great number of true and important things to say about morality—notably his magnificent aphorism, ‘Prayer and ethics are simply the inside and the outside of the same thing.’ But the thing I want to discuss here is something he says about prohibitions. Briefly the New Morality<sup>2</sup> is characterised by the doctrine that no moral prohibition is unconditionally valid. That is to say, according to the New Morality you can never describe a course of human action and say that this action would always be wrong in absolutely any circumstances. I think the New Morality is mistaken about this.

It is true that prohibitions do not have a very fundamental or important part to play in ethics. I do not think that a man can base his moral life on avoiding prohibited actions, any more than he can base his physical life simply on avoiding poisons. The law, in the sense of a code of prohibited behaviour, could never be the foundation of a human life. This is the clear teaching of St Paul and I accept it as unreservedly as does the Bishop. If a man tries to live simply by the law it will not help him to do right—it will only make clear to him where he has done wrong. The root and life of morality is not the law but love; what is not an expression of love is not good behaviour however much it may resemble good behaviour. Let us agree once and for all that, for example, chastity without charity is not even true chastity, it resembles the true virtue as a corpse resembles a living animal.

<sup>1</sup>The substance of one of the Dominican lectures given at Cambridge in March 1964.

<sup>2</sup>I take the New Morality to be what the Bishop expounds in Chapter Six of his book, *Honest to God*. It is a view of morals that is widely accepted in England, though I do not hold him or the New Morality responsible for some of the stranger things that have been said by others in its name. Besides the chapter in *Honest to God* I have also made use of some lectures which the Bishop gave in Liverpool last year, the text of which he has kindly let me see. In these, it seems to me, he does not depart in any way from the teaching of *Honest to God*, he simply clarifies his position and corrects some mistaken impressions.

The disagreement is not then a disagreement about 'legalism'. If legalism means trying to base human life simply on law, then we both reject it. Nor is it an argument about 'anti-nomianism'. An antinomian is one who thinks there ought not to be any moral laws at all—the Bishop does not hold this any more than I do. The difference between us, as I hope will be made clear, is not a difference in *emphasis*: as though I were being more or less right-of-centre, sympathising more with the legalists, and he were left-of-centre, sympathising more with the antinomians. The difference is a clear and exact one: I do not wish to say that the Bishop has his emphasis in the wrong place, I wish to say that he is simply wrong; and if he is right, I am simply wrong.

We both hold that laws, and in particular prohibitions, have a place in ethics though not the most important place: we differ about the status and function of these laws. The Bishop holds that we need them as good rough general guides to action—they nearly always ought to be obeyed, but not necessarily every time; whereas I hold that some prohibitions (very few) are absolute, we cannot ever rightly set them aside: there are some things that human beings simply must not do.

The basis of the view of moral law held by the New Morality is, I think, this: Moral law can never be about exactly what morality is about. The sphere of moral law and the sphere of morality may overlap most of the time, they may seem to coincide, but there is no intrinsic link between them and they may slide apart. I quote: 'One cannot, for instance, start from the position "sex relations before marriage" or "divorce" are wrong or sinful *in themselves*. They may be in ninety-nine cases or even a hundred cases out of a hundred, but they are not intrinsically so, for the only intrinsic evil is lack of love.'

He goes on 'Continence and indissolubility may be the guiding norms of love's response; they may, and should, be hedged about by the laws and conventions of society, for these are the dykes of love in a wayward and loveless world . . .'

There is no question of the Bishop rejecting moral laws, he thinks we ought to have them, but their function is to be the 'hedges and dykes of love'. Nothing which can be legislated for—for example, 'sex relations before marriage'—can be intrinsically bad or good. 'The only intrinsic evil is lack of love.' The New Morality takes this view because what can be legislated for (I don't mean by the state of course, but by the moral philosopher) is a public activity, something I do in the common world, something, roughly, that I do with my body; whereas love, and therefore morality, has to do with a private world, with what goes on secretly

inside my head. Moral laws are for the machine, morality is the business of the ghost that lives inside.

For the New Morality the rules of morality have something of the same character as the rules of an art. There are certain conventions and rules to be observed in writing a sonnet or a novel or a play, but there are no rules for writing a great sonnet or novel or play. On the whole a man will be well advised to abide by the rules, to accept their discipline, to work within their framework, but the genius will recognise the moment when he has to break through the rules. This is because the rules of an art are not about what the art is about. Of course breaking the rules for its own sake will not produce great art, whereas keeping to them may result in competent work—to break them effectively you have to be inspired in the course of some particular creation. The man who breaks rules by rule is just as uninspired as the man who simply keeps to them by rule. Inspiration is something that has no intrinsic connection with either keeping or breaking rules. In much the same way, for the New Morality, the moral law is a good rough-and-ready guide to conduct and should never be broken just for the sake of breaking it, but there may arise situations in which under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of love, we recognise that we have to set it aside.

For the New Morality, then, the only intrinsic evil is 'lack of love', and its exponents criticise the older morality because it seems to make something else an evil—i.e. breaking a law. On this point they are misinformed. Traditional morality also starts from the position that the intrinsic evil is lack of love. The difference between the two views is that for traditional morality certain kinds of behaviour are simply opposed to love, whereas for the New Morality *any* kind of behaviour *might* be compatible with love.

It is from here that my criticism of the New Morality begins. My puzzle is this: If there is absolutely no behaviour which might not be compatible with love, can we attach any meaning to the word 'love'? If there is no behaviour on the part of Fred which would falsify the proposition 'Fred loves Angela', then can we claim that 'Fred loves Angela' has any meaning? If on the other hand there is some piece of behaviour on the part of Fred which *would* falsify this proposition, then we at once have an absolute moral law—since both the old and the new morality agree that Fred has an absolute obligation to love. If there is some piece of behaviour—let us say: sticking pins into her just for the fun of watching her wriggle—such that we can say 'If Fred does this to Angela then he does not love her', and if we can also say 'Not loving

Angela is intrinsically evil', then we can certainly conclude that 'Sticking pins into Angela just for the fun of watching her wriggle is intrinsically evil'. Or we can say it is prohibited by an absolute moral law. Acceptance of the New Morality then depends absolutely on the proposition that there is *not and cannot be* any kind of behaviour on the part of Fred which would falsify the proposition 'Fred loves . . .'

It is not always evident that the Bishop of Woolwich fully recognises this implication of his position. Thus in one of the Liverpool lectures he says:

In Christian ethics the only pure statement is the command to love: every other injunction depends on it and is an explication or application of it. There are some things of which one may say that it is so inconceivable that they could ever be an expression of love—like cruelty to children or rape—that one might say without much fear of contradiction that they are for Christians always wrong. But they are so persistently wrong *for that reason*. There is not a whole list of things which are 'sins' *per se*. That is not to say that there are not working rules which for practical purposes one may lay down as guides . . .

Now what exactly is being said here? Leaving aside the peculiar suggestion that rape and cruelty to children are somehow wrong, especially for Christians—as though they were not wrong for others as well—*does* the Bishop mean that in fact you cannot love someone if you rape them, and you cannot love a child if you are cruel to him? If he does then he already has two absolute laws 'Thou shalt not rape' and 'Thou shalt not be cruel to children'; he has in fact, a list of things that are sins *per se*, even if the list has only two members. But if he is saying this he has no *new* morality at all. This is what all the moral theologians, legalist and non-legalist, have been saying for about two thousand years and more. However he may be saying something else—the phrase he uses is 'It is so inconceivable that they could ever be an expression of love . . .' Now how do you know whether something is inconceivable, or how inconceivable it is? For myself I should say that it is inconceivable that Fred could express his love for the child Marmaduke by being cruel to him, because not being cruel to Marmaduke is one of the criteria which Fred would have to satisfy in order to verify the proposition that he loves Marmaduke. Of course you have to define cruelty carefully, but your definition does not have to include the notion of love—otherwise of course the business would be circular. Also, in my view—and this is very important—Fred *himself* only knows whether he loves Marmaduke by applying the same public criteria than anyone else might apply. The fact that Fred loves Angela

may be a secret hidden only in the heart of Fred. But the meaning of the statement 'Fred loves Angela', the criteria by which it is assessed, cannot be a secret hidden in the heart of Fred. Meaning always has to be public meaning first of all.

It is however possible to make good sense of the New Morality on certain cartesian presuppositions about man. On this view man has two kinds of knowledge. On the one hand he can look out into the external world and on the other he can turn his attention away from this world into his own mind. I am not here concerned with the special cartesian teachings about the uncertainty of the information we receive from outside, merely with the sharp division that is made between what is known empirically, the impressions of sense, and what is known by introspection of our states of mind. In respect of *this* thesis, the English empiricists are as much heirs to Descartes as are their rationalist enemies.

On a cartesian (or an empiricist) view, words for outside things, like tables and chairs and murders and adultery, have meaning because they stand for these things which we can experience in the public world. Similarly words for states of mind, like love and sorrow and displeasure, have meaning because they stand for things we can experience by introspection in the private world of our minds. To say that Fred is kicking Angela is to say something about the public world that can be verified or falsified by observation. To say that Fred loves Angela is to say something about Fred's mind which can also be verified by observation—but the only man capable of doing the observation is Fred, for he alone can, by introspection, look into his own mind. Other people looking at him from outside may guess pretty accurately whether Fred loves Angela or not, but they cannot really know, for they cannot see the love that is going on secretly in Fred's inner life. They have to make use of rough and ready rules of thumb like 'There is a strong correlation between the public behaviour of kicking people and the private behaviour of not loving them'; but of course this is merely a matter of empirical observation and induction, it could well not hold in this particular case. Thus what the people outside are observing is not the love of Fred itself but some behaviour which is more or less closely associated with it.

It will I hope be clear, how neatly such a philosophical approach dovetails with the New Morality. For the Bishop of Woolwich morality seems to be concerned not with the public world of murders, adultery and such—describable events that can be observed by all—but with the private world of states of mind. And since to prohibit some course of action is always to talk about the public world, such a prohibition cannot

be about what morality is about—which is love, a state of mind.

If somebody sets out to provide a criterion of good and bad actions, or indeed of anything else, there is one question he must necessarily claim to answer: the question, How do I know when the criterion applies and when it doesn't? If I say: 'You can always tell a crypto-communist by his boogle', I must be prepared to say how you would detect the presence or absence of a boogle—what does it look like or smell like or whatever. Similarly if I say: 'You can always tell a good action by the fact that it is an expression of love', I must be prepared to say how you would detect the presence or absence of love.

In answering this question there is, I think, a strong and a weak cartesian position—both I think false, but slightly different. The strong one goes as follows: nobody can tell the presence or absence of love except the man actually doing the action, and he tells by introspection. He looks into his heart and if he finds love there then he knows that his action is good. If he doesn't then he suspects it may be bad. Since, obviously, nobody else can look into his heart, nobody else can tell whether his action is good or bad. This is why we cannot make moral judgements about other people. It is not that it is morally wrong to judge others, it is logically impossible.

It seems to me that this strong position buys immunity from outside judgement at the expense of any judgement at all. I should claim that if it is *in principle* impossible for others to make a judgement, then no judgement is possible at all. A criterion which is in principle not public is not a criterion at all.

The strong defence of the New Morality involves, in fact, the heresy of private meaning.

If the word 'love' were simply the name for a private, secret, experience, it would not have any meaning at all. It has to have meaning in the public world before it can be used about the private world. I am not of course in the least denying that man may have private and secret experiences; my point is only that if he is to name or describe them he has to use words that have their meaning in the public world, in the community. A word that 'means' something to me and nothing to anyone else does not mean anything to me. I may be exceptionally fond of the word 'Cramble', I may enjoy saying it, I may feel it is full of strange meaning, I may get an ecstatic frisson whenever I hear it, it may have tremendous aesthetic value to me but unless it means something to others it does not *mean* anything at all. Words in this respect are like money. I may have this lovely rectangular bit of green paper, I may love to handle it, it may have

immense aesthetic value to me, I wouldn't part with it for the world. But unless it had monetary value to others it has no monetary value to me. Money first of all has to have value in the community; then it can have value to me. And words first of all have to have meaning in the community; then they can have meaning for me. Language and meaning is part of living together. This goes for the word 'love' amongst others. Either it has a public meaning or it is just a nice comforting noise. If it is to have a public meaning then in principle other people must be able to tell whether it is being applied or misapplied. There must be public criteria for its use. If this is so, then Fred is not the only authority, or even necessarily the best authority, on whether he loves Angela or not. If the way to tell were simply by some kind of looking into his heart then of course he would be, but this is not so. How, after all, does Fred know *what to look for* when he looks into his heart?

Of course love is an 'interior' thing, it does not consist in a piece of bodily behaviour. But interior things are not hidden or secret things. It is one of the less important characteristics of interior actions that they can be hidden fairly easily if you want to do it. You can hide your love for Angela just as you can talk to yourself without anyone overhearing. But the fact that you can talk to yourself secretly is not the most important thing about having language, and similarly the most important thing about love is not that it can be dissembled. Having an interior life, I should say, is not a way of withdrawing from the community into a secret hidden world of your own, it is a way of belonging to a new kind of community. Men, like all the other animals, form a biological community—they are linked by complicated physical relations and responses, but because they are capable of speech they also form a linguistic community—they are linked by 'interior' relations and responses. Language and the whole interior life is a new way of living with people, not a way of escaping from them.

Love, then, is interior but its criteria are public—otherwise we could never learn the meaning of the word. If I may quote once more from the Bishop: "To the young man asking in his relations with a girl, "Why shouldn't I?", it is relatively easy to say "Because it's wrong" or "Because it's a sin" . . . It makes much greater demands to ask, and to answer the question "Do you love her?" or "How much do you love her?" . . ."

Well of course, if somebody asks 'Why shouldn't I?' and I reply 'Because it's wrong', I could only be making some kind of joke. Presumably I know from the context that, when he says 'Why shouldn't I?', he means 'Why is it wrong?' He wants to know, in fact, what reasons I can

give for thinking it is wrong, and I should try to tell him. But the Bishop's question does indeed make much greater demands: He asks simply 'Do you love her?' How does the young man set about answering this? He would take into account all sorts of things: in the first place he has certain feelings when he thinks about her or is with her; then he is concerned about her, he cares for her. How does he know he cares? Well, he is sure that in this or that situation he would behave in this or that way. He can actually remember not complaining when bitten by her poodle, and so on.

So the question 'Do you love her?' speedily resolves itself into questions about 'How do you behave towards her?' And this only brings you back to the question, 'Why shouldn't I behave in *this* way? Why should it involve lack of love?' In fact everybody knows and takes for granted that the young man ought to act from love; the puzzle he has is whether (and why) sleeping with her before marriage is an act of love or not. About this the Bishop does not seem to help him at all. He just goes on to say that if he loves her 'he will respect her far too much to use her or take liberties with her.' Yes, but the question is: what is to count as using or taking liberties? In this matter the New Morality as expounded by the Bishop has absolutely nothing to offer.

So far I have been concerned to criticise what I have called the *strong* cartesian wing of the New Morality—the view that Fred himself is the only one who can look into his mind to find out whether he has love there or not. That his external behaviour has really no intrinsic connection with love at all, so that nobody looking at his behaviour could tell whether he is loving or not.

There is, however, another more plausible, though equally false, view which I shall call the weak cartesian position. This would claim that the presence or absence of love can, after all, be indicated by external behaviour, and that the meaning of the word 'love' is learnt by observing certain kinds of behaviour and not by introspecting a state of mind, but while love is associated with some sorts of behaviour, there is no special sort that is tied to it. Thus a man who loves will do X or Y or Z, or a number of other things, or any combination of these things. There are a whole family of kinds of behaviour which are loving behaviour and there is no single common element that belongs to them all in virtue of which we call them loving. Thus the fact that a man does not do X or Z is no sign that he does not love, so long as his action comes within the range of possible love behaviour.

Now this, so far as it goes, is excellent. It is indeed true that you cannot predict a man's behaviour in its 'existential particularity' from the fact



that he loves. The fact that Fred loves Angela is not to be equated with the fact that Fred performs some particular action. It means that he is disposed to perform any one of a whole family of actions. Fair enough. There is no especial difficulty about this. We know that to say that Fred is playing football is not to say that he is performing any particular action—he may be standing quite still for example; we are accustomed to such uses of language. But suppose a man were to say: 'No, when Fred plays football he doesn't have to be kicking the ball, he doesn't have to be running towards it, and so on . . . in fact, he might be doing just anything at all'—and suppose we then ask him: 'What if Fred takes his shoes off and walks round the room reciting the United Nations' Charter—could that be playing football?—If he answered, 'Yes, even that could be playing football in certain circumstances', then we should begin to feel puzzled—do we really understand what football is at all?

Now in the same way a man might say, 'Well, charity—it's like this: a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves . . . but of course a man *could* have charity even if he passed by on the other side; there isn't any action that charity absolutely demands. In fact absolutely anything *could* be an act of charity, even the behaviour of the thieves'. Then we begin to have just the same sense of vertigo—have we really any idea what love or charity means now?

We are prepared to accept the proposition that 'Fred loves Angela' may be verified in all kinds of unpredictable ways. What is a lot more difficult to swallow is that it cannot be *falsified at all*. And this is the proposition by which the New Morality stands or falls. For, if I may repeat myself, *any* action on the part of Fred which would falsify the statement 'Fred loves . . .' would have to be the subject of an absolute prohibition, and the New Morality denies the existence of these.

I am maintaining the thesis that *if there is nothing which could falsify the proposition 'Fred loves X' then it is meaningless*. I am open here to a serious objection which goes like this: But don't you say that God exists, and that this statement means something, and also that nothing in experience could falsify it. I would wriggle out of this one by saying that God is a special case. For one thing I am not claiming to *detect* the existence of God as a *happening*. It makes no sense at all to say, 'God has begun to exist', whereas it does make sense to say, 'Fred has begun to love Angela'. And for such things which might or might not be in the world I would maintain that we can only meaningfully say that they *are* if there is something which could falsify the statement.

Now the old morality recognises this. We say: the vital and important

thing is to love; without love there is no good action. Love is not some particular behaviour, and therefore when we prescribe love we do not prescribe a particular course of action. But since the word 'love' has meaning, and is not just a comforting noise, there are certain actions which would be opposed to it, for example murder, adultery, and so on, and these are therefore, as a matter of logic, prohibited.

To summarise my objection to the New Morality: I think it rests on a dualistic view of man, on the view that he inhabits two worlds—a public world of observable actions like cruelty and murder and adultery, and a private world of really human actions, like motives and intentions and love. The central thesis of the New Morality is that there is no intrinsic connection between the two: what we say about the public world is only a rough guide to what is really right and wrong in the private world; we can only make real moral judgements when we enter into the private world and ask 'Am I loving or not?'

## The Bird's Eye View

### Some Thoughts about the Just War Tradition

G. S. WINDASS

#### 1. *The Theory*

Although the teaching and example of Christ clearly call us away from violence and hatred and bloodshed, the world often pulls the other way. The tension which results can be agonising; and it is tempting to get rid of it straightaway by a kind of intellectual manoeuvre. We can for instance pretend that the world does not exist—or that we are not responsible for it; or we can pretend that the gospels do not apply to it. If we succeed in reducing the tension, then is the time to beware; for the tension between the world and the gospels can only be removed by eliminating one of them; and both are necessary for a Christian-in-the-World.

St Augustine felt forced by historical circumstances to admit that a man could serve in the army and still please God; but it was not without