Constructing a non-foundational theological approach to Christian ethics

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Postmodernism challenges the idea of any foundational truth on which theoretical and operational systems may be built. This has led to a meta-ethical revision of the presuppositions underlying different ethical systems. This article offers a meta-ethical critique of the possibility of constructing a Christian ethical system. It is argued that the general concept of ethics cannot be used as a foundation on which to build any Christian ethical system, as the Christian faith opposes a number of key meta-ethical assumptions for ethics. At the same time Christianity must be careful not to isolate itself from rational ethical debates through succumbing to the temptation of fideism. While the Christian faith may utilise certain ethical categories, and must permit itself to be judged by other ethical systems, it also has to develop its own unique response to reflect the faith, hope and love which the good news of Christ offers to broken sinners in a broken world.

Introduction

As Abraham trekked up the mountain, in obedience to the hard demand of God to sacrifice his son, his obedient action shattered the possibility of ethics for all people of Christian faith, the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard (2008), suggests in a little book entitled *Fear and trembling*. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's act of faith can only be held to be praiseworthy by those who acknowledge that faith and love always take us beyond the realms of reasonable ethical judgements which are universally valid for all time:[1]

> The ethical is as such the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside of itself which is its telos, but is itself the telos for everything outside of itself and when the ethical has absorbed it into itself it goes no further. The single individual … is the individual who has his telos in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. … [*But*] faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal – yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. (Kierkegaard 2008:54–55)

Banner (2009:83) points out that for Kierkegaard: 'The story of Abraham contains a teleological suspension of the ethical.' Abraham cannot be considered a tragic hero because in a tragedy the hero may well be forced to make some sort of supreme sacrifice, but such a sacrifice is then usually made in the service of something 'greater' or 'higher'. But how does one determine what constitutes this higher 'something' that has the right to demand such supreme sacrifices from its heroes? It cannot be simply based on personal opinion for it has to be something that other people will also acknowledge as a valid reason for making the sacrifice. Such universal acknowledgement presupposes an underlying ethic of what is to be considered *good* and right; of what would make such a supreme sacrifice acceptable and just. It is only by making an *ethically* justified sacrifice that the hero gains the right to be acknowledged as a hero. Abraham, however, had 'no middle term that saves the tragic hero. … Far from being any use in explaining what he did, the ethical in the sense of the moral is entirely beside the point' (Banner 2009:83). Ward (in Velásquez 2003) agrees:

> Whereas the tragic hero relinquishes himself to express the universal, Abraham gives up the universal to express something that is higher, that is not universal. This higher particular that Abraham attempts to grasp is his God, who, as love, according to Kierkegaard, is the one who demands absolute love. Real love is always exclusive and tends towards the particular – Abraham could not share his love between his family and God. (p. 312)

While not accepting the radical individuation and existential 'inwardness' that mark Kierkegaard's perspective on the person of faith, I wish to pose the same question in this article

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1.The term 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which originally covered the semantic domains of custom, habitual conduct, usages and later, character. Morals or morality is used as an alternative term and is derived from the Latin term *mores* which encompasses the semantic fields of custom, approval, good, obligatory, right and worthy (see Kimmel 1988:27).

that Kierkegaard directed to the philosophical and ethical rationalism propounded by Immanuel Kant, namely: How does faith in God affect the philosophical and religious presuppositions that we bring to ethics?[2] Or, to follow Kierkegaard even further: In what way does faith challenge the very foundations of ethics for Christian believers?[3] Bonhoeffer argues that Christian ethics, by definition, have to attack the underlying assumptions of other ethics. Bonhoeffer (2012) states that:

> Christian ethics stands so completely alone that it becomes questionable whether there is any purpose of speaking of Christian ethics at all. But if one does so, notwithstanding, that can only mean that Christian ethics claims to discuss the origin of the whole problem of ethics and thus professes to be a critique of all ethics simply as ethics. (p. 17)

Meta-ethics

The critiques of both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer belong to the domain of *meta-ethics* – the critical investigation of *ethics qua ethics*.[4] Such investigation usually takes place from a range of metaphysical, semantic and epistemological perspectives. The shift from modernism to postmodernism is also having a profound impact on our understanding of and approach to, ethics, not necessarily by abandoning modern ethical problems for a minimalistic, ego-centric morality, but in:

> [T]he rejection of the typically modern way of going about moral problems (that is, responding to moral challenges with coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory). (Bauman 1993:4)

As Bauman (1993) further contends:

> Human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live; and yet, as if defying the worried philosophers who cannot conceive of an unprincipled morality, a morality without foundations, we demonstrate day by day that we can live, or learn to live, or manage to live in such a world, though few of us would be ready to spell out, if asked, what the principles that guide us are, and fewer still would have heard about the 'foundations' which we allegedly cannot do without to be good and kind to each other. Knowing that to be the truth (or just intuiting it, or going on *as if* one knew it) is to be post-modern. Post-modernity, one may say, is *modernity without illusions* (the obverse of which is that modernity is post-modernity refusing to accept its own truth). (p. 32)

In this article I wish to explore meta-ethics from a theological perspective. The theological perspective may be said to form the operational context of ethics. Mark Timmons (1999:5),

to my mind, successfully argues that meta-ethics should accommodate 'both the deeply embedded commonsense presumptions of moral discourse and practice, as well as any well-supported general assumptions, theories and views from other areas of inquiry', adding that this can only happen where the context of the ethical discourse is fully accounted for. The theological context, with its unique presuppositions about what it means to live as a Christian before God in this world, requires critical reflection and evaluation of the foundational presuppositions (or lack thereof) by which ethical systems are constituted as ethical systems and the presuppositions that theology brings to the table concerning how Christians should live in, and engage with, this broken world.

Main arguments

Christian ethics often finds itself relegated to a sub-branch of ethics, such as *deontology*, and then more specifically *divine command theory*.[5] I will argue that there is no ethical foundation on which to ground Christian ethics.[6] This is, however, not an embarrassment for Christian faith, because it will be shown that ethics itself is impossible to define and lacks any final foundations. In this aspect morality bears a strong resemblance to religious faith. While ethics may not be defined, it nevertheless exists and operates. The Christian faith, however, contradicts a number of key prerequisites for ethics to operate: (1) The gospel's call to radical obedience to God undermines freedom as a necessary condition for morality; (2) grace places the Christian on the side of the judged, rather than the judge, thereby ceding the neutral position required of ethical decision making;[7] (3) the biblical insistence on unconditional forgiveness undermines the notions of justice, guilt and moral responsibility which underlie all ethical endeavours; and finally, (4) faith and hope, operating within the context of the eschatological Kingdom, obstruct the development and engagement of timeless universal ethical principles. Instead of making ethical judgements, I will argue, Christians are instead called to express their *faith* through their *actions* on behalf of those who are not aligned to the will of God. This does

2.Gustafson (1992:1) asks the question: 'How do the ideas about God and God's relations to the arenas in which we live and act qualify our valuation of things. What values, principles of conduct, ideals and aspirations, are rules grounded in, backed by or based upon our understanding of God and God's relation to the world?'

3.Abraham acquires a new interiority of a higher privacy and individuation above the rational and moral order embedded in the community. 'Abraham therefore, unlike the tragic hero, learns that the soul can feel as well as think, or is heart as well as mind' (Velásquez 2003:313).

4.This is different from the operational perspectives of ethics which may take on certain forms such as descriptive, normative and aretaic ethics.

5.'Deontological theories are normative theories. They do not presuppose any particular position on moral ontology or on moral epistemology. Presumably, a deontologist can be a moral realist of either the natural (moral properties are identical to natural properties) or nonnatural (moral properties are not themselves natural properties even if they are nonreductively related to natural properties) variety. Or a deontologist can be an expressivist, a constructivist, a transcendentalist, a conventionalist, or a Divine command theorist regarding the nature of morality' (Alexander & Moore 2012:6).

6.'There are at least six frames of reference within which the term has been used. These overlap and meet at the edges, but much confusion has come about from failure to see clearly that they are different frames of reference. Christian ethics may mean (1) the best in the moral philosophy of all ages and places, (2) the moral standards of Christendom, (3) the ethics of the Christian Church and its many churches, (4) the ethics of the Bible, (5) the ethics of the New Testament, and (6) the ethical insights of Jesus' (Harkness 1957:1). In this paper the notion of Christian ethics is aligned to the obedient, hopeful and loving actions of Christian believers in the praxis, as a consequence of their faith in God in response to his grace in Christ; and flowing from the presence of his Spirit's presence in and work through the church and individual believers to put up signs of the Kingdom of God, within this broken world, of the alternative reality inaugurated through the person and work of Christ.

7.It is, of course, true that complete neutrality is not possible. It can be argued that ethics is the critical process by which people seek to gain some neutral place from which to choose between right and wrong. While the judiciary endeavours to find a neutral foundation in the law, ethics does so on the deeper philosophical distinction between right and wrong.

not imply that the Christian way of life cannot be described using ethical categories or that the Christian faith cannot utilise ethical categories for the purpose of indicating how Christians should express their faith in the world. Such uses, however, it is argued, must be made subservient to the biblical categories within which they are employed.

Meta-ethical foundations

Foundational ethics grounds the whole ethical system on a first norm. The process of delineating such a first norm is often referred to as *grounding ethics*. Grounded ethical theories result in *foundational ethics* as an ethical system built on one or more such first norms. (Quintelier, Van Speybroeck & Braeckman 2011:32). Murphy (2011 par. 1.3) for instance, describes Aquinas's ethical system as foundational in that it is built on one key norm 'that good should be done and evil avoided.' According to Aquinas this is an observable given in nature and is thus not dependent on other ethical norms for its validity but forms the basis for other ethical laws. Because these ethical laws are grounded on the first norm, they cannot be used to refute or challenge it. The first norm, resting upon itself, or on something outside and independent of the ethical system – such as nature – can thus be said to be foundational for the ethical system as a whole.[8] These basic beliefs or first principles are supposedly 'universal, context-free, and available – at least theoretically – to any rational person.' (Grenz & Franke 2001:31).

According to Grenz and Franke (2001) there are three primary aspects to foundationalism, namely:

[B]asic or immediate beliefs (or first principles) which form the bedrock under-girding everything else we are justified in believing; the mediate or non-basic beliefs we derived from these; and the basing relation, that is the connection between our basic beliefs (or first principles) and our nonbasic beliefs that specifies how the epistemic certainty of basic beliefs can be transferred to nonbasic beliefs. (p. 30)

Religious knowledge is usually relegated to non-basic status. Over against 'strong foundationalism' which demands absolute and universal status for moral first principles, there is also a 'soft' or modest foundationalism which holds that foundational first principles can be overridden but are accepted as basic unless new evidence convinces otherwise.

Hume (2006) starts his *Inquiry concerning the principles of morals* by considering a number of possible foundations for ethics:

There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether they be derived from reason, or from Sentiment;

whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species. (p. 2)

Many secular ethicist have felt that the absolute character of morality demands something more stable than 'the particular fabric and constitution of the human species' as its grounding and have thus sought a foundation elsewhere, including religion and God. Grounding ethics on God and religion, however, raises its own unique set of problems. Is the God who invoked to act as the final guarantor for ethics (Kant) not simply another rational human construction? Are those who deny God of necessity less moral than those who hold to some form of religion? Atheists and agnostics rightly take exception to such claims. Against this, Hoose (2000) argues:

Morality has a certain autonomy. By that I mean that religious faith is not necessary in order to experiences and recognise the moral point of view: that is something that is demanded of our humanness or rationality. (pp. 152–153)

But even if one should accept that religion is able to provide a true foundation for ethics, it still begs the question: Which religion provides the right foundation? At the heart of each religion is its own unique concept of God. The morality that stems from the worship of a tyrannical God will of necessity look different from a religion that is centred on a God of mercy and grace. Again Hoose (2000:152) makes the point: 'So it has been rightly said that the question of who God is, is the most basic question of moral theology.' Religion, furthermore, like culture, speaks with multiple voices; each religion having its own set of presuppositions that ultimately want to silence alternative interpretations. Even within the context of one religion such as Christianity people know, and make ethical decisions, on the basis of what their specific Christian communities have taught them. (Williams in Gill 2001:12). Finally, religion's ethical pronouncements often uncritically reflect the cultural context from which, and into which, it speaks. Each religion ends up justifying certain ethical positions and abhorring others – often the same positions that are justified as acceptable behaviour by another religion. The philosopher Frankena cynically observes:

If morality is dependent on religion then we cannot hope to solve our problems or resolve our differences of opinion about them, unless and in so far as we can achieve agreement and certainty in religion (not a lively hope). (Outka & Reeder 1973:295)

A second option is to follow Kierkegaard and see morality as existing in and of itself, not being founded on anything else outside of, or apart from itself. In Plato's *Euthrypo* (West & West 1998:41ff.) Socrates poses the question whether things are right and good because God wills them(?); or does God will them because they are right and good? If 'right' and 'good' exist independently of God it presupposes an objective

8. Aquinas's grounding of his first moral norm in nature, however, may be challenged. Where can one observe 'should' and 'ought' in nature? The movement from what 'is' to what 'ought' is not directly accessible through observations but requires other postulates. One can argue from an observation: People tend towards good and shun evil (premise one) to the ethical injunction 'good should be done and evil avoided' only through a second premise, that constitutes a value judgement: 'It is right that good should be done and evil avoided' (Premise 2). According to what norm is this judgement made, however? If this value judgement is the conclusion of another observation – 'because men are happier when this happens' then happiness, becomes the first norm. But this results in a regression *ad infinitum*.

moral order to which even God is subject. Moral realism, for instance, argues that there are moral facts according to which 'judgements on matters of norms and values are literally true' (Illies 2003:1). Against this view, however, Nietzsche has argued that all moral judgements are activities aimed at gaining power for the one making the judgements and are thus biased and fall short of morality's own standards. 'Morality' in such cases is then nothing more than an instrument of our will to rule over others. A further problem with the idea of 'one objective universal ethics' is that in the real world there are many different ethical systems. Montaigne famously questioned how it is possible for something to be considered 'truth' in one place, but a lie in another, with only a mountain separating the two places (Kierkegaard 2008:73). In *Leviathan* Hobbes (1958) also reacted strongly against any such objective grounds for morality:

> For these words of good, evil and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man, where there is no Commonwealth; or in a Commonwealth, from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up and make his sentence the rule thereof. (p. 32)

A third possibility is to ground ethics on the foundation of reason. Banner (2009) states:

> According to many understandings of ethics (including the understanding advanced by Kant) our individual duties or obligations arise from universally binding rules of conduct which command that an act be good in itself and therefore necessary for a will which is to conform to reason. (p. 82)

In his *Critique of pure reason* Kant (1855), to my mind successfully argues that it is impossible to 'prove' things outside the realm of the *Dasein* which include metaphysical elements such as God, immortality and freedom. In his *Critique of practical reason* (Kant 2014) however, concludes that God, freedom and immortality are reasonable postulates that are necessary for morality. He contests that only a moral law in which the form and contents coalesce can exclude the subjective desires of the moral agent and thus operate according to reason alone. Such a law would render objective ethical judgements outside the desires and caprice of the individual subject. He then proceeds to furnish such a universal law that can be used as a validity test for all ethical actions. Kant believes that the practical reason is able to make a priori synthetic judgements – the most certain epistemological grounds for truth. Ethics, founded on reason is deontological by nature: It demands absolute obedience to the rules, duties and obligations imposed on it by the practical reason. Basing ethics on reason, however, has come under the same kind of intense criticism as grounding it on humanity, or God and religion. Postmodernism has stripped Western rationality of its claim of infallibility. 'Rationality', Iutisone Salevao (2005:153) argues, 'is an historical concept which covers a whole range of different things.' Reason falls short as a foundation for ethics because life has been shown

to be value oriented rather than purely instrumental. Many ethicists, Illies (2003:4) notes, accept that ethics must embrace supernatural indefinable properties with the unique power of intuitive recognition. According to Brubaker (1987:2) Max Weber believed that only a specific group of problems which do not involve conflict over ends and values are 'solvable' by purely rational means. 'The most pressing problems of social life do involve the clash of ends and values and thus … cannot be solved in an objectively rational manner' (Brubaker 1987:2).

Fourthly, the notion of 'values' as a foundation for ethics has been attacked for its inherent subjectivity, not only for being grounded within the human subject that relieves it of any claim to objective truth, but also by what it does to that which is valued:

> It is important finally to realise that precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is so robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object of man's estimation ... Every valuing, even when it values positively, is a subjectivizing. (Heidegger quoted in Hatab 2000:90)

It remains uncertain whether morality is a reflection of our attitudes, values and beliefs or a standard for them. (Illies 2003:10). Bertrand Russel (quoted in Liu 2003) commenting on the subjective dimension of ethics, stated:

> I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it. (p. 1)

Finally, some ethicists deny the possibility for ethics to exist. They argue that that which we understand as 'ethics' is directly linked to the biological instinctive dimension of being human. According to this view, ethics never looks beyond itself in search of the benefit of the other, but always only seeks to benefit the one making the ethical decision. A radical materialistic paradigm embeds ethics completely within an evolutionary framework that strives for the survival of the fittest:

> The position of the modern evolutionist … is that humans have an awareness of morality … because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth … Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love they neighbor as thyself', they think they are referring above and beyond themselves … Nevertheless … such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, … and any deeper meaning is illusory. (Ruse 1993:262, 268–269)

There thus seems to be no universal agreement of what ethics 'is'; on what foundation it rests; or, on how it is to be accessed. Differing ethical foundations result in valid criticism of each others' truth claims. Ethics thus may claim to be absolute and universal, but it is relativised by the particular;[9] it presents

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9.Those who argue for moral relativism spurn fundamentalists as wrong.

its truth objectively, but its truth cannot be separated from human subjectivity and belief systems; it purports to be reasonable but cannot bypass supernatural intuition; it objectively reflects the values of individuals and society but these values become norms by which to criticise other ethical value systems; it may claim to reflect God's will, but it is also used to critically evaluate God and hold him accountable to its norms; it focuses on the other, but in the process may serve the self; it claims to be knowable, but nobody knows how it is known or whether what is known is 'real' in any sense of the word.[10]

Carnap (2002:304) has suggested that there are both internal and external questions that can be brought to bear on any system of thought. Internal questions operate within the framework of the system and can therefore be answered reasonably in the light of this framework. According to Mackintosh (2009:86), Christian ethics, therefore, will be 'a view of the Christian life from the inside, while it is still in progress and unfinished. Christian ethics are ethics for Christians.' External questions, according to Carnap, on the other hand, question the framework itself; these types of questions are not answerable by reason, but only by an existential jump. But, one may reasonably ask, an existential jump to what? The different foundations proposed for ethics all seem to crumble when tested.

Non-foundational ethics

Moore (1993:5) challenges the notion of a first foundational norm arguing that ethics ultimately becomes grounded on the definition of the semantic concept of 'good'. He states (1993):

> Unless this first question be fully understood, and its true answer clearly recognized, the rest of Ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge. (p. 15)

Moore then continues and points out that the concept 'good' is ultimately analytically indefinable: There is nothing more which can be added or detracted from the concept: good is simply good. This only leaves the option of seeing 'good' as an operational term. Good is what is good in the context in which it is utilised and by the values that are attached to it within such a particular context. Many philosophers of religion have welcomed Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games' (Harris 2013:22), seeing religious discourse as a unique language game with its own rules and logic that is embedded in a form of life and can only be evaluated in terms of its own internal rules and logic.

> Since religious discourse is a separate unique language game, different from those of science, religious statements, unlike scientific ones, are not empirically testable. To demand that they be, is a serious misunderstanding of that form of discourse. (Martin 1993:25)

Fideism

According to Martin (1992:256–261) Wittgenstein's thesis protects religious belief from outside philosophical criticism by demanding that any religion's own foundational assumptions should be taken seriously as the ground for its internal logic and rules: '[T]he meanings of religious utterances are relative to different language games' (Martin 1992:258). If we apply this analogy to ethics we may conclude that the intention of the 'game' of ethics establishes a foundational first norm which, in turn determines the operational rules of the game which, finally determine the outcomes of the game in conformity with the original intention of the game. The first rule, norm or foundation is thus constituted by the internal logic of the operation of the game in line with its intention to do so. In this understanding ethics does not rest on anything else than the willingness of people to play this game. But why should people play 'ethics'. Ultimately, there is no other reason than that people believe it necessary or important to do so. Reflecting on Christian ethics Ralph MacInerny (1993) warns:

> Perhaps the greatest temptation facing the faith in our times is fideism. Just as Wittgensteinian fideism attracted believing philosophers after decades of having the statement of their beliefs called meaningless, so theologians may be tempted to join in the disparagement of reason and commend the faith as its full alternative. (p. 67)

While we will argue in this article that reason is not an adequate foundation for theological ethics, MacInerny (1993) is nevertheless correct in challenging the notion that Christian faith may be used to isolate the church from criticism for the ethical choices it makes. Such isolation ultimately results in religious fideistic fundamentalism. By allowing itself to enter into critical dialogue with other ethical systems and to be held accountable for its responses, Christian action escapes the hubris of always being right because it is in accordance to its own definition of 'right'. The brokenness of the world within which Christians find themselves, and in which they also participate, challenges any notion of a final answer.[11] While the church may not ignore critique and insights from secular ethicists, the very unique dimension that the Christian faith brings to questions regarding Christians' 'right behaviour' in this world may also not be overlooked. Christians bring an alternative but participatory voice to the ongoing ethical debate in the world.

Meta-ethical problems with Christian ethics

The Christian faith cannot be co-opted to directly support any particular foundation for ethics. Christian ethics, in turn, cannot proceed from any secular ethical foundation that does not do justice to the theological presuppositions undergirding Christian action and behaviour. As Kierkegaard (2008) has suggested in *Fear and trembling*, such theological presuppositions must ultimately deconstruct many of the

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10.Joseph in Kafka's trial knows that he has transgressed an absolute moral law but does not and cannot know its contents. Raskolinov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and punishment* comes to see an absolute moral law that is hidden from all minds. Pollock and Cruz (1999:13) state: 'Ethical intuitionism is not popular in contemporary philosophy. There are alternative theories but none of them are popular either. In fact, in contemporary ethics there is little work even being attempted in moral epistemology.'

11.I develop this position more fully in (Van Oudtshoorn 2014).

meta-ethical presuppositions that ground secular ethics. Christian ethics is grounded on the theological scope of its operations flowing from the Christ-event which constructs certain ontological, epistemological and anthropological presuppositions for Christian 'right behaviour'. Christian ethics remains dependent on a God who refuses to be co-opted within any one ethical system, but who, through the Christ-event, has created an alternative theological interpretive frame within which to operate.

Freedom

All moral action presumes the free agency of those who endeavour to act morally. Freedom is indeed, also a core element of Christian living. Believers are called to live out of the freedom that the Spirit gives rather than simply submitting to external coercive laws. This freedom is a by-product of the Spirit's presence; it is a gift from God. The freedom that the Spirit gives the church, however, is not the freedom of individual choice. The Spirit instead, binds believers to 'the other'. Jones (in Gill 2001:25–26) states: 'Whereas the democratic theorist will speak of the rights of the individual, Christianity always speaks of God's gifts to the church as a whole.' This gift of being free to live for each other in love is realised in the church through the continuous transformation of individual believers to reflect more and more of the character of God.[12]

The presence of the Spirit within believers, and the subsequent 'fruit of the Spirit' that shows itself through the actions and dispositions of believers, ultimately also challenges the free agency of the moral actors that all ethical systems require. As we have seen, the freedom that the Spirit offers is not the freedom to choose between 'good' and 'bad', but rather to be free from such choices. In Christ believers are free from sin and free to serve God. Believers can, however, never own their good character or behaviour. They cannot improve themselves. They can only 'remain' within the vine (Jn 15) and look to the Spirit to bear fruit in and through them. 'Moral life is transfigured by Christian faith. It is theological' (Hoose 2000:152).

Grace

A second limitation that the good news about Christ places on utilising the concept of ethics within the context of the Christian faith lies in the gospel's message of grace. Those who are under grace know that they belong on the side of those who are shown to be in the wrong. Grace does not allow those affected by it to take up the position of judging other people or even themselves. Christian ethicists, according to Wogaman (1993:273), often link grace to the possibility it offers for libertarianism and immorality, arguing that it needs to be balanced by responsible moral actions.

He (1993) further comments that:

> The recurring dilemma is that moral rules and even moral activism, apart from grace, derive from self-centredness; but

grace apart from moral actions is empty – indeed, it is not even grace. Somehow Christian ethics must link grace and moral action, even while it affirms the priority of grace. (p. 274)

In contrast to this, grace should be seen as first of all linking those who experience it to a deep awareness of being in the wrong; to the conviction that they, themselves, are in need of forgiveness. Christians do experience this forgiveness; by grace they do believe that they have been put right with God. Grace, however, always binds them to the confession that they do not possess this 'righteousness' in and of themselves, but only indirectly in Christ. Without faith in Christ, the resurrected human, has no possibility of being in the right with God or with other people. Grace thus places the righteous next to the sinner. The righteous remains a sinner – *simul iustus et peccator* – the phrase that Luther famously used to describe the position of believers. Luther (2001), in his classic work *Concerning Christian liberty* correctly indicates that grace frees the Christian from external moral works by which to earn salvation In his discussion Luther still continues to use moral categories for describing the Christian life, even though 'with Luther there is no longer an objective content to morality' (Wogaman 1993:111). This is because grace, when correctly perceived, only knows the confession of guilt when focused on the self, and forgiveness and righteousness when focused, by faith, on Christ. Grace strips away all moral righteousness; moral and religious righteousness are instead shown to be the enemies of the gospel of grace. It is the man who delights in not being like the robbers, evildoers, adulterers (Lk 18:9–14) who is sent home unjustified. There is no objective distance between Christians and those who do wrong. Christians cannot set themselves apart from, or over against the sins of others, for the grace of God convicts them that they too, are in the wrong; they have to confess their own wrongdoing before God even while becoming aware of the sins of others. Grace convicts Christians that they too are – and will continue to be – in need of God's forgiveness.

The role of conscience

Conscience, the voice of morality, is often linked to the voice of God. Jerome used the term *syneidesis* to refer to a holy transcendent element that is present as a moral ability in all humans, driving them to a good conscience.[13] In considering the reference to conscience in Romans 2, Berkouwer (1962) points out that:

> It is surely unacceptable to say that Christian ethics here find one of its most important concepts, that of a special moral organ through which man can escape the effects of the corruption and can respond in obedience, with the whole of his existence, to God's command. (p. 171)

12.'An action offered as a gift to the life of the Body must be recognisable as an action that in some way or other manifests the character of the God who has called the community' (Williams in Gill 2001:8).

13.Linda Hogan (2000:38) points out that in the early Christian era the term *syneidesis* had a wider semantic reach than simply pertaining to morality, and that the moral dimension could also be rendered using other terms such as *wisdom* and *heart*. The verb *sunoida* carries the root notion of 'knowing in common with', and from this it extends to 'knowledge of another person which can be used as a witness for or against him.' (Hogan 2000:39). Paul deals with 'conscience' in a number of places, especially in 1 and 2 Corinthians where it occurs 15 times. While the term, in Paul's use of it, continues to carry a focus on some form of judgements after the event. Hogan (2000:52) notes: '[*T*]he role given to the positive pronouncements of conscience is significant.'

The term *syneidesis* does occur in the New Testament, but then mostly in a positive context such as in 1 Peter 3:21; 1 Timothy 1:5, 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; and 1 Peter 2:19. Here *syneidesis* is connected to an assurance of forgiveness; to a heart cleansed from an evil conscience. Conscience does not refer to some form of 'moral organ', Berkhouwer (1962) notes:

> [*But rather*] to a consciousness of being in a good relationship with God. This consciousness is closely related to salvation, to baptism, to sanctification, to purification (Heb. 9:14). We find ourselves not in the context of an autonomous moral organ but rather in that of practical action. The conscience is not an organ wholly separate from the heart with which men believe. The conscience expresses the richness of life in communion with God and the prospect of salvation, which resonates into the deepest regions of man's heart and life, and so leads to godly boldness. (p. 173)

Christian decision-making

This transformation of the conscience, from condemning to affirming is closely linked to God's gracious forgiveness of sinners (Rm 8:31–34). Morality cannot forgive. It can praise and blame, but never forgive. The act of forgiveness needs the personal dimensions of grace and love. Morality may call for sacrificial actions to enable the guilty to redeem him or herself for past transgressions, but morality can never deliver a free pardon to the guilty. This is, however, exactly what God does. The scandal that the unjust are forgiven without having to do anything to deserve it stands at the very heart of the gospel. It is the task of human beings, MacIntyre (quoted in McMylor 1993) suggests:

> [*T*]o show mercy in practical ways in order to set some limit to the lack of mercy in the world – 'I was in prison and ye came unto me'. (p. 7)

To forgive the guilty, however, is to shatter the moral concept of justice. Forgiveness is always subversive, an act of sabotage against the very edifice of morality. The church, as the gathering of the forgiven, is by definition called to be a forgiving community. Christians are to forgive as they have been forgiven (Mt 6:12; Lk 11:4).[14]

The church continues to live out of the forgiveness of God:

> The Christian is certainly in some sense a new creature, but that clearly means not another species altogether, but a creature, a man transformed or renewed, whose transformation and renewal cannot be articulated apart from some understanding of his existence as a creature independent of that renewal. (Robinson 1972:16)

This means that the individual Christian as well as the church as a whole has no supernatural access to God enabling them to always only do what is right; the individual Christian and the church remain fallible, open to making the wrong decisions, leaving them at the mercy of God's forgiveness

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14. I am dealing with the concept of justice as symbolised by 'the scales of justice' in which the perpetrator does not get away with his or her evil, but has to pay some form of injury or punishment for it. While Paul does speak about shaming the evildoers by blessing them in Romans 12, this shaming should not be seen as extracting some form of punishment, but rather an awareness of grace.

alone. Sometimes, in a broken world, there are no 'right' decisions to make. Morality insists that one should be able to make judgements that, though difficult, ultimately do not condemn you. By following the right process; or acting from the right motives; or having the right goal in mind, people's decisions can be excused, exculpated; and they themselves exonerated, even turned into heroes. Christians have no such luxury, Christians have to acknowledge that, within this broken reality, they sometimes only have the option of making a wrong decision before them; that none of the choices that are open to them are compatible with the will of God; that any decision they make will ultimately lead to hurting and damaging some innocent party.

In making their decisions Christians are not able to shift the blame away from themselves. They have to take responsibility for their decisions, they have to own their guilt, confess their personal sin and liability for the consequences that flow from their decisions:

> Against orthodox Christianity, the prophetic tradition of Christianity must insist on the relevance of the ideal of love to the moral experience of mankind on every conceivable level … But every conceivable order in the historical world contains an element of anarchy. Its world rests on contingency and caprice. The obligation to support and enhance it can therefore only arise and maintain itself upon the basis of a faith that it is the partial fruit of a deeper unity and the promise of a more perfect harmony than is revealed in any immediate situation. (Niebuhr 2013:104)

Christians can only make God's choices on the basis that God forgives sins. God's forgiveness is itself, based on an act of injustice, that of the innocent Jesus dying on a cross in the place of evildoers. Instead of trying to find reasons to be shown to be 'in the right', Christians expect to be declared righteous by their faith in Christ alone, the one who embodies God's love for those who are in the wrong and in need of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Postmodernism has forced ethics to reconsider its underlying foundations. It was shown that there is no meta-ethical unanimity concerning any such foundation. As the foundation for ethics ultimately determines the whole ethical enterprise, this has led many ethicists to the option of non-foundational ethics. The problem with non-foundational ethics, I have argued, is that it too easily falls prey to fideism and thus to uncontrolled relativity. I reflected on the underlying similarities between ethics and religion and then argued that the Christian faith operates with a unique set of presuppositions which may enable it to overcome some key meta-ethical issues. I have shown that the Christian theological meta-ethical framework set up a unique Christian theological operational theory which transforms broken reality through actions marked by faith, grace, forgiveness and love. The way in which the Christian faith operates when confronted with a broken reality was shown to be radically different from the operations of ethics.

Acknowledgements

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