

## ETHICS AND THE PLAY OF INTELLIGENCE

CORNELIUS ERNST, O.P.

IT is not usual, in this country at least,<sup>1</sup> for Catholic moral philosophers and theologians to question the metaphysical status of the principles which they employ in their arguments. God and man are taken for granted, and morality is presented as a systematic description of the order which ideally obtains between them and of man's defection from that order. The importance of such a procedure is hardly to be denied: a programme, a map of life, coherently and consistently recommended, answers immediately to our present perplexities. And yet these perplexities cannot all be satisfactorily resolved in a programmatic way. For our perplexities are not merely first-level perplexities, which may be defined in terms of a restricted number of possible courses of action in a world whose intelligible articulation is something securely achieved, and which may thus be resolved in terms of the recommendation of just one of these courses of action. Our perplexities are also (when they are acknowledged) second-level perplexities, concerned with the articulation itself, throwing into question the very nature of the order obtaining between man and God. Our morality cannot be wholly derived from a metaphysics established without explicit reference to morality. We can no longer merely insert our action into a programme; to attempt to do so, to refuse to admit the existence of second-level perplexity, is to evade a responsibility, the serious acceptance of which could and normally should creatively achieve a fresh, a more interior insight into our relationship to God by deliberately taking the strain of the question in order to offer an answer. Foursquare bluntness, whatever authoritative sanctions may be claimed for it, simply will not do here; for that moral inwardness to which we are here trying to point cannot simply be confronted with imperatives, however wholesomely reasonable their enchainment: the inwardness is essentially a multiple possibility, available to our reflexion only by advertence to the styles of moral discourse in which it has been variously realized in history.

'Styles' of moral discourse might be said to be the real promoters of the dramatic action in which Professor Mackinnon seems to have found a form for his study of ethical theory.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is to practise a kind of interpretation of his work not unlike his own interpretations of the

<sup>1</sup> Compare, for instance, the excellent essays in *Morale Chrétienne et Requêtes Contemporaines* (Casterman, 90 fr. belg.).

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Mackinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*. (A. and C. Black; 21s.)

familiar figures to be found in any account of ethical theories, and if this is so he cannot complain. But it is important that the prospective reader of his study should not be put off (or for that matter solicited) by the list of contents: Utilitarianism, Kant, Butler; the old familiar faces, one might think. But the faces are not merely made up and tricked out in the latest fashion; they are animated and made to deliver themselves of relevant utterance with a life and an accent which, for all their individual variety, are recognizably Professor Mackinnon's very own. And this is the special merit of his outstandingly intelligent and consistently, insistently perceptive study: that he unfailingly sustains with his own complex and vigorous life a sharply characterized dramatic dialogue, the progressive movement of which creates a truly living image of our moral being.

Professor Mackinnon has two qualities which make the study of his book peculiarly rewarding: a delicate and developed sympathy for the variety of styles in which moral philosophers have in one way or another attempted to elicit this central mystery of our moral being; and a resolute, informed conviction that this mystery is indeed central, unique, however variously it has been deployed and determined conceptually. His sympathy is quite chameleon-like: set him beside any historically given form of ethical doctrine, and he glows and quivers with the colour of it. Ultimately this sympathetic receptivity, this capacity variously to expose himself, is rooted in the feeling for the central mystery; unlike the moral philosophers who concern themselves in England today with the analysis of ethical language, Professor Mackinnon is engaged in the real moral debates of our time, his concerns do not have the air of being circumscribed by the etiquette of the Senior Common Room.

But this is not to say that Professor Mackinnon does not suffer from the defects of his special virtues. If his sympathy is chameleon-like, his own quite individual style sometimes gives the impression (if the vulgarity be permitted) of a chameleon set beside a tartan; and more seriously, it occasionally tempts him into what must quite firmly be called attitudinizing. A specially marked instance of this occurs in his final chapter, where he is discussing the problem set by M. Camus of the Spanish Catholics who, as Professor Mackinnon puts it, 'remaining convinced of the truth of their faith . . . protest against the readiness of the Catholic Church to rely on every sort of coercive method to extend and maintain its sway'.

It will not be found surprising that a writer in *BLACKFRIARS* should be specially sensitive to this sort of remark; but my point is not to deny that conflicts between 'faith' and 'freedom' are possible: they are possible and even frequent. My point is that Professor Mackinnon is

content to accept this conflict and categorize it in his second-level analysis without troubling to inquire whether *this* unique faith, the Catholic faith, might not, at the level of immediate and concrete debate, provide a solution to *this* particular instance of the conflict. The fact that such problems exist is sufficient for Professor Mackinnon because his sympathy allows him simultaneously to adopt (even to strike) both opposed attitudes; we are not far here from an indulgence in 'problems' for their own sake, a sense that one's moral being is somehow heightened by the mere fact of having become problematic. And this again reflects a deep and evasive uncertainty about the central mystery of our moral being; Professor Mackinnon is 'on edge' (to use his own frequently repeated phrase) in the presence of any simple ontological affirmation of this mystery; he would far rather evoke it by the successive adoption of a multiplicity of styles, refer to it by a succession of bearings, than simply situate himself in it, coincide with it squarely. Professor Mackinnon's intelligence is constantly at play, he is Homo Ludens *antonomastice*; but 'play' is an ambivalent notion.

What, after all we may fairly ask, makes this play possible? What allows Professor Mackinnon so successfully to assume his many rôles, to sustain them with such convincing and diversely realized enthusiasm? We intend here merely to recall the *scintilla animae* of the early medievals, the *synderesis* of St Thomas.<sup>3</sup> Metaphysical affirmation *need* not always be foursquare (as Professor Mackinnon sometimes seems to think); it need not necessarily absorb the moral in the cosmological. It is not merely our capacity diversely to evaluate but also our capacity to adopt diverse styles of evaluation which need to be rooted explicitly in the inexhaustible fertility of our spiritual being: St Thomas's discussion of the mutual engagement of the 'interior' and 'exterior' acts of our moral action in I-II, 18-20 gives us some notion of how this might be achieved, the elements of a moral topology. But once we make this metaphysical affirmation of a moral centre (an affirmation now rich with all that we have learned from Professor Mackinnon), we recover, with a new insight, the lineaments of an order between man and God, the old programme with a new dimension of depth, the sense of the person manifest and manifesting in the human nature. The metaphysical determinateness of the one world we inhabit remains, but includes now an awareness of the *active* character of our inhabitation of it: we are contained within a God who is Lord of history as well as of nature. The determinateness is relevant; we may see how it is relevant if, beside Professor Mackinnon's category of the apostle, we set the category of the martyr. The apostle is presented to us in terms of an analysis of what St Paul says

3 Cf. the 'Renseignements Techniques' of T. Deman, O.P., in his edition for the *Revue des Jeunes* of II-II, 47-56, *La Prudence*, pp. 375-523, especially pp. 430 sq., pp. 478 sq.

about himself in II Corinthians: a concrete manifestation of value in a life informed by a conviction of 'certain metaphysical propositions', a transparent submission to Christ. But Professor Mackinnon's presentation is once again *too* sympathetic; the conviction is Paul's merely, we are invited to acknowledge the value whether or not we share the conviction, almost by a willing suspension of disbelief. But St Paul, and St Ignatius of Antioch, were also martyrs, as, say, Cranmer in the last resort was not; and our acknowledgment of the value of a death which seals a testimony depends *constitutively* upon our admission of the determinate truth of the testimony. In spite of all Professor Mackinnon says at this point, I cannot feel certain that he has ever quite ceased to speak in *oratio obliqua*.

An attempt has been made in this notice to situate Professor Mackinnon's study in the context of a classical metaphysical tradition, an attempt the success of which is to be estimated by no means merely in terms of an uncovering of any deficiencies in his study, but primarily in terms of an enlargement of the perspectives of the tradition necessitated by the attempt so to situate it. And this has meant that the particularities of Professor Mackinnon's analyses (particularities which the present writer is hardly competent to discuss) have been unfairly ignored. Yet it is these particularities which make his book especially important, above all for the scholastic. It is to be hoped that all scholastics (including those enigmatic, anonymous Thomists at whom Professor Mackinnon glances in footnotes) will perform the exercise of working through his book; at the very least, their active hold upon their principles will gain in suppleness and agility.

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## R. L. STEVENSON AND THE LEPERS

GEORGE MARSHALL

THAT the first biography of the Belgian missionary priest who devoted his life to the lepers at Molokai should be written by a Scots freethinker, a grandson of the manse, is curious. That it should be the cause of a controversy which made Father Damien's name known throughout the world, and which may yet make it even better known and venerated, is an indication of the often seemingly round-about way in which God chooses that his will be done on earth. No two men with less in common and with less possible mutual sympathy than Father Damien and Robert Louis Stevenson could