

Emil Brunner's Theory of Social Ethics

Prolegomena: The Quest for a Norm

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The question, What ought I to do?, became the subject of serious philosophic reflection for the first time in ancient Greece, when the traditional foundations of truth collapsed before the speculations of the cosmologists. From that day to this there have appeared only two major systems of ethical theory, corresponding to the Naturalistic-Idealistic antithesis which has dominated philosophy through the centuries. The former (Epicurus) begins with *Sein*; the latter (Socrates) with *Sollen*. For the one, ethics is a descriptive science; for the other, a normative one. At least one thing seems clear as the student surveys the history of the debate: i.e., one can never arrive at what *ought* to be if he begins with what *is*. Naturalism turns every virtue to ashes. Duty becomes mere instinct and conscience simply the collective experience of what is most useful to the greatest number. The end of the way is the ethic of self-expression, of power. Might makes right.

By contrast, the idealistic approach is refreshing. Kant's celebrated dictum, "Act only according to that Maxim which at the same time you can will that it become a universal law," is not superficial and trifling, whatever its limitations may be. But this noble Idealism has faded away before the recrudescence of the ethic of power in the shape of dictatorships, slave camps, brain washings and bloody purges. Hardly could one have believed its demise would be so tragically sudden. Physicians are still debating the nature of the disease which brought it about. We are told, for example, that the modern man, enamored of natural science, is weary of finely spun systems and refined speculations. For the Christian, however, the cause is far deeper. Specifically, from the Christian point of view, Idealism has failed to solve the ethical problem for two reasons. First of all, it has no place for a genuine doctrine of revelation. In one way or another, the human and the divine are merged. The ethical subject is autonomous; that is, able to decide for himself what he ought to do. Secondly, Idealism has no place for a doctrine of moral incompetence. The last word, even for Kant

who was not far from the kingdom with his concept of radical evil, is, I ought, therefore I can.

In Neo-orthodoxy we have, avowedly, an effort to return to a truly Christian approach to the ethical question. The norm of right action is declared to be the will of God as he addresses man in his word; that is to say, the Liberal effort to separate morality from religion is repudiated in the name of an ethic that is based on theology. Furthermore, the Neo-orthodox insist that man is a sinner and therefore incapable of achieving the ethically good apart from divine grace.¹ Among the followers of Barth, no one has pursued the implications of this neo-theological approach to ethics with more thoroughness than Emil Brunner; in fact, in this respect, Brunner has made more of a contribution than Barth himself, a contribution which we will now review and evaluate.

In a lecture delivered to the *Kunstgesellschaft* in Thun about ten years ago,² Brunner declared that the problem of an autonomous ethic is the fundamental problem of contemporary human existence. The attempt to uproot ethics from its religious basis stems from the spirit of the Enlightenment. Kant was the first who really set the problem with his severance of the practical reason from the theoretical reason, and the Positivists proceeded to remove what vestiges of metaphysical foundation still remained to Kantian ethics, till morality was reduced to a purely natural factor.³ One could now love his neighbor as himself without loving God at all. That was the theory of things until Nietzsche arose to challenge not only the religious basis of the law of love, but the law itself, substituting a morality of power,—the survival of the fittest. It is more than a coincidence that Hitler sent Mussolini the works of Nietzsche as a personal present. The frightful events precipitated by the practice of this ethical nihilism should teach us once and for all, according to Brunner, that such doctrines as the rights of man, the worth of

¹ There is not, to be sure, complete unanimity among these thinkers as to the meaning of such terms as "the word of God," "sin" and "grace." Some Americans especially, who are classified as Neo-orthodox, give these terms rather esoteric content.

² *Glaube und Ethik* (Thun, Krebsler & Co.), 1945.

³ Our generation, says Brunner, is greatly concerned with the gruesome realities of the total state, but we will not confess that it is not the discovery of a master criminal, but our own progeny, "the necessary consequence of our faithless Positivism, which is anti-religious and anti-metaphysical." *Gerechtigkeit* (Zurich, 1943), 8.

personality, the love of neighbor, and all the other values which we have cherished, are not natural facts, but postulates grounded in a religious conception of reality, without which religious basis they become impotent to change men's lives, and float like beautiful bubbles in the sun.⁴ The fundamental task of the Christian church is to disabuse the modern mind of the lie that man is accountable to no one, that he is the master of his own fate, the captain of his own soul. Our only hope of survival is renewal of faith from the ground up,—religious revolution.⁵ "A disposition to true fellowship can be awakened only from a reverential love for the Creator. . . . Therefore, the fundamental question in ethics is none other than the question of faith."⁶

THE MORAL INCOMPETENCY OF MAN

Calvin began the *Institutes* with the observation that the knowledge of God is indissolubly united with the knowledge of self. The validity of this insight, so significant in any discussion of ethics, is borne out, in a negative way, by what happened in Liberalism with its substitution of Idealism for the message of Scripture. With the loss of a truly transcendent view of God, man began to suffer illusions of grandeur about himself and his moral possibilities. The essence of Brunner's reasoning at this point is as follows: In Idealism, because the will of autonomous man (rather than the word of God) is made the final norm of right and wrong; therefore, the perverseness of man's will is made a bagatelle. If my better self tells me I ought to do something, though I may not do it in a given instance, that is incidental; I *can* do it. Otherwise the concept "ought" would not make sense. For Brunner, such reasoning is the curse of legalism. It suffers from a lack of critical realism. No such superficial diagnosis of the situation can possibly cope with the

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 7-13. Also his "Christianity and the Cultural Crisis of Our Days," *Current Religious Thought*, VII:22-28, 1947, where he observes that Buchenwald [with its lampshades of human skin] grimly exhibited the relation between religion and ethics with a poster prominently displayed which read, "Here there is no God."

⁵ Cf. his *Die reformatorische Botschaft und die Wirtschaftsfrage* (Bern und Leipzig, 1933), 4-7.

⁶ *Das Grundproblem der Ethik* (Zurich, 1931), 28-29. For a more technical and exhaustive treatment of this phase of Brunner's ethical thought, see his major ethical treatise, *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen* (Tubingen, 1932), chapters 3 and 28.

brutal facts of experience. The only adequate answer to the problem of radical evil is "Christian radicalism," in which a man comes to the place where he recognizes that the accusation of conscience is the accusation of God and, at the same time, that the God who accuses is the only one who can remove the accusation. In such an experience of faith man is restored to a true knowledge of God and himself. He recognizes God as his sovereign Lord whose every word he is bound to obey and at the same time discerns his own impotence to realize this goal. But man cannot of himself play this role of the prodigal; it is not a matter of New Year's resolutions and moral rearmament. It is rather a matter of new birth, in which the entire *Existenzrichtung* of the individual is reversed.⁷ "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things *are* passed away."⁸ God is a God who gives the good, apart from the works of the law, apart from human merit or action, by grace alone. In its real message, the Bible treats not of a God who demands and a man who acts, but of a God who acts and a man who receives (*dem beschenkten Mensch*).⁹ As a result of this divine activity there arises in the heart "a new will to do that which the moral law requires."¹⁰

Having sketched the framework within which Brunner approaches the ethical problem, let us now recapitulate and fill in some of the details. We have seen that he is concerned to give to ethics a theistic basis. To the moral relativism, the uncertainty about the question of right and wrong which is the hallmark of our times, he answers: To be right, something must be right from eternity, regardless of what men say or do; but this is true of the will of God alone. "For the right is nothing else than the will of God,

⁷ Cf. *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 143. "The event of the 'new birth,' the experience of becoming a new creature, of becoming another person, occurs only there where the Spirit of God himself touches the human heart, where the Creator-God creates a turning-about, a 'conversion' through his saving word and his Holy Spirit in the inmost being of man." *Gerechtigkeit*, 310.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 62-63.

¹⁰ *Glaube und Ethik*, 21. Brunner insists that the Church is culpable for making faith to consist, not in an experience of renewal, but rather in the affirmation of the dogmas of the church or the doctrines of the Bible. Such faith is incapable of developing moral power. "This Catholic misunderstanding of the faith was, indeed, what called forth the reformation protest and the whole reformation movement" (*Ibid.*, 28).

and the wrong is nothing else than the opposite of the will of God."¹¹ But what *is* the will of God and how do we know it? These are not easy questions, but obviously they must be answered if one is to formulate a theological ethic.

There are those among the followers of Barth who have argued on behalf of a Christological basis for ethics, according to which Jesus himself, as the personal revelation of God in his love, is the norm from whom all principles of right action are to be derived. But Brunner feels this "ethic of the Lamb" is beside the point, for obviously, society would collapse if the Sermon on the Mount were made the sole basis of moral obligation.¹² Furthermore, there is no real force to the objection that any other approach to the problem impugns the lordship of Christ over all spheres of life, for the incarnate Son is the Logos of creation, and he himself appealed to the order of creation when speaking about such ethical matters as marriage and divorce.¹³ It is proper and necessary, therefore, that in our efforts to make the will of God the basis of ethical action, we should begin with the will of God as Creator. If one should object that such a procedure exalts the *lex naturae* above Scripture, Brunner would answer that such an objection confuses the *ratio cognoscendi* with the *ratio essendi*. The proposition, Who-so sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed,¹⁴ is not, to be sure, a truth learned by reason or the observation of nature; it is revelation. But what is revealed is that man's life is sacred because it is created in the divine image. Murder is wrong because of what God did in creation.¹⁵

In developing this basal phase of his ethical theory, Brunner

¹¹ *Von den Ordnungen Gottes* (Bern, 1929), 6-7.

¹² This approach is not to be confused with the Liberal "ethics-of-Jesus" view in which Jesus is simply a concretion of moral ideals, valid in themselves; exhibit A of what it means to be a Christian. For Brunner's early repudiation of this position, see his "Zur evangelischen Ethik und Wertschaftsethik," *Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz*, 85:100, 28 Marz, 1929.

¹³ For a further discussion, see Brunner's *Gerechtigkeit* (Zürich, 1943), 321; also "Zwischen Scylla und Charybdis," *Kirchenblatt*, 100:355 f., 30 Nov., 1944.

¹⁴ Genesis 9:6.

¹⁵ "Zwischen Scylla und Charybdis," *Kirchenblatt*, 100:373-4, 30 Nov., 1944.

employs freely the formula, creation ordinances (Schöpfungsordnungen). He prefers such a term to *lex naturae* or "rights of nature." For one thing, these latter formulations carry with them certain classical connotations which are incompatible with Christianity. In the view of the Stoics and others, the *Ratio* on which natural rights were based was divine, the essential element in man, who, since he needed no revelation, for this reason recognized none. The Christian, to be sure, acknowledges that it is the reason which *apprehends* the divine law, but that does not mean that it is the reason which *gives* it.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Roman Catholic theologians have identified the *lex naturae* in an uncritical way with their dogma of a corpus of universally recognized law. Actually the facts cannot be squared with such a view of things. The Positivistic school has eliminated the fiction, ". . . fixed rights of nature." History shows that different peoples in different eras have looked upon completely different things as good,¹⁷ though it may be that there is evidence of some very limited material agreement as to the content of right and wrong action.¹⁸ However that may be, the primary error of the Positivists is the assumption that the difference of ethical practice among the nations means that the idea of right and wrong is relative. This is a *non sequitur*. The concept of the RIGHT, in distinction to that which is WRONG, what Stammler has called "the just right," is absolutely indispensable; and while the history of the race may not testify to any significant material agreement in the ethical dimension, it emphatically testifies that this distinction is a matter of universal consciousness.¹⁹ To infer that the idea of right and wrong, as a critical postulate, is relative because all

¹⁶ Cf. his address, "Die Menschenrechte nach Reformierter Lehre," *Universität Zürich Jahresbericht*, 1941-42, delivered as rector of the University of Zürich, April 29, 1942.

¹⁷ Cf. *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 604-9, 655f.

¹⁸ Compare *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 18, with 604-9, 655f. In *Offenbarung und Vernunft* (Zürich, 1941), ten years later, the investigations of the Roman Catholic, Cathrein, contained in the latter's *Die Einheit des sittlichen Bewusstseins*, seem to have induced Brunner to grant a somewhat larger material unity of moral conviction. He declares (p. 72), "The individual commandments of the Bible are testified to by the religious voices of the people from all parts of the world, when considered purely according to their material content." Cf. *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 607.

¹⁹ Cf. *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 609; 18.

people do not have the same ethical views is as absurd as concluding that the axioms of thought are relative because so many contradictory claims are made by those who appeal to reason. Interestingly enough, the most nihilistic fanatic when it comes to judging the actions of another or defending his own rights, suddenly evidences an astoundingly fine moral sense, in which action he is recognizing, *in praxi* if not *in thesi*, an absolute, eternal idea of the RIGHT.²⁰

Little, then, as the Christian may care for certain connotations of the term "natural rights," he insists that much of the essential thought contained therein must be rebuilt into society if our civilization is to survive.

Now this idea of an eternal primal ordinance, which is absolute and normative for all human law, is what the Christian means when he speaks of the ordinance (or ordinances) of creation²¹ This creative ordinance is ". . . the celestial model of earthly ordinances."²² Only on such a basis can we formulate an ethic that has relevance for all men, which, of course, we must do if we are to discharge our Christian responsibility, especially in the sphere of social ethics.²³ Though it is true that the Biblical view of reality postulates the entrance of sin into the world, and that in the radical sense of the term, yet this does not mean that the ontology of creation has been destroyed, nor does it mean that the epistemological situation of the natural man has become hopeless. To be sure, the Christian point of view involves and rests upon assumptions of a religious character which are not recognized by all men because of their sin, but since the Christian doctrine of creation is true, all men are bound more or less to acquiesce in its practical implica-

²⁰ "If there is no sacrosanct, eternal, divine, absolute justice, then there is no possibility of calling anything, be it a law, a civil system, or action of the state, unjust; if the Positivist theory of justice is correct, then there is no possibility of fighting against the total state as a monster of wickedness. Then one cannot say: it is unjust; but only: it does not please me; I do not like such things." *Gerechtigkeit*, cir. 8.

²¹ Whether the singular or plural number is used is immaterial. Consider the interchange of decree and decrees in theological discussions.

²² "Zwischen Scylla und Charybdis," *Kirchenblatt*, 100:374, 30 Nov., 1944.

²³ "The final ground of social ethics is always: the creation ordinance of God." *Ibid.*, 356.

tions.²⁴ God works as Creator and Preserver, even there, where men do not know anything about Him. Therefore, His creative ordinances can be effective, even where man does not recognize Him as Creator."²⁵ As a matter of fact, the laws of nature with which all scientists reckon and apart from which, science (and life) would be impossible, are simply creation ordinances, which, rightly understood, provoke a spirit of reverence in the mind of the investigator for the great Creator and Sustainer of cosmic lawfulness.²⁶

These laws of nature govern man insofar as he is a physico-biological object of the world. But man differs from the lilies of the field and the birds of the heavens. God feeds and clothes both, but not in the same way, for man, fashioned after the divine image, is free, though responsible to his Maker for the use of his freedom. And the Creator has so constituted man that to use his freedom responsibly means to use it in fellowship—fellowship, that is, with God and all men. "For our neighbor meets us not only as an individual, but as a bearer and member of definite *ordinances of fellowship*, which we will call in the narrower sense of the term, creation ordinances. We understand by this term such items of human communal life as are related to all historical life as unalterable pre-suppositions; therefore, in their form, historically variable; however, in their basic structure, unalterable; and such as at the same time in certain definite ways point men to one another and join them together."²⁷

What are some of these ordinances of fellowship? The most basic and primary one, Brunner feels, is the family; the most all-embracing one is the State. Besides these, he speaks of friendship (the fellowship of *eros*), economics (the fellowship of work), and the church (the fellowship of faith).

We cannot, however, follow Brunner as he works out the im-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 374. For a cursory review of the controversy between Barth and Brunner on Natural Theology, see my *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation*, 17. Significantly, Barth has never been very interested in social ethics, though he finally got around to shaking off the dust of Hitler's German Reich from his Swiss feet.

²⁵ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 204.

²⁶ We see a confused but significant expression of such reverence, Brunner feels, in the Greek's idea of a cosmos, by which they meant a super-human, divine order (*Sinn Ganzes*), an idea awakened in them by the regularity of nature. Cf. *Gerechtigkeit*, 56.

²⁷ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 194.

plications of this Christian ontology, without bearing in mind that he looks upon human life not only as created by God but fallen from God. Since man is created as a person, he is so created ". . . that he must determine himself to that to which he is determined."²⁸ This dignity, however, is his danger, for, by the exercise of his freedom, man has determined himself to the opposite of his proper end. Whereas he was created to enjoy the fellowship of God, he has become the enemy of God. He has retained his formal freedom, but has lost his material freedom. He has become, as Brunner puts it, the slave of his own emancipation.²⁹ Hence, the natural man in the actual working out of the implications of the creation ordinances for his life, has garbled and marred the original, like an incompetent builder who will not follow the architect's plans. This does not mean, as we have already observed, that the non-Christian has nothing to contribute to our theory and practice in the varied relationships of life. Though sin has darkened human understanding, these matters are not so wholly inaccessible to reason but that the natural man may have real, though inadequate insights.³⁰ But it does mean that we cannot undialectically identify the will of God with what is. ". . . We recognize the creation of God always as *broken* by sin and therefore, the will of God confronts us only indirectly, never directly. There is nothing real in this world, which God does not will, but there is also nothing in this world which God also does not will."³¹

The Christian, then, is basically conservative, i.e., he has reverence for natural, historical reality.³² And yet a rigid conservatism on the order of ancient Chinese ethics would be as brutal as the real world *is*.³³

²⁸ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 153.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 153. For a fuller discussion of Brunner's concept of personality with a critique see my article, "Ebnerian Personalism and Its Influence upon Brunner's Theology," *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 16:113-47, May, 1952.

³⁰ Brunner feels, for example, that Aristotle laid the foundations of the doctrine of justice for all time. *Gerechtigkeit*, 108.

³¹ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 110.

³² Cf. "Die ethische Bedeutung des Christlichen Dogmas," *Der Grundriss*, 1: esp. 379 (Dec. 1939) where he affirms that the spirit of irreverence is the kernel of Bolshevism.

³³ An example of the latter in Christian circles would be inflexible views on divorce which turn the married state under certain circumstances

Turning then to Brunner's treatment of the divine ordinances of creation as they have come to more or less adequate expression in the actual institutions of history, we find that his analysis turns about two fundamental aspects of man's being as constituted by the Creator. All the ordinances of human life, in the narrower sense of the term, are for the purpose of preserving and fostering these two primary human values, i.e., *freedom* and *fellowship*. Man is created for *freedom in fellowship and fellowship in freedom*.³⁴ Each concretion of the creation ordinances in history is more or less just, more or less approximating the ideal, in proportion as it promotes ". . . a fellowship grounded in mutual dependence, which at the same time does not invalidate original freedom and equality."³⁵ Because of man's sinfulness this two-fold ideal of freedom and fellowship is constantly degenerating into the extremes of Individualism on the one hand and Collectivism on the other. In order to appreciate how this is so, we must understand what Brunner means by such terms as Individualism and Collectivism.

As for Individualism, it is the lesser of the two evils, inasmuch as Collectivism, by the destruction of individual freedom, destroys the possibility of criticism and therefore, of correction.³⁶ In fact, if one means by Individualism, the preservation of the individual from absorption into the collective unit, then the Christian faith is individualistic; for man is made for the ordinances, not the ordinances for man.³⁷ But generally, Brunner means by Individualism the view that every man is sufficient unto himself, and responsible only to himself for how he lives and enjoys his freedom.³⁸ Philo-

into a curse; or an appeal to the ordinance of the family to prove the woman's place is in the home with no consideration of the fact that there are in certain societies several more million marriageable women than men. Such a position stems from a failure to remember that ". . . the creation ordinances of God are not to be identified with given realities." "Zur Sozial-ethik," *Kirchenblatt*, 85:326f., 10 Oct., 1929. We shall say more of these things later, but cf. also "Zur Evangelischen Ethik, etc.," 99-100.

³⁴ Cf. "Die politische Verantwortung des Christen," *Der Grundriss*, 6:89, März/April, 1944.

³⁵ "Das Kapitalismus als Problem der Kirche," 6:327, Nov./Dec., 1944.

³⁶ Cf. *Kommunismus, Kapitalismus und Christentum* (Zürich, 1948), 8.

³⁷ *Gerechtigkeit*, 160.

³⁸ Cf. "Die göttliche Schöpfung der Familienordnung und ihre Zerstörung," *Grundriss*, 3:34, Feb., 1941.

sophically, this popular approach to life has its roots in the Greek idea that the *Ratio* is the essence of humanity. Accordingly, every man has that which is essential in himself, and does not need his neighbor. In fact, this emancipation of the individual from his neighbor is but the ethical expression of his emancipation from God, in which emancipation, reason views itself as “. . . the final court of appeal in matters of truth and the moulding of life.”³⁹ Brunner calls it, “. . . getting rid of God by the use of reason.”⁴⁰

But we should not assume, as some economic theorists have dreamed, that the answer to Individualism is Collectivism. That would be to cast out the Devil by Beelzebub. In the last analysis Collectivism is Individualism's twin brother since it is born, “. . . of the abstract rational concept of equality.”⁴¹ Autonomous reason again is the final court of appeal. The whole, which is thus achieved, is simply an atomistic conglomerate in which the individual is lost, and this is true not only when one seeks the goal by violence as in Russian Communism, but also when one seeks it by legislation as in English Socialism. In fact, if a Christian had to choose, he would choose Individualism over Collectivism, for though the former is a distorted half-truth, it is the larger half of the truth.⁴² The curse of Collectivism is that it destroys the individual, but God has created us as individuals; therefore, the individual can never be regarded as a nothing, to be sacrificed to the whole which is everything. God loves not humanity in general, but the individual in particular, in the peculiarity of his created being. “God creates no schemes, but individuals. He whom he addresses as ‘thou,’ he thereby gives his unchangeable face, his individuality.”⁴³

Against these twin evils, Brunner pits the Christian concept of *individual freedom* expressed and realized in *fellowship*. To understand these latter terms in the light of what we have said above, is to understand everything he has to say of an essential sort, in the broad sphere of social ethics.

³⁹ *Das Grundproblem der Ethik*, 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ *Das Gebt und die Ordnungen*, 412.

⁴² Cf. *Gerechtigkeit*, 99.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47. For a powerful indictment of Communism and rebuttal of any neutral position respecting it on the part of the church, see his *Kommunismus, Kapitalismus und Christentum* (Zürich, 1948), the section entitled, “Das Nein der Kirche zum Kommunismus,” 15-26.