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Christian Moral and The Space Age

JAMES MCGLYNN, S.J.

I suppose that if we were for the dominant character of our age, we would say that we are living in an age of rapid change. Comparing our era to what many Catholics like to call the Golden Age of the 13th century, we find that whereas St. Thomas had essentially the same picture of the physical world as Aristotle had seventeen hundred years before him, most of us have had to absorb radical changes of outlook within our own lifetime. Perhaps even the majority of us can remember when relativity was a brand new concept and quantum mechanics had not been developed. Or to take your own field of medicine, I for one can remember when sulfa first appeared; and I can remember the hopeless feeling we had when a cousin of mine was down with tuberculosis before the discovery of any of today's wonder drugs. No doubt many of you have had to do much more than the generation before you to catch up on medical developments since you received your degree and hung up your shingle.

Our world has changed and is changing with almost startling rapidity. Who can say what tomorrow's discoveries will be? Just last week we had a new breakthrough in the use of computers. A new mechanical brain has been developed to handle the program-

ming of data which up to now has been the big bottle-neck in using computers. For instance, last year a man from Burroughs told me that the big computer, which is their answer to Univac, was all set to handle a complicated problem involved in wing design but no one was able to program the data for the machine. The new brain developed at MIT will be able to do this for us. It will open new vistas for automation. Who is to say that we will not have similar advances in other fields?

In the face of this swiftly changing outlook of our world it would be easy for man to become light-headed. What are we to think as we see the world being remade around us? Man is more and more becoming the master of nature and might be tempted to set himself up as the ruler of the universe. He might want to declare that the world is made for him and he is its center. This is a possibility and some people have succumbed to the temptation to make the universe anthropocentric.

But in our age no honest thinker can hold this position very long. For while man is learning more and more about nature and finding new ways to master it, his horizons have been rapidly widening. The little universe of Aris-

totle and St. Thomas has burgeoned out into the almost boundless universe of today's astronomers and astrophysicists. Scientists like Harlow Shapley, of the Harvard Observatory, tell us that in the universe the chances for organic life on other solar systems is perhaps one in a million million. And yet even with such tremendous odds there are probably a minimum of one hundred million planetary systems with suitable conditions for the presence of organic life. That is, there are at least one hundred million possible homes for other rational beings. Hence, far from being unique, man might be one of a hundred million species of rational beings and might well be one of the least intelligent of these people.

Meditating on this sobering thought, the man of our world might become extremely humble. Now, instead of being created "a little less than the angels," he might be just another rational being on one of the less significant planets in one of the least important solar systems in just another galaxy. Many of today's materialists have panicked at this thought. Rejecting any idea of God and rejecting the traditional theological orientation which put man at the center of the universe as the apex of God's creation, they now have found that instead of hitching their wagon to the evolutionistic star of human achievement, they had tied their hopes to a trivial little meteor which is destined to burn out almost as soon as it begins to glow. The

disillusionment has led some to despair and others to a sense of futility. For both types the byword is "Don't hope for too

much about the Christian? The universe is no less changing for him or any other human being. What sort of adjustment, then, must the Christian moralist make as he sees the old boundaries being thrown away and the old landmarks disappear? Must his idea of man and his place in the universe be revised? Must he also learn not to hope for too much?

Before we try to answer this question, let us consider just what it is that we are being asked to adjust to. What is this new universe opening before our eyes and how does man sink into insignificance before it? That the universe is immense beyond the wildest dreams of earlier ages is certainly true. That the conditions necessary for organic life, and hence for rational beings like ourselves, can be found on other planets in solar systems would seem to be not only possible but even probable. If we take what Professor Shapley considers to be a conservative estimate, there are one hundred million possible planetary systems in which organic life could be found. Offhand, it would seem highly improbable that not one of these one hundred million systems would have intelligent beings. Fr. O'Connell of the Vatican Observatory, as quoted in the Catholic press a few weeks ago, also thinks it "brash and even presumptuous" to deny that other

intelligent material beings exist in the universe.

Actually, I suppose, we have to admit that we are in very much the same position as our European ancestors were in 1492. They did not know whether Columbus was going to fall off the edge of the world or find some new kind of beings, possibly more intelligent than themselves, possibly, like the natives, touched by original sin. Would it be a race they could live with or one which might enslave or destroy them?

They simply did not know. Perhaps all of this was not very well formulated in their minds, just as it is not very well formulated in most of ours today. But the gnawing fear and uncertainty is there. We really don't know just what to expect.

There are three basic possibilities. First, we may find planets suitable for human life but on which there are no rational beings so that we would be free to colonize them without infringing in any other rational being's domain. Secondly, we may find planets with intelligent beings already living there, but beings who are less intelligent than we are and with a less advanced civilization and culture than ours. Thirdly, and this is the fearful prospect, we may find planets which are inhabited by rational beings who are much more intelligent than we and who are so far advanced technically and scientifically that they could easily enslave us or exterminate us as the European colonists have practically exterminated the Indian population of America.

Only the future can tell us which of these will actually be the case. This being so, we are in no position to affirm with certainty that man is or is not unique in the universe. The chances are that he is not and that sooner or later we will have to adapt our thinking to a new perspective which must include other thinking animals on other planets. The Christian's thinking will be complicated by the consideration of whether these beings have contracted original sin and been redeemed or are living in a purely natural state or, finally, in a supernatural economy different from ours, a life of grace without original sin. Theologians can entertain themselves working out the various possible relationships between the children of Adam and these creatures of outer space. Such speculation is interesting but would take us too far afield.

Now to get back to our problem, does this expanding horizon bring any essential change in the outlook of the Christian moralist? Obviously, a naturalistic morality, which determines right and wrong solely in terms of man and the rest of the visible universe, is going to have to change its ideas radically when the place of man in this universe is radically changed. Does this hold also for the Christian moralist? Anyone who understands the basis of Christian morality will know that it is not founded primarily on man's relationship to the rest of creation but on his relationship to God. And this is not essentially modified by the presence or absence of other

intelligent beings. Whether there are two or two million billion intelligent creatures in the universe, our condition before God is essentially the same.

I say *essentially* because we are related to God as individual human persons. It is true, of course, that man is a social animal and has various obligations to his fellow men, as you yourselves experience, perhaps acutely at times, in the practice of medicine. But morality is not a group enterprise. Someone else may pay our debts and someone else may be able to take care of our families, someone else may even, in the rare case where it is necessary, patch up one of your patients after you have given the wrong treatment, or straighten out a student to whom I have given the wrong answer. Other people can do all of this but only we alone can fulfill our moral obligations. When it comes to right and wrong, each of us stands alone before God. In our innermost self, when we are alone with our conscience, we know that we are really not alone. God is there with us. And our moral obligations result from this personal relationship which we individually have to God.

Consequently, Christian morality will be fundamentally the same whether there is one human race or a million. The difference will be that if and when we discover other rational beings, we will have to remember that they, too, are intelligent beings, persons with souls, people who have the same relationship to God which we have. We must therefore treat

them as human persons, children of God, whose rights as persons we must respect. Thus if they are less developed intellectually and morally than we, we will have to be careful not to exterminate them. The moral value of a human person does not matter whether he be a brilliant scientist or a poor mongoloid child, or, now we must add, a creature from another world. This would equally for all space purposes matter what their level of intelligence and culture. We must accept them as children of God and work for peaceful coexistence in justice and in charity.

This is a problem of the space age which is purely theoretical at the present time but one which may become practical even in our life time. I would like now to take up a more practical problem, which may have repercussion in your lives as physicians and surgeons. The problem is: What is the morality of sending men into outer space?

Not long ago the air force announced that it had picked two hundred men from whom the first U.S. space explorer will be chosen. These were screened down to thirty-six; finally to twelve from whom the actual space traveler will be picked. Recently, too, it has been announced that the contract has been let for the capsule in which the space man will travel. Delivery is expected in two or three years. From all this it should be obvious that certain of your colleagues are right now faced with the question of the morality of sending men into space. For their experiments and their

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decision will be decisive. If they say no, the military will dare send a man riding a rocket into space. How can these decisions be decided?

To begin with, there is no problem about space travel as such. We have got beyond the fears which some men had of the immorality of new ideas. You may have heard the argument. When bathing became popular fifty or sixty years ago, some diehards thought it immoral. People with the same mentality predicted God's judgment on the world for man's use of aircraft, saying that if God had wanted us to fly, he would have given us wings. It does not take much philosophy to answer this. Plato saw it 400 years before Our Lord's coming. And St. Thomas in his dry logical way points out that whereas God gave lower animals special protective coatings—fur, feathers, shells, etc. and natural instincts; in place of these He gave man intelligence to clothe himself, to protect himself and to grow in knowledge and culture. The exploration of space is one use of this intelligence and so in itself is perfectly legitimate.

If there is a moral problem in space travel it arises because in sending men out into space we are risking their lives. Consequently, being rocketed out into space, is from the moral point of view just a more spectacular form of the hazardous enterprise which man has undertaken ever since the first man climbed a tree to get the juicy pear on the topmost branch or

stalked a boar to bring it home for the family dinner.

The moral principles are the same. Our old friend, the principle of the double effect, which has done yeoman service for the moral theologians for centuries, applies here as it applies to other cases of risking one's life. The moralist tells us that one can expose himself to the danger of death if there is a proportionately grave reason, if death is not intended, and if death (should it occur) would follow from a good or at least an indifferent action. You are well aware of the use of this principle regarding a doctor who is working with contagious diseases. An heroic member of your profession in a less antiseptic civilization than ours might expose himself to almost certain death to minister to the plague-stricken. Or a demolition team may flirt with death to defuse a bomb which threatens some community. At the other extreme the lion tamer, the high wire artist, and the movie stunt man can engage in their dangerous professions, provided the normal safeguards are taken. In all of these cases men are risking their lives and they are allowed to do so because there is sufficient reason for them to run the risk and because death, should it come, is not intended, nor the result of some evil action.

To apply this to space travel, the first thing we must determine is the risk involved. If we send a man out into space, are we sending him to certain death? If it were, no Christian moralist could permit it under normal circum-

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stances. And as Catholic Americans we can be proud that our government has never considered such suicide flights. Instead we have begun an extensive program to evaluate the dangers which will be met in space and to discover ways of protecting the pilots who will explore space. The important field of space medicine is engaging some of our best young doctors precisely because our government accepts the basic Christian concept of the value of human life.

But if we cannot in conscience send these explorers to certain death, what must their chances be before we can morally authorize such space explorations? The general rule is that the greater the danger, the more serious must be the reason for performing the action. There is no mathematical proportion possible here. We must try to judge prudently and honestly. In the case of sending a man out into space we should have reasonable assurance that we can bring him back safely. Of course there is always the chance of something going wrong, but given the value of such exploration to national prestige and national defense, we can take this chance. It would be wrong to send someone off into space without taking reasonable precautions—for instance

to send a man up in a rocket before we have sufficient knowledge of radiation hazards, re-entry problems, etc. Our space agencies must be prudently cautious in all matters, too, for they are careful in studying the reports from our satellite launchings to make it as safe as possible for our astronauts. The Christian moralist can only applaud this vigilance. As long as it continues we can foresee no conflict between Christian morality and sending American explorers into space. The enterprise is laudable, the means used are not evil, and the risk being run is proportionate to the good result which is sought and desired.

Just a word in conclusion. The Christian need not fear the space age. In his morality he has all the principles needed to guide him through these new experiences. The solid rock of divine truth on which our morality rests will never weaken and never change. We can look into the space age with confidence and hope. New problems will arise but Christian morality will be well able to solve them.

Father McGlynn of the Philosophy Department of the University of Detroit gave this address to the Detroit Catholic Physicians' Guild at their annual Communion breakfast in March.