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## Holmes, ETHICS: APPROACHING MORAL DECISIONS

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human commitment to values and refinement of valuations, and his effort to preserve that history in the face of increasing relativism and nihilism.

*Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, by **Arthur F. Holmes**. Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1984, 132pp., \$4.95 (paper).

Reviewed by PETER GENCO, Eastern College.

Christians have always appealed to the Bible when setting themselves the task of developing a moral theology. However, although they work from a common source, divergent views still emerge concerning exactly how the Scriptures should be appropriated in the construction of a systematic Christian ethic. This methodological concern has prompted some writers to work for a "pure" ethic free from the taint of non-biblical approaches and has prompted others to integrate both philosophical and biblical truth into a unified and more complete whole. Arthur Holmes takes his place among the latter.

In the first chapter of his book, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, Holmes expresses the view that there is a complementary link between philosophical ethics and religion. The former provides the tools for systematically structuring biblical morality and for addressing questions regarding moral choices and exceptions to moral rules. The latter fleshes out abstract ethical principles and virtues by drawing on the vast repertoire of ethical material found in the biblical narrative.

Accordingly, Holmes contends, the Christian cannot afford to disregard ethical reasoning and opt instead for a "pure" biblical ethic. On the contrary, as he sees it, Christians should want their "...philosophical and biblical ethics to go hand in hand, the biblical informing the philosophical whenever possible, and the philosophical serving the biblical" (p. 13). This means, of course, that Christians must enter into dialog with other philosophical approaches.

In the next four chapters, Holmes himself enters into dialog with Cultural Relativism, Emotivism, Ethical Egoism and Utilitarianism. Being faithful to his purpose, Holmes discloses what is untenable and commends what is acceptable in each approach. When considering Cultural Relativism, for example, he maintains that Christians must accept as fact the differing moral beliefs and practices of other cultures and must be tolerant of these differences. However, he also makes the point that variety does not preclude there being universal moral principles and that tolerance need not be non-selective. In other words, Cultural Relativism recognizes moral differences (as should the Christian Ethic) but does not recognize (as does the Christian Ethic) the validity of transcultural principles—and thereby overstates its case. Holmes says the same about Emotivism, Egoism and Utilitarianism. Each has something to teach the Christian but none tells the

whole story.

Mindful of what is tenable and untenable in these non-Christian ethical approaches, Holmes proceeds to develop a Christian ethic. In chapter six, he lays bare a structural pattern shared in common by most ethical systems. Most systems, he states, evidence a procedure for responding to particular cases by applying rules, which in turn are underpinned by principles which themselves are justified by reference to theological or philosophical bases.

Although Christians and non-Christians are likely to have greater agreement regarding cases or area rules, Holmes maintains there is less agreement concerning principles and perhaps “insuperable disagreement” concerning the most fundamental level—*bases*. *Bases*, as he views it, constitutes the distinctive feature of the Christian ethic.

Drawing on both the Old & New Testaments, Holmes argues for a creationally based ethic that is supported by natural indicators which bear witness to the purposes of God regarding human affairs. That is, an account of what is essential to or inherent in human nature, Holmes contends, may be seen as meshing with the Christian doctrine of creation and general revelation. From a Christian perspective, natural indicators would therefore disclose both the “...good ends God intended in making us as he did and that God’s law is the law of creation” (p. 63). Carefully developing this theme of universal indicators, Holmes shows that although natural moral beliefs open to discovery by all do afford some common ground for moral knowledge, creational ethics is better grounded and more reliable than common morality. Common morality bereft of universal moral principles is incapable of settling novel moral issues, and being plagued by the variability of moral consensus, it affords no comprehensive ethic.

In chapters nine through twelve, the effectiveness of a creationally based ethic is demonstrated in connection with the basic issues surrounding practical questions about human rights, criminal punishment, legislating morality and sex behavior. Discussing each from a creational point of view, Holmes provides insightful guidelines for decision-making. Here, as he has done throughout the book, he commends the insights of other ethical approaches, discloses what is wanting and seeks to develop a more complete moral perspective wherein love and justice are the primary guiding principles.

I think Holmes has succeeded admirably in doing what he intended in writing his book. He has effectively shown how Christians can dialog with non-Christians and draw on their insights in the area of ethics, and he has provided the Christian with a clear knowledge of the tools for moral decision-making.

However, it seems to me that at one point, Holmes may be subject to the same basic criticism directed against those views he has explored. He too may have overstated his case. In chapter eight, Holmes argues that apart from a Christian ethic, an adequate answer cannot be given to the question, “Why *ought*

those who know the good do it? They may *want* to, but *ought* they? Whence comes the obligation?" (p. 70). This he sees as a problem for the non-Christian approaches but not for the Christian approach because the former, though not the latter, entails the deductive fallacy of passing from "is" to "ought". In my judgment, he is mistaken. It seems to me that if it is conceded that the good is *known*, then it must also be conceded that it is justified from the moral point of view. Moreover, if it is also conceded that one *wants* to do the good, then it must also be conceded that one is committed to the moral point of view. Accordingly, it would follow that both a justifying reason and a motivating reason for doing the good obtain from willingly taking the moral point of view—apart from any religious commitment. One *ought* to do what one *knows* to be good because, as Paul Taylor puts it, "A moral reason is, by its very nature, a *reason for acting*." (*Principle of Ethics*, p. 216). In other words, it is in and through the moral point of view that one discovers universal principles that provide moral reasons for why persons *ought* to act in certain ways.

Hence, it seems to me, whether we are asking, "What makes values obligatory?" or "What makes God's commands obligatory?", the answers are predicated alike on a commitment to a point of view. In the former case it is the moral point of view; in the latter case, the theistic point of view. In both cases, therefore, before a justifying response can be given, one must first be persuaded to "self-impose" a particular perspective.

Holmes himself has argued that primary universal principles are discoverable in nature. If they are, then we have the bases for adequately responding to the question, "Why *ought* those who know the good do it?" "Ought" need not necessarily be linked to "God wills it."

What Holmes has shown is not that there is a logical link between religion and true morality. Rather, he has only shown that within a given religious framework there is a necessary link between *its* religious claims and *its* ethic.

Hence, in making the stronger claim of entailment between religion *qua* religion and ethics *qua* ethics, it appears to me that Holmes has claimed more than he ought. Nonetheless, that he has effectively shown a complementary link between the Christian ethic and non-Christian approaches is clearly evident.

His book is lucid, insightful and thought-provoking. It is, as the editor of the series had hoped, a work reflecting quality scholarship. Accordingly it significantly contributes to the attainment of a greater degree of philosophical awareness regarding ethical issues that should be the concern not only of Christians but of all reflective persons.