

# The Achilles Heel of Humanism

GORDON H. CLARK

THE PROBLEMS of ethics are problems that no philosophy can avoid. And, indeed, few people seem to want to avoid them. Voices everywhere insist on the moral duty of ending segregation, of eliminating the slums, and of establishing the welfare state. Ecclesiastical leaders assert that the brotherhood of man requires the various churches to unite into one powerful organization and the several religions to fuse into one nebulous confusion. Some say that war is wrong and that pacifism is right, that mercy killings are right and that capital punishment is wrong. It would appear therefore that ethical problems are *not* being avoided.

In all this propaganda the impression is given of wide-spread agreement. Is there anyone who is anti-social? Does anyone defend the slums? Do we not all accept the brotherhood of man and believe in serving humanity? Perhaps, if we look far enough, we might find some divergent views. But we have to look far. Back in ancient Greece Aristotle advocated infanticide. Unwanted babies were to be fed to the wolves on the mountain-side. If even in the more recent past there were savage cannibal tribes, still they were in the remote corners of the world. But today everybody agrees in the main and only minor points are matters of dispute.

Such a happy opinion, reflecting the superficial agreement among English speaking people, may itself prevent a thorough examination of the bases of moral distinctions. When a moral decision is taken for granted, the reasons behind it are often forgotten. But fortunately for those whose interests are more systematic and philosophical, the falsity of this happy opinion and the superficiality of the agreement can be made clearer now than it could be made fifty years ago. At the opening of this century many people were probably shamed into a hypocritical acceptance of popular western morality, and this condition still continues to some extent in the United States. But in Europe vigorous dissent has been heard. Two mighty nations, and powerful minorities in other

One of the most prevalent philosophies of the day is Humanism. Many who do not even know what the word philosophy means have the philosophy of Humanism. In brief, Humanism is an outlook on life which is man-centered and interested chiefly in this world. This discussion of a prevalent philosophy was given by the chairman of the Department of Philosophy of Butler University at the first convention of the newly-formed Evangelical Theological Society.

nations, have openly advocated brutality, violence, deceit, and murder. In our own country the CIO has attempted to persuade the Supreme Court to declare unconstitutional an Arkansas law that prohibits pickets from injuring or killing men who want to work. What respectable people in the past have called evil is now proclaimed as good, and the new leaders of militant masses are prepared to force acceptance by starvation and torture. To meet this philosophy, we cannot rely on any superficial agreement about sweetness and light. If murder is wrong, only an appeal to basic principles can show it.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMANISM

Corliss Lamont in his *Humanism as a Philosophy* asserts with evangelistic zeal that "the chief end of thought and action is to further this-worldly human interests on behalf of the greater happiness and glory of man" (p. 273). He is sure that egoism is evil and that atheists may be willing to sacrifice their lives for the social good. The social good includes the idea that the labor unions should have a direct and constant influence on the policies of industrial enterprises, that the government should own and operate the main means of production and distribution, and that not only should there be national planning, but international planning for the welfare of mankind. Lamont treats Marxism with deference, but he is equally sure that a Fascist state is bad. These in general are his ideals and norms. His method of achieving these ideals is essentially the utilitarian calculus of Jeremy Bentham. Lamont says, "in judging whether any particular means is ethically justifiable for the accomplishment of a certain end, we must in the first place endeavor to estimate impartially the total consequences of using that means" (p. 284). He underlines the

phrase "total consequences". It might also be remarked that since the ethical procedure of Kant is not so popular as it once was, this utilitarian calculus is in almost undisputed possession of the field; and a refutation would apply to nearly all the currently held theories.

## OBJECTIONS TO HUMANISM

There are in fact two major, and to my mind, crushing objections to the humanistic theory. One of them refers to the assertion of ideals, and its exposition will be postponed for the moment; the other objection relates to the utilitarian calculus as a method, and with this part of the theory the examination begins.

Lamont and Bentham fail, because the calculation of the total consequences of a proposed act is impossible. One example must suffice. Suppose that I were a minor official in a large corporation, and being ambitious to rise I consider undermining the reputation of an immediate superior in order to be promoted to his position. The humanist would have me calculate the total consequences. Aside from the consequences to the victim of my slander, I would have to foresee whether I would be caught in my own trap. Would someone higher up detect the fraud and have me discharged? Or, if I escaped discharge on this score, would my associates and inferiors detect it and undermine me in turn? In addition to these obvious questions there are more remote consequences. It is at least possible that the loss of this position might lead to another where promotion would be more rapid, and thus my slander would be beneficial in an unusual way. Further, there would be social consequences of one sort or another to my family and my friends. It should be evident therefore that the total consequences of my action are incalculable. I

simply cannot know what the results will be. And if this is unknown, the method of calculation cannot solve ethical problems. It is a complete failure.

The humanist might reply that strict mathematical accuracy is not necessary, but that probability will suffice; and, the humanist might continue, the probabilities are that slander will result in evil. At this reply, however, a similar question reappears: How can probability be calculated? Are the chances of being detected in slander one out of two, four out of five, or only one in a hundred? Before such a probability could be calculated, it would be necessary to make the original calculation many times over. Only after one knew that slander was successful in these three instances and unsuccessful in these thirty-one or fifty-seven instances, could the fraction expressing probability be determined. If the absolute truth is impossible at the start, probability, shall we say, is even more impossible. It follows therefore that if ethical decisions are to be made by calculation, a man can never have any reason for choosing one action rather than another. On this theory ethical problems have become insoluble.

#### THE LACK OF A STANDARD

Let this suffice as a refutation of the humanistic method of solving particular ethical problems. There is another objection relating to humanistic ideals. How does Lamont know that egoism is a false ideal? How is it shown that we should establish a socialist world government for the welfare of all mankind? How are ideals determined?

The difficulties of answering these questions on a humanistic basis are the same as those that confront men like Edgar Sheffield Brightman, who, though rejecting humanism, are unwilling to adopt a Christian position. Brightman in *A Philosophy of Religion* follows a contemporary procedure of trying to establish ideals by the so-called scientific method. Apriori and authoritative pronouncements are repudiated in favor of experience and empirical discovery. Each person, Brightman argues, has certain likes and dislikes. These values are as much a part of experience as is the sensation of green. Through long experience some of these values are found to give more lasting satisfaction than others. The most stable of these values are ideals, and on them ethics is based.

The two authors seem to rely on the hope that most people will accept their

proposed values without questioning them too much. And though socialism may be more acceptable in Boston or New York than it is in Cincinnati or Indianapolis, it may be said that in general the values offered are quite respectable in American communities. But there are other communities. Gorgias, in Plato's dialogue of the same name, and Polus were refuted because they were ashamed to disagree with the accepted values, but Callicles boldly said what he thought and by doing so tested the logic of Plato's argument. Today there are millions who advocate brutality and murder. There are millions,

both Roman Catholics and Communists, who believe that totalitarianism is valuable. The respectable virtues of Boston are seriously questioned and deliberately rejected. How can the so-called scientific ethics answer this challenge?

It seems to me that scientific ethics has no answer. Brightman begins with the values that he as an individual likes. But there is no logical connection between what he likes and what you, I, or the communists like. Even if he finds certain values more pleasing to him as he grows older, it does not follow that you or I

(Continued on page 19)

## THE QUESTION BOX

ROBERT STRONG

Q. How old is the human race? Were our ancestors as a recent picture article in "Life" suggests cave dwellers with ape-like faces?

A. One of the most helpful little books to which I can refer the reader for authoritative data with which to answer such questions is Byron C. Nelson's *Before Abraham*. I offer a few quotations from the book to indicate the line of argument developed in it. "The genealogies of Scripture must be regarded as abridged. God had no intention that they should be used for the construction of a chronology. So far as the Bible is concerned, the date of the creation of Adam and Eve may be many times earlier than Ussher supposed." "The evolutionary idea that the earliest human beings lived in caves because they had not yet evolved intelligence enough to construct houses is opposed by the evidence that the people of the earliest ages which we can discover built houses, and also by the fact that many truly human beings now live in caves. The evolutionary idea that the use of stone tools marks men of old as less human than men of today is denied by the fact that intelligent men in all ages make use of the best materials which exist at the time in which they live, and stone was, in the earliest days, the best material men had. The first inhabitants of Ur used stone tools. Some men use stone tools today. The notion that there was an ancient, unintelligent and poorly evolved race of men with short bodies and low, ape-like brows, called the Neanderthals, and another ancient, intelligent and highly evolved race, which had tall bodies

and high foreheads, called the Cro-Magnons, both of which were entirely distinct from one another, the first mentioned dying out completely and the second giving rise to all modern men, is purely imaginary, and is supported only by the arbitrary selection and grouping of certain ancient remains. The evolutionary 'Neanderthal — Cro-Magnon' hypothesis is belied by a careful comparison of the remains of the two kinds, and by a comparison of the remains of the ancient, supposedly extinct, Neanderthal type with many living men." "The Heidelberg, Piltown, and Java remains, which, when first discovered, were loudly acclaimed as proofs of human evolution have, upon careful study, been proved to be surprisingly like men of today. . . . The most publicized Peking skulls are arbitrarily separated from a connected group of skulls of equal age less favorable to the evolutionary theory. The Rhodesian skull was found intermingled with bones of modern African animals and is probably very recent. The doubts expressed by the evolutionists, Keith, Leakey, and Hawkes, concerning the propriety of the majority of evolutionists in rejecting the great antiquity of the 'modern' shaped Galley Hill, etc., remains promotes the view that an unprejudiced science would prove that men have always been as they are now."

Whether you get the book or not, the material summarized above should be valuable. But I do urge you to send to Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis 15, Minn., for a copy of Nelson's book. The price is \$1.50.

directly because our sins are under the blood of Christ and because we wear a robe of perfect righteousness, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us (not worked out by us) and received by faith alone. Between us and that throne there are no priests, no pope, no saints, no angels, no masses, no relics, no images. But do we avail ourselves of this sweet and wonderful access? How many minutes did you pray last week? How many times did you really go to the throne of grace?

I call your attention to a peculiar fact of history. Since the Reformation there has been a social phenomenon characteristic only of Protestant countries. It is the religious revival. Periodically, the Protestant peoples of northern and western Europe and especially of the English speaking world have had seasons of refreshing from God. Latin Christianity has not had such seasons. In the 18th century there was a great awakening under Whitfield and the Wesleys. In the 19th century there were stirrings under men like Spurgeon, Finney and Moody. Something like these tidal waves of spiritual blessing and power is what we need today, and I believe that there are evidences of such in the land.

I submit that the best way Protestants can help America is to seek a religious revival. Such a revival must start somewhere. Two hundred men in the tribe of Issachar wielded large influence in their day. I believe that two hundred men in a congregation like ours can wield large influence in our day. I wonder if there are two hundred men in this Church who will agree to spend thirty minutes in Bible reading and prayer every day before 9:00 A. M. and who will lead in an enthusiastic campaign to make the Lord's Day indeed the Lord's Day, by supporting faithfully the morning and evening activities of this Church. It may seem irrelevant to say that we can strengthen our nation by starting with ourselves and a small group to get closer to God, but history proves that revivals start with one or with a small group and then go on to the larger mass until the effects are felt throughout the nation. It is the best suggestion I know to make for Protestants in America today.

May God bless all the churches of our land that they may exalt Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of men and give the Bible to the people; and may our country be made pure and strong, and forever free.

## THE ACHILLES HEEL OF HUMANISM

(Continued from page 5)

will have the same experience. And nothing based on his experience will serve as a norm to govern anyone else.

Brightman's argument and all forms of so-called scientific ethics are based on a logical oversight. The premises of these theories are always descriptive statements, such as, I like this, or my friends like this. Science is a matter of observation and description, but scientific ethics depends on empirical observation for its premises. And if the premises are descriptive statements, the conclusions cannot be logically anything else than descriptive. Yet for ethics there must be normative conclusions. It will not suffice to say that you, or I, or Brightman likes this. What is required is a statement that you and I and Brightman ought to like this, and that everyone ought to like this, even though as a descriptive fact nobody likes it. The premises of science are always descriptive propositions; the conclusions of ethics must be normative. And it is a logical blunder to insert terms in the conclusion that did not appear in the premises. Any theory of ethics therefore that attempts to support ideals on observation, experience, or scientific method rests on a fallacy.

### CHRISTIANITY AVOIDS THESE OBJECTIONS

On the contrary and in opposition to humanistic and scientific ethics, a theistic and revelational theory recommends itself

by avoiding these two objections. If there is a God, as Lamont denies, and if God has revealed the Ten Commandments, as Brightman denies, then objective ideals rest on divine sanctions. It is no longer a matter of the subjective preferences of one man or the actual conduct of another; it is a matter of a divine command imposed on all men. Thus Christian ethics can, as humanistic ethics cannot, give a reason for opposing the brutal but satisfying ideals of Stalin. Independent of descriptive empiricism, theistic ethics begins with normative propositions and escapes the fallacy of introducing terms into its conclusions that were not present in the premises.

Similarly the first objection, relative to the impossibility of calculating the total consequences of a proposed action, does not apply to revelational ethics. With the Ten Commandments before us, we shall not need to calculate consequences in order to decide whether or not to engage in slander. If we know, as we say, that the consequences of immoral action will be disastrous, we know it, not by calculation, but because God has told us that he will administer the consequences. Accordingly, Christian ethics determines the means as well as the ideals.

To conclude: humanistic or scientific ethics depends on an impossible calculus and uses fallacious syllogisms. Revelational ethics avoids both troubles.

The August-September issue of THE WITNESS will appear about September 10th.

### SPECIAL OFFER

THE WITNESS is a missionary waiting to be sent. Its timely articles can be your means of preaching the Truth to others. Five dollars will send it into four homes each month. Take advantage of this special offer now.

- |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Name ..... | 3. Name ..... |
| Address ..... | Address ..... |
| .....         | .....         |
| .....         | .....         |
| 2. Name ..... | 4. Name ..... |
| Address ..... | Address ..... |
| .....         | .....         |
| .....         | .....         |

Enclosed find \$5.

Bill me later.

Mail to: THE WITNESS, Willow Grove, Pennsylvania