[Published in The Witness, June-July 1950, pp. 5-6, 19. Read at the founding of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949]

The Achilles Heel of Humanism

Gordon H. Clark

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.

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 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-wordly 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 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 Catholic 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 will have the same experience. And nothing based on 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. 1f 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.